



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

The Restructuring Procees of Iraq

Irak'ın Yeniden Yapılanma Süreci

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1. IRAQ

- **Nujaifi heading to Arbil this evening**

Baghdad / NINA / --Parliament Speaker Osama Nujaifi will be this evening in Arbil capital of Kurdistan province to calm the escalation of tension between Baghdad and Arbil .

A statement by Nujaifi office said : "This visit is a complement to Nujaifi former initiative in this regard , also comes at the request of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to spend more efforts for the purpose of calming down the situation after repeated reports that confirmed an intensive redeployment of Peshmargah forces in the vicinity of Kirkuk city as well as in different localities of the disputed areas .

The statement added: " Bbarzana confirmed these reports in a pfone call with Nujaifi last night ."

http://www.ninanews.com/english/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GELJFG

- **Kuwaiti Prime Minister is to visit Iraq this weekend**

BAGHDAD / NINA / A familiar source said that the Kuwaiti Prime Minister, Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah will visit Iraq early next week at the invitation of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

The source told the National Iraqi News Agency / NINA / that the two sides would discuss ways to strengthen relations between the two countries in various fields, including economic.

The Kuwaiti Prime Minister, during a meeting with the head of the Iraqi Journalists Syndicate Mo'aid al-Lami and Iraqi media delegation, which visited Kuwait earlier this month, expressed his country desire to sign a number of agreements during his visit to Iraq in December at the invitation of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Also He looked forward to the expected visit by al-Maliki to Kuwait "for the sustainability of these relationships Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah established during his meetings with al-Maliki, especially in his visit to Baghdad to attend the Arab summit."

He explained: "It is our duty to forget the past and look to the future and the common interests that bind the two peoples of Iraq and Kuwait" at the same time praising the consistently elite visits of delegations between the two countries to break all the sediment.

http://www.ninanews.com/english/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GELJDE

- **Vice President meets UAE's ambassador in Iraq**

BAGHDAD / NINA / Iraqi Vice President, Khudair al-Khuzaiie discussed with the UAE Ambassador, Abdullah Ibrahim al-Shehhi bilateral relations and ways of developing them and the latest developments in the region.

He stressed, during the meeting the "Iraq's desire to establish better relations with the Gulf countries, especially the United Arab of Emirates" asserting that "Iraq's desire to develop economic relations and open areas of investment between the two countries," according to a statement by his office today 4, Dec.

Khuzaiie said: "There are challenges in the region; therefore all Arab and Islamic countries should be united and work to overcome them."

For his part, Al-Shehhi expressed his country's desire to develop its relations with Iraq at all levels, adding that Iraq possesses elements of prosperity and progress.

http://www.ninanews.com/english/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GELIMK

- **Nujaifi heads to Erbil this evening to calm the tense situation**

BAGHDAD / NINA / The Office of House Speaker Osama Nujaifi announced that Nujaifi will travel to Arbil this evening to meet with the President of Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani and to calm the tense situation between the federal government and the province.

A statement by the Office of Nujaifi said, "This visit comes to complement Nujaifi's initiative to calm the crisis taking place between the federal government and the Kurdistan region, also comes at the request of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to more intervention for the purpose of calming the situation after news talks that forces of the Peshmerga has moved to Kirkuk."

The statement added: "al-Nujaifi contacted Barzani, who confirmed the news that Kurdish forces has moved to the disputed areas."

The House Speaker Osama Nujaifi has announced today, during his meeting with the Canadian ambassador to Iraq Mark Kozdekke that "He will visit the Kurdistan region today for the purpose of communication and calm Kurds, because the House of Representatives is responsible to achieve peace and save the Constitution, stressing that the crisis between the central government and the provincial government is still interacting significantly"

http://www.ninanews.com/english/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=GELIMH

- **Kurdish MP: Talabani's interference to settle crisis between CG, KRG "Necessary"**

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Ruz Mahdi, of the Kurdistan Alliance assured that the interference of the President, Jalal Talabani, to settle the crisis between Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government is necessary and expected.

He stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) "The claim that the patriotic stances is limited to one community or one political side."

"Who gave the right to say that the Kurds participating in the political process are not patriots while the others are patriotic?" he questioned.

"We strived for the sake of creating a democratic Iraq more than what some political sides participating in the political process," he continued.

"The President, Jalal Talabani, is the protector of the constitution and he has the right to interfere to solve the crisis," he mentioned.

"If the crisis continued as it is, all sides must take daring measures," he concluded.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=23897:kurdish-h-mp-talabanis-interference-to-settle-crisis-between-cg-kr-q-necessary-q-&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **MP accuses KR of committing serious violations**

Baghdad (AIN) -MP Salman al-Musawi of the State of law Coalition accused Kurdistan Region of committing serious political and economic transgressions.

Musawi stated to AIN "Kurdistan Region commits serious economic, political and military violations where all these files will be revealed and published for the public," stressing that "The first loser in the crisis between Baghdad and Erbil is the Kurdish people therefore it is better for the Kurds to get to the dialogue table."

"Among these violations is, the sheltering of the fugitive former Vice President, Tariq al-Hashimi, the diplomatic violation represented by the visit of the Turkish Foreign Minister to the Region, in addition to revoking the neighboring and world countries against Iraq," he added confirming "As for the economic transgression it is represented by conducting smuggling operations and opening of the unofficial border crossings at the KR."

He continued saying "The detained terrorists and smugglers are released by force by Peshmerga military forces," pointing out that "There are evidences for purchasing weapons by the KR from international companies of different types, heavy, medium and light weapons."

