



## News from the Nations

### IRA link to PLO

British security officials are looking into suspicions that a crack sniper who killed ten Israeli soldiers and civilians on the West Bank might be an IRA gunman. Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, has asked European and American security agencies if they can help to identify the killer. The attack shocked the Israeli Defence Force. The IRA is known to have links with the Palestine Liberation Organisation and other Middle East armed groups, and at least one member of the IRA army council is known to speak Arabic. The security official said: "Many IRA men and women have been trained in camps in the Middle East and North Africa".

### Romania and Bulgaria may be added to NATO list

Richard Armitage, the US deputy secretary of state, recently gave the clearest signal yet that Romania and Bulgaria may be added to the list of more advanced East European countries that will be invited to join NATO this year. At a conference in Bucharest of ten heads of state hoping to be included in the expansion of the defence organisation due in November, Mr Armitage said: "We want the most robust round of enlargement possible. We want to bring in as many countries as are qualified, from the Baltic, to the Black Sea, to the Adriatic. No country is excluded". Bulgaria and Romania are hoping to capitalise on their part in aiding the US operations in Afghanistan. Both countries have opened their airspace to US warplanes, and the US is also using a Bulgarian Black Sea base for refuelling aircraft.

### Syria and Libya broaden the 'axis of evil'

The inclusion of Libya and Syria as countries for which the US should be prepared when "setting requirements for nuclear strike capabilities" may be the most surprising element in a secret Pentagon review of US nuclear policy, recently leaked. The naming of the two countries will be seen as a broadening of President Bush's 'axis of evil', which includes Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Both Syria and Libya have backed the US war on terrorism and are rarely cited by the Administration as serious threats. Neither has a nuclear weapon nor is thought to be developing one. However, experts said recently that US nuclear deterrence was not only aimed at hostile nuclear states but also at countries suspected of developing chemical or biological weapons. Syria and Libya are in that category, while Syria also has missile capabilities.

### IRAQ COUNTERATTACK

According to a World-Watch report, after US Vice President Dick Cheney returned home empty-handed from his support-seeking tour of the Middle East, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein sent out officials to seek backing from Arab countries in case of a possible American attack. Vice-chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council Izzat Ibrahim went to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, while Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan and Deputy Prime Minister Aziz were sent to other regional capitals.

### Haider set to host Saddam weapons chief

As Saddam Hussein braces for an American offensive, Austria's radical right is reinforcing its ties with Iraq. Jörg Haider, former leader of the Freedom Party, has invited Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri and Petroleum Minister Amr Rashid and his wife to visit Carinthia, the province of which he is governor. Also included in the invitation was the British-educated head of Iraq's biological weapons research and development programme, popularly known as 'Dr Bacillus'. Haider issued the invitations during a mid-February trip to Baghdad. The proposed visit to Austria has sparked speculation that it might be linked to Iraqi attempts to acquire material and machines required for weapons of mass destruction. Among the topics discussed at Haider's fifteen-minute meeting with the Iraqi dictator during his February visit was strengthening ties between the Freedom Party and Saddam's Baath Party. A statement issued by the Iraqi news agency INA underlined the importance Saddam paid to Haider's visit on account of his "positive attitude" to the régime.

**AFFIRMATION OF ANTI-ZIONIST COMMITMENT**

*A call for a reassertion of the role of Muslim ulama in fighting Zionism was made in Beirut in December, when about 130 senior ulama from around the world gathered there for a two-day conference on "Saving Jerusalem and Supporting the Palestinian People". The conference was also attended by resistance groups, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hizbullah. At the end of the meeting the ulama issued a communiqué emphasising that "Palestine in its entirety from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea and from its northernmost to its southernmost, with all its cities and villages and its capital Jerusalem, is an Arab-Islamic land and the homeland of all its Palestinian progeny, whether those living under occupation or those rendered refugees forcibly and compulsorily, and it must be given back to them and they must return to it unconditionally". The declaration rejected every kind of agreement with Israel as "null and void" because the Zionist State represents "an illegitimate and illegal presence that stems from invasion, usurpation and occupation". On Jerusalem, the statement said that the Holy City "with its known historic boundaries is an Arab-Islamic city subject to neither division nor partition. It is the duty of all Muslims to liberate it, defend it, and protect it from Judaization and the changing of its landmarks". The communiqué also expressed "praise for the contents of the Saudi crown speech, and valued the stances of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran in supporting the Palestinian people and the resistance". It also praised the "distinguished role of Lebanon, government and people, in confronting the Israeli occupation, and resistance to 'normalisation' with Israel at the economic, political, diplomatic and trade levels". They also proclaimed the "prohibition of offering aid for American-led aggression against any country around the world".*

**Putin's message to Russian rabbis**

Russian President Putin has held an historic pre-Pesach (Passover) meeting with twenty-one Lubavitch rabbis—a dramatic signal of Chabad's ever-closer ties with the Kremlin. After the meeting a spokesman for the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia said that Mr Putin had voiced his gratitude for "the Jews' contribution to Russian society". Mr Putin had also extended Pesach greetings to Russian Jews and emphasised the national importance of fighting religious intolerance. The significance of Mr Putin's Passover greeting—the first ever by a Kremlin leader—was not lost on the president, Mr Berkowitz, who said: "He knew that people would compare the freeing of the Jews of Russia to the Exodus from Egypt". Mr Putin reportedly pledged support for efforts to open more synagogues and Jewish day schools. Federation and Lubavitch leaders have been urging Washington to remove Russia from the Jackson-Vanik 'watch list'. Rabbi Lazar used the meeting with Mr Putin to reiterate his view that Soviet-style state anti-Semitism had ceased to exist in Russia.

**Carey's peace call**

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Carey, voiced hope recently that religious leaders would play a part in bringing about an end to violence in the Middle East. Speaking at a gathering of religious leaders at the Vatican's Notre Dame Centre in Jerusalem, Dr Carey said that religions could "lend their weight in a call for peace". The meeting, attended by Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Rabbi Michael Melchior and Jerusalem's Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, was a follow-up to January's so-called Alexandria Declaration. Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders meeting in the Egyptian port city signed a joint declaration vowing to work to create a just and lasting Middle East peace.

**Israeli push to continue**

Israel has decided to press on with an offensive in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—despite an historic United Nations resolution calling for a Palestinian State. The document was the first UN vote to recognise the right of Palestinians to a homeland. The US-drafted document, which outlined "a vision of a region where two states, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognised borders", was backed by fourteen out of fifteen security council members. Only Syria abstained in the UN vote, claiming the resolution did not go far enough and failed to address the issue of Arab lands taken by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War.

**VATICAN'S CHANGE OF MIND**

*In what appears to be the latest in a series of stalling tactics, the Vatican recently announced that it would not open its controversial World War 2 archives for at least another three years.*