



News from the Nations

Russia to put missiles on NATO's border

President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia ordered the stationing of nuclear-capable missiles on NATO's borders recently for the first time since the Cold War. According to World News in the Daily Telegraph, "In the first state of the nation address to parliament, [Mr Medvedev] said that short-range Iskander surface-to-surface missiles would be placed in Russia's Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad, which borders Poland and Lithuania. Mr Medvedev said he was responding to a missile defence shield that the United States wants to build in Central Europe by 2011. The Russian leader even hinted that he was prepared to use the missiles to destroy the shield, which is to be erected in Poland and the Czech Republic. The shield will consist of a radar station in the Czech Republic and ten missiles—with no warheads—in Poland. These 'interceptor' missiles would offer no protection against Russia's nuclear arsenal, which totals about 13,000 warheads. Their only purpose would be to shoot down a missile launched from Iran, which is presently developing the ability to fire rockets at long-range targets. Although Russia's Iskander is normally equipped with conventional warheads, it could be modified to carry a nuclear weapon. The Russian leader also blamed the US for the war in the Caucasus, which saw Russia invade Georgia. In his address Mr Medvedev said, 'The conflict in the Caucasus was used as a pretext for sending NATO warships to the Black Sea and then for foisting America's anti-missile systems on Europe'".

UK leads push to boycott settlement goods

The Israeli and British Governments have clashed over imports from Jewish West Bank settlements, with Jerusalem concerned this may be the first salvo in a British-led international campaign. The issue has been personally pursued by Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who according to an internal document "has proposed a round table involving UK government officials, NGOs and retailers" to discuss it. The dispute arises from complaints by the UK Revenues and Customs service that Israeli companies label products, especially fruit and vegetables grown on West Bank settlements, as originating within the Green Line, the name given to the border line between Israel and the West Bank. In 2005 Ehud Olmert, then Israeli Finance Minister, and the then European Trade Commissioner, Peter Mandelson, agreed that Israeli EU imports would be labelled with the postcodes of the areas where they were produced, enabling governments and retailers to know if they originated on a settlement. The Israel-EU preferential trade agreement only covers products from within the Green Line. Now the Foreign Office is demanding that Israel identify settlement products more clearly. The Foreign Office initiative is a result both of pressure from consumer groups with a significant pro-Palestinian element, and of British ambitions to lead a campaign by the EU to force Israel to take action on the various settlement issues, with the EU using "political influence to encourage Israel to freeze settlement construction as per Israel's Road-map commitments". "Britain wants to see some progress", said an Israeli diplomat, and now that there has been a lull in terrorist activity they are focusing on the settlements as the main obstacle.

Khyber convoy brings winter relief to NATO forces

A convoy supplying NATO forces in Afghanistan drove through the Khyber Pass recently as Pakistan reopened the crossing for the first time since militants hijacked and looted thirteen lorries recently. About fifty vehicles carrying oil, food and military hardware made its way to the frontier from the northwestern city of Peshawar, escorted by 100 Pakistani soldiers and paramilitaries in vehicles mounted with heavy machine guns. The escorts had orders to shoot on sight. Helicopter gunships patrolled overhead. NATO and US officials say attacks have not affected their operations in Afghanistan and refuse to give details of which supply routes they use for security reasons, claiming they have multiple supply routes. NATO struck a deal with Moscow to open a new supply route through Russia and Central Asia, but it has yet to be approved. The alliance is also wary of giving Moscow a stranglehold on its supplies in Afghanistan after their dispute over the war between Russia and Georgia.

Removing Israelis from peace process

According to an article in *Israel Today*, “with Israel’s democratic process getting in the way of securing a final peace agreement with the Palestinians, the international community would like to take the troublesome Israeli electorate out of the equation. This was made clear by the ‘Quartet’ of world powers mediating the Middle East peace process—the US, UN, European Union and Russia. After a meeting in New York, Quartet leaders insisted on keeping Israelis in the dark about what their leaders are offering to the Palestinians. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Middle East envoy Tony Blair represent the world powers pushing to divest Israel of its biblical inheritance. According to Israeli media reports, caretaker Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Olmert’s replacement as leader of the ruling Kadima party, have offered the Palestinians at least ninety-three per cent of Judea and Samaria (the so-called ‘West Bank’) and parts of East Jerusalem for the creation of a Palestinian state. In a statement, the Quartet noted the significance of this process and the importance of confidentiality in order to preserve its integrity. Referring to the ‘irreversibility of the negotiations’, the Quartet effectively tied any future government to the above concessions. The leader of Israel’s main opposition party, Netanyahu of the Likud, has warned that the government’s concessions to the Palestinians are dangerous and will lead to the establishment of a Hamas terror state in Israel’s back yard. But by declaring these concessions ‘irreversible’ the Quartet is effectively saying that they will be binding on any future government no matter what the electorate decides. In the years since Oslo, the international community has come to understand that the Palestinians will settle for nothing less than 100 per cent of their demands being met. The only way to achieve this is to make all Israeli offers binding, no matter how tentative, and then stockpile them over a period of time until the Palestinians are satisfied. The Quartet’s goal appears to be to change the rules of the game, to the point of denying Israeli voters the ability to participate in the peace process in any meaningful way. Israel’s leaders have been only too happy to acquiesce to the new anti-democratic rules as they seek to forge a positive legacy as ‘peacemakers’. If the international community succeeds in eliminating the last vestiges of electoral pressure and political accountability in Israel, then the convergence of increasing recklessness by the nation’s leaders and overbearing-ness by Western power brokers will be complete”.

Water level of Kinneret

According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, the water level of the Kinneret (the name Israel calls the Sea of Galilee) finally stabilised after six months in which it shrank every day. Following heavy rains it is now 214.25 metres below sea level, but to fill up completely it still needs to rise another 5.45 metres. At the same time, rationing of water for household use is proposed by spring if this winter is a dry one, and the forecasts for the region are not optimistic.

EU seeks to end dependency on Russian energy

According to a *Daily Telegraph* news report, the European Union is drawing up plans to cut its dependency on Russian oil and gas supplies by signing deals with dictatorships in Asia and the Middle East, arousing the concern of human rights groups. EU leaders are keen to bypass Russia in order to break its stranglehold on supplies to the continent. The European Commission will publish a strategic review of “energy security”. The document has identified the EU’s dependency on oil and gas imports from Russia as a major element in foreign policy and as a key factor in political power play between Europe and Moscow. Britain has been looking for ways to cut dependence on Russian energy following previous disruption to pipelines and growing fears that Moscow could use the threat of switching off the lights to wield international power. Medvedev’s doctrine is to build a new security bloc and a gas cartel, and transform Moscow into a financial hub. Key to reducing the dependency on Russian pipelines will be the creation of a “southern corridor” for the supply of gas from Caspian and Middle Eastern sources, which could supply a significant part of the EU’s future needs. Eight countries—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Ireland, Sweden and Finland—are completely dependent on Russian gas.

Damascus offers talks

Syrian President Bashar Assad has transmitted a message to Israel that he wants to renew indirect talks through Turkey, it was reported in early November in the *Jerusalem Report*. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni’s response was, “If this is anything more than just maintaining the negotiations alive, it is inappropriate and unacceptable”.