



News from the Nations

War on Want urges sanctions against Israel

According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, a leading communal executive of Jewish charities has voiced fears that British charities are being swept along by a tide of anti-Israel sentiment. Board of Deputies director-general Jon Benjamin said recently that, while it was legitimate to raise funds for impoverished Palestinians, there was a growing tendency amongst charitable organisations to target Israel "for special condemnation". Concerns were sparked by a War on Want campaign calling for sanctions against Israel and urging action against Caterpillar, an American-based corporation that sells bulldozers to Israel. The report says that "War on Want certainly has a politicised stance on Israel". In a message to the government, War on Want accused Britain of shying away from imposing economic pressure on Israel, "trusting instead in a policy of close engagement to exert influence". The War on Want view was that the government should press for the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, under which Israeli goods have preferential access to European markets. By its "violation of Palestinian human rights" Israel was in breach of the accord. War on Want chief executive Louise Richards maintained that failing to introduce sanctions against Israel would be seen "as a betrayal of the Palestinian People".

US THREATENS TO STARVE UN OF FUNDS

The US Congress is on a collision course with the United Nations by threatening to cut its annual budget by tens of millions of pounds, which would disrupt its work on the ground. Republican senators have waged a long campaign against the UN, much of whose work they oppose on ideological grounds. Their case has been aided by recent scandals. The US is the single biggest contributor to the UN, paying about twenty-two per cent of the total budget, with Japan second on 19.5 per cent. The United Nations reform bill of 2005 proposes that the UN implement various reforms, and that failure to do so will result in a fifty-per-cent budget cut. The bill targets programmes, including the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, which the Israeli Government has been campaigning against.

Talks over Iran's nuclear programme

The US has thrown a lifeline to Europe's attempts to keep negotiations alive over Iran's nuclear programme, diplomats said recently, by giving a green light to Teheran's bid to start World Trade Organisation membership talks. Iran's membership talks, formally approved by the Geneva-based trade body recently, were described as part of a broader deal securing the continuation of the European Union's talks on containing Iran's nuclear programme.

Turkey's concern about Iran's nuclear ambitions

Mr Erdogan, the Turkish prime minister, shares Israel's concern about the Iranians' nuclear ambitions, which, he said, threatened Turkey as much as Israel. He also called for cooperation in combating terrorism, and condemned anti-Semitism as "a crime against humanity". Turkey is currently negotiating defence contracts with Israel Aircraft Industries worth more than \$200 million. Israeli holidaymakers are flocking to Turkey in their hundreds of thousands every year. Still, Alon Liel, a former Israeli ambassador to Turkey, sounded a warning note. Mr Erdogan, he wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv*, had as soft a spot for Syria as he had for Israel. He cared about the Palestinians more than previous Turkish leaders. Like Mr Putin, the Turkish leader urged Israel to be patient with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and help him restore order.

Papal synagogue visit plan

Pope Benedict XVI has told the Vatican that he intends to visit the main synagogue in Cologne, Germany, in August. He will become the second pontiff in history to visit a synagogue. Israeli ambassador Oded Ben-Hur said the pope told him of his intention recently following an audience with diplomats assigned to the Vatican. The pope is proposing to visit the synagogue during a planned trip to Cologne for World Youth Day. The event is expected to draw tens of thousands of young people to the city.

Russia to sell anti-aircraft missiles to Syria

Commenting on Mr Putin's proposal to sell SA-18 anti-aircraft missiles to Syria, the *Jewish Chronicle* states: "Ariel Sharon's concern is that these arms could reach terror groups. Putin's visit was widely interpreted in Jerusalem as an attempt by Russia to upgrade its role in international affairs, hence the rejection by Israel of a proposal for a Middle East peace conference in Moscow in the autumn. Despite sharp differences over Russia's help in building an Iranian nuclear reactor and proposed missile sales to Syria, Russia is back in the Middle East diplomatic game. Despite the thaw, Israeli officials insisted that they would continue to lobby against Russia's nuclear cooperation with Iran and the missile sale to Syria. They were not convinced by Mr Putin's attempt to assuage their fears.

New pope renews pledge for dialogue with Jews

In a message congratulating Rome's Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff on his 90th birthday, Pope Benedict XVI said that Jews and Catholics could look with confidence towards the future and continue their dialogue under his reign. He went out of his way to demonstrate that his commitment to Catholic-Jewish relations is as strong if not stronger than that of his predecessor.

UN FOOD AGENCY CALLS FOR AID TO NORTH KOREA

The United Nations World Food Programme, which feeds 6.5 million North Koreans, is imploring the US, Japan and South Korea to increase their donations to the agency, despite the political stand-off over the North's nuclear-weapons programme. Aid agencies report that food shortages are reaching a critical stage at the same time as prices of staple goods are spiralling.

The Caspian oil pipeline

A pipeline that will carry oil for the first time from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean was opened last month in Baku, attended by four regional presidents, marking the emergence of the Caspian region as a new force in the world's oil markets. According to a report in The Times, this is being hailed as the biggest investment in the region since the collapse of communism. The leaders of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey recently met together and turned on the taps of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline linking the three countries. "This is the Silk Road of the twenty-first century", said Ahmet Sezer, Turkey's president, at the opening ceremony. The £1.7 billion pipeline will carry one million barrels of oil a day when it is fully operational by the fourth quarter of this year, and more if, as expected, Kazakhstan joins the project in the near future. Lord Browne, chief executive of oil major BP, the biggest shareholder and investor in the BTC pipeline, with a 30.1-per-cent stake, said in an interview that the project was "an important piece of the jigsaw of the world energy market". As well as bringing together the presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Kazakhstan, it also attracted Samuel Bodman, US energy secretary, who championed the project for geopolitical reasons, including the chance to enhance the independence of former Soviet republics from Moscow. The pipeline's circuitous 1,770-kilometre route through some of the most mountainous territory in the Caucasus bypasses Russia, which currently dominates routes to Western markets for oil from the Caspian and central Asia.

The significance of the new pipeline

According to oil analysts, it was significant that Moscow did not try to block the pipeline, though Russia was a notable absentee at the opening. The pipeline also deepens the isolation of Armenia, which has fought a war with Azerbaijan and has no diplomatic relations with Turkey. The opening came more than ten years after the project was announced. If it had not been built, Caspian oil would have had to have continued to be shipped through the crowded Bosphorus strait that runs through the centre of Istanbul. Turkey is pressing for an end to tanker traffic on the strait, which is still used to ship large amounts of Russian oil. One commentator says, "This engineering feat brings Central Asia closer to Europe and in bypassing the Bosphorus removes the threat of intolerably heavy tanker traffic in those clogged straits". The Caspian's oil reserves are said to equal those of the North Sea.

North Korea's nuclear weapons

America's spy satellites have detected frenetic activity in North Korea, indicating that the secretive Stalinist state is on the verge of detonating a nuclear weapon for the first time. The preparations include the construction of a reviewing stand that might be used by Pyongyang's leadership to observe a test explosion. Intelligence officers regard that as highly significant, since Kim Jong-Il's régime constructed a stand seven years ago when it fired a new missile over Japan, an act that triggered a major regional security crisis.