

U.S. Jewish news

Focus on issues

Orthodox groups welcome Bush, see room for cooperation on policy

By SHARON SAMBER

WASHINGTON (JTA) - As President-elect George W. Bush prepares to take office, Orthodox Jewish groups hope they will find a more sympathetic ear in the White House. After eight difficult years trying to push their agenda with the Clinton administration, groups like Agudath Israel of America and the Orthodox Union are hopeful

they'll have a better chance with Bush and his staff, who support a greater role for religion in public life.

The groups' early outreach to Bush highlights the domestic priorities of the organizations and their attempts to persuade Bush to include them in the policy circle, particularly on issues such as school vouchers and charitable choice.

"There is reason for optimism that the new administration will move in the direction that we have long been



GEORGE W. BUSH: Many Orthodox Jews support his proposal for public funding of private school tuition.

advocating," said David Zwiebel, Agudath Israel's executive vice president for government and public affairs.

Vouchers, which provide government funds for students to attend parochial or private schools, continues to be a divisive issue for Jewish organizations. But many Orthodox Jews, who send their children to yeshivas or Jewish day schools, support publicly financed tuition vouchers. Both Agudath Israel, a fervently Orthodox organization, and the O.U., a centrist Orthodox group, strongly support vouchers.

In an open letter this month from Agudath Israel to Bush, Zwiebel asks the president-elect to "enlist Jewish support for policies that expand parental options in education." Last month, the O.U. sent a memo to Bush outlining its domestic policy priorities.

Ross to U.S. Jews: Palestinians will rue another missed opportunity

By MICHAEL S. ARNOLD

NEW YORK (JTA) - The Clinton administration's point-man for Middle East peace talks predicts that the Palestinians will one day regret not seizing the opportunity to conclude a peace deal offered under the Barak and Clinton administrations. In his final appearance before an umbrella organization of American Jewry, outgoing Middle East envoy Dennis Ross said the Palestinians' regret will mirror their remorse over rejecting the UN partition plan that would have divided Palestine half a century ago.

Ross, 52, is stepping down after shepherding the peace process from its inception to the verge of a final peace deal. He will become a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where he plans to write about his experiences in the negotiations. Though he said he doesn't see a viable framework for peace other than the parameters President Clinton outlined in December, Ross said the Palestinians should not assume the same package will still be on the table when they decide to come around to it.

"I've always been a firm believer that when an opportunity comes along, you seize it, and if the opportunity is not seized, you lose it," Ross told the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in New York on January 17. "If the ideas are not accepted, one certainly can't count on them being around" in the future. Ultimately, Ross said, the two sides will have to determine for themselves what are acceptable peace terms. American involvement is most necessary at two times, he said - when the sides have difficulty talking directly, as during the 1996-1999 administration of Israeli Prime Minister



DENNIS ROSS, Clinton administration advisor on Middle East: Stepping down after overseeing the peace process from the start.

Benjamin Netanyahu, and when momentous decisions must be taken.

During his talk, Ross sought to maintain the Clinton administration's posture of evenhandedness, criticizing Israel for activities that feed the Palestinian sense of grievance - such as settlement building, home demoli-

tions and insensitive treatment at military roadblocks - while saying the Palestinian leadership had "not done nearly enough" to prepare its public for peace. Yet Ross strongly implied that the failure to reach a peace agreement stemmed from Palestinian recalcitrance.

At the Camp David summit last July - when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered such far-reaching concessions for a peace deal that his government collapsed - the Palestinians seemed less sensitive to the historical import of the moment, Ross said. Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat "wanted peace, but had not come reconciled to what it took to produce it" in the form of Palestinian concessions, Ross said.

Powell: Support for Israel solid, but Arab needs also important

By SHARON SAMBER

WASHINGTON (JTA) - Characterizing the situation in the Middle East as "uppermost in our mind," Colin Powell told the U.S. Senate committee considering his nomination for secretary of state that he would work for a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Appearing before the Foreign Relations Committee on January 17, Powell, a retired U.S. general, praised President Clinton's work toward a peace agreement and indicated that President-elect George W. Bush would continue the effort. "We will do our part to keep the peace process moving forward," he said.

