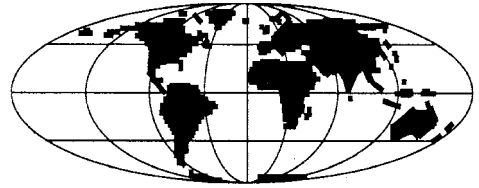


News from the Nations



Egypt to help broker new Gaza agreement

Egyptian intelligence minister Omar Suleiman visited Israel recently in an attempt to broker an agreement with Hamas that will enable an orderly opening of the Rafah border-crossing and possibly an unofficial ceasefire with Israel. Mr Suleiman is widely regarded as one of the most powerful men in Egypt after President Mubarak, and is seen as one of the candidates, along with the president's son Jamal, eventually to succeed him. He is the senior go-between for Israel and the Palestinians. Egypt has a clear interest in a peaceful opening of a border crossing at Rafah, at the southern border of the Gaza Strip, after the chaos caused recently when Hamas blew up the border fence and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians streamed into Sinai. Mr Suleiman will be offering a deal whereby a new crossing is opened, similar to the one that existed before Hamas took over Gaza two years ago. He hopes to receive American support for his plan. In the meantime the Israel Defence Force continued to carry out operations within the Strip. Recently a combined force of tanks, engineers and Givati infantry troops uncovered five tunnels in the Dahaniya region that had been used for smuggling arms into Gaza. Some fifty Palestinians were arrested for questioning. Members of Al-Qaeda infiltrated the Gaza Strip after its border with Egypt was breached, military intelligence head Amos Yadlin told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee.

Blair plea on Mideast peace talks

Tony Blair has warned that the current Middle East peace talks must be pursued with "greater urgency and greater focus" if Israelis and Palestinians are to achieve a peace agreement by the end of the year. Mr Blair, who is the international community's Middle East envoy, said, "We can keep going at the present pace, and at the present pace things are moving forward slowly—but this pace is not urgent enough to deliver an agreement this year. There needs to be greater urgency, greater focus and greater determination". In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Mr Blair insisted he was making progress towards his task of improving the Palestinian economy and bolstering the capabilities of the Palestinian Authority.

EU CALLS FOR TROOPS ON GAZA BORDER

Members of the European Parliament are to call for European Union troops to be sent to supervise the reopening of Gaza's border with Israel. Their demand follows the resumption of work on a major Gaza relief project, sponsored by Tony Blair's peace mission, after Israel allowed the World Bank to deliver forty-four tons of cement to the £8 million Umm al Nasser sewage treatment plant, designed to stop 40,000 litres of waste every day polluting the water supply to 10,000 Palestinians. Mr Howitt, Labour's foreign affairs spokesman, accused Israel of "imposing medieval conditions on the people of Gaza". The European Parliament met recently to vote on calls for an end to the Israeli blockade and for Europe to challenge its legality in the UN. "European countries can achieve support from all sides in the UN Human Rights Council, to seek enforcement of international humanitarian law", it said.

Merkel strengthens Israeli ties with Germany

Israel and Germany agreed recently on a closer strategic relationship, with agreements on joint investments and defence cooperation, during a visit to Jerusalem by the German chancellor, Angela Merkel. Under the agreement the two governments will meet annually, a relationship that cements Germany's role as one of Israel's strongest allies in Europe and its second-largest trading partner. The visit was to mark the sixtieth anniversary later this year of Israel's creation. Merkel will not meet Palestinian leaders, although her government has agreed to host a joint Israeli-Palestinian conference to encourage the peace process. At a joint press conference with Merkel, Olmert spoke about expanding settlements in East Jerusalem. "We have announced that there will be places where there will be additional building—these are places that will remain with Israel in any constellation, and this includes first and foremost Jerusalem, and everyone knows it".

Iran remains the biggest threat to Israel

Iran will likely reach the nuclear tipping point in late 2009 or early 2010, the heads of Mossad and Military Intelligence told the Israeli cabinet in March during an in-depth briefing on the strategic situation facing the country in 2008. Both Mossad and Military Intelligence pointed to Iran as Israel's most menacing threat, both because of the progress it was making in its nuclear programme, and due to its leadership of a radical axis in the Islamic world. According to the Jerusalem Post, it was not the only problem, with Syria, Hizbullah, Gaza and Palestinian terrorism, and global jihad, named as the other threats Israel would face in 2008. The intelligence community warned that a major flare-up on any front could lead to other fronts opening as well; an escalation in violence in the Gaza Strip could lead to a Hizbullah attack in the north. The assessment was that the threat from Teheran was growing due to the weakening of the worldwide front against it, the fact that its nuclear programme was moving forward, and since it was establishing itself as the leader of the radical camp in the Islamic world. The intelligence officials said Iran was likely to reach a "point of no return" in its nuclear programme by the end of 2009, and also declared that Syria was engaged in an intensive armament programme and was deploying long-range missiles. The representatives from Mossad and Military Intelligence said the region was in the midst of a struggle between a radical axis led by Iran and a pragmatic camp that included Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf states, Jordan and Egypt. Shin Bet representatives said there was an increasing separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. They said Hamas had made a significant military leap and was now very close to having an organised army, with training coming from Iran.

Hamas denies understandings with Israel

Hamas has denied that it had reached understandings with Israel over a truce or period of calm, but confirmed that Egypt was playing a role in trying to achieve a ceasefire. Palestinian Authority officials in Ramallah told the *Jerusalem Post* in March that Hamas and Israel had reached "secret understandings" to stop the violence. The officials claimed that the latest agreement was reached under the auspices of the Egyptians, and that Hamas had pledged to stop firing rockets at Israel. Israeli officials emphatically denied that it was negotiating any type of ceasefire with Hamas, or through a third party.

UN APPROVES FRESH SANCTIONS ON IRAN

The United Nations escalated the pressure on Iran over its nuclear programme recently by imposing more sanctions. The resolution, passed by fourteen votes to nil in the Security Council, with one abstention, was the culmination of months of diplomatic effort by America and Britain, and places travel bans and asset freezes on twelve individuals and thirteen companies linked to the nuclear programme. It also requires the monitoring of two state-owned banks. Teheran is steadily being shut out of the world banking system, limiting its use of oil revenues.

Vatican's secret talks with Saudis

The Vatican has been holding secret talks with the Saudi Arabian authorities on building churches, according to one of Pope Benedict's top Middle East representatives, who said, "Discussions are under way. We cannot forecast the outcome". In a news agency press report, the pope's envoy in the Gulf added, "There are around three or four million Christians in Saudi Arabia, and we hope they will have churches". The opening recently of the first church in Qatar left Saudi Arabia as the only country in the region that still bans all forms of Christian worship. Last November, King Abdullah became the first Saudi monarch to visit the Vatican, and sources in Rome say the Saudis are keen to establish formal relations, but the Vatican demands religious freedom. Benedict has made it one of the aims of his papacy to press for "reciprocity". Qatar's deputy prime minister, Abdullah bin Hamad al-Attiyah, said, "We are enjoying the construction of mosques and Islamic centres in the West, so we must be fair to Christians".

Jewish youth alienated from Israel

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, recent studies show that young Jews around the world are increasingly alienated from Israel. The report said, "Philanthropist Charles Bronfman says that a new study shows that the next generation of American Jews is 'less concerned with Israel's welfare than previous generations and, unbelievably, less comfortable with the very idea of a Jewish state'. The same study finds that fewer than half of American Jews under the age of 35 feel that Israel's destruction would be a personal tragedy".