



News from the Nations

Egyptian plutonium find

According to the *Jerusalem Report*, after the discovery of unexplained traces of plutonium near a nuclear facility in Egypt, Israeli analysts are not ruling out the possibility of a clandestine Egyptian programme to produce nuclear weapons. The article states: "Professor Gerald Steinberg, an expert on nuclear proliferation at Bar-Ilan University's BESA Centre for Strategic Studies, says that, while there is no hard evidence that the Egyptians are trying to manufacture a bomb, the circumstances surrounding the plutonium discovery, by inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), are 'highly suspicious' and 'leave many questions unanswered'".

Fallback option for Turkey and the EU

France is pressing other European Union members to identify a "special partnership" as a fallback option for Turkey should negotiations for its EU membership fail. Inclusion of such a clause in the EU's final decision on the start of membership talks would greatly anger Turkey, which has sought membership for forty years. A French parliamentary debate last month showed deep hostility to Turkish entry, despite private assurances that Mr Chirac backed the "geopolitical" case for membership. "One cannot underestimate the possibility that in a few years we come to realise that . . . the road that Turkey has to travel does not permit it to adopt all the values of Europe", Mr Chirac said recently.

The UN no friend of Israel

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Peter Hansen, the director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), is reported to have told a Canadian diplomat that the UN employs "peaceful" Hamas members. The *Jerusalem Post* says: "Hamas, in addition to other terrorist groups, fire deadly rockets into civilian Jewish communities from inside Gaza. The UN, by taking no action whatsoever to prevent these firings, has virtually approved of them. Kofi Annan, the overall head of the UN, will do nothing to upset the many Arab nations in the UN whom he needs to retain his present position. Annan's son was named in connection with the recent scandalous disclosure regarding the dubious food for oil programme of Hussein, the former Iraqi leader. Annan, at all cost, will protect his son over any alleged wrongdoing. To expect the UN to be a moral force in such a disquieting picture is tantamount to being farcical!".

Hizbullah's boasts

Hizbullah has boasted of its infiltration of Israel in November by releasing footage of its unmanned aerial vehicle flying over northern Israel. The Israeli Defence Force dismissed the sending of the drone as a "propaganda stunt", but reportedly sent fighter jets streaking over Lebanon in an obvious display of asymmetrical power. Meanwhile, UN officials in Lebanon voiced concern that tensions were rising along the border and urged the government in Beirut to exercise control. The drone was Iranian-made and relatively small, weighing about eighty kilograms. It had a wingspan of three metres, and flew at about 129 knots, according to a senior source. The flight prompted military chiefs to warn that the Shi'ite group could use unmanned aircraft for cross-border terror attacks. Israel's chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Moshe Ya'alon, told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee that, armed with a bomb, the drone could be used for attacks on Israel.

Religious United Nations

At a reconciliation meeting with heads of Christian churches in Israel, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yona Metzger has called for the establishment of a religious United Nations in Jerusalem. Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, who initiated the meeting, seconded Metzger's proposal. Greek Orthodox Archbishop Aristarchos, speaking in Hebrew, said the meeting was "an important and joyful event". The church representatives signed a declaration that as leaders of the Jewish and Christian religions they called on followers to "increase their tolerance, respect, and understanding for members of different faiths".

European Union must work for peace

The pope received in audience Mr Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, prior to the signing in Rome in October of the treaty establishing a constitution for Europe. The treaty was signed by the twenty-five Member States. The pope said: "You are here in Rome in these days for the solemn act of the signing of the European Constitution by the twenty-five States that the European Union includes today. The place chosen, the very one where the European Community was born in 1957, has a clearly symbolic value—one knows Rome stands for the spread of universal juridical and spiritual values". (The Holy See encouraged the formation of the European Union even before it acquired any juridical framework, and has subsequently followed it with active interest through its various stages.) The pope continued: "Today I would like to congratulate you in particular, Mr President, for the work carried out during your mandate as head of the European Commission. May the European Union always express the best of the great traditions of its Member States, work actively on an international scale for peace among the Peoples and offer generous assistance for the development of the neediest people on the other continents".

The pope's reflection on a new Europe

In October, before an audience in St Peter's Square, the pope spoke about the signing of the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union. The following is a translation of the pope's reflection, reported in *L'Osservatore Romano* news edition: "On Friday 29 October the Constitutional Treaty of the European Union was signed in Rome. This was a highly significant moment in building the 'new Europe', which we continue to look upon with confidence. The Holy See has always favoured the promotion of a united Europe based on those common values that make up its history. Keeping in mind Europe's Christian roots means to take advantage of a spiritual patrimony that remains essential for the future development of the Union. Let us now prayerfully entrust all peoples of the Continent to Mary, Queen of Europe".

Macedonian tensions rise

The Balkan republic of Macedonia lurched into fresh crisis recently when the prime minister resigned, blaming ethnic Albanians in his coalition government for hijacking the country's political agenda. Prime Minister Kostov's resignation betrays deep ethnic division at the heart of the government. It also mirrors increasing tensions within Macedonia's population as a whole. A peace deal to end fighting during an uprising in 2001 granted Albanians more rights, angering some nationalist Macedonians. The politics involve redrawing boundaries so as to give ethnic Albanians, who make up twenty-two per cent of the two million population, a majority in sixteen out of eighty municipalities and granting them language rights in other districts, including Skopje, the capital, where they form a substantial minority.

Israel warns Lebanon

Israel has issued a stern warning to the Lebanese Government to prevent terrorist actions being launched from its territory, regardless of the identity of the perpetrators, or suffer the consequences of severe retaliation. According to a Defence report in the *Jerusalem Post*, "the warning followed the discovery recently of the remains of a 107-mm Katyusha rocket on open land near the industrial zone of the western Galilee town of Shlomi. The rocket was one of two fired from Lebanon overnight. The second apparently fell into the sea. It was the second rocket to hit in roughly the same area in two weeks".

Palestinians facing humanitarian crisis

The Palestinian territories are facing one of the world's most serious "forgotten" humanitarian crises, the United Nations warned recently. "The Palestinians are not forgotten in terms of political interest but are largely forgotten as a deep humanitarian crisis", Jan Egeland, UN humanitarian aid chief, told the Financial Times. Unemployment has soared, health standards have fallen, malnutrition has increased and sixty-four per cent are below the poverty threshold, he said. The UN is due to launch a "consolidated appeal" for \$1.7 billion to help twenty-six million people survive a global "web of forgotten humanitarian crises".

Iran wants nuclear warheads

America has intelligence indicating that Iran is trying to make its missiles carry nuclear weapons, said US Secretary of State Colin Powell in an economic forum in Chile. He partially confirmed claims by an exiled Iranian opposition group that Teheran is deceiving the United Nations by attempting secretly to try to obtain atomic weapons by next year.