

IN THE NEWS
Israel lifts roadblocks after meeting Abbas

Israel agreed to remove 27 military checkpoints from the West Bank.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert approved the move Sunday following his Saturday night meeting in Jerusalem with P.A. President Mahmoud Abbas.

"Abu Mazen is an adversary — he is a not an easy adversary, but with an adversary like this, there is, perhaps, a chance of dialogue that will bring an accord between us and the Palestinians," Olmert said Sunday.

During the talks, Olmert promised Abbas \$100 million from Palestinian tax revenue that Israel collected but froze when Hamas took power last March.

Fatah officials were cautiously optimistic. "It would be a mistake to think that all the problems could be solved in one meeting, but the meeting improved the feeling on both sides," said Saeb Erekat, a senior aide to Abbas.

United Nations sanctions Iran

The United Nations Security Council voted unanimously Saturday to impose sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program.

The resolution, sponsored by Britain, Germany and France and watered down to meet Russian concerns, demands that Tehran end all research on uranium enrichment and halt research and development that can make or deliver atomic weapons.

The resolution, approved in a 15-0 vote, does not permit the use of force if Iran does not comply. Iran rejected the decision, calling the sanctions illegal and vowing to continue its nuclear program.

The thrust of the sanctions is a ban on imports and exports of dangerous materials and technology relating to uranium enrichment, reprocessing and heavy-water reactors, as well as ballistic missile delivery systems.

Israeli leaders welcomed the resolution.

WORLD REPORT

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For advocating ties with Israel, Bangladeshi journalist persecuted

By LARRY LUXNER

WASHINGTON (JTA) — For a man who says he could be condemned to death as early as next month, Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury is surprisingly calm.

Choudhury's crime: calling for diplomatic ties between his native Bangladesh and the State of Israel.

"The High Court has ruled that by conveying the message of the rise of Islamic militancy in Bangladesh to Jews and Christians, and by advocating relations between Dhaka and Jerusalem, I have damaged the image of Bangladesh worldwide," Choudhury said.

The 41-year-old journalist and editor spoke to JTA in a 20-minute phone interview last week from Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital.

He said his trial for sedition, blasphemy and treason, which began in September, will resume Jan. 22 after a short break.

Choudhury, who is free on bail, said there is little chance of receiving a fair trial, and he probably will be sentenced to death. He spoke from a secure landline since his cell phone is under government surveillance, Choudhury said.

"The judicial system is corrupted by Islamic radicals," he said. "By continuing this trial and convicting me, they want to send the message that anyone else in Bangladesh who thinks as I do will face the same consequences."

Choudhury is the editor and publisher of *The Weekly Blitz*, an English-language newspaper founded in 2003 that now has

7,500 print subscribers and another 40,000 readers online.

Those numbers may not sound impressive for Bangladesh — a nation of 145 million people packed into an area the size of Wisconsin — but the newspaper is read regularly by policymakers, businesspeople and other influential Bangladeshis, as well as foreign diplomats.

A Muslim, Choudhury first came into contact with Jews in the early 1990s while working as Dhaka correspondent for the Russian news agency Tass.

He established friendships with Jewish colleagues despite the anti-Semitic propaganda so prevalent in Bangladesh, which is 85 percent Muslim and ranks as the world's third-most populous Muslim nation after Indonesia and Pakistan.

"When I was a child, my father always encouraged us not to believe the Friday afternoon sermons of hate coming from the mosque," said Choudhury, who began a dialogue with editors at the *Jerusalem Post* three years ago and eventually was invited to Israel by the Hebrew Writers Association.

But Choudhury never made it to Jerusalem.

On Nov. 29, 2003, as he was about to board a plane in Dhaka for the circuitous journey to Israel, Choudhury was arrested and his passport was confiscated, David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, said in a prepared statement. He was accused of espionage and charged with sedition.

Choudhury "spent the next 17 months in

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BEHIND
THE
HEADLINES

■ *A mob of 40 Islamic militants beat Choudhury in his office*

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hellish prison conditions, including torture, denial of medical attention and isolation" as the government tried to build a case that Choudhury was an Israeli spy, Harris said.

He was released in April 2005, thanks largely to the efforts of U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and Dr. Richard Benkin, a Jewish activist from Chicago.

Yet the sedition charge is pending, and in October, a mob of 40 Islamic militants beat Choudhury in his Dhaka office — three months after the office was fire-bombed.

On Nov. 14, Kirk and Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) cosponsored a resolution calling on the Bangladeshi government to drop all charges against Choudhury, stop "harassment and intimidation," and "hold accountable those responsible for attacks" against him.

Choudhury initially was charged with passport violations; the sedition charges were added nearly two months later. Among other things, Choudhury was accused of writing an inflammatory column titled "Hello Tel Aviv" for USA Today.

