



GÜNLÜK ORTADOĞU BÜLTENİ

MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

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1. IRAQ / IRAK

- Arab League Secretary General Amro Moussa is due in Baghdad on Saturday to meet senior officials and discuss preparations to host the Arab Summit.

Moussa's visit is aimed to discuss the different local and regional political developments and the situation in Iraq in light of the recent consensus over the new government formation.

The Arab League Secretary General is due to visit as well Kurdistan, the holy city of Najaf and south and central Iraq. (Alsumaria Iraqi Satellite TV)

- Iranian acting Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi arrived to Baghdad on Wednesday in a visit during which he is due to hold talks with senior Iraqi officials.

Talks are centered on enhancing bilateral ties, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said. (Alsumaria Iraqi Satellite TV)

- The official spokesman for the Goran (Change) Movement said his party has not set a date for the meeting between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Goran's leaders, rejecting the reports that the recent meeting between the two parties was political.

In its Wednesday issue, the Kurdish Awena (Mirror) newspaper stated Jalal Talabani, the PUK General Secretary, sent a leader from his party to Goran to arrange for a meeting between the two party leaders. In replay to the invitation, Nawshirwan Mustafa, who heads Goran, suggested to hold a high level meeting after a while.

mhamad tofiq rahim Mohammed Tofiq Rahim told AKnews recently there was a meeting between some “colleagues” from both sides and the meeting was called by Yusif Zozani, a leader from the PUK. He added the gathering was to discuss some “social not political” issues.

Rahim dismissed the reports claiming the two sides have set a date for the meeting between Talabani and Mustafa.

After the news went public in Awena daily, the two parties were quick to respond to the reports, rejecting them.

Internal disputes between the PUK wings, led some members of party break away from the PUK and form Goran in 2009. The movement ran for Kurdistan Region’s 2009 parliamentary elections independently and won 25 seats in the 111-seated parliament. However, currently Goran plays opposition with two Islamic parties in the Regional parliament.

Goran also withdrew from the Kurdistan Blocs Coalition (KBC), a super bloc including all the Kurdish representatives to the Iraqi parliament. It has also announced its withdrawal from the Iraqi political process. (AK News)

- The Iraqiya List stated on Wednesday that it will not oppose the application of Article 140 for the normalization of the situation in the disputed areas during the next two years.

Jamal Al-Batikh Wasit, Jamal Al-Batix WasitMP Jamal al-Battikh told AKnews that Article 140 is constitutional and there are political consensus about it among all the winning blocs in the elections.

"The list assured on that the application of this article should be preceded by the suitable environment and it not be affected by any nationalism at the expense of other ethnic groups in the disputed areas, especially in Kirkuk and the surrounding areas."

"There are political agreements between the blocs that oblige them to ensure a suitable atmosphere for the application of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution in the disputed areas."

Article 140 is one of the articles of the permanent Iraqi constitution to resolve the issue of disputed areas between the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil and the federal government in Baghdad. According to the article, its three paragraphs were supposed to be implemented at the end of 2007 and they state first on returning the displaced inhabitants of the disputed areas to them, then conduct a census year in these areas, and at last making a public opinion poll to vote on the annexing these areas to Kurdistan or to the federal government in Baghdad, but non of these paragraphs are implemented so far. (AK News)

- A member of the Kurdish Gorrani Movement which recently withdrew from the federal government over its non-allocation of ministries said on Wednesday that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is able to return the Lists' ministerial share from the Kurdish Blocs Coalition (KBC).

The Gorrani List which holds 25 seats in the 111-seat Kurdistan Region Parliament withdrew from the KBC at the beginning of December last year saying that it would participate separately in the federal government in Baghdad where it holds eight seats.

Although the KBC was awarded seven ministries in the newly formed government, the Gorrani Movement did not receive any, prompting their immediate withdrawal from the federal political process.

Lawmaker Bayzid Hassan told AKnews: “Prime Minister Maliki is demanded to intervene immediately to resolve our cause, and he is able to recover our ministerial share from the KBC.”

Hassan explained that the Iraqi PM and his coalition had assured the allocation of Gorran’s ministerial shares within the shares of the KBC.

“We haven’t received any ministries from the KBC,” he complained, “...we will not negotiate with them about it, we negotiate with Maliki and call on him to give us what is ours by right,” said Hassan.

He pointed to the presence of blocs with seven seats which received two ministries, while the Gorran Movement with eight seats hasn’t received any.

Out of the 42 ministries that make up the Iraqi government, the KBC were awarded the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Commerce, Health, Immigration, Civil Society Affairs, Women’s Affairs and the Ministry of State. (AK News)

- The Deputy Premier, Ruz Nouri Shawees, condemned the bombing that targeted al-Qiddissin Church in Alexandria city in Egypt.

A statement by Shawees’ office cited “Shawees sent a condolence message to the Prime Minister, Ahmed Nadhif, denouncing the bombing.” (NINA)

- The member of the Kurdistan Alliance, Mahmoud Othman, pointed out that “The withdrawal of Taghyeer bloc from the Central Government and the KA will negatively affect the internal situation in Kurdistan Region.”

He stated to the National Iraqi News Agency (NINA) “Taghyeer bloc has a great popularity in KR,” assuring that “We are afraid that the bloc to arouse disputes inside KR parliament.”

He emphasized that “We prefer the return of Taghyeer bloc to the KA through conducting dialogues with the bloc.”

“The bloc does not accept to return to the government and the KA,” he added, stressing that “We wish to settle the disputes for which the bloc has withdrawn.” (NINA)

- Iraq’s President, Jalal Talabani, has described relations with Iran as “good, despite difficulties,” adding that “there is a national consensus to cement them,” according to a Presidential statement on Thursday.

The statement pointed out that President Talabani had received in Baghdad on Wednesday Iran’s visiting Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Salihi and his accompanying delegation, who conveyed greetings and wishes of the Advisor of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Ali Khamanei and Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, to President Jalal Talabani.

The meeting, attended by Iraq’s Foreign Minister, Hoshiar Zibari and a number of other officials, had witnessed “President Talabani’s welcome of the Iranian Foreign Minister and members of his delegation, expressing gratitude for Khamanei and the Iranian President, for their greetings, “reiterating deepness of the historic links and bilateral relations between Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran, in all fields.”

“Our relations have passed through tests and experiences, but despite that, they have become good relations and there is an Iraqi consensus to boost relations with neighboring Iran and to strive to boost them to cover all fields,” the statement pointed out.

On his part, the Iranian Foreign Minister had expressed gratitude for President Talabani for his good reception and hospitality, pointing out that his meetings with Iraq's Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki and Foreign Minister Zibari, had "been good and constructive, based on the high interests that serve both peoples, reiterating Iran's attention and hope to boost security, stability and prosperity of Iraq."

The Iranian Foreign Minister had also highlighted "the efforts, exerted by President Talabani to strengthen bilateral relations and activate construction cooperation between both countries, expressing his country's rejoice to see the Iraqi people passing the difficult phase that passed during the formation of the new government of national-partnership, representing all parties of the Iraqi people, thing that had its impact on opening broad horizons for bilateral relations between the two countries."

Minister Salahi, the statement said, had conveyed an official invitation by the Iranian President for President Talabani to visit the Islamic Republic of Iran, adding that President Talabani had accepted the invitation, asking the Iranian Foreign Minister to convey his greetings to President Ahmednejad.

The Iranian Foreign Minister had arrived in Baghdad on Wednesday, on an official visit for Iraq. (Aswat Al Iraq)

- Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki discussed on Wednesday with Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi ways to develop and cement bilateral ties, according to an official statement.

"The premier asserted the Iraqi government's keenness to develop relations with Iran in various domains for the good of the two people," said the statement received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

Al-Maliki highlighted the importance of activating the joint high committee between Iraq and Iran, noting that the committee's meeting would be held soon in Baghdad.

Salehi, for his part, said Iran would support the Iraqi new government, stressing that his government will do its best to further expand ties with Iraq through increasing cooperation.

This is the first visit of a high ranking Iranian official to Iraq after the country formed its new cabinet late in December last year. (Aswat Al Iraq)

- President of Iraq's Kurdistan region, Massoud Barzani, said on Wednesday that the Kurdistan leadership has a strong desire to boost relations with Kuwait, according to a presidential statement.

"The president received today at the Salah al-Din resort a high-profile media delegation from Kuwait, led by Adnan Khaliefa Rashed Ibrahim," said the statement received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

"Barzani underlined Kurdistan's desire to boost relations with Kuwait for the good of the two people," it added.

