



## News from the Nations

### Russia retrieves nuclear fuel

According to a news report, "a quantity of highly enriched uranium (HEU) has been salvaged from a Czech storage facility under an international scheme to keep dangerous substances 'out of the hands of terrorists'. Enough HEU to make several nuclear bombs is still in storage plants across the former Soviet Union and its satellite states, almost 16 years after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. The 'secret' operation in Prague that took place recently was part of a joint long-term nuclear clean-up programme by Russia and the United States. Fears that terrorists could get their hands on HEU held in poorly guarded storage facilities prompted the Bush Administration to pledge £255 million last year to help to repatriate Russian-origin HEU. About 31lb. of highly enriched reactor fuel was retrieved under armed guard from the KV-2 Sparrow reactor at the Czech Technical University in Prague. About 55lb. is sufficient to make a nuclear device. Three large steel drums holding 20 fuel rods were loaded onto a Russian cargo plane and flown to a high-security storage centre at Dimitrovgrad in Russia. The programme is part of the Global Threat Reduction Initiative, which Presidents Bush and Putin agreed to speed up. The onus is on Russia, which originally supplied the nuclear fuel, to recover it. Previous shipments, largely paid for by America, have been made from Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Libya, Uzbekistan and Latvia, yielding almost 270lb. of HEU—enough to make five nuclear bombs".

### BOSNIA CLOSER TO TALKS ON EU LINK

*The Bosnian Serb parliament voted recently to create a unified police force, removing an obstacle to Bosnia's eventual membership of the European Union. Bosnia remains the only country in the Balkans without a formal EU membership plan after Croatia was given the green light recently to enter accession talks.*

### Israel's economy is booming

Israel's economy is booming as a result of the disengagement from Gaza, with exports rising, unemployment falling, an almost zero inflation rate and a stable shekel. The London-based Economist Intelligence Unit recently revised its economic forecast for Israel. The export-led recovery of 2003-4, it predicted, will broaden into the domestic sector as job growth and relative stability in the security situation boost consumer confidence and encourage investment. But Ya'acov Fisher, British-born managing director of I-Biz Israel business information services, cautioned, "On the surface, things look very good. The economy is doing well. But in order to give a true picture, we have to raise some questions which we shall only be able to answer in the months to come".

### Israel honours John Paul II

Israel has issued a unique commemorative stamp in honour of the late Pope John Paul II, citing his contributions to Christian/Jewish dialogue but also his work of initiating diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel and his lifelong record of promoting Holocaust understanding. The stamp, described by Communications Minister Dalia Itzak as a "historic initiative", is the first Israeli stamp to have a non-Jewish religious leader portrayed on it. It was formally unveiled in the Knesset in July in the presence of local Christian leaders.

### Sanctions threat against Syria

*According to an investigation report, "Russia and the Arab League opposed an implicit Franco-American threat of sanctions against Syria, contained in a tough draft UN resolution demanding Syria's full cooperation with the investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. A Russian foreign ministry spokesman warned it would do 'everything necessary to stop attempts at declaring sanctions against Syria', while the Arab League saw no 'logic or legitimacy in imposing any sanctions . . . on the basis of incomplete accusations'. Meanwhile the UN warned that the alleged flow of weapons from Syria to armed Palestinian groups inside Lebanon could undermine efforts to bolster its political independence. Kofi Annan said there were indications of 'an increasing influx of weaponry and personnel from Syria to some of these groups'".*

### **New Iraq has no relations with Israel**

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani has warned that diplomatic ties with Israel will remain “impossible” unless it adopts an Arab League-supported peace plan. Mr Talabani said Iraq was committed to the 2002 Arab League initiative, whereby Arab states would normalise ties with Israel if a Palestinian state were established in all the territories captured in 1967.

### **TENSIONS BETWEEN THE EU AND RUSSIA**

*Russia's president met EU representatives recently to discuss sensitive issues. Mr Putin, in his recent visit to attend a summit with the European Union, insisted that nothing is wrong with Russia-EU relations, but said that the EU's eastward enlargement and arguments over the treatment of ethnic Russians in the Baltic states have put grit into the diplomatic machinery. According to a news report, “Mr Lukyanov, editor of the Moscow-based Global Affairs magazine, says, ‘The Kremlin's new line, following events in Ukraine, is that the EU is an expanding empire of a new type . . . but the official line from Putin is to stay calm and cooperative’”. The talks covered issues such as Russia's troubled northern Caucasus, human rights, and policies towards former Soviet states located between Russia and the EU. With oil prices high, Russia and EU officials are very aware of the energy trade's key role in the relationship. Many Western analysts see Russia as a resurgent state, fuelled by growing energy export revenues, which is increasingly willing to assert itself and no longer in need of the Western support it sought in the 1990s. Mr Putin recently announced plans to build a new gas pipeline from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea—a route that will avoid East European transit countries. The Kremlin insists that the move is purely economic.*

### **Concern about al-Qaida**

*According to a report in the Jerusalem Post, “In the wake of an al-Qaida letter threatening to ‘clash with Israel’”, there are concerns about al-Qaida crossing Israel's border, “while a leading expert on global jihad has cast doubt on the letter's authenticity”. Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev told the Jerusalem Post in response to a query that al-Qaida activities in the region were being followed very closely. The report says, “The 6,300-word letter which the US government said was written by al-Qaida's No. 2 man to its leader in Iraq outlines a four-stage plan for global jihad: Expel US forces from Iraq, establish an Islamic authority, take the battle to Iraq's secular neighbours, Syria and Egypt, and then ‘clash with Israel because Israel was established only to challenge any new Islamic entity’ . . . Dr Reuven Paz, an expert in global jihad, said that the four-step plan follows ‘the real strategy of al-Qaida’. ‘The path to liberate Jerusalem passes through the liberation of Cairo and Damascus, because for them Assad and Mubarak are infidels’, said Paz, who is the director of PRISM—the Project for Research of Islamist Movements—at the Interdisciplinary Centre in Herzliya. ‘In their view Israel can be defeated by a real jihad of a real Islamic state . . . so first they have to expel the United States from the region, then fight the Arab governments and establish a true Islamic state, and then to fight Israel’ . . . [According to] Paz, fears of al-Qaida's presence on Israel's borders are real. ‘In Israel they have no presence so far, although they may have supporters in Gaza . . . but they are definitely trying to infiltrate Sinai’”.*

### **EU offers Palestinians cash**

The EU offered to boost aid to the Palestinian Authority for rebuilding the Gaza Strip if other countries did the same. The EU currently plans to give the PA about £250 million this year.

### **IRAN CHALLENGES THE SECURITY COUNCIL**

According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Teheran recently told a conference that “Israel should be wiped off the map”, and expressed no doubt that the latest wave of Palestinian terrorist attacks would soon remove “this disgraceful blot from the face of the Islamic world”. Whilst he has been condemned by a few nations, there has been silence from the Arab world, from Egypt, Jordan and Mauritania, but also from Morocco, Qatar and Tunisia, which have sought to strengthen links with Israel following its recent withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Shimon Peres, Israel's deputy prime minister and an archetypal dove, has suggested that Iran be expelled from the UN, saying, “A member that calls for the destruction of another defies the purposes of the organisation's charter . . . the Security Council . . . has seemed to court irrelevance over the past few years. It declined to grasp the nettle of Saddam Hussein's repeated challenges to its authority. It has handed over North Korea's nuclear ambitions to six-party talks hosted by China. It has yet to take proper responsibility for a similar challenge posed by Iran. If the Security Council fails to confront such a rogue head of state, it does not deserve its name”.