



News from the Nations

Sharon rejects settlement freeze

Mr Sharon, Israeli prime minister, has refused to meet demands for a freeze on Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Mr Sharon told a news conference he believed it would be "possible to find a way to tend to the current needs of the settlements and on the other hand to calm the fears of our neighbours".

UK to promote trade with Israel

Britain is to allocate £1 million to promote trade, investment and joint projects with Israel, the British ambassador to Israel, Mr Cornish, told the Israel-Britain Business Council in Jerusalem.

Assad shortens Egypt visit

The official Syrian press confirmed that President Bashar al-Assad cut short his visit to Egypt recently because of rising tension with Israel. According to the report, "President Assad's meeting with Egyptian President Mubarak was of great importance, given the dangerous Zionist plan for . . . barbaric aggression against the Palestinian people, Lebanese territories and Syrian forces stationed in them". Farouk al-Shara, Syria's foreign minister, visited Beirut to discuss what a Lebanese statement called "Israeli pressures against Lebanon and Syria". Syria supports Hizbullah as a pressure point to help return the Golan Heights. A Hizbullah leader recently envisaged further attacks on Israel in "all occupied territory". "We hope there will be new initiative in Golan to face the Zionist occupation", said Mohammed Raad, head of Hizbullah's parliamentary delegates.

Mubarak's call for intervention

Egypt's President Mubarak recently appealed for international intervention to bring an end to the bloodshed in the Palestinian Territories and Israel, a day after leading Arab states suspended contacts with the Israeli Government. "Vengeance will continue, if other countries do not intervene to persuade these people to calm things down", he said. Eight foreign ministers from the most powerful Arab states held an emergency meeting in Cairo at the request of Yasser Arafat, at which they signalled both anger and frustration at the violence. According to the report, "In response to Israel's use of F-16 aircraft to bomb Palestinian targets in the West Bank, [the Arab states] announced an end to political contacts with the government of Israeli prime minister Sharon. The communiqué is signalling that the Arab states are freezing normalisation with Israel". A five-point plan envisages an Israeli military withdrawal to positions occupied before 28 September last, as well as a series of confidence-building measures and a freeze on Jewish settlement building in the occupied territories. The plan has been met with only lukewarm support in Washington, while attracting a more positive response among EU member states.

The pope fails to oppose anti-Semitism

The following is the view of a former director general of the Israeli foreign ministry, writing in the *Jerusalem Post* about the pope's visit to Syria: "Pope John Paul's recent visit to Syria was momentous and in line with his ongoing effort to reach out to other religions and seek what is common to, rather than what divides, the world's major faiths. The pope remarked that 'Damascus is the capital of an open, free, democratic and liberal society, whose only concern is for peace, justice, and stability in the Middle East'. In view of the fact that Mr Assad is heading one of the more brutal, oppressive and tyrannical regimes in the region, and as an official guest and religious pilgrim, and although constrained by his status and the context of his visit—his silence was deafening. Even worse was the pope's silence during and after Assad's anti-Semitic diatribe. It was only natural that Assad would use his welcoming address to the pope to deliver an extremely anti-Israel speech, when the attention of the world was riveted on him. The pope has no divisions—but he claims to have a moral voice. It was this voice which was not heard during the 1930s and 1940s and its silence epitomises to this very day the moral failure of the Roman Catholic Church in our time. As a secular Jew I feel deeply ashamed for the head of the Roman Catholic Church. Once again the church has failed its test of speaking truth to power".

Turkey and the European rapid reaction force

Turkey said it had reached an "understanding" with NATO that would clear the way for the setting up of the European Union's rapid reaction force. The deal would give the EU guaranteed access to Turkey's military assets in NATO. It was up to the EU to respond to the NATO proposals. If a deal is ratified, it will pave the way for the EU to move ahead with setting up its own security and defence arm. Turkey had insisted on denying the EU use of its armed forces if it was not given the right to decide how they were deployed. A breakthrough came with intense diplomatic efforts by Britain and the US in secret meetings in Istanbul recently involving senior political and military officials. The proposals, subject to approval by the EU, will end a dispute involving one of NATO's more important allies. They will also give the EU assured access to NATO's assets. It will also allow the EU access to NATO's military experts that Turkey—not an EU member—tried to block. Under the terms of the "understanding", consultations between the fifteen EU member states and the six NATO countries not in the EU will be increased, but not to the level of full participation that Turkey had demanded. EU diplomats said participation would have given a non-EU country power of veto.

ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRATION TO ISRAEL

By maintaining a steady flow of 100 or more immigrants per week, Israel plans to bring in approximately 6,000 Falas Mora from Ethiopia this year, up from 2,000 a year in 1999 and 2000, according to Jewish Agency sources. This is made possible by Natan Sharansky, interior minister under Ehud Barak, who established a new system to check the eligibility of those applying to come to Israel under the Law of Return. Sharansky made it possible for the necessary background checks on the Falas Mora—Jews or the offspring of Jews who converted to Christianity in the past but have returned to Judaism—to be carried out by a special team from the Interior Ministry working in Ethiopia rather than in Israel, as had been previously the case. The immigrants from Ethiopia are now being sent directly to hotels or hostels, most of which are private enterprise. The upside of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which has delivered a severe blow to the tourist industry in Israel, is the freeing up of ample accommodation for these newcomers.

Iraq sanctions proposal in trouble

A British initiative to introduce "smart sanctions" against Iraq has run into trouble after Russia and China immediately raised objections and Iraq threatened to cut off oil supplies to its neighbours. The British proposal, presented at the United Nations, aims to end many of the sanctions on civilian supplies to Iraq while maintaining the UN's control of Iraq's finances and restricting the smuggling of goods into the country. However, it depends on the support of Russia and China, both permanent members of the UN Security Council with veto powers, and the cooperation of Iraq's neighbours. Iraq renewed its threat to stop oil exports under the UN's oil for food programme if the "smart sanctions" are approved, sending world crude prices soaring.

Nazism in St Petersburg

The Russian press is expressing concern about the "rabid flourishing of Nazi ideology" in St Petersburg, according to the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews.

Europe threatens cults

In April 1997 the Belgian Parliamentary Commission on Cults issued a 600-page report identifying 189 religious groups as cults. Included were twenty-one evangelical denominations. Germany, Austria and Italy proposed a religion supplement to the Maastricht Treaty, which could have meant that churches without a "constitutional status", including evangelical and charismatic churches, could be discriminated against. Recently all eyes have switched to France. In the French bill, initially it was the words "mental manipulation" which caused the main concern. It was envisaged by opponents that such phraseology would certainly mean that groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Scientologists and the Unification Church would be found guilty. It could go even further. Any group that sought to change the way a person thinks about their faith could be accused, and it would depend eventually on how the judges defined 'manipulation' as to whether they were found guilty or not. Mr Douglas Harris, Director of Reachout Trust, said: "There are clear differences between true Christianity and the sects and cults that offer a false hope and maybe use manipulative controls. We already have laws that deal with crimes against persons that can be brought against sects and cults, but why do we need a specific law that deals with belief?". Mr Harris is very concerned, and believes that the time to act is now before Britain is brought under some European Law.