



# MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

## GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

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## 1. IRAQ

### • UNAMI welcomes first update to voters' record since 2009 (alliraqnews)

Baghdad, Dec 10 (AIN) - The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Iraq, Martin Kobler, welcomed the beginning of the first voter registration update in three years as part of preparations for the forthcoming Governorate Council elections on 20 April 2013.

A statement by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) received by AIN quoted Kobler, as saying "The opening of 891 Voter Registration Centers is an important step towards transparent and credible elections in 2013," Mr. Kobler said. "With Iraq's large youth population, it is particularly significant that many first-time voters who have turned eighteen since the last election will join the list and become part of the political process."

"Until 28 December 2012, all women and men over 18 years of age can visit a Voter Registration Centre (VRC) to check their data on the list and to amend it if necessary. Mr. Kobler said that the launch of the voter registration update process shows how quickly and efficiently the new Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is moving to ensure that all is ready for the April elections," he added.

"The new IHEC has made fast progress," he said. "The United Nations will continue to support IHEC through its preparations to ensure political inclusion for all Iraqis, including key target groups - youth, women, internally displaced persons, minorities, and disabled persons," he concluded.

- **Iraq launches national education strategy (UNICEF.org)**

Strategy sets vision and mission to provide a quality education for all Iraqi citizens, especially the most deprived children and youth

BAGHDAD, Dec 10 – The Government of Iraq has launched a new national education strategy to improve access to quality education for Iraq's 33 million citizens.

"This is Iraq's first ever national education strategy, which is unique in both Iraq and the region," said Dr. Mohammed Ali Tamim, Iraq's Minister of Education. "This strategy will respond to the needs of over 8 million students presently in school and an additional 3 million students in alternative education programmes."

The strategy focuses on a number of components, including providing free and accessible education to children and youth from pre-school to higher education as well as ensuring a high quality education based on global best practices.

"This strategy presents a serious and ambitious roadmap to bring about a qualitative improvement in Iraq's education sector," said Dr. Ali Al-Adib, Iraq's Minister of Higher Education.

“The investments that it sets out will improve the political, economic, social and technical structures in the country.”

The strategy aims to enhance social reintegration and cohesion as well as prevent social exclusion within Iraqi society. It calls for financial resources to be dedicated to ensure adequate educational, psychological and social support for the most marginalized individuals across Iraq.

Key educational targets in the strategy include increasing Iraq’s pre-school enrolment rate from the current rate of 7 per cent, to 22per cent by 2020, as well as the primary school enrolment rate from today’s 93 per cent to 98 per cent by the end of 2015.

“We applaud the Government for its commitment to ensure all children have the right to a quality education, especially the thousands of children who are currently missing out on the timely development of the competencies, skills and opportunities that a quality education will provide them,” said Dr. Marzio Babilie, UNICEF’s Representative to Iraq. “We now look forward to working so that all children complete their primary education on time and continue on to secondary school.”

The strategy also emphasizes the importance of having quality curricula, institutions, and resources in higher education.

“With an emphasis on improving secondary and post-secondary education, this strategy responds to Iraq’s basic needs in education in the short term, while stimulating a longer term competitive knowledge-centred economy,” said Mohamed Djelid, Director of the UNESCO Office in Iraq. “It has been designed to constitute the foundation of a modernized Iraqi State where decision-making is based on research and planning.”

[http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_66597.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_66597.html)

- **Iraqi Kurdish leader visits disputed areas (AP)**

BAGHDAD, Dec 10 -- The president of Iraq's self-ruled Kurdish region visited Kurdish troops Monday in ethnically disputed areas near the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, a move likely to worsen already poor relations with the country's central government.

The visit by Massoud Barzani to Kirkuk province was his first since June 2012, according to officials in the city. Tension between the Kurds and Baghdad flared up over the past two months following a decision by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to form a new military command to oversee security forces bordering the Kurdish region. The move has angered the Kurds.

The tensions between the mostly Kurdish region and the central government are just one of the elements of potential instability in Iraq, nearly a year after the last U.S. troops left the country. Sectarian violence in the form of bombings and shootings rattles the country, and the government is paralyzed by conflicts between Shiite and Sunni Muslim lawmakers.

Brig. Gen. Shirko Rauof, a Kurdish military commander, said Barzani met soldiers aligned to his region in two areas near Kirkuk. He urged them to be on high alert while avoiding any escalation with nearby forces from the central government. Control over the surrounding area is disputed by Iraqi Arabs and Kurds, as well as the smaller Turkomen minority.

The latest move by Barzani drew criticism from the Iraqi government and non-Kurdish provincial officials in Kirkuk.

The prime minister's spokesman, Ali al-Moussawi, described the visit as "provocative" and said it does not serve efforts to reach a peaceful solution of the problem of the disputed areas.

In Kirkuk, Burhan Mizhar, a Sunni Arab member in Kirkuk's provincial council said that the local government was not informed of the visit in advance.

"We reject such a visit, and we are afraid that the visit aims to increase tensions in Kirkuk," Mizhar said.

- **Kurdistan leader vows to defend claims over disputed city (Reuters)**

KIRKUK, Iraq, Dec 10 (Reuters) - Iraqi Kurdistan's president vowed to protect Kurdish interests during a visit to the city of Kirkuk on Monday, in a show of defiance of Iraq's central government over disputed territory and oil.

Tensions are running high between autonomous Kurdistan and Baghdad after both sent troops to reinforce areas along their disputed internal border, bringing them close to confrontation in their long-running feud.

Dressed in military uniform and flanked by troops, Kurdistan's President Masoud Barzani visited Kurdish-controlled areas of Kirkuk, a city long seen as a flashpoint for Arab-Kurdish tensions after the U.S. military withdrawal a year ago.

"Kurds, throughout history, did not choose war as a means, but this does not mean they will sit handcuffed in the face of oppression," he said on the outskirts of Kirkuk.

"We are against the war and we do not like war, but if things come to war, then all Kurdish people are ready to fight in order to preserve the Kurdish identity of Kirkuk."

Barzani's sensitive visit and tough rhetoric come as U.S. officials try to negotiate an end to the military standoff that began last month when Baghdad and Kurdistan both sent troops to reinforce positions around cities on their internal border.

Although outside the three northern Iraqi provinces run by Kurdistan, Kirkuk has historically been claimed by the Kurdish region. A census to determine whether the city has a Kurdish or Arab majority has long been delayed.

Kirkuk sits on some of the world's largest oil reserves and fields around the city produce about a fifth of Iraq's total crude exports of 2.6 million barrels per day.

American troops acted as a buffer between the two regions until their departure. Since then, the federal government and Kurdistan have increasingly sparred over control of land and oil.

Kurdistan relies on the central government for its share of the national budget. But tensions have grown since the Kurdish region signed deals with major oil firms like Exxon and Chevron to develop its oilfields, a move Baghdad sees as an unconstitutional challenge to the central government.

- **Iraqi Kurdistan president visits forces in Kirkuk (AFP)**

KIRKUK, Iraq, Dec 10 — Massud Barzani, the president of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, inspected Kurdish peshmerga security forces in the disputed north Iraq province of Kirkuk on Monday, a Kurdish general said.

The visit may increase already-high tension with Baghdad, which has seen both sides deploy military reinforcements to areas in north Iraq.

"The president of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (Barzani) inspected peshmerga units located on the outskirts of Kirkuk" city, the capital of the province of the same name, peshmerga brigade commander Major General Shirko Rauf told AFP.

According to Rauf, Barzani emphasised to peshmerga forces "the importance of maintaining brotherhood and peace and serving all the (residents) of Kirkuk."

The province is part of a swathe of territory in north Iraq that Kurdish leaders want to incorporate into their autonomous region, over Baghdad's strong objections.

The dispute over territory in northern Iraq is the biggest threat to the country's long-term stability, diplomats and officials say. Ties between Baghdad and Kurdistan are also marred by disputes over oil and power-sharing.

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jNlsezLyI9Oy7bOqAXqSWFjxKUOQ?docId=CNG.4388fedd5560965753ae3cca5b9ad218.941>

- **Barzani addressing to Peshmerga in Kirkuk: You defend the future of Kurdistan people**

Baghdad, Dec 10 / NINA /-- President of Kurdistan region , Massoud Barzani, addressed a speech to the Peshmerga forces during visiting Kirkuk province earlier today , saying, "You assume today a sacred task that impose on you to defend the future of Kurdistan people .

He added : " the Peshmerga forces stationed in Kirkuk province since 1991 uprising and liberating most of Kurdistan region did not deal harmfully to the Iraqi army," stressing that the Kurds have had a significant role in the formation of the current federal government in Iraq after 2003.

- **Kurdistan accuses Maliki of pushing the crisis to the brink of armed conflict (NINA)**

Erbil, Dec 10 (NINA) – Spokesman for the Government of Kurdistan Region, Sefeen Dezee, affirmed that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has appointed commanders, from the former regime, in the Dijla Operations, accusing Maliki of pushing the crisis to the brink of armed conflict.

In a statement to the press on Monday, Dec. 10, Dezee said, "The Region's Government will continue pursuing the mean of dialogue in solving current crisis to safeguard the country from undesirable outcome.

He added that a 14-point agreement to solve the crisis with the Center has been suggested, but Maliki did not agree on any of its points, stating that residents are responsible for protecting their areas, but he did not make a move toward implementing it.

