



News from the Nations

GREEN LIGHT TO ANTI-SEMITES

Both Jewish community representatives and opposition activists have attacked Russian President Putin's regime for remaining silent over a spate of recent anti-Semitic incidents. Election campaigns in the provinces of Kursk and Ryazan have been marked by anti-Jewish remarks. Mr Axelrod of the Anti-Defamation League in Moscow said: "If the authorities don't speak out against these attacks, it could soon be too late". In Kursk, in western Russia, newly elected governor Alexander Mikhailov—who was backed by the Kremlin—used a newspaper interview to attack his opponent's Jewish roots. He called Jews "filth", and praised Mr Putin as an ally against Zionism.

Russia seeks ties with EU

Igor Ivanov, the Russian foreign minister, has called for a "strategic partnership" with the European Union as a sign of strengthening relations between the two regions. Mr Ivanov pointed specifically to defence policy, saying: "Russia wanted to be more closely involved in future cooperation, and such links could extend to deploying Russian troops alongside EU forces in tackling international crises". The report continues that Mr Ivanov made clear that the deep differences of policy that emerged during the Kosovo conflict would continue to cast a shadow over relations. He also warned that the eastern expansion of NATO remained a sticking point. "The closer NATO comes to the Russian border, the greater our concerns will become".

Israel denounces European statement

Israel has rejected a declaration by European foreign ministers urging it to pull back its forces, end the building of settlements and call off its economic blockade of the Palestinian areas, according to a news report. An Israeli official described the statement, issued after the ministers met in Brussels recently, as "one sided", and said it clearly ignored the responsibility of Palestinian leadership for the incitement of violence and terrorist attacks. EU foreign ministers said that the situation in the territories was "not tolerable". They continued by saying that lack of progress in the peace process included "the settlement issue", which lies at the heart of the Palestinian population's frustration and violence. A spokesman in Jerusalem said that Israel took a "grave view" of the blame attached to Israel for the lack of progress in the peace process, and rejected the notion that the settlements were the main reason for this.

Russian defence minister's visit to Iran

Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeev visited Tehran recently for a three-day visit, according to a report. US fears are that Russia might reinforce Iran's arsenal. Russia assured the United States previous to this that it would not sell offensive weapons to Iran, which Washington says has an acute nuclear arms programme and supports anti-Western terrorist groups. US officials travelled to Moscow to press the concerns and make sure that any new transfers to Iran do not include technology that might improve its Sahab-3 missile, now in development with a range of about 1,600 kilometres. Iran's defence minister said recently that Tehran wanted to expand military cooperation with Russia, and that "the geographic position of the two countries in this sensitive region necessitates close cooperation, and, in accordance with Iran's foreign policy, development of military ties with Russia is high on the agenda".

More Balkan troubles

Serbian special police and ethnic Albanian guerrillas were on a standoff just 500 yards apart recently, in a region that threatens to spark a new Balkan war. The 1,500-strong guerrilla army is holding out in the Albanian village of Lucane, which it took over after moving into the three-mile buffer zone between Serbia and Kosovo. The Yugoslav authorities have sent tanks, soldiers and police to seal the Kosovo-Serbia border. On the Serb side of the buffer zone Yugoslav leaders and representatives of the NATO peacekeeping force converged on the town of Bujanovac in an effort to tackle the situation before it got further out of control.

Arms move to Baltic takes West by surprise

The West's renewed attempts to win over President Putin with a visit by Chancellor Schröder of Germany have been jolted by reports of Russian deployment of nuclear weapons on the Baltic coast. Suggestions that Moscow has boosted its military strength in the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad with tactical nuclear weapons have provoked concern in a region that is traditionally seen as Germany's back yard. Russian military and civilian officials have denied reports from Washington of the nuclear deployment, but Poland has asked for an international inspection to check these claims. The reports of a possible Russian nuclear deployment on the borders of a NATO member country have highlighted the perils of accepting Mr Putin at face value, or underestimating his will to revive Russian pride. Russia is particularly sensitive to any threat of NATO deploying its own nuclear weapons on the territory of former Warsaw Pact countries, such as Poland.

Turkish troops enter Iraq

At least 500 Turkish troops have pushed 100 miles into Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq in their deepest incursion in the fifteen-year conflict, Iraqi Kurdish officials said recently. The move is seen as preparation for a major offensive against 2,500 rebels of the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party dug in along the Iran-Iraq border. According to reports, as many as 10,000 Turkish troops have poured into the Kurdish controlled enclave this year in response to pleas for help from one of the main Iraqi Kurdish factions in the area. Western diplomatic sources said they were aware of a Turkish troop build-up in the region, which has brought strong protests from Baghdad. "We are deeply concerned that it will further destabilise what is already a highly unstable region, and could even provide Saddam with an excuse to intervene", a European diplomat based in Ankara said.

CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS UNITE OVER JERUSALEM

The Bishop of the Roman Catholics in Syria, Ezidore Batikha, has said that Muslims and Christians should stand hand-in-hand in the face of the dangers poised if Israel had full control over Jerusalem and its holy sites. In an interview, Bishop Batikha called on world Christians to rise up and defend the holy city, without which, he said, Christianity has no meaning. "If Israel controls the Muslim and Christian holy shrines, this could involve a serious threat to the Christian shrines and to Christianity itself", he said.

EU force could act in Bosnia

Europe's planned rapid reaction force would have the capability to assume responsibility for peacekeeping in Bosnia, according to France's chief of defence staff. General Kelche's remarks could meet with opposition from Conservative Eurosceptics in Britain, who fear the force will undermine NATO and over-commit UK armed forces, and is a step towards a European army. The NATO stabilisation force in Bosnia currently numbers about 20,000 troops from thirty countries, including the US.

Iran's oilfield development

Iran recently granted Japan first negotiating rights over part of its Azadegan oilfield, in a move that will put pressure on the US to give up its unilateral sanctions and prevent a handful of European companies gaining a stranglehold in Iran in the absence of US and Asian competition. Japan Petroleum Exploration and Japanese-owned Indonesia Petroleum will negotiate exclusively with National Iranian Oil Company on developing a section of the oilfield in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province. It reflects Japan's desire to forge stronger ties with Iran ahead of the expiry next year of the US Iran-Libya Sanctions Act.

ARAB LEADERS AND THE US PEACE PLAN

Representatives of Arab states are discussing US proposals for a permanent settlement of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, Yasser Arafat said in Gaza recently. Among the issues are the future of Palestinian refugees and the status of what the Arabs call the Haram al-Sharif, and the Jews the Temple Mount, sacred to both Jews and Arabs. Under the proposals, the Haram al-Sharif, together with Arab parts of east Jerusalem, would fall under some form of Palestinian sovereignty. But Mr Arafat would be expected to surrender the right of return to Israel of 3.6 million Palestinian refugees. The Palestinians said they were still seeking more details and clarifications on these proposals from Israel and the US. The Israeli prime minister faces general elections on February 6, and has committed himself to reaching a final-status agreement with the Palestinians before then. But Ariel Sharon, the leader of Likud, the biggest opposition party, leads Mr Barak in opinion polls, and has said he will not be bound by any agreement reached by the current prime minister.