"The delegation valued the developments in the region, expressing hope for more progress and that Kuwait would benefit from the investment opportunities in the region and to open its consulate in Arbil." (Aswat Al Iraq)

- Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr arrived in Najaf on Wednesday after three and half years in Iran, al-Sadr office said.

"Leader of the Sadrist bloc Muqtada al-Sadr returned today to his house in Najaf," the office said in a statement received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

Al-Sadr has not been seen publicly in Iraq since 2007. He left the country and has been living in Iran. (Aswat Al Iraq)

- Kürdistan Koalisyonunun Irak Parlamento Üyesi Dr. Mahmud Osman açıklamasında,Emniyet Bakanlıklarında görev dağılımı yapılması halinde Kürtlerinde bu bakanlıklardan birini almayı hakettiğini ifade etti.

Kürt Parlemerter Dr.Mahmud Osman PNA'ya verdiği demecinde, Irak'lı Siyasi Grupların Emniyet bakanlıkları dağılımında tarafsız kişilerin bu görevlere getirilmesi yönündeki görüşlerine değinerek, Siyasi partilerin daha sonra görüşlerinde değişikliğe gittiğini belirtti. Osman, Siyasi Partilerin kendi aralarında görev dağılımına gittiğini, Savunma Bakanlığını El Irakiye'ye ve İçişleri Bakanlığın ise Irak Ulusal İttifakına verilmesi yönünde talepte bulunduğunu söyledi.

Parlemerter Dr. Mahmud Osman, bakanlıkların siyasi partiler üzerine dağılımı yapılması halinde emniyet bakanlıklardan birini almaya Kürtlerinde hakkı olduğunu söyledi. Kürdistan Bölge Başkanlığı tarafından yapılan açıklamaya değinerek Osman, Emniyet Bakanlıklarından birinin Kürtlere verilmesi gerektiğini savundu.

Dr. Mahmud Osman açıklamasının devamında,Kürdistan Bölge Başkanlığının Irak Hükümetinin İstikbarat Bakanlığının kendilerine verilmesi yönünde bir açıklamada bulunduğunu sözlerine ekledi. (Peyamner)

2. IRAN / İRAN

- The Iranian parliament will definitely approve the bill of the law on cutting ties with Britain, a senior Iranian lawmaker reiterated on Wednesday.

"Deputies of the nation are angry at the British approach (towards Iran) and the bill is going to be approved at the parliament," Rapporteur of the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Kazzem Jalali told FNA on Wednesday.

Asked if his commission's ratification would be enough for requiring the government to cut Tehran's ties with London, Jalali said the bill should first be put to vote, which, he said, would be carried out once the necessary discussions and studies are done by the MPs.

"We first need the bill to be approved as a law, and to do this we should put it to vote," he said, reminding that nothing is binding on the government until it is approved as a law.

The bill has already received the approval of the National Security and Foreign Policy commission. Late in December, the commission submitted the bill to the parliament's presiding board for a final discussion and approval by all parliament members.

Later, Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani underlined that the country's legislative body would seriously pursue ratification of the bill to reciprocate Britain's inimical approach towards Iran in recent years.

The move by the commission came days after British Envoy to Tehran Simon Gass criticized the human rights situation in Iran.

Iran protested at the British envoy's meddlesome measures, but London voiced all-out support for Gass and the British Queen gave Gass a knighthood for his services to Britain.

The Iranian lawmakers initially started drafting a bill to downgrade ties with London after Britain's direct involvement in stirring post-election unrests in Iran in 2009, but they intensified and accelerated the move after British Envoy to Tehran Simon Gass criticized the human rights situation in Iran, and said, "Today, International Human Rights Day is highlighting the cases of those people around the world who stand up for the rights of others - the lawyers, journalists and NGO workers who place themselves at risk to defend their countrymen."

"Nowhere are they under greater threat than in Iran. Since last year human rights defenders have been harassed and imprisoned," Gass said in a memo published by the British Embassy in Tehran on December 9.

Other lawmakers, including head of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, had previously blasted the negative role of the British ambassador to Tehran, and asked the country's foreign ministry to expel him from Iran. (Fars News Agency / FNA)

- Türkmenistan Cumhurbaşkanı Berdi Muhammedov, İran'a doğalgaz ihraç etmek için inşa edilen boru hattının ikinci aşamasının hayata geçmesini, Türkmenistan'ın 2010 yılında en önemli projesi niteledi.

Türkmen lider, yeni boru hattının Türkmenistan'ın İran'a doğalgaz ihracat kapasitesini 2.5 kat arttırdığını kaydetti.

Söz konusu boru hattı projesi, geçen Kasım ayında İran ve Türkmenistan Cumhurbaşkanı'nın katıldığı törenle hizmete açılmıştı.

Türkmen lider, İran ile iktisadi ilişkilerin 2011 yılında daha da gelişeceğinin altını çizdi ve İran'la yakın ilişkilerin her iki ülkenin yanısıra bölge halkının da fevkalade yararına olduğunu belirtti. (FNA)

- A top Iranian diplomat says it hopes that Tehran, Baghdad, Ankara, and Damascus form an alliance to take major steps for promotion of regional peace and security.

Iranian Acting Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi made the proposal in a meeting with Iraqi Parliament Speaker Osama al-Najafi in Baghdad on Wednesday.

In a separate meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki, Salehi also said cooperation will benefit the entire region.

Maliki also said regional nations should make efforts to strengthen their unity.

The prime minister also said Baghdad plans to take serious steps to expand ties with Tehran.

Salehi also told Maliki that Tehran is ready to help implement infrastructure projects in Iraq.

The acting minister went on to say that Iraq has a high status in Iran's foreign policy. (Mehr News Agency / MNA)

- The Persian Gulf region is one of the most strategic regions in the world, because it abounds with oil and gas reserves and meets a large part of the world's demand for energy.

That is why the world powers have always been attracted to this region and tried to wield influence on regional governments.

But, the presence of extra-regional players in the region has negatively affected its security, and this problem has taken its toll on the regional nations.

Therefore, the regional nations should work together to find a feasible solution to the issue of regional security.

As the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has recently said, a safe and secure Persian Gulf benefits all regional countries, but if regional security is undermined, all of the countries in the region will suffer.

The foreign players can not resolve the issue and their presence in the region has become a paradox. They claim they have come to bring security and peace to the region, but their presence has undermined the regional security.

The Persian Gulf region and the Middle East are currently faced with many serious security challenges like the presence of foreign forces, terrorist groups, state-sponsored terrorism, killing of innocent civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, the Zionist regime's aggressions, movements aimed at provoking religious and ethnic divisions, attempts aimed at poisoning the regional relations, and promotion of Iranophobia and Islamophobia.

As the Supreme Leader has stated, the solution to all these issues is the promotion of regional cooperation.

Maintenance of security in the Persian Gulf through cooperation of the littoral states is a realistic and responsible security plan.

The expansion of regional cooperation in economic, commercial, environmental, cultural, and social areas can facilitate the establishment of lasting peace and security in the region.

If the foreigners leave this region, the countries themselves can overcome the challenges facing the region with a reliance on their own capabilities and capacities.

But unfortunately a misguided security policy by some regional countries has prepared the ground for a military presence of foreigners in the region, and this presence acts as a constant destabilizing factor.

As the last point it should be mentioned that any security plan for the region should be drawn up with cooperation of all regional countries, otherwise if such a plan excludes any country it will prove ineffective and inefficient. (MNA)

- Bugün Dışişleri Bakan Vekili ile Bağdat'a giden İran Dışişleri Bakanlığı Sözcüsü, İran – Irak İşbirlikleri Yüksek Komisyonu oluşturulacağını haberini verdi.

Mehr haber ajansı muhabirinin bildirdiğine göre, Tahran ve Bağdat arasındaki işbirliklerin derinleşmesi için bu seyahat yapıldığını ifade eden Ramin Mihmanperest, bu ülkede konuşlanan terörist gruplarla mücadele etmek yolları üzerinde düşünce teatisinde bulduklarını söyledi.

Ramin Mihmanperest, İran – Irak İşbirlikleri Yüksek Komisyonu oluşturulacağını haberini verirken, Bağdat'la bölgesel ve iliki güvenlik işbirliğine gidileceğini kaydetti. (MNA)

- Bugün İran Dışişleri Bakan Vekili Ali Ekber Salih ile ortak basın toplantısı düzenleyen Irak Dışişleri Bakanı Hoşyar Zebari, İran-Irak Sınırları Ortak Komitesi'nin oluşması üzerinde görüşbirliğine vardıklarını bilgisini verdi.