"I never wrote any such article," he insisted. "Even the prosecution said he had no document available because it was never published."

In late October, The Washington Times published an editorial urging the Bush administration to suspend \$63 million in annual aid to Bangladesh unless the charges against Choudhury are dropped.

Besides the AJCommittee, other organizations that have been outspoken in the case include Reporters Without Borders, Scholars for Peace in the Middle East and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Responding to the attacks, Shamsher Chowdhury, Bangladesh's ambassador to the United States, insisted that Choudhury the journalist is a conniving liar with a criminal past.

"In Bangladesh, nobody is a prisoner of conscience," the ambassador told JTA. "There is no such thing as putting a journalist behind bars for expressing his views. We have total freedom of the press. If he's saying he was arrested for advocating ties with Israel, then he's not telling the truth. That cannot be a charge. That's not sedition."

Choudhury said it is "totally untrue" that the journalist was beaten by a mob outside his office as police stood by idly, as Choudhury has claimed.

Far from being a "prisoner of conscience" for advocating ties with Israel, Chowdhury said the journalist in the past has been found guilty of embezzlement and misappropriation of funds.

"In 2003 he leaked very classified information about the government which we thought endangered state security," Chowdhury said. "So charges of sedition were brought against him, and now the matter is before the court. He's on bail and free to write and correspond with people. He has a valid passport and is free to travel."

The ambassador claims Choudhury "is in touch with his friends here and has even thanked the Bangladeshi government for creating a situation where he can travel. He doesn't feel threatened anymore."

Choudhury responded angrily to the ambassador's claims.

"He's a committed liar," he said. "This is nothing but a damn lie."

Benkin, the Chicago activist, said the

Bangladeshi government — including the ambassador, whom he met in April 2005 with Kirk — has lost all credibility.

"The government has never produced a scintilla of credible evidence against him," Benkin said. "Over three years ago they said he was guilty. They tortured him for 17 months and they're still carrying out this persecution."

He added that the Bangladeshi government demonizes Israel, even naming a bridge after Hezbollah in the wake of the terrorist group's war against Israel last summer.

Nobody practices Judaism openly in Bangladesh, though Choudhury said 150 to 200 Jews live in Dhaka, where they keep an extremely low profile and meet secretly in private homes.

Benkin's Web site, www.freechoudhury.com, calls on Americans to boycott apparel made in Bangladesh — a crucial industry that employs more than 2 million people — to pressure the government to drop the Choudhury case.

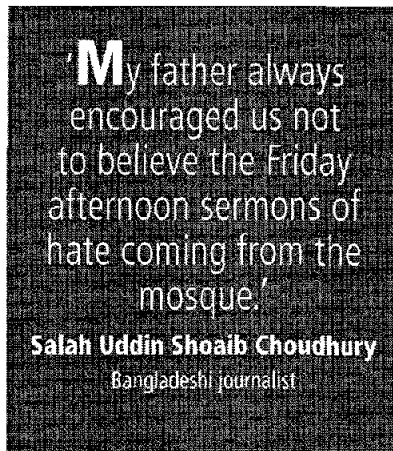
Benkin, who has never met Choudhury, applied three times this year for a visa to Bangladesh but was rejected. Under pressure, however, Chowdhury the ambassador recently changed his mind and granted a visa to Benkin, who plans to fly to Dhaka early next month.

In another development, Canadian legislator and human-rights lawyer Irwin Cotler announced he would defend Choudhury in court.

A former justice minister of Canada and past president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Cotler has represented prisoners of conscience including South Africa's Nelson Mandela, Argentina's Jacobo Timerman and Soviet refusenik Natan Sharansky.

Despite the risks, Choudhury said he had no intention of asking for political asylum abroad.

"I'm not going to do that because there is no dignity, no pride or honor in quitting," he said. "I have complete faith and trust in God, and in my brothers and sisters around the world who are working on my behalf."



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Hoyer: Dems back dialogue with Iran, Syria

By RON KAMPEAS

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The new Democratic Congress will encourage contact with Syria and Iran, the U.S. House of Representatives' incoming majority leader said, outlining an agenda that differs radically from the Bush administration's on domestic and foreign policy.

U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) said both parties' support for Israel would remain unstinting.

"[Rep.] Roy Blunt and I will continue to make it clear that there is a bipartisan overwhelming commitment to Israel's defense and security," Hoyer said, referring to the incoming minority whip, a Missouri Republican.

While a number of the marquee domestic items that the Democrats hope to pass in Congress' first 100 working hours already have explicit Jewish backing, the leadership's openness toward Syria and Iran conflicts dramatically with much of the mainstream pro-Israel community.

"Not talking is not particularly useful," Hoyer said in a wide-ranging 45-minute phone interview with JTA. "It may be symbolic but it doesn't get to solutions."

