



## News from the Nations

### Iran's nuclear buildup

Iran has become the most contentious foreign-policy issue in the Bush Administration, with bitter division over whether to force régime change in Teheran or woo reformist elements. According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, "Iran is putting in place key pieces of a sophisticated nuclear industry that America fears will turn the theocratic régime into a dangerous and destabilising nuclear power in the near future. In the latest of a series of worrying signs that Iran may have a covert nuclear weapons programme, diplomats said that United Nations inspectors had detected traces of enriched uranium in samples that were taken in Iran recently. The International Atomic Energy Agency has found that Iran has been building a large and previously unknown uranium enrichment plant, a heavy water production plant, and had plans to build a heavy water nuclear reactor. It has also failed to declare imports of uranium products and the fact that it had made uranium metal, which has few uses apart from nuclear weapons. A Russian-built nuclear reactor at Bushehr, on the Gulf coast, is due to begin operating by early 2005. At about the same time a large new uranium enrichment plant will start work at Natanz, in central Iran. A country so rich in oil and gas has no legitimate use for nuclear power. Experts believe Iran is still a few years away from being able to make a bomb. But Israel gave warning recently that Teheran was moving so fast that its nuclear programme would become 'irreversible' in 12 to 18 months".

### IRANIAN MISSILE TEST

*Iran confirmed recently that it had finished testing its Shahab-3 missile, which could reach Israel and be a threat to the region and US interests there, despite US efforts to stop the programme. This fuels international fears over Iran's suspected development of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. The Israeli Government said it was very concerned. Experts see the delivery test as preparation for mass production of the Shahab-3, which is based on North Korea's Nodong-1 missile. The EU has suspended trade talks with Iran over the nuclear issue, demanding that Teheran open all its facilities to UN inspection. Russia is continuing construction of a civilian nuclear reactor in southern Iran, which is under UN safeguards.*

### Russian arms exports

Russia's arms exports are running at more than \$4 billion a year, providing vital revenues for the country's ailing manufacturing industries. Moscow is ready to risk Washington's wrath by continuing to trade with states blacklisted by the US, such as Iran and Syria, as well as supplying China and India.

### Israel warns Britain of Iranian nuclear threat

*Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told Tony Blair at a private Downing Street meeting recently that Israeli intelligence officials believe that Iran is within about a year of developing a nuclear bomb. According to a report, senior diplomats in Mr Sharon's entourage said he used the meeting to assure Mr Blair of his readiness to make concessions for peace with the Palestinians, but also to sound a dual warning. The first concerned the Iranian arms programme; the second, concerning Mr Sharon's bid to convince Mr Blair and Mr Straw to cut ties with Mr Arafat, was politely but firmly rebuffed.*

### North Korean nuclear threat

International concern over North Korea's nuclear threat intensified, according to a *Daily Telegraph* report, when it was reported that Pyongyang had reprocessed 8,000 spent fuel rods to extract plutonium for nuclear weapons. The report was followed by a warning to Tokyo by Washington that North Korea has 200 medium-range Nodong missiles aimed at Japan. Australian Prime Minister John Howard said that "North Korea is a rogue state. It is clearly in breach of international obligations on nuclear weapons". North Korea has never tested a nuclear device, but said recently that it intended to "build up its nuclear deterrent". South Korean intelligence services reported that North Korea had carried out seventy high-explosive tests linked to nuclear weapons development.

### Sharp fall in immigration to Israel

Israel's renewed conflict with the Palestinians, and the economic recession, have sparked a large drop in the number of immigrants arriving in Israel. Immigration Minister Tzippi Livni said consultations were underway over ways to stem the trend. According to ministry figures, just 7,500 immigrants arrived in Israel from January to June of this year. Even if the number doubled in the second half of the year, the total figure would be far below the 35,000 for 2002 and 45,000 in 2001. Ms Livni said: "It is impossible to remain indifferent to what's going on. I believe that immigration will define the strength of the State of Israel. We have to focus our resources to bring in more immigrants". Mr Rosenberg of the Jewish Agency suggested that perceptions of growing anti-Semitism in France, and Argentina's own economic crisis, might prompt a rise in immigration to Israel.

### Russia and China bid for Iranian oilfield

Russia and China are offering to develop Iran's largest oilfield after a Japanese consortium bowed to US pressure recently and suspended negotiations on a deal worth more than \$2 billion. The readiness of Russia and China to enter talks over the giant Azadegan field demonstrates the difficulties facing the Bush Administration in its efforts to halt Iran's suspected nuclear weapons programme through economic sanctions. The loss of Azadegan to China, which is a growing oil importer, would deal a serious blow to Japan. Both are competing for energy sources in the Middle East and are engaged in a high-stakes struggle to secure an oil pipeline from Russia.

### Undefeated

*On the Afghanistan-Pakistan border the Taliban are regrouping, bent on spreading terror. A report said that "The Taliban are stronger now than at any time since the fall of their government". In the past month, militants belonging to or affiliated with the Taliban have launched scores of rockets at US military bases, and detonated explosives in several Afghan cities. They have ambushed American and Afghan troops. According to Masood Khalili, once a leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and now Afghanistan's ambassador to India, "A year ago the Taliban were scared, broken and disconcerted. Now they are forming again, slowly, gradually, like a photograph developing". The big picture, according to Kandahar's police chief Akram, is that these neo-Taliban number in the thousands. They operate from sanctuaries in Pakistan's tribal belt, guided by many of the same men, including supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, who ran Afghanistan's ultra-orthodox theocracy from 1995 to 2000, when the group harboured Osama bin Laden. The Taliban have also forged a deepening alliance with Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his fundamentalist, anti-Western, Hizb-I-Islami Party, which remains potent in eastern Afghanistan.*

### AFGHAN BORDER CLASHES

*According to a report in the Daily Telegraph, "Afghan fighters claim their country has been invaded and say explosions regularly echo across the hills. A Pakistani army is positioned well inside territory that Afghans take to be part of Afghanistan. On both sides of this new front line, forces are building up, promising a grim new problem for the United States, in keeping two of its crucial allies in the fight against al-Qa'eda away from one another's throats. At least 600 Afghans, a battalion-sized force, have already attempted to storm Bab-Doud and regain it from the Pakistanis. The engagement was just one of many border skirmishes which have been fought out in the past fortnight on a wild stretch of country between the Afghan province of Nangahar and the Pakistani tribal agencies. Afghans in the area say they have never seen the Pakistanis so close or so aggressive. Everyone speaks of war. US troops on the Afghan side of the Durrand Line were supposed to seal the border to stop infiltration of Taliban guerrillas who had taken refuge in Pakistan. Pakistani troops were supposed to do the same on their side".*

### Israel sees new EU role in Middle East

The EU ministers, including British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, are responding to an address in Brussels by Israeli counterpart Silvan Shalom, who also signalled a change of heart in Jerusalem on Europe's involvement in the Middle East peace process. Mr Shalom said: "We believe that there is an immense contribution that Europe can make towards building a new language of peace in the region". The "culture of hate" had to be replaced by a "culture of peace". He said that he was "convinced that Europe can play a key role". Mr Shalom's address followed a warning by US President Bush that both Iran and Syria were protecting terrorists.