



News from the Nations

RUSSIA'S DEAL OVER CASPIAN SEA

Azerbaijan and Russia agreed recently to draw a line marking the borders between the two countries in the Caspian Sea, where billions of dollars of potential oil and gas reserves are at stake. The deal, signed during a two-day visit by Russian President Putin to the Azeri capital, was hailed as a big step towards an overall agreement for dividing up the sea's considerable hydrocarbon reserves and natural resources. The four Caspian states created by the break-up of the Soviet Union—Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan—along with Iran have been unable to reach agreement on the overall status of the Caspian, the world's largest inland body of water. Mr Putin and Mr Aliyev (his Azerbaijan counterpart) agreed to the principle of drawing a line from a mutually recognised point in the middle of the sea-bed, yet to be determined, to the borders of the two countries on the shoreline. The line recognises the existence of the two countries' already existing national sectors, and follows a similar agreement between Russia and Kazakhstan in 1998. Officials say that the deal could have further implications as it creates momentum for a wider general agreement between all five countries that border the sea. Western plans for the region have suffered a setback because of concerns about the financial viability of a proposed oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea to Turkey through Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's energy reserves, and its location between Russia, Iran and Turkey, have led to it being labelled a "geopolitical pivot" by some US strategists, but increasingly Moscow is the dominant power in the region.

CHURCHES UNITE TO CELEBRATE EASTER

All the Christian Churches (representing almost two billion souls, according to a report in The Universe) will celebrate Easter on the same day this year, Pope John Paul II announced recently at the closing ceremony of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. He hoped this year's common celebration of Easter would lead to agreement on a common date for Easter for the future. The report continues: "Until the 16th century, all Christians celebrated Easter on the Sunday after the first full moon of spring. But after Pope Gregory XIII reformed the Julian calendar, Easter began to be celebrated on different dates by the Eastern and Western churches". The pope apparently made the announcement at a major ecumenical service at the Basilica of St Paul's outside the Walls in Rome on 25 January, attended by delegates from twenty-eight Christian churches and communities, including the Orthodox and Protestant. The pope said the Church was irreversibly committed to the search for Christian unity.

Turkish and Israeli ties

Israeli and Turkish delegations recently held a two-day meeting in Ankara, a sign that the two countries' increasingly close ties are surviving the crisis in the Middle East. There has been domestic political pressure in the wake of the Palestinian-Israeli clashes in September for Turkey to lower the profile of its ties with Israel. An exchange of visits by senior military personnel is planned for the near future. Joint naval exercises involving Turkey, Israel and the United States meanwhile began off Israel's Mediterranean coast. Originally planned for last year, they were postponed due to the renewed Middle East violence.

Moscow halts debt repayments

Russia recently threatened not to pay its debts to the Paris Club of sovereign creditors for the first quarter of this year, adopting an aggressive tone towards servicing its international debts. As its economy starts to come right, Moscow can afford to ignore international donors, even to the extent of declining to make repayments. One reason for Russia's apparent lack of concern over making repayments is that it does not now need money from foreign donors and is more confident in dictating its own terms as a result. Another factor is that Mr Putin, concerned about Russia's dependence on the outside world, has sent signals to his administration in recent months that foreign aid should be reduced in an effort to establish greater autonomy.

Swedes plan closer EU-Russia links

Sweden intends to use its six months' presidency of the European Union to develop closer EU relations with Russia and to help it move towards membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Goran Persson, the Swedish prime minister, said that "the time was very promising for developing ties with Russia while its economy was improving. EU-Russian relations were among the highest priorities on the Swedish agenda". Leif Pagrotsky, the Swedish trade minister, said that the present Russian Government wanted to integrate Russia into the world economy. "If it can be done it will be an irreversible step. Russia will not again face the temptation to go into isolation", he said. He hoped Russia would make a leap forward in the coming year. Sweden will organise an EU-Russia conference in Moscow in March to explain the WTO and its obligations to the Russians.

IRAQ'S CHEMICAL WAR PLANTS

The Foreign Office said recently that it shared American fears that Saddam Hussein has rebuilt factories capable of producing chemical weapons. The claim came amid signs that the new US Administration is considering a tougher policy towards Baghdad. Arab countries are drawing closer to Baghdad, pushed by a popular feeling that sanctions have gone on long enough, and attracted by Iraq's growing economic power as a result of high oil prices. Iraq has become one of Egypt's biggest export markets, while Syria stands to make good profits by importing cheap Iraqi oil through a 552-mile pipeline that is being refurbished. Several Western countries, especially France, have reappointed diplomats to head high-powered "interests sections" in Baghdad.

GERMAN-RUSSIAN TALKS OVER KÖNIGSBERG

Germany has launched a 'secret' initiative to acquire economic domination over the former East Prussian capital of Königsberg (now a detached part of Russia) in return for waiving part of Moscow's £22 billion debts to Berlin. Moscow has made it clear that its faltering economy means that it is in no position to repay all its debt to Berlin. Instead it has offered Germany equity stakes in Russian companies—a development which, if fully implemented, could give Germany unprecedented influence over Russian economic policy. If realised, the proposals for Kaliningrad (Königsberg), captured by the Red Army in 1945, would make Germany the dominant economic player in its former Baltic stronghold which, until now, had been considered irrevocably consigned to Russia. The inclusion of its immediate neighbours, Lithuania and Poland, into the Union over the next decade will leave the region effectively cut off from its hinterland. For Germans, Kaliningrad is important from an emotional standpoint. German cash has been raised to reconstruct the ruined Königsberg cathedral, and thousands of Germans make pilgrimages to the city each summer in an attempt to rediscover their lost roots.

President Bush and Israel

In one of his first actions as President, George Bush has instructed aides to begin exploring the process of moving the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, according to the *Jerusalem Report*. The president has asked his foreign-policy team to look into how this can be accomplished. According to a spokesman for the White House, Bush's goal in the Middle East is to achieve "lasting peace, based on a secure Israel, and he will work actively on that issue—but it's not going to happen overnight".

Saddam has atom bombs

Saddam Hussein has two fully operational nuclear bombs and is working to construct others, an Iraqi defector has told the *Sunday Telegraph*. According to the unnamed defector, bombs are being built in Hemrin in northeastern Iraq, near the Iranian border. "There are at least two nuclear bombs which are ready for use", he said recently. "Before the UN inspectors came there were 47 factories involved in the project. Now there are 64". Security experts say they were aware only that the area around Hemrin was well guarded. "The area is restricted to the Special Security Organisation", according to the defector. "Some of it is under the control of the military industrialisation ministry, which is in charge of building up Saddam's weapons arsenal, but one area is entirely under the control of the nuclear energy organisation. They are digging shelters there". The nuclear programme is shrouded in secrecy. The chain of command leads directly to the presidential palace and Saddam's closest aide, Abed Hmoud. Melissa Fleming, a spokeswoman for the UN-founded International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, said: "We want to investigate this as soon as possible".