Style

'Lebensraum'

JTOP production ponders Jewish-German rapprochement

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A page a day

Brian Hendler/JTA photo

Orthodox Jews take part in an English-language Siyum HaShas celebration, the end of a seven-year cycle of daily Talmud study, in Jerusalem at the International Congress Hall, March 2. Thousands of English speakers living in Israel and people that arrived from overseas took part in the event. *See stories, pages 8 and 14.*

Jewish groups face resistance on Sudan

By Matthew E. Berger
Jewish Telegraphic Agency

WASHINGTON — The Jewish community is facing resistance as it attempts to intensify pressure on the Sudanese government to ease the violence that has killed tens of thousands.

Several Jewish community activists said they were not finding much interest in the issue when they tried to partner with African-American or church groups.

Instead, U.S. Jewish groups have turned to international organizations such as the United Nations, European Union and African Union to halt the killings and help those who have fled the fighting in the African nation and flocked to refugee camps.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, said he led a coalition that met with ambassadors of African Union countries, asking them to increase the number of troops in Sudan and to protect innocents as well as humanitarian workers.

Saperstein said some progress has been made in expanding the African Union's mission to include protecting innocents.

John Prendergast, special adviser to the president of the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit agency, said there has not been one U.N. or other international punitive measure levied against Sudan in 23 months.

"The message is as clear as it can come," he told Jewish Council of Public Affairs and Hillel delegates Feb. 27. "You can kill as many people as you want. There will be no repercussions."

The government has exploited ethnic tensions, sponsoring Arab militias that

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UJF helps day schools secure $1.29M in funding

Pittsburgh's four Jewish day schools recently received $1.29 million in scholarship funding secured by the United Jewish Federation through a state tax credit program.

Through the Pennsylvania Educational Improvement Tax Credit Program, Community Day, Hillel Academy, Mesivta of Allegheny County and Yeshiva Schools each received the state funding through contributions made by 15 corporations. Last year, the day schools received $1.05 million in tax credit funding.

"Since we launched our effort in 2001 to secure participation by local corporations in the program, we have enabled our day schools to receive $3.55 million in additional revenues to support scholarships," UJF President Jeff Finkelstein said in a prepared statement.

The funding has been distributed to the schools on a per capita basis for student scholarships as determined by the income eligibility formula contained in the state law.

The UJF was one of the first organizations in western Pennsylvania to take advantage of the program when it was launched three years ago. A supporting foundation was established to comply with the many state regulations.

Nearly 900 students are educated through the Jewish community's day school system. Approximately 37 percent receive scholarships.

W.Va. Jews support Byrd despite record

By Susan Jacobs
Associate Editor

Senator Robert C. Byrd drew the ire of Jewish groups last week when he compared the tactics of Senate Republicans to those of Nazi Germany.

Robert C. Byrd

This wasn't the first time the West Virginia Democrat has drawn criticism from Jewish groups. With a long history of opposing foreign aid packages that support Israel, Byrd has a reputation for being unfriendly to the Jewish state.

As the so-called dean of the Senate, who is immensely popular in his home state for all the lucrative federal projects he has directed there, Byrd draws mixed reactions from Jewish voters. Some admire his willingness to stand up to and criticize the Bush administration, while others say that he has never been an advocate for Israel or the Jewish people.

Byrd's remarks last week came in the context of a discussion of whether to limit senators' license to draw out legislative debate indefinitely — known as the filibuster. Some Senate Republicans would like to do away with filibusters to expedite the legislative process. Byrd said that doing so would weaken the power of the minority and, as Hitler did in Nazi Germany, make it possible for one party to "manipulate law to cruel and unjust ends."

The Republican Jewish Coalition responded by calling Byrd's remarks "inappropriate and reprehensible."