Mehr haber ajansının Brasa ajansına dayandırdığı habere göre, Ali Ekber Salih ile birlikte düzenlediği ortak basın toplantısında gazetecilerin sorularına yanıt veren Hoşyar Zebari, Salih ile sınır güvenliğinin yanısıra iki ülkeyi ilgilendiren konular üzerinde görüş alışverişini yaptıklarını söyledi.

Irak Dışişleri Bakanı, İran-Irak Sınırlar Ortak Komitesi'nin oluşması üzerinde Salih ile görüşbirliğine vardıklarını konuşmasına ekledi.

Zebari ayrıca, Salih ile İranlı ziyaretçilerin durumunun yanısıra bölgesel ve uluslararası meselelerin üzerinde düşünce teatisinde bulduklarını kaydetti. (MNA)

- İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakan Vekili Ali Ekber Salih bu sabah Tahran'ı Irak'a doğru terk etti.

Salihi bu seyahatta ikili ilişkilerin gelişmesi üzerinde Irak'lı yetkililerle bir araya gelerek görüş alışverişi yapacaktır.

İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakan Vekili Salihi, Irak Dışişleri Bakanı Hoşyar Zebari ve Başbakanı Nuri el Maliki ile bir araya gelecektir.

Salihi, Bağdat havaalanında yaptığı açıklamada, İran'ın 'ın Irak güvenlik ve toprak bütünlüğünü desteklediğini ifade etti ve İran'ın Irak halkı ve devletinin arkasında olduğunu vurguladı. (IRNA)

- Foreign Ministry spokesperson Ramin Mehmanparast has said representatives of several countries will be traveling to Iran to visit its nuclear facilities in the near future.

Representatives of some members of the European Union, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Group of 77, and the 5+1 group have been invited to visit Iran's nuclear sites.

The invitation came in a letter that Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Iran's ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, wrote to the IAEA.

The invitation shows the transparency of Iran's peaceful nuclear activities, the Foreign Ministry spokesman said during his weekly press briefing on Tuesday.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Mehmanparast said that defending the rights of Iranian nationals is a priority on the agenda of the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

He made the remarks in response to reports that Shahrzad Mir-Qolikhani, an Iranian woman unjustly imprisoned in the United States for three years, is being treated in an inhumane way.

He also noted that some other Iranian nationals are being detained in the U.S. illegally and are being deprived of their most basic rights and called on Washington to respect the human rights of Iranian nationals.

Iran warns Britain about intrusive remarks

Mehmanparast warned the British ambassador to Iran, Simon Gass, against making interfering and provocative remarks.

The British envoy to Tehran was appointed by Britain's Queen Elizabeth as Knight Commander of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (KCMG) in the 2011 New Year Honors.

The British ambassador should be cautious about his remarks and should be aware that these interfering statements violate diplomatic protocol.

"As far as we know, the title is granted annually to a number of individuals and officials in Britain as a ceremonial title," he added.

He went on to say that an ambassador's mission is to make efforts to expand interactions between countries and they should never do anything which undermines bilateral relations.

Israel should be held accountable for death of Iranian national

Mehmanparast also said there are reports indicating that Iranian citizen Ali-Reza Asgari has been killed in an Israeli prison and added that the Zionist regime should be held accountable in the case.

Asgari, a former Iranian deputy defense minister, mysteriously disappeared in 2007 while on a trip to Turkey. It is believed that he was abducted and transferred to Israel.

The Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that Iran and Turkey are currently working together to discover clues about the fate of Asgari.

Mehmanparast said even some Israeli media outlets have officially confirmed that Asgari had been detained in Israel.

The Zionist regime is responsible for Asgari's safety, he said, adding that Iran's Foreign Ministry is pursuing the case through "legal and political" channels.

Azerbaijani president misquoted

Asked about the recent reports claiming that the Azerbaijani president has said he is the leader of all the Azerbaijanis in the world, Mehmanparast said it seems that the remarks have been reported incorrectly.

Certain media outlets are seeking to sow discord between the two countries, so everyone should be on guard about these tricks, he added. (Tehran Times)

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE / İSRAİL – FİLİSTİN

- The ongoing impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is jeopardizing the security of the Middle East, Jordanian King Abdullah II told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu late Wednesday.

In a phone conversation initiated by Netanyahu, the monarch urged the Israeli leader to fulfill his commitment to peace by removing "obstacles" that impede the resumption of direct talks with the Palestinians.

"The monarch underlined the need for translating the commitment to peace into a practical action, by removing all obstacles that block the achievement of the two-state solution as the only way for achieving security and stability in the region," said a royal statement following the call.

The Palestinians withdrew from U.S.-sponsored direct talks with Israel at the end of September, citing the Netanyahu government's failure to extend a moratorium on the building of settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which Israel captured from Jordanian control during the 1967 Six-Day War.

The monarch urged the parties to refrain from wasting more time, saying they should immediately enter into "serious and effective negotiations in accordance with the agreed references in order to address all final status issues as soon as possible."

He pointed out that the talks should lead to the establishment of "an independent Palestinian state that lives in peace with Israel."

"The continuation of the present stalemate will jeopardize the region's stability and security," King Abdullah said.

In a parallel Jordanian effort, King Abdullah is sending his Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh on Thursday to Ramallah for talks with Palestinian leaders, apparently to encourage them to return to the negotiating table, officials said.

National security adviser Uzi Arad visited Jordan secretly on December 27 to meet with Judeh, who told Parliament on Wednesday that the discussions had dealt with chances of reviving the deadlocked peace process. (Hareetz)

- EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton visited Israel Wednesday and was told by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman that if Europe wanted Israel to lift its siege of the Gaza Strip, it had to help halt the flow of weapons into the territory.

"If you want to bring about an end to the siege of the Gaza Strip, you have to take responsibility and set up a strong, genuine and effective force to stop weapons smuggling," Lieberman said, according to a communique put out by his office after he met with Ashton Wednesday night.

He said the siege had been imposed because of the "ceaseless" smuggling of weapons - which were used against Israel - into the strip, mainly through tunnels running under the closed border between Gaza and Egypt.

"I can assure you that the moment the weapons smuggling to Gaza stops, the siege will be lifted," he said.

An EU statement described Ashton's visit as taking place "to confirm the commitment of the European Union to the peace process, and to reiterate the need for the opening of crossings into Gaza in order to allow for its reconstruction and economic recovery."

Prior to her visit, Ashton noted that "urgent progress is now needed towards a lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the European Union will continue to support all efforts towards that goal."

Ashton will hold two days of meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders. She also discussed the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in separate meetings with Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Opposition Leader Tzipi Livni on Wednesday.

Livni also focused on Iran's nuclear drive, and urged the EU to adopt a "resolute" position, "so that Iran understands that the world will no longer accept Teheran's shuffling around and lagging in an attempt to obtain nuclear weapons."

The Iranian regime is suspected of trying to obtain nuclear weapons and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other Iranian leaders have repeatedly made statements to the effect that Israel should be wiped off the map. (Hareetz)

- Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has likened Turkey to Iran on the eve of its 1979 Islamic revolution, saying Ankara's policies were to blame for the breakdown of ties with Israel.

Writing in Thursday's edition of the Jerusalem Post under the headline "We will not be Turkey's punching bag," Lieberman offered to meet his Turkish counterpart as part of a "frank and honest dialogue" on how their alliance might be restored.

But in the latest rhetorical broadside to follow Israel's deadly interception of a Turkish-sponsored aid flotilla that tried to breach its Gaza blockade in May, far-rightist Lieberman put the onus on the Islamist-rooted government in Ankara.

"The completely unilateral change in the relations is not reflective of our actions; rather it is the result of Turkey's internal politics," he said.

"Unfortunately, recent events in Turkey are reminiscent of Iran before the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Like Turkey, Iran was among Israel's closest allies and the two nations held good relations between both governments and people."

The Islamic Republic of Iran is Israel's arch-foe and routinely calls for its destruction. That has stoked Israeli and Western concerns over Iran's nuclear program.

To Israel's dismay, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan urged engagement with the Iranians, chafing at U.S.-led sanctions on Tehran as well a plan by NATO -- to which Ankara belongs -- for a regional missile shield that might help Israel.

Lieberman further deplored what he described as the failure of the Erdogan government to stem "hatred and incitement" in Turkey against Israel, which surged after Israeli marines killed nine Turkish activists in brawls aboard aid ships that tried to reach the Islamist-ruled Gaza Strip on May 31.

Turkey casts itself as an even-handed Middle East broker and has accused Israel of fomenting instability with its policies toward the Palestinians and undeclared nuclear capability.

The former allies held brief rapprochement talks last month. Turkey wants Israel to apologize and offer compensation for the flotilla raid, a demand Lieberman publicly scorned as "chutzpa".

