

Topics in the news – Monday 19th November 2012

1. The tit-for-tat fighting between Gaza and Israel goes on

This is Day 6 of the exchange of rocket fire from Gaza on the one hand and aerial bombardment on the other. Yesterday an Israeli missile flattened the house of one of the Hamas leaders, killing the 10 family members inside. Rockets fly towards Israeli towns and villages, some being destroyed by the missile defence system but others landing on or near Israeli homes.

Tanks are lining up outside Gaza, presumably in readiness for a ground invasion. Meanwhile, Egypt is leading diplomatic efforts to negotiate an alternative settlement, and the UN Secretary General is calling for an immediate cease-fire.

When, and how, will it end?

2. President Obama visits Burma

I remember that Burma used to be country ostracised even by tourists, in protest against the military regime's human rights record. However, in recent years the regime has softened and the international community is doing its best to encourage this movement. The visit by Barack Obama is seen as recognition of and a reward for its progress.

3. Chocolate and intelligence

Following evidence that eating cocoa can help mental ability in elderly patients, a scientist has looked at the link between chocolate eating and winning Nobel Prizes – on a country-by-country basis. The results? There is a very strong correlation. The countries which win most Nobel Prizes eat more chocolate! This correlation does not, of course, mean that one causes the other.

It is probably just that there are underlying socio-economic factors which cause an increase in both. Or does eating chocolate make you more intelligent?!

4. North African solar power plan is in danger

A plan for solar panels across the north African coastline to power 15% of Europe's energy by 2050 has run into difficulties. Although it was set up with a massive budget, it seems that European countries such as Spain are now hesitating to commit themselves to contracts which would require them to subsidise the renewable energy costs. There are also concerns that the north African countries are politically too unstable. Europe is looking for alternative sources of power, but solar energy from north Africa may not be the easy answer after all.

Where should our energy come from?