The new administration's first step will be to ask Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to rein in the violence that has raged in the region since late September. After that, the administration will prepare its diplomatic strategy while waiting for the results of Israel's February 6 election, Powell said.

Bush's foreign policy team is expected to take a very different approach to the peace process than the current administration, which took a strongly proactive role in nudging Israel and the Palestinians toward an agreement.

Powell, who served as national security adviser in the Reagan administration and then as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War in 1991, noted that Israel and the Palestinians themselves need to take the initiative on the peace front, and not rely on the United States to push an agreement forward. "We seek a lasting peace, as have all previous administrations, based on unshakable support for the security of Israel, the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people, our friendships in the Arab world and a hard-headed recognition that the parties themselves must make the peace," Powell said.

World Jewish news

Commission reports do little to resolve mystery of Wallenberg's death

By LEV GORODETSKY

MOSCOW (JTA) - Despite 10 years of study by a joint Russian-Swedish commission, the mystery surrounding Raoul Wallenberg remains unsolved. The commission studying the case of the Swedish diplomat, who saved tens of thousands of Jews during World War II only to be arrested by Soviet agents in Budapest in 1945, issued two conflicting reports January 12.

In the Russian version, Wallenberg, arrested at the age of 32, died in 1947 at the Lubyanka prison as a result of violence. Soviet officials had long held that Wallenberg died of a heart attack. He was "rehabilitated" late last year after reports surfaced about the committee's findings.



RAOUL WALLENBERG: Commission studying his fate has issued conflicting reports.

Sources in Moscow said the official rehabilitation - an acknowledgment that Wallenberg was the victim of Soviet-era injustice - was initiated by President Vladimir Putin, who wanted to heal a wound in Russia's relations with the West and international Jewish groups.

The Swedish report, however, cites evidence

that Wallenberg may have died as late as 1989 in a psychiatric clinic near Moscow. A strong argument in favor of this version, says the Swedish report, is the fact that in 1989 Soviet officials gave Wallenberg's relatives his personal belongings. Soviet prison regulations specify that

this should be done within six months of a prisoner's death. The Swedes also say they have documents and witness testimony from CIA archives that indicate Wallenberg was held at the psychiatric clinic in 1983.

Russian experts argue that these witnesses

could have been KGB-controlled.

The Soviet spy agency often used such agents to spread misleading information, Igor Sinitin, a former Soviet intelligence officer who has become a Wallenberg expert, told JTA. Wallenberg risked his diplomatic

status to issue "protective letters" that saved Jews in Budapest during the war. The Russian version is the one many Jews for years have believed to be true, but one U.S. Jewish group long involved in the Wallenberg effort does not find the Russian report conclusive.

WORLD NEWS IN BRIEF

Wolfowitz named deputy secretary

WASHINGTON (JTA) - Paul Wolfowitz was named deputy secretary of defence by President-elect George W. Bush. Wolfowitz, a Jew who was undersecretary of defence in the administration of Bush's father and is currently dean of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, was an adviser to the Bush campaign and had been a leading candidate for secretary of defence, a post that went to Donald Rumsfeld.

Czech calls for crackdown

PRAGUE (JTA) - A Czech legislator called on police and state prosecutors to crack down on people selling neo-Nazi CDs and literature in towns close to the German border. Vladimir Lastuvka made the appeal after two German legislators showed him evidence that extremist materials were being sold in two Czech towns.

Croatian leader backs Nazi trials

NEW YORK (JTA) - Croatia's president agreed to back his country's prosecution of alleged Nazi war criminals, according to the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Stjepan Mesić, who made these comments in a meeting with Efraim Zuroff, an official with the Nazi-hunting group, also agreed to support a Holocaust education project that will be translated into Croatian for use in schools and cultural institutions throughout the country. The Wiesenthal Center had refused to meet with Mesić's predecessor, Franjo Tudjman, because of what it called his glorification of Croatia's fascist wartime government.

Activist Ben Zion Leuchter dies

NEW YORK (JTA) - Jewish activist and journalist Ben Zion Leuchter died January 14 after suffering from ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Leuchter, who lived in Key Biscayne, Fla., was a former president of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and a past chair of CLAL. He also served as a longtime JTA director.



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