



News from the Nations

Shaking in Israel

An earthquake measuring 5 on the Richter scale shook Israel and neighbouring countries recently, but there were no reported serious injuries. In Jerusalem, Knesset members, fearing an explosion, evacuated the legislature's committee rooms. Structural damage was discovered in several buildings in places as far apart as Acre in the north and Jerusalem. Experts, according to a weekly review in the *Jerusalem Post*, warn that this was simply the "coming soon" clip for a horror movie. According to seismologists, the prospect of a major earthquake in the next few decades is not a question of if, but when. The epicentre of the recent quake was on the northern edge of the Dead Sea, some sixteen kilometres below the surface. It is precisely on the line of the Syria-Africa fault that created the Jordan Valley in the first place. The report continues that it was tremors along this front, which marks the boundary between two tectonic plates that have rubbed together over millennia, that caused the geological upheavals in the past. The Syria-Africa fault, which runs along the eastern border of Israel from Metulla to Eilat, also has branch lines, of which one of the most potent is the so-called Carmel fault, which runs roughly from the Damiya Bridge area in the Jordan Rift, along a diagonal path past Yokne'am and Megiddo and the eastern side of Mount Carmel, and out into Haifa Bay. Scientists have warned that a serious quake along the Carmel branch line would cause extensive damage, as the fault runs directly under the petrochemical complex in Haifa Bay, which includes oil refineries and a whole string of factories. According to experts (who have submitted numerous reports to the appropriate authorities, including the Ministry of National Infrastructure), the area is an ecological disaster that is just waiting to happen. Geologists say that a tremor like the 6.8 quake that devastated Bam, Iran, is only a matter of time.

US holds talks with Libya

The US Administration is reported to be holding talks with Libyan officials on steps that would lead to normalisation of ties between the two countries. These talks came shortly after a US congressional visit to Libya, the first in thirty-four years. The delegation, led by Curt Weldon, a Pennsylvania Republican, praised Colonel Gaddafi, and underlined that, if progress on weapons dismantlement continued, Libya could look forward to formal relations with the US and to a lifting of more than twenty years of US sanctions. "We hope to welcome you to America", he told Latif al-Dali, head of the People's Congress in Tripoli. American oil companies are eager to return to Libya.

NATO looks to Israel

NATO is seeking to deepen political and military contacts with Israel and a number of Arab states, and may invite their representatives to a summit of alliance leaders in Istanbul in June. NATO officials said the alliance wanted to upgrade its ten-year-old Mediterranean Dialogue programme with Israel, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia. The programme includes regular political meetings, military exchanges and conferences, small military exercises, information sharing on terrorism, and preparations to help one another in peacekeeping, de-mining and civil emergencies.

Libya and Israel

The recent announcement that Libya will stop developing weapons of mass destruction was immediately followed by reports on diplomatic talks between Jerusalem and Tripoli, which apparently came to a complete standstill once they became public. A report quoted Saif al-Islam, the son and presumed heir of Gaddafi, as saying that Libya no longer considers Israel a security threat, nor is Libya in a confrontation with Israel. Meanwhile, the report continues, "the Israeli official reaction was that, if Libya is serious about ties, Tripoli needs to fulfill its recent pledge to dismantle its weapons of mass destruction, change its stridently anti-Israel tone, and begin looking into paying Jewish refugees compensation for property lost in their mass emigration—some 30,000 Libyan Jews fled the country from 1948 to 1951".

Rifkind warns against Euro force

Former Tory Defence Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind has criticised the government for a “foolish and dangerous” drive to form a new joint European armed force. According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, Sir Malcolm warned against the creation of the rapid-reaction force—a project spearheaded by Britain, France and Germany. Speaking on “America and Europe: Marriage or Divorce”, he argued that “Mr Blair and the British Government should abandon the foolish and dangerous initiative of trying to develop a European military capability independent of NATO. The French have had this agenda since De Gaulle, but Britain and Germany should know better . . . By all means let us improve cooperation between European armed forces and reduce unnecessary overlap, but NATO, for the foreseeable future, will remain the only credible means of collective security. The Americans cannot be expected to continue to guarantee Europe’s security through NATO, if we are simultaneously following after false gods”.

ANTI-SEMITISM INCREASES

Anti-Semitic incidents in Britain rose last year to the second-highest level since records began twenty years ago, stoked by the Iraq war and rising tensions in the Middle East, according to the Community Security Trust. A recent poll in Russia revealed that Russians believe that the two most prominent characteristics of Jews are slyness and stinginess, nearly half (forty-six per cent) would disapprove of a close relative marrying a Jew, and only one per cent express admiration for Jews. According to the International Jerusalem Post, “The sombre statistics show that Russian chauvinism, fed for centuries under the czars and then Stalin, is again on the rise”.

New evidence on Iran’s atom bomb

America has convincing new evidence that Iran is hiding an atomic bomb project, despite Teheran’s promise to open up all of its nuclear facilities to international inspectors, a senior US official told the Daily Telegraph. He said the Teheran régime was secretly trying to build a second and more advanced uranium enrichment plant in parallel with the large facilities in the town of Natanz revealed to the International Atomic Energy Agency last year. The official said: “There is no doubt in our mind that the Iranians have a lot that the IAEA does not know about, the Iranians have a military programme that the IAEA has never set eyes on”. Another Western source confirmed that the nuclear technology smuggling network headed by Abdul Khan, Pakistan’s top nuclear-weapons scientist, had sold much more equipment to Iran than Teheran has so far admitted to. The latest intelligence on Iran, if corroborated, will ignite an intense international crisis with the Iranian régime. America for the moment is trying to stop Iran’s nuclear programme through inspections and diplomatic agreements brokered by Europe. But the presence of US troops either side of Iran—in Iraq and Afghanistan—is a reminder to the régime that Washington retains the declared option of pre-emptive military action. If there is clear-cut proof of a secret nuclear-weapons programme in Iran, this would be an acute embarrassment for Jack Straw, the British Foreign Secretary, who has invested heavily in engagement with the clerical régime.

Israeli Government to boost immigration from Ethiopia

According to the *Jerusalem Report*, Israel is set to speed up the immigration to Israel of thousands of Ethiopians, who are currently waiting in two compounds in Addis Ababa and Gondar, by proposing immediately granting entry rights to those who can demonstrate a hereditary link by tracing their Jewish heritage back several generations. Fifty to a hundred Falas Mora, Ethiopians whose Jewish ancestors converted to Christianity but who have resumed practising Judaism, are now arriving in Israel each week, which grants residence on family reunification criteria. The new rules would enable many who do not meet those criteria to enter also. Officials say they are worried by the seemingly inexhaustible number of Ethiopians arriving in the open compounds. In 2000 there were 26,000 who were registered on lists; since then 11,000 have arrived in Israel, and yet the number has hardly fallen. Officials fear many are trying to take the opportunity to leave famine-stricken Ethiopia, and want to limit entry to the 15,000 left from the 2000 lists.

Evacuation of Gaza “an illusion”

The architects of the Geneva Accord have dismissed Israeli Prime Minister Sharon’s plan to evacuate Gaza Strip settlements as “yet another illusion”. Former Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin said that the most difficult issue that had faced the Geneva framers was “not the status of the Temple Mount, not the issue of the refugees, but the final border between the two states”.