



## News from the Nations

### **Muslims deny Israel's right to exist**

There will never be peace in the Middle East as long as Israel exists", according to the Muslim Association of Britain chair Dr Azzam Tamimi, who addressed a large crowd at a London conference recently. Dr Tamimi told an audience of around 300 at the School of Oriental and African Studies that "no Muslim on the face of the earth, not even Yasser Arafat, will accept that Israel has the right to exist". He was among speakers at the all-day forum on "the impact of Zionism on Jewish, Christian and Muslim Relations", organised by the Friends of Al Aqsa. Dr Tamimi continued, according to a report in the *Jewish Chronicle*: "We have nothing against the Jews, we have everything against the Zionists". Dr Tamimi, a Hebron-born Palestinian, argued that, "alongside all Arab nations, Israel should become a United States of the Middle East, under Islamic law". Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, in a recent statement before he died, said: "Islam is against the killing of all civilians. But Israelis are not civilians . . . we will continue our fight until Israel is an Islamic state".

### **FRANCE FORGES CLOSER LINKS WITH CHINA**

France's growing closeness to the Chinese leadership was acknowledged when the two countries held joint naval exercises and the European Union said it wanted to scrap its post-Tiananmen Square arms embargo. According to a news report, as two French and two Chinese warships practised "non-conventional security", the EU's foreign policy supremo, Javier Solana, said it was working to end the embargo in an "orderly fashion". Although the drive to scrap it has been led by France, with the support of Germany, some other members are uneasy because of China's poor human rights record.

### **Pope hosts historic talk with rabbis**

The pope recently held talks with Israel's chief rabbis and assured them of his commitment to improve Catholic-Jewish relations and promote cooperation between the two faiths. "The official dialogue established between the Catholic Church and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel is a sign of great hope. We must spare no effort in working together to build a world of justice, peace and reconciliation", the pope said.

### **EU urges Libya to join trade talks**

The European Union has called on Libya to send officials to Brussels after Tripoli said it was ready to join the EU's Barcelona process, the only grouping that brings together all the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. The aim of the Barcelona process is to create a free trade region by this decade.

### **Brown freezes Hamas accounts**

Chancellor Gordon Brown recently froze funds held in Britain by five senior Hamas figures, including Abdel Aziz Rantisi, the organisation's new leader. According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, Abdel Rantisi is seen as more extreme than assassinated Sheikh Yassin. The Treasury has instructed the Bank of England to direct all financial institutions to freeze the accounts of Mr Rantisi and the Damascus-based Hamas political leader, Khaled Masha'al, as well those of three other top leaders. The Treasury said it had "reasonable grounds" for suspecting that four of those named had facilitated or participated in commissioning acts of terrorism. Ahmed Yassin would have appeared on the list too, said Treasury officials.

### **European unity award for pope**

Pope John Paul II is being honoured for his efforts to ensure European unity with a special edition of the International Charlemagne Prize. The pontiff follows Sir Winston Churchill, former US President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Tony Blair in winning the prize, which has been awarded annually since 1950 by the German city of Aachen. The award committee cited the "extraordinary contribution of the pope to the process of European integration, and his particular effort to exert an influence from Europe on the shaping of the world order". The presentation ceremony is to be held in the Vatican later this spring.

### **Bridging a rift in the Middle East**

Israel and Jordan laid the cornerstone for a joint research centre straddling the border between the two countries in the Arava recently. Organisers said the 150-acre campus near Moshav Ein Yahav is a way of building peace from the ground up. The project has the backing of Israeli, Jordanian and American business people, as well as Cornell and Stanford universities in the US. Jordanian Education Minister Khaled Toukan said at the groundbreaking ceremony: "I am hoping that a centre like this will help promote better understanding between our peoples".

### **Next on the European ecumenical agenda**

The ecumenical movement is rapidly moving into interfaith. The Roman Catholic Council of European Bishop's Conferences (CCEE) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) now call the ecumenical tune in Europe. The CCEE speaks for Rome and the CEC represents the non-Roman Catholic churches, including Protestants, Orthodox and Anglicans. The two organisations work closely together and with the EU Commission. Their joint 'Islam in Europe' Committee has produced the report, *Christians and Muslims: Praying Together? Reflections and Texts*. The authors argue that joint prayer with Muslims is now not just acceptable but unavoidable, as for instance in cases such as a communal accident, an end-of-term event in a mixed school, a mixed marriage, or a civic service with a Muslim mayor in a Christian area. When such inter-religious worship is organised there are a number of religious expressions used which people of all faiths feel they can participate in.

### **Mubarak and the US**

According to a daily newspaper, President Mubarak of Egypt is cornered over the US push for Middle East Reform. "In the unlikely setting of a rebuilt terminal at Cairo International Airport, President Mubarak spoke with fury betraying the pressure that his ally, America, has suddenly put on his régime. 'Nobody imagines that we can press a button and freedoms will arrive, otherwise it would lead the country to chaos', he said. 'If you opened the door wide open without any controls, it would be anarchy'". President Bush has declared the spread of democracy in the Middle East a vital American interest and called on Egypt to lead the way. US officials are touring the Arab world, promoting the "Greater Middle East Initiative". Many in his Administration believe that Iraq has opened up an historic opportunity to democratise the region. In the Arab League's Cairo headquarters, delegations from Egypt and its allies are trying to agree a counterproposal. They hope to find a position that satisfies Mr Bush while leaving them in control of the direction and extent of reform. Observers believe that Mubarak has no doubt about his predicament. "Suddenly he is losing his grip. His modus operandi is unsustainable", said the publisher of the Cairo Times and president of the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights. "He's responding. He knows that he is cornered". Egypt is the second largest recipient of American aid in the world, receiving more than £1 billion a year. Mr Mubarak is acutely aware of America's leverage. Mr Seif, leader of the Hisham Mubarak Legal Centre, says: "Egypt's human rights record is worse than two years ago". He shares his president's suspicion of US pressure. "When America says 'You must be more democratic', I ask the question, 'What do they really want?'" Mr Kassem believes the trend is clear. "This is an authoritarian régime that is crumbling. What's happening now is irreversible".

### **PRINCELY SUM FOR THE HOLY LAND**

According to the Catholic Times, the world's cardinals gave Pope John Paul II one million euros (£700,000) for his twenty-fifth anniversary, and the pope has designated the funds for projects to assist Catholics in the Holy Land. Pope John Paul has begun distributing the money, giving €100,000 (£70,000) to the Pontifical Mission for Palestine. The Pontifical Mission for Palestine is linked with the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, an organisation founded by the US bishops in 1926 at the request of Pope Pius XI. A Vatican official said the rest of the money would be distributed to other Catholic charitable agencies and to the patriarchs of the Catholic churches in the Holy Land.

### **Israeli-Turkish water deal**

Israel and Turkey have signed a deal which will bring some fifty million cubic metres of water annually from Turkey for the next twenty years. The agreement, five years in the making, was signed in Jerusalem by Foreign Ministry Director-General Yoav Biran and his Turkish counterpart Ugar Ziyal, who was in the country to take part in the annual Turkish-Israeli strategic dialogue.