- **Turkmen bloc within Kirkuk PC describes Barzani's visit to Kirkuk as "violation to constitution" (alliraqnews)**

Kirkuk, Dec 10 (AIN) –The Turkmen bloc within Kirkuk Provincial Council described the visit of the President of Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, to Kirkuk as a violation to the constitution.

The member of the bloc, Tahseen Kahiya, stated to AIN "Barzani's visit to the deployed elements of Peshmerga is against the constitution since the deployment of these forces in Kirkuk is unconstitutional."

"Barzani's visit will complicate this disputes," he added, noting that "He was better to visit the PC building then to head to any other place he likes to visit."

Earlier, President of Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, visited Peshmerga military forces in Kirkuk province.

An informed source told All Iraq News Agency on Monday "Barzani has arrived in Kirkuk on Monday morning where he visited the sites of the Peshmerga forces in Lelian district of southern the province."

[http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=24304](http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24304)

- **Chairman of Kirkuk's provincial board urges not to make the province an arena for political conflicts (NINA)**

Kirkuk, Dec 10 / NINA /-- Head of the provincial council of Kirkuk, Hassan Turan, called on the political parties in the province not to make Kirkuk an arena for differences for the upcoming election campaigning.

He said during meeting with a delegation from the Islamic Alliance in the presence of members of the provincial council: "The differences in Kirkuk are similar to differences within the same family, and will not affect never close ties linking components".

- **Iraqi MPs Warn US to Drop Plan for Meddling in Kurdistan Region (Fars News)**

TEHRAN, Dec 10 (FNA)- Iraq's parliamentarians voiced their strong opposition to the US mediation between the Baghdad government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and warned Washington to stay away from Iraq's problems.

"The Americans cannot solve Iraq's problems, because during their nine-year presence in Iraq they showed that they cannot do anything or solve any problem in such a way that they have left behind thousands of problems for Iraq," an Iraqi parliamentarian and one of the leaders of the Iraqi Kurdistan's Coalition Mahmoud Osman told FNA on Monday.

He urged Iraq's political parties to start talks in a bid to resolve the country's problems.

Osman also stressed that the Turkish government should be held responsible for the problems affecting Iraq's Kurdish region.

"On one hand, Turkey provokes Kurdistan against Iraq's central government and on the other, it instigates the central government (in Baghdad) against the Kurds," he added.

Another Iraqi MP, Eskandar Vetvet, told FNA that "Iraq does not need the US interference in its internal affairs, specially with regard to the Erbil crisis".

Javad al-Bozoni, another Iraqi lawmaker, said that the US meddling in Iraq's affairs doest not benefit that country, specially considering that the so-called crisis in the relations between Baghdad and Erbil is fake and not a genuine crisis.

He said the US left Iraq according to the will of the Iraqi people and thus its return to Iraq would be unacceptable because it would run counter to the will of the nation.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107125983>

- **Maliki criticizes Sadr's statement over armament contracts for IA forces (alliraqnews)**

Baghdad, Dec 10 (AIN) –The Premier, Nouri al-Maliki, criticized the statement issued by head of the Sadr Trend, Muqtada al-Sadr, regarding the armament contracts.

Maliki's official website released a statement which included his answer regarding a question asked by one of the journalists, he asked him about the latest statement issued by Sadr regarding arming the Iraqi Army that involved a number of dangerous accusations to him.

Maliki's answer was "Sadr's statement doesn't matter anymore and he will soon change his statements, his behavior doesn't match with his statements."

Regarding the arming of Iraqi Army, Maliki said "Any one who launches the accusations should prove his accusations before he start talking about it, otherwise he will face the legal consequences.

- **Sadoun calls to keep financial budget away from political disputes (alliraqnews)**

Baghdad, Dec 10 (AIN) –MP, Mihsin al-Sadoun, of the Kurdistan Alliance called to keep the financial budget away from the political disputes.

Speaking to All Iraqi News Agency (AIN), he said "The budget may be exploited for political aims through calls to reduce the budget of Kurdistan Region," noting that "The allocated percentage for KR during the former years was 17% because the census is not conducted yet."

"KR will adhere to the percentage that will be identified by the census," he added, assuring that "The percentage of KR was identified a long time ago before toppling the former regime."

"The political tensions led to the calls for reducing KR budget and now we call to endorse the budget for all the Iraqi provinces rather than the provinces of KR only," he concluded.

- **Criminal Court issues death sentence against officer within Hashimi's guards (alliraqnews)**

Baghdad, Dec 10 (AIN) –The Criminal Court issued a death sentence against an officer within the guards of the Fugitive Vice-President, Tariq al-Hashimi, due to his participation in killing the innocent citizens.

A judicial source stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) on Monday "The Central Criminal Court issued a death sentence against an office within Hashimi's guards accused of killing a citizen in Ghazaliya district in Baghdad."

Hashimi and his guards are sentenced to death due to their involvement in criminal actions.

- **Palestinian PM meets Maliki in Baghdad (alliraqnews)**

Baghdad, Dec 10 (AIN) –The Palestinian Prime Minister, Salam al-Fayadh, met the Premier, Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad on Monday.

Informed source stated to AIN "Fayadh, who headed a formal delegation to participate in the Conference of Palestinian Prisoners and Detainees, met Maliki at his arrival in Baghdad."

It is worth mentioning that the Palestinian Ambassador to Baghdad stated to AIN "Fayadh will arrive in Baghdad heading a Governmental delegation to participate in the Conference of Palestinian Prisoners and Detainees."

"Fayadh will hold several meetings with the Iraqi officials to discuss bilateral relations," he added.

Earlier, the Foreign Ministry Undersecretary, Labid Abbawi, discussed with a number of local, Arab and foreign satellite channels, the ongoing preparations for holding the Conference of Palestinian Prisoners and Detainees that will be held in Baghdad on 11 and 12 of December.

[http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=24302](http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24302)

- **Talabani: Iraq stands firm in support of Palestinian right (NINA)**

Baghdad, Dec 10 (NINA) – President Jalal Talabani affirmed Iraq's firm stand in support of the Palestinian peoples' right to regain its right; which is firm in support of Palestinian right.

A statement issued on Monday, Dec. 10, by the President's Office, said that receiving the Palestinian delegation, headed by Prime Minister Salam Fayadh, and the Arab League delegation headed by its Secretary General, Nabil Elaraby, on Monday evening, President Talabani expressed pleasure for Baghdad hosting the International Conference in Solidarity with Palestinian and Arab Prisoners in Israeli Occupation Prisons.

Talabani stressed the importance of holding the Conference in Baghdad, and Iraq's continued work to provide all facilities that would make the Conference successful to achieve its goals.

In the meeting, discussion touched on current Arab situation, the on going events, and the Arab League's role in such circumstances.

- **Arab League delegation up to Baghdad to participate in the Conference in Support of Palestinian prisoners (NINA)**

Baghdad, Dec 10 / NINA/-- Arab League delegation left Cairo this afternoon heading to Baghdad to participate in the International Conference in Support of Palestinian prisoners to be held tomorrow in Baghdad.

The conference, will last two days under the auspices of President Jalal Talabani, and will be attended by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, General Secretary of the Arab League, Nabil Elaraby and a large number of Arab and international personalities officials and interested in Palestinian affairs.

- **Turkish Investor sees Kurdish oil as Turkey's chance since Ottomans (Aswat al-Iraq)**

BAGHDAD, Dec 10 / Aswat al-Iraq: Turkey's Genel Enerji President Mehmet Sepil thinks the opportunities in northern Iraq are the best they have been since Ottoman times and does not believe that the recent political tension between Baghdad, Arbil and Ankara will affect efforts to explore and produce oil and gas in the region, hurriyet daily reported on Monday.

"Oil will find its way," Sepil said. "When the world is so energy hungry and when the prices of energy resources are so high, it is impossible for the oil not to be unearthed for political reasons. It's only a matter of time ... The world does not have the luxury of leaving oil and gas underground."

"When we were working in the Taq Taq oil field, we could see Americans bombing Kirkuk. But the only risk is not political - there is also the risk of not finding oil.

We call this risk mitigation. The political risks were high, but the chances of finding oil were very high."

"Why are we calling this place the last frontier for oil exploration onshore? The hit rate the possibility of finding oil] is 20 percent on average in the world.

Here it may be 70 percent. Yes, perhaps the political risks are higher, but so are the chances of finding oil," he said.

## 2. IRAN

- **Iran has decoded data from U.S. drone captured in 2011**

TEHRAN, Dec. 11 (MNA) – Iran has decoded all the data from an advanced U.S. spy drone that Iran brought down in 2011, the commander of the Aerospace Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) announced on Monday.

Iran announced on December 4, 2011 that an advanced RQ-170 unmanned U.S. spy plane had been brought down in eastern Iran near the border with Afghanistan by the armed forces of the Islamic Republic but did not say when the incident occurred.

“We have decoded all the systems and (data storage devices) of the aircraft and obtained all the data from it,” Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh said. “There is nothing that we do not know about the aircraft. We know where the aircraft had gone step by step.”

He also said that the decoding of data showed that the drone had not carried out missions over Iranian nuclear facilities before it was brought down.

“The aircraft, which was captured last year in the eastern part of the country, is a highly advanced spy aircraft, and the ability to evade radars is not its only important feature, but this stealth aircraft enjoys advanced technologies in several parts,” he said.

