



PROPHETIC TIMES

WEEKLY WORLD NEWS UPDATE

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

AUGUST 23 2008

IRAN'S MISSION TO SEND ASTRONAUT INTO ORBIT SPARKS FEARS IT WANTS TO PUT WEAPONS IN SPACE

August 21, 2008 The Evening Standard reported: "Iran has launched a mission to send its first astronaut into space within the decade. The Islamic Republic plans to send a manned rocket into space in the next 10 years, state television said on Thursday, just days after announcing it had put a dummy satellite into orbit.

The Republic has long held the goal of developing a space program, generating unease among world leaders already concerned about its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Embroided in a standoff with the West over its nuclear ambitions, Iran said on Sunday it had put the dummy satellite into orbit on a home-grown rocket for the first time.

U.S. security officials said Tehran's attempted satellite launch was a failure that fell short of claimed successes, but an analyst said the test marked a technical advance for Iran.

The long-range ballistic technology used to put satellites into space can also be used for launching weapons. Iran says it has no such intention.

The West accuses Iran of seeking to build a nuclear warhead, a charge Tehran denies, insisting its nuclear ambitions are aimed at generating electricity so it that it can export more of its massive oil and gas reserves.

"One of the aims of Iran's 10-year space programme is to send a manned rocket into space," state television quoted Reza Taghipour, the head of Iran's aerospace organisation, as saying.

"Within in the next six months to one year, the exact date of this mission will be determined," he added."..."



HALLMARK ROLLS OUT GAY MARRIAGE GREETING CARDS

August 21, 2008 The Associated Press reported: "Most states don't recognize gay marriage -- but now Hallmark does. The nation's largest greeting card company is rolling out same-sex wedding cards -- featuring two tuxedos, overlapping hearts or intertwined flowers, with best wishes inside. "Two hearts. One promise," one says.

Hallmark added the cards after California joined Massachusetts as the only U.S. states with legal gay marriage. A handful of other states have recognized same-sex civil unions.

The language inside the cards is neutral, with no mention of wedding or marriage, making them also suitable for a commitment ceremony. Hallmark says the move is a response to consumer demand, not any political pressure.

"It's our goal to be as relevant as possible to as many people as we can," Hallmark spokeswoman Sarah Gronberg Kolell said.

Hallmark's largest competitor, American Greetings Corp., has no plans to enter the market, saying its current offerings are general enough to speak to a lot of different relationships."..."

REBEL COMMANDER DECLARES 'ALL-OUT WAR' AGAINST PHILIPPINES

August 20, 2008 The Agence France-Presse reported: "A Muslim rebel commander behind deadly raids in the southern Philippines declared on Wednesday an "all-out war" against the government, saying his fighters were willing to die in battle.

Abdurahman Macapaar of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), also known as Commander Bravo, taunted the military and said his mujahedeen, or holy warriors, were willing to engage them in firefights anytime.

"We are prepared to trade fire with them until we are decimated. If they cannot finish us, we will finish them," Bravo said over the Radio Mindanao Network. "We are prepared to kill, we are prepared to be killed."

He said the attacks on several Christian towns in the provinces of Lanao del Norte and Sarangani on Monday that left 38 dead were led by "mujahedeen" angered by an aborted land deal with the government.

"What the Muslims want is Islamic justice in Mindanao," Bravo said, referring to the country's main southern island where the MILF has been waging a separatist rebellion since 1978.

"In the eyes of Allah we are not terrorists," he said, reacting to accusations by some government officials that he and his rebel unit no longer follow the MILF chain of command.

Bravo is a senior MILF leader who controls large rebel areas in the mountains of Lanao in Mindanao.

Short and of medium build, Bravo along with another MILF commander named Umbra Kato, is a separatist hardliner who has repeatedly staged attacks despite ongoing peace talks.

Kato's men last week illegally occupied more than 20 villages in another Mindanao province, triggering intense gunbattles.

The military said they were trying to verify field reports that Kato may have been wounded in a firefight late Tuesday.”...”

