



News from the Nations

Kuwait shuts border

A large area of northern Kuwait is to become a "military zone" in response to security fears expressed by US forces, Kuwait's defence ministry announced recently. "For safety reasons we have decided to clear the area of all non-military personnel. Evacuation measures are being put in place today", Brigadier-General Ahmed Rahmani said. Joint US and Kuwaiti exercises are planned for this winter, and a British armoured division of up to 20,000 men is expected to arrive shortly. "No one will know just how many troops will be operating there, but the buildup to war can now really begin", said a Kuwaiti security official. The area, which runs parallel to the demilitarised zone that separates Kuwait and Iraq, covers more than 5,000 square miles and stretches from the Gulf to the border with Saudi Arabia.

Israel's right to retaliate

President Bush recently defended Israel's right to retaliate against a sudden Iraqi attack, after talks with Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister. Speaking in the Oval Office, President Bush warned that any Iraqi attack on Israel would face a severe response. "If Iraq attacks Israel tomorrow, I would assume the prime minister would respond", he told reporters as he sat next to Mr Sharon. Citing the prospect of an attack by Saddam Hussein on Israel, Mr Bush added: "He's got to understand that the international community won't tolerate an unprovoked attack on Israel, or anybody else for that matter".

US ruling on Jerusalem

The Arab world was caught by surprise recently by the announcement that American President George Bush had signed into law a symbolic commitment to recognise Jerusalem as the Israeli capital. The law, which mostly authorises the US budget on foreign affairs, urges the president to begin immediately the transfer of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and stipulates that Jerusalem be referred to as the capital of Israel in official US documents. Arab diplomats argued that the preliminary reports emanating from Washington were conflicting. State Department officials say the notion of an embassy in Jerusalem forms part of the permanent status issues that would be negotiated in a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nabil Shaath, the Palestinian Authority's planning and international cooperation minister, said the move was "an act against peace, an act of incitement". Officials at the Arab League in Cairo, which represents twenty-two Arab states, said they were studying the new law and had no immediate comment. A spokesman for Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, said that Egypt wanted to study the original text of the law and Mr Bush's response to it before commenting. Nor was there a response from Morocco, whose King Mohammed VI chairs the Arab League's Jerusalem committee. In Cairo, the US embassy insisted that the three provisions of the law at issue were only "of symbolic importance" and would not be observed in practice.

JORDAN'S TWO PARTNERS

Conflict leaves Jordan torn between two partners. The US recently announced a further £54 billion grant to Jordan, in a move analysts say is designed to shore up its alliance with the Hashemite kingdom ahead of a prospective US strike on Iraq. Jordanian ministers said that all but \$10 million would be allocated to augment hard currency reserves, providing a vital cushion against the economic fallout of an Iraqi war. Torn between its two largest trading partners and donors, Iraq and the US, Jordan has ruled out the use of its territory as a staging ground for an invasion of Iraq, while acknowledging its military ties with Washington. In a drive to coordinate the positions of Iraq's Arab neighbours, Jordan's King Abdullah travelled to Kuwait, warning that regional tensions had grown "extremely dangerous" and calling on Iraq to "fully and unconditionally abide by the UN resolutions" to avert the threat of war. Thousands of US troops concluded military exercises early in September, and Jordan's information minister, Mohammed Adwan, has announced that US special forces will stage fresh exercises in November, alongside troops from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and other countries.

Indonesian ties with the Arabs

The blame apportioned to al-Qaeda and its local affiliate, Jemaah Islamiah, for the Bali bombing has raised the spectre of a sinister connection between Indonesia and the Middle East. The world's most populous Islamic nation—home to 180 million predominantly moderate Muslims—has a relationship with the Arab world, with business, political and social ties that evolved over centuries. Oil-rich Kuwait topped the list of Arab countries making foreign investments in Indonesia in the first seven months of this year with just one project valued at \$400,000. According to government figures, trade between Indonesia and nine Arab countries amounted to \$1.95 billion in the first six months of this year alone, \$950 million of which comprised Indonesian exports. That business has traditionally paled in comparison with that done with China and in modern times even Western countries. The recent bombing of Western tourists in Bali has laid open the depth of Muslim extremism in areas far from the Middle East. According to reports, these groups are going after big economic targets, whether oil tankers or tourism. The bombings in Bali, like the Trade Centre attacks, were specifically targeted to wipe out an economic baseline; Bali's economy is based on tourism. Counter-terror experts say that the recent al-Qaeda attack clearly indicates that the network's leadership is keen to make good its vows to strike at the "infidel" economy. Al-Qaeda leaders have demanded that Washington must end its support for Israel and back away from plans to invade Iraq. Indonesia is a pro-Western Islamic state that relies heavily on tourism. But the attack in Bali is likely to affect the tourism trade across the world, not only in Southeast Asia.

Europe's historic expansion

The European Union is poised for a 'big bang' enlargement, with ten countries expected to join by 2004 in an historic expansion that will finally bring Europe's Cold War divisions to an end. The expansion, recently recommended by the European Commission, is the largest since the European Union's first institutions were established more than fifty years ago, and is the first to include countries once dominated by the former Soviet Union. It will increase the number of countries in the European Union from fifteen to twenty-five, even though the EU's institutions are still unprepared to cope. "It is an historic moment for us", said Romano Prodi, Commission president. The Commission, however, left unclear the status of Turkey, a candidate member since 1999. Diplomats said Turkey's status may be decided at an EU summit in Copenhagen in December. Countries named as making up the ten are Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Cyprus and Malta. The European Commission recently said the ten countries would be ready to complete accession negotiations by the end of the year and to join by 2004. It even suggested that Bulgaria and Romania could join by 2007. "This enlargement is unlike any other", said Gunter Verheugen, enlargement commissioner.

North Korea admits secret nuclear programme

In a development that opens up the possibility of a new crisis in Asia, North Korea, confronted with US evidence, has acknowledged it is operating a secret nuclear weapons programme in violation of a 1994 agreement, senior US officials said recently. One official told Reuters agency that the Bush Administration believed North Korea's activities had "effectively nullified the 1994 agreed framework". Mr Bush has included North Korea with Iran and Iraq in what he termed an "axis of evil" of states developing weapons of mass destruction and backing international terrorism. The North Koreans eventually acknowledged "they had a secret nuclear weapons programme involving enriched uranium", an official said.

RUSSIA'S FORGOTTEN WAR

Russia's 'forgotten war' in Chechnya has turned uglier, and looks increasingly likely to spread beyond its borders, according to a Newsweek report. The recent Russian theatre siege witnesses to the truth of this. Russian forces in recent weeks have bombed alleged guerrilla positions in neighbouring Georgia. Rebels have attacked Russian troops from Ingushetia—a potentially dangerous departure from their earlier policy of sparing the Ingush, a people closely related to the Chechens, from the fighting that has been devastating elsewhere. According to Newsweek, it is said by high-level intelligence sources that Moscow may soon airlift troops across the Georgian border in an effort to dislodge rebels sheltering in the famously inaccessible Pankisi Gorge. If so, Washington and its European allies will face some hard choices. What with Afghanistan, the war on terror and the impending attack on Iraq, the last thing they want is a crisis in Caucasia.