



News from the Nations

Russia provides smallpox to Iraq

A Russian scientist who visited Iraq in 1990 gave Saddam Hussein a virulent strain of smallpox suitable for use as a biological weapon, an informant has told the CIA. The information was considered credible enough to be presented to President Bush, and hastened White House plans to inoculate a million Americans with the smallpox vaccine. Britain is also planning to inoculate squads of emergency workers, including health professionals and servicemen. Former UN inspectors have said Saddam displayed an increased interest in smallpox vaccines after 1990 and the reason had previously been unknown.

Ukraine-Iraq 'radar deal'

An Anglo-American inquiry has disclosed there is a "credible possibility" that Ukraine sold sophisticated radars to help Saddam Hussein shoot down allied aircraft and then lied about it. Up to four Kolchuga radar systems may have been despatched. The inquiry's report further accused Ukraine of obstructing a week-long investigation which involved British and US officials travelling to Ukraine last month. At a news conference in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, the US and British ambassadors gave official backing to the findings of the report and threatened Ukraine with unspecified retaliation. An investigating team, made up of thirteen British and American experts, concluded that no direct sale had been made, but raised the possibility of the use of an intermediary, possibly China.

Syrians smuggling arms to Baghdad

Syria is secretly helping Saddam Hussein to prepare for a United States-led attack by smuggling vital arms supplies to Baghdad. Western intelligence officials have discovered that at least fifty-two crates containing new air-defence systems and spare parts have been smuggled into Iraq from Syria since the start of December. The Russian-made equipment, which has been purchased through a Belorussian middleman, was taken into Iraq through the al-Walid border crossing earlier last month. In an interview with *The Times* recently, Mr Assad publicly defended the activities of Palestinian suicide bombers in Israel, and gave warning that a military campaign to topple Saddam would have "catastrophic consequences" for the region. Although Damascus says it is backing the international campaign against al-Qaeda, it has recently improved ties with Baghdad, allowing Saddam to open an oil-smuggling route through the port of Latakia. Syria also allows a number of terrorist groups, including Hizbullah and Hamas, to base themselves in Damascus.

NATO EXTENDS TO RUSSIA'S BORDERS

NATO leaders have welcomed seven new members from Eastern Europe and announced the creation of a rapid reaction force to fight terrorism worldwide, as the alliance embarked on an ambitious plan to revitalise itself. The eastward extension of NATO to the border with Russia marks the end of the last traces of the Cold War, but it has also raised doubts about the future of the alliance. The inclusion of Baltic countries is insignificant militarily but is an important act of symbolism because they were once a part of the Soviet Union. Only the Communist party, whose chief following is among Russia's old and rural, expressed its dismay. In an open letter to President Putin, the party chief, Zyuganov, attacked the Kremlin's indifference. "NATO's expansion will pose the most serious military threat to Russia since the Nazi invasion", he wrote. But most said the world had moved on since the Cold War and the new imperative was that Russia and the West now work together to defeat Islamic terrorism.

Al-Qaeda threatens US and Israel

Al-Qaeda recently threatened "faster, harder strikes" against America and Israel "on land, air and sea". The threat came on an Islamic website in a statement attributed to the terrorist network's one-time spokesman. "The Jewish Crusader coalition will not be safe anywhere from the fighters' attacks", the statement said, using a collective term for what al-Qaeda sees as a US-Israeli alliance. "We will hit the most vital centres and we will strike against its strategic operations with all possible means".

Israel confident in face of Iraqi suicide-plane attack

If the Americans launch a strike against Iraq, Israeli and US intelligence officials believe Iraq will send suicide pilots to attack Israel with biological or chemical weapons. Although neither is making light of the threat, neither believes it will be effective. Israel has tightened its air defences, and officials say relatively slow-flying 'suicide planes' would be easier to intercept—with Patriot and Hawk anti-aircraft batteries and conventional aircraft—than Scud missiles. The same officials consider missile attacks less likely than suicide-plane sorties, because Iraq's stocks of missiles and its capacity to launch them have been severely curtailed since the 1991 Gulf War. The US has agreed to coordinate with Israel in preventing the Iraqis from moving missile launchers into western Iraq (from which Israel would be in range), and destroying them if they do. In the wake of Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz's December visit to Washington, Israel and the US are setting up teams to coordinate operational plans for pre-empting or responding to Iraqi attacks on Israel, but Mofaz, defence sources say, did not give a blanket promise that Israel would not retaliate in any circumstances. On the contrary, he made it clear that Israel reserves the right to retaliate if it suffers heavy civilian casualties or if it is attacked with non-conventional weapons.

Euro-Pentagon plan

The European Union is drawing up plans for a 'Euro-Pentagon' in Brussels, commanded by a defence chief able to launch military operations anywhere in the world. The proposals call for an EU defence secretary with responsibility for running operations. His staff would be able to draw on an autonomous EU command and control nexus and an intelligence agency with satellite capability. The document says the world has changed so dramatically since 11 September 2001 that national defence is "no longer sufficient". The plans go far beyond the EU's 60,000-man rapid reaction force, which is to take on its first peacekeeping mission in the Balkans early this year. A military structure would be backed by a European Arms and Strategic Research Agency that could harness the EU's industrial might for future military needs. An EU military academy was also floated as a possibility. The proposals are causing deep concern to the EU's four non-NATO neutral states—Austria, Sweden, Finland and Ireland—and were greeted with alarm recently by the Tories. Geoffrey Orden, the Tory defence spokesman in Brussels, said: "If this isn't an EU army then I don't know what it is. Mr Blair should call a halt to this before it is too late".

UPGRADING TURKISH BASES AHEAD OF WAR

Mr Wolfowitz, US deputy secretary of defence, recently said the US would begin negotiating the upgrading of Turkish bases that might be used in a possible attack on Iraq. "I am quite confident that we will in fact have a significant level of Turkish participation in an eventual attack—now it should be clearer than ever that Saddam Hussein is surrounded by the international community.

Germany source of Iraqi weaponry

The leaked details from Iraq's weapons dossier published in a German newspaper recently are in line with the long-held view that Germany was historically one of Iraq's main sources of weapons equipment and technology, analysts said. State prosecutors in Germany have mounted several cases against companies on suspicion of breaking tough national and international rules on exports to Iraq. Government officials stressed that the involvement of many German companies in Iraq prior to Baghdad's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was well known. A news report suggested that German companies had also been involved in illegal weapons-related exports to Iraq before 1990, and that the German Government had been aware of those activities.

Belgrade's links with Iraq

Yugoslavia has reacted angrily to a US-based think-tank report alleging it had failed to clamp down on illegal arms sales to Iraq. The response came as the UK Government used an international conference on organised crime in the Balkans to denounce the alleged links between Belgrade and Baghdad. "International rule of law means no breach of UN sanctions—such as selling weapons to Saddam Hussein", said Mr MacShane, UK Foreign Office minister with responsibility for Europe. The conference was aimed at giving fresh impetus to coordinated European strategy against the illicit arms trade as well as drugs trafficking, and people and cigarette smuggling. But it has been overshadowed by the leak of a report alleging deep trading links between Belgrade's political and military leaders and Saddam Hussein's régime, in violation of the UN arms embargo.