He said the Democratic Party embraced such contacts, one of the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, the congressionally mandated commission headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former U.S. Rep. Lee Hamilton.

Hoyer scored a decisive win in a caucus vote last month to become majority leader. Jewish groups watched the race closely, since Hoyer has proven to be one of Israel's best friends in Congress, leading multiple delegations to the Jewish state and isolating the caucus' few anti-Israel voices.

In the interview, he said commitment to Israel was unflagging, noting that Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.), a Holocaust survivor who is one of Israel's staunchest defenders, was set to chair the House International Relations Committee.

Hoyer also said he expected to strengthen close alliances with the Jewish community on a host of domestic issues where there is natural agreement.

"The Jewish community has been a real partner in fighting for policies on the domestic front in America," Hoyer said.

Among those key items that Democrats

hope to pass in Congress' first 100 working hours that already have explicit Jewish backing: The Reform movement and the National Council of Jewish Women back raising the minimum wage; the American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress back federally funded research into energy independence; and a wall-to-wall coalition of groups led by Hadassah backs funds for embryonic stem-cell research.

He expressed frustration with the failure of the lame-duck Republican Congress to pass nine of 11 funding bills.

That effectively crippled funding for 2007, Hoyer said, because it is logistically impossible to simultaneously

budget for two years, and the legislative process for 2008 funding begins in February.

Focusing on 2008 means there will be no 2007 earmarks — the grants lawmakers funnel to their own communities — or new programs.

In one of its final acts this year, Congress passed the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act.

Hoyer suggested that the 110th Congress — the first led by Democrats since 1994 — would continue to advocate the isolation of a Palestinian Authority led by Hamas, a terrorist group, while seeking ways to bolster Mahmoud Abbas, the relatively moderate P.A. president from Fatah.

Hoyer is especially close with Howard Friedman, a Baltimore-area constituent who is president of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and a past JTA president.

AIPAC has made clear — obliquely, through backgrounders distributed to the media — that it opposes the Iraq commission's call to open channels to Iran and Syria.

Bush already has bluntly rejected the commission's recommendation that greater engagement with Syria and Iran could help contain Iraq's burgeoning civil war.

Those nations will remain off limits, Bush has said, until they stop backing terrorism and — in Iran's case — cooperate

with nuclear inspectors.

Talking "does not mean you talk to make a deal that is not in the interests of America or its allies, and Israel is an important ally," Hoyer said.

He said Congress would use all its tools to encourage such talks, including hearings, resolutions and appropriations.

That could raise concerns in some sectors of the pro-Israel community and encourage others. Groups like the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League already have excoriated the Iraq Study Group, saying it handed an undeserved plum to rejectionists.

Abraham Foxman, the ADL's national director, said he was not overly concerned because Hoyer was voicing what long has

been the Democratic credo of engagement.

"Steny is and will continue to support Israel as part of a bipartisan effort, but he's also a Democrat, and the Democrats' position on these and other issues is talk to everybody," Foxman

said.

The more dovish pro-Israel groups welcome opening up such channels.

"A reassessment of America's policy toward Syria could serve Israel's interests, not just in terms of peaceful relations with Syria," said Ori Nir, spokesman for Americans for Peace Now. "It could serve greatly a peace accord between Israel and Lebanon, defanging Hezbollah and having a positive impact on Israel's relations with Arab states outside the immediate circle of Israel's neighbors, as well as Israel-Palestinians."

Hoyer said Congress would remain vigilant about Iran's nuclear capability.

"The mere fact of talking does not mean you're going to agree with an Iran that says, 'If we get out of Iraq you'll get off our backs on nuclear weapons,'" he said.

A pro-Israel activist said the community was not opposed in principle to talk, as long as it wasn't a means for rogue regimes to buy time.

There are growing pressures inside and outside the Israeli government to investigate recent calls by Syrian leaders for a resumption of peace talks with no preconditions.

FOCUS
ON
ISSUES

Not talking is not particularly useful.
Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.)
Incoming majority leader

NEWS IN BRIEF

MIDEAST

Foreign pilgrims sparse in Bethlehem

Some 3,500 foreign pilgrims came to Bethlehem for Christmas. The Associated Press cited the figures Monday from the Palestinian Tourism Ministry. Before the intifada broke out in 2000, foreign pilgrims to Bethlehem on Christmas numbered in the tens of thousands.

Israelis want to keep Golan

Most Israelis want peace talks with Syria, but not at the cost of giving up the Golan.

A poll published over the weekend by Yediot Achronot found that 67 percent of Israelis think their government should respond to recent peace overtures from Syria by resuming negotiations that stalled in 2000.

But an almost equal number — 66 percent — said they would be opposed to returning the Golan Heights to Syria, even under a peace treaty. The survey involved 501 respondents and had a margin of error of 4.5 percent.