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a right-winger who sits in an uneasy coalition with Lieberman's more hawkish party, has been more clement about the overtures to Ankara.

Such disagreements within the Israeli government have been cited by Ankara as another reason for the diplomatic deadlock. (Hareetz)

- Israel has asked the United States to consider outlawing the Turkish Islamist group behind a flotilla that tried to break Israel's blockade of the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip in May, Israeli officials said on Wednesday.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman requested the outlawing of the IHH, or Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief, at a meeting with visiting U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano on Tuesday.

The IHH is a prominent Turkish charity banned in Israel over its alleged support for Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist movement that appears on Israeli, U.S. and EU terrorist lists.

The IHH describes itself as an aid group. It organized a Gaza-bound flotilla which was intercepted last May by the Israeli Navy. Commandos stormed one of the ships and killing nine Turkish activists after a brutal fight.

The once-strong ties between Turkey and Israel hit rock-bottom as a result of the incident. Turkey has demanded an apology and compensation, which Israel has refused.

The U.S. embassy in Israel did not immediately return a call for comment on Lieberman's request.

A U.S. diplomatic cable from December 2009 and published by WikiLeaks said a U.S. Treasury official who visited Ankara "raised concerns about IHH" and described it as "a large NGO providing material assistance to Hamas". (Hareetz)

- Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has likened Turkey to Iran on the eve of its 1979 Islamic revolution, saying Ankara's policies were to blame for the breakdown of ties with the Jewish state.

Writing in Thursday's edition of the Jerusalem Post under the headline "We will not be Turkey's punching bag," Lieberman offered to meet his Turkish counterpart as part of a "frank and honest dialogue" on how their alliance might be restored.

Unfortunately, recent events in Turkey are reminiscent of Iran before the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

But in the latest rhetorical broadside to follow Israel's deadly interception of a Turkish-sponsored aid flotilla that tried to breach its Gaza blockade in May, far-rightist Lieberman put the onus on the Islamist-rooted government in Ankara.

"The completely unilateral change in the relations is not reflective of our actions; rather it is the result of Turkey's internal politics," he said.

"Unfortunately, recent events in Turkey are reminiscent of Iran before the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Like Turkey, Iran was among Israel's closest allies and the two nations held good relations between both governments and people."

The Islamic Republic of Iran is Israel's arch-foe and routinely calls for its destruction. That has stoked Israeli and Western concerns over Iran's nuclear program.

To Israel's dismay, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan urged engagement with the Iranians, chafing at U.S.-led sanctions on Tehran as well a plan by NATO -- to which Ankara belongs -- for a regional missile shield that might help Israel.

Lieberman further deplored what he described as the failure of the Erdogan government to stem "hatred and incitement" in Turkey against Israel, which surged after Israeli

marines killed nine Turkish activists in brawls aboard aid ships that tried to reach the Islamist-ruled Gaza Strip on May 31.

Turkey casts itself as an even-handed Middle East broker and has accused Israel of fomenting instability with its policies toward the Palestinians and undeclared nuclear capability.

The former allies held brief rapprochement talks last month. Turkey wants Israel to apologize and offer compensation for the flotilla raid, a demand Lieberman publicly scorned as "chutzpa".

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a right-winger who sits in an uneasy coalition with Lieberman's more hawkish party, has been more clement about the overtures to Ankara.

Such disagreements within the Israeli government have been cited by Ankara as another reason for the diplomatic deadlock. (Al Arabiya News Channel)

4. EGYPT / MISIR

- Judicial sources said on Wednesday that General Prosecutor Abdel Meguid Mahmoud has referred eight protesters for a speedy trial after they were arrested while demonstrating against Saturday's Alexandria church bombing.

Security forces arrested eight persons in Shubra, Cairo during a protest condemning the church bombings which left 23 dead and scores of others wounded.

The protesters were accused of gathering, rioting, damaging public property and assaulting civil servants.

The general prosecutor decided late on Tuesday to hold the protesters for four days for questioning.

In a related context, activists called for a demonstration on Wednesday evening demanding the release of the protesters.

Security forces arrested the eight for nothing other than their expression of solidarity with thousands of Copts, and demanding the dismissal of Alexandria's chief of security directorate and the issue of a unified law on places of worship, activists said in a statement.

Investigators say the protesters hurled stones at security forces resulting in the injury of 20 officers and causing damage to 20 cars, ten of which belonged to the police.

The protesters also blocked traffic by protesting in the street, chanting and clashing with security forces, say investigators. The detained protesters meanwhile deny the allegations against them. (Al Masry Al Youm)

- Egypt's main opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, has said 6001 of its members were arrested during the past year. All have been released since, except for 37 who remain in detention.

Egyptian authorities closed 106 economic establishments and confiscated 26 cars belonging to Brotherhood members, Abdel Moneim Abdel Maqoud, Muslim Brotherhood lawyer, said in a statement on Tuesday.

A total of 44433 students affiliated with the group and enrolled in 16 universities were assaulted. Of that number 451 were expelled, and 1422 excluded from student union elections, said Abdel Maqoud. A further 1665 have been subject to further investigations, and 895 excluded from university dormitories.

Among members arrested last year were Mahmoud Ezzat, the Muslim Brotherhood deputy, and other lead figures including Essam al-Erian, Mohie Hamed, Abdel Rahman al-Bar and Osama Nasr Eddin.

Members were arrested mainly in connection with participation in Shura Council midterm elections as well as parliamentary elections, Abdel Maqsood explained, referring to the government's desire to limit the group's activity and block it from political participation.

The statement mentioned that Sharqiya Governorate, located in the Nile Delta, had the lion's share of those members arrested--781--followed by Alexandria, where 467 were arrested, while just 50 members were arrested in the North Sinai governorate, north east of Egypt.

Many Muslim Brotherhood leaders were also banned from traveling abroad in 2010, including Mahdy Akef, former Muslim Brotherhood supreme guide, and Essam al-Erian, another prominent figure, according to Abdel Maqsood. (Al Masry Al Youm)

- Ahmed Sadek Abdel Rahman was unjustly arrested on 26 December and detained in Al-Salam police station where he is being tortured, said The Egyptian Observatory for Justice and Law (EOJL) in a note to the attorney general on Wednesday. It claimed that Abdel Rahman has been transferred to another police station, and that his family is unable to locate him.

The note also said that security services in Egypt detain citizens without legal basis and force them to confess to crimes, in violation of the Egyptian law and international charters signed by the Egyptian government.

Calling for bringing the responsible police personnel to immediate trial, EOJL warned of such "hostage" detentions passing unpunished. It also called for the interior ministry to

abide by local and international laws that prohibit kidnapping citizens for ransom. (Al Masry Al Youm)

- The well known account of events in Egypt in 1882 states that the rationale used for the bombardment of Alexandria, and the invasion of British forces, was the massacre that took place there under mysterious circumstances, although there are many signs that this was part of a plot against the Orabi Revolt, which was taking place at this time. The Alexandria riot was sparked by a quarrel over a fare between an Egyptian donkey boy and a Maltese man, who drew his knife and stabbed the Egyptian; this sparked a riot and subsequent massacre in which dozens of foreign nationals were killed, along with many Egyptians. When the Egyptian government, in which [Ahmed] Orabi was the Under-Secretary of War, learned of this riot, it was alarmed and sent a commission of inquiry. However it was too late, the [British] invasion had already begun.

There is a big difference between what happened roughly 129 years ago in Alexandria, and the massacre witnessed there on New Years Eve 2010. The former happened against a backdrop of political turmoil, and a nationalist movement rebelling against foreign control over the country's fate. The latter was carried out by a terrorist, or a handful of terrorists, hiding in the darkness, however their goal is clear; and that is to incite strife between Egyptian Copts and Muslims. However, if the perpetrators of the Alexandria massacre are allowed to achieve their objectives, through the creation of an internal rift [between Muslims and Copts in Egypt], there will be only one outcome and that is the weakening of Egypt's internal fabric, which would open the door to foreign intervention or even control, of Egypt.

The question that must be asked here is, and this is a question that the analysis of this massacre deals with, is: is this attack being talked about as a simple act of terrorism, or is there also a sectarian element [in how this attack is being viewed]? Head of the Egyptian Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda III, wisely said that the forces behind this bombing do not

want Egypt to prosper. President Mubarak was also wise to stress that terrorism is directed against Egyptians in general.

