



News from the Nations

114 STATES CONDEMN ISRAEL

More than 100 signatories of the Geneva Convention gathered in Switzerland early in December last to reprimand Israel for "indiscriminate and disproportionate violence" against Palestinian civilians in the occupied territories. The 114 states, including Britain and the rest of the European Union, issued a declaration urging Israel to abide by international laws listed in the 1949 accord seeking to protect civilians in wartime or under occupation. It was the first such declaration by signatory states since the Convention was signed in 1949. Israel and its close allies, the United States and Australia, which are also signatories of the Convention, boycotted the session.

Observer force for Palestine?

The European Union is strongly urging the US to agree to the dispatch of an international observer force to the Palestinian territories. The *Jewish Report* has learned that the EU wants to give added momentum to negotiations between Peres and the Palestinians, aimed at ending Intifada violence through early recognition of a Palestinian state.

Papal coin to be collectors' item

The Vatican City's version of the euro coin will go into circulation next month, a Vatican spokesman said recently. The Vatican euros, featuring an up-to-date profile of Pope John Paul in the twenty-fourth year of his papacy, are expected to be snapped up by collectors. Existing Vatican coins are in lire.

Israeli experts see danger from Iraq

Senior Israeli security experts warned recently of a possible Iraqi attack if the US turns its anti-terror campaign against Saddam Hussein. "We have to prepare our civilian defences so that Israelis will be ready for every possible reaction by Iraq to an American attack", former Prime Minister Netanyahu told a conference on the 'Balance of National Strength and Security'. The European Community remains largely opposed to such military action, but regional opposition seems to have softened somewhat, with Turkey reportedly having given private indications that it would let US troops use its air bases in the event of action. Israeli chief-of-staff Shaul Mofaz warned that US action "could cause conventional and non-conventional weapons to be fired at us". Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, however, told the conference that he felt the next US target in its war on terror was more likely to be Yemen, Sudan or Somalia.

HAMAS RAISED MILLIONS THROUGH TEXAS CHARITY

According to the Jerusalem Post, a recent FBI memo has shown that a Texas-based charity raised millions of dollars in the United States for Hamas. The forty-nine-page memo was used by the Treasury Department to support its recent decision to freeze \$5 million in assets and raid the offices of the Palestinian-led Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, headquartered in Dallas. The charity, which has branches in New Jersey, Illinois and California and raised \$13 million last year, says it collects for Palestinian refugees and social services in the West Bank and Gaza. FBI investigators, working closely with Israeli intelligence, concluded that its leaders were Hamas members and it was the primary US fund-raising body for the terror group. "The money was intended from the beginning for Hamas and is for all practical purposes part of Hamas", said Yaron Levin, an analyst with the Anti-Defamation League.

Saddam calls for summit on Israeli conflict

Saddam Hussein recently raised his voice in support of Palestinians, calling for an emergency Arab summit to discuss their conflict with Israel. The move, according to a report, was an effort by the Iraqi leader to embarrass other Arab rulers who have been keen to avoid high-level public gatherings that highlight their inability to have an effect on the conflict. Raising the banner of the Palestinian cause is also part of an attempt to link the fate of Iraq with that of the Palestinians at a time when some members of the US Administration want to expand its anti-terror campaign to target Iraq. He suggested that the meeting be held in Mecca, the Saudi holy city, to "guarantee attendance by all".

Threat to Arafat from Hamas

The main threat to Yasser Arafat comes not from Israel but from the radicals of the Palestinian terror group Hamas. So confident are Iranian hard-liners of taking over the West Bank and Gaza that they are pressing for the disposal of PLO Chairman Arafat. Iran has increased its financial support for Hamas in the hope that it will succeed in establishing an Islamic régime in the West Bank and Gaza. The desperate position in which Arafat finds himself has led Iran's hard-line ayatollahs to conclude that there is now a realistic possibility that Arafat's régime could be replaced by a Teheran-style theocracy. They are so confident of the West Bank and Gaza falling under Hamas control that they have considered the removal of Yasser Arafat. Western diplomats based in Syria have been closely monitoring a series of meetings that Hamas leaders have attended in recent weeks at the Iranian embassy in Damascus. The main outcome was a commitment by the Iranians to increase Teheran's financial support from its current level of £1.5 million to £8 million a year. The money will be paid to Hamas through front companies in South America. The Iranians firmly believe that there is now a golden opportunity for Hamas to take control of the West Bank and Gaza. The revelation that the Iranian embassy in Damascus is actively plotting to influence events in the occupied territories will cause concern in Washington, where President Bush recently warned Syria that it could find itself targeted in the war on terrorism if it did not take effective action to prevent Damascus being used as a base for terrorist operations. The Iranians are working directly on the orders of Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's spiritual leader, who has personally approved the increase in funding for Hamas.

GROWTH OF ISLAM

Islam will soon be the second-largest religion in Europe. The number of Muslims in Europe is much higher than expected, at 51.8 million, according to the Central Institute Islam Archives in Soest, Germany. Muslims hold the majority in Turkey, Albania and Bosnia. In Belgium, France, Italy and Spain they have overtaken Protestantism as the second-largest religious constituency behind Catholicism. In Austria, Protestants constitute the third-largest religious group following Roman Catholics and Muslims. Muslims are also the second-largest religious group after the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Russia and Serbia. Of the 750 million Europeans, 269 million are Catholics, 171 million Orthodox, 79 million Protestants, 28 million Anglicans, others 203 million. So far the Institute has put the number of Muslims in Europe (including Russia) at 33.4 million. But Islam is growing at an annual rate of 6.5 per cent. If the trend continues, Muslims will be the second-largest religious group behind Roman Catholics by the year 2014. The Institute bases its findings on official figures issued by individual countries. Russia, including Siberia and Chechnya, has 25 million Muslims, more than any other European country. It is followed by the European region of Turkey (5.7 million), France (5 million) and Germany (3.5 million). (German Evangelical News Agency.)

Saddam's nuclear arms

An Iraqi defector has confirmed that Saddam Hussein had rebuilt some of his capability to make nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. The defector, a civil engineer who left Iraq in August, said he visited twenty sites associated with chemical or biological weapons and had carried out repair or construction work in nuclear weapons facilities. He said some factories were built underground and disguised, under water wells, and a biological weapons factory had been constructed under the Saddam Hussein hospital in Baghdad. He also claimed that Iraqi companies had gained permission from the United Nations sanctions committee to buy equipment that was then used to develop the weapons.

A Russian change on Abkhazia

Russia has changed its position on the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia. Dieter Boden, the special representative of the UN Secretary General in Georgia, said five countries, including Russia, are overseeing negotiations, and have drafted a document recognising Abkhazia "as a sovereign entity with the rule of law within the state of Georgia". The move appears to reflect an important shift in Russian policy towards Georgia and Abkhazia that has taken place at senior levels in the Kremlin. The document still requires approval by both the Georgian and Abkhazia authorities, but it could represent the beginning of a significant change in relations between the countries in the Caucasus, and a shift in policy towards Russia's own breakaway region of Chechnya.