"For Robert Byrd, a former member in the Ku Klux Klan, to invoke Hitler in a debate over Senate procedure on judicial nominations is way over the line," said the coalition's director, Matt Brooks, in a prepared statement. Byrd was a Ku Klux Klan member as a young man, but long ago renounced his membership and has since apologized for affiliating with the white supremacist group.

"He has apologized time and time again," said Tom Gavin, Byrd's press secretary. "He has called it the biggest mistake he ever made. Looking back he

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Byrd:
A West Virginia 'institution'

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doesn't understand why he would join such a group."

Byrd's remarks last week caught the attention of Jewish voters in West Virginia, but most of those interviewed for this article said they were not upset by what he said.

"He always cages things in historical references," said Rabbi Victor Urecki of B'nai Jacob Synagogue in Charleston.

Urecki explained that he didn't consider Byrd's reference to Nazi Germany to be at all anti-Semitic. "He was playing the Holocaust card," the rabbi said. "I think it's a wrong approach, but that doesn't mean that lurking behind it is anti-Semitic feeling."

Even so, Rabbi Helen Bar-Yaacov of Temple Israel in Charleston said that it was inappropriate to compare Republicans to Nazis.

"Any comparison of this to the Nazis is really to be abhorred," she said. "It is nothing like that. This country is still a democracy. All of us have to be very guarded in how we use terminology."

Richard Gutmann, the director of the West Virginia University Hillel in Morgantown, said Byrd's remarks have been blown out of proportion, but that Byrd was making an important point in safeguarding a long-held practice in the Senate.

"Maybe there was a better way to say it," Gutmann said.

Charleston lawyer Robin Godfrey had no problem with Byrd's remarks.

"I think it was clear what he was complaining about," he said. "Why Jews take offense to this I don't know. They should support the one with the backbone to want to assure the checks and balances that are fundamental to our democracy."

West Virginia Jews are also split on whether Byrd's voting record on Israel detracts from his reputation as an otherwise respected legislator, albeit one who is unafraid to speak his mind in strong language and to stand alone in opposition to his Senate colleagues.

"Generally, voters in West Virginia see Byrd as the last of an old breed of power brokers and are willing to overlook his lapses," said Morgantown attorney Richard Cohen. "He could not be said to be pro-Israel.

"Jewish voters are proud of Byrd for standing up for the Constitution," Cohen continued. "They are not eager to see him replaced."

Apart from Byrd's voting record on aid to Israel, Urecki said, West Virginia Jews have never had any conflicts with him. And because Byrd is so popular in the state, he added, no other candidate is likely to beat him in an election.

"He's so much a part of West Virginia, it doesn't make a difference what we think of him," Urecki said. "He's going to get elected. He's an institution."

With only about 2,000 Jews in West Virginia, the Jewish vote has little impact on statewide elections. In addition, the Jewish community is hardly monolithic in its political views.

Byrd's opposition to the war in Iraq has brought him national prominence and respect from many liberals, Godfrey said. "In today's climate, I think he's a hero. Across the country he's really respected for the principled stand he's taken."

On the other hand, Israel lobbyists no longer make an effort to meet with Byrd because he is so staunch in his refusal to vote for resolutions that aid the Jewish state.

Dr. Fred Pollock chairs the West Virginia delegation of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. For the last three years he has attended AIPAC's national convention in Washington, in which participants meet with senators and representatives to ask them to support Israel. While Pollock has met with Sen. Jay Rockefeller and Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, he has never met Byrd, and AIPAC has sent the implicit — if unspoken — message that meeting with Byrd would be a waste of time.

"It's not worth the trouble to meet with him. He doesn't support foreign aid of any sort," Pollock said. "Most people feel he is not a friend of Israel. I wouldn't vote for him."

Gavin, Byrd's press secretary, said that the senator's voting record reflects a commitment to being evenhanded.

"What he has worked to do is ensure that the U.S. is seen as an honest broker in the Middle East," he said. "The funding bills were not as evenhanded as they should be. He has voted accordingly."