What happened was a pure act of terrorism, but the problem is that this comes against a backdrop of division, and a strained atmosphere, between Egypt's Muslims and Copts. This has, in some cases, taken a violent form in recent years, and we have seen a worrying rise in such incidents over the last year. The reason for this is that incidents appear, when examined in an isolated manner, to be trivial, such as the quarrel between the donkey boy and the Maltese man. For example, we see a crisis emerging as a result of a romantic relationship between a young man and woman of different faiths, or a crisis because the Copts when to expand a Church, in other words, small issues that should be resolved by a local council, or even a basic court. However such issues take on greater dimensions and international resonance because of the presence of an underlying climate [in Egypt] that is conducive to tension, and increasing problems.

This is what should be discussed and resolved, within the framework of maintaining national unity and healthy relations between Egypt's communities. It is not healthy to bury one's head in the sand; these problems are a phenomenon that can easily be resolved with the understanding of all parties concerned, especially if the Copts have demands which if not met will cause them to feel that there is a lack of justice or equal opportunities. Yet what is most important is to confine the extremist ideological trends. Such ideology is equivalent to a Tartar invasion, in the sense that it consumes everything and everyone, leaving behind an ideology of hatred. We must strengthen a culture of citizenship, God's religion, and a homeland for all.

Links have already been drawn between what happened in Alexandria, external interferences, and the threats made by Al Qaeda in Iraq a few weeks ago against all Christians in the Middle East, and against the Coptic Church in particular. There may or may not be a relationship between these threats and what happened in Alexandria, but

any external parties wishing evil upon Egyptian society will not be able to incite strife if the internal body is solid and sound. (Asharq Al Awsat)

5. LEBANON / LÜBNAN

- Speaker Nabih Berri urged rival groups Wednesday to take advantage of ongoing regional efforts to end Lebanon’s political impasse, while bickering groups continued to trade accusations over the state of paralysis that has mired the country in the past months.

“Let’s seize the opportunity before it’s too late,” Berri was quoted as saying by the state-run National News Agency.

“We have to exploit the Saudi-Syrian initiative,” he said, in reference to efforts undertaken by Lebanon’s two main power brokers Saudi Arabia and Syria to solve Lebanon’s deadlock over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (S.T.L.), probing the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Berri, who spoke to the 18 M.P.s who visited him at his residence in Ain al-Tineh as part of his weekly meetings with lawmakers that he re-launched this week after a long interruption, promised he will call for a legislative or a question-and-answer session before the end of the month.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s Future News television, however, described Berri’s call for a meeting with MPs as a “smokescreen” against accusations that the Speaker has kept Parliament inactive for the past five months.

Media reports had quoted Berri as telling visitors this week that he won’t have any regrets if the current Cabinet leaves, but reiterated that he supported Hariri to head any new government.

Talk about government change was irrelevant according to Education Minister Hassan Mneimneh, who blasted Hizbullah in comments to be published Thursday in Al-Hawadeth magazine.

Mneimneh, a member of Hariri's team of ministers, said Hizbullah's policy was to impose conditions on other groups. "They try to impose their conditions in the government and if these are not met they impede the work of the Cabinet," he said.

Lebanon's Cabinet has not met since December 18 and sessions held in November and October were far from productive, with the issue of the so-called "false witnesses" crippling the work of the government.

March 8 accuses the "false witnesses" of misleading the probe into the Hariri killing and calls for their trial by the country's highest court, the Judicial Council. Their rivals in the March 14 coalition say the case of "false witnesses" can be looked into by the regular judiciary.

Mneimneh said while the prime minister welcomed talks with Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbullah put forth a series of conditions for the meeting to take place. "The ball is in their court not ours," he said, adding that Hariri will not relinquish the court.

Tension between the Hizbullah-led March 8 group and Hariri's March 14

Alliance mounted in recent months over the indictment to be issued by the U.N.-backed S.T.L. The court is widely expected to point the finger at Hizbullah, sparking fears of violence once the indictment is released.

The education minister said Saudi-Syrian efforts were currently in limbo. "This might be because regional and international guarantees are yet to materialize or because the [March 8 group] is being slow and not abiding by commitments they made," he told the Voice of Lebanon-Voice of Freedom radio station Wednesday.

But a senior March 8 source told The Daily Star that the Syrian-Saudi bid was being carried out in total secrecy. “All the remarks made on the Saudi-Syrian efforts are totally baseless,” said the source, adding that Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz and Syrian President Bashar Assad have not discussed Lebanon since their long telephone conversation in late December.

The source said Berri and Hariri also lost touch when Hariri traveled outside the country for the Christmas break. On top of the contentious issue of “false witnesses,” the source said, the speaker and the prime minister were wrangling over promotions of Internal Security Forces personnel. “Hariri had made plans to return to Beirut to sign the promotions but changed his mind when [President Michel] Sleiman informed him that Berri was not pleased with them,” said the source.

The senior March 8 source also said high hopes should not be put on talks in Washington next week between U.S. President Barack Obama and French President Nicholas Sarkozy.

“Lebanon will certainly not be the focus of their talks,” said the source. “Although Sarkozy might relay to Obama the fears expressed by Lebanese politicians he had met over the post-indictment phase.”

French Foreign Minister Michele Alliot-Marie told French daily “20 minutes” in comments published Tuesday that Lebanon’s unity ought to be safeguarded but the S.T.L. must continue its work.

“Prime Minister Hariri is working to preserve Lebanon’s unity but the S.T.L. should be able to perform its work,” she said. “The S.T.L. is the fruit of an international desire and no one can discredit or impede its work.”

Alliot-Marie said those who will be mentioned in the indictment will be tried in their capacity as individuals rather than representing a certain party or community. Hezbollah and its leader Sayyed Nasrallah said the party will cut off the hand that dares arrest any of its members.

Also commenting on the situation in Lebanon, Syrian Ambassador Ali Abdel-Karim Ali hoped that Syrian-Saudi efforts, in addition to inter-Lebanese entente, would bear fruit soon.

Agriculture Minister Hussein Hajj Hassan, meanwhile, slammed attempts by the March 14 groups to play down Syrian-Saudi efforts. “Saudi-Syrian efforts exist, they are real and serious and have reached a certain stage but very few know the content of talks,” he told Hizbullah’s Al-Noor radio station.

He held the March 14 alliance responsible for the paralysis witnessed in the country and accused them of protecting “false witnesses.”

Hajj Hassan added that March 8 ministers will respond to any call for the government to convene to finally resolve the issue of the “false witnesses” either by referring it to the Judicial Council or putting the issue to a vote. The president adjourned a session on December 18 to discuss the issue of “false witnesses” when March 8 called for it to be put to a vote. (The Daily Star)

- While the constitution gives Lebanese civilians the right to not belong to a sect, there is no legal system in which people without a listed religion can exist –religious courts hold jurisdiction over all laws and contracts in Lebanon.

But on February 9, 2009 Interior Minister Ziad Baroud issued a circular giving the Lebanese the right to remove any reference to their sect from their Civil Registry Records, though they are still subject to the wider sectarian system prevailing in Lebanon.

The action followed prolonged efforts from Lebanese individuals and civil society groups advocating secularism and the creation of a civil state and laws.

But now, almost two years later, there has been talk about obstacles involved in striking one's religion from his or her record, especially when matters involve personal affairs and employment.

Yet while media outlets have highlighted the risks involved in striking one's religion from the record, much can be done to stop what Talal Hussein refers to as "administrative reluctance," from public sector employees.

Hussein, president of the Civil Center for National Initiative, says that the Lebanese are still unaware that they can be public citizens not bound by their sect. "The biggest obstacle" he told NOW Lebanon, "is in the heads of the Lebanese people, civilians and employees in the administration."

Before their baby was born, the Hajj Alis had their confession struck from their records, but when the time came to register their newborn, they faced reluctance from an employee at the Directorate General of Personal Status. The officer said the child should have his sect recorded or else he could not exist officially. The Hajj Alis took their case to a higher authority, and eventually the employee was informed of the parents' right to register their child without including his religion.

In another case, several young men who had had their confessions stricken from their records applied for positions at the Internal Security Forces, but were stalled by the admissions committee because their names couldn't be classified within a sect, and ISF positions are doled out according to officers' religion. The men's applications were returned to them, and they were requested to provide records clearly stating their sect. However, Minister Baroud intervened and requested the committee create a new category for those who wish not to be classified under a sect. Only then were the men's applications accepted, though some had already gone back to the Directorate General of Personal Status to put their religions on their records again.

Bassel Abdallah, lawyer and General Director of the Civil Society Movement, says that religious figures in a sense "punished" the applicants for striking their sect from their

records by pushing admissions board employees to leave their applications pending until Baroud's intervention.

