



News from the Nations

Bush seeks censure of Iran over atomic plant

The United States is to ask the international community to declare Iran in breach of a key nuclear weapons treaty, after deciding that new evidence of Iranian misconduct is so blatant that even the United Nations cannot ignore it, it was reported recently. Bush Administration officials reported in *The Times* that they hoped to extract official condemnation of Iran from the International Atomic Energy Agency. Such a condemnation would pave the way for punitive sanctions by the United Nations. As with North Korea, the third member of President Bush's axis of evil, the Bush administration maintains hopes that other nations will judge it in their own interests to join America in pressing Iran to stop developing a nuclear arsenal. The US has also called on Europe to work more closely with Washington over combating weapons of mass destruction, asking Brussels to use its diplomatic clout to persuade Iran to abandon its alleged nuclear weapons programme. The US has accused Iran of an "alarming, clandestine programme" to develop nuclear weapons.

RUSSIAN FEARS ABOUT OIL

Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to be sure that whoever succeeds Saddam Hussein does not flood the world market with oil. The Russian economy—and the Kremlin's tax revenues—depend critically on prices staying above \$18 a barrel. "The oil price is basically crucial to the Russian economy", says one politician.

An Israeli view of Iran

According to a report in the Jerusalem Post, "Iran is strategically and religiously committed to the obliteration of the Jewish state, and relentlessly exports Islamic revolutionary fervour, along with vast supplies of weaponry and expertise, to Hizbullah on our northern border and Hamas and Islamic Jihad networks in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—a devastating combination of fundamentalist rhetoric and high explosives. It also relentlessly pursues a VIA-confirmed programme of chemical weapons development. It sought systematically to recruit the top scientists employed in the fragmented Soviet Union's biological weapons programme (offering salaries 60 times higher than the USSR norm). Recently the Bush Administration has acknowledged that Iran is much, much farther down the path to nuclear arms than had previously been believed. A nuclear complex near the town of Natanz, south of Teheran—a vast project—will by 2005 be capable of producing enough enriched uranium for several bombs a year. North Korea and China head the list of suspected facilitators. Whenever the fate of Saddam Hussein is sealed, there must be no illusions about a battle won. Israel has long regarded Teheran as its most potent enemy—a more discreet, subtle, patient and single-minded foe. As [US Secretary of State Colin] Powell has acknowledged, the post 9/11 focus, first on al-Qaeda, and then on Baghdad, have combined to give Iran breathing space. Breathing space it has fully, and terrifyingly, exploited".

East Europe open to US troops

The foreign ministers of Bulgaria and Romania said they will actively pursue bases for US troops once they become full members of NATO, a goal that came a step closer recently as they were among seven Eastern Europe countries unanimously approved for membership of the Atlantic alliance by the US Senate. General Jones, the new head of American troops in Europe, is re-evaluating the US's "footprint" in the region, and has recommended that many of the 80,000 troops based in Germany be moved eastwards. Bulgaria and Romania, with ports on the Black Sea used by the US during the Iraq war, are leading contenders. Mircea Geoana, Romania's foreign minister, said the shift east will help US and NATO forces become more flexible to respond to "new threats coming from the greater Middle East", and noted that Pentagon engineers had been evaluating Romanian military facilities since 1997. The Romanian airfield and port at Costaza is seen as a probable location for possible operational footprints for future NATO missions.

THE ROADMAP TO MIDDLE EAST PEACE

The recently announced roadmap to peace in Israel envisages "a final and comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by 2005 . . . [based on] an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours". Three phases were proposed:

Phase 1 (to May 2003): "Unconditional cessation of violence" by both sides, a new Palestinian constitution and elections, and a freeze on Israeli settlement activity;

Phase 2 (June-December 2003): Following Palestinian elections, an international conference to be held with a view to "possible creation of an independent Palestinian state with provisional borders in 2003";

Phase 3 (2004-2005): "Consolidation of reform and stabilisation of Palestinian institutions, sustained, effective Palestinian security performance, and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations aimed at a permanent status agreement in 2005", including normalisation of relations between Israel and Arab states.

Israel to dismantle settlements

Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz plans to order the army to dismantle several dozen settlement outposts constructed illegally in the West Bank over the past few years, ministry sources have told the Jerusalem Report. The recent evacuation of one of them, Hill 26 outside Hebron, was only the first, they added. They spoke after Prime Minister Sharon had told a meeting of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee last March that "legal is legal and what is illegal will be evacuated". (Peace Now's Settlement Watch records that seventy outposts were established during Sharon's first government.)

Iraqi oil to be exported via Israel

Israel has suggested that a new democratic regime in Baghdad could allow the reopening of an existing oil pipeline from Iraq to Israel across Jordan. Israel's infrastructure minister said that restarting the British mandate-era pipeline would slash up to twenty per cent off fuel prices. Most Middle East countries refuse to deal with Israel, which gets eighty per cent of its oil from the former Soviet Union. He said: "We are looking into the possibility of renewing the pipeline between Mosul and Haifa, which would bring enormous benefits to the region" He acknowledges that there are difficulties, and indicated that it was too early to say at this stage when this might happen. Jordan has denied that it has engaged in official contacts with Israel for this latest pipeline plan, but a spokesman at the Israeli Infrastructure Ministry said unofficial talks had begun. He said it would be technically easy to reopen the pipeline, with the Jordan-Israel stretch needing the most work. Reopening the pipeline would help Israel in its policy of isolating Syria and strengthening links with a reluctant Jordan.

ISRAEL WARNS SYRIA

A war of words between Jerusalem and Damascus escalated recently, according to a report, after Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara'a threatened to make Israel pay if its "American friends" went to war against his country. Israel, which is taking the threat seriously, reinforced US pressure on Syria over alleged support for Saddam Hussein. It demanded that President Bashar al-Assad remove Hizbullah from south Lebanon, destroy thousands of medium-range missiles with which the Shi'ite militia could target the coastal city of Haifa, and expel Palestinian extremist headquarters from Damascus. In an interview with a newspaper, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said Israel was also pressing, via Washington, for Syria to stop Iran from shipping weapons to Hizbullah through its air and sea ports. Israel has long alleged that leaders of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other radical Palestinian groups have been ordering attacks from offices operating in Damascus, where Mr Assad has publicly questioned Israel's right to exist.

Sharon offers "hand of peace" to Palestinians

The Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, extended an olive branch to the country's Arab neighbours recently, saying his government was prepared to "do its part" to promote a peaceful Middle East. He also said that the new Palestinian leadership had abandoned the "strategy of terror" and was ready to embark on a new road to end the current conflict. "We extend our hand in peace . . . to all the neighbouring countries and their peoples", Mr Sharon said. "Israel is ready to do its part in the effort to advance the entire Middle East". As Israel marked the fifty-fifth anniversary of its foundation, Mr Sharon vowed to "banish war from the land" and bring peace and security.