



News from the Nations

LONDON A BASE FOR TERRORISTS

Senior Egyptian officials accused the British Government recently of allowing London to be used as Europe's largest base for terrorists convicted in Egypt. The charge came as two Egyptian terrorist organisations broke off ceasefires and renewed their support for the overthrow of the government of President Hosni Mubarak. According to the report, Islamic Jihad announced that it is still committed to overthrowing the regime as a means of 'liberating Palestine'. An Egyptian senior cabinet official said: "Unfortunately, the masterminds are living in the United Kingdom, using it as their major base of operations and enjoying the hospitality of British taxpayers". A British official in Cairo admitted that there were certain "loopholes" in British asylum law that prevented the Egyptian Government from extraditing convicted terrorists. He denied that the laws were under review. Israel has released details of British passport-holder Jihad Shuman, whom it accuses of planning to carry out terror attacks against Israel, and said a six-month administrative detention order had been imposed on the UK national.

Iran and Syria in talks

Iranian President Khatami recently hosted his Syrian counterpart Bashar Assad for "a strategic dialogue". Assad's two-day trip, according to a report, came after Iraq conducted large-scale military manoeuvres on the Syrian border, reportedly in prior agreement with Damascus. Assad's apparent cooperation with Saddam Hussein has elicited an American warning.

Russia rejects arms proliferation accusations

Russia has reacted angrily to allegations from the US defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, that it was aiding proliferation of missile technology. The defence secretary should produce "incontrovertible proof" of his claims, said senior Russian general Manilov. Russia also rejected fresh US media reports of shipments of tactical nuclear missiles into Kaliningrad (Königsberg), its Baltic enclave. Large military exercises by Russia recently may have been meant as a signal of the national mood. Russia strongly opposes the planned US missile defence system. Analysts say Russia fears mainly the buildup in China's nuclear arsenal that would probably follow. Mr Rumsfeld said it was "misplaced" for Russia to oppose US defence plans and at the same time export missile technology. Russia was "part of the problem", he said. It was "an active proliferator . . . selling and assisting countries like Iran, North Korea and India and other countries with these technologies which are threatening other people including the United States". The *Washington Times* newspaper said that US spy satellites had established the exact location of a shipment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons allegedly sent to Kaliningrad.

IRAQ VERSUS JERUSALEM

Iraq said recently it was mobilising an army to liberate Jerusalem, as Arab commentators predicted war after the election of Ariel Sharon. "War is coming, and the Palestinians and Arabs must be prepared to confront this new . . . attack". Despite the hysteria in some Arab newspapers, Egypt and Jordan, which have both signed peace treaties with Israel, were more cautious, saying, "We will wait and see what Sharon will do—will it be a policy of peace or of suppression?". In contrast, Syria's ruling party report said: "The victory of Sharon 'the terrorist' is a clear message from the Zionist entity to the Arabs, taking the form of an official declaration of war". In the official Iraqi view, the 1991 Gulf War was not an unparalleled disaster for Iraq but the prelude to the momentous battle for Jerusalem. In the meantime, Mr Sharon has declared that "Jerusalem will remain the eternal and indivisible capital of Israel, with the Temple Mount as its centre, for all eternity".

Greek Church agrees to papal visit

After years of opposition, Greek Orthodoxy has bowed to diplomatic pressure and given its blessing to a visit by the pope to Athens. According to a report, a Rome newspaper said recently that the visit would take place on 9-10 May as the final leg of a pilgrimage in the footsteps of Paul that would first take in Damascus and Malta.

Moscow arms deal with Tehran

Russia hopes to sign military-technical cooperation agreements with Iran this year, leading to new Russian arms sales worth £205 million a year, a Russian official said. Mr Komardin, deputy head of the Russian Government's new arms-export monopoly, said that "real contracts" could follow as early as this summer. He claimed France was also taking an active interest in the Iranian market. In another sign of strengthening ties with Iran, Russian media have reported that a date in mid-March will soon be agreed for a first official visit to Moscow by the Iranian president, Mohammed Khatami. Russia has, according to a report, started work on a second reactor for a nuclear power station it is building in Iran, at Bushehr. In another diplomatic move, Russia is starting to plan for a possible visit to Moscow in April by Kim Jong-il, the North Korean leader. North Korea and Iran are among the countries against which the US's proposed National Missile Defence System would be directed, which Russia strongly opposes.

Russian military exercises cause alarm

The Russian air force staged big military exercises on opposite sides of the globe recently, forcing Japanese and Norwegian fighters to scramble as Russian bombers approached over the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The exercise provoked a diplomatic row with Japan. Norway also scrambled fighter jets after detecting Russian bombers off its Arctic coast. The incident provoked speculation in Japan that the Russian exercise might be linked to a summit between the two countries' leaders set for 25 March. According to a report, however, the scale of the Russian exercise suggests an audience other than Japan alone. It may have been an attempt by the air force to advertise its skills at a time when Mr Putin is considering big cuts and restructuring in the armed forces. Or it may have been directed at US plans for a National Missile Defence programme, as a warning of Russia's power to respond.

RUSSIA UNVEILS DEFENCE SYSTEM PLANS

Russia recently outlined its proposals for an antiballistic missile defence system, which it says could be developed in conjunction with the US and Europe in place of Washington's controversial National Missile Defence (NMD) system. One diplomat said that details were likely to be presented at the next meeting of the NATO-Russia council in Brussels, to be held in the next few months. But Western diplomats said the plan did not differ radically from proposals the Russian Government had made publicly in the past. Diplomats from NATO countries said they saw the Russian proposal mainly as an attempt to prolong debate on NMD rather than offering a real alternative. Russia has also offered Europe help with its plan to build a defence force under the umbrella of the European Union, which the US fears might duplicate and destabilise NATO. Russia and China agreed recently to "coordinate even more closely" their policy in opposing American missile defence plans. Russia and China are known to be drafting a wide-ranging treaty of "friendship and cooperation", which they hope to sign during a planned summit meeting.

Assad claims Golan Heights

Syrian President Bashar Assad has recently insisted on a full return of the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights as a basis for resuming peace negotiations, indicating that he would work with any Israeli Government willing to meet his requirements. In his first comments since the election of Ariel Sharon, Israel's right-wing leader, as prime minister, Mr Assad also emphasised that Syria's commitment to a comprehensive peace in the region required that Israel should also address the Palestinian track.

ISRAEL-US JOINT EXERCISES

Israeli and American soldiers began exercises to test the Patriot air-defence system recently amid fears that Saddam Hussein could retaliate for recent air strikes against Iraq by the US and the UK by launching missiles at Israel. 400 American soldiers came from Germany with two Patriot missile batteries to test the "inter-operability of air defence systems", according to the Israeli army. The Patriot missiles are being deployed in the Negev Desert and will be tested against drones, or unmanned aircraft. Though the army command has said life should continue as normal, Israelis have called in increasing numbers to replace gas masks in case of attack by missiles with chemical warheads.

EU support for Palestinians

European Union foreign ministers recently presented a package of economic measures aimed at preventing the collapse of Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority. But implementation of the £37.5 million package will depend on mustering broad international donor support for funding the PA's budget in coming months, the Palestinians adopting an austerity budget, and Israel ending the closures on the West Bank and Gaza Strip.