



News from the Nations

Russia vows to end Hamas ban

Hamas leader Khaled Meshal welcomed Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's pledge recently to work to end the international boycott of the Palestinian government. Following their Moscow meeting, Mr Lavrov also said he had received assurances that Hamas would act to stop rocket fire from the Gaza Strip. Mr Meshal stressed again that Hamas will not recognise Israel.

A gas producers' cartel

According to a news brief in *Newsweek*, "Iran has long favoured the idea of forming a gas producers' cartel to fix prices, modelled on OPEC. Vladimir Putin seems to agree. 'A gas OPEC is an interesting idea. We will think about it', said the Russian president recently on the eve of a visit to Qatar, the world's third largest gas producer. That's bound to send shivers through Europe. Russia also recently signed an energy cooperation deal with major gas producer Algeria. If Russia were to strike a gas entente with Algeria, Iran and Qatar, the EU could all but say goodbye to its dreams of diversifying supplies. Unfortunately, gas can't be bought on spot markets unless it's expensively liquefied. Putin assured Europeans that Russia does not 'plan to form any kind of cartel', only to 'coordinate activities', but after suffering gas and oil cut-offs via Ukraine and Belarus in the past year, Europeans are rightly sceptical". So Russia continues to extend its influence over Europe by economic rather than military means.

Churches back plan to unite under pope

Radical proposals to reunite Anglicans with the Roman Catholic Church under the leadership of the pope are to be published this year, according to *The Times*. The proposals have been agreed by senior bishops of both churches: "In a 42-page statement prepared by an international commission of both churches, Anglicans and Roman Catholics are urged to explore how they might reunite under the Pope. The statement leaked to *The Times* is being considered by the Vatican, where Catholic bishops are preparing a formal response. It comes as the archbishops who lead the 38 provinces of the Anglican Communion meet in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in an attempt to avoid schism over gay ordination and other liberal doctrines that have taken hold in parts of the Western Church. Rome has already shown itself willing to be flexible on the subject of celibacy when it received dozens of married priests from the Church of England into the Catholic priesthood after they left over the issue of women's ordination. There are about 78 million Anglicans, compared with a billion Roman Catholics, worldwide. In England and Wales, the Catholic Church is set to overtake Anglicanism as the predominant Christian denomination for the first time since the Reformation, thanks to immigration from Catholic countries. The Catholic Church is the first port of call for thousands when they find themselves in difficulty".

DEFIANT IRAN A NUCLEAR THREAT

Iran will persist in its nuclear plans in the coming year, Israel's head of military intelligence, Major General Amos Yadlin, told the cabinet very recently. He added that moderate Arab countries might join international efforts to stop Teheran achieving its aim. In presenting the country's intelligence assessment for 2007, he warned that Israel's strategic environment was less stable than in the past due to negative developments in the region, mainly in Iran, Syria and Iraq. He said, "Iran's leader will continue to defy the international community and the UN, but at the same time a moderate and pragmatic Arab front is forming against the Iranian threat". Israel has denied that it was negotiating with the US to provide an "air corridor" over Iraq so Israeli jets could attack Iranian nuclear-weapons sites. Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh said a Daily Telegraph report was based on "Western sources, who want to avoid dealing directly with Iran . . . and prefer to pass the ball to Israel". Mossad head Meir Dagan told the cabinet that Hizbullah had suffered a blow during last summer's war and was now seeking both to restore its military force and to strengthen its political power in the Lebanese government. Recently, The Times reported that Hizbullah was building up its forces just north of the Litani River, out of the reach of United Nations soldiers in the south of the country.

Putin using oil to rebuild Russia's power

Whatever is thought about Russian President Putin, he has, according to a report in Newsweek, "re-established his country's credibility as a great power. Russia's geopolitical standing seemed to crumble during the 1990s. Then at the end of 1999 Putin took over. Since then he has ruthlessly reasserted Kremlin control over the energy sector and the media. The economy has bounced back, with growth averaging 6.8 per cent and inflation coming down into single digits. Putin's most impressive achievement, however, has been to restore Russia's global clout. His Russia is an energy empire, sitting on more than a quarter of the world's proven reserves of natural gas, 17 per cent of its coal and 6 per cent of its oil. For geographical reasons, the US is not one of Russia's main customers. But two-fifths of Germany's natural-gas imports come from Russia, as do all of Iran's new nuclear reactors. When Putin mentioned energy prices, it was the Germans in the audience who took notes. When he got onto nuclear proliferation, it was the Iranians who sat up. The political implications of today's expensive oil are worth pondering. Quite simply, Russia is the only major power than has an interest in high energy prices. It is therefore the only major power with no interest in Middle Eastern stability. That is why Russia poses America's biggest problem when it comes to stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The fact remains that it is the Russians who are building the Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushehr and the Russians who have just won the contract to build an additional six such plants. Putin may have spoken at Munich of the 'risk of global destabilisation' emanating from the Middle East. In reality, nothing would suit him better. For it is the destabilisation of the Middle East that guarantees the high energy prices on which Russian power has come to depend. Putin may have led Russia out of its Time of Troubles. Could this be the start of a new Time of Troublemaking?"

Hizbullah getting arms from Syria

Weapons are reaching Hizbullah from Syria "on a weekly basis", usually at night, evading UNIFIL peace-keepers stationed in Lebanon, officers in the IDF's Northern Command told Vice Premier Shimon Peres in February. Peres, accompanied by OC Northern Command Major-General Gadi Eizenkot, visited the Lebanese border to learn about preparations for a possible regional flare-up in the near future. Peres downplayed forecasts that another conflict with Hizbullah was imminent, but said, "We need to be on a high state of alert".

Fatah and Hamas agree to unity

After months of political squabbling, the two main Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah, agreed to form a national unity government recently following three days of crisis talks in Mecca. But it was unclear whether the unity government would be enough to lift the international boycott imposed on the Palestinian government when Hamas swept to power unexpectedly thirteen months ago.

Moves for Israel to join NATO

According to a news item in the *Jerusalem Post*, "in an effort to establish more effective deterrence in the face of Iran's race to obtain nuclear weapons, [Israeli] government ministries are, for the first time, working on drafting a position paper that will include guidelines and a strategy for turning Israel into a full-fledged member of NATO. The paper is being drafted by an inter-ministerial committee made up of representatives from the Defence Ministry and the Foreign Ministry and headed by the National Security Council. The committee plans to complete the paper soon and present it to Prime Minister Olmert for approval, as they see the Iranian threat serving as 'an excellent occasion to enforce deterrence by making Israel a member of NATO'".

A SAUDI PROTECTORATE FOR PALESTINE?

A report from the Jerusalem Post suggests that "the Palestinians need a transition period in which a higher authority will guide them toward nation-building, and state formation. This cannot be done by the EU or the UN. Only a legitimate Arab regime, one with enough power and money, can do it—and the Saudis may be the best candidate for the role, especially as it may also fit into their own overall view of trying to stabilize the region. The Palestinians have to come out from under Israeli occupation, but they are unable to create the infrastructure that will give their political entity the necessary stability. A Saudi protectorate could be the way out of this conundrum, and the notion should be seriously addressed by all concerned. If the UN is now considering independence for Kosovo under a UN guiding hand, why not something similar, under Saudi protection, for the Palestinians?"