“The most advanced technologies in the world in this regard are in Iran’s possession through capturing this drone,” he added.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Hajizadeh said that Iran has no cooperation with other countries, including China and Russia, in capturing drones and eliciting information from them.

Commenting on a U.S. ScanEagle drone which has recently been captured by Iranian naval forces, he said, “U.S. drones of this model and another model, named the Shadow, which have crashed due to malfunctions or have been brought down by our air defense units, have been in our possession... And today, a large number of this model of aircraft is being manufactured domestically, and its capture does not add anything new to us.”

The commander of the IRGC Naval Force, Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi, announced on December 4 that IRGC naval forces had captured a U.S. ScanEagle drone that had violated Iranian airspace.

The drone was captured by air defense units of the IRGC Naval Force when it entered Iranian airspace in the Persian Gulf after it had circulated for a few days in the area.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1763131>

- **World Secretariat of Muslim professors to be established**

TEHRAN, Dec. 11 (MNA) – The two-day international conference on university professors and the Islamic Awakening opened in Tehran on Monday.

Two hundred and fifty foreign professors and 350 Iranian professors are attending the conference. The theme of the meeting is “Promotion of Justice and Islamic Democracy.”

During a meeting of one of the specialized committees of the conference, it was agreed that a secretariat of Muslim professors of the world’s universities be established.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad delivered a speech at the conference, in which he stated that efforts should be made to help promote justice in the world because many problems facing the world’s people have their roots in injustice.

He also said that many global problems have been caused by the people who have established economic and political hegemony over the world.

In addition, Ali Akbar Velayati, the director of the Permanent Secretariat of the World Assembly of the Islamic Awakening, delivered a speech at the conference, in which he said, “What can accelerate the spread of the Islamic Awakening is maintenance of unity among social and political forces, insistence on primary objectives, the exercise of patience when faced with political and economic problems, a constant presence on the scene, appreciation of challenges and threats, finding solutions to overcome them, and particularly, adherence to Islamic principles.”

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1763129>

- **UN official praises Iran for cooperating with UNODC**

TEHRAN, Dec. 11 (MNA) – The representative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Iran has thanked the Iranian government for cooperating with the UNODC.

Antonio De Leo made the remarks in a speech during a conference on the campaign against corruption held in Tehran on Monday to mark the International Anti-Corruption Day, which has been observed annually on December 9 since the passage of the United Nations Convention against Corruption on October 31, 2003.

According to a translation of his remarks, the UN official said that corruption is a complex social, political, and economic phenomenon that affects all countries, adding that corruption undermines democratic institutions, slows economic development, and contributes to the instability of governments.

He also said that the cost of corruption is measured not just in the billions of dollars of wasted or stolen government resources, but most poignantly in the absence of hospitals, schools, clean water, roads, and bridges that might have been built with that money and would have certainly changed the fortunes of families and communities.

Elsewhere in his remarks, he thanked Iran's State Inspectorate Organization for hosting the conference and expressed hope that the meeting would help generate creative ideas and pave the way for increased cooperation.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1763186>

- **Iran determined to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes: FM**

TEHRAN, Dec. 11 (MNA) - Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi has said that Tehran is determined to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

Salehi made the remarks in Tehran on Sunday during a farewell meeting with the South African ambassador, Ebrahim Mohamed Saley, at the end of his diplomatic mission in Iran.

Commenting on nuclear talks between Iran and world powers, he stated that it is possible to negotiate on an equal footing and noted that the Westerners have turned technical issues into political ones.

The outgoing South African ambassador said that all countries have the right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, adding that the Republic of South Africa supports the rights of the signatories to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Salehi noted that expanding relations with South Africa is high on Tehran's agenda and called for further bilateral economic, cultural, and commercial cooperation.

Ambassador Saley hailed Iran's achievements in recent years, including the fact that Iranian villages gained access to utility services such as potable water, electricity, health services, and proper schools, and added that Iran's experience and actions inspire South Africa.

Saley also appreciated the hospitality of the Iranian people and thanked Iranian officials for their cooperation to boost bilateral ties.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1763152>

- **Iran's deputy foreign minister set to visit China for talks**

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Asia and Oceania Abbas Araqchi is set to travel to Beijing to hold consultative talks with Chinese officials.

"These deliberative negotiations are held every six months between the two countries, and this time, it is the Iranian side's turn to travel to China for the talks," Araqchi told IRNA on Monday.

The Iranian deputy foreign minister is due to leave Tehran for Beijing on Tuesday.

Araqchi added that during the visit, he will discuss the latest issues on bilateral ties as well as various regional and international issues with the Chinese authorities.

Iran is currently China's third largest supplier of crude oil, providing China with roughly 12 percent of its total annual oil consumption.

Trade between the two countries is currently dominated by Iran's energy exports, while the main Chinese exports to Iran include machinery and textiles among other consumer goods.

The total value of annual trade between Tehran and Beijing currently stands above USD 45 billion.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/11/277385/irans-deputy-fm-due-in-china-for-talks/>

- **Iran, Turkey trade volume can rise fivefold: Envoy**

Iran's Ambassador to Turkey Bahman Hosseinpour says the trade volume between Tehran and Ankara can potentially increase fivefold to as high as USD 100 billion a year.

“This year, the value of trade between Iran and Turkey will surpass USD 20 billion,” Hosseinpour said in an interview with a Turkish newspaper on Monday.

“This figure is only 20 percent of the two countries’ capacity, and can be increased to USD 100 billion,” Hosseinpour added.

The Iranian ambassador added that ample investment opportunities await Turkish investors in Iran.

“When I left Istanbul in 2003 as the head of Iran’s consulate, trade volume between Iran and Turkey stood at USD 8.3 billion, and now after four years of serving as Iran’s ambassador in Turkey, it has reached USD 20 billion,” Hosseinpour said.

The value of the Iran-Turkey trade exceeded USD 16 billion in 2011. The two countries plan to increase the level of their bilateral trade volume to USD 30 billion by 2015.

Referring to the Western sanctions imposed against Iran over unfounded allegations about the Islamic Republic's nuclear energy program, Hosseinpour said these measures represent an opportunity for Iran to flourish.

The Iranian ambassador said the anti-Iran sanctions led the country "to stand on its own feet."

The illegal US-engineered sanctions have been imposed on Iran based on the unfounded accusation that the Islamic Republic is pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program.

Iran rejects the allegations, arguing that as a committed signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, it has the right to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/11/277383/iran-turkey-trade-volume-can-quintuple/>

- **US confused about Iran's defense power: Cmdr.**

A senior Iranian commander says the Americans are confused about the Islamic Republic's defense power following the country's success in capturing a US spy drone over the Persian Gulf.

"Americans must know that we have necessary capability to take defensive measures and we advise them not to make any trouble for themselves and for others without any reason," deputy head of Iran's Armed Forces Chiefs of Staff Brigadier General Massoud Jazayeri said on Monday.

He added that Iran is able to identify and intercept any aircraft intruding its borders and sometimes warns them to leave its territory in accordance with international regulations.

The commander noted that Iranian scientists are capable of using various technologies in different areas, particularly in defense and military fields, to defend Iran's territorial integrity.

Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) captured a US ScanEagle spy drone over the Persian Gulf waters upon its intrusion into Iranian airspace on December 5.

The drone is a long-endurance aircraft built by Insitu, a subsidiary of Boeing.

This is not the first time that the US has violated Iran's airspace with an unmanned aerial vehicle. In December 2011, the Iranian military grounded a US RQ-170 spy aircraft while it was flying over the eastern city of Kashmar, some 140 miles (225km) from the Afghan border.

Jazayeri further said the capture of US drones which violated Iran airspace has exposed aggressive nature of the US and expressed hope that Washington would stop its aggressive behavior and allow regional nations to live in security and peace.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277312/iran-defense-power-confuses-us/>

### 3. SYRIA

- **Syria rebels 'seize key Aleppo army base'**

Syrian rebels have captured parts of a large army base in the country's north, just west of the city of Aleppo, activists say.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the rebels entered the sprawling Sheikh Suleiman base on Sunday afternoon, after weeks of fighting.

The development indicates the rebels are strengthening their grip on northern areas near the Turkish border. Last month, they captured another large base near Aleppo.

Amateur videos released by activists showed fighters walking inside the base. The footage also shows rebels driving around in a captured tank and manning heavy anti-aircraft machine guns.

Among the groups that seized the base was the al-Nusra Front, which the US government is due to blacklist as a "terrorist organisation", documents released on Tuesday showed. The US says that al-Nusra is allied to al-Qaeda in Iraq.

#### Damascus air raids

Meanwhile, the Syrian military carried out an air strike on suburbs of Damascus, the capital, as rebels clashed on the ground with soldiers on Monday, the Observatory said.

"A fighter bomber carried out a raid on Daraya as rebels and soldiers fought on the ground, while artillery bombed Moadamiyet al-Sham," it said, referring to two towns south of Damascus.

The air force also overflew Eastern Ghouta, an area where rebels have set up rear bases amid its orchards, the Observatory said.

The military has for several days bombarded rebel strongholds in the suburbs from ground and air, raising fears of a looming ground assault by the army to try to establish a secure cordon around the capital.

#### Russia against 'recipes'

On the diplomatic front, Russia said plans for Syria's political future should not be forced on it from outside, underlining its hostility to foreign pressure for President Bashar al-Assad's exit and to Western backing for an opposition coalition.

