



## News from the Nations

### UN demands Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon

Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, has added his voice to American calls for Syria to pull out of Lebanon. According to a news report, he warned the Syrians in a television interview that they would face “measures”—presumably some form of sanctions—if they did not pull their army out of Lebanon completely by April. With pressure growing, Waleed al-Mualem, the Syrian deputy foreign minister, committed his country to further withdrawals, but failed to make a clear commitment to complete the evacuation. The report continues that a permanent withdrawal would change the political complexion of Lebanon, effectively regarded by Damascus for decades as part of Greater Syria, where its troops and security services could do as they pleased. Abdul-Rahim Murad, the Lebanese defence minister, said a decision had been made for Syrian troops to withdraw from the coast towards the border, but gave no timetable. For the UN nothing less than a complete withdrawal of the remaining troops and the military intelligence agents who control the country will suffice.

### NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR DEAL WITH THE LIBYANS

*The White House issued a grave warning recently that North Korea's nuclear programmes are a threat to world peace, as new evidence suggested that the secretive Stalinist state had exported nuclear material to Libya. The finding reinforces fears that Pyongyang may have sold nuclear material to other states with nuclear ambitions, including Syria and Iran. President Bush cited North Korea with Iran and Iraq as part of an “axis of evil”, and said North Korea was one of six “outposts of tyranny”. One recently retired Pentagon official said, “It suggests we do not have time to sit around and wait for negotiations. It's a scary conclusion because we don't know who else they may have sold to”.*

### Blair's envoy to the Middle East

It has been revealed that Lord Levy, one of Tony Blair's closest confidants, was involved in engagements with Middle East leaders. The details have been published under the Freedom of Information Act. A diary apparently shows that Lord Levy visited leaders of countries including Israel, Syria, Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian territories. He met Hafez al-Assad, the late president of Syria and father of the current president, five times in a little over a year. Lord Levy has been closely involved in the Middle East peace process, aimed at resolving the conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians. He met Arafat, the late Palestinian leader, no fewer than eleven times. He also accompanied Mr Blair on a trip to Israel and Palestine in December, when he met Mahmoud Abbas, the new Palestinian leader.

### Why Syria is feeling the world's heat

There are three reasons why Syria is feeling the world's heat. Firstly, there is its meddling in Lebanon. Syria maintains control over Lebanon by keeping 14,000 troops deployed there. A UN Security Council resolution backed by the US and France has called for Syria's withdrawal. Secondly, there is its support of terror. Damascus has long been regarded as one of the chief patrons of militant groups like Hizbullah and Hamas, which have launched attacks against Israel with the support of the Assad régime. Thirdly, there is Syria's involvement in sheltering Iraqi insurgents. The US says members of Saddam Hussein's régime are in Syria, directing the insurgency from there, and that Syria is financing Iraq's terrorist kingpin Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi.

### Churches' divestment call

*The World Council of Churches (WCC), the main body uniting non-Catholic Christians, has asked its members to sell off investments in companies profiting from Israeli control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The call, made recently at the WCC headquarters in Geneva, sparked protests from Jewish organisations. The Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee demanded that the WCC retract the call.*

### Israel-Turkey deal

Israel and Turkey have signed a \$1.5 billion deal to upgrade the ageing fleet of Turkey's air force and the Turkish army's tanks.

**US spy planes over Iran**

American spy aircraft have been overflying Iran in an attempt to detect any sign that the country is closer to producing a nuclear weapon. Unmanned drone surveillance aircraft have repeatedly flown over suspected Iranian nuclear sites carrying 'sniffing' equipment, it emerged recently. Drones carrying radar, video, stills cameras and air filters have been launched from United States bases in neighbouring Iraq, according to the *Washington Post*. Iran unleashed another war of words with the US over its nuclear plans. "They know our capabilities", said Hamid Reza Asefi, the foreign ministry spokesman. "We have clearly told the Europeans to tell the Americans not to play with fire". Teheran had complained that the flights were illegal, and referred to "the presence of unidentified flying objects in the Bushehr sky on a number of occasions in recent weeks". Bushehr is the site of a large Iranian nuclear plant built by the Russians. An Iranian official said, "It was clear to our air force that the entire intention was to get us to turn on our radar". According to some US reports, a major effort is underway to identify targets to be destroyed in any all-out assault on Iran's bomb-making programme.

**Israel's economic progress**

Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has told UK investors that Israel will become one of the ten richest countries in the world within fifteen years. He said that "everything in Israel is undervalued". The country had emerged from "the worst crisis in our history". Its economy had recovered from near-bankruptcy and shrinking annual gross domestic product in 2001 to growth of 4.2 per cent last year.

**Russian far right scapegoats Jews again**

The situation of the Jews in Russia has worsened since the start of 2005, and social unrest there has raised fears that anti-Semitic scapegoating may spread. Physical attacks on Jews have already taken place. In January, a letter signed by twenty members of the Russian parliament and 500 others appealed to the country's top prosecutor to investigate Jewish organisations for "religious extremism" and inciting religious hatred, with an eye toward banning them. Among the signatories are some of the harshest critics of President Putin's welfare reforms, and their initiative may be connected to protests, which began in January, by tens of thousands of pensioners and students in scores of Russian cities against welfare and military draft reforms. The protests mark Putin's biggest domestic challenge since he took office five years ago. According to a report, the timing is disturbing to anyone familiar with the tradition in Russia of scapegoating Jews. Andrei Savelev, a lawmaker with the nationalist party who signed the letter to the prosecutor, denies any connection between the letter and the nationwide demonstrations. But he is open about his frustration with the number of Jews in business and government, which he says is an intolerable situation. The Russian president has pledged to take "all necessary steps" to combat anti-Semitism after an approach by Aba Dunner, chief executive of the Conference of European Rabbis, at the ceremonies for the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

**Iran strike still not ruled out**

Major-General Eliezer Shkedi, the head of the Israeli Air Force, recently declined to rule out an Israeli air strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. "For obvious reasons, if the government asks us to do something, they can decide. We have to give the answers. We have to do the planning". General Shkedi told reporters that "We must try all the alternatives before we choose something complicated. But we do not have a lot of time".

**ISRAEL TO BUILD MORE HOMES ON WEST BANK**

The Israeli Government was forced recently to admit that it plans to build more homes for Jewish settlers in the West Bank—less than a week after confirming that it will withdraw from the Gaza Strip. Although government spokesmen disputed the scale of the new building programme, they admitted that a number of new homes would be built and settlements extended. It shatters any impression that the Gaza withdrawal, due to start in July, proves that the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon accepts the principle of an independent Palestinian state roughly consistent with the 1967 borders. It is likely to aid left-wing critics of Mr Sharon, who accuse him of using the withdrawal from Gaza as a smoke screen to conceal a land grab in the West Bank. It is reported that plans and building permits were issued for a "limited number of housing units", 6,391 new homes to be built in the West Bank this year. Saeb Erekat, Palestinian negotiator with Israel, accuses Israel of breaking the 'road map'.