



News from the Nations

Troubled Georgia

Russia, Georgia's traditional enemy, has been watching events in troubled Georgia closely, anxious about the prospect of unrest on its border and the extent of US influence. Georgia sits astride key pipeline routes linking the Caspian oil basin to export terminals, while its constant disorder has provided refuge for criminal gangs and terrorists, including Islamists. Western leaders are especially concerned over the fate of a £2 billion pipeline that is being built between Baku in Azerbaijan and Turkey, running through Georgia. The pipeline is designed to lessen the stranglehold the Middle East has on the world's oil supply by piping oil directly from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. Georgia, a country of five million between Russia and Turkey, is considered a vital ally of the West in a volatile region, especially by America, which has sent military advisers there. In the decade since independence Georgia has had frosty relations with Moscow, which sponsored an armed insurrection in the northern province of Abkhazia. More recently, the Kremlin has accused Tbilisi of allowing Chechen terrorists to use the Pankisi Gorge as a refuge, and threatened to send soldiers across the border. One top Kremlin official told his Georgian counterpart recently, "Georgia should turn its back to the West, that would worry the US and Europe, since Georgia is the gateway to the oil and natural-gas reserves of the Caspian Sea".

Macedonia to apply for EU membership

Macedonia is to submit its application for European Union membership in the next few months, in a bold effort to show the progress made since it stood on the verge of civil war in 2001. President Trajkovski announced Skopje's plans at a weekend conference in Berlin hosted by the Financial Times and the BMW non-governmental foundation. His officials said Macedonia planned to apply by February and would become the third country in the former Yugoslavia bidding for membership. A fourth, Slovenia, is one of the ten states joining the Union next year.

Cyprus deal a boost to Turkey

Britain, backed by several other countries, has told Turkey that its chances of starting accession negotiations with the European Union in early 2005 would "be enormously boosted" if a political settlement to reunite Cyprus was reached in the coming months. Turkey is smarting over the recent report by the European Commission warning that its chances of starting accession negotiations could be jeopardised if it did not clinch a deal over Cyprus by the time the island joined the EU next May.

EUROPE PLANS BORDER AGENCY

Plans were unveiled recently for a pan-European border agency to help seal the European Union's new frontier after expansion next year. The fledgling agency is scheduled to start work in January 2005 with a £4 million budget and a staff of thirty. The Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders will serve as a headquarters for air, sea and land surveillance, keeping watch on Poland, Slovakia and the Baltic states that will soon have the task of patrolling the EU's eastern borders.

EU calms US fears

The EU sought to calm US fears that a planned European military force would undermine NATO. At the end of a two-day summit, Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi said EU leaders had agreed unanimously that their defence policy would be "complementary to . . . never an alternative to NATO". US Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns said earlier that the plans represented the most significant threat to the alliance.

NATO chooses Turk for Afghan role

NATO said recently that it had appointed Hikmet Cetin, former Turkish foreign minister, as its senior civilian representative in the Afghan capital, where the alliance commands 5,700 peacekeepers. Mr Cetin will liaise between the Kabul-based International Security Assistance Force and the interim government, the United Nations, the EU and non-governmental organisations.

Peace poll hits Israeli relations with EU

Relations between the European Union and Israel took a sharp turn for the worse recently after an opinion poll showed most Europeans considered Israel the biggest threat to world peace. The poll, requested by the European Commission, asked more than 7,500 people in the fifteen EU member states whether named countries presented a threat to world peace. Fifty-nine per cent named Israel, with North Korea, Iran and the US coming joint second, ahead of Iraq and Afghanistan. A statement issued by the Israeli mission to the EU said it was with "great sadness that we learn that European citizens consider Israel to be the biggest threat to world peace". Those who ask biased questions "should face the consequences of the biased answers they get", it added. Diplomats said the findings would harden beliefs in Israel—and the US—that Europeans are essentially anti-Israel. EU diplomats said they could also undermine efforts by Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, for Europe to play a more active role in trying to force a cease-fire between Israel and the Palestinians.

Tensions rise on Lebanese border

Lebanese Hizbullah guerrillas and Israelis traded fire in a disputed border area recently in the latest sign of rising tensions between Syria and Israel. The attack drew at least five Israeli air strikes and heavy shelling on the edges of several Lebanese border villages. The clashes coincided with a meeting between Lebanese President Lahoud and Lieutenant General Hasan Turkmani, Syria's chief of staff, who has placed the Syrian armed forces on high alert against any fresh Israeli attack.

Russia and Israel

Russian President Putin indicated to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon at the latter's visit to Moscow recently that Russia may reconsider the resolution it introduced to the UN Security Council, calling on it formally to endorse the 'road map' for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Sharon, in a three-hour meeting with Putin in the Kremlin, voiced Israel's adamant objections to the resolution. Putin reportedly told Sharon: "If this bothers you, we will not push". Sharon also discussed with Putin Israel's concerns over Russia's assistance to Iran's nuclear programme, which could be used for nuclear weapons. According to an international report, a senior Israeli official told reporters that Sharon's comments were listened to seriously, but that Putin made no concrete commitments. The official said Sharon told Putin that the 'road map' was aimed at forging a bilateral agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, and could not work if imposed by outsiders. "Russia's position in this UN forum does not help strengthen our relations", the official quoted Sharon as telling Putin. Sharon told Putin that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose a threat, not only to Israel, but to world peace. Welcoming Sharon to the Kremlin for the third time in the last three years, Putin said Russia would continue trying to help the Middle East peace process, and added that recent violence in Israel had caused much concern in Russia for former citizens who have emigrated to Israel. "We follow closely how our former countrymen settle down and go about their lives in Israel, and the worsening of the situation in the Middle East gives us certain concerns about their future", Putin said.

France calls on US to hand over power in Iraq

Dominique de Villepin, French foreign minister, urged the US to hand power to Iraqis, saying, "The international community cannot wait any longer". Although he offered French help, saying, "It is time to work together", he criticised the increasingly tough US military response to attacks in Iraq. He said this risked blurring the distinction between those motivated by a desire to end the occupation and sheer terrorists. M de Villepin insisted that the best way to deal with the deteriorating situation was to speed up the political process, and ask the United Nations to appoint a "special envoy" to work alongside Paul Bremer, the US administrator in Baghdad. He denied that France wished to undermine US policy in Iraq, or that it wanted to prove French policy was right in opposing the US-led invasion.

UK JEWS UNDER THREAT

Scotland Yard has warned Britain's Jewish community of the threat of imminent terrorist attacks. British security officers say that, although they cannot predict specific attacks, urgent measures are needed to protect potential targets such as synagogues and community centres. Some US State Department officials are considering issuing an official warning to US travellers to Britain. Some of the terrorism concern in Britain appears to relate to suspicious Iranian activities.