"There is no law forcing the Lebanese to present which sect they belong to when applying for a post that is not of the first category," Hussein said, referring to high-ranking official positions, which are still allotted based on a person's religion. "The post-Taif Accord law stressed on freeing public jobs from sectarianism, and whenever there is a violation of this law, the minister must intervene to solve the issue."

"These actions [of civil society activists and Minister Baroud] are telling the religious figures to move over because we want to replace you with a civil system, but they will not allow it; they are preserving their power," lawyer and human rights activist Marie Rose Zalzal said. But Zalzal says that the Lebanese are not being active enough in seeking to remove religion from all official and legal aspects of life in the country. They should "come up with means of pressure, and going to the courts is one of them," she said. "One needs to at least exercise the right that he has to gain the right that he doesn't have."

Vartan, who chose to only go by his first name, applied to strike his religion from his records before 2009, and when he felt he was being denied the right to do so, he filed a lawsuit against the Lebanese state and the Ministry of Interior.

"The lawsuit was put on hold because of the issuance of the circulation, and now I don't have reference to my confession in my records. For me I got my right, but if at any point I feel that my civil rights are being stripped from me, I am more than ready to go to the courts again."

Vartan, Zalzal and Hussein believe that if there is a reasonable number of Lebanese who wish not to be governed by their sect in any capacity, they can see the establishment of a secular judicial and legal system in the country.

“We may be weaker than the sectarians,” Husseini said. “They have platforms and more human and financial resources, but we are stronger than the sectarian system. We exist.”
(Now Lebanon)

6. SYRIA / SURİYE

- Syrian Minister of Transport Yarub Bader on Wednesday signed with his Jordanian, Lebanese and Turkish counterparts in Amman minutes of the first quartet meeting to boost cooperation and integration among their countries in the field of transport.

A press release issued by the quartet said the meeting aims at developing the regional transport policy and enhancing various types of transportation in addition to developing regional infrastructure plans for transport and adjusting legislations and regulations to comply with the European Union and international standards.

The statement also said the meeting dealt with transport sector on roads, transporting hazardous goods, period of driving allowed and increasing the qualifications of transferring passengers and goods.

Earlier, meetings of transport ministers of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey kicked off in Amman to crystallize the formula of the proposed partnership for holding economic and trade partnership council in the four countries.

Jordanian Minister of Transport Alaa al-Bataina said holding this quartet partnership aims at deepening the complementary economic relations and establishing a free trade zone.

This meeting comes in implementation of the joint statement issued by the foreign ministers of the four countries during their meeting in New York last September. (SANA)

- Lübnan Parlamento Başkanı Nebih Berri, Lübnan'daki iç durumların korunması için gerekli icraatların alınmasında Suriye-Suudi Arabistan çabalarının kullanılması çağrısında bulundu.

Berri bugün yaptığı açıklamada, bu ayın ileriye doğru olumlu dönüşüm ayı olma temennilerinde bulunarak, sürekli tekrarlanmaması itibarıyla halihazırda mevcut fırsatın değerlendirmesine davet etti.

Lübnan Parlamentosu Başkanı Berri Özgürlük ve Kalkınma Kitesinin düzenlediği bir oturumda genel durumlara ilişkin değerlendirmelerde bulunmuştu. (SANA)

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA / ARAP YARIMADASI VE BASRA KÖRFEZİ

- Kuwait's embattled prime minister survived a no-confidence motion in parliament Wednesday after opposition lawmakers failed to sway enough votes over accusations the government is trying to roll back political freedoms in one of the West's key Middle East allies.

Prime Minister Sheik Nasser Al Mohammed Al Sabah was backed by 25 members in the 50-seat parliament and 22 voted in favor of his dismissal, according to the state news agency KUNA. One parliament member abstained and others could not vote because they also hold government posts.

The closed-door voting capped weeks of political tensions in Kuwait, which has one of the few elected bodies in the Gulf with the power to challenge authorities and force changes in the leadership.

It's the second time in 13 months that the prime minister — a nephew of Kuwait's ruler — turned back a no-confidence challenge that would have led to political upheavals of either reorganizing the government or calling elections.

Last month, Sheik Nasser was grilled by lawmakers in a rare parliamentary questioning session called after security forces clashed with opposition deputies and their supporters at a Dec. 8 rally.

The prime minister, who took office in 2006, survived a no-confidence vote in December 2009 after allegations that public funds were misused.

After the vote, Sheik Nasser appealed for a "new era" in political cooperation. But opposition lawmakers vowed to maintain pressure on the government, including possible street protests, media reports said. (Asharq Al Awsat)

- Kuwait's prime minister on Wednesday eased past a no-cooperation vote after 25 lawmakers defeated the motion submitted last week by the opposition.

According to the results, 22 lawmakers voted to push Shaikh Nasser Al Mohammad Al Sabah to resign, while one lawmaker, Abdullah Al Roumi, abstained from voting. Only one of the four women MPs elected in a historic breakthrough to the parliament, Aseel Al Awadi, voted in support of the motion.

Shaikh Nasser has now survived three attempts by the opposition since Dec-ember 2009 to force him to resign.

Prior to yesterday's voting, MPs Shoaib Al Muwaizri and Waleed Al Tabtabai spoke for the no-cooperation motion, while MPs Ali Al Rasheed and Husain Al Qallaf gave short speeches urging fellow lawmakers to defeat the move to oust the government. The narrow victory achieved by the government camp is likely to reinforce the determination

of the opposition to go ahead with its plans announced on Tuesday to take to the street to exert pressure on Shaikh Nasser to resign.

Available options

MP Muslim Al Barrak, one of the no-cooperation move leaders, said that the opposition was eyeing other options to bring down the government, including resorting to street pressure tactics.

"We will go to the street. The street in many countries has caused the fall of governments and we are confident that the Kuwaiti street will push for the resignation of Shaikh Nasser's government," MP Muslim Al Barrak said. "The street has often annoyed MPs and even the government and we will exercise our right to resort to it. The pressure will start right after the outcome of the no-cooperation vote and we will be practical about it."

However, the government dismissed the threat and insisted that divergences could be addressed in the parliament.

"Whoever has an opinion should use the parliament, and not the street," Radhwan Al Radhwan, the State Minister for Cabinet Affairs, said.

"Kuwait is a country of law and institutions and everyone should behave and act according to the law and the constitution. After the parliament reasserts its confidence in the prime minister, the lawmakers and the government should devote themselves to the nation-building process," he said.

The no-cooperation motion was filed by ten opposition lawmakers on December 28 following an 11-hour grilling of Shaikh Nasser Al Mohammad over clashes between anti-right police and people at a rally in Kuwait City on December 8.

The opposition blamed the authorities for their alleged "heavy-handedness" in dealing with the people, including MPs and one university academic.

However, the police said that they were striving to maintain law and order after people taunted them and broke the law by holding their rally in the open.

Political turmoil

* Shaikh Nasser Al Mohammad is the first prime minister in Kuwait and the only Arab sitting prime minister to face grilling by the parliament. Supporters say it is a clear testimony to democracy in Kuwait.

* December 8, 2009: Shaikh Nasser is grilled by MP Faisal Al Muslim over an alleged cheque given by the premier to a former lawmaker in 2008.

* June 8, 2010: Shaikh Nasser is scheduled to be grilled by MP Khalid Al Tahoos over government inaction on pollution in a residential area. The grilling was aborted after Al Tahoos failed to show up.

* December 8, 2010: Clashes erupt between anti-riot police and people at a rally in Kuwait City.

* December 9, 2010: MPs denounce the "police onslaught" and pledge parliamentary action

* December 13, 2010: MPs Muslim Al Barrak, Jama'an Al Harbish and Saleh Al Mullah file a motion to grill Shaikh Nasser for "violation of the constitution and assault on public freedoms."

* December 28, 2010: Shaikh Nasser Al Mohammad faces day-long quizzing over clashes between anti-riot police and people, including MPs, at a rally in Kuwait City.

* December 28, 2010: Ten MPs file a no-cooperation motion against the prime minister

* January 5, 2011: Shaikh Nasser survives a no-cooperation motion. (Gulf News)

- More than 40 African migrants trying to reach Yemen by boat have drowned in heavy seas off the coast and a second boat with up to 40 Ethiopians aboard is missing, Yemeni and UN officials said.

Yemen's interior ministry said on its website on Monday that three Somalis were rescued after a vessel carrying 46 people, mostly from Ethiopia, capsized, and a second boat carrying Ethiopians was missing.

"It's not known in which direction the wind took them and their fate is unknown," the website quoted the Yemeni coastguard as saying of the missing vessel, which it said carried 35-40 Ethiopians including women and children.

