



News from the Nations

EU expresses anger with Israel

The European Union is protesting to Israel about the destruction of EU-funded projects hit by Israeli troops in anti-terrorist strikes on the West Bank and Gaza. According to a report, a Foreign Office spokesman in London told the *Israeli News* that the European Commission and the EU presidency would take up the matter with Jerusalem. European anger was voiced recently by the EU's External Affairs Commissioner, former Conservative Party chairman Sir Chris Patten. Israeli officials have placed responsibility for the damage, estimated at £12.4 million, squarely on Arafat's Palestinian Authority. According to a list of affected EU-funded projects compiled by the European Commission, Gaza airport and the Palestinian radio station in Ramallah had sustained the heaviest damage. School-building schemes and an irrigation system had also been destroyed. Another EU diplomat noted that the EU was the main provider of aid to the Palestinians, having donated £647 million to the PA since 1999. He said: "The irony is that if and when this destruction and fighting ends, the EU will be asked by the Israelis to help to financially support the Palestinians".

POPE UNITES RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PILGRIMAGE FOR PEACE

The pope, along with rabbis and imams, Buddhists and Sikhs, ministers and cardinals, presided over an unprecedented "pilgrimage of peace" to Assisi in which 200 world religious leaders undertook to oppose the use of violence in God's name. The pope's address followed various "testimonials to peace" given by key religious speakers, including a message from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, read by his representative in Rome, director of the Anglican Centre in Rome. The Christians gathered near the tomb of St Francis in the Lower Basilica for their own ceremony of benediction, song and prayer. Among those present was a delegation led by the Russian Patriarch Pitirim, whose arrival was read as signalling a thaw in the frosty relations between the Vatican and the Russian Orthodox Church. There were also twenty-five Roman Catholic cardinals and eight bishops on hand, including the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Murphy O'Connor. The Chief Rabbi, Professor Jonathan Sacks, sent Rabbi Alan Plancey, who handles interfaith issues in his 'cabinet'. In London, representatives of nine faiths, ranging from the Baha'i tradition to Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs, took part in a service organised by the Roman Catholic Church. Timed to coincide with the gathering at Assisi, the service was held at the Maria Assumpta Centre, Kensington, where participants pledged to "work for peace and to heal the wounds of discord and division".

Beijing links Xinjiang separatists to Bin Laden

Muslim separatists in western China have been trained and financed by Osama Bin Laden as part of a 'holy war' to establish a religious state in the region. A paper outlines in detail China's case for 'separatists' in the vast Xinjiang region to be classified as terrorists by the West in the same way it has Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network. China says in a paper that it has arrested more than 100 terrorists trained in Afghanistan to undertake a violent campaign to establish a state of 'East Turkistan' in Xinjiang.

US warns China over weapons

A senior US official recently called on China to do more to prevent the spread of mass destruction. His comments follow long-running complaints from Washington that China is not doing enough to stop the flow of weapons of mass destruction and related materials and technology to unstable regions. Beijing has failed to abide by a November 2000 agreement to stop exporting certain technologies, and has transferred missile technologies to Pakistan.

Iran gas exports to Turkey

Iran recently inaugurated its first exports of gas since the 1979 Islamic revolution, supplying Turkey under a twenty-five-year contract that had been opposed by the US but could eventually lead to sales to Europe. Iran, with the second largest gas reserves in the world, sees gas as the fuel of its economic future, competing with exports of crude oil as its main source of foreign currency.

RUSSIA'S HIGH ROAD

A report in the Daily Telegraph reads: "The last Russian convoy through the Salang Tunnel was part of the Red Army's northward retreat from Afghanistan in 1989. Recently 26 trucks bearing the Russian flag trundled in the opposite direction. They were bringing aid to a suffering people but, even more significant, marking the reopening of one of Afghanistan's key arteries. The tunnel is the highest in the world at 11,034-ft cutting straight through the Hindu Kush mountain range and providing the only direct link between north and south. Two miles long, it was built by Russian engineers from 1956 to 1964 to give Moscow a strategic foothold in Afghanistan during the Cold War. It later became the major conduit for invading forces. The journey from Kabul to the northern capital Mazar-i-Sharif will be reduced from a treacherous two- to three-day journey to just eight hours. Mr Votrotin, a Russian minister, wished the Afghans peace, independence and good relations with their neighbours. Abdul Fazel, the Afghan minister of works, said, "This is the first step for a further relationship between our two countries".

Bush warns Iran

George Bush, the US President, said that Iran should turn over to the US any al-Qaeda fighters who flee into their territory from Afghanistan. He has warned Teheran against trying to destabilise Afghanistan's interim government. Diplomats said that public condemnations of the peace process by influential clerics close to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would reinforce Western concerns that hard-line elements in Iran were seeking to undermine the Afghan administration of Hamid Karzai. Iranian agents were threatening some tribal leaders and bribing others to undermine US-backed programmes.

Iran reverts to type

Afghanistan is facing a serious threat from Iran to its post-Taliban independence. According to a news report, Teheran is seeking to bolster its influence by sending weapons, uniforms and footwear to its longtime ally, the warlord Ismail Khan. The Americans are concerned, and may already have destroyed an Iranian arms shipment with a cruise missile. Now that the Taliban have been overthrown, Islamabad's influence has drastically declined and Teheran is seeking to fill the vacuum. President Khatami of Iran pledged his support for the interim government of Hamid Karzai, but the head of state does not control the main lines of foreign policy; under the revolutionary institution of Velayat-e-faqih it is the prerogative of the supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei. It is he and his shock troops, the Revolutionary Guards, who are likely to be dictating Iran's line towards Afghanistan, which would be intensified by hatred of the United States and Britain. The Iranians have also maintained their anti-Israel stance, strengthening the links between their protégé, Hizbollah, and Palestine Islamic Jihad, Hamas and elements of Fatah. The seizure recently by the Israelis of a ship carrying fifty tons of arms destined for the Palestinians, and allegedly loaded on or near the Iranian island of Qeshm, points to their involvement.

EU to take over police operations in Bosnia

The European Union's fledgling security and defence policy received a boost recently after foreign ministers agreed in principle to take over international police operations in Bosnia. The 500-strong police will be drawn from the fifteen member states and will replace the United Nations-led International Police Task Force, whose mandate expires at the end of this year. It will be the EU's first civilian operation directly tied to its European security and defence policy. By mid-2003 the EU hopes to have in place a 60,000 strong rapid-reaction force capable of carrying out "humanitarian, rescue and military missions" inside or outside Europe.

Carey to sign Anglican-Muslim agreement

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Carey, has signed "an historic agreement" with the Grand Imam of al-Azhar al-Sharif, Dr Mohamed Sayed Tantawy (Egypt's senior Islamic figure, and holder of one of the most respected positions in Sunni Islam worldwide), putting into place arrangements for a programme of dialogue between Anglicans and Sunni Muslims. Dr Carey said that the move was deeply encouraging: "I'm delighted that we have found so much common ground and that we are now able to move ahead in our understanding of one another". The parties hope to achieve the following goals:

- to encourage Anglicans to understand Islam
- to encourage Muslims to understand the Christian faith
- to encourage institutions on both sides to play a positive role in development.