



News from the Nations

Georgia to hand rebels over to Russia

Georgia recently agreed to hand over to Russia thirteen alleged Chechen rebels, defusing a conflict that has fuelled Russian accusations that it was supporting terrorists. The move represented the second conciliatory gesture to Moscow by the Georgian Government, following an offer by Prime Minister Eduard Shevardnadze for Russia to send military observers to its Pankisi Gorge border region. Tensions between the two countries have been escalating in the past few months, with President Putin warning this month that he was drawing up plans for military strikes in Georgian territory as part of his country's right to "self-defence". Attacks against Russian forces from bases in Georgia were "unfortunately happening frequently", according to Russian sources.

Rocket fire over the Ukraine

An El Al pilot reported seeing the flash of an anti-aircraft missile near his plane over Ukraine during a 4 July night flight from Moscow. Ukraine said it had not fired a missile in the area, which was not far from where an Air Saber airline flight from Tel Aviv was shot down by a stray missile in October 2001, killing passengers and crew.

Libya's lifeline for Mugabe régime

Libya has agreed to provide Zimbabwe with another year's supply of petrol. The deal covers some £230 million-worth of fuel, according to a state-controlled media report at the end of a visit to Tripoli by President Mugabe.

What about Libya?

According to the *Jerusalem Report*, Libya is "very energetically working on the development of a nuclear bomb, and seems to be the most advanced Arab state in doing so", quoting Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. There followed a meeting between John Bolton, the US State Department undersecretary responsible for arms control, and Ephraim Halevy, the chief of Israel's intelligence agency Mossad—the ideal forum to discuss how to tackle the Libyan threat. Libya, the intelligence sources say, does not yet have nearly enough fissionable material to produce a bomb, but as soon as it does, assembling a nuclear warhead would take only a few months. With its North Korean-supplied Nodong missiles, which have a range of up to 1,300 kilometres, Libya could deliver a nuclear payload from a launch site on its Mediterranean coast to as far away as Israel or southern Europe. Libya apparently received the first instalment in an order of fifty Nodong missiles in November 2000 as part of a \$600 million deal with North Korea. Initially deployed inland, the missiles were recently moved up to the Mediterranean coast. Even without a nuclear bomb, Libya, with its erratic leadership, poses a considerable non-conventional-weapons threat to Israel and Europe. It has three huge chemical weapons plants: at Rabta, 75 miles southwest of the capital city Tripoli, an underground facility at Tarhumah, 40-50 miles southeast of the capital, and a complex in the Sebha Oasis in the Sahara. With the bomb, the threat to Israel and the West would be infinitely greater, says Likud politician Steinitz, head of the Israeli Knesset's Foreign Affairs Committee. He says that "Libya's idea is to create a new balance of power between the Arab world and the West".

AFRICAN COUNTRIES MAY BE SOURCE OF URANIUM

Tony Blair said recently that Iraq was suspected of sourcing significant quantities of uranium that could be used for a nuclear weapons programme from deposits or nuclear stockpiles in Africa. Africa accounts for twenty per cent of global production of uranium. Namibia, Niger, South Africa and Gabon are the main producers, but the Democratic Republic of Congo is a more likely source of smuggled uranium. Congo's largest uranium mine is Shinkolobwe in the southern province of Katanga, an area under the control of Zimbabwean forces.

Red Sea–Dead Sea canal

Jordan and Israel are to spend \$800 million on a canal to carry sea water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea, to save the shrinking inland body of water from drying up altogether.

Pumping dispute on Lebanese border

According to the Jewish Chronicle, a small river in southern Lebanon has become the focus of an escalating dispute with Israel, prompting veiled threats of military action, and renewing concerns of a possible "water war" in the already divided region. Recently Washington sent a team of water experts to examine the site of contention—a pumping station on the Wazzani River—in an effort to defuse the issue. The report continues that Israel has warned Lebanon that it will not tolerate its plans to increase pumping dramatically from the Wazzani, a tributary of the Hasbani River, to serve surrounding Lebanese villages. Israeli water experts say "such pumping would reduce the flow of water into the Jordan River and on to the Sea of Galilee, which is Israel's main source of fresh water. The Hasbani project would lead to a one-third increase in the salinity of the Sea of Galilee and would make much of the water in the reservoir unusable within two years' time". Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer said recently that "the State of Israel cannot ignore the water issue—it is our elixir of life". Ariel Sharon has said, "Israel takes a grave view of the project". Lebanon's President Lahoud said that the country was not cowed by Israel's "threats", adding that the decision to tap the rivers was final.

US mistrusts Ukraine–Iraq link

The rift between the US and Ukraine over Ukraine's relationship with Iraq deepened recently as Washington inched closer to accusing Kiev of breaking the United Nations embargo on supplying arms to Iraq. The Ukrainian Government denounced the "outright falsity" of the accusations. Reuters quoted a US official as saying that Washington believed Iraq had obtained and was using Ukrainian made 'Kolchuga' radars, improving Iraq's chances of targeting the US and British aircraft that patrol Iraqi air space. "We believe the Kolchuga was transferred", Reuters quoted the official. Richard Boucher, a US State Department spokesman, told a news briefing recently that "there are some indications that suggest the Kolchuga radars may be in Iraq", but "we are not certain". Mr Boucher said the US had authenticated a recording received from one of Ukrainian President Kuchma's former guards in which Mr Kuchma okays a plan to sell four Kolchugas to Iraq for \$100 million.

Syria's message to the UN

Syria recently urged the United Nations to adopt the same stance against Israel as it is doing against Iraq, and urged a political solution to the Iraqi crisis. "Why should the world request Iraq to adhere to Security Council resolutions, while Israel is allowed to be above international law?", Farouq al-Shara, the Syrian minister of foreign affairs, asked the United Nations General Assembly. Syria has been one of Iraq's strongest backers in the Arab world and one of its biggest trading partners, even though it was part of the allied coalition against Saddam Hussein more than a decade ago.

ISRAEL BACKS BUSH

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said recently that he accepted President Bush's Middle East plan, as outlined in the US leader's 24 June policy speech. The plan involves setting up an interim Palestinian state, after the PA's current leadership is replaced.

Hizbullah to target Jews and Israelis overseas

Concern is mounting that the Lebanese-based Arab terrorist organisation Hizbullah, under pressure not to operate against Israel on the Lebanese border, may be looking more to its terror and "special operations" wing to strike at Israeli or Jewish targets abroad. The US is pressing Damascus, the controlling force in Lebanon, not to allow the Hizbullah "resistance" to operate against Israel from there. And, suggests German terrorism expert Rolf Tophoven, "Syria may have arranged with Hizbullah to act against Israel abroad instead". Mr Tophoven also points to growing cooperation between Hizbullah and Al-Qa'eda, who he says are regrouping after escaping from Afghanistan through Pakistan or Iran, and making their way to the Middle East, as well as to the Balkans. In the Balkans, under the cover of new mosques, Islamic fundamentalists are believed to be building a "new Islamic army" sponsored by Iran, Saudi Arabia and Al-Qa'eda as well as Hizbullah. "They are building the infrastructure in the Balkans for an Islamist springboard to Europe", says Tophoven. Hizbullah has some 800 members in Germany and is now planning to open a political and social bureau in Berlin.

Israel's population

Israel's population at the end of last year was 6,592,000, up 133,000 from the end of the previous year, the Central Bureau of Statistics said.