



News from the Nations

GERMAN PLEDGE ON ISRAEL

Angela Merkel used her first Bundestag speech as German Chancellor to stress her government's support for Israel. She also attacked Iran's stance on the Jewish State. She told MPs, "Germany has a very special responsibility with regard to Israel . . . on behalf of the new government, I would like to use this opportunity to stress Israel's right to exist and the right of its citizens to live free from terror, fear and violence". She also stressed that her government supported the Palestinians' right to establish a state alongside Israel.

Chief Rabbi to vet Christian Aid texts

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks has asked Christian Aid that he be allowed to vet any potentially controversial statements on the Middle East. The request included giving his office advance warning if the charity planned to release any contentious statements about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the opportunity to view possibly divisive press releases, in order to avoid misunderstanding over the use of language. July's recommendation by the Anglican Consultative Council for churches worldwide to reconsider investments in companies supporting Israeli policies further strained relations between the Jewish and Christian communities. A meeting, thought to have been initiated by the charity, was held as Christian Aid attempts to rehabilitate its relationship with the Jewish community.

EU tries to break Russia's stranglehold on energy

European Union states are urgently studying ways to reduce their energy dependence on Russia after Moscow's recent decision to halt gas supplies to neighbouring Ukraine. This move affected supplies to various EU countries that receive gas via pipelines running through Ukraine. After a few days Russia restored deliveries, and most countries, some of which suffered a fifty-per-cent reduction in supply, are reportedly back to normal. Despite Russia's temporary climb-down in its row with Ukraine, which has refused to accept a fourfold increase in gas prices levied by its neighbour, the damage to Moscow's reputation as a reliable energy supplier has already been done. Officials from five central European states—Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria—met recently to discuss finding alternative sources of energy. "Diversification of gas supplies to Poland is a priority", said Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, the Polish prime minister. Austria said energy supply and security would top the agenda at the EU summit in Brussels in March. The EU's energy commissioner, Andris Piebalgs, hinted that the organisation could collectively look at ways of sourcing energy outside Russia. "The situation has shown how vulnerable the union is to shortages of gas supply", he said. In London, Paris and Brussels, senior officials of the EU said the crisis showed the need to move towards a common European energy policy.

Russian weapons to Iran

Israeli officials have strongly condemned the reported sale of Russian weapons to Iran, calling it a "very dangerous move". Moscow is selling more than \$1 billion worth of missiles and other defensive systems to Teheran, according to Russian media reports.

HAMAS'S LANDSLIDE VICTORY IN THE WEST BANK

Hamas supporters celebrated a landslide election victory in major West Bank towns recently, the strongest sign yet of the Islamic militant group's growing political appeal before parliamentary elections. Israel is concerned, saying that a Palestinian government dominated by Hamas, which calls for Israel's destruction, would not be a partner for peace. The results shocked officials from the Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah Party. Hamas overwhelmed Fatah in the northern West Bank city of Nablus, capturing seventy-three per cent of the vote and thirteen of fifteen council seats. The Islamic party did well in other local elections, winning seventy-two per cent of the vote in el-Bireh, a large suburb of Ramallah. Hamas's schools, clinics and other welfare programmes—coupled with its resistance to Israel's occupation—have won it support among Palestinians fed up with Fatah's corruption and inability to bring order to the lawless streets of the West Bank and Gaza.

Russia takes over presidency of the G8

According to an observer on Middle Eastern affairs, commenting on Russia's take-over of the year-long presidency of the G8 (the exclusive group to which the world's richest countries belong), "In truth, it is a travesty that marks the West's moral surrender to values and behaviour that threaten freedom, decency and the rule of law, both in Russia and elsewhere. The country now heading a club that is meant to represent the highest standards in governance is one that has become a by-word for stupendous corruption and heavy-handed government under President Putin. Today Russia is selling nuclear technology to Iran, just as it once sold air-defence systems to Saddam Hussein. Closer to home, Russia's policy is even more pernicious; it is using its stranglehold on the continent's gas pipelines to bully the new democracies of Eastern Europe. Countries that toe the Kremlin line get access to cheap energy. Those that lean towards democracy and the West, like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, are punished with fivefold price hikes. Already, Russia's warplanes probe the airspace over the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but there is rarely a squeak of protest from Nato. Membership of the European Union and Nato has brought only the illusion of security for the former captive nations of Eastern Europe. 'We think we are doing well here', says a senior intelligence official in the Baltic states, 'but what we have to understand is that the war for the Baltics is being fought in Brussels, Berlin and Paris and we are outgunned and outmanoeuvred'. In Germany, ties with Russia have been close for years. Germany and Russia earlier this year agreed to build a gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea—this will enable Russia to cut off gas supplies to Poland and the Baltic states in order to put political pressure on them whilst maintaining deliveries to its big customers in Western Europe. At the next G8 summit, in St Petersburg in July, the world's top democracies will be represented by the glowering face of Mr Putin, with his pals Berlusconi and Chirac—is it for these sleazy figures that the captive nations of the Evil Empire struggled to break free? How the West has let those countries down!"

Israel threatened with long-range missiles

Three armed Palestinian groups in the Gaza Strip have threatened to continue their attacks on Israel and said they have long-range missiles capable of reaching more Israeli towns and cities. One of the groups belongs to Fatah, the ruling party headed by Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas. The two others are the Popular Resistance Committees, an alliance of various armed groups, and al-Quds Brigades, the armed wing of Islamic Jihad. A senior PA official said, "Israel's decision to set up a security zone in the northern Gaza Strip will only complicate matters". Asked about the new long-range missiles, the official said he did not rule out the possibility that such weapons had been smuggled from Egypt in recent weeks. "If Israel sets up a security zone in the northern Gaza Strip our group will not sit idly by", warned a spokesman for the group; "we will use these weapons".

EU SUPPORTS PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY

The European Union has spent more than £180 million in the past year supporting the Palestinian Authority, UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw revealed after a meeting with international donors in London recently. The money, he said, had been spent on a range of initiatives, including training for the Palestinian civil police and the establishment of an EU monitoring mission for the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt. Europe is the largest single donor to the PA. He also said that Israel had to play its part by facilitating the forthcoming Palestinian elections and improving freedom of movement and access to markets for the Palestinians: "Positive things are likely to happen in the coming months after the elections".

Spain ignores US objections

Spain has ignored the objections of Washington and concluded a controversial £1.2 billion arms deal with Venezuela to sell boats and warplanes. Venezuela said the equipment would be used to combat the illegal drugs trade, but US officials see the deal as part of an arms build-up by a country that they regard as a major source of regional instability.

Gaza pull-out popular in Israel

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, "Despite the hostility he has attracted from many of his traditional supporters, Sharon's Gaza withdrawal was highly popular with the Israeli electorate, as were his plans for further disengagement from the West Bank. Recent polls suggest that Kadima [the new party set up by Ariel Sharon] would secure enough votes to form a government. Whatever happens in March, the old Bulldozer appears to have generated a momentum for peace that it will be very difficult to stop".