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=23888:mp-accuses-kr-of-committing-serious-violations-&catid=41:2011-11-19-15-21-19

- **Dahlaki: Iraqis not supporting armed conflict between CG, KRG**

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Ra'ad al-Dahlaki, of the Iraqiya Slate confirmed that the Iraqis do not support the escalation of the crisis and the attempt to conduct armed conflicts between the Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

He stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) "Recently, some sides attempt to start armed conflict between the CG and KRG which is an attempt to turn the political crisis into social one," noting that "These are red lines which must not be violated."

"The politicians must realize that the Iraqi should not kill an Iraq," he assured, stressing that "The politicians have to work to reach a common vision to solve the problems without shedding bloods."

He called "The politicians to avoid exploiting the issue of the disputed areas that must be run by their people to gain political interests."

"The current stage is dangerous and the Iraqis do not support the conflicts that aim at achieving political interests," he concluded.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=23908:dahlaki-iraqis-not-supporting-armed-conflict-between-cg-krg-&catid=42:2011-11-19-15-21-51

2. IRAN

- **'Several arrested over Iran blogger death'**

Iranian Prosecutor General and Judiciary Spokesman Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei says several police officers have been arrested in connection with the death in custody of Iranian blogger Sattar Beheshti, Press TV reports.

“Seven people from Iran’s police force have been arrested in Sattar Beheshti’s case, some of whom have been interrogated and are out on bail,” Mohseni-Ejei said in a press conference on Monday.

It is clear that the police have acted with negligence and are at fault for the place Sattar Beheshti was kept and the way he was treated, Mohseni-Ejei added.

The Iranian judiciary official further said that on different occasions Beheshti had expressed discontent over his situation. “There should have been direct supervision over the interrogations,” Mohseni-Ejei said.

The Iranian judiciary official also said that the coroner's office had not yet provided a final explanation for the Iranian blogger’s death.

“The coroner’s office has stated that the reason of death is not yet clear, but shock could be the cause of death; this shock could be physical or psychological. However, the doctors have stated that there is no [sign of] physical shock on the body.”

Beheshti was charged with and arrested for cyber crime and later passed away in prison in early November. Iranian Judiciary Chief Ayatollah Sadeq Amoli Larijani ordered an investigation into his death.

On November 11, Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee formed a subcommittee headed by the Iranian lawmaker Mehdi Davatgari to probe the case.

Following the investigations, Davatgari said on November 26 that, “The Judiciary's measure for arresting Sattar Beheshti has been legal, but the violation by cyber police in this case is indisputable.”

In a decree issued on December 1, Iran Police Chief Brigadier General Esmail Ahmadi-Moqaddam fired the country's cyber police chief, Mohammad Hassan Shokrian, due to “negligence and insufficient supervision over the conduct of his subordinates” who handled the case of the deceased blogger.”

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/04/276083/several-arrested-over-iran-blogger-death/>

- **Iran condemns US Senate sanctions bid**

Iran has slammed the recent sanctions bid approved by the US Senate against the Islamic Republic as contradictory to Washington's declared support for diplomacy over Tehran's nuclear energy program.

“The recent measure by the [US] Senate is incompatible with the claims made by the US government in support of diplomacy and negotiation,” Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said on Monday.

On November 30, the US Senate approved a new round of sanctions against Iran's energy, port, shipping and shipbuilding sectors. The amendment should pass through the House of Representatives and should be signed by US President Barack Obama before turning into law.

A report published on the website of Foreign Policy on Friday, however, said that the White House had been against the new measure and that it had conveyed a message indicating its opposition to the senators through its National Security Council Spokesman Tommy Vietor hours before the amendment was passed.

Even if the opposition of the US President Barack Obama administration to the new round of sanctions is verified, it will be indicative of the confusion in the corridors of power in the United

States, Mehmanparast said, adding that the policies of such confused power systems are “untrustworthy.”

Mehmanparast said the approval of such laws undermines the basic principles of international law, including sovereign equality.

“The measure demonstrates to the world public opinion that the logic behind Iran’s resistance against the US bullying approach is a strong one, which is aimed at the negation of unilateralism and a commitment to the principles of international law in order to strengthen international peace and stability.”

The US, Israel and some of their allies falsely claim that Tehran is pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program. The US and European Union have use the unfounded accusation as a pretext to impose international and unilateral sanctions on Iran.

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/04/276074/iran-condemns-us-sanctions-bid/>

- **Iran captures intruding US drone over Persian Gulf waters**

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

IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi made the announcement on Tuesday, adding that the Iranian armed forces enjoy full intelligence command over foreign movements in the Persian Gulf region.

Referring to the captured ScanEagle drone, the Iranian commander pointed out, “Such drones are usually launched from large aircraft carriers.”

The ScanEagle drone, which has a 10ft (3m) wingspan, is a long-endurance aircraft built by Insitu, a subsidiary of Boeing.

Commander Fadavi further said that the IRGC Navy is fully monitoring all the movements of the foreign forces in the Persian Gulf and the strategic Strait of Hormuz to counter any potential threats against the country.

Earlier in December 2011, the Iranian military also grounded a US RQ-170 Sentinel stealth aircraft while it was flying over the Iranian city of Kashmar, some 140 miles (225km) from the Afghan border.

The US RQ-170 Sentinel stealth aircraft was downed with minimal damage by the Iranian Army's electronic warfare unit. The drone was one of America's most advanced spy aircraft.

Last month, Iran repelled a US drone that had entered the country's airspace above the territorial waters of the Islamic Republic in the Persian Gulf.

Brigadier General Amirali Hajizadeh, the commander of the Aerospace Division of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), said that the drone had been driven away by Iranian forces as it attempted to gather intelligence around Kharg Island in southern Iran.

Hajizadeh also warned that the country's armed forces would respond with stronger action if US drones attempted to violate Iran's airspace again.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/04/276071/iran-captures-intruding-us-drone/>

- **Iran, Egypt key to unity of Muslim world: Lawmaker**

A senior Iranian lawmaker has highlighted the significance of Iran and Egypt in promoting stability in the Middle East and uniting the Muslim world.

