



News from the Nations

Iran rages at the UN

Iran threatened recently to end cooperation with the United Nations nuclear watchdog after it gave Teheran a seven-week ultimatum to prove that it was not secretly trying to build an atomic bomb. The Iranian delegation in anger said: "We will have no choice but to have a deep review of our existing level and extent of engagement with the agency vis-à-vis this resolution". The comments amounted to a thinly veiled threat to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, under which countries are allowed to develop a nuclear power industry as long as they do not try to build nuclear weapons.

Threat to Australian Jews

Australia's 100,000 Jews have been rated a "category one" terrorist target by the country's intelligence services. Stephen Rothman, president of the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies, told a local TV station that the country's security intelligence organisation had informed the community that it was in the highest at-risk category. He said 900 young Jews had volunteered for training on how to guard against terrorist attacks. "The information that we have is that activities have occurred in Australia, which . . . can have no basis other than the operation of terrorist cells", he told Channel Seven. Although there is no indication of a new specific security threat, the Jewish community has been vigilant and has increased security at many Jewish institutions, schools and synagogues throughout the country.

Iran under pressure

The United States and Europe joined forces against Iran recently, when they demanded that Teheran reveal details of its controversial nuclear programme to United Nations inspectors by the end of the month. According to a report, a draft resolution by Britain, France and Germany at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) signalled that transatlantic differences have been put aside in dealing with Teheran. "It is essential and urgent . . . that Iran cooperate fully with the IAEA to ensure verification of compliance with Iran's Safeguards Agreement by taking all necessary actions by the end of October", the draft resolution said. An IAEA report circulated last month revealed that traces of highly enriched uranium, a key component for an atomic bomb, were found at an Iranian nuclear facility south of Teheran. The Iranians were also accused of misleading IAEA inspectors and of seeking nuclear equipment not compatible with a purely civilian programme. The document demanded that Iran "remedy all failures" mentioned in the report. It insisted that Iran make a "full declaration" of all imported equipment related to the enrichment programme. It called on Iran to allow UN inspectors "free access" to nuclear sites and said that Teheran should sign a "protocol" allowing snap inspections. "This is their last chance", said Peter Jenkins, the British envoy to the IAEA.

ISRAEL DISCUSSED AT THE TUC

A prominent Israeli Arab attended the recent Trades Union Congress (TUC) conference in Brighton, UK. Nawaf Massalha, international secretary of the Histadrut labour federation, who served as Deputy Foreign Minister in Ehud Barak's government, joined the TUC general secretary Brendan Barber in addressing members of the Trades Union Friends of Israel (TUFII). A TUFII spokesman said that Mr Massalha was the "best advocate possible" to present the case for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. The spokesman was ready for left-wing delegates to criticise Israel during the conference, although the foreign affairs debate focused largely on Iraq. Tabled by the Transport and General Workers' Union, the main Middle East motion called for "the termination of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and an end to settlement policy". It also urged an end to violence by "states or terrorist groups". An amendment proposed by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) opposes Israeli efforts to build a wall to prevent terrorist infiltration from the West Bank. Condemning it as an "apartheid wall", the NUM said it was incompatible with the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. It further declared that peace could not be achieved "without recognition of the Palestinian refugees' inalienable right to return to their homes".

Al-Qaeda's new home

Scattered and on the run, Osama bin Laden's network is rallying new recruits to battle US forces in Iraq. Signs that al-Qaeda is gaining a foothold in Iraq are ominous, not just for the future stability of Iraq but for the Bush Administration's wider war on terrorism. "Al-Qaeda isn't just surviving", says a top Pakistani intelligence officer. "From this region, it's planning new attacks all over the world, wherever it can strike". In the eyes of budding terrorists, Iraq presents an opportunity to prove their mettle by driving a superpower out of the Muslim world, as bin Laden's cohort did to the Soviet army in Afghanistan in the 1980s. According to Mustafa Alani, an Iraqi security expert at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in London, a majority of fundamentalist websites now list Iraq as the destination of choice for those interested in waging holy war for Islam, ahead of Palestine, Afghanistan and Chechnya. "It is an ideal environment", says Alani. He also says: "The most hospitable ally for al-Qaeda operatives in Iraq remains Ansar al-Islam, the militant group of Afghan-trained fighters that was based in northern Iraq before the war".

Did al-Qaeda cause US power blackout?

According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, al-Qaeda's Abu Hafs Brigades has claimed the responsibility for "Operation Quick Lightning in the Land of the Tyrant of this Generation", referring to the blackout in the Northeast and Midwest United States. An Abu Hafs Brigades communiqué published on the Dar Al-Hayat website said that two important electricity supply targets on the east coast were targeted in compliance with orders from Osama bin Laden to strike at the American economy. The communiqué said the attackers cannot reveal how they did it, because they will probably have to use the same method again soon.

ISRAEL'S BUDGET CUTS

The Israeli Government recently approved—by fourteen votes to nine—the draft budget for 2004. The budget, which includes £1.5 billion of cuts in welfare, child benefit and education, must be approved by the Knesset by December 31. Several ministers, including Education Minister Limor Livnat, said the proposed cuts would mean major public-sector job losses. Israel has an unemployment rate of close to eleven per cent, with almost 300,000 jobless.

Israel's Bedouin powder keg

Over the next five years the Israeli Government intends to encourage, and if necessary force, 70,000 Negev Bedouin to leave their sprawling shantytowns for new, urban communities, and thus to free up space for Jewish building. The goal is both to prevent a feared 'Arab link' across the Negev from the West Bank to Gaza, and also to allocate colossal investment to improve Bedouin living standards. But community leaders fear the funding will not be found, and fear a slide into violent confrontation as well.

Russia joins umbrella Islamic group

According to the *Jerusalem Report*, Russia, with a hefty Muslim minority of twenty million citizens, wants to join the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC), the fifty-six-nation group that includes a "Bureau for the Islamic Boycott of Israel". President Putin made the announcement while on an arms-selling trip in August to Kuala Lumpur, which is to host an OIC summit in October. Now Putin has ordered Russian diplomats to get to work on winning observer status in time for the OIC summit. Putin says: "We should do everything possible so that the Russian Muslims who make up about fourteen per cent of the population should feel themselves a part of the Muslim world". Analysts see no danger to Israel if Russia joins this group.

EU blacklists political wing of Hamas

Intelligence and security officials from European Union countries met recently to decide how they will blacklist the political wing of Hamas, the militant Palestinian group. The move, at a recent informal ministerial gathering in Italy, came after France, Belgium and Ireland, which had been reluctant to blacklist the organisation, preferring a more gradual approach, lifted their objections. The recent meeting in Brussels was to identify which charities and social welfare groups will be blacklisted and which assets frozen. The EU had been under strong pressure from the US and Israel to blacklist the political wing of Hamas. The decision was welcomed by the US Administration and European Jewish organisations. "We are extremely satisfied by the EU decision", said Serge Cwajgenbaum, secretary-general of the European Jewish Congress.