



News from the Nations

ISRAEL'S ANTI-MISSILE DEFENCE

Israel's Arrow-2 anti-ballistic missile is capable of intercepting and destroying any Iranian missiles, even were they to carry nuclear warheads, a high-ranking Israel Defence Force (IDF) officer told the *Jerusalem Post* recently. In addition, the *Post* has learned that the Israel Air Force's elite search and rescue Unit-669 is currently training to carry out long-range missions. Meanwhile, a senior IDF officer told the *Jerusalem Post* that Israel would have no choice but to launch a massive ground operation into the Gaza Strip in the near future to stop the Kassam attacks.

EU cash for Palestinians

The EU recently donated \$45 million for Palestinian relief. The sum, given to the United Nations for disbursement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, was an ad-hoc gesture that was not meant, the EU said, to undermine the EU's call for Hamas to moderate its stance on Israel. Last month the EU gave the Palestinian Authority a similar amount to pay salaries.

Al-Qa'eda in the West Bank

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Israel has provided the first evidence of al-Qa'eda activity in the West Bank when two Palestinians were charged with receiving funds and training from the group for a double bombing in Jerusalem. The case gives the most concrete proof yet of al-Qa'eda penetration of the country. However, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, recently announced he had evidence that it had tried to recruit in Gaza and the West Bank.

Palestinian rockets threaten Israel

Israel needs to prepare for a large-scale disaster caused by Kassam rockets fired from Gaza, which could strike the Ashkelon power plant, or chemical storage tanks in the nearby industrial zone, senior security and government officials have warned. Eight Kassams have been fired at the Western Negev, with one exploding close to a strategic installation in the Ashkelon industrial zone, home to a desalination plant and sections of the Ashkelon-Eilat oil pipeline. The Israel Defence Force censor has prevented the publication of the exact targets hit by the rockets so as not to help the Palestinians improve their accuracy. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, former Israeli Chief of General Staff Moshe Ya'alon has accused the government of responsibility for Hamas's victory in the recent Palestinian Legislative Council elections because of the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, and not providing sufficient protection for cities targeted by Kassam rockets. "We need to escalate military action against the Kassam launchers, even if it means entering the Gaza Strip", he said in a speech during a conference of the Jerusalem Centre of Public Affairs. He thinks Israel made a mistake by not responding immediately after the Kassam showers began.

Hamas attacks US support for Israel

As reported in *World News*, the senior Hamas foreign minister launched a stinging attack on America and its close relationship with Israel. These comments have dashed any hopes that Hamas would bow to international pressure for it to recognise Israel and give up its armed struggle for a Palestinian homeland. He said that America is committing big crimes against the Arab and Islamic countries. He also accused the United States of supporting Israel's "occupation" of Palestinian land. America provides Israel with about £2 billion annually, and Mr Zahar said this money was spent on "the occupation".

US anger over Moscow's Hamas invite

The US and Russia are still engaged in a diplomatic dispute following Moscow's decision to break ranks with the international community and invite members of the Hamas leadership for talks. Washington is now battling to maintain an international front against Hamas, with not only the Russians forging ties with the organisation but also moderate Arab countries and possibly France too. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni warned of a slippery slope if any contact with Hamas did take place. Other Israeli officials were more scathing, with Transport Minister Meir Shitreet calling Russia's move a stab in the back.

The US and Iran's nuclear threat

According to a report in the *Jerusalem Post*, "With the US stuck and focused on its troubles in Iraq, the superpower might have missed out on its opportunity to stop Iran's nuclear programme, leaving Israel to deal with the threat alone", former senior Israeli officials warned. "We cannot let this war prevent action against Iran". Gary Berntsen, a former senior CIA operative, believes the US has the ability easily to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. He said the US could use bunker-buster bombs and other weapons to carry out the operation: "We can take care of it in a couple of days with air strikes and they would not be able to stop us". Moshe Ya'alon, Israel's former Chief of General Staff, also said the Israel Defence Force could attack Iran's nuclear facilities, and could do it in conjunction with the US and some EU countries. However, Berntsen believes Israel should not carry out any operations. "It is better for the United States to do it. If Israel does it, we will have all sorts of problems in the Middle East, all sorts of countries that will align themselves with the Iranians over this. Politically it makes more sense for the US to do it", he said.

UK warning to Hamas

The UK Foreign Office has warned Hamas that it would ban all official contacts with the organisation until it changed its policies. "At the end of the day it is up to Hamas to recognise Israel and halt terrorism if it wants to renew links with us", a diplomatic source told the *Jerusalem Chronicle*. The warning came as Prime Minister Tony Blair made it clear in his monthly press conference that British support for the creation of a Palestinian state would be forfeited if Hamas did not abandon violence.

Israel a "threat to Christianity"

Palestinian church leaders have told British Christians that the Israeli occupation, rather than the newly elected Islamic government, presents the greatest threat to Christianity in the territories. Addressing an ecumenical conference at Westminster Central Hall, Bethlehem Bible College's Dr Bishara Awad attacked Israel as "a machine of oppression, of destruction and discrimination against people who have been created in the image of God. In recent history, it is Israel and not Islam that has caused the rapid exit of Christians from Palestine". The Anglican bishop in Jerusalem, the Right Reverend El-Assal, a critic of Israel, said he had publicly congratulated Hamas on its election victory.

US FIRM ON IRAN

It is reported that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice took a tough stand on the Iranian nuclear issue in a meeting with Jewish leaders in Washington recently. Speaking to leaders of Aipac, the American Jewish Committee, the United Jewish Communities and the Republican Jewish Coalition, Dr Rice made it clear that "no option is off the table. No one is ready for a nuclear Iran and the Iranians must understand that". She added that, when it came to using force, President Bush "does not have a credibility issue".

Teheran warns Washington

According to the *Financial Times*, Iran threatened the US with "harm and pain" recently as the dispute over Teheran's nuclear programme moved to the United Nations Security Council. Some Western diplomats are alarmed at Iran's growing influence in the Middle East, where it has strengthened ties with Syria, reinforced relations with Iraq's Shia majority and promised funding for Hamas, the militant Islamist group that won this year's Palestinian elections. Washington described Iran's response to the IAEA meeting as "provocative". John Bolton, US ambassador to the UN, told the Associated Press news agency, "Their threats show why leaving a country like that with a nuclear weapon is so dangerous". He said the Iranian comments reflected their determination to acquire weapons.

Russia plans to sell reactor fuel to India

According to the *Financial Times*, Russia defended plans to sell nuclear fuel to India as Western governments and advocates of arms control voiced concern that international guidelines were being weakened at a critical juncture for nuclear non-proliferation. Russia, host of the G8 meeting, has upset fellow members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) by deciding to supply sixty tons of nuclear fuel to India, which is not a member of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Members of the NSG, an informal association, were unhappy with Russia but could do little, diplomats said. "If Russia goes forth with the sale of nuclear material to India without consensus from the NSG this will begin a new era in which the rules that governed nuclear trade for decades are gradually swept away".