



News from the Nations

United Nations reform

At the 59th Session of the UN General Assembly, held in New York in October last, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, delivered a statement during a debate on reforming the UN: "The Holy See looks at the process of strengthening the United Nations with hope, great interest and willingness to submit its contribution . . . Today the universal common good is confronted with problems of worldwide dimensions, problems, therefore, which can be solved only by an authority possessed with power, organisation and means coextensive with these problems and whose sphere of activity is world wide . . . First of all, we should keep in mind that the United Nations is a community of States that shares fundamental values, well outlined in the Millennium Declaration: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. Making these founding principles irreversible is a primary task. The United Nations needs to become a more outward-looking organisation capable of listening more carefully to the needs and demands of the global community. In this context we are reminded of the recommendation of the Panel on United Nations Civil Society Relations to 'connect the global with the local'. This criterion can be read as a modern version of the well-known notion of subsidiarity, which is another landmark for the process of reform".

Russia accuses Turks of blocking strait

Russia has accused Turkey of blocking one of its most important oil export routes by implementing a new shipping safety system on the crowded Bosphorus strait. Russian delegates to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) said that the system, introduced to improve safety on one of the world's busiest but most difficult to navigate waterways, had in fact made the passage of oil tankers more dangerous and caused unnecessary delays. Turkish delegates denied the charge, and said that without the £23.3 million "vessel traffic" radar and computer system they would have been unable to cope with the rapid rise in tanker traffic recently. The number of oil tankers clogging the narrow waterway, which runs through the heart of Istanbul, has become a source of contention between the two countries. Igor Ponomarev, Russia's permanent representative to the IMO, said that the system, implemented this year, has caused jams of up to forty ships at a time waiting for access from the Black Sea through the strait, most of which are carrying dangerous cargo, and that the system is a threat to safety and security. Mr Ponomarev said Russia had offered technical assistance to Turkey and that this would be discussed at the next bilateral meeting between the two countries in Moscow this January. Turkey's deputy undersecretary for maritime affairs has denied charges that Turkey was deliberately slowing down traffic in the hope that it would lead to lucrative pipelines being built on its soil. The Turkish energy ministry is studying at least five pipeline projects to provide an alternative to the Bosphorus. Russia has unrestricted access through the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles Strait to the Aegean and Mediterranean, but Turkey has warned that the sharp rise in tanker traffic could cause a devastating accident that might claim lives or cause pollution.

PUTIN'S NUCLEAR BOAST

According to Newsweek, "while US officials agonise over the axis of evil acquiring nuclear arms, news that the former evil empire may have a new nuke barely raises an eyebrow. Russian President Putin announced recently that his scientists are developing nuclear-missile systems of a type that no other nuclear state has. Arms specialists have tried to guess what Putin meant, some pointed to a mobile version of the silo-based Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missile. Others wondered if Russia was hyping a long-sought-after missile that can zigzag to avoid interception or one that can travel five times the speed of sound. Both may be capable of slipping past Washington's proposed national missile shield. Nuclear arms remain Moscow's lone claim to super-power status".

Putin's worst humiliation

Viktor Yushchenko, just elected as the president of Ukraine, declared: "Today Ukraine is a true democratic country". Why is this bad for Russian President Vladimir Putin? According to a report in Newsweek, "The last thing Putin wants to see is another chunk of the old USSR disappear into the hands of the ever-encroaching West. Yushchenko has promised to bring Ukraine into the European Union and possibly to follow the Baltic states into NATO. Putin has sought to halt further disintegration of the former Soviet superpower and its sphere of influence. As Russia has grown richer on oil revenues, Putin has become bolder in coveting Russia's old regional turf. He recently emphasised the point by announcing that he would modernise his nuclear arsenal. Putin now has to wonder if the new wind from Ukraine will blow back at him. The cheers in Kiev could give heart to Russia's own flagging democrats, whom Putin had just about silenced with a series of repressive restraints. Other former Eastern-bloc states living under semi-autocracy since the collapse of the Soviet Union could be affected as well. 'Yesterday—Georgia. Today—Ukraine. Tomorrow—Kazakhstan'. Ukraine was for centuries split between eastern and southern territories that were incorporated into Tsarist Russia and western lands ruled by Poland and later by Austria-Hungary. The west was peopled largely by Ukrainian-speaking Catholics; the east came to be dominated by Orthodox Russian-speakers, including many ethnic Russians. Putin is now facing a united front of the US and Europe on Russia for the first time since Iraq". Sergei Markov, the Russian president's adviser in Ukraine says, "Putin is absolutely convinced that the West wants Yushchenko as president for one reason: to blockade Russia".

Catholic hospital in Jerusalem

In November last, the pope addressed the International Board of Trustees of St Joseph's Hospital in Jerusalem, the only Catholic hospital in that city. The following is an extract from the pope's address: "I appreciate the praiseworthy sense of solidarity and concern for the needs of the Palestinian Community which led to the establishment of St Joseph's as the only Catholic hospital in Jerusalem. May the Hospital continue to find moral and material support both in the Holy Land and abroad. I impart my Apostolic Blessing".

ISRAEL'S TSUNAMI AID SPURNED

The euphoria in the press claiming that national, religious and racial differences have been set aside in the international aid effort for the victims of the tsunami has one glaring omission. According to a news item in the Daily Telegraph, one of the first nations, as usual, to launch an aid effort was Israel. Israel's generosity, for such a tiny country, went virtually unreported. Now we see television reports in America that Sri Lanka is refusing aid from Israel on the basis that Israeli military personnel may be involved, and that this should be condemned in the strongest terms.

The pope and Iraq

In November last, the pope met in his private library with the prime minister of Iraq, Dr Ayad Allawi. The following is a quotation from the pope's address to Dr Allawi: "I am pleased to welcome you to the Vatican and to assure you of my continued closeness to the Iraqi People, so sorely tried by the tragic sufferings of recent years. I pray for all the victims of terrorism and wanton violence. I wish to encourage the efforts made by the Iraqi People to establish democratic institutions which will be truly representative and committed to defending the rights of all, in complete respect for the ethnic and religious diversity which has always been a source of enrichment for your Country. Upon you and your associates, and upon all the beloved People of Iraq, I cordially invoke the abundant Blessings of Almighty God".

Israel and Egypt talk

Israel has agreed in principle to the expansion of Egyptian forces in Sinai to block the smuggling of arms to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip after this year's planned disengagement. Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev told the *Jewish Chronicle*: "If the Egyptians are ready to do a serious job on their side of the border, we want them to do it. The idea is for them to have more forces armed with heavier weapons". Under the 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, Egyptian forces in northern Sinai were limited to police with light weapons. Mr Regev was speaking after talks in Jerusalem recently between Premier Ariel Sharon and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, and Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit and intelligence chief General Omar Suleiman.