In a statement Russia "stressed that fundamental decisions about reforming Syria's political system ... must be made by Syrians themselves, without outside interference or attempts to force prepared recipes for socio-political development" on them.

The US and its NATO allies have pressed for al-Assad's departure as part of efforts to end the bloodshed in Syria, but Russia and China have blocked action against the Syrian leader at the UN Security Council.

The Russian statement called for an immediate end to violence and "the start of a national dialogue during which representatives of the Syrian government and opposition should discuss and agree parameters of a transition period".

The statement also signalled opposition to Western backing of the opposition Syrian National Coalition, which the United States could soon recognise as the sole representative of the Syrian people.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/20121210104312760502.html>

- **EU boosts status of Syrian opposition bloc**

EU foreign ministers have met the head of the newly formed Syrian opposition coalition in Brussels, with some arguing Ahmed Mouaz al-Khatib should be recognised as the legitimate replacement for President Bashar al-Assad.

Ministers said in a statement on Monday that the "EU accepts as legitimate representatives of the Syrian people" the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces which al-Khatib leads.

Previously, the EU had recognised the coalition as "legitimate representatives of the aspirations of the Syrian people".

Asked about the importance of the change in wording, EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton said the statement spoke for itself, adding that ministers had found it "incredibly useful" to have met al-Khatib.

While Britain and France have extended full recognition to the coalition, several EU member states have reservations about the group in terms of how representative it is and its democratic commitment.

The statement welcomed the coalition's efforts to "become more operational and inclusive," and encouraged it to continue to work on these goals.

'Very clear assurances'

Al-Khatib gave the ministers "some very clear assurances about the inclusivity of the National Coalition", according to British Foreign Secretary William Hague.

These assurances included the coalition's desire to represent all people living in Syria, and included references to Kurds and Christians living there, he said.

"I've urged him to once again make very clear the commitment of the national coalition to all the things the Assad regime is not committed to," Hague said, adding that this meant commitments "to human rights, to international humanitarian law, to democracy and freedom for the people of Syria".

Full recognition of the coalition could allow Western powers to arm rebel forces seeking to oust Assad but that is a sensitive issue, with some EU member states still cautious about the possible unintended consequences of such a step.

The EU recently rolled over its arms embargo on all Syrian parties for another three months to March 1.

Pushed by Britain, the EU decided at the end of November to review sanctions on Syria every three months instead of every year to make it easier in future to equip the rebels.

Humanitarian aid

After Monday's talks, the European Commission announced that it would provide another \$39m in humanitarian aid to help people affected by the Syrian civil war, bringing its total contribution to about \$210m.

Al-Khatib, an Imam, author and activist, was in Brussels ahead of the Friends of Syria meeting scheduled for Wednesday in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh.

The US is expected to announce Washington's backing for the new Syrian coalition at that meeting.

Earlier on Monday, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said Germany had expelled four Syrian embassy staff as part of a drive to reduce ties with Assad.

"With the expulsion of the four embassy employees announced today we are sending a clear message that we are reducing relations with the Assad regime to an absolute minimum," he said in a statement.

"We are counting on the [opposition] National Coalition strengthening further and building as soon as possible functioning institutions for a political transition."

Germany expelled the Syrian ambassador in May.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2012/12/201212112293112325.html>

- **US, Britain to assist militants in Syria: Report**

The United States and Britain have decided to provide military assistance to the militants fighting the Syrian government, a report says.

A Monday report by the Independent said the head of the British Armed Forces, General Sir David Richards, held a secret meeting in London a few weeks ago with military officials from France, Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates as well as an American general.

Officials from several other British government departments also hosted similar meetings and discussions with their counterparts in 'allied states' to review strategies and ways to 'help' the foreign-sponsored militants in crisis-stricken Syria.

The meetings were held at the request of British Prime Minister David Cameron, who has recently been calling for further efforts to undermine the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the report said.

It further claimed that the US, Britain, and France have 'pledged not to perform ground operation or deploy forces in Syria,' but their training camps will reportedly be set up in Turkey where they can train militants near the Syrian border.

The countries also believe that any military action against Syria should be carried out without the authorization of the United Nations due to likely opposition on the part of China and Russia, who will likely refuse to back a resolution against Assad's government.

Recent reports also showed that the US is planning to provide logistical assistance and sophisticated weapons for the militants fighting the Syrian government.

The reports said a wide range of modern weapons would be sent to Syria through Washington's regional allies, such as Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Syria has been the scene of unrest since March 2011, and many people, including large numbers of security and army forces, have lost their lives in the violence.

Syria says that the chaos is being orchestrated from outside the country, and there are reports that a very large number of militants fighting the Syrian government are foreign nationals.

The government blames the US and its regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, for funding and arming the anti-Damascus militants.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/11/277382/us-britain-to-assist-militants-in-syria/>

#### 4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Netanyahu blasts intl. community for condemning Israeli settlement plans**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has criticized the international community for condemning Tel Aviv's illegal settlement activities.

"This weekend the leaders of Hamas openly called for the destruction of Israel. Where was the outrage? Where were the UN resolutions?" Netanyahu angrily asked the states, which opposed Israel's new settlement plans, on Monday.

He claimed that it's "simply not true" that the settlements are an obstacle to Palestinian statehood.

"I don't understand how this will prevent territorially the establishment of a Palestinian state," Netanyahu said, referring to Israeli construction activities in the area between East al-Quds and the occupied West Bank -- the so-called E-1 area.

Netanyahu's comments came on a day when the European Union's 27 foreign ministers said in a statement in Brussels that they were "deeply dismayed" by Israeli plans to build thousands of more illegal settler units on the occupied Palestinian lands.

"The European Union is deeply dismayed by and strongly opposes Israeli plans to expand settlements in the West Bank," said the ministers.

"The E-1 plan, if implemented, would seriously undermine the prospects of a negotiated resolution of the conflict by jeopardizing the possibility of a contiguous and viable Palestinian state and of Jerusalem (al-Quds) as the future capital of two states," the foreign ministers said.

On November 29, the 193-member UN General Assembly voted 138-9 with 41 abstentions to upgrade Palestine's status to non-member observer state.

On December 3, Israel announced that it plans to construct 1,600 new illegal settlement units in East al-Quds. On November 30, Israel approved a plan to build 3,000 more units in East al-Quds and the occupied West Bank.

Many countries, including some of Tel Aviv's allies, have condemned the Israeli plans to construct illegal settler units in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said on Monday that the Israeli plan is "pure vengeance against the Palestinians following the UN vote."

On December 3, Britain, France, Spain, Sweden, and Denmark summoned the Israeli ambassadors in their capitals to protest against the settlement expansion plan.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/11/277356/netanyahu-condemns-intl-community/>

- **Israel tanks, bulldozers enter Gaza in 1st post-truce incursion**

Israeli forces have conducted a limited incursion into the Gaza Strip's southern city of Khan Yunis for the first time after a cease-fire agreement ended the Israeli regime's offensive on the blockaded coastal sliver.

Local sources reported on Monday that the Israeli army tanks and bulldozers launched the brief intrusion into the eastern city of Khan Yunis in southern Gaza.

The Tel Aviv regime's recent incursion of the coastal enclave comes for the first time after an Egypt-mediated cease-fire put an end to Israel's deadly offensive on the Gaza Strip on November 21.

Israeli military has already breached the truce deal on several instances.

On November 23, Israeli forces opened fire on a group of farmers in the village of Khuzaa, east of Khan Yunis, killing a young Palestinian and injuring seven others only two days after the cease-fire entered into effect.

Over 160 Palestinians, including women and children, lost their lives and about 1,200 others were injured in the Israeli aerial raids on Gaza that were carried out during the eight-day period of November 14-21.

Palestinian resistance fighters incessantly poured rockets and missiles on the Israeli cities, killing at least five Israelis, including one soldier, in retaliation for the deadly attacks on besieged territories.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277267/israel-tanks-conduct-incursion-of-gaza/>

- **'Unofficial steps will likely lead to 'Palestine' by 2030'**

New US intelligence report predicts that in less than two decades, a Palestinian state will exist, but key issues such as Jerusalem's status are likely to remain unresolved; China's economy to overtake US.

It is likely that unofficial actions will lead to a Palestinian state by 2030, US intelligence analysts cited by AFP said Monday.

"On the one hand, if the Islamic Republic maintains power in Iran and is able to develop nuclear weapons, the Middle East will face a highly unstable future," a new intelligence report said. "On the other hand, the emergence of moderate, democratic governments or a breakthrough

agreement to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could have enormously positive consequences."

However, according to AFP, the report predicted that a more likely scenario was that unofficial actions would lead toward a Palestinian state with key issues such as the status of Jerusalem remaining unresolved.

The report, "Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds," was issued by the National Intelligence Council, an analytical arm of the US government's Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

It is the fifth report of a series - the previous one was released in 2008 - that aims to stimulate "strategic thinking" among decision makers and not to predict the future. The reports intentionally coincide with presidential election years to offer insights on global trends to new administrations.

Islamist terrorism might end by 2030, but terrorism is unlikely to disappear completely because states may use such groups due to a "strong sense of insecurity," the report said.

