



News from the Nations

Israeli settlers' last stand

According to a report in *Time* magazine, "In a lonely outpost, a group of Israelis prepares to confront Ariel Sharon's army. Since Israeli Prime Minister Sharon announced plans to evacuate the residents of Sa-Nur this summer, new residents have flooded into the settlement. Now 150 people live there. At the synagogue, Yossi Dagan organises the fight to resist Sharon's orders, with many people arriving to protect those living there. Residents are preparing to wage last stands of their own. Nowhere else is there greater potential for an Israeli-on-Israeli confrontation than in Sa-Nur. Israeli security forces fear that this lonely outpost of 38 families could be the nastiest flash point in the evacuation campaign. Dagan says he expects thousands of supporters to make their way to Sa-Nur to resist the army's effort to uproot the settlers".

Putin visits Tel Aviv

Vladimir Putin became the first Russian president to visit Israel last month, after decades of hostility over Russia's support for Arab régimes, when he flew into Tel Aviv. He had a meeting with Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, and this was followed by talks in Ramallah with Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader. Speaking in Cairo before his arrival, Mr Putin proposed a Middle East summit in Moscow in the autumn. Since the end of the Cold War more than a million Russian Jews have emigrated to Israel, making it the largest single source of Israeli citizens.

Putin's links to Israel's enemies

The historic visit to Israel of Russian president Vladimir Putin was overshadowed by a row over Moscow's links with Iran and Syria, two of the most implacable enemies of the Jewish state. Mr Putin sought to reassure Mr Sharon that his country's sale of nuclear components to Teheran and anti-aircraft missiles to Damascus would not change the balance of power in the Middle East. The Israeli Government said Russia's links with Iran in particular were a "cause for concern" and, in what was seen as a snub for Mr Putin, flatly rejected his offer to host a Middle East peace conference in Moscow. Iran's growing nuclear capability has led to suggestions that Israel is preparing a unilateral military strike, similar to its 1981 attack on Saddam Hussein's nuclear programme. Concern has been raised by the announcement that America, Israel's close military partner, will provide it with 100 bunker-buster bombs, well suited for attacking Iranian nuclear facilities. At a press conference, Mr Putin was forced to address the Syrian missile sales. "The system we are going to supply to Syria is short-range and poses no threat whatsoever to Israeli territory", he said. On the nuclear issue, he said that Russia was part of an international diplomatic effort to ensure Iran uses its nuclear technology only for "peaceful means".

UN blames Israel for lack of Arab reform

The creation of Israel, and the US support for its policies in the West Bank, are partially to blame for the lack of reform in the Arab world, according to a UN-sponsored report released 5 April. The Arab Human Development Report 2004 (AHDR) cited the creation of the Jewish state as one of the roots of authoritarianism in the Middle East, along with the discovery of oil and the support for dictators by the superpowers during the Cold War. The 248-page report, published by the United Nations Development Programme, was ready months ago, prior to the Palestinian and Iraqi elections, but its release was delayed because of objections by the US and Egypt. It was finally released with the UN logo in the preface. In the most controversial part, titled "Towards Freedom in the Arab World", the report stated that the Israeli occupation of the territories and the US occupation of Iraq both created excuses for Arab governments to postpone democratisation and strengthened extremist groups that advocate violence.

Turkey buys Israeli drones

Turkey is to buy Israeli drones for its armed forces, sources at the Turkish Defence Ministry said. The \$200-million deal is expected to be signed during Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's two-day official visit to Israel.

The Palestinian Authority's missiles

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz told the Israeli cabinet recently that the previous week Palestinian security forces smuggled SA-7 Strella anti-aircraft missiles into Gaza from Egypt. These missiles are capable of shooting down commercial airliners and military aircraft. Mofaz said that while the Palestinian Authority (PA) had uncovered between seventeen and twenty tunnels from Egypt into Gaza, the smuggling of the Strella—not the first time this weapon had been smuggled into the PA—was an act that “crosses the red line”. Mofaz said that Israel viewed this as especially serious, not only because of the weapon involved but also because a PA security service assisted in smuggling them in. Mofaz added that there was a significant gap between PA declarations to fight terror and its actions on the ground. He said that the promised security reforms in the PA were very slow in coming, and that there were those in the Palestinian establishment who were working against the policies of PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas. He did not elaborate. Meanwhile, the arrest of a Hamas activist who returned to Gaza from military training in Syria disproves President Bashar Assad's statements that terror organisations no longer operate in his country.

ROMANIA AND BULGARIA TO JOIN EU IN 2007

Romania and Bulgaria recently signed an historic accession treaty with the European Union, clearing the way for the EU to admit its two newest, and poorest, members in January 2007. A ‘safeguard’ clause allows the EU to postpone accession by a year. France, Romania's strongest backer in Western Europe, could also fall out with Bucharest over its desire for closer ties to Britain and America.

Turkey to invite bids for oil refiner

Turkey is to invite bids for Tupras, the country's biggest oil refiner, renewing efforts to find a buyer for the company after courts blocked a previous sale. Turkey is seeking to sell Tupras and other government-run businesses under an International Monetary Fund-backed plan to help reduce inflation and debt.

Canada recalls passports listing ‘Jerusalem, Israel’

The Canadian Embassy recently recalled Canadian passports that mention “Jerusalem, Israel” as the bearer's place of birth. A spokesperson at the Canadian Embassy confirmed, “We are recalling the passports, because they are inconsistent with our long-standing policy”. Canada, like almost every other country in the world, does not recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and in the past has only listed “Jerusalem” on passports for its citizens born in the city.

Jews praised by new pope

The newly elected Pope Benedict XVI has extolled Jews for sharing a “spiritual heritage” with Christianity. In the Vatican sermon marking his installation as Pontiff, German-born Pope Benedict offered greetings to “my brothers and sisters of the Jewish people, to whom we are joined by a great shared spiritual heritage, one rooted in God's irrevocable promises”.

WHERE THE NEW POPE STANDS**On other forms of Christianity:**

“[They] are not Churches in the proper sense; however, those who are baptized in these communities are by Baptism incorporated in Christ and thus are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, with the Church”.

On other religions:

“Objectively speaking, they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those in the Church, who have the fullness of the means of salvation”.

IRAQI SHIAS INFILTRATED BY IRAN

Control of Iraq's police force was handed to a Shia Arab party with historic links to Iran, despite warnings by American intelligence that Iranian agents have infiltrated the group's paramilitary wing. The announcement that Baqir Soulagh, a member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (Sciri), is to be interior minister, risks alienating Iraq's Sunni Arab community whose support is needed if the insurgency is to be defeated. Sciri is one of the principal partners in the coalition of Shia groups that won the majority of seats in January's election. It is loathed by many ordinary Iraqis as its leaders spent two decades in exile in Iran, and its 10,000 member paramilitary wing, the Badr Brigade, fought against Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. The failure to agree on the appointment of many Sunni ministers further added to the community's concern about the new government's composition. The prominent role for Sciri is likely to fuel widespread concern that Teheran's influence is expanding in Iraq. Reports reveal that many Iranian agents are in Sciri's Badr Brigade, and its operatives have been instructed to infiltrate Iraqi security agencies.