



## News from the Nations

### **RUSSIA CAN BE AN ALLY OF AMERICA, SAYS BUSH**

President Bush sought to reassure Russia on his recent visit. In a speech in Warsaw he said America and Europe alike had a stake in Russia's success and greatness, "a greatness measured by the strength of its democracy, the good treatment of its minorities and the achievements of its people". Mr Bush did express concern about reports that Russia was selling weapons technology to Iran, but said his first task was to "reassure" Russia of his peaceful intent. Despite these words, Russia can only be alarmed by Mr Bush's implicit call for NATO to admit the Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

### **Syrian troop movements**

A Syrian army truck, displaying portraits of President Bashar Assad and his late father Hafez, recently left the Beirut suburb of Yarze and headed toward the Beirut-Damascus highway en route to an unspecified destination. Hundreds of Syrian soldiers have packed their belongings and left strategic positions in Beirut as part of a troop redeployment whose magnitude and aims remain unclear.

### **UN extends Golan mandate**

The UN Security Council recently extended for six months the UN peacekeeping force serving as a buffer between the Israeli and Syrian armies on the Golan Heights. The fifteen-member body, in a unanimous vote, extended until 30 November the UN Disengagement Force, known as UNDOF, which numbers some 1,038 military observers.

### **Middle East water disputes continue**

The recent Lebanese attempt to tap into the Hatzbani River is alarming for Israel. The Hatzbani is a tributary of the River Jordan, and as such feeds Israel's major water source, Lake Kinneret. The Lebanese move violates a forty-six-year-old tacit agreement between Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to maintain an equitable distribution of the Jordan's various sources. Lebanon's failure to stand up to its citizens' tampering with Israel's water sources, like its ongoing abandonment of its entire south to Hizbullah's devices, will have to result in harsh Israeli action. However, the Hatzbani dispute pales in comparison with the controversies between Turkey and its downstream neighbours, Iraq and Syria, or that between Israel and the Palestinians concerning subterranean West Bank aquifers. The common denominator among all these is that, in an area famously short on water and long on violence, the creation of a regional water regime is imperative. As long as it is led by mostly selfish, violent, and autocratic regimes, the Middle East's water will loom ominously as a microcosm of its leaders' tribalist tunnel vision.

### **JORDAN RESTRICTS ENTRY BY PALESTINIANS**

Jordan has limited the entry of some Palestinian residents of the West Bank in a bid to block any possible mass movement of Palestinians into the kingdom, Jordanian Interior Minister Khulaifat said recently. Khulaifat, quoted by an official news agency, said that most Palestinians in the territories who held "green cards"—temporary Jordanian passports—would not be allowed into Jordan without prior permission. Khulaifat, also deputy prime minister, said the "recently implemented" measure was agreed with the Palestinian Authority. He described the move as temporary and said it was aimed at foiling "any attempt to displace Palestinian citizens from their land".

### **Egypt and the EU in trade talks**

Egypt and the European Union took a significant step towards setting up a free-trade area in manufactured goods recently by signing an association agreement that had been the subject of difficult negotiations for more than five years. Under the deal signed in Luxembourg, trade barriers will be gradually dismantled over a twelve-year period from the date of ratification, which is expected to be within eighteen months. Egypt has also gained additional concessions for its agricultural exports to Europe, which remain excluded from the free-trade area.

**French senate passes anti-sect law**

*Anti-sect legislation was passed by the French Senate last May that many felt could open the door to religious discrimination in Europe. The bill has the potential not only to promote religious intolerance within France but also to legitimise discriminatory legislation in other countries that look to the nations of the European Union for direction in their own internal policymaking. It will now be sent back to the National Assembly to be voted upon again in its final form. It is widely feared that the legislation will pass, and be put into practice within the next few months, creating religious discrimination in Europe. A list has been published of 173 identifiable 'sects' (including such mainstream Christian groups as a Free Baptist Church); members of the listed groups reported increased discrimination and harassment. A new addition to the bill would also allow anti-cult groups to initiate penal proceedings against any group they deem to be a sect, increasing the likelihood of legal harassment of religious minorities. Mr Peter Farley of France Mission told the English Churchman that, to avoid being labelled 'sects', French evangelicals need to identify themselves as Protestants—a movement rooted in French history. If the evangelical churches can align or compromise with this, they can avoid the label of sects.*

**Pontiff reveals vision for Europe**

As European Church leaders were preparing to sign a major document on ecumenical cooperation, Pope John Paul II offered his encouragement, and said that Christ must be proclaimed on the continent with one voice. The pope wrote to Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant leaders meeting in Strasbourg, France. "A clear proclamation of the gospel is particularly urgent in Europe", the pope said in his message to a recent meeting of the 123-member Conference of European Churches and the Catholic Council of European Bishops' Conferences; "Europe can be neither understood nor constructed without taking into account the roots which constitute its original identity".

**PREPARING MACEDONIA FOR NATO TO INTERVENE**

*Germany is assembling a NATO force of 10,000 troops, including British units, to prevent the Macedonian conflict erupting into another full-blown Balkan war. SAS troops are in southern Kosovo preparing the ground by cutting off supply lines and reinforcements. The Ministry of Defence said it had no knowledge of any NATO force being readied for Macedonia, but the Daily Telegraph understands that British troops have already been committed. Representatives of the top five military countries in NATO—America, Britain, France, Germany and Italy—met in Brussels to discuss plans to put troops into Macedonia. President Bush was more vague as to America's commitment: "Our government is committed to working with NATO and the EU to bring peace and democracy and stability to that part of the world", he said. Peace talks continue, but a grim fate awaits Macedonia's front-line communities if they fail. "It's as if some people would prefer war to peace", said a senior EU official.*

**Turkey and Russia rivals over oil shipments**

Turkey is currently playing geopolitics with oil piped via Russia. A new pipeline from the Caspian to the Black Sea has just been completed, bringing a huge increase in traffic through the Bosphorus strait. Two Turkish environmental groups, Greenpeace and One Earth, set out into the waters of the Bosphorus armed with the usual protests. Turkey is tolerating and encouraging them; the reason is that they are at the front line of a new geopolitical conflict pitting Turkish and Western interests against an old rival, Russia. The only existing pipelines to the north Caspian, including the largely US-funded Caspian Pipeline Consortium's newly built line, all run to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. From there the oil is put into tankers and shipped to the rest of the world. What worries Western and Turkish politicians more are the strategic implications. If all of Kazakhstan's oil were exported via Novorossiysk, Russia would have a total monopoly over Kazakhstan's export routes, bringing Kazakhstan irrevocably back into the Russian sphere of influence. Turkey and the White House have therefore long favoured sending at least a chunk of Kazakhstan's oil via an alternative pipeline bypassing Russia, stretching instead from Azerbaijan's capital Baku to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Consideration is being given to the possibility of building a new pipeline that will transport the bulk of Azerbaijan's oil, and which could easily carry Kazakhstan's if the necessary connections were built. It remains to be seen what portion of Kazakhstan's crude oil would then flow to Ceyhan in Turkey via Baku, rather than to the Russian port of Novorossiysk.