“Egypt and Iran can play an important and effective role in the Middle East region for promoting peace and security, and providing proper grounds for unity of the Muslim world,” said head of Iran Majlis Research Center Kazem Jalali at his Monday meeting with Head of Egypt's interests section in Tehran Khalid al-Said Ibrahim Amari.

He pointed to historical, cultural and religious commonalities between Iran and Egypt and called for the expansion of mutual ties in all spheres, particularly in parliamentary affairs.

The Iranian legislator also indicated the readiness of Iran Majlis to transfer its experiences to the Egyptian legislative bodies, especially the newly elected parliament.

Jalali hailed Egypt’s 2011 revolution as a “great achievement for the regional nations,” adding, “Every revolution is usually followed by a transition period which has to be passed and the Egyptian revolution is no exception to this rule. We hope to see stability and calm in this country very soon.”

Amari, for his part, pointed to the historical and cultural ties between Iran and Egypt and called for further cooperation between officials of the two countries in an attempt to boost bilateral relations.

He thanked Iranian nation and government for supporting Egyptian revolution and described Iran and Egypt as “two wings of the Islamic civilization” in the east and west of the Middle East.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/276005/iran-egypt-key-to-muslims-unity/>

- **Global arrogance backs terrorist attacks against media: Iran MP**

Following the recent bomb attack on vehicles belonging to Iran's al-Alam and Press TV news networks in Syria, an Iranian lawmaker says the global arrogance supports terrorists in their attacks against independent media.

“The imposition of sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) by the [US] Senate simultaneous with militants’ attack on al-Alam office in Syria indicate that the global arrogance uses any means to prevent dissemination of correct news by our country’s media,” Nasrollah Pejmanfar said on Monday.

On Friday, the US Senate approved a new round of sanctions against Iran over its nuclear energy program. The new embargoes against Iran’s energy, port, shipping and shipbuilding sectors, also impose restrictions on the IRIB and its chief, Ezzatollah Zarghami.

The decision aims to block all the IRIB assets and prevent others from doing business with it.

The new sanctions were passed after two young men, who were caught on camera, approached an SNG (satellite news gathering) truck belonging to Press TV and Al-Alam television networks in Damascus. One of them quickly attached an explosive device to the bottom of the vehicle near Press TV office and ran away.

The bomb exploded but no one was hurt as a result of the blast. Several other vehicles surrounding the area were also damaged.

Pejmanfar added that Western media never cover the brutal onslaught against the Syrian and Palestinian nations by militants and the Israeli regime but independent media, including Press TV and al-Alam, are taking proper steps to broadcast such news in spite of great danger.

He said news coverage of Syrian militants’ crimes by Press TV and al-Alam has enraged Syria opposition groups.

Terrorists and their Western-Arab allies are not happy with Iranian media performance and this is the reason why they seek to eliminate them by threat and intimidation, he concluded.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/276006/global-arrogance-backs-attack-on-media/>

- **Iran FM urges political solution to ongoing Syria crisis**

Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi has stressed the importance of restoring peace in Syria, urging the necessity of a political solution to resolve the ongoing unrest in the Arab country.

In a meeting with the visiting deputy chairman of Syria's National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change Haytham Manna in Tehran on Monday, Salehi said Syrian-Syrian talks between the government and opposition groups would end the country's crisis.

He briefed the Syrian official on Iran's efforts at regional and international levels to restore peace in Syria, saying, "The current situation in this country [Syria] is not beneficial to any of the involved parties."

Salehi added that certain foreign meddling moves which aim to deepen political and religious differences in Syria are in line with politically-motivated objectives of ill-wishing countries.

The Iranian minister noted that a meeting on the national dialogue in Syria which was recently held in the Iranian capital, Tehran, further underlined Iran's views including necessity of finding a Syrian-Syrian solution, preventing violence, assuaging the Syrian people's sufferings, and providing an appropriate ground for the implementation of democratic trend in the crisis-hit country.

Iran hosted a two-day meeting between the representatives of the Syrian government and opposition groups in November with participants unanimously opposing foreign interference and calling for a peaceful resolution to the conflict in the Arab country. Tehran also plans to hold the second round of the Syria national dialogue meeting.

Manna, for his part, hailed as positive the Islamic Republic's efforts and measures to resolve the ongoing crisis in Syria.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since mid-March 2011. Many people, including large numbers of security personnel, have been killed in the violence.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/275955/iran-urges-political-solution-to-syria/>

3. SYRIA

- **Obama warns Syria over chemical weapons**

Barack Obama, the US president, has warned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad not to use chemical weapons on his own people, saying there would be consequences if he were to do so.

"Today I want to make it absolutely clear to Assad and those under his command: The world is watching," Obama said on Monday.

"The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable and if you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons there will be consequences and you will be held accountable," Obama said.

But Syrian state media quoted its foreign ministry as saying that it would "never under any circumstances" use such weapons, "if such weapons exist".

Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state who is in Prague, the capital of Czech Republic, said she would not outline any specifics.

"But suffice it to say, we are certainly planning to take action if that eventuality were to occur," she said.

Earlier in the day, a senior White House spokesman said that the US and its allied intelligence had monitored Syrian movement of chemical weapons components in recent days.

"We are concerned that an increasingly beleaguered regime, having found its escalation of violence through conventional means inadequate, might be considering the use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people," Jay Carney, press secretary, said at a White House briefing.

"And as the president has said, any use or proliferation of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime would cross a red line for the United States," he added.

Al Jazeera's Alan Fisher, reporting from Washington, said: "It's clear there is a concern on the Americans' part, as there has been since the start of the rebel uprising in Syria, that perhaps the Assad regime could turn to its chemical weapons stockpile - something it says that it may not have - to attack its own people."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012123194243690946.html>

- **Syrian foreign ministry spokesman 'defects'**

There are unconfirmed reports that the spokesman of the Syrian foreign ministry has defected.