"With more widespread access to lethal and disruptive technologies, individuals who are experts in such niche areas as cyber systems might sell their services to the highest bidder, including terrorists, who would focus less on causing mass casualties and more on creating widespread economic and financial disruptions."

China's economy to overtake US by 2030

China's economy is likely to surpass the United States in less than two decades but the Asian country is not expected to take on the superpower role of the United States in gathering coalitions to deal with global issues, US intelligence analysts said on Monday.

By 2030 Asia will overtake North America and Europe combined in global power based on gross domestic product, population, military spending and technological investment, a new intelligence report said.

"China alone will probably have the largest economy, surpassing that of the United States a few years before 2030," it said. "Meanwhile, the economies of Europe, Japan, and Russia are likely to continue their slow relative declines."

Despite the economic power of China, the United States is expected to retain its superpower status because it still is the only country able to pull together coalitions and mobilize efforts to deal with global challenges, analysts said.

"China isn't going to replace the US on a global level," Mathew Burrows, counselor to the National Intelligence Council, said at a media briefing. "Being the largest economic power is important ... (but) it isn't necessarily the largest economic power that always is going to be the superpower."

China recognizes that it cannot play that role of organizing across regions and across state-nonstate boundaries, he said.

The health of the global economy increasingly will be linked to progress in the developing world rather than the traditional West, the report said.

<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=295409>

## 5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt braces for rival protests on referendum amid Tahrir attacks**

Rival protests are set to sweep the streets of Cairo on Tuesday over a bitterly divisive referendum on a new constitution.

The dueling demonstrations, which reportedly resulted in nine people being hurt early Tuesday when unknown attackers fired at protesters camping at Tahrir Square in central Cairo, has prompted Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi to order the army to help "preserve security".

The rival protests have been organized by Islamists backing Mursi and the largely secular opposition, raising fears of street clashes like ones last week in which seven people were killed and hundreds injured.

Mursi's decree instructs the military to fully cooperate with police "to preserve security and protect vital state institutions for a temporary period, up to the announcement of the results from the referendum."

Army officers "all have powers of legal arrest," it says.

The military, which has urged dialogue and warned it "will not allow" the political crisis to deteriorate, has for several days kept tanks and troops deployed around Mursi's presidential palace.

On Tuesday, police cars surrounded the Square, the first time they had appeared in the area since Nov. 23, shortly after a decree by the Islamist president giving himself sweeping temporary powers touched off widespread protests.

The unknown attackers also threw petrol bombs which started a small fire, witnesses said. Many of the protesters, awakened by the noise, chanted: "The people want the downfall of the regime." Recorded recitations of the Quran were played over speakers in the Square, according to Reuters.

Leftists, liberals and other opposition groups have called for marches to the presidential palace in the afternoon to protest against the hastily arranged referendum on a new constitution planned for Saturday, which they say is polarizing the country.

Islamists, who dominated the body that drew up the constitution, have urged their followers to turn out "in millions" the same day in a show of support for the president and for a referendum they feel sure of winning and that critics say could put Egypt in a religious straitjacket.

The elite Republican Guard has yet to use force to keep protesters away from the palace, now ringed with tanks, barbed wire and concrete barricades, but a decree issued by Mursi late on Sunday gives the armed forces the power to arrest civilians during the referendum and until the announcement of the results.

Cairo schools informed parents they would be closed as a precaution on Tuesday.

A group of senior judges on Monday said pro-Mursi Islamist protesters would have to lift a week-long sit-in outside the constitutional court before they would consider overseeing the referendum.

If the charter is rejected, Mursi has promised to have a new one drawn up by 100 officials chosen directly by the public rather than appointed by the Islamist-dominated parliament.

But analysts said still-strong public support for Mursi and the Brotherhood's proven ability to mobilize at grassroots level would likely help the draft constitution be adopted.

If that happens, warned Eric Trager, analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, it would "set up the country for prolonged instability," he told AFP news agency.

Leftist politician Hamdeen Sabahy, one of the most prominent members of the National Salvation Front opposition coalition, said Mursi was driving a wedge between Egyptians and destroying prospects for consensus.

As well as pushing the early referendum, Mursi has angered opponents by taking sweeping temporary powers he said were necessary to secure the country's transition to stability after a popular uprising overthrew autocratic former president Hosni Mubarak 22 months ago.

"The road Mohamed Mursi is taking now does not create the possibility for national consensus," said Sabahy.

If the constitution was passed, he said: "Egypt will continue in this really charged state. It is certain that this constitution is driving us to more political polarization."

The National Salvation Front also includes Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohamed ElBaradei and former Arab League chief Amr Moussa.

The opposition says the draft constitution fails to embrace the diversity of 83 million Egyptians, a tenth of whom are Christians, and invites Muslim clerics to influence lawmaking.

But debate over the details has largely given way to noisy street protests and megaphone politics, keeping Egypt off balance and ill-equipped to deal with a looming economic crisis.

Mahmoud Ghozlan, the Muslim Brotherhood's spokesman, said the opposition could stage protests, but should keep the peace.

"They are free to boycott, participate or say no; they can do what they want. The important thing is that it remains in a peaceful context to preserve the country's safety and security."

The army stepped into the conflict on Saturday, telling all sides to resolve their disputes via dialogue and warning that it would not allow Egypt to enter a "dark tunnel".

The continuing disruption is also casting doubts on the government's ability to push through tough economic reforms that form part of a proposed \$4.8 billion IMF loan agreement.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/11/254444.html>

- **Egypt's Judges Club agrees to oversee constitutional referendum**

Egyptian Administrative State Council's Judges Club on Monday accepted to oversee the constitutional referendum scheduled for December 15 but with conditions.

The club stipulated that the government should protect polling committees and public buildings including headquarters of the higher committee supervising the referendum, Hamdy Yassin, head of the club, said at a press conference Monday.

The government should also work to end the sit-in outside the Supreme Constitutional Court by supporters of President Mohammed Mursi, Yassin added.

Since December 2, some of Mursi supporters were protesting outside the Supreme Constitutional Court fearing that the judges to issue verdicts to dissolve the current Shura Council or the Constituent Assembly that wrote the draft constitution.

Opponents of Mursi, meanwhile, rejected the draft constitution and called for protests on Tuesday.

Yassin said judges should also be protected, adding that "it is the right of every judge to withdraw from the process if he is insulated by the voters or by the police... we will not allow this."

Judges in Egypt have initially announced their boycott to the referendum after Mursi announcing his new sweeping grab on power on November 22.

In his power grab, Mursi curbed the independency of the judicial and protected the Islamist-dominated constitution-drafting body and the Shura Council from dissolution.

Meanwhile, on Monday, Mursi has temporarily given the military the authority to arrest civilians to help safeguard a constitutional referendum planned for Saturday, Reuters reported the official gazette as saying.

The order, gazetted late on Sunday, said the military would support police and liaise with them to protect “vital institutions” until the referendum result is declared.

The decree gave army officers the right to make arrests and transfer detainees to prosecutors.

Despite its limited nature, the edict will revive memories of Hosni Mubarak’s emergency law, also introduced as a temporary expedient, under which military or state security courts tried thousands of political dissidents and Islamist militants.

But a military source stressed that the measure, introduced by a civilian government, would have a short shelf-life.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254372.html>

- **Tunisians protest against graft, Ben Ali cronies**

TUNIS, (AFP) - Hundreds of Tunisians, most of them Islamists, rallied on Saturday in the capital to demand that cronies of ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali be put in the dock on corruption charges.

"The people want to clean up the country," demonstrators chanted in central Tunis, with some holding Salafist flags. "People, rise up against the cronies of the dictator," they said amid a heavy police presence.

The rally was organised by the League for the Protection of the Revolution, a group close to the ruling Islamist Ennahda party, which claims its mission is to protect the goals of the 2011 revolution that toppled Ben Ali.

The protesters' rage focused on businessman and influential politician Kamel Eltaief who has been banned from travelling since November and who is being investigated for "conspiracy against state security."

"Eltaief, your hour has come," they chanted. "No more corruption after the revolution."

Lawyer Mohamed Cherif Jebali, who lodged a complaint against Eltaief prompting the launch of the probe against the businessman, said the word on the street is: "Kamel Eltaief must be judged."

"This man spearheads the counter-revolution, and the judiciary are dragging their feet in his case," said Jebali, who said he was taking part in the rally like other activists over concerns that the uprising was being hijacked.

Eltaief, once considered Ben Ali's eminence grise and who helped him in decision-making, told AFP in an interview that he was in the crosshairs of the Islamists because of his current links to the opposition.

"Officials of the Islamist party Ennahda and their leftist allies want me in jail for political reasons," said Eltaief, an influential figure in Tunisian politics both before and after the revolution.

Demonstrators also called for the "purification" of the main labour union UGTT, saying that the General Union of Tunisian Workers was rife with "symbols of corruption" and diehard former regime figures.

"The UGTT has become the hostage of the left," said Hedi Belaid, a former leader of the union of aeronautical technicians. "It must stop delving into politics and continue its task of protecting the rights of all workers."

Tensions have escalated in Tunisia between the powerful union and the ruling Islamists, with the UGTT calling for a rare nationwide general strike for December 13.

It called the strike to denounce an attack on its headquarters this week that it says was carried out by the pro-Ennahda League for the Protection of the Revolution. The Islamists say the UGTT itself orchestrated the confrontation.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32097>

- **Morsy bans voting outside of assigned electoral districts**

Voters will no longer be able to vote outside of their electoral districts in the upcoming constitution referendum, after President Mohamed Morsy amended an electoral law.

