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POPE PREPARES FOR MIDDLE EAST VISIT

May 7, 2009 VOA News reported: "Pope Benedict XVI is preparing for a week-long visit to the Middle East that will take him to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories. Many Vatican observers see this trip as the most challenging foreign visit by Pope Benedict to date, due to past relations with Jews and Muslims. But there are hopes this visit will help improve relations with the other religions.



The first leg of the pope's Middle East tour will take him to Jordan, where Catholics are less than two percent of the population. During three days there he will visit sites of religious significance: Bethany-Beyond the Jordan and Mount Nebo.

Vatican observer Father Thomas Williams says the pope will attempt to give Christians living in the Middle East new hope. Many have been leaving the region, driven by a difficult economic and political climate. "One of his main goals there is to bolster Christians in the Middle East and give them encouragement to stay there, to hold firm," Father Williams said.

The pope has made a visit to the Middle East one of the early priorities of his papacy."..."

NORTH KOREA WITHDRAWS FROM SIX-PARTY NUCLEAR TALKS

May 7, 2009 Voice of America reported: "North Korea says it will boycott the talks on its nuclear program. Pyongyang made the decision after international condemnation of its long range missile test. In this report we look at what is known as the six-party talks process.

The six-party talks began in August 2003 as a forum focusing on North Korea's nuclear weapons program. It brings together representatives from the United States, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea and North Korea.

Jim Walsh is a North Korea and security expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "The goal of the six party talks is to come to a negotiated settlement on North Korea's nuclear program," said Jim Walsh. "And in particular, to fulfill the promise of the agreement that was made in February 2007 at these talks, an agreement in which North Korea promised to dismantle its nuclear weapons program - dismantle all its nuclear weapons. And in return, the other parties would help North Korea with its energy, with its economic development, with it entering the world global economic system rather than being the isolated country it is right now."

Analysts say it is difficult to know how many nuclear weapons Pyongyang possesses - estimates vary from six to 12.

Walsh says the six-party talks made progress, especially regarding North Korea's small (five megawatt) Yongbyon nuclear complex that reprocesses plutonium - the first step in building nuclear weapons.

"It stopped running the Yongbyon reactor and if that reactor isn't running, then it can't produce new nuclear material," said Jim Walsh. "And if it can't produce nuclear material, then North Korea can't produce new nuclear weapons. So this agreement, as a first success, capped, froze North Korea's nuclear program. And then the various parties made other sorts of steps, taking North Korea off the various trading lists and terrorist lists to allow them to come out into the international community."

However, toward the end of the Bush administration, negotiations ground to a halt, as North Korea refused to agree on specific verification measures of its nuclear activities."..."

TALIBAN ISLAMISTS NEARING PAKISTANI NUKES

May 6, 2009 Israel National News reported: "Israel and the US should be focusing more on the Taliban's rise in nuclear Pakistan than on Iran's nuclear aims, more and more experts are saying.

"Pakistan must move to the top of our strategic agenda," writes former US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton. Similarly, "Nuclear Taliban/Al Qaida is a far more ominous threat than nuclear Iran could ever be," writes Byron Ellis, who heads the international Jethro Project consulting company.



Bolton, writing in The Wall Street Journal on Monday, warns that the U.S. must take "hard steps" to prevent Pakistan's nuclear arsenal from falling into the hands of Taliban. U.S. President Barack Obama's statement of confidence last week that the nuclear arsenal will not fall to the terrorists is "not reassuring," Bolton writes, "in light of the Taliban's military and political gains throughout Pakistan."

There is a "tangible risk that several weapons could slip out of military control," Bolton warns. "Such weapons could then find their way to Al Qaeda or other terrorists, with obvious global implications."

Even graver is the possibility that Pakistan's government could collapse entirely, enabling "a well-organized, tightly disciplined group to seize control of the entire Pakistani government."

"To prevent either scenario, Pakistan must move to the top of our strategic agenda, albeit closely related to Afghanistan," he wrote.

"Neither greater economic assistance, nor more civilian advisers upcountry, nor stronger democratic institutions will eliminate the strategic

threat nearly soon enough... We must strengthen pro-American elements in Pakistan's military so they can purge dangerous Islamicists from their ranks; roll back Taliban advances; and, together with our increased efforts in Afghanistan, decisively defeat the militants on either side of the border.”