Wael Merza, Syrian National Coalition presidential adviser, said that Makdissi had arrived in London. a claim Al Jazeera could not confirm.

Lebanons' Al Manar television station reported that Makdissi had been sacked for making statements that do not reflect the state's line.

"We know that in late July, he made comments saying that Syria was not going to use its chemical weapons, admitting, basically, to Syria having chemical weapons," Al Jazeera's Rula Amin reported from Beirut.

"Then there was a lot of effort by the government to try to defuse the statement," she said.

Makdissi's role had been scaled back since then, with fewer statements and press conferences.

"We've heard, from different sources, that he did leave Syria - at least he has not been in Syria for the past two days - through Lebanon and is now in London." our correspondent said, adding that British officials are neither confirming nor denying Makdissi's defection.

Makdissi often spoke at news conferences in Damascus to set out Syria's response to the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

In June of 2011, the Syrian government also fired spokeswoman Reem Haddad for saying that Syrians were seeking shelter in Turkey in order to visit their relatives there.

Hisham Jaber, director of the Middle East Centre for Studies and Research, told Al Jazeera that he believes Makdissi was given permission to visit his family in Lebanon and that he flew to London from Beirut.

"I think he had a reason, maybe, to leave the country, and he made his choice," he said.

"Of course the gentleman is not in the position to have a lot of secrets, but he was very close to the regime and has a lot of information. He's also a very brilliant person and can use his skills among the opposition."

There is no official confirmation on Makdissi's status from the Syrian government.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012123163314873741.html>

- **Syria combining chemicals to make sarin gas: U.S. official**

Syria has begun mixing chemicals that can be used to make deadly sarin gas, a U.S. official told AFP Monday, amid fears that President Bashar al-Assad's forces could attack rebels with chemical weapons.

"We've picked up several indications which lead us to believe that they're combining chemical precursors," the official said, on condition of anonymity, adding that the operation was apparently aimed at making sarin.

U.S. President Barack Obama directly warned Syria's President Bashar al-Assad Monday that he would face "consequences" if he made the "tragic mistake" of turning chemical weapons on his own people.

"Today, I want to make it absolutely clear to Assad and those under his command, the world is watching. The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable," Obama said.

Earlier, a senior U.S. defense official said U.S. and allied intelligence have detected Syrian movement of chemical weapons components in recent days, the Associated Press reported, as the Obama administration strongly warned the Assad regime against using them.

A senior defense official said intelligence officials have detected activity around more than one of Syria's chemical weapons sites in the last week. The defense official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly about intelligence matters.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, in Prague for meetings with Czech officials, reiterated President Barack Obama's declaration that Syrian action on chemical weapons was a "red line" for the United States that would prompt action.

"We have made our views very clear: This is a red line for the United States," Clinton told reporters. "I'm not going to telegraph in any specifics what we would do in the event of credible evidence that the Assad regime has resorted to using chemical weapons against their own people. But suffice it to say, we are certainly planning to take action if that eventuality were to occur."

Syria said Monday it would not use chemical weapons against its own people. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said Syria "would not use chemical weapons - if there are any - against its own people under any circumstances."

Syria has been careful never to confirm that it has any chemical weapons.

The use of chemical weapons would be a major escalation in Assad's crackdown on his foes and would draw international condemnation. In addition to causing mass deaths and horrific injuries to survivors, the regime's willingness to use them would alarm much of the region, particularly neighboring states, including Israel.

At the White House, press secretary Jay Carney said, "We are concerned that in an increasingly beleaguered regime, having found its escalation of violence through conventional means inadequate, might be considering the use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people. And as the president has said, any use or proliferation of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime would cross a red line for the United States. "

Administration officials would not detail what that response might be.

Although Syria is one of only seven nations that have not signed the Chemical Weapons Treaty, it is a party to the 1925 Geneva Protocol that bans the use of chemical weapons in war. That treaty was signed in the aftermath of World War I, when the effects of the use of mustard gas and other chemical agents outraged much of the world.

Clinton didn't address the issue of the fresh activity at Syrian chemical weapons depots, but insisted that Washington would address any threat that arises.

An administration official said the trigger for U.S. action of some kind is the use of chemical weapons or movement with the intent to use or provide them to a terrorist group like Hezbollah. The U.S. is trying to determine whether the recent movement detected in Syria falls into any of those categories, the official said. The administration official was speaking on condition of anonymity this person was not authorized to speak publicly about the issue.

The senior defense official said the U.S. does not believe that any Syrian action beyond the movement of components is imminent.

An Israeli official said if there is real movement on chemical weapons, it would require a response. He didn't say what that might be and spoke on condition of anonymity pending a formal government response to the reports of the latest activities.

Israeli officials have repeatedly expressed concerns that Syrian chemical weapons could slip into the hands of Hezbollah or other anti-Israel groups, or even be fired toward Israel in an act of desperation by Syria.

Syria is believed to have several hundred ballistic surface-to-surface missiles capable of carrying chemical warheads.

Its arsenal is a particular threat to the American allies, Turkey and Israel, and Obama singled out the threat posed by the unconventional weapons earlier this year as a potential cause for deeper U.S. involvement in Syria's civil war. Up to now, the United States has opposed military intervention or providing arms support to Syria's rebels for fear of further militarizing a conflict that activists say has killed more than 40,000 people since March 2011.

Clinton said that while the actions of President Bashar Assad's government have been deplorable, chemical weapons would bring them to a new level.

"We once again issue a very strong warning to the Assad regime that their behavior is reprehensible, their actions against their own people have been tragic," she said. "But there is no doubt that there's a line between even the horrors that they've already inflicted on the Syrian people and moving to what would be an internationally condemned step of utilizing their chemical weapons."

