



News from the Nations

Russia seeks leading role

A seventeen-strong official delegation from Russia arrived in Kabul recently for talks with the Northern Alliance and other local groups, as Moscow attempted to maintain a leading role in steering the future shape of Afghanistan. The group, led by Alex Oblov, special envoy, and including representatives from the foreign, defence and emergencies ministries, arrived via the Central Asian state of Tajikistan, over which Russia retains a strong grip, where they held discussions in the capital Dushanbe. The delegation comes at a delicate time, with the Northern Alliance calling on British troops to leave Afghanistan, and already facing criticism from the UN that it is stalling its plans, which Russia supports. As a further sign of Russia's interest in expanding its influence in the region, officials said they were developing plans to open a Russian consulate in Afghanistan's second city, Mazar-e-Sharif. Mr Ivanov, the Russian foreign minister, called recently for the creation of a UN anti-terrorist centre, and new international legal measures to hold countries responsible if they failed to control terrorists harboured within their territory. Russia has been swift to seize the chances for warmer relations with the West triggered by the terrorist attacks on America, and Mr Putin has emphasised his belief that he would welcome closer cooperation with NATO, which he argued was outdated in its current form. However, according to this report, tensions between Russia and the US continue to exist, with a Russian factory recently shipping parts to Iran for the Bushehr nuclear power station, which the US fears could be used for military purposes.

Putin succeeds where Brezhnev failed

Arms and tanks in Kabul streets are evidence of Russia's influence, according to a report from the *Sunday Times*. Russian influence has been apparent on the battlefield, where the success of General Dostum's Uzbek forces over the Taliban during recent weeks has been greatly aided by tanks and arms provided by Moscow. Western diplomats believe that the Russians were responsible for the decision by alliance commanders to occupy Kabul, contrary to the numerous commitments they had given to the West and Pakistan not to do so. On the day that the capital was liberated, it was Russian-made T-55 tanks that paraded through the streets of the city. By backing the alliance covertly and overtly, Mr Putin appears to have succeeded where his five predecessors failed in establishing Moscow's influence across Afghanistan, and all without a Russian life lost. According to one diplomat who has observed the Russian manoeuvres, Mr Putin's tactics have paid off brilliantly.

RUSSIA'S REASONS

Apart from extending their influence over Afghanistan, the Russians have other reasons for wanting to extend their influence in Central Asia. The Russians are obsessed with getting the huge oil and gas riches from the Caspian basin and Central Asia to the warm-water ports. The current proposal is to build a pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan in Turkey, but this would skirt Iran, Iraq and Syria. If, however, the Russians were able to establish warm relations with the new regime in Kabul, they would be tempted to explore the possibility of building a pipeline through Afghanistan. The fate of much of the world's future oil supplies could soon be under Russian control. With an estimated reserve of 110 billion barrels of oil, the Caspian can fill America's energy gap. This might suggest why Mr Bush has suddenly softened his stance on scrapping the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and Mr Putin can play hardball about Russia's partnership with NATO, as he spelt out to Lord Robertson, the Secretary-General of NATO, in Moscow very recently.

EU prepares for entry of ten countries

The European Union is preparing for a 'big bang' entry of ten new members within two-and-a-half years, according to the Daily Telegraph. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Cyprus and Malta are expected to be ready for membership by early 2004. In the latest enlargement report the commission said that the ten states had established full democracies and met the political and economic criteria for entry.

IRANIAN OFFICIALS IN TALIBAN TALKS

Iran has held secret negotiations with the Taliban in an attempt to secure its influence in the region and block the return of the exiled Afghan King Shah. There have been two official visits from the Taliban to Teheran in the past few weeks and a (secret) visit by an Iranian delegation to Kabul. Iran is believed to have offered to arm and fund the return to Afghanistan of Gulbuddin Hekmatayar, a former Mujahideen leader, who has been in exile in Iran and wants to take up arms against the former king. The meetings mark a dramatic shift in Iran's policy of supporting the anti-Taliban's radical brand of Sunni fundamentalism. A Pakistani religious leader close to Mr Hekmatayar said that Teheran will still never accept the Taliban, but they have invested a lot in Afghanistan and do not want to end up with a hostile pro-American government on their borders. Iran fears that the return of King Shah could stir up support for the overthrown Iranian Pahlavi dynasty. Officially, Iran still backs the Northern Alliance, but hard-liners have long pushed for greater cooperation with the Taliban to regain power and influence in Afghanistan.

Straw on second Iran visit

Britain recently underlined its determination to forge a strong relationship with Iran when Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, made his second visit to the country in two months. Mr Straw travelled to Teheran to urge Iran to help in efforts to deliver a new multi-ethnic government in Afghanistan. Iran is crucial to the success of an initiative by the United Nations because of its influence over the Northern Alliance, the force that now controls most of northern Afghanistan.

Russian-Indian links

Russia agreed recently to construct a \$2.6 billion nuclear reactor in India and cooperate on a joint \$1.4 billion jet fighter development programme during top-level talks in Moscow to strengthen links between the two countries. Mr Putin and Atal Vajpayee, the Indian prime minister, issued a statement expressing their full agreement on combating extremism and terrorism, and Mr Putin said he hoped that dialogue could lead to a resolution of the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan.

Kaufman's warning to Israel

Labour MP Gerald Kaufman has urged Britain and America to threaten Israel and the Palestinians with the withdrawal of Western aid over the impasse in the Middle East peace process. Addressing a Common's debate on war against terrorism, Mr Kaufman said that it was time to present the two sides with a "stark choice". Mr Kaufman was one of several speakers to contend that issues central to the terrorist attack on America and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait "come back to the existence of Israel".

HAIDER BACKS ARAB RESISTANCE

Jorg Haider, founder of the far-right Austrian Freedom Party, has been quoted as telling Egyptian journalists that a distinction must be made between terrorism and legitimate resistance against occupation for the restoration of the occupied lands. Mr Haider, on a tour of Egypt, Syria, Kuwait and Iran, reportedly said that terrorism had its roots in the Palestinian problem, and that Europe should seize the opportunity to press for a speedy and peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict.

US aid for Israel

Israel will receive \$2.76 billion in foreign aid from the US in 2002, as part of the foreign aid package passed by the Senate in October last by a vote of 96 to 2.

Anglicans accept pope

According to the Vatican news agency Zenit, Mr Forster, the Anglican Bishop of Chester, announced that the Anglican Communion accepts the primacy of the pope, although its application must be subject to further study. He was speaking as Ecumenical Delegate of the Anglican Communion to the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops in Rome. "Anglicans have come to accept the wisdom and need of a universal primacy, exercised by the Bishop of Rome. It is recognised that such a need, for the mission of the Church, will grow discernibly as the process of globalisation progresses". As Zenit says, "Recognition of the unique role of the Bishop of Rome in Christianity was agreed by the Anglican Communion in a 1999 document entitled The Gift of Authority, of the Anglo-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC)".