Morsy issued an amendment to Law 73 for the year 1956 canceling the stipulation allowing voters to cast their ballots in referendums outside of their electoral districts, a presidential statement on Tuesday morning said.

The amendment, which the president's office claimed was requested by the Supreme Elections Commission, is aimed at "public interest, and for Egypt to successfully end the current transition and move on to the building of constitutionally-founded institutions."

The statement added that the amendment also aimed to "avoid concerns about the fairness of the electoral process and to alleviate the judges supervising the polling from potential burdens."

The president's office justified the amendment by alleging that while allowing voters to cast their ballots outside their electoral districts may be convenient for people, the process can produce many appeals and cast a lot of doubts about the extent to which the referendum is a free and clean process.

The statement also claimed that allowing voting outside of one's electoral district would require supervising judges to create lists for those who are not registered in a given district, imposing an additional burden on them.

The referendum starts on 12 December with voters abroads casting their ballots, while it will take place in Egypt on 15 December.

Morsy scheduled the referendum amid simmering political unrest stemming partially from the constitution draft and the conduct of the Constituent Assembly. Secular forces have accused Islamists of hijacking the drafting process.

Until a new Parliament is elected, Morsy has legislative powers, through which he has been issuing laws and decrees. If the constitution is passed, legislation powers will be transferred to the Islamist-dominated Shura Council; the upper house of Parliament, until new parliamentary elections are held.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/morsy-bans-voting-outside-assigned-electoral-districts>

- **Attackers descend on Tahrir Square, protesters wounded**

Some 10 protesters were injured in an armed attack in the early hours of Tuesday in Tahrir Square, where an open-ended sit-in has been staged since 23 November.

Unknown attackers fired birdshot at protesters in the square. Nine suffered injuries to their arms and legs, while one protester suffered from a head injury.

The attack caused a wave of chaos in the square, with protesters chanting "the people want the fall of the regime" in response, before calm eventually returned.

Popular committees charged with securing the square spread around its main entrance for fear of the renewal of the attack. Police cars were deployed around the periphery of the square for the first time since the sit-in started.

The sit-in followed a mass protest on 23 November against a freshly announced constitutional declaration by President Mohamed Morsy, through which he claimed sweeping powers including

the immunization of the Constituent Assembly from dissolution, which secular forces accuse of being dominated by Islamists. Morsy canceled the declaration later.

Meanwhile, a referendum on the resulting constitution is due to take place on 15 December, amid polarization between supporting Islamist forces and opposing secular ones, especially after a violent confrontation between the two groups took place on 5 December next to the presidential palace in Heliopolis.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/attackers-descend-tahrir-square-protesters-wounded>

## 6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Lebanese army implements security plan in Tripoli amid Syria-linked clashes**

The Lebanese army has implemented a security plan in the northern city of Tripoli amid clashes between supporters and opponents of the Syrian government.

A security source speaking on condition of anonymity said that the plan is to go into effect as of Monday.

At least 17 people have reportedly died in a week of clashes between the neighborhoods of Jabal Mohsen, whose residents largely support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Bab al-Tabbaneh, where residents oppose the Damascus government.

Lebanese army units are tracking down gunmen and have seized machine guns, hand grenades, ammunition, and military equipment.

Although the violence in Tripoli is linked to the current conflict in Syria, some people in the city blame the Lebanese government for the continuation of the fighting.

Tripoli has been the scene of clashes between the two groups over the past few months. Several people have been killed and injured, and the fighting has forced residents to leave their neighborhoods.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since March 2011. Many people, including large numbers of security forces, have been killed in the turmoil.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277220/lebanon-implements-security-plan/>

- **Two Israeli military aircraft fly over skies of Lebanon**

Two Israeli military aircraft have penetrated Lebanese airspace and flown over several areas of the country in a clear violation of a UN Security Council resolution.

The fighter jets crossed into Lebanon's airspace over the southern border village of Kfar Kila, located 96 kilometers (59 miles) south of Beirut, at 9:22 a.m. local time (0622 GMT) on Sunday, according to a statement issued by the Lebanese military.

The warplanes flew over several areas in Lebanon before leaving Lebanese airspace at 11:15 a.m. local time (0815 GMT) while flying over the southern border town of Alma al-Shaab.

Israel violates Lebanon's airspace on an almost daily basis, claiming the flights serve surveillance purposes.

Lebanon's government, the Hezbollah resistance movement and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, known as UNIFIL, have repeatedly condemned the overflights, saying they are in violation of UN Resolution 1701 and the country's sovereignty.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which brokered a ceasefire in the war of aggression Israel launched against Lebanon in 2006, calls on Israel to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In 2009, Lebanon filed a complaint with the United Nations, presenting over 7,000 documents pertaining to Israeli violations of Lebanese territory.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277174/israeli-planes-violate-lebanon-airspace/>

- **King orders release of jailed protesters**

AMMAN — His Majesty King Abdullah directed authorities on Monday to release over 100 jailed protesters, ending their month-long detention.

The Monarch directed the government to release 116 citizens detained for their alleged participation in, at-times, violent protests over rising fuel prices last month.

According to the Jordan News Agency, Petra, the decision excludes 13 detainees who are facing charges of criminal conspiracy, vandalism and illegal detention of people for their actions during the wave of riots.

A government decision in November to lift fuel subsidies and the subsequent increase in fuel prices sparked protests, riots and acts of vandalism in the Kingdom that resulted in over 70 injuries and the deaths of one citizen and two police officers.

In a press statement, the government vowed to take “all legal measures” to comply with the directives, stressing its respect for “peaceful movements” expressing their demands within the boundaries of the law.

During a meeting with political party representatives, Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour said the government respects popular movements that work within the constitutional limits and abide by the Kingdom’s laws, adding that some of the 13 who remain in custody have been previously convicted of other crimes, Petra reported.

“The freedoms of expression and assembly are guaranteed under the Constitution as basic civil rights and pillars of reform in general, particularly political reform,” Government Spokesperson Samih Maaytah said in a press statement.

The detainees remained in custody as of late Monday, with official sources expecting their release late Tuesday.

While welcoming the pardon, activists expressed “disappointment” over what they claimed as ongoing “martial law policies” towards protesters.

“It is unfortunate that it takes a Royal Decree to guarantee the freedom of these men and women and recognise their right to protest peacefully,” said Mamoun Harassis, the defence attorney for the bulk of the detainees.

Officials had referred some 125 protesters to the State Security Court, where they faced charges of “illegal assembly”, slandering the Monarch and “undermining the political regime” — offences that could have earned each detainee up to 10 years in prison.

Among the detainees are 45 members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Jordan’s largest political force, as well as Emad Abu Hattab, a senior leader of the Islamic Action Front, the Brotherhood’s political arm.

The detentions sparked a wave of demonstrations urging the protesters’ release, with relatives and activists hosting sit-ins at the Prime Ministry, the State Security Court and the UN headquarters in recent weeks.

<http://jordantimes.com/king-orders-release-of-jailed-protesters>

## 7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Qatar calls on Arab League to rethink Israel-Palestine peace offer**

Qatar has called on the Arab League ministers to reconsider an Arab peace offer to normalize ties with the Israeli regime in return for its withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territories.

“It is logical after 10 years to objectively reconsider the peace process, including the Arab initiative,” said Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem Al Thani during an Arab League ministerial meeting in the Qatari capital, Doha, on Sunday.

He also called for a “thorough look into developments in the region and the world, and to decide carefully on our future steps and roadmap.”

The Arab League Ministerial Committee was held to reevaluate the Israel-Palestine peace process and review the Arab Peace Initiative in which Arab countries establish diplomatic relations with Israel in turn for Tel Aviv’s pullout from Palestinian lands and an equitable solution for Palestinian refugees.

The Qatari prime minister further criticized the so-called Middle East Quartet, which had “proven to be a failure and unable to make any achievements,” calling for a “reevaluation of its performance.”

The Quartet, comprising the United States, Russia, the United Nations and the European Union, was set up in 2002 to promote talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority on establishing a Palestinian state next to Israel.

However, acting Palestinian Authority chief Mahmoud Abbas told the meeting that he was opposed to a withdrawal of the peace offer, warning that such a move could bring about conflict in the region.

“It is not permissible to talk about sidelining the Arab peace initiative. It should stay,” he said, adding, “It is a very important initiative, and I hope that we would not every time talk about shelving it, because that would mean war”

On December 3, Arab League Secretary-General Nabil al-Arabi also described the Quartet as ineffective, saying that Arab countries must approach the UN to pressure Israel into withdrawing from occupied territories.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/10/277288/qatar-urges-al-to-rethink-peace-offer/>

- **Bahrain charges 8 police officers with torturing prisoners**

Bahrain's public prosecutors say they have charged eight police officers with torturing political prisoners who were arrested during a Saudi-backed crackdown on pro-democracy protesters.

"Five cases have been referred to special courts after charging eight policemen, including a lieutenant," the prosecution said in a statement published by the BNA state news agency on Monday.

The statement added that the charges range from "using torture to force a defendant to confess, to causing a permanent disability, as well as insults and physical assaults."

In February 2011, massive protests broke out in Bahrain, with people taking to the streets and calling for a constitutional monarchy -- a demand that later turned into calls for the ouster of the monarchy.

