



News from the Nations

Egypt's nuclear intentions?

According to a report in the *Financial Times*, "The sudden revival of Egypt's plans to develop nuclear power have led to speculation that President Mubarak may have more than just future energy supplies in mind. Mr Mubarak and his 42-year old son Gamal argued in speeches at the ruling National Democratic Party's annual conference recently that nuclear power could help Egypt manage its energy resources more efficiently. But experts and analysts point to the timing of the announcements—coinciding with Western concerns that Iran's nuclear programme may prompt an arms race in the Middle East—as a sign of their potentially broader regional significance. According to their energy minister, construction would be at a cost of \$1.5bn (£790m) for a 1,000MW nuclear power plant on the Mediterranean coast, and could be complete by 2015. Mark Fitzpatrick, non-proliferation expert at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies, said, 'Whilst Egypt's plans should not be exaggerated, there did appear to be a security dimension to the project, and it was something to be watched—Egypt, with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, are the most likely to respond to Iran going nuclear'. Whilst peaceful production of nuclear energy is allowed under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, to which Egypt is a signatory, so far Cairo has no plans to develop a uranium enrichment capability, which would raise suspicion of nuclear weapons intentions. The regional powers also blame the West for turning a blind eye to Israel's undeclared arsenal".

CHIRAC BREAKS RANKS OVER IRAN

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, President Chirac recently provoked a diplomatic showdown at the UN when he broke ranks with America and its allies and called on them to stop threatening Iran with sanctions, and argued for more negotiations. He said, "I don't believe in a solution without dialogue and have never noticed that sanctions have been effective". Mr Chirac's comments shattered the shaky consensus between America and the EU 3—Britain, France and Germany—which have been leading the diplomatic negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme. In public the White House kept its cool, saying the "process in Iran was going pretty well", but privately officials were fuming. They accused Mr Chirac of grandstanding, and argued that a split between the Western powers over Iran was exactly what Teheran had been hoping for. One of the key tenets of diplomacy was not to show your hand.

The earth moved for Israel

A mild earthquake, measuring 4.4 on the Richter Scale, shook Israel recently. The tremor, whose epicentre was in the Jordan Valley, caused no serious damage or casualties.

ARMS SHIPMENT DETAINED

A North Korean shipment of air-defence systems that may have been on the way to Hizbullah has been intercepted en route to Syria. A ship carrying eighteen lorry-mounted mobile radars and three command vehicles was stopped in September while docked in Cyprus after Interpol issued an arms smuggling alert. Interpol was alerted to the ship by Israel.

Nearly seven million Israelis

Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics recently reported that the country's population on the eve of Rosh Hashanah (5767) stood at 6,990,700. There are 5,313,800 Jews (76 per cent, down from 77.8 per cent in 2000), 1,140,600 Muslims (16.3 per cent, up from 15.2 per cent in 2000), 146,000 Christians (2.1 per cent), 115,200 Druze (1.6 per cent) and 272,200 (3.9 per cent) who did not classify a religion. Israelis' life expectancy is among the highest in the world, with men reaching 78.3 years on average and women 82.4. The Israeli population's most significant country of origin is the former Soviet Union, including its Asiatic republics. (The population from the former USSR numbers 1.177 million people—of whom 242,000 were born in Israel.) In 2005 the number of native Israelis continued to grow, and reached approximately 3.7 million people. The proportion of Israeli-born children has grown steadily since the establishment of the state. In 1948 approximately 35 per cent of the general Jewish populace were Sabras, as opposed to 65 per cent at the end of 2005 (of the general Jewish populace and others).

Anglican Church offers to act as Middle East mediator

The Anglican Church could assist in mediation between Israel and Lebanon, Israel's Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi said in London recently. According to the *Jewish Chronicle*, Rabbi Yonah Metzger and Israeli Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar were at Lambeth Palace to sign an interfaith dialogue declaration with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams. The wording had been agreed during a morning of discussion. Rabbi Metzger was pleased that the declaration had incorporated a pledge to improve relations with Muslim communities. Around seventy people were at the signing, including Britain's Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who later called it "a very important development given some of the negative phenomena we have picked up in the churches about Israel".

Middle East talks

The US is pushing to renew Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, citing for the first time the importance of dealing with the conflict in order to secure an international coalition against Iran. The push comes against a background of renewed official talks between the two parties at the UN recently. At a meeting between Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader reassured Ms Livni that a national unity government he was negotiating with Hamas would recognise Israel's right to exist. Ms Livni told reporters that the "important and constructive" talks touched on the situation in the Palestinian territories, how to promote peace and the next steps. But she stressed that "the most important issue for Israel is the unconditional release of Gilad Shalit", the Israeli soldier captured on the Gaza border in June of this year.

Israel says it's time for the world to act on Iran

Following Iran's rejection of pressure to compromise over its nuclear programme as a UN deadline passed recently, senior Israeli officials are saying that the onus of responsibility rests with the international community. According to a report, "Iran has thrown down the gauntlet, and it's now time for the international community to pick it up, implement the UN Security Council resolution and expedite the process of sanctions", a senior official said. Officials have said that Israel was carefully watching to see how the world would react to Iran's continued disregard of the call to suspend its nuclear development, with some arguing that it is becoming clear that in the face of the world's tentative response, Israel may eventually have to 'go it alone' to stop Iran. Nevertheless, Israel continued to press the argument that "nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran was a global problem, not only an Israeli one . . . A nuclear Iran under the current extreme régime constitutes a threat to the Middle East and the world". Israel's Defence Minister Amir Peretz said in a statement following security consultations, "Iran is a country that publicly calls for the destruction of Israel and supports terrorism throughout the Middle East. Iran stood behind Hizbullah's control of south Lebanon and its transformation into a base for terrorism. It also supports Palestinian terrorist organisations with the aim of preventing any chance for a peace agreement".

Arab peace plan

King Abdullah of Jordan, in a recent interview with *Time*, revealed the outlines of a new Arab peace initiative dubbed Beirut Plus (a reference to an Arab League initiative adopted in Beirut in 2002). The effort, which the king insists is "really one of the last chances" for peace, hopes to revive Arab-Israeli talks before the November elections in the US. He said, "If we don't solve the Palestinian issue, the future looks bleak for the Middle East . . . I don't think the Middle East could afford another war. And a war with Iran would open a Pandora's box, one that I don't think the Middle East would recover from".

TOP EU OFFICIALS TALK WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Islamic and Buddhist representatives held talks in Brussels in recent months with senior European Union officials on promoting "mutual respect and tolerance" in the context of European integration. According to a report in a British church newspaper, the contribution of the churches and religious communities to the European integration process was at the centre of the discussions of religious leaders with the President of the European Council, Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, and the President of the European Commission, Jose Barroso. The meeting was part of the EU's scheme for pushing ahead with the Constitution, despite the fact that it is unratified and rejected. According to the Conference of European Churches (CEC), a highlight of this meeting was the presence of the Dalai Lama. The CEC is a fellowship of some 125 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic Churches from all countries of Europe, plus forty associated organisations.