



News from the Nations

Mixed messages from Iran

Iran has stepped up its efforts recently to rally Islamic countries against a US-led war on terrorism, as opinion in the Muslim world hardened against the prospect of military strikes on Afghanistan. After initial expressions of sympathy for the acts of terror in Manhattan, the Ayatollah Khamenei's tone changed abruptly by bluntly ruling out any support for a US-led campaign in Afghanistan or elsewhere, and calling on Islamic nations to take an independent stance. Analysts in Tehran said that the US and its allies should not underestimate the danger of an Islamic backlash in the region over US military operations in Afghanistan.

Jack Straw's diplomacy

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was denounced from both ends of the Middle East political spectrum recently. He has been criticised by Israel for a "despicable" article he wrote in the Iranian press arguing that anger over the Palestinian situation had helped to breed terrorism. Raanan Gissin, spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, said: "I have no doubt that it is malicious. I would expect the foreign minister of Libya or Iran to write such an article but not the foreign minister of Britain". According to a report, Jack Straw offered Iran an important role in building Afghanistan's next government after the Taliban's removal. He is quoted as saying, "I want British-Iranian relations to improve; I am devoting as much time as I can to ensure the relationship is a much deeper one than it has been in the past, a kind that I want to see continued".

Moscow seeks role in Central Asia

Top Russian officials met leaders in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in an apparent attempt to reassert Russia's dominant role in the region. Russia has put its troops on the Afghan-Tajik border on a war footing in the last few weeks in anticipation of an imminent US attack on the Afghan mountain strongholds of Osama bin Laden. Russia has two regiments of its 201st Division stationed in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe and another two regiments about sixty miles from the border, in all about 10,000 men. President Putin has pledged Moscow's support to Washington in efforts to root out "international terrorism", and said that it would not oppose punitive strikes but would not join in. Mr Putin is playing a delicate balancing game. Ending the Yeltsin-era fantasy that Russia was still a superpower, he has taken a pragmatic line and wants to carve out a new role for Russia as a leading member of the international community.

Warning to the west

A local mayor and elected member of the nationalist party on the Afghan border to Pakistan, who opposes the Taliban, said to a news reporter: "Terrorism is evil but it is like a snake and has to be killed cleverly and diplomatically". The nazim, or mayor, had a word of advice for the military planners in the White House and the Pentagon. "Russia is like a sleeping lion that is wounded and is licking its wounds", he said. "You must take care not to stir it".

RUSSIA'S DILEMMA OVER SALES TO IRAN

Iran's defence minister recently visited Moscow for talks on arms sales. The visit sums up the contradictions facing Russia if it wants to be accepted as a full partner in a US-led war against terrorism while still maintaining traditional friendships and markets in the Arab world. In recent months Russia's improving ties with the US and Israel have forced on it a delicate balancing act. But recently, Russia's defence ministry called Iran a "constructive and stable" force for "stability and security" in the Middle East. Russian officials say the West should value Iran's hostility to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Vatican mints Euro coins

The Vatican has revealed in the *Catholic Times* that Euro coins will be minted and produced by the Holy See and will be legal tender across Europe. The coins will bear the image of Pope John Paul II and are expected to become collectors' items immediately, as the amount put into circulation will be small. The European Central Bank has placed severe restrictions on the amount of currency that can be minted.

Turkey supports the US

A longtime ally of the United States has re-emerged as a crucial regional linchpin: Turkey. NATO's sole Muslim member, an important partner in the Gulf War coalition and Israel's closest regional ally, is poised to play a key role in the war against terrorism. Bordered by Iran, Iraq and Syria, Turkey has been quick to offer its unstinting support, saying it would open its airspace to military transport aircraft and share intelligence on Afghanistan. This support will be given so long as it does not negatively impact Turkey's national interests. Turkey senses that the Americans are determined now to get rid of Saddam Hussein, regardless of how the Turks feel about it. An Iraqi Kurdish official said regarding Turkey's attitude: "They want to jump on the bandwagon and make sure that the Americans give the Kurds nothing". They will open up their bases to American forces in an eventual attack against Iraq, and perhaps even take part in the operation.

France calls for EU constitution

A European Union constitution is needed within three years, French President Chirac insisted recently. Stepping up plans for closer European union, he said that issues with an international dimension, such as immigration, refugees, fighting crime and drugs, "call for more integration" between member states. Europe needed a stronger identity, and the "adoption of a constitution would contribute", he told a conference of French ambassadors.

Euro-army to take over from NATO

It was suggested in the June 2001 *European Foundation Intelligence Digest* that Macedonia might become a testing ground for the new European army when NATO's mandate ran out. The current EU envoy there, François Leotard, said that he wants an EU force to deploy there when NATO completes its Operation Essential Harvest. Although an EU official denied that this was EU policy, the European Union did announce its intention to maintain a military presence in Macedonia after NATO had finished, although it was not made clear why any continued presence is necessary at all. Some 1,500 soldiers are also expected to stay to act as a "dissuasive and stabilisation" force, according to the French foreign minister. The EU has also considered integrating other countries into the mission, including Russia and the Ukraine. The fifteen members of the EU have also expressed the desire that this intervention be sanctioned by a vote in the UN Security Council, just as the previous NATO one was.

Afghan opposition unites

Senior figures from Afghan's main anti-Taliban force, the Northern Alliance, held talks in Rome recently with the former Afghan King Mohammed Zahir Shah, in the hope of forging a broad-based coalition that could one day run the country. The talks coincided with a visit to Rome by eleven members of the US Congress, supporting the former monarch.

SHARON SEEKS RUSSIAN GOODWILL

President Putin has stressed Russia's commitment to the international fight against terrorism in conciliatory remarks during talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Moscow. He also expressed his concern for the safety of the one million Russian speakers living in Israel, against the backdrop of the current violence. "We are watching with alarm everything that is happening there, especially considering that a large part of Israeli citizens come from the former Soviet Union and Russia. We are not indifferent to the fate of these people", Mr Putin said. This seems a good basis for Russia to make a substantial contribution to resolving the situation in the region. The report said that the visit appeared to reflect a more balanced Russian position, as it attempts to re-establish its role in the Middle East at a time of growing international criticism of Israel. Western diplomats believe Israel's attempts to forge closer ties with Russia are aimed at counterbalancing Moscow's relations with Iran and Iraq. Mr Sharon is said to be particularly concerned about the potential for an alliance between Iran, Iraq, Syria and the Palestinians. Mr Sharon's trip came at a time when Russian military cooperation with countries such as Iran could shift the balance of power in the Middle East, currently dominated by Israel and Egypt.

Israel's worry

A news report states that "Israel might have expected to be a major beneficiary of America's war on terrorism, winning further sympathy and support in its struggle with the Palestinians. Instead, as the campaign develops, it is feeling alarmed, isolated and afraid". They see America cosying up to Iran, possibly the world's biggest sponsor of international terrorism.