DOZENS KILLED IN PHILIPPINES REBEL ATTACKS

August 19, 2008 AFP reported: “At least 28 civilians and three soldiers were killed Monday in a wave of Muslim separatist rebel attacks in the southern Philippines, witnesses and officials said.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels raided several towns in southern Lanao del Norte province, looting businesses, burning homes and randomly attacking the mostly Christian villagers, officials said. Nine bodies were lying bloodied by a roadside in the village of Lapayan in Kauswagan town as black smoke billowed from houses burning nearby, AFP reporters said.

Five other civilians were killed in a neighbouring village, residents fleeing the area told AFP. Six more bodies were found in Kauswagan later Monday. All 20 bodies were taken by troops to two mortuaries in Iligan city a few kilometres (miles) away, an AFP reporter saw.

Meanwhile, in the town of Kolambugan, six civilians and three soldiers were killed, mayor Beltran Lumaque said in a radio interview.

Another rebel unit struck the town of Maasim, leaving two civilians dead as they ransacked a pawnshop and looted a drug store, said military spokesman Major Randolph Cabangbang.”

RUSSIA-NATO RELATIONS IN TATTERS

August 20, 2008 The EU Observer reported: “Moscow's relations with NATO were left in tatters on Tuesday (19 August) after the Kremlin dismissed the results of an emergency meeting of the military alliance on Russia's actions in Georgia as "empty words."

NATO foreign ministers gathered in the Brussels headquarters yesterday to discuss what actions it could take following the five-day war between Russia and its small Caucasian neighbour, Georgia, amid a hesitant withdrawal of Russian troops.

But NATO itself is internally divided on how to approach energy-rich Russia. The EU relies on it for around a quarter of its energy needs, a factor said to influence the more cautious approach of Germany, France and Italy towards condemning Moscow, meaning the alliance cobbled together a political statement but little more.

It said it would freeze regular contacts with Russia and said there would be "no business as usual under present circumstances" while urging Moscow to "take immediate action to withdraw its troops from the area."

There were no promises of troops in Georgia to give weight to the statement, however. Instead, the alliance said it would help with certain non-military "support measures."

NATO plans to send a "team of 15 civil emergency planning experts to help Georgia assess damage to its civil infrastructure" and "support the re-establishment of the air traffic system and assist the Georgian government in understanding the nature of cyber attacks."

There was no real push for giving Georgia and Ukraine NATO membership. French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner also said the EU would not rethink its support for Russia's attempt to join the World Trade Organisation.

The lack of substance was immediately picked up on by Russia.”...

Russia continues to only pull back its troops slowly from Georgia even though it agreed to a France-brokered ceasefire over the weekend and announced the withdrawal on Monday.”...”

BUFFETT, OTHERS SAY HIGH U.S. DEBT LEVELS POSE RISKS

August 22, 2008 Reuters reported: “Warren Buffett, the billionaire co-founder of a top private equity firm and a prominent voice for U.S. fiscal responsibility, called on the United States and its elected officials to combat the nation's fast-growing, multi-trillion dollar debt load.

Buffett, Blackstone Group LP co-founder Peter Peterson, and former Comptroller General David Walker were part of a panel that spoke Thursday night in Omaha, Nebraska following the national premiere of the documentary "I.O.U.S.A." The talk was simulcast in more than 350 movie theatres.

The film argues the country might face economic disaster if it can't find a way to pay some \$53 trillion it has committed to spend -- and doesn't have now -- as the population ages, and Medicare and Social Security costs soar.

It also argues, and panelists agreed, that the United States has become too dependent on foreign investors to buy its goods and its publicly-issued debt. There was also agreement that many politicians fear making tough policy choices that have ramifications far beyond the current election cycle.”...”

Roughly four-fifths of the \$53 trillion figure is related to projected shortfalls in Medicare and Social Security. Most of the rest is what is commonly called the "national debt," which in July totaled nearly \$9.6 trillion, according to the U.S. Treasury Department's Bureau of Public Debt.”...”

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