



News from the Nations

Storm brewing in Israel

Binyamin Netanyahu, the leader of Israel's right-wing Likud opposition party, said recently, "A storm is brewing in all corners of the country", after Prime Minister Olmert survived three no-confidence votes brought against him in the Israeli parliament.

Israel warns Hamas

Officials in Israel have recently said that Israel could target Hamas leader and Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh for assassination. In the Jewish Chronicle it was reported that Israeli government officials have said, "There is no one who is in the circle of commanders and leaders in Hamas who is immune from a strike. When someone preaches that the State of Israel should be destroyed, he is not in the political echelon, he is a terrorist in a suit". Internal Security Minister Avi Dicker told Army Radio that Hamas's political leader, Khaled Mashaal, who is based in Syria, "was not invincible, not in Damascus and not elsewhere".

HAMAS REFUSES TRUCE

Hamas recently rejected any possibility of declaring a unilateral truce with Israel and promised to continue firing rockets. Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, who held talks in Cairo with Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal, failed to persuade him to declare a unilateral truce, PA officials in Ramallah said. Mashaal insisted during the talks that any ceasefire be mutual and include the West Bank, according to the officials.

Row over Palestinian gas

The militant Hamas movement has launched a stinging attack on BG (British Gas) Group and vowed to block a potential £2 billion deal being brokered by the company to supply Palestinian gas to Israel, according to a report in *The Times*. The Islamist group told *The Times* that "any agreement would be equivalent to a modern-day 'Balfour Declaration'", the British Government statement that formally approved the creation of an Israeli homeland in 1917. Ziad Thatha, the Hamas economic minister in the coalition Palestinian Government, said, "BG Group is an embarrassment to the Palestinian people. When a company sells Palestinian gas to the Zionist occupation, it is similar to acts of theft the Israelis are practising against our land every day". The comments threaten to overshadow key negotiations BG Group hoped would lead to the development of the Gaza Marine gas field discovered seven years ago. Talks over a fifteen-year contract are due to begin soon, and the Israeli Foreign Ministry said it was keen to conclude a deal "as soon as possible". The Gaza Marine field is the Palestinians' only sovereign natural resource, and its development could generate £500 million for the Palestinian economy in royalties from BG Group. The gas would meet ten per cent of Israel's annual energy requirements.

China's nuclear missiles

Washington is becoming increasingly concerned about China's deployment of mobile land- and sea-based intercontinental ballistic nuclear missiles that could hit targets in the US. The 2007 Pentagon China Military Power Report will highlight the pace of development of a new Jin-class submarine. It will be equipped with nuclear ballistic missile warheads that will have a range of more than 8,000 kilometres. Strategists in Washington are also worried about the implications of China's preparations to deploy new mobile land-based DF-31A intercontinental ballistic missiles, which have the range to target the whole of the US. "China is moving at a rapid pace to becoming a military contender", one senior US official said in a report. The report will also renew concerns about the buildup of missiles across the Taiwan Strait, and the country's recent anti-satellite missile test.

Russian church heals eighty-year rift

According to a news report, "The Russian Orthodox Church recently healed an 80-year-old rift when the New York-based Orthodox Church Abroad, set up by refugees, restored ties in a ceremony at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow".

Hi-tech Israel

There are many hi-tech developments in modern Israel that rarely hit the headlines. Here are some examples. Recently scientists from Tel Aviv University in Israel unveiled a simple device that could be fitted to the back of large lorries, reducing drag at high speeds and increasing fuel efficiency by ten per cent. One third of Israel is covered by the barren wilderness of the Negev Desert, an extension of the Sinai Desert in Egypt, but by planting millions of trees Israel has successfully reversed the desertification of the area. Israelis also invented the drip-feed irrigation system used throughout Africa and other parched areas of the world. Israeli brainpower has become the country's major economic resource. Israelis invented the technology behind voice messaging, instant messaging and Voice Over Internet Protocol. Israel developed Intel's Pentium chip and the new Core 2 Duo, which Intel is counting on to restore its fortunes. Outside the US, and despite a tiny population of only seven million, Israel is the country with the largest number of companies quoted on New York's NASDAQ stock exchange. The Tel Aviv stock market is at an all-time high. Hi-tech exports rose twenty per cent last year, and foreign investment soared to a record level.

UK MPs sponsor anti-Israel motion

A number of UK Members of Parliament have called on the government to block moves to upgrade Israel's ties with the European Union, currently under consideration by the EU following talks between Israel's foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, and the European Commission. Seventy-seven MPs have signed a Commons Early Day Motion accusing Israel of being in breach of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which calls for adherence to human rights. The agreement is a key treaty which allows Israeli exports preferential treatment in the EU, Israel's biggest trading partner. The document accuses Israel of committing "grievous human-rights abuses" and supports calls for the suspension of the Association Agreement "until there are improvements". An Israeli official dismissed the MPs as "the voices of the past", saying Israel was keen to upgrade its relations with the EU.

RUSSIA PLANS TIGHTER CONTROL ON ENERGY ROUTES

A report in the Financial Times says, "Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have called for a new pipeline to be built along the coast of the Caspian Sea to carry additional central Asian natural gas exports north into Russia in a move that would tighten Moscow's control over energy routes out of the region. The leaders of the three former Soviet republics also agreed to expand an existing gas pipeline to Russia, currently central Asia's only major gas export outlet. This would be a setback for the US and European Union, which had urged central Asian republics to reduce their dependence on Russia by building pipelines across the Caspian Sea to carry oil and gas to Turkey and Europe. Putin, the Russian president, said the long-stalled project for a new pipeline going through Russia had been 'given new impulse'. Mr Putin said the pipeline would carry at least 20 billion cubic metres of gas north by 2012 and allow for an increase in energy supplies to Europe and world markets".

Criticism of Israel in Britain

"Israel will continue to come under blistering criticism in Britain", some of it "totally unjustified", as long as "Israel is regarded as an occupying power", British Ambassador Tom Phillips said in an interview recently. Asked to explain why the British public at times seemed "awful" on Israel, manifest by a hostile press and various calls to boycott Israel from different unions—the most recent coming from the journalists' union—Phillips said that this was "what goes with being an occupying power."

Is Syria preparing for war?

"While Syria is repairing its military positions along the border with Israel, its army has not beefed up its forces on the Golan Heights, Austrian Major-General Wolfgang Jilke, commander of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), responsible for maintaining the ceasefire on the Syrian-Israeli border, told the Jerusalem Post. Israeli defence officials rejected Jilke's assessment, and pointed to what they called an unprecedented military buildup by the Syrian military that included exercises and the procurement of advanced weaponry such as Russian anti-aircraft systems and missile ships, as well as the movement of rockets and missiles within range of Israel.

Will Tony Blair convert to Rome?

Tony Blair will become a Roman Catholic after stepping down as UK Prime Minister, it was recently claimed. Father Michael Seed, who has previously helped several prominent politicians convert, said, "Tony Blair has been going to Mass every Sunday". Technically the Prime Minister is an Anglican, but his wife and four children are Catholics. To receive Mr Blair "into the fold" would be a triumph for the Roman Catholic Church.