



News from the Nations

PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY REJECTS THIRD-PARTY TROOPS

A senior Palestinian Authority official said there was no need for the presence of foreign troops in the West Bank "because the Palestinian security forces are capable of assuming their responsibilities in the area". According to the Jerusalem Post, the US is preparing a plan to station third-party troops in the West Bank to secure the area after an Israeli withdrawal and before the Palestinian Authority can take over full security control.

Forty Iranian Jews make aliya

The Jewish Agency is working hard to bring all of Iran's remaining 25,000 Jews to Israel, an official told the Jerusalem Post, as the forty immigrants landed at Ben-Gurion International Airport last December. The arrival is the largest ever single group of Iranian immigrants brought by the agency to start new lives in a country that their president vowed to wipe off the face of the earth. The Jews of Iran were "starting to feel the earth burn beneath their feet" said Yossi Shraga, director of Middle East immigration at the Jewish Agency. The media have not been allowed to publish the name of a third country from which the immigrants arrived at the airport. These forty immigrants are religiously traditional. They will lose their assets in Iran entirely. Shraga said, "The Jewish Agency has spared no expense in bringing the Jews of Iran and will work to bring the rest of them to Israel. The atmosphere in Iran has done the work for us. Anti-Semitism in Iran is growing from day to day".

Israel prepares for incursion into Gaza

As Israel prepares a fighting force for a possible large-scale incursion into Gaza, a wide range of regular and reserve units is training in urban warfare tactics. A lesson of the last Lebanon war was that an increasing amount of warfare will be in built-up areas, explains one commander. "As Hizbollah demonstrated, the advantages the IDF [Israel Defence Force] has in firepower and technology are lessened when the fighting takes place in confined spaces, where only small groups of soldiers can operate together. It is obvious that Hamas and other potential adversaries such as the Syrian army have drawn the same conclusion, and the IDF has to put a much greater emphasis now on urban-warfare tactics". Recently, the entire Givati Brigade, the Southern Command's main fighting force, completed a major exercise at Tze'elim that simulated an incursion into Gaza. Many other regular and reserve units have been rotating in and out of the base. "The whole point of urban warfare is to disregard everything Israeli soldiers are best at, using their weapons effectively in the open field", explains Captain Yoni, an instructor at Tze'elim, "and learning how to be instinctively aware of the danger that can jump out from any street corner or small window in a back street. Such an environment is a great equaliser, which Hizbollah use to their advantage".

Diaspora should be consulted over future of Jerusalem

Diaspora Jewry (Jews living outside Israel) should be consulted over critical decisions on the future of Jerusalem, including a possible division of the city as part of a peace treaty with the Palestinians, the head of a Jerusalem think tank said recently. "From all points of view, it is most significant for the future of Israel's relation with the Diaspora to include the leaders of the Jewish people, their organisations and institutions, in critical decisions over the future of Jerusalem, including the possibility it will be divided as part of an agreement with the Palestinians", said Professor Yehezkel Dror, president of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, in Jerusalem. Dror argued that his controversial recommendation to include the Diaspora leadership in any major decision on the future of Jerusalem will serve both to strengthen Israeli Diaspora relations and to epitomise the centrality of Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish people. The head of the independent Jerusalem-based think tank noted that he has raised his organisation's proposal with Israeli and Diaspora leaders, so far without success. Palestinians claim all of east Jerusalem, including the city's holy sites, as the capital of their future state. Israeli public opinion polls have indicated that two thirds of the public are opposed to any division of the capital.

Israeli government in crisis

Within days of the visit of President Bush in mid-January, designed to strengthen Ehud Olmert and kick-start the peace process, the Israeli prime minister has been plunged into a coalition crisis. Strategic Affairs Minister Avigdor Lieberman resigned recently in protest at Mr Olmert's decision to begin talks on the core issues: borders, refugees and Jerusalem. The defection of his right wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, with eleven MKs (Members of the Knesset, Israel's parliament), reduced the ruling coalition to 67 seats out of 120. The Sephardi Orthodox Shas party, with twelve seats, is threatening to follow Yisrael Beiteinu into opposition if the government considers dividing Jerusalem. Mr Olmert responded, however, by saying that there was "no alternative to conducting serious diplomatic negotiations in order to reach peace". If Labour withdrew its nineteen MKs the government would fall. With a Shas defection a more serious prospect, Mr Olmert has already put out feelers to two smaller parties, the left wing Meretz (five seats) and the strictly Orthodox Torah Judaism (six).

Iran's nuclear weapons programme continues

The American intelligence community's mis-assessment of Iran's nuclear weapons programme has opened the door for Iran to achieve its nuclear ambitions, the former head of the IDF Military Intelligence, Major General Aharon Ze'evi-Farkash, warned recently. Farkash was speaking at a Hebrew University seminar before an audience that included members of the Supreme Court, leading politicians, foreign ambassadors, senior members of the Israeli intelligence community and numerous other notables. American intelligence reports released late last autumn said that Iran had stopped developing nuclear weapons several years ago.

OLD FRIENDS OF TEHERAN

Washington's economic sanctions have pushed Iran closer to trade partners like Russia and China. According to a report in Newsweek about President Bush's visit to European leaders in recent weeks, at which the latest round of US economic sanctions against Iran were discussed, European governments are taking a harder line in the hopes of quelling the threat of invasion. Already, Deutsche Bank, Commerzbank, Siemens, Dresdner and HSBC have backed out of Iran. So much the better for their emerging market rivals. Hundreds of Chinese and Russian companies are working in Iran, in search of lucrative contracts once dominated by the West. In sectors like oil production, telecommunications, aerospace and automobiles, the absence of Western mainstays is creating new opportunities for these emerging powers in one of the world's fastest-growing and most strategic markets. Energy is the most obvious prize. In Iran, firms such as Shell, Total and BP are now hesitant to move forward on new energy deals as geopolitical tension rises. The Chinese and Russians are now going to get contracts in oil exploration and production they never would have got. According to Newsweek the deals keep coming as sanction pressure increases. Last month Russia negotiated the sale of thirty Tupolev commercial airplanes to Iran for \$1.3 billion. Three months earlier Chinese carmakers joined forces with Iran's biggest auto company in a £370 million venture to build cars in northern Iran.

Blair sends a warning to Israeli settlers

Mr Blair met settlers' (Jews who have established settlements in the West Bank) representatives and right-wing politicians recently in Jerusalem for the first time in his capacity as international envoy for Middle East peace. Although a spokesperson for the former British prime minister described the talks as "cordial", a statement from a settlers' organisation, the Yesha Council, pointed to differences over the future of the settlements. Yesha representatives, headed by the movement's secretary general, Danny Dayan, told Mr Blair that Israeli Premier Olmert had no mandate to negotiate a peace agreement that demanded the dismantling of settlements. The retort of Mr Blair was that "nothing can stop the relaunching of the peace process". His remarks reflected the international community's view that the settlements are illegal and obstacles to peace.

Bush warning to Gulf states

President Bush described Iran as the foremost threat to global security as he attempted to rally Gulf states to take a tougher line against Teheran during a visit to the region. In a speech in Abu Dhabi, Mr Bush said it was time to confront an Iran that supported terrorism and defied the United Nations to pursue secret nuclear research. "Iran is today the world's leading state sponsor of terror", he said. "It sends hundreds of millions of dollars to extremists around the world. Iran's actions threaten the security of nations everywhere. So the United States is strengthening our long-standing security commitments with our friends in the Gulf and rallying friends around the world to confront this danger before it is too late".