



News from the Nations

EU agency accepts EU candidates

Six countries, mostly in Eastern Europe, have joined the European Union's environmental agency. It is the first time that an EU agency has accepted EU candidate countries as full members. Joining the European Environment Agency were Bulgaria, Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Malta and Cyprus, the agency said at its headquarters in Copenhagen.

Russia warns about the Middle East

"The Middle East is crossing a dangerous line", said Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, after the recent Palestinian suicide bombings and the Israeli takeover of Orient House, the symbolic Palestinian government centre in East Jerusalem.

Israeli anti-religious freedom legislation

A law has been proposed by Knesset Member Moshe Gafni as follows: "The distributor of a document by means of the mail, the fax, the electronic mail or by any other means, in which there is some form of persuasion to change religion, whether directly or indirectly, without obtaining the prior consent of the addressee thereto, is subject to three months' imprisonment". The above proposal is being challenged by the Israeli Messianic Action Committee, who are asking for the bill to be removed from further consideration, as they endeavour to protect the right of all Israeli citizens to express their religious beliefs.

US to send truce monitors to Israel

President Bush's administration is reportedly preparing to send a small group of ceasefire monitors to the troubled areas of Palestine and Israel. According to a report, the State Department is said to be assembling a team of around ten people to gauge Palestinian and Israeli compliance with the ceasefire and 'cooling-off' periods included in former Senator George Mitchell's blueprint to end the violence. William Burns, the new US Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, said that "There is a real urgency to moving forward". He described the monitoring scheme as "a fairly modest mechanism that both sides might see as a way to facilitate implementation of Mitchell". Israel has consistently resisted the idea of outside monitors, and even more strongly opposed suggestions of a fully fledged international observer force. Mark Regev, spokesman at the Israeli embassy in Washington, told reporters that "sending monitors or observers to the region will just be adding another focal point for instability". Israel has argued that any outside presence would risk manipulation by Palestinian extremists.

BRITISH DISAPPROVAL OF ISRAEL

Foreign Office Minister Ben Bradshaw has reinforced British disapproval of Israel's targeting Palestinian militants. He said that "it was incumbent on the Israelis to recognise Arafat's serious efforts to rein in terrorism. There is an overriding need for Israel to acknowledge Mr Arafat's efforts to curb Palestinian extremists—it would be much easier for him to do more if there was some signal from the Israeli side that what he was doing was being rewarded". Mr Bradshaw also said that Britain would seriously consider contributing personnel to an international observer force if it were sent to the region with the agreement of both sides. Israeli diplomatic sources saw the minister's remarks as indicative of mounting British and European frustration over the deterioration of the peace process, and of the apparent near collapse of the Palestinian Authority, in which the EU has invested heavily.

Israel plays down Palestinian talk of chemical weapons

Israeli officials are refusing to comment on a recent article in the Palestinian weekly *al-Manar* indicating that the Palestinian Authority may be seriously considering using chemical and biological weapons against Israel. The *al-Manar* article is by Mr Khosa, deputy chairman of the Palestinian Journalists' Union, who has close ties with PA leaders. He claims that "serious thinking has begun about developing biological or chemical weapons of deterrence". Israel counter-terrorism experts believe that publication of the article is more a calculated attempt at psychological warfare than an announcement of a serious operational programme.

World Council of Churches supports Palestinians

A boycott of goods produced by Jewish settlers in the West Bank area, and active support for the Palestinians, are central planks in what church leaders recently described as an effort to forge Middle East peace. The measures, which have drawn criticism from Israeli diplomats and pro-Israel Christians, are among the recommendations of a World Council of Churches (WCC) delegation that recently spent four days in the region. There was British participation in the fifty-strong delegation to the area, which met Palestinian officials and Israeli civil rights leaders. A report, to be debated at the WCC executive meeting in Geneva this month, concentrates on the plight of the Palestinians, making no mention of the atrocities against Israelis. In a statement, the WCC, representing 400 million Christians, and to which the Church of England is affiliated, said it was "painfully aware of the urgent need to move from affirmation to action in solidarity with the Palestinian people". The WCC statement coincided with the opening of talks among thirteen Arab leaders in Damascus over reviving the Arab boycott of Israel. A spokesman for the Boycott Office said the aim was to force Israel "to liberate" Arab land. Absent from the discussions were representatives from Egypt, Jordan and a number of Gulf states that maintain relations with Israel.

Arafat may share power with militants

Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader, is preparing to open talks with hard-line Islamic factions on forming a national unity government. This could formally kill off the peace process. According to a report, there is a growing call among Palestinians to "strengthen national unity" by including groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad in his government. They have never recognised the State of Israel, and their military wings are behind the spate of suicide bombings against Israelis. Mr Arafat has so far refused to bring in the extremists, knowing that it would alienate the Americans. But the prestige of Hamas and Islamic Jihad is so high among Palestinians that he has little choice but to recognise them as brothers in arms. "We face a serious choice", said Husam Khadr, a leader of Mr Arafat's Fatah group in Nablus on the West Bank. "Either we escalate the struggle against Israel, or we end the lie that we're involved in an uprising".

HOSTILE RECEPTION FOR SHARON VISIT

Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit recently criticised Ariel Sharon's policy of not negotiating while under fire at a difficult joint press conference marking the end of the Israeli Premier's one-day visit to Turkey. Sharon's meeting had been with Mr Ecevit and Foreign Minister Ismail Cem to discuss bilateral relations as well as the Middle East situation. Mr Ecevit said that efforts to stop violence and resume the peace process should go together. Mr Ecevit said that, "If hopes for peace vanish, our relations might face difficulties". He added that Turkey attached great importance to strong ties with Israel and did not want their relations to be negatively affected. In recent months a number of high-level Israelis have paid official visits to Turkey.

Syria and Iraq mend relations

Mustafa Mero, the Syrian prime minister, became the most senior Syrian to visit Baghdad in twenty years. According to a report, the visit marked a new step in the rapprochement between two historic foes run by rival branches of the Ba'ath party. Mr Mero, at the head of a large delegation of ministers and businessmen, landed at Saddam Hussein international airport twenty-four hours after the US and UK launched bombing raids against Iraq. Mr Mero's visit to Baghdad will raise concerns in Washington, where the Bush Administration wants Arab governments to isolate Iraq and clamp down on the smuggling that helps keep Saddam's regime afloat. Travel between the two countries has been eased as Syria seeks to expand trade ties and Iraq looks for new markets for its oil. Syria is also concerned by the strong defence ties between Turkey, its northern neighbour, and Israel.

Iraq rebuilds chemical arsenal

News of a training accident emerged recently, after Iraqi soldiers took part in a chemical-weapons exercise that went wrong. Evidence has surfaced recently that Iraqi scientists are working around the clock to rebuild the Iraqi leaders' conventional-weapons and self-defence arsenal as well as his chemical capability. In the past three months eight military factories have begun working at almost full strength. The most important factory, situated in the unpopulated Syrian border area of Al Qayem, is said to be building chemical weapons and missiles. Evidence also emerged that Saddam's most sophisticated Chinese-built radar tracking systems are back to strength. Chinese engineers and technicians have become regular visitors to Baghdad.