Israel counts its Christians

One in 50 Israelis is Christian.

According to data published by the Central Bureau of Statistics in Jerusalem ahead of Christmas, Israel has 148,000 Christian citizens, or 2.1 percent of the population.

Most of these are Christian Arabs, but the figure includes some 28,000 immigrants from the former Soviet Union whose Jewish spouses obtained naturalization rights under the Law of Return. Israel is also home to around 180,000 legal and undocumented foreign workers, many of whom are Christian.

Archbishop slams security barrier

In his Christmas sermon in Bethlehem, the Archbishop of Canterbury criticized Israel's security barrier.

In his Monday speech, Rowan Williams compared the Palestinians' situation to the suffering of Jesus, and added that the security barrier is "a sign of the things which are deeply wrong in the human heart itself, that terrible fear of the other, of the stranger, which keeps us all in one kind or another of prison. In one of the hymns we sing in English during the Advent season, we sing about Jesus Christ, the one who comes the prison bars to break. And it's our prayer and our hope for all of you that the prison of poverty and disadvantage, the prison of fear and anxiety, will alike be broken." Israel's West Bank security barrier has drastically reduced terrorist attacks.

Israel gets secular rabbis

Nine secular rabbis were ordained in Israel. The Tmura Institute, a group lobbying for religious pluralism in the Jewish state, this month certified seven men and two women to conduct weddings, and bar and bat mitzvahs for Israelis who reject Orthodox practice.

The nine underwent three years of training in Judaism but profess no spiritual convictions.

Since they will not require couples they marry to prove that they are Jewish, the weddings will not be recognized by the state. But Tmura said its achievement was more a matter of symbolism.

Settler murderer hangs himself

A settler sentenced to life for murdering four Palestinians killed himself. Asher Weissgan was found in his Ayalon Prison cell last Friday hanging by his phylacteries, with his prayer book opened to the Kaddish mourning prayer, Ha'aretz reported.

Weissgan murdered four Palestinian workers in the West Bank settlement of Shilo in August 2005 and wounded a fifth.

WORLD

Benedict's eyes to Zion

Pope Benedict XVI said he wants to visit the Holy Land.

"Dear brothers and sisters, I truly hope that Providence sees to it that circumstances permit me to make a pilgrimage to the land that was made holy by the events in the history of salvation," the pope said Monday in a Christmas sermon.

"I hope to be able to pray in Jerusalem, homeland of the hearts of all the spiritual descendants of Abraham." Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who met the pope in the Vatican earlier this month, invited him to visit. Benedict said he would await a calmer political situation.

Irving vows to continue denial

David Irving vowed to continue his Holocaust denial. Returning to England after being released from an Austrian prison, Irving said Dec. 21 that he felt "no need any longer to show remorse" for his views and would continue expressing them.

He was released a day earlier after completing about a third of his sentence in Austria for Holocaust denial. Austrian immigration authorities said he was permanently banned from the country.

Irving, a discredited historian, has insisted that Jews at Auschwitz were not gassed.

He traveled to Austria last year knowing there was an open arrest warrant for him there dating from 1989.

Austrian media reported that Ernest Mauer, the judge who released Irving, is close to Joerg Haider, the Austrian politician who has said Jewish claims against the country are overblown.

Madrid inaugurates Rabin plaza

The city of Madrid inaugurated Plaza Yitzhak Rabin in honor of the late Israeli prime minister.

With Rabin's daughter, Dalia, present, Madrid Mayor Alberto Ruiz-Gallardon and Israeli Ambassador Victor Harel dedicated the plaza last Friday.

The dedication comes as Spain and Israel finish a year of activities celebrating 20 years of diplomatic ties. "Today we honor the memory of Yitzhak Rabin, a soldier who hoped to win his last battle, the battle for peace," Harel said at the ceremony.

Also present at the ceremony were local authorities, ambassadors and students from the Madrid Jewish day school.

NORTH AMERICA

Demjanjuk appeal rejected

The top U.S. immigration board rejected John Demjanjuk's appeal against deportation.

The Dec. 21 decision by the Board of Immigration Appeals upheld the chief immigration judge's 2005 deportation order against Demjanjuk, a former Nazi death camp guard. That judge rejected as baseless Demjanjuk's claims that he would be tortured if returned to his native Ukraine, and that no other country would accept him.

Demjanjuk, 86, who lives in suburban Cleveland, may still appeal the decision in federal courts. Demjanjuk was deported to Israel in the 1980s to face charges that he was "Ivan the Terrible," a guard at Treblinka who killed thousands.

He was acquitted in 1993 and returned to the United States, and had his citizenship restored.

However, U.S. immigration courts subsequently found that Israeli courts had established that Demjanjuk indeed had been trained as a death camp guard, even if he wasn't Ivan, and again revoked his citizenship.