Cohen said that Jews in West Virginia are not single-issue voters, and are willing to see past Byrd's record on Israel.

"People were not pro-Bush even though he was seen as pro-Israel," he said. "There are bigger issues people are concerned about." Their concerns include the fear that pre-emptive strikes in the Middle East may jeopardize Israel's security.

For his part, Gutmann will continue supporting Byrd, even if he doesn't always agree with the senator's views.

"I don't agree with everything he does, but all in all he's a good senator," he said. "He's done a lot for the state of West Virginia."

(Susan Jacobs can be reached online at sjacobs@pittchron.com.)

Sudan:
JCPA calls for sanctions

Continued from page 1.

have killed tens of thousands of Africans in Sudan. Experts estimate that more than 1 million people have fled the violence and most are now in refugee camps in neighboring Chad.

But Saperstein told JTA it has become more difficult to press for sanctions for Sudan, because of concerns that this might disrupt a separate shaky peace deal that has emerged and ended violence between Muslims in the north and Christians and animists in the south.

"How do you balance compromises made to end the war without tying your hands to difficulties in other parts of the country?" he asked.

The issue played a large role in the JCPA plenum last week in Washington, capturing the support of Jewish community relations councils. It was also discussed by students who were attending the Charlotte B. and Jack J. Spitzer B'nai B'rith Hillel Forum on Public Policy at the same time.

"This is genocide," said Martin Raffel, JCPA associate executive director for international concerns. "If there's a genocide happening, how can this not be at the top of our agenda?"

JCPA passed a resolution denouncing the genocide, and questioned Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., and Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., on the issue.

It also pressed the United Nations to condemn the genocide.

"I wouldn't yet give up on the United Nations," Clinton said March 1. "I would like to argue and shame them into taking action in Darfur."

Scores of convention-goers sported green bracelets to acknowledge the genocide. One was even presented to McConnell.

Felice Gaer, director of the American Jewish Committee's Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, said the Jewish community has a unique role to play in advocating for more action.

"There is a certain moral force the Jewish community has addressing issues of genocide," she said. "It shouldn't be allowed not to speak from the heart just because this has become an issue for the European Union or African Union."

The JCPA's resolution calls for targeted sanctions to be imposed on the Sudanese government and its business interests as a means of pressuring the government to end the genocide.

Raffel joined a delegation who met with John Underriner, project management coordinator in the Sudan Programs Project at the State Department, and gave him a petition signed by nearly 1,000 JCPA and Hillel conference participants.

Raffel said Underriner suggested the Bush administration has seen a rise in public concern about the crisis there, and said it is of great importance to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

The JCPA also passed several other resolutions on foreign policy issues.

Language that backed $350 million in U.S. aid to the Palestinians was added to a bill expressing support for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The measure was approved unanimously.

The plenum also approved a resolution expressing concern over Iranian efforts to obtain nuclear weapons and urged the United States and international community to use "appropriate means" to combat the threat. Original language that suggested military intervention as an option was deleted.

The Reform movement is expected to broach the topic on March 13, when it opens its biannual Consultation on Conscience.

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West Bank city handovers imminent

Israel was expected to hand over Jericho to Palestinian Authority control Wednesday. Security sources said.

The handover schedule was set Tuesday by Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, in talks aimed at restarting goodwill gestures agreed upon at last month's peace summit but hindered by the Feb. 25 suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.

The Palestinians are to regain control of five West Bank cities altogether. Should the Jericho handover go smoothly, Tulkarm is expected to follow next week.

On Thursday, Mofaz is to fly to Sharm el-Sheik to meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the main patron of the latest Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation efforts.

In a related matter, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef called Prime Minister Ariel Sharon "evil" because of his plan to withdraw settlers from the Gaza Strip. In his weekly sermon Tuesday night, former Sephardi chief rabbi and spiritual head of Shas, said, "God should strike him a fatal blow, that he should go to sleep and never get up," Army Radio reported.