



News from the Nations

Turkey-Armenia ties

In August, Turkey and Armenia agreed to establish diplomatic ties for the first time, a rapprochement that could thaw a dispute dating back to World War 1 over Istanbul's refusal to acknowledge the massacre of up to 1.5 million Armenians by Ottoman Turks as 'genocide'; Turkey prefers a term that means 'mass deportation'.

Nuclear deal for Venezuela

Time magazine reports that, after agreeing to arms and oil deals, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced in September that Russia would help the South American country develop nuclear energy. "We're not going to make an atomic bomb", said Chavez, "so don't go bothering us".

US missile-defence move

Russian parliamentarian Mikhail Margelov, on the Obama Administration's shift of planned missile-defence systems from Eastern Europe to Southern Europe and Turkey, is quoted as saying, "For Russia, it is a victory for common sense".

Missile-defence exercise in Israel

US Navy missile ships began arriving in Israel on 20 September ahead of a joint missile-defence exercise in October between the Israeli Defence Force and the US that will test the Israeli-made Arrow system and three American systems. Officials said the US might leave some systems in Israel to bolster its defences against the Iranian threat.

Black Sea tinderbox

For the last few months, according to Time, "Russian officials have hinted at a renewal of hostilities between Russia and Georgia. Now it looks as though Moscow has made a decisive move that makes a naval confrontation in the Black Sea more likely than ever. A Russian patrol boat carrying rockets docked in a port along the coast of Abkhazia, one of Georgia's breakaway republics. Moscow has promised nine more boats to follow. When they come, they will face a small fleet of Georgian gunboats supplied by the US that—until now—have effectively blockaded Abkhazia but have so far made no attempt to confront the Russians. The arrival of the Russian Navy puts Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and his US allies in a bind. The last thing that President Obama wants is a renewed Russo-Georgian war, especially now that he has 'reset' relations with Moscow. At the same time, being forced to lift the blockade of Abkhazia would be a major defeat for Saakashvili, a key US ally in a turbulent region. Moscow seems determined to force the decision. With Russia apparently spoiling for a fight, the situation is looking more explosive than ever".

Russia deploys border defence

Russia has deployed a missile-defence system near its border with North Korea to protect its population from stray missiles, Nikolai Makarov, Russia's top general, said recently. Russia shares a small border with North Korea, and its main Pacific port of Vladivostok, with a population of 600,000, lies only 150 kilometres (95 miles) from North Korea. A series of missile launches and a nuclear weapon test by North Korea in May this year alarmed its neighbours, including South Korea, China and Japan.

ISRAELI AND RUSSIAN PRESIDENTS MEET

An Iranian nuclear bomb would be tantamount to a "flying death camp", Shimon Peres told his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, in August. They had a four-hour meeting at Medvedev's home in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. The two leaders discussed the sale of Russian weapons to countries hostile to Israel, including the Islamic republic. "President Peres stressed that the sale of these weapons could damage the delicate balance of power in the region, and requested the Russian president, in the name of the State of Israel, to reconsider Russian policy in regard to this, stressing that Israel has concrete proof of Russian weapons being transferred to terrorist organisations by Iran and Syria, especially to Hamas and Hizbullah". The two presidents also discussed the Middle East peace process and strategic ties between Moscow and Jerusalem. Medvedev said he hoped to upgrade relations to the same level as those Russia had with European states. Russia has long wanted to host an international conference on the Middle East peace process.

Palestinian state within two years?

Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayad has outlined a unilateral plan to build the infrastructure and institutions for an independent Palestinian state within two years, according to a report in The Times Magazine. The proposal, which Fayad intends to move forward on without waiting for the outcome of the peace negotiations with Israel, calls for new seaports and railways and an international airport in the Jordan Valley, and re-opening Yasser Arafat Airport in the Gaza Strip, as well as a new capital in East Jerusalem. The US welcomed the initiative, although Israeli officials have dismissed it as inviable. According to the plan, the Fayad government will work hard to build institutions and infrastructure in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for the future state. The government also pledges to work toward "reuniting" the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Fayad said that, instead of waiting for a final peace agreement with Israel, the Palestinians should pursue their efforts to build a state of their own. He said the plan envisages the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital on all territories captured by Israel in 1967.

No military strike on Iran?

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said on 20 September that Israeli officials had assured him they were not planning a military strike on Iran. Medvedev confirmed he had met Prime Minister Netanyahu on a 'secret' visit to Moscow on 7 September. The Russian president called an Israeli air strike against Iran "the worst thing that can be imagined".

Nuclear weapons deadline for Iran

The West recently gave Iran until the end of the year to prove that its nuclear programme will not be used to manufacture weapons. The meeting in Geneva between Iran's chief nuclear negotiator and Western governments will be the last chance to come to a settlement over the programme, diplomats said. If not, Western governments will seek tough new sanctions at the United Nations.

MORE CONSTRUCTION

Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Eli Yishai said recently that a planned freeze in West Bank settlement construction was only a "strategic delay", and that Israel would build hundreds more housing units despite US objections. A White House spokesman said of Israel's intention to continue building: "The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued settlement expansion and we urge that it stop". In a recent report Israel said they resolved to build almost 3,000 new homes for Jewish settlers in the West Bank. Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, said he was authorising another 455 housing units inside existing Israeli settlements besides 2,500 new homes already under construction. Mr Netanyahu's coalition, dominated by right-wing parties, has decided to begin building the 2,955 extra homes before agreeing to any freeze. The prime minister has also made clear that no restrictions will apply to settlements in east Jerusalem, which America and the international community regard as occupied territory but which Israel's government sees as an integral part of its "eternal and undivided capital".

Iran's nuclear capability

A. Q. Khan, creator of Pakistan's nuclear-weapons programme, says he helped Iran develop a network of suppliers for nuclear-weapons materials years ago, and that Iran's nuclear capability will neutralise Israel's power.

TUC BOYCOTT VOTE

The Jewish Chronicle describes a decision of the Trades Union Congress to support a "targeted, consumer-led" boycott of goods from Israeli settlements in occupied areas as a warning shot. Communal leaders fear that unions that are anti-Israel will attempt to implement a much wider boycott next year. The TUC says the move will "reiterate our encouragement to unions to affiliate to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and to raise greater awareness of the issues". It has also called for greater co-operation between Histadrut and the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions.

Fears over UN Gaza report

A United Nations investigation into the Gaza conflict will be used as a political weapon to undermine Israel and could lead to an upsurge of international anti-Semitism, the head of a Geneva NGO has warned. Hillel Neuer, director of the highly respected UN Watch, has said that the group is preparing to challenge the report, which is due to be formally presented to the UN Human Rights Commission at the end of the month. It is widely believed that the report will result in calls for Israel to be prosecuted for alleged war crimes. "I would point out that the UN in Geneva is the place where the new anti-Semitism is much in evidence. Today it is dressed up as Human Rights but it sees Israel as the collective Jew. We have blood libels and the demonisation of Israel as the enemy of humanity. The UN has become ground zero for the delegitimisation of Israel".