The Bahraini government promptly launched a brutal crackdown on the peaceful protests and called in Saudi-led Arab forces from neighboring Persian Gulf states.

Dozens of people have been killed in the crackdown, and the security forces have arrested hundreds, including doctors and nurses accused of treating injured revolutionaries.

A report published by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry in November 2011 found that the Al Khalifa regime had used excessive force in the crackdown and accused Manama of torturing political activists, politicians, and protesters.

The protesters say they will continue holding anti-regime demonstrations until their demand for the establishment of a democratically elected government is met.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/11/277359/bahrain-charges-8-policemen-with-torture/>

- **Saudi labor minister meets with tweeps over expat workers fees**

Saudi Arabia's ministry of labor invited for the first time micro-blogging website Twitter users to a one-to-one meeting after news of increasing expats labor card fees created uproar among the kingdom's Twiteratis.

The ministry recently decided that private sector employers who hire more foreigners than Saudis must pay a fee of \$640 a year for each additional expats when they renew an expat's on-year residency permit.

The price increase raised the ire of Saudi businessmen who attacked the ministry's decision. This prompted Labor Minister Adel al-Fakeih to hold a meeting with Twitter users to explain the ministry's point of view and the implications of the increase.

The minister held a three-hours-long meeting with the Twiteratis trying to explain the ministry's decision, saying it aims to find all possible ways to offer Saudi citizens the most suitable job opportunities. Media outlets, however, were not allowed to attend the meeting.

"The meeting establishes a culture of dialogue between officials and citizens," Khaled al-Ulqomi, a Saudi businessman and a Twitter user, told Al Arabiya.

"We appreciate the minister's initiative and courageous step," he said in a phone interview, adding that he made several suggestions regarding the labor market in the kingdom during the meeting.

Al-Fakeih said in January that the largest Arab economy needed to create 3 million jobs for Saudi nationals by 2015 and 6 million by 2030, partly through "Saudi-izing" work now done by foreigners.

In an economy in which imported labor fills nine in 10 private sector jobs, according to central bank data, many companies fear the new fees will hit their businesses hard by adding to their costs and shrinking the pool of available workers.

The new rule is aimed at reducing unemployment of 10.5 per cent among Saudi nationals by getting them into jobs now performed by 8 million expats in the country, a long-term Saudi goal given fresh impetus by the uprisings in Arab countries last year that were partly driven by high unemployment.

The requirement covers everyone from expat professionals to hospital workers and laborers on construction sites and in addition to quotas already in place to limit foreign staff numbers.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254383.html>

- **Bahrain opposition welcomes prince's call for talks**

Bahrain opposition groups welcomed a government appeal for dialogue to break a deadlock in the restive kingdom, saying they were prepared to meet without any pre-conditions, but called for the results of talks to be put to a referendum.

The Gulf Arab state, which hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet, has been convulsed by unrest since February last year following mass demonstrations led by Shi'ites demanding democratic change in the Sunni-led monarchy.

Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifah told a conference on Middle East security in Manama on Friday that real progress can only come through face-to-face negotiations.

Wefaq, the leading opposition group in Bahrain, said in a statement it was willing to take part in talks but the outcome should "be approved by the people."

The group's leader Sheikh Ali Salman told Reuters he would push for a referendum, an idea first aired before a failed attempt at dialogue last year. But he said a referendum was a not a condition of starting talks.

“We have clear opinion about that. We are looking for a dialogue without any precondition and it is the same for the government - don't put any precondition,” he said in an interview in Manama.

Bahrain, where the Fifth Fleet is based as a bulwark against Iran, accuses Tehran of encouraging the unrest. Iran, which is led by Shi'ite clerics, has denied meddling in Bahrain's affairs.

Some Sunni Bahrainis argue against democracy in the kingdom citing what they describe as the influence of Iran's Shi'ite clerics over Bahrain's Shi'ite majority.

“People vote for religious figures. Their mentality is to follow the religious leader,” said a prominent Bahraini Twitter user who styles himself Ateekster and asked for his real name not to be used in a phone interview.

Pro-government members of parliament and advisers to the authorities have complained that it is not clear whether Wefaq could speak for the whole opposition and that it has shifted position before on possible talks.

Other groups, including the secular Waad, also welcomed the call for new dialogue.

In his speech on Friday, Crown Prince Salman urged all political figures to condemn street violence.

King Hamad last year called for talks “without preconditions”, but that initiative quickly stalled when Wefaq pulled out, saying its views were not being taken seriously.

Salman said he had been indirectly contacted by the authorities but did not have any information on when talks would take place.

The two sides have appeared to softened their positions in recent days. In his speech the crown prince said Bahrain needed to work harder on judicial reform and to ensure policing was equally applied to all Bahrainis.

On Friday Wefaq's leader chastised protesters chanting slogans directly attacking the king and ruling family.

The authorities have banned protests, saying they often lead to confrontations that block the streets, and revoked the nationality of 31 activists. Opposition groups say brutality and repression used to put down last year's revolt, which embarrassed Bahrain's Western allies, continues.

“We demand that the authorities stop using excessive and systematic force against citizens,” the opposition statement said.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/10/254322.html>

## 8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **US report faults Pakistan over Afghan war**

WASHINGTON: Despite an easing of tensions with the United States, Pakistan is persistently undermining security in Afghanistan by permitting safe havens for insurgents, a Pentagon report said Monday.

In a biannual war assessment mandated by Congress, the Defense Department said that the 68,000 US troops in Afghanistan and their allies had succeeded in preventing Taliban advances while limiting civilian casualties.

But Taliban havens across the border in Pakistan, the limited capacity of the Afghan government and “endemic corruption” pose the greatest risks as the United States prepares to pull out troops by the end of 2014, the Pentagon said.

The report noted the better US relations with Pakistan, which agreed in July to reopen Western forces’ supply routes into Afghanistan. Pakistan had refused access after a US border strike killed 24 of its troops in November 2011.

“However, Pakistan’s continued acceptance of sanctuaries for Afghan-focused insurgents and failure to interdict (explosive) materials and components continue to undermine the security of Afghanistan and pose an enduring threat to US, coalition and Afghan forces,” the report said.

The report, which covered developments from April through September, said that Pakistan “has contributed to US interests while simultaneously falling short in other areas.” The Pentagon also reported modest progress between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since then, Afghan President Hamid Karzai said that an attack last week on the Afghan intelligence chief was planned in Pakistan.

Islamabad denied Karzai’s assertion. Many analysts believe Pakistan has sought to keep open ties to militants in Afghanistan in hopes of preserving influence after the Nato withdrawal.

The Pentagon report said that enemy attacks went up one percent from April to September 2011. But it attributed the rise to a shorter poppy harvest, which kept low-level insurgents busy for less time, and said life had improved in urban areas.

Enemy attacks “are now disproportionately occurring outside of populated areas, and the security of many of Afghanistan’s largest cities increased substantially during the reporting period,” it said.

However, the Pentagon figures showed that enemy attacks were higher than in 2009 before President Barack Obama ramped up troop numbers. The last of the 33,000 “surge” troops withdrew in September this year.

Opinion polls show that most Americans want to end their country’s longest-ever war, which was launched following the September 11, 2001 attacks by al Qaeda militants living in Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

The Pentagon report described “substantial progress” by Afghans in taking the lead in their own security, but acknowledged logistical and management shortcomings in the national forces as well as corruption.

A Defense Department official, briefing reporters on the report on condition of anonymity, said that the goal remained for Afghan forces to be able to operate independently by 2014.

“Is it going to be a challenge? I agree with you, yes,” he said. “Will there continue to be a need for training and advising after 2014? Yes.” The report recorded 66 insider attacks on Nato or Afghan national forces, a sharp rise from 43 the year earlier, but voiced hope that new countermeasures would reduce the threat.

The Pentagon gave a positive assessment to efforts to reduce civilian casualties, seen as a major cause of resentment toward the Western-backed government.

Civilian casualties caused by Nato forces decreased by 35 per cent compared with the previous year, although overall civilian casualties rose due to attacks by insurgents, the report said.

Representative Mike Honda, co-chair of the peace and security task force of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, said the uptick in attacks in rural, impoverished areas showed that “we can’t continue to kill our way to stability.”

“The greatest threats to stability throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to be pervasive poverty, which makes for an enduringly intractable conflict unless it is addressed proactively,” he said.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/11/us-report-faults-pakistan-over-afghan-war/>

- **LB polls in cantonment areas Supreme Court reproves govt over inaction**

ISLAMABAD: Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry suggested on Monday that the local government elections could be helpful in checking the menace of extremism in society because it provided people-to-people contact at the grassroots level.

“One of the reasons behind growing extremism and dacoities in the neighbourhoods is that we have lost interaction with the people at the ward and union level,” the chief justice observed, adding that the country’s founding fathers had deliberately incorporated constitutional provisions for holding local bodies’ elections.

The observation was made when a three-judge bench took up a petition filed in 2009 by Rab Nawaz from Quetta.

The petitioner has sought justification from the authorities for violating the Constitution by not holding local government elections in cantonment areas for the past 14 years.

“When you talk of democracy then you have to hold the local government elections even in the cantonment areas,” the chief justice observed and noted with concern that the last such elections were held in Oct 1998.