In a similar vein, Ellis writes that “Israel’s focus on Iran’s nuclear pursuit is misplaced; [Israel] should be focusing on the rise of the Taliban in nuclear Pakistan. Nuclear Taliban/Al Qaida is a far more ominous threat than nuclear Iran could ever be.”

“History indicates that Iran is... a rational nation,” Ellis argues, while “the Taliban and Al Qaida are brutally irrational and will not hesitate to use weapons of mass destruction against Israel. Thus, the Taliban/Al Qaeda nuclear threat dwarfs any imaginary Iranian threat. The international community, including Iran and Israel, must collaborate to reduce this symbolic and real threat, which could affect any nation.

The international community cannot afford to commit another Bushism, expending war resources on the wrong threat. The United States needs a coalition of nations to confront the looming potential of a nuclear Taliban/Al Qaida and cannot afford any more distractions in the Middle East.”

GAY MARRIAGE LEAPS AHEAD IN MAINE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

May 6, 2009 The Associated Press reported: “New England states signaled an increasing willingness to sanction gay marriage on Wednesday as Maine legalized the practice and the New Hampshire Legislature voted to do the same. If New Hampshire Gov. John Lynch signs the bill or lets it become law without his signature, his state would become the sixth overall to allow gay marriage and the fifth in New England. Rhode Island would be the only state in the region without such a law.

Maine Gov. John Baldacci, a Democrat who hadn't indicated how he would handle his state's bill, signed it shortly after the legislation passed the Senate on a vote of 21-13 - a margin not large enough to override a veto.

"In the past, I opposed gay marriage while supporting the idea of civil unions," Baldacci said in a statement read in his office. "I have come to believe that this is a question of fairness and of equal protection under the law, and that a civil union is not equal to civil marriage."

Lynch, also a Democrat, remained uncommitted but has said he believes the word "marriage" should be reserved for unions of a man and a woman. "I'm going to talk to legislators and I'm going to talk to the people of New Hampshire and ultimately make the best decision I can for the people of New Hampshire," the governor said Wednesday evening.

The New Hampshire bill squeaked through on a 178-167 vote after an hour of debate. Both chambers appear to be far short of enough votes to override a veto.”...

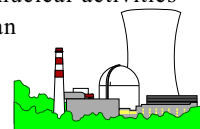
Maine's bill authorizes marriage between any two people rather than between one man and one woman, as state law currently allows. The House had passed the bill Tuesday. The law is to take effect in mid-September but could be sidetracked before then.”...

EGYPT: NUKE PROGRAM ONLY FOR PEACEFUL PURPOSES

May 7, 2009 The Jerusalem Post reported: “Egyptian officials reiterated on Thursday that the country's nuclear activities are of a "peaceful nature," a day after it was reported that UN nuclear inspectors found traces of weapons-grade uranium in Egypt last year and in 2007. Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki called the media reports "mistaken and outdated."

"The issue dates back to 2007 and the International Atomic Energy Agency always confirms in its reports that Egyptian nuclear activities are of a peaceful nature and that there are no pending issues related to Egyptian cooperation with the IAEA," he said in a statement.

The IAEA report on the matter, obtained by the Associated Press on Wednesday, said Cairo believed the particles could have come into the country on containers with radioisotopes but that the IAEA was continuing its investigations because “it has not yet identified the source of the uranium particles.”



The report said traces of low-enriched uranium were found at the same site— Inshas, northeast of Cairo, where Egypt’s two small research reactors are located.”

'GAY' DAY COMING TO CALIFORNIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

May 7, 2009 WorldNetDaily reported: “A California committee passed a bill proclaiming that the state's public school children will take a break from learning every year to celebrate Harvey Milk – a homosexual icon considered by some to be "a martyr for gay rights."

The California State Senate Education Committee passed SB 572 today on a 7-2 vote. The bill encourages all California public schools to "conduct suitable commemorative exercises ... remembering the life of Harvey Milk and recognizing his accomplishments as well as the contributions he made to this state. It requires no parental consent for student participation.”...

SB 572 will mean an official day commemorating homosexuality, bisexuality, and transsexuality in California government schools, without parental permission," said Randy Thomasson, president of SaveCalifornia.com, which has been "It's absurd that government schools teach children not to smoke or use drugs, yet would teach children as young as kindergarten that homosexuality is good and healthy and maybe even for them. That's just not true...Thomasson said.”...