The UN refugee agency said five men among 46 Ethiopian and Somali passengers had survived the tragedy, which witnesses said began when the engine was caught in fishing nets of the boat, which had left Djibouti three hours earlier.

"This caused panic among the passengers who began to move around causing the boat to capsize. The two smugglers, Yemeni men, jumped off the boat. It is not known whether they survived," Melissa Fleming, UNHCR chief spokeswoman, told the Reuters news agency.

"UNHCR staff will be interviewing the survivors tomorrow (Tuesday) to learn more," she said, adding the Geneva-based agency had no word yet on the fate of the second boat.

Mass drownings have been frequent as many African migrants in unseaworthy boats try to reach Yemen, which they see as a gateway to wealthier parts of the Middle East and the West.

"The Gulf of Aden is still used by many migrants and asylum seekers trying to get to Yemen and then further on to Saudi Arabia," Jean-Philippe Chauzy, spokesman of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) said.

"We've seen a slight change in the route used by smuggling rings, they are increasingly using Djibouti as a stepping stone on the way to Yemen rather than using Bosasso, Somalia. It is a transit areas for asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa trying to reach Yemen," he said.

More than 74,000 Africans fled to Yemen in 2009, a 50 percent increase over 2008 despite instability in the country, according to figures issued by the UNHCR.

Upheaval and economic strains in the Horn of Africa fuelled a rise in migrants paying smugglers and undertaking the hazardous sea crossing, it said. (Al Jazeera)

8. SOUTH ASIA / GÜNEY ASYA

PAKISTAN / PAKİSTAN

- The top decision-making body of the PML-Q has decided not to join the PPP-led coalition government, but its breakaway faction says it is ready to strike a bargain with “anyone” offering a “good deal”.

The Central Working Committee of the PML-Q, convened by its chief Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, decided on Wednesday that it would not support the embattled government nor would it rock the boat.

Speaking at a news conference after the session, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and the party’s Secretary-General Mushahid Hussain Sayed said they would decide future strategies keeping in view the fast-changing political landscape.

About the assassination of Governor Salmaan Taseer, Hussain urged the government to discuss the incident in a joint sitting of both houses of parliament.

Hussain opposed any changes in the controversial blasphemy laws but said that a new law should be enacted to stop their misuse. On the other hand, the PML-Q (Likeminded Group), the breakaway faction of the party of the Chaudhrys of Gujrat, said on Wednesday that it was ready to strike a bargain with “anyone” offering a “good deal”.

The decision was made in a meeting of the Likeminded group’s Central Executive Committee, headed by Senator Saleem Saifullah Khan, which discussed the country’s overall political situation.

The statement issued by the group after the meeting was stereotypical, criticising the PPP-led coalition and main opposition party, the PML-N, but the group’s information secretary Kashmla Tariq told The Express Tribune that her party was open to dialogue with all parties including the PPP and the PML-N “to steer the country out of the current political crisis”.

“We are open to all ... be it PPP, PML-N or PML-Q. We are ready to sit with anyone who can give a better national agenda,” Kashmla Tariq said when asked to give details of her party’s future plans. She said the country was passing through a critical situation and her party was ready to play its role to avert a crisis.

In reality, six sitting MNAs and a couple of senators were among those who attended the meeting, but the group claims that it enjoys the support of at least 10 lawmakers in the National Assembly and six in the Senate and believes that if there is any possibility of the faction joining the government, “more undecided lawmakers in the main PML-Q would join their fold”.

Despite their significant numerical strength, if the group supports the government without the consent of its parent party, their members may have to face the defection clause. However, some leaders of the group claim that among the 51 National Assembly members elected on a PML-Q ticket, only 15 were staunch supporters of the Chaudhrys. The PML-Q’s Like-Minded group says it was also willing to collaborate with the PML-N if it goes for an in-house change via a no-trust motion. (The Express Tribune)

- More than 500 religious scholars belonging to the Barelvi school of thought paid rich tributes to the assassin of Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer on Tuesday and urged ‘Muslims across the country’ to boycott the funeral ceremony.

While the Deoband and Barelvi leaders appear to be on the same page when it comes to condemning the slain Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader for terming the blasphemy law as a black law, the Barelvi scholars, who claim to be the ‘true lovers of the Holy Prophet (pbuh)’, have taken a more hardline stance.

The largest body of the Barelvi group, the Jamaate Ahle Sunnat Pakistan (JASP), whose directions are considered binding on every other organisation that follows the same school of thought, issued a statement saying that “No Muslim should attend the funeral or even try to pray for Salmaan Taseer or even express any kind of regret or sympathy over the incident.”

The statement which has been endorsed by senior Barelvi leaders such as Professor Saeed Shah Kazmi, Allama Syed Riaz Hussain Shah, Syed Shah Turabul Haq Qadri and Hajji Mohammad Tayyab calls the assassin Mumtaz Hussain Qadri ‘Ashiqe Rasool Ghaziye Mulk (Lover of the Prophet, Commander of the Country)’.

“We pay rich tributes and salute the bravery, valour and faith of Mumtaz Qadri,” the statement said, adding that the ministers, politicians, ‘so-called’ intellectuals and anchor persons should learn lessons from the governor’s death. The scholars said that those who insult the Holy Prophet (pbuh), even if they did not intend to, were liable for death.

Hajji Mohammad Tayyab, who is also the secretary general of the Sunni Ittehad Council, told The Express Tribune that scholars had “repeatedly urged the president, prime minister and Governor Taseer himself that if their knowledge about the blasphemy law are limited, they should consult them and avoid debating over the issue as it would inflame the people and then anything could happen.”

Shah Turabul Haq Qadri's son Siraj, also a senior member of the JASP, endorsed the statement and said it was now binding on every Muslim.

Jamiat Ulemae Pakistan (JUP) central executive committee member Maulana Shabbir went as far as saying that in his opinion Salmaan Taseer was 'Wajubul Qatil' (must be killed according to divine law). "He had called the divine law of God, a black law and tried to protect a condemned blasphemer," he said.

Senior Sunni Tehrik leader Shahid Ghauri said although his party was yet to issue any formal statement about the matter, he would support the call of JASP because the people who gave the edict were his elders.

Senior Jamaate Islami leader Farid Paracha distanced his organisation from the JASP statement, but condemned the governor for calling the blasphemy law, a black law. "I believe that this call for changing the law was being done at the behest of the US and other western powers."

Senior cleric of the Deoband school of thought and Jamia Binoria chief Mufti Naeem said he could not understand why the slain PPP leader invited trouble for himself, especially given that the blasphemy law was passed in 1985 by the parliament unanimously. "He kept on taking Aasia's name, but I ask why didn't he ever make a similar plea for Aafia (Siddiqui)." Naeem said although Islam says that anyone who commits blasphemy is liable to death punishment, what the killer Mumtaz Qadri did was totally wrong as he took the law into his hand.

"The blasphemy law was made exactly to prevent such incidents. Else there will be chaos in the country and everyone would kill everyone," he said. Maulana Asad Thanvi too supported Naeem's stance and said although what governor Taseer did was condemnable in the strongest words, he should have been tried in the courts.

Allama Abbas Kumaili of the Shia school of thought said the blasphemy law can be misused and there was no doubt about it. "But the way Salmaan Taseer took up the

matter was blunt which inflamed the more emotional and ignorant people of our country. (The Express Tribune)

INDIA / HINDISTAN

- Creation of a separate Telangana state with Hyderabad as its capital and keeping Andhra Pradesh united with constitutional and statutory measures for empowerment of the Telangana region are among the six options recommended by the Justice Srikrishna Committee.

The report of the five-member committee headed by former Supreme Court judge that gave its recommendations after about 11 months of consultation process in the state was released by the Home Ministry on Thursday, a week after it received it.

The two-volume 461-page report has also suggested maintaining status quo with a rider that it is the least favoured option.

In the fourth option, for which political parties spearheaded by TRS have been campaigning, the Committee suggests bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh into two units -- Telangana and Seemandhra -- as per existing boundaries.

Telangana will have Hyderabad as capital, while Seemandhra, comprising Rayalaseema and coastal Andhra regions, will have a new capital.

In the option for keeping the state united, the Committee has suggested that there should be simultaneous provision of certain constitutional and statutory measures for socio-economic development and political empowerment of Telangana region by creation of a statutorily-empowered Telangana Regional Council.

Another option is to bifurcate the state into Seemandhra and Telangana with Hyderabad as a Union Territory and the two states developing their own capitals in due course.

Bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh into Rayala-Telangana and coastal Andhra regions with Hyderabad being an integral part of Rayala-Telangana is another option suggested by the committee.

