



News from the Nations

Israel's chief rabbis meet pope

According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, Israel's two chief rabbis held a "very cordial and heartfelt" private meeting with Pope Benedict XVI. The forty-five-minute audience recently at the pope's summer residence south of Rome was part of the commemorations of the fortieth anniversary of the Vatican's landmark *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Times) declaration, which opened the way for Catholic-Jewish dialogue. Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yonah Metzger and his Sephardi counterpart, Shlomo Amar, called on the pope to condemn the Palestinian destruction of abandoned synagogues in Gaza. They also asked him to establish an annual day for Catholics to reflect on interfaith relations and to join with Jews around the world to discuss how to fight anti-Semitism. Numerous meetings, ceremonies and other events are planned to mark the anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* being set up by the Second Vatican Council in October 1965. It urged dialogue and mutual understanding and respect between Catholics and Jews in order to discover the spiritual patrimony shared between the two religions.

Turkey asks pope to visit

President Ahmet Necdet Sezer of Turkey has invited Pope Benedict XVI to visit the country next year. If he accepts, the pope will be the third pontiff to visit the overwhelmingly Muslim and secular country. The pope is a controversial figure in Turkey. He has questioned whether admitting a Muslim country to the European Union is compatible with European values.

Anglicans rule out economic boycott of Israel

A key Church of England committee has decided against divestment from companies exporting to Israel for the time being, to the relief of Jewish leaders. The Ethical Investment Advisory Group (EIAG) resisted calls for the Church to sell shares in the Caterpillar company because of exports to Israel. Caterpillar was one of five companies targeted recently by the Presbyterian Church (USA) as contributing "to the ongoing violence that plagues Israel and Palestine". The American church said it was beginning a process of "progressive engagement" to persuade the companies to change their policies. War on Want is among organisations urging the Church of England's national assembly, the Synod, to act on the Anglican Consultative Council's resolution. Dr Rowan Williams has tried to play down suggestions that Israel is under threat of economic boycott from Anglicans worldwide. Pro-Palestinian campaigners had argued that Caterpillar-made machines were being used in the demolition of Arab homes. In a statement the EIAG acknowledged concern "at the uses to which the Israeli authorities have put Caterpillar machines in the past" and promised to keep events under review. The Church's shares in the US-based company amount to £2.2 million.

ISRAEL CONSIDERS EU FOR BORDER SECURITY ROLE

The European Union may be given a security role at the border between Egypt and Gaza in a significant escalation of its involvement in the Middle East peace process. A decision to invite the EU to help supervise the crossing would underline a shift of attitude by the Israeli Government, which has traditionally viewed Brussels with suspicion. Speculation of an armed presence has been heightened by the need to provide security for the crossing at Rafah. Sa'eb Erakat, who heads the Palestinian negotiating team, said, "We don't object to EU supervision. We have offered to have a third party involved. The Europeans are acceptable to us". The French Foreign Minister, Philippe Douste-Blazy, said recently that the EU had offered to help oversee entry and exit points into the coastal strip, which is home to 1.4 million Palestinians.

Egypt plans to deepen Suez Canal

Egypt will deepen the Suez Canal to sixty-six feet from sixty-two feet at a cost of about £115 million by the end of 2006, the Suez Canal Authority reported recently. Authority chairman Ahmed Ali Fadel said the project was fifty-eight-per-cent finished. Once completed, he said, the canal would attract more ships because the extra depth would mean it could handle greater cargoes than its current 220,000 ton limit.

Russia aids Iran in nuclear row with West

Russia put a defensive wall around Iran recently, saying no action should be taken over moves that Western countries fear amount to a covert attempt by Teheran to make an atomic bomb. The announcement could derail a move by Britain, France and Germany to report Iran to the United Nations Security Council over its refusal to come clean about key aspects of its nuclear programme. As the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan backed the diplomatic campaign, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said the move would be "counter-productive". Western countries believe they have a majority to push through a British-drafted resolution calling for Iranian breaches of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to be reported to the council. But they fear that unless they have an understanding with Moscow, the issue will be blocked by a Russian veto in the Council and open up another damaging international rift. Iran insists that it seeks to develop nuclear energy for only peaceful purposes. But Peter Jenkins, the British ambassador to the IAEA, told the board that Iran's attempts to master the ability to make uranium and plutonium, which can be used as fissile material for atomic bombs, "has neither an economic nor a technical rationale".

Israel's West Bank barrier

Israel's Supreme Court has ordered the government to consider a radical change to part of the route of its 370-mile separation barrier, while upholding its right to build the barrier inside the occupied West Bank. The Supreme Court ruled that the route of the barrier round the Jewish settlement of Alfe Menashe created a "chokehold" on five Palestinian villages. But at the same time the nine-judge panel underlined that Israel was entitled to build parts of the barrier inside Palestinian territory, despite an advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice that it was violating international law. The Supreme Court rejected petitions issued on behalf of the residents of the five villages, which argued that the route should go along the 1949-67 border of Israel. By doing so, the Supreme Court underpinned the Israeli Government's contention that the route is legal and that Israeli citizens settling in the West Bank are constitutionally entitled to the state's protection.

PRIMATE'S PLEA ON THE ROLE OF ISLAM

According to a news report in the Independent, Muslims must find a new understanding of their religion to fit in with Christian Europe, the Archbishop of Canterbury said recently. Dr Rowan Williams said that some strains of Islam pointed towards religious tyranny as the only legitimate way to run a country. But Muslims through the centuries had in practice accepted the idea that religion should not rule over politics. That meant that the presence of "significant minorities" of Muslims "need not be seen as an insoluble problem for what a Christian might see as the European identity". Dr Williams said the best hope of avoiding extremism and violence was for Islam to join Christian churches in cooperating with secular states. The Archbishop's remarks at a 'prayer for peace' meeting in France contrasted with an attack on Islam last year by his predecessor, Lord Carey.

Iran threatens to retaliate

Iran recently threatened wholesale retaliation against any Western move to refer it to the UN Security Council, including imposing oil sanctions, limiting nuclear inspections and leaving the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Teheran's reaction came after European countries circulated the text of a British-drafted resolution for the International Atomic Energy Agency to report to the Security Council Iran's "many failures and breaches of its obligations" to comply with the treaty.

Israel and Pakistan start talks

According to a report in the *Jewish Chronicle*, Pakistan is planning to send a high-level diplomatic mission to Israel and the Palestinian Authority this autumn, a spokesman for the Pakistani embassy in Jordan confirmed, but a date has yet to be set. The decision followed a ground-breaking meeting in Istanbul recently between Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and his Pakistani opposite number, Khurshid Kasuri. It was the first public encounter between officials from Israel and the world's second largest Muslim state. Mr Kasuri later revealed that Israel and Pakistan had been talking secretly for the past ten years. Israel's foreign ministry spokesman Mark Regev welcomed the breakthrough with Pakistan as a "small earthquake". He said that Pakistan was not only the second largest Muslim state, but one whose very existence was due to its Muslim identity. "When a country which is such an important player in the Organisation of Islamic States conducts a public and official dialogue with Israel, that has repercussions throughout the Muslim world. We are hopeful that other Muslim countries will be encouraged to speak with Israel".