Activity has been detected before at Syrian weapons sites, believed to number several dozen.

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said in late September the intelligence suggested the Syrian government had moved some of its chemical weapons in order to protect them. He said the U.S. believed that the main sites remained secure.

Asked Monday if they were still considered secure, Pentagon press secretary George Little declined to comment about any intelligence related to the weapons.

Senior lawmakers were notified last week that U.S. intelligence agencies had detected activity related to Syria's chemical and biological weapons, said a U.S. intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door meetings. All congressional committees with an interest in Syria, from the intelligence to the armed services committees, are now being kept informed.

"I can't comment on these reports but I have been very concerned for some time now about Syria's stockpiles of chemical weapons and its stocks of advanced conventional weapons like shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles," said House intelligence committee Chairman Mike Rogers, R-Mich. "We are not doing enough to prepare for the collapse of the Assad regime, and the dangerous vacuum it will create. Use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime would be an extremely serious escalation that would demand decisive action from the rest of the world," he added.

Syria is believed to have one of the world's largest chemical weapons programs, and the Assad regime has said it might use the weapons against external threats, though not against Syrians. The U.S. and Jordan share the same concern about Syria's chemical and biological weapons - that they could fall into the wrong hands should the regime in Syria collapse and lose control of them.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/03/253185.html>

4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Israel rejects outcry over settlement plan**

A defiant Israel has rejected a wave of American and European condemnations over plans to build thousands of new homes in east Jerusalem and West Bank settlements, vowing to press forward with the construction in the face of widespread international opposition.

The UK, France, Spain, Denmark and Sweden on Monday summoned Israeli ambassadors in their respective countries to protest Israel's plans to build more settler homes.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's office said Israel would continue to stand up for its interests "even in the face of international pressure, and there will be no change in the decision taken".

The announcement from Netanyahu's office was likely to deepen a rift that has emerged between Israel and some of its closest allies following the UN's recognition of a Palestinian state last week.

Russia and Germany have also expressed opposition to the building of additional settlements, and the White House issued a statement urging the "Israeli leader to reconsider their unilateral decisions".

The official twitter-account of Russia's ministry of foreign affairs said that, "Israeli construction on Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 is illegal, unrecognised and condemned by Russia and internationally."

Media reports on Monday also said France and Britain were considering recalling their ambassadors to Israel over the plans.

Al Jazeera's Charlie Angela, reporting from London, said that the British government was "frustrated not only by the scale of this expansion...but also by the timing of the announcement."

French President Francois Hollande said he was deeply concerned about the effect it could have on the peace process.

"I said, as the French foreign minister did, that we are highly pre-occupied by what was announced by the Israeli government - the installation of new colonies composed of 3000

settlements with all the consequences it could have on the peace process," said Hollande on Monday.

'Fatal blow'

The decision to build in a key area east of Jerusalem, called E1, sparked a storm of diplomatic protest from Washington and Brussels as well as from UN chief Ban Ki-moon, who on Sunday warned it would deal an "almost fatal blow" to the prospects of resolving the conflict.

E1 is a highly contentious area of the West Bank that runs between the easternmost edge of annexed east Jerusalem and the Maaleh Adumim settlement.

Palestinians bitterly oppose the project, as it would effectively cut the occupied West Bank in two, north to south, and sever it from Jerusalem, and make the creation of a viable Palestinian state even more problematic.

Carl Bildt, Sweden's foreign minister, told Al Jazeera that Sweden wants to "urge the Israeli government to take a step back".

"We had anticipated that they would be ready now to enter into direct peace negotiations with the Palestinians after the vote in the UN, and instead, we are extremely concerned over the announcement that we've heard from the Israeli government," said Bildt.

Josh Lockman, a professor of international law at the University of Southern California, said Israel's reaction to Palestine's new UN status brings into doubt its "genuine commitment to a two-state solution".

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012123101816967394.html>

- **United Nations tells Israel to let in nuclear inspectors**

The U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly approved a resolution Monday calling on Israel to quickly open its nuclear program for inspection and backing a high-level conference to ban nuclear weapons from the Middle East which was just canceled.

All the Arab nations and Iran had planned to attend the conference in mid-December in Helsinki, Finland, but the United States announced on Nov. 23 that it wouldn't take place, citing political turmoil in the region and Iran's defiant stance on nonproliferation. Iran and some Arab nations countered that the real reason for the cancellation was Israel's refusal to attend.

The resolution, approved by a vote of 174-6 with 6 abstentions, calls on Israel to join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty "without further delay" and open its nuclear facilities to inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Those voting "no" were Israel, the U.S., Canada, Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau.

Resolutions adopted by the 193-member General Assembly are not legally binding but they do reflect world opinion and carry moral and political weight.

Israel refuses to confirm or deny it has nuclear bombs though it is widely believed to have a nuclear arsenal. It has refused to join the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, or NPT, along with three nuclear weapon states - India, Pakistan and North Korea.

The Arab proposal to create a weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone in the Mideast, and to pressure Israel to give up its undeclared arsenal of perhaps 80 nuclear warheads, was endorsed at an NPT conference in 1995 but never acted on. In 2010, the 189 parties to the 1970 treaty called for convening a conference in 2012 on the establishment of a WMD-free zone in the Middle East.

The resolution, which was approved by the assembly's disarmament committee before the conference was cancelled, noted the decision to hold it "with satisfaction."

But Israel has long said there first must be a Mideast peace agreement before the establishment of a Mideast zone free of weapons of mass destruction. The region’s Muslim nations argue that Israel’s undeclared nuclear arsenal presents the greatest threat to peace in the region.

Just before Monday’s vote, Iranian diplomat Khodadad Seifi told the assembly “the truth is that the Israeli regime is the only party which rejected to conditions for a conference.” He called for “strong pressure on that regime to participate in the conference without any preconditions.”