Yet another idea is to bifurcate Andhra Pradesh into Seemandhra and Telangana with enlarged Hyderabad Metropolis as a separate Union Territory.

“This Union Territory will have geographical linkage and contiguity via Nalgonda district in the south—east to Guntur district in coastal Andhra and via Mahaboobnagar district in the south to Kurnool district in Rayalaseema.

Following are the options and explanation:

1. Maintaining Status Quo: The committee said it is of the unanimous view that it would not be a practical approach to simply maintain the status quo in respect of the situation.

“Some intervention is definitely required and though maintaining the existing status quo is an option it is favoured the least,” the panel says.

2. Bifurcation of the state into Seemandhra and Telangana; with Hyderabad as a Union Territory and the two states developing their own capitals in due course:

“There is a definite likelihood of serious backlashes in Telangana region and on overall consideration, the Committee found this option was also not practicable.”

3. Bifurcation of the state into Rayala-Telangana and Coastal Andhra Regions with Hyderabad being an integral part of Rayala-Telangana:

“This scenario is not likely to be accepted either by the pro-Telangana or by the pro-United Andhra protagonists.

While this option may have economic justification, the committee believes that this option may not offer a resolution which would be acceptable to people of all three regions,” it says.

4. Bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh into Seemandhra and Telangana with enlarged Hyderabad Metropolis as a separate Union Territory. This Union Territory will have geographical linkage and contiguity via Nalgonda district in the south-east to Guntur district in coastal Andhra and via Mahaboobnagar district in the south to Kurnool district in Rayalaseema:

“This is likely to receive stiff opposition from Telangana protagonists and it may be difficult to reach a political consensus in making this solution acceptable to all,” it says.

Appeal for maintaining peace

Four political parties, which attended a meeting convened by the Centre to hand over the report on Telangana by Justice Srikrishna committee, on Thursday issued a joint appeal to the people of Andhra Pradesh to maintain peace and harmony.

The “joint appeal” issued after the meeting also said the parties have agreed to the suggestion of Home Minister P. Chidamabaram that they will meet again later this month after discussing the report within their respective parties.

“We have received the copy of the report of Justice Srikrishna committee and have indicated that we would consider the report within our respective parties before we express our views thereon,” said the statement signed by representatives of Congress, CPI, CPI(M) and PRP.

“We have agreed with the suggestion of the Home Minister that we may meet again later this month.

“Meanwhile, it is our earnest appeal that peace, harmony and law and order should be maintained in Andhra Pradesh,” the appeal said.

While the meeting was boycotted by TRS, TDP and BJP, the representatives of All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) refused to sign the statement.

AIMIM leader Akrabuddin Owaisi said, “We did not sign the appeal because it is not us but the Congress party workers who have been engaged in creating disturbance. The Congress should first put their house in order.” (The Hindu)

- Pakistan has imposed a complete ban on the export of onion to India via Wagah—Attari land route, a development which may hit Centre’s efforts in rein in skyrocketing prices of bulb in the country.

“Pakistan government has banned the supply of onion to India via land route,” Customs Department (Amritsar) Deputy Commissioner R K Duggal said today, while adding that today no truck was allowed to bring onion by Pakistan authorities following the ban.

Local traders attributed the imposition of ban on export of onion by Pakistan government to prevent any spiralling hike in bulb prices in the neighbouring country.

Sudden ban imposed on export of onion has hit the traders of both the countries with Indian importers claiming that Pakistan had not even allowed the supply of almost 1,500 tonnes of contracted orders of onion.

“Almost 1,500 tonne of onion was yet to be supplied to us but Pakistan government has not allowed the local suppliers to fulfil their trade obligation,” rued Anil Mehra, Amritsar—based vegetable merchant.

According to custom officials, between 100—150 trucks laden with onion were not allowed to enter Indian territory at Amritsar by Pakistan authorities on Wednesday and asked to return.

“When custom authorities (of Pakistan) have already given clearance to contracted supply of onion heading for India then why they (Pakistan) have stopped the supply,” asked Mehra, whose 250 tonnes of onion imported from Pakistan got stuck following the implementation of ban.

Though Indian custom authorities claim that onion supply from Pakistan was allowed through rail route yet importers argued that Pakistan had banned onion export except sea route.

“Pakistan order clearly says no supply of onion will take place except sea route,” traders asserted claiming that vegetable suppliers in Pakistan were agitating against imposition of ban on onion export.

Notably, close to 7,000 tonnes of onion had arrived since the commencement of onion export to India from Pakistan via land route. Because of the supply of Pakistan onion, prices of onion in Punjab and Chandigarh had come down from a level of Rs 60—65 per kg to Rs 45—50 per kg.

Even the Centre had abolished the custom duty on import of onion in order to rein in spiralling rates of bulb.

India and Pakistan had agreed to start cross border movement of trucks in the month of October 2007 after a gap of sixty years from Attari Check post at Amritsar in India to Wagah border in Pakistan with an intention of boosting bilateral trade. (The Hindu)

AFGHANISTAN / AFGANİSTAN

- Afghan and NATO-led forces kicked off a civilian-military operation to ensure peace in post-Taliban Afghanistan and uproot the hardcore Taliban insurgents, Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman General Zahir Azimi said Wednesday.

"The operation dubbed "Omid" which means "hope" is kicked off just days ago with a special operational plan to cover all over the country," Azimi told newsmen in a weekly press conference here.

"In fact, this is a civilian-military operation which besides targeting insurgents and ensuring security also includes launching development projects to win the hearts and minds of people," the spokesman emphasized.

Operation Omid is scheduled for 18 months to stabilize security throughout the country, he added.

The newly launched operation - Omid is similar to the one that Afghan and NATO-led forces had carried out in southern Kandahar province last summer in which they had cleared several districts and re-established government control there, adding it is a civilian-military operation which includes targeting insurgents and accelerating reconstruction process.

"The Afghan National Army will be on the lead in the operation that would pave the way for reconstruction, good governance and will further protect civilians," he stressed.

However, he said there will be tough days ahead in 2011.

He made this comment while Afghan security forces are getting ready to begin gradual takeover of security responsibility from NATO-led troops in the coming months.

The transition of security responsibilities from NATO and U.S. forces to Afghan army and police will begin in early this year and would be completed in 2014. (Xinhua)

- In efforts to ensure durable security for northern region of the war-torn Afghanistan, Afghan and NATO military officials have met in a conference to discuss the issue, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Senior Afghan civil and military leaders met in a conference at Afghan National Army Camp Shaheen on Jan. 2 to outline the way forward in security, governance and socio-economic development in northern Afghanistan." the statement said.

In the conference, according to statement, the officials were informed and briefed on Operation Omid 1390 by planners from Afghan and Regional Command North military offices.

Supported by ISAF, operation Omid 1390, which means "hope" in Dari language, provides guideline from Afghan gov't to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in order to achieve security, good governance and socio-economic developments over the next 18 to 24 months, the statement further said.

"We continue to get better and better," said U.S. Army Lt. Gen. David M. Rodriguez, commander, ISAF Joint Command in the statement.

The necessity for joint-cooperation between Afghans and ISAF was stressed by German Army Maj. Gen. Hans-Werner Fritz, commander, ISAF in the North of the war-torn country.

The previously peaceful Afghan northern provinces, have been experiencing Taliban-led militancy over the past one year.

Taliban militants who staged a bloody comeback four years ago in their traditional hotbed south Afghanistan have been attempting to destabilize northern provinces. (Xinhua)

- Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry says it is seeking clarification about a video aired on Afghan television that purportedly shows dead and wounded Afghan migrants in Iran, RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan reports.

The video, aired by private channel Tolo TV on December 31, shows a number of bodies strewn across a road, including that of an apparently wounded man, while men described as Iranian border guards stand alongside.

It's unclear when the video was recorded, or what the circumstances of the incident are.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmad Zaher Faqiri told RFE/RL today the ministry had raised the matter with Iranian officials.

"Our colleagues at the Islamic Republic of Iran's Embassy in Kabul and at the Embassy of Afghanistan in Tehran are following the issue," Faqiri said.

"We have urged them to talk to officials in charge and provide us with a detailed report."

An estimated 1.5 million Afghans live in Iran, including refugees and those staying there illegally.

Their treatment has become an increasingly sensitive issue in recent months after a number of Afghans convicted of drug smuggling were executed in Iran. (Radio Free)

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**This media summary is prepared by ORSAM Middle East Research Assistants Nebahat Tanrıverdi O and Sercan Doğan. It covers news and commentaries as reported by the national media sources publishing in the Middle Eastern countries. The views expressed are not those of ORSAM and their inclusion does not imply factual accuracy.*

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