

Publishing Editor's column

AT THIS TIME fifteen years ago the world was looking a safer place than it had been for many years. An American-led and United Nations-backed force had driven the Iraqis out of Kuwait. The Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev had abandoned its aggression towards the West and was soon to break up into a number of independent nations, leaving America as the only world superpower. Commentators foresaw a world becoming free of conflict between nations under a benevolent America and a United Nations which seemed at last to have the ability to restrain any dictator, like Saddam Hussein of Iraq, who threatened other nations.

This time five years ago the outlook was still hopeful. Russia, by far the largest of the countries making up the former Soviet Union, was weak following years of bad government, corruption and a collapse of its economy. The civil wars that followed the break up of Yugoslavia had largely been brought to an end by NATO- and UN-sponsored action by various nations. Some progress had been made in achieving peace between Israel and the Arabs. Then, on 11 September, came the event which, as predicted at the time, has changed the world: the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York by Islamic extremists.

The steadily worsening world situation of today is illustrated by an article in the 24 July edition of *Newsweek* magazine. A report of an interview with former American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright begins, "You wouldn't be alone if you thought the world was spinning out of control: war in Lebanon, North Korean missile launches, Iran's nuclear programme, Iraq's civil war and real disagreement among world leaders at the G8 [the recent meeting of the leaders of eight major nations in Moscow]". It is a very different world situation from that of five years ago, and it is interesting that it is a war involving Israel that has triggered off such a gloomy assessment of the situation.

The previous time this column was published was in May (the intervening months being covered by a Special Issue), and I then drew attention to the threat posed by Iran to Middle East peace. Interestingly, much of *Newsweek's* coverage of the warfare in Lebanon between Israel and the Hizbullah extremists is about Iran's role in fomenting the conflict, Hizbullah being a Shiite Muslim group established, armed and funded

by Iran, with the support of Iran's ally Syria. It would seem that Iran is seeking to advance its aims by proxy, therefore.

There is no way, of course, that Hizbullah itself could overthrow Israel, but there is always the potential with an escalating conflict to draw in other more powerful forces to enforce peace, and such involvement can always be used by such forces to advance their own interests. We can see in this a way in which prophecies of the nations invading Israel could be fulfilled. It is noteworthy that the disagreement between the G8 nations at the Moscow summit was largely because of Russia's tendency increasingly to flex its muscles. With a strong, even dictatorial, leadership and rapidly increasing wealth due to its oil and gas reserves, and the rapid rise in the prices of these vital commodities, Russia is once more a power to be reckoned with.

In parallel with the growing military tensions in the world, and the Middle East in particular, have come growing warnings from environmentalists that we might be reaching the point of no return in global warming. The greatest area of concern seems to centre around the rapidly melting polar icecaps and the effect this will have on the world's weather systems. And it may not be only the weather that is affected; there are fears that one effect of vast quantities of melting ice will be to create shifting pressures on the earth's crust, triggering earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis. Three times in the last eighteen months we have been reminded of the devastation which can be caused by the forces of nature (the Indonesian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake), and worse may be on its way. Recent reports of a rift opening up along the Rift Valley fault line in Africa, a fault line which extends through Israel, remind us of another aspect of the turmoil to overtake the Middle East before the peace and tranquillity of the Kingdom comes.

The Scriptures relevant to these things are well known to us. The prosperous Western world seems largely to be oblivious of the threats to its prosperity, caught up in sport, holidays and shopping. "But [we] are not in darkness, that that day should overtake [us] as a thief" (1 Thess 5:4), and we need to recognise that drastic changes to our way of life may be round the corner to test our faith before our call to judgement comes.

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