Israeli diplomat Isi Yanouka said his country has continuously pointed to the danger of nuclear proliferation in the Mideast, singling out Iran and Syria by name.

“All these cases challenge Israel’s security and cast a dark shadow at the prospect of embarking on a meaningful regional security process,” he said.

“The fact that the sponsors include in this anti-Israeli resolution language referring to the 2012 conference proves above all the ill-intent of the Arab states with regard to this conference,” Yanouka said.

Syrian diplomat Abdullah Hallak told the assembly his government was angry that the conference wasn’t going to take place because of “the whim of just one party, a party with nuclear warheads.”

“We call on the international community to put pressure on Israel to accept the NPT, get rid of its arsenal and delivery systems, in order to allow for peace and stability in our region,” he said.

The conference’s main sponsors are the U.S., Russia and Britain. British Foreign Office Minister Alistair Burt has said it is being postponed, not cancelled.

While the United States voted against the resolution, it voted in favor of two paragraphs in it that were put to separate votes. Both support universal adherence to the NPT, and call on those

countries that aren't parties to ratify it "at the earliest date." The only "no" votes on those paragraphs were Israel and India.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/04/253250.html>

- **Pressure mounts on Israel to reverse on settlement activity**

Australia on Tuesday became the latest country to summon its Israeli ambassador to convey concerns over plans to build new settlements in east Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Australia joined Britain and France in opposing Israeli settlement activity.

Foreign Minister Bob Carr said the Israeli proposal, and plans to withhold tax revenue from the Palestinian Authority, "enormously complicate the prospects for resuming negotiations between the two sides."

"Australia has long opposed all settlement activity," he added.

"Such activity threatens the viability of a two-state solution without which there will never be security in Israel."

Israel, whose settlements on occupied or annexed Palestinian land have long been a thorn in the side of peace efforts, has refused to back down.

Its move is seen as payback for the Palestinians winning non-member observer state status at the United Nations on Thursday.

Some of the 3,000 homes are to be built in a corridor of land called E1, an area of the occupied West Bank that runs between the easternmost edge of annexed east Jerusalem and an existing Israeli settlement, Maaleh Adumim.

Britain, France, Denmark, Spain and Sweden have all summoned Israeli ambassadors to express deep concern, while U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called the plans a “fatal blow” to the two-state solution.

But Israel, whose settlements on occupied or annexed Palestinian land have long been a thorn in the side of peace efforts, remained defiant, insisted it would not back down and laid out revised plans for an additional 1,600 homes.

Israeli settlement plans always raise hackles but Friday’s proposals, seen as payback for the Palestinians winning non-member observer state status at the United Nations on Thursday, are considered particularly contentious.

Palestinians believe construction on E1 will ultimately connect Jerusalem to Maaleh Adumim, largely dividing the northern and southern West Bank and making the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state almost impossible.

Israeli plans for construction in E1 have been on the cards since the early 1990s but have never been implemented due to heavy pressure, largely from the United States.

The international outcry since Friday’s move has been intense.

The U.S. State Department warned on Monday that the E1 area “is particularly sensitive and construction there would be especially damaging to efforts to achieve a two-state solution.”

President Barack Obama’s spokesman Jay Carney ramped up the pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu later in the day, directly calling on him to change course.

“We urge Israeli leaders to reconsider these unilateral decisions and exercise restraint as these actions are counterproductive and make it harder to resume direct negotiations,” Carney told reporters at the White House.

Obama has had a history of strained ties with Netanyahu that date back to the U.S. leader's failed efforts to secure a durable freeze on Israeli settlement activity early in his term.

Since then, the Obama administration has routinely criticized settlement construction announcements, but this time went further than usual in detailing its concerns and publicly asking Israel to reverse course.

The U.S. response is expected to be tempered by recognition that Netanyahu may be taking a tough stand on settlements ahead of a Jan. 22 Israeli national election, but that any actual building could take a long time to place in motion.

It was not immediately known whether Israel gave the United States advance notice of its settlement-building plan.

Meanwhile, Germany, Russia and Japan also criticized the Israeli plans.

But despite the clamor, Israel dug in and even went further by reviving a plan to construct 1,600 new settler homes in the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo.

"Israel continues to insist on its vital interests, even under international pressure. There will be no change in the decision that has been made," a source in Netanyahu's office said earlier.

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas slammed the Israeli decision, and called on the international community to "take the necessary steps to avoid the collapse of everything," his spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina said in a statement.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/04/253245.html>

- **Israel should have accepted Palestinian U.N. bid: Olmert**

Israel had no reason to oppose Palestine’s U.N. observer state membership, according to ex-prime minister Ehud Olmert, who plans to announce Wednesday whether he will run in the next polls.

“I have made my decision and I will announce it in two days,” Olmert told AFP of his political future, after a speech in New York late Monday during which he renewed criticism of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

He said a decision to announcement new settlements in a sensitive occupied area was “certain to offend” the United States after it backed Israel in opposing the Palestinian bid to become a non-member state.

“To be honest with you, I am not sure there was a reason to oppose the request from the Palestinian Authority to upgrade their status,” Olmert said in his speech.

Olmert, who is seeking to rebound from a corruption case that forced him to stand down as premier in 2008, said the U.N. vote last week served Israeli interests more than Palestinian ones because it boosted hopes for a two-state solution.

The former premier praised the “outstanding expression of courage” shown by the US administration in backing Israel at the U.N. last week. The United States and Israel were among only nine countries to oppose the Palestinians.

Israel should have thanked the United States, he added.

“I was utterly surprised -- as I can see now were most countries in the world -- that the next morning the Israeli government decided to do the one thing that was certain to offend the policymakers of the United States” by announcing the new settlements, Olmert added.

