



News from the Nations

EU anti-Semitism meeting

EU Vice-President Franco Frattini has agreed to hold a second European conference on anti-Semitism, probably at the European Commission in Brussels this autumn. The first such meeting, held at the instigation of the World Jewish Congress in February 2004, had been triggered by an EU poll suggesting that Europeans believed Israel was the greatest threat to world peace. Mr Frattini spoke of his concern at the increasing number of attacks against European Jews, and told delegates, "Fighting anti-Semitism is and will remain my highest priority, and we should act against it in a concrete manner". He announced the establishment of a new EU-sponsored agency, saying that the "fight against anti-Semitism will be at the heart of its activity". Its mandate would be to make recommendations to EU member states on ways to fight racism and intolerance around Europe and to "spread a culture of freedom of religion and tolerance". The format of the second conference would "not be Jews talking to Jews" but rather European intellectuals and experts discussing solutions to eradicate anti-Semitism. It was said that this was a "European problem, and not a Jewish problem".

Romania closer to EU entry

Romania took two important steps recently towards joining the European Union in 2007, winning a key stamp of approval in Brussels and adopting an anti-corruption programme at home. The European parliament's foreign affairs committee recommended that the full parliament endorse membership for Romania and Bulgaria.

Sharon welcomes truce by militants

Palestinian militant groups announced recently a de facto truce that will expire at the end of the year if their demands, including military withdrawals and prisoner releases, are not met. Thirteen Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, issued a statement after meeting in Egypt, saying they had agreed to the conditional truce. Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, called the arrangement a "positive step", but added that further progress in the peace process hinges on disarming the militants. "The terrorist organisations cannot continue to exist as armed groups and certainly not as terrorist organisations", Mr Sharon told President Mubarak of Egypt, according to a spokesman. A ceasefire concluded last month by Mr Sharon and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, failed to include radical militant groups. Israel has maintained its stance that any progress towards easing conditions on the ground for the Palestinians depends on the halt to violence. Mr Sharon is concentrating on his plans to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements later this year.

HIZBULLAH AND THE EU

The EU is "highly unlikely" to place Hizbullah on its list of terror organisations before the May elections in Lebanon, despite intense Israeli diplomatic efforts recently to get the organisation blacklisted, according to a reported assessment in Jerusalem. Israel stepped up its diplomatic efforts earlier in the year, after Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas was elected, when it became clear that Hizbullah was increasingly involved in terror attacks inside Israel. Israel received a boost when Abbas indicated that Hizbullah was complicating his efforts to bring about a ceasefire and solidify his own authority. There is also a sense in Jerusalem, according to the report, that attempts to place Hizbullah on the terror list will be more difficult after the Lebanese elections if Hizbullah does well at the polls. One of the arguments heard in Europe, particularly in France—which so far has been the leading opponent to blacklisting Hizbullah—is that the organisation is a legitimate political party and that the EU should not cut off ties with legitimate political parties. Even as Israel is trying to get Hizbullah on the list, the Arab press reported that there are rumblings in Europe—primarily Spain and France—about leaving Hamas off the terror list. The reason is speculation that Hamas will fare well in the July Palestinian Legislative Council elections, and if it is on the terror list EU countries will have difficulty dealing with the organisation. Israel's traditional response to those who say Hizbullah is a political party is that political parties generally don't have an arsenal of some 13,000 missiles.

Turkey and Europe

The EU sees Turkey as a way to engage further in the Middle East. Accession talks are meant to help that along. According to a report in the Jerusalem Post, "Although Turkey is only a candidate for European Union membership, the license plates being used on Turkish cars are exact replicas of EU plates—same size, same shape, same vertical blue stripe on the left. Only the circle of 12 golden stars that is the Union's symbol is missing. Last December 17 the EU finally gave the green light to begin accession negotiations with Turkey, expected to last 10–15 years. With this step, the EU decided not only to embark on negotiations to bring Muslim Turkey into its fold but also, assuming the talks are successful, to extend Europe's borders to Syria, Iraq and Iran, with far-reaching geostrategic implications. 'The EU is looking for greater engagement in the Middle East', says Michael Emerson, a senior research fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies, a Brussels-based think tank. 'It is aiming to advance economic and political developments at the national level'. In Emerson's view, the United States, through its unpopular war in Iraq and continuing support of the Sharon administration, has become disabled in the Mideast, losing both trust and influence. The EU meanwhile has an opportunity to step in and fill the vacuum left by Washington's declining image in the region. Emerson says, 'Turkey should be regarded as an unambiguous potential asset for EU foreign and security policy', since its historical and current ties in the Middle East give the EU ready access to the region. Graphically and culturally, Europe sees Turkey as a doorway to new markets and spheres of influence, and access and a say in the Middle East and the Caucasus".

Iran and US discuss nuclear issues

The US and Iran have rejected each other's opening offers over the Islamic régime's nuclear programme, but European negotiators remain hopeful that a long process of bargaining lies ahead, rather than a rapid slide into a US bombing campaign. Iran quickly dismissed concessions put forward by the Bush Administration recently as worthless. US officials in private have been equally dismissive of a technically complicated Iranian offer that would allow it to preserve critical parts of its nuclear fuel cycle under an intrusive system of inspection. European diplomats confirmed that Iran had made a 'side-door' offer to the US out of frustration with the lack of progress in negotiations with the three EU members, France, Germany and the UK. The Bush Administration refuses to join these negotiations. But under pressure from the EU it agreed to allow Iran to proceed with its application to join the World Trade Organisation and to consider further sales of spare parts for Iranian civilian aircraft.

DEAD SEA QUAKES

An earthquake measuring 4 on the Richter Scale hit the Dead Sea area in February. It was the sixth tremor in twelve months.

Plan for softer look to Israeli flag

According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, Israel is almost certain to change its flag within the next year. According to sources close to Prime Minister Sharon, senior cabinet members have long been unhappy that the present flag is seen as the symbol of an aggressive, uncompromising Israel, and have asked the country's top design agencies to come up with alternatives as the first step in a complete rebranding of the state. The new design features seven Magen David (Star of David) symbols in pastel shades on a pale blue background floating around a menorah—echoing Theodor Herzl's seven golden stars on a white background, which he intended to become the flag of the Zionist state. The winning designer, the noted Tel Aviv graphic artist Mordecai Silver, told the *Jewish Chronicle* that he saw the new flag as promoting a new, less harsh Israel.

SURVEY PREDICTS MASS EXODUS OF FRENCH JEWS

According to a news report, "A new survey of French tourists to Israel has suggested that 60,000 French Jews—one tenth of the country's community—could emigrate to Israel over the next five years. The research, by a Professor Erik Cohen of Israel's Bar-Ilan University, focused on about 125,000 French Jewish tourists who visited Israel last year. The survey also found that only 28 per cent of those questioned believed they would still be living in France at the end of that period. The survey's results were presented on Monday at the founding conference of Ami (brainchild of French hi-tech entrepreneur and European Jewish Congress Vice-president Pierre Besnainou) which aims to provide financial and technical aid to new French immigrants to Israel".