



News from the Nations

EU's foreign-relations chief criticises Israel

The EU's new foreign relations chief, Catherine Ashton, criticised Israel in her first speech on the Middle East as she unveiled plans to visit the region in the New Year. Dubbed recently by one Israeli lobbyist a person who will be easy to influence because of her lack of foreign-policy experience, Ms Ashton came down hard on the Israeli Government in an address to MEPs in Strasbourg last December.

UK charities

UK charities have accused the international community of "betrayal" for failing to take action to end the Israeli blockade on Gaza that they claim is "preventing reconstruction and recovery". Coinciding with "the first anniversary of the start of Israel's military offensive in Gaza" the sixteen charities and Christian groups (including Amnesty International, Oxfam, Christian Aid and Medical Aid for Palestinians) lambasted world powers for not doing enough and blamed Israel for not allowing Gazans to "rebuild their shattered lives".

LIVNI VOWS TO TEST UK WAR CRIMES ARREST LAW

Tzipi Livni is planning to travel to London to test the process for the issuing of arrest warrants for alleged war crimes. Her words to the Jerusalem Chronicle were, "I will do this not for me, not for provocation but for the right of every Israeli to travel freely . . . the British system is being abused by extremists for political reasons . . . Belgium and Spain have changed their laws and the British have to do the same".

Egypt finally seals Gaza border

After years of turning a blind eye to Palestinian smuggling through a network of tunnels under the border, Egypt suddenly reversed course. They have constructed an underground steel wall which "sliced" through hundreds of tunnels along the nine-mile frontier, cutting off a lifeline to Hamas and tightening Israel's already crippling blockade. According to a report, the work was guarded by Egyptian troops in armoured personnel carriers mounted with machine guns. Egypt had been under pressure from Israel and the US to cut off weapons smuggling to Hamas, but Egypt has interests of its own. According to a report, Egypt fears that the Islamic militancy in Gaza could spread across the border and destabilise the country. The pro-Western Egyptian Government already faces a threat from the radical Muslim Brotherhood, and the two-way flow of weapons and terrorists from Gaza could threaten the lucrative tourist industry in the Red Sea resorts of the Sinai Peninsula. Hamas are reportedly furious, organising a protest on the Egyptian border. Isolated by Israel and the West, the last thing the terror group needed was a confrontation with its powerful neighbour Egypt, the traditional leader of the Arab world. The Egyptian wall and Israel's new Iron Dome rocket defence system are putting a double squeeze on Hamas.

Straw 'blocking law change'

According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, British Justice Secretary Jack Straw remains a stumbling block to updating British war crimes legislation: "An announcement on reform of the law that allows magistrates to grant arrest warrants for visiting Israeli military figures and politicians is imminent and could come within weeks. Senior figures in the Jewish community now believe that responsibility is likely to be passed to the Attorney General following intense UK embarrassment over the arrest warrant that was granted for the former Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni. Attorney General Baroness Scotland told an audience at the Hebrew University recently, 'The Foreign Secretary has stated clearly that the government is looking urgently at ways in which the UK system might be changed to avoid this situation arising again and is determined that Israel's leaders should always be able to travel freely to the UK'. The *Jewish Chronicle* understands that the one serious stumbling block to agreement over new legislation remains the Justice Secretary Jack Straw. As Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw bolstered the influence within government of the Muslim Council of Britain, which is fiercely opposed to reform. The government is looking at this issue urgently; no decisions have yet been made".

Israel and Vatican spar over Upper Room

According to an article in Israel Today, "A delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Ayalon paid a visit to the Vatican to tell Church officials what they did not want to hear. The Upper Room 'is part and parcel of Jerusalem and nobody can expect us to split sovereignty or possession', Ayalon said. The dispute is not only about religious heritage, but also about sovereignty. Israel fears that relinquishing the site could strengthen Vatican and UN demands for the internationalisation of Jerusalem, which the Jewish state sees as its sovereign, undivided and eternal capital. It is crucial to secure the freedom of worship in this city, says Franciscan priest David Jaeger. 'All three monotheistic religions have to be treated equally . . . Since the holy places of Christians, Muslims and Jews are centred in Jerusalem, its future status is a highly sensitive question in the interfaith dialogue'. Relinquishing Israeli sovereignty over the Upper Room would mean it would legally belong to the Vatican, and that any Israeli request to pave roads or develop infrastructure in the area would have to be approved by the Holy See. It would also bolster Vatican demands for sovereignty over other holy sites such as the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, the Church of All Nations (Gethsemane) on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes on the Sea of Galilee. Pope Benedict brought up the issue of the Upper Room during his visit to Israel last year, prompting an unequivocal statement from the Chief Rabbinate: 'According to Jewish Law, it is prohibited for any person to assist in transferring property in the Land of Israel to the Vatican, including the holy places that are the heart and essence of the people of Israel'".

ISRAEL PLANS ANOTHER SECURITY WALL

Israel has unveiled plans for a security barrier along the Egyptian border to keep out militants and African migrants. The country has hundreds of miles of fences and walls designed to keep out terrorists. As reported in the Daily Telegraph World News, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "This is a strategic decision to ensure the Jewish and democratic character of the State of Israel. Israel will remain open to war refugees, but we cannot allow thousands of illegal workers to infiltrate into Israel via the southern border and flood our country". The new barrier will initially be built in two sections, one near the Red Sea city of Eilat and another on the edge of the Gaza Strip, where Egypt has already constructed an underground steel wall to close off smuggling tunnels. The fence will include radar to detect human movement. Eventually the whole border will be sealed. Israel is also continuing to build its controversial barrier in and around the occupied West Bank. The government says the 400-mile system of fences and concrete walls is needed to prevent suicide bombers from launching attacks.

More immigrants

Immigration to Israel rose by some seventeen per cent in 2009, according to the figures released by the Jewish Agency last December, from 13,860 in 2008 to some 16,200 in 2009.

Gas mask for every Israeli

The Israeli cabinet has decided to hasten the production of gas masks so that in three years the entire population will be equipped with them. According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, "Updated intelligence assessments regarding the capabilities of Syria, Hamas and Hizbullah and the belief that any armed conflict between Israel and its enemies, including an air strike on Iran's nuclear installations, will include an intense bombardment of Israeli cities, has made the government reassess the policy. Meanwhile the Defence and Health ministries and the IDF Home Command will carry out the largest exercise to date dealing with a biological warfare attack on an Israeli city".

Israel not ready for a major earthquake

The Israeli Defence Ministry will hold a national earthquake preparedness exercise this year in response to the Haiti disaster. Experts estimate that between twenty and fifty per cent of Israeli buildings are not built to withstand a large earthquake. Israel is situated in the northern part of the Great Rift Valley, in an area which historically has known devastating earthquakes. Seismological experts are convinced that a large-magnitude earthquake in Israel in the next few decades is all but inevitable. The National Emergency Directorate in the Defence Ministry has sent a special fact-finding delegation to Haiti to learn more about the implications of such a disaster and how a country can return to normal afterwards. The Directorate is planning a nationwide exercise some time this year in which a siren will be heard throughout Israel, all the citizens will be asked to take basic precautions and the rescue services will practise emergency procedures.