The Netanyahu government has said it will build 3,000 homes, some in the E1 area of the West Bank linking annexed East Jerusalem to the Maaleh Adumim Jewish settlement.

Olmert said he had agreed to a request by former US president George W. Bush's administration not to build in E1 because the Palestinians would not agree to peace talks.

"Time is running out" for a settlement with the Palestinians, Olmert added as he condemned any move to dismiss the importance of peace efforts in the campaign for the January 22 election.

"It will be an historical mistake that will be disastrous to the life, to the people to the future of the state of Israel," said Olmert, who has until the end of the week to register to stand in the election.

Netanyahu is the overwhelming favorite in the election. But Olmert, who returns to Jerusalem on Tuesday vowed to "use every platform in the state of Israel in whatever position I will have in order to make sure that we will not miss the opportunity."

The former leader of the opposition Kadima party stepped down as prime minister in 2008 after police called for corruption charges.

In July, a court found Olmert guilty of breach of trust but cleared him on two more serious charges related to the alleged receipt of cash-stuffed envelopes and multiple-billing for trips abroad.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/04/253249.html>

- **Australia calls in Israeli envoy to protest settlement plan**

CANBERRA - Australia summoned the Israeli ambassador on Tuesday to protest against Israel's decision to expand Jewish settlements in east Jerusalem and the West Bank and withhold tax revenue from the Palestinian Authority.

Australia's move followed similar actions in Europe including Spain, France, Britain, Sweden and Denmark in the wake of the Palestinians winning de facto UN recognition of statehood.

"Australia has long opposed all settlement activity," Foreign Minister Bob Carr said in a statement after Israeli Ambassador Yuval Rotem's meeting with senior Australian officials. "Such activity threatens the viability of a two-state solution without which there will never be security in Israel."

Carr, whose country takes up a rotating UN Security Council seat next year, said Israel's actions had complicated the chances of fresh negotiations between the two sides.

"I am extremely disappointed with these reported Israeli decisions," he said.

<http://www.jpost.com/Headlines/Article.aspx?id=294519>

5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Egypt Judicial Council to oversee referendum**

Egypt's Supreme Judicial Council has agreed to oversee the referendum on a draft constitution proposed by Mohamed Morsi, the county's president.

"The Supreme Judicial Council has met and agreed to delegate judges to oversee the constitutional referendum", Mohamed Gadallah, legal adviser to the Egyptian president, said on Monday.

Judge Ahmed Abdul Rahman, a member of the council, also said the judiciary's top body has agreed to assign judges and proesecutors to oversee the vote.

He went on to say no judge would be allowed to reject the assignment without an excuse acceptable to the council, the state-run al-Ahram daily reported.

The announcement comes as other judges have begun an open-ended strike. Several local media outlets have also joined in the opposition against what they have called Morsi's "dictatorship".

On Sunday, Ahmed al-Zend, head of the independent Judges Club, called for the nation's judges not to oversee the referendum, which may not be recognised without proper oversight.

The Club criticised Morsi for interfering in the judiciary's work and violating its independence through a recent decree by which he makes his decisions immune to judicial review.

Press protest

The press has also joined in, in the criticism of the president, who just completed his first 100 days in office.

Eleven independent and opposition party newspapers have declared they will not go to print on Tuesday.

An editorial in the al-Shuruq daily led with the headline: "Beware -- fascism is coming".

The executive editor-in-chief of the Al-Masry al-Youm newspaper explained why they would not go to print on Tuesday: "We took the decision of suspending the newspaper from printing tomorrow as an objection to the articles in the new Egyptian constitution that limit freedom of speech and also because the constitution does not have the approval of all Egyptian factions," Mohamed Samir said.

Samir warned of 'disastrous' outcomes if neither side of the debate reached a compromise.

"We expect a disastrous scenario if both sides stick to their position and continue to mobilise and rally supporter behind them and if the President's position remains stubborn."

The opposition has called for civil disobedience on Tuesday that will be accompanied by street rallies by thousands of protesters to Morsi's presidential palace.

Demands are centred on cancelling both Morsi's decree that placed him above judicial oversight and the draft constitution rushed through in a night session of the constituent assembly.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/12/2012123142938497845.html>

- **Egypt opposition to march on presidential palace**

CAIRO: Opponents of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi were to march on the presidential palace on Tuesday to protest his power grab and a controversial draft charter, as the country plunged deeper into crisis.

Five marches were set to take off at 4:00 pm (1400 GMT) from several mosques in Cairo towards the Itihadiya presidential palace in the upscale neighbourhood of Heliopolis, organisers said.

Security measures have been tightened around the capital, with some schools and businesses closing early for the day.

A November 22 decree issued by Mursi expanding his powers and enabling him to put to a December 15 referendum a draft constitution -- rejected by liberals, leftists and Christians -- has sparked strikes and deadly protests.

Independent and opposition newspapers refused to publish their Tuesday editions in protest at the lack of press freedom in the constitution.

The move was in order to "stand up to tyranny," independent daily Al-Tahrir said on its website.

"The Egyptian Independent objects to continued restrictions on media liberties, especially after hundreds of Egyptians gave their lives for freedom," read a message on that newspaper's website, its only viewable content on Tuesday morning.

Daily Al-Masry Al-Youm said the papers were "protesting against the articles on the press in the draft constitution... and reject (Morsi's) November 22 decree."

As he faces his worst crisis since taking office in June, Mursi insists the measures are aimed at ending a tumultuous transition following the popular uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

But his opponents have accused him of choosing the same path of autocracy that finally cost Mubarak his presidency.

Mursi's decree not only placed his decisions beyond judicial oversight but also barred any judicial body from dissolving the Islamist-dominated panel that drafted and approved the new constitution, sparking a conflict with the country's judges.

The constitution has become the focal point of a political and ideological battle in Egypt between Islamists who support Mursi and the largely secular-leaning opposition.

