



News from the Nations

RESHAPING THE MIDDLE EAST

The creation of a democratic régime in Iraq “could fundamentally reshape” the Middle East and make it easier to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, said recently. Senior Pentagon officials have said privately that they believe that toppling Saddam Hussein could trigger a democratic revolution in Iran and reform in Saudi Arabia. Mr Powell said success in attacking Iraq could fundamentally reshape that region in a powerful, positive way that will enhance US interests, especially if, in the aftermath of such a conflict, progress can be achieved on Middle East peace. He also said that Saddam has been a poisonous force against reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. When he is gone there may well be an improvement.

Call for poll on Europe

Voters must be given the right to reject radical EU plans to take control of Britain’s economy, defence and foreign policy, a Tory think-tank said recently. The Centre for Policy Studies called on Tony Blair to call a referendum before ruling on the proposal for a Brussels-based constitution. Its chairman, Lord Blackwell, said the EU plan would lead to “civil and political breakdown”, although it was likely to be rejected by the British, who had fought hard for the right to freedom and self-government. By contrast, those in many European states were accustomed to rule by rigid and distant authorities. All but six of the thirty-eight states in Europe had had Communist or fascist governments over the past century.

Fears over Iranian nuclear policy

The top US official for arms control, John Bolton, is to visit Russia to underscore concerns over Iran’s nuclear programme, following an inspection by the head of the United Nations nuclear watchdog, who said he was struck by the level of sophistication he had seen, according to a *Times* report. Iranian President Mohammad Khatami announced the discovery and extraction of uranium, but insisted that the nuclear power programme was strictly for civilian use. Mr Bolton is expected to warn Moscow that Russian technology may be providing Iran with the means to develop nuclear weapons, according to a US official involved in proliferation issues. The report follows a visit by Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency to Iran’s newly declared uranium enrichment facility at Natanz. Iran has recently said that it intends to develop the full nuclear fuel cycle for its nuclear programme for peaceful purposes only, but in Washington, Richard Boucher, a US State Department spokesman, said: “We continue to have very grave concerns that Iran is using its supposedly peaceful nuclear programme . . . as a pretext for advancing a nuclear weapons programme”.

Foreign investment report on Iraq

*As President Bush presses ahead with his plans to topple Saddam Hussein, the oil world is preparing for what many foresee as the dramatic effects of any return by Iraq to the international market. A former Iraqi oil minister and member of the opposition predicts that Iraq could within five years rival the dominant position of Saudi Arabia, which controls 260 billion barrels of crude oil reserves, more than twenty per cent of the world’s total. Unlike the Caspian region—the “great new frontier” of the 1990s—Iraq’s oil is easier to access and export. Iraq has the added advantage of being able to transport much of its output through the Mediterranean via a pipeline to Turkey—a flexibility other Middle East producers lack. Mr Yergin, author of *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*, says: “Iraq needs to be seen as a part of the larger emerging contest between Russia and the Caspian on one side and the Middle East on the other side as to who will add more capacity to meet the growing world demand”.*

Elite forces inside Iraq

US defence officials say small units of élite Special Operations forces are already operating inside Iraq, stepping up contacts with opposition groups and helping plan the seizure of large portions of Iraq should President Bush give the order to go to war.

A regional earthquake?

According to an article in the Jerusalem Report, several leading Israeli defence officials predict that the fall of Saddam would trigger a Middle East 'domino effect' immensely beneficial to Israel, although there are terrifying potentials on the down side. The Israeli prime minister's national security adviser, Ephraim Halevy, laid out a utopian picture of the Middle East after a US invasion of Iraq when he spoke to the top defence and strategic experts from over forty countries who formed his audience at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in early February. According to the article, "Halevy spoke of 'shock waves' from a post-Saddam Baghdad having 'wide-ranging effects in Teheran, Damascus and Ramallah'. He envisaged a post-Arafat Palestinian leadership negotiating in good faith with Israel, and a progressive and prosperous Iraq rejoining the family of nations. Syria, no longer feeling a need to compete with Iraq, would loosen its ties with Iran, leading to a weakening of the Iranian hold in South Lebanon, Halevy predicted. Syria would withdraw from Lebanon, and Hizballah would be disarmed. 'Syria could feel comfortable in allowing Lebanon true freedom, withdrawing the 30,000-odd Syrian soldiers from Lebanese territory and opening an embassy in Beirut for the very first time since Lebanon's independence', he elaborated. And 'the departure of Syrian and Iranian forces from Lebanese soil, accompanied by the disarmament of Hizballah, could enable Lebanon to make peace with Israel' . . . Amos Gilad, the newly appointed national commentator on the war with Iraq—deputed to reassure Israelis as the conflict progresses—called the imminent American strike a 'miracle' which would help solve Israel's dire security and economic problems".

European superstate approaches

According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, the Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, a draft of which has just emerged from the constitutional convention in Brussels, would, if adopted by the Council of Ministers, be the *coup de grâce* for the European nation states. If the British Government were to submit to such a constitution, it would be acquiescing in the abolition of our parliamentary democracy and the creation of a European superstate. The moment of truth, long feared by Labour and Conservative governments, when Britain might have to choose between EU membership and national independence, may soon arrive. The text was drafted by a triumvirate of arch-federalists: two commissioners, Michel Barnier of France and Antonio Vitorino of Portugal, with the former Italian prime minister Giuliano Amato. The other members of the presidium, including its chairman, Giscard D'Estaing, and the British representative, Gisela Stuart MP, agreed to it, ignoring the rest of the convention. Mr Blair now has a choice. He could veto the treaty, in which case Britain could face exclusion from full EU membership. Or he could put it to a referendum. The third possibility, that he might sign it, even in a diluted form, sounds unthinkable, yet appears to be being thought.

Korean missiles could reach US

North Korea has nuclear weapons and a missile which could carry them to the west coast of America, the head of the CIA, George Tenet, said recently. A move to 'report' North Korea to the United Nations Security Council, taken in Vienna by the International Atomic Energy Agency's thirty-five-nation board of governors, is intended to make clear to Pyongyang that the world is not about to back away from a second confrontation even though it may appear to be preoccupied with Iraq. However, Russia attacked the decision, dealing a blow to US efforts to unify the international community against the Communist state. Moscow said Security Council involvement in the Korean nuclear crisis would be "counterproductive". China also expressed reservations about the UN's role in tackling North Korea. As permanent members of the Security Council, Russia and China could veto UN action against North Korea.

N. KOREA RAISES TENSIONS

North Korea's Stalinist leadership recently threatened a pre-emptive strike as the nuclear weapons crisis and domestic troubles pushed it towards panic measures. Furthermore, a North Korean fighter jet flew into South Korean air space recently in an apparent attempt to increase tension as Colin Powell, the American Secretary of State, prepared to tour the region. The incident underlined the extent to which Kim Jong-il, the North Korean leader, is seeking to antagonise America while the latter focuses on Iraq. A further cause for concern is that North Korea's director of energy has revealed plans to build four more nuclear plants, each bigger and more powerful than the controversial Yongbyon plant that America fears may be used to develop nuclear weapons.