



News from the Nations

UK DECIDES AGAINST BUYING ISRAELI MISSILE

Israel's hopes for a £300 million defence deal with Britain were scuppered recently, when London announced it would not be buying the Israeli-made Spike anti-armour missile. The device had been on trial with the British Army for more than a year. Israeli officials described the decision—announced in the Commons by Defence Minister Adam Ingram—as regrettable. It followed recent tensions between Jerusalem and London over an alleged informal UK embargo on arms sales to Israel. Pro-Arab MPs had lobbied the government not to purchase the Spike, manufactured by the Rafael Armament Development Authority.

Turkey moves supplies

Turkey's armed forces said recently that they were sending military equipment and supplies to the eastern part of the country in preparation for a possible US-led military attack against Iraq. The decision was the first concrete sign that Turkey, a staunch opponent of any war, may be resigned to it. It comes as General Richard Myers, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, acknowledged that US troops were in northern Iraq already, although he said the numbers were "not significant". NATO military officials have drawn up plans to assist the US along the Turkish border, including the option to move small, highly mobile ground forces or substantial air power along Turkey's southeastern flank, according to diplomats. The plans are still awaiting political approval from NATO.

Amman seeks missile defence

Fearful of being caught in the crossfire in a missile exchange between Iraq and Israel, Jordan is belatedly seeking a European supplier for an air-defence anti-missile system. Jordanian officials said recently that regional tensions lay behind their decision to look to Europe, rather than the US, after the collapse of an earlier deal to acquire a Russian surface-to-air defence system. Officials in Amman said Moscow had failed to meet a February deadline for an S-300 missile system, seeking a delay until the year's end. "Missile batteries supplied by the US would be interpreted by the Iraqis as preparation for an attack on Iraq", an official said. "It would send the wrong message to Saddam Hussein". He noted that US troops had arrived in Israel, and said that Jordan would not allow US forces to be stationed in the kingdom. Jordan's King Abdullah II was quoted as saying that, with war all but inevitable, Jordan was urgently seeking an alternative supplier for three anti-missile batteries to defend its airspace. Jordan fears that unless a supplier comes forward within days it will be forced to rely on anti-missile cover from Israel and American warships deployed in the eastern Mediterranean.

Britain set for big role in Iraq conflict

Recent deployment of troops and armour to the Gulf shows that Britain is preparing for a significant military role in any conflict with Iraq. A 26,000-strong force, which includes 6,000 frontline troops, 120 Challenger II battle tanks and 150 armoured personnel carriers, dwarfs the 4,000 Royal Marine commandos on their way. The deployment, at the top end of military observers' expectations, means Britain's forces were due to be in place by mid-February. The paratroops from 16 Air Assault Brigade will probably be ready first. They could be deployed in southern Turkey in a few weeks to link up with US forces, though Ankara has yet to give approval.

China-Pakistan nuclear links

India recently expressed "deep concern" over China's alleged continued support of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme. Senior Indian analysts believe that China, whose assistance in the 1980s and 1990s is thought to have been critical to Pakistan's emergence as a nuclear weapons state, is using third-party conduits to provide further help to Pakistan, notably via North Korea. Last year the US Administration expressed worry over reports that Pakistan was providing uranium enrichment technology to North Korea in exchange for support on Islamabad's ballistic missile programme.

Russia considers building Syrian nuclear reactor

Russia is in negotiations to build a nuclear power plant in Syria, risking damage to its tighter relationship forged with the West in recent months and triggering fresh concerns over the spread of nuclear weapons. According to a news report, Moscow's ministry of atomic energy (Minatom) confirmed the discussions. They said, "Syria wants the project and Russia 'in principle' could supply it", stressing that an agreement was "not ready". Washington has long been a critic of Russia's contract to build the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran, which Russia is seeking to expand, as well as Russian agreements to build reactors in other countries. Mr Milhollin, director of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control in Washington, said, "This is a relationship breaker between the US and Russia". In an unclassified report released recently, the US Central Intelligence Agency mentioned the existence of a "draft cooperative programme" between Russia and Syria on civil nuclear power. Agreement had been drafted under which Russia would build a nuclear power plant and an atomic desalination plant in Syria. Minatom said that the Bushehr contract with Iran was worth about £620 million, with an equivalent sum from a project in India and twice as much from another in China, and it recently expressed interest in cooperating with North Korea.

Turkey wary of US forces

America has slashed its request for troops to be stationed in Turkey from 120,000 to 15,000 because of Ankara's fears about the consequences of a war against Iraq. The revised request appeared designed to ease Turkish fears that the presence of US troops would inflame anti-American sentiment. Washington is desperate to station men in Turkey's southeast to present a credible threat that the allies would open a northern front in any war against Iraq. Britain has also requested the right to station troops in Turkey.

LIBYA TO HEAD UN RIGHTS WATCHDOG

According to the latest ICM opinion poll, eighty-one per cent of the British public would support war against Iraq with—and only with—the support of the UN, according to a report in the Daily Telegraph. The report points out that the United Nations has just elected Libya as the chairman of its Human Rights Commission, ignoring objections from America, Canada and Guatemala. There were seventeen abstentions, including Britain and other European states. Although European nations had opposed the nomination of a country with a record of human rights abuses, they chose to abstain rather than directly block Libya for fear of alienating African nations, which backed Libya. Libya was nominated by the commission's Africa regional grouping, which currently holds its presidency. The presidency rotates annually among the commission's five regions. Libya's assumption of the chairmanship of the UN's human rights watchdog has fuelled Washington's long-standing disenchantment with the UN body, whose multilateralism is a constant thorn in America's side.

Israel puts army on alert

Israel has stepped up its defence preparations ahead of a possible US war against Iraq, deploying anti-missile systems and placing the military on a state of high alert. Joint military exercises with several hundred US military personnel are underway across Israel involving drills with Patriot and Arrow anti-missile batteries. A liaison unit has been established at the US embassy in Tel Aviv. Israel is warning the public to be prepared—many Israelis are more preoccupied with the fear of Palestinian terrorist attacks.

Saudi initiative

Saudi Arabia, a key US ally and the Gulf region's economic powerhouse, recently said it had proposed an initiative to fellow Arab states to resolve the Iraq crisis. According to a report, Crown Prince Abdullah said on state television that he did not believe there would be a war, and that "Saudi Arabia has presented proposals to its brothers in Arab states and asked them to accept them and for them to be the basis of any summit". No further details were available.

Istanbul conference

Turkey recently hosted foreign ministers from all but one of Iraq's neighbours in an attempt to forestall a US-led military campaign to oust Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi leader. According to a report, it was not clear whether the Istanbul conference—attended by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Jordan and Egypt—would pave the way for a later meeting of heads of state. Syria, for one, has said that it wants to host such a summit. In Cairo, Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, implied that little had been agreed so far.