Deputy Attorney General Dil Mohammad Alizai, representing the federal government, informed the court that the defence ministry would soon submit a summary for approval of the prime minister to hold local government elections in cantonment areas.

He conceded that the affairs of cantonment boards were being run by nominated administrators.

He told the court that the government was ready to hold local bodies elections the moment the Election Commission of Pakistan announced the election date.

The Director Legal, Ministry of Defence, Commander Shahbaz, told the court that the summary would positively be moved on Monday from his department for the approval of the prime minister.

The chief justice observed that the prime minister was a very efficient functionary and recalled that the local bodies' polls were always held during military regimes, though no such elections were held in the cantonment boards.

Pointing towards the defence ministry's representative, the chief justice observed that provisions of the Constitution could not be denied and that they should be supportive in strengthening democratic institutions.

Local governments are an effective institution because local representatives are always close and within reach of the common people. They also help settle issues at the grassroots level, reducing despondency among the masses.

The court, however, adjourned the hearing till Dec 17 on the request of the defence ministry and the deputy attorney general so that they could seek instructions from the government.

**SINDH LB ORDINANCE:** The same bench put off proceedings in a petition against the Sindh Local Government Act, 2012, till Dec 17.

Through his petition, Barrister Zamir Hussain Ghumro of the Sindh Bachayo Committee has challenged the controversial law, which was adopted by the Sindh Assembly two months ago.

The petitioner pleaded before the court to declare the Act as illegal, unconstitutional and unlawful since dozens of its sections, wholly or partially, were in clear conflict with Articles 2, 5, 9, 25, 97, 129, 130, 137, 142 and 175 of the Constitution.

Mr Ghumro has requested the court to declare that towns could not be created outside the boundaries of revenue divisions, no new police districts could be created on the basis of towns in metropolitan corporations and provincial subjects and executive authority of other departments under Schedule-1 could not be transferred to the department of local government or any local body.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/11/lb-polls-in-cantonment-areas-supreme-court-reproves-govt-over-inaction/>

- **Attacks Kill Afghan Police Chief, Women's Affairs Official**

Afghan authorities say separate attacks have killed a provincial police chief and a women's affairs official.

Officials say a roadside bomb Monday killed General Mohammad Musa Rasouli, head of police in Afghanistan's western Nimroz province, as he was traveling back to Nimroz from nearby Herat province.

Rasouli was rushed to the hospital but died from his wounds.

Also Monday, insurgents killed Najia Sideqi, the acting provincial director of women's affairs in Laghman province, east of Kabul. The provincial governor's spokesman said Sideqi was killed while on her way to work in Mehtarlam.

Sideqi's predecessor, Hanifa Safi, was killed in a July bombing.

There were no immediate claims of responsibility for Monday's attacks.

Taliban insurgents often target officials. Last week, a Taliban suicide bomber wounded Afghanistan's intelligence chief.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **Taliban launches new wave of attacks in Afghanistan**

KABUL, Dec. 10 (Xinhua) -- Despite a decline in the Taliban-led attacks due to the cold weather in an imminent winter in the war- hit Afghanistan over the past couple of weeks, the insurgents is mounting a new wave of violent attacks in the country recently.

A senior official with the women's affairs department was shot dead in a drive-by shooting in the country's eastern province of Laghman Monday morning.

"The Acting Director of Provincial Women's Affairs Najia Siddiqi was killed in a drive- by shooting in Sharmaki area in provincial capital Mehtarlam city at about 8:30 a.m. local time today," a spokesman for the Laghman provincial governor, Sarhadi Zhawak, told Xinhua.

Siddiqi died of her wounds on the way to the hospital. The attackers made their good escape shortly after the shooting, he said, adding the police have launched an investigation into the incident in the province some 90 km east of capital Kabul.

He added that Siddiqi was appointed to the post after the former director of the women department Hanifah Safai was killed in a bombing earlier this year.

Earlier Monday morning, the provincial police chief of the country's Nimroz province, some 790 km southwest of capital Kabul, was killed in a roadside bombing.

"The police chief of Nimroz province General Mohammad Musa Rasouli died following a bomb attack on his vehicle in Adraskan district of western Herat province Monday morning," regional police spokesman Abdul Rauf Ahmadi told Xinhua.

Rasouli was traveling in his official vehicle, after attending a security meeting in Herat, to Nimroz provincial capital Zaranj, the spokesman said.

"The police chief was shifted to a nearby hospital but died of his wounds an hour after the roadside bombing attack," Ahmadi said, adding that one policeman was also wounded in the attack that took place at around 7 a.m. local time.

The Afghan Interior Minister Ghulam Mujtaba Patang issued a statement and strongly condemned the bombing for which he blamed the Taliban.

Afghan officials and pro-government figures have been repeatedly targeted by the militants over the past years. More than 50 senior Afghan officials, local elders and pro-government figures have been killed in targeted killings in the insurgency-hit country over the past year. Taliban suspects routinely claim responsibility for such incidents.

The Taliban insurgent group, which launched an annual rebel offensive on May 3 this year, has said that anyone working for the government and the NATO-led troops are legitimate targets of the militants.

Taliban has also warned the civilians to stay away from official gatherings, military convoys and centers regarded as the legitimate targets by militants. They also warned people against supporting government and foreign troops.

In addition, a U.S. soldier with the U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USFOR-A) was killed on Sunday in eastern Afghanistan.

"A U.S. Forces-Afghanistan service member died in eastern Afghanistan today," the USFOR-A forces confirmed in a statement issued late Sunday, without providing more details.

However, the local media reported that a U.S. special force member was killed in a mission that rescued an abducted American citizen in a raid that also left seven Taliban militants dead.

Meantime, the U.S. forces confirmed that they rescued an American citizen, who was a doctor named Dilip Joseph, during an operation in eastern Afghanistan on Sunday.

Joseph was abducted by the Taliban on Wednesday Dec. 5 in the vicinity of Sarobi district, lying some 50 km east of Kabul, the statement issued here Sunday said.

General John Allen, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, said in a statement that he ordered the mission when intelligence showed that Joseph was in imminent danger of injury or death, adding that "Joseph is now undergoing evaluations."

The Taliban claimed responsibility for a failed suicide bombing against the country's intelligence service chief Assadullah Khalid on Thursday.

Khalid is recovering from injuries that he sustained when a bomber detonated hidden explosives inside his body in an agency's compound in Kabul.

The recent attacks are being seen as a setback to fragile reconciliation efforts with insurgents and the seeking for a political solution to the war in Afghanistan.

Separately, five armed militants were killed and five were wounded in a clash in Nangarhar province, 120 km east of Kabul, on Sunday afternoon.

"The clash took place when a group of special-counter narcotics police forces launched a poppy opium eradication campaign in Khogyani district Sunday afternoon," spokesman for the governor, Ahmad Zia Abdul Zai, told Xinhua on Monday.

He said additional forces arrived in the area shortly after the fighting.

"Seven more armed militants were captured by the police. The security forces also found and seized weapons and explosives placed in two small shops around the area,"

Up to 102 Afghan security personnel had lost their lives in eradicating poppy fields so far this year, Afghan officials said.

Afghanistan remains the main producer of opium as about 90 percent of the world's opium, the raw material used in manufacturing heroin, is produced in this country, according to reports.

More than 3700 tons of opium was produced in Afghanistan last year, officials said.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **US: Service Member Died in Afghan Rescue Mission**

Sunday's rescue of an American doctor officials say was kidnapped in Afghanistan by the Taliban cost a U.S. service member his life.

A NATO spokesman on Monday discussed the rescue of Dr. Dilip Joseph from what he described as kidnappers "heavily armed" with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades.

"The operation took part in eastern Afghanistan and very sadly one of the soldiers who was taking part in the rescue operations died, and our thoughts and condolences go to the families and to the friends of this individual," said Brigadier General Gunter Katz.

U.S. President Barack Obama spoke about the death Sunday, saying the U.S. special operations team member and his teammates "remind us once more of the selfless service that allows our nation to stay strong, safe and free." Defense Secretary Leon Panetta also praised the service member, calling him a "fallen hero."

Dr. Joseph was rescued early Sunday in a joint operation by U.S. and Afghan forces after intelligence showed he was in imminent danger of injury or death. The special operations service member killed in the operation is reported to be a Navy SEAL.

Officials say Dr. Joseph and two Afghan co-workers were abducted last Wednesday outside the Afghan capital, in the Sarobi district of Kabul province. The two Afghans were released Saturday after extensive negotiations.

The three worked for Morning Star Development, a Colorado, U.S.-based relief group that helps rebuild communities in Afghanistan.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **US-led trooper killed in southern Afghanistan blast: ISAF**

A soldier serving with the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has been killed in a bomb blast in the troubled southern Afghanistan, the Western military contingent says.

“An International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) service member died following an improvised explosive (IED) device attack in southern Afghanistan today,” the NATO-led coalition forces said in a press release on Monday.

The Western military coalition forces in Afghanistan have not released the nationality of the soldier or the exact location of the attack.

According to the latest figures released by the website icasualties.org, 3237 foreign soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan since the US-led war began in 2001.

The increasing number of military casualties in Afghanistan has caused widespread anger in the US and other NATO member states, undermining public support for the Afghan war.

The US-led war in Afghanistan removed the Taliban from power, but insecurity continues to rise across Afghanistan, despite the presence of thousands of US-led troops.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>



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