The charter has been criticised for failing to protect key rights and for paving the way to a strict interpretation of Islamic law.

Leading dissident and former Arab League chief Amr Mussa, who walked out of the constitution panel, said the charter did not reflect the freedoms that should be guaranteed in the 21st century.

"The document has to be something that makes life easier for Egyptians... not something that requires difficult interpretations, which scares people," Mussa told reporters. "We are in the 21st century."

The decision to go to a referendum on December 15 caused further upheaval, including within the judiciary itself.

On Monday, top judges said they would ensure judicial supervision of the referendum, despite calls for a boycott by some of their colleagues.

The decision by the Supreme Judicial Council marked a boost for Mursi and dashed opposition hopes of stripping the referendum and the constitution of their legitimacy.

Analysts said the decision by the Supreme Judicial Council indicated a rift within the judiciary but there are likely to be enough officials to monitor the voting.

"Maybe there will not be one judge for every ballot box, but perhaps one judge for every polling booth," said Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyed, a political science lecturer at Cairo university.

Tuesday's march to the presidential palace is the latest in a string of protests which the opposition said could escalate.

"We will see what measures to take, which could include calls for civil disobedience and strikes should Mursi not back down on his decree and the vote go ahead," Tareq al-Khuli of the opposition April 6 movement told AFP on the eve of the marches.

In Cairo's iconic Tahrir Square, hundreds of protesters have been camping out since Mursi issued his decree.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Dec-04/197161-egypt-opposition-to-march-on-presidential-palace.ashx#axzz2E5A0UrA6>

- **DR Congo army returns to Goma**

DR Congo troops have entered the eastern mining city of Goma, two days after rebel M23 fighters withdrew in line with a regionally brokered deal.

But the rebels have warned they will retake the city, if the government fails to meet their demands within 48 hours.

The rebels' lightning capture of Goma on November 20 eight months after they launched an uprising against Kinshasa had sparked fears of a wider war and major humanitarian crisis, and their withdrawal was widely welcomed.

Dozens of government army trucks, crammed with heavily armed soldiers, entered the regional capital in the afternoon, after trundling along the shores of Lake Kivu.

A battalion of around 600 men in total is expected to move into Goma, while government officials have also begun to arrive back to reassert their authority after 12-days of rebel rule.

While the M23 fighters have left the city, rebels remained camped just beyond the outskirts, appearing to break a deal to pull back 20 kilometres from Goma, with residents fearing renewed clashes as the two sides edge closer.

"Our people are still there because you can only withdraw in stages, that is how it is done," said rebel commander Antoine Manzi.

Ugandan army chief Aronda Nyakairima, speaking after a meeting in Goma with army chiefs of DR Congo and Rwanda, said he was "completely satisfied with the implementation of the accord so far" and that the rebels would fully pullback.

DR Congo's interior minister, Richard Muyej Mangez, said the government was ready to start talks "in the next few days", but that M23 should respect the agreement to withdraw the full 20 kilometres.

Uganda will mediate the talks, which will begin once a full withdrawal has taken place.

The region, which borders Rwanda and Uganda, has been the cradle of back-to-back wars that embroiled other nations from 1996 to 2003 and were fought largely over its vast wealth of copper, diamonds, gold and coltan.

Neighbours' role

Meanwhile, UN experts have accused Rwanda and Uganda, which played active roles in DR Congo's previous wars, of supporting M23, a charge both countries deny.

The group of experts quotes local people as saying more than 1,000 Rwandan troops crossed into DR Congo before the offensive and that Rwandan generals helped M23 commander Sultani Makenga lead the attack.

The day Goma was captured, some 500 Rwandan soldiers crossed into the city from the Rwandan town of Gisenyi, to back up the rebel forces, the report quotes various Congolese and Rwandan sources as saying.

The report includes photos of several people it identifies as Rwandan troops on Congolese territory.

M23 was founded by former fighters in a Tutsi rebel group whose members were integrated into the regular army under a 2009 peace deal that they claim was never fully implemented.

Aid agencies are struggling to cope with the newly displaced, with some 285,000 people having fled their homes since the rebels began their uprising in April.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/12/201212318492118383.html>

- **Kenya crimes suspects form poll alliance**

Two Kenyan presidential hopefuls suspected of crimes against humanity have said they intend to join forces in next year's vote by running on the same ticket.

Deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta and former cabinet minister William Ruto announced the deal at a rally hosted by Ruto's United Republican Party (URP) and Kenyatta's The National Alliance party in the Rift Valley town of Nakuru, 140km northwest of the capital Nairobi, on Sunday.

Under the agreement, Kenyatta will seek the presidency and former rival Ruto will be his vice-presidential running mate.

"We have agreed here to make a government with Uhuru Kenyatta as the president, and William Ruto will be the vice president. We have agreed that God-willing, next year URP and TNA will form the next government," Ruto told thousands of supporters gathered in a stadium.

Both Uhuru and Ruto face charges of crimes against humanity before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their alleged role in having orchestrated post-election violence in 2007-2008 that killed at least 1,300 and displaced more than 600,000.

Kenyatta faces five charges of crimes against humanity, including murder, rape, persecution, deportation and other inhumane acts, while Ruto faces three charges of crimes against humanity.

Both have claimed their innocence, remain free and have promised to co-operate with the court.

"Our union is not to attack anyone, but to build Kenya," Kenyatta said at Sunday's rally in one of the areas worst hit by the post-poll ethnic violence. "Our work is to preach peace, and make sure there is no blood spilt again."

'Winning ticket'

The alliance brings together URP and Kenyatta's The National Alliance party (TNA) under the slogan Umoja Kenya

(Kenya Together).

Al Jazeera's Mohammed Adow said the two candidates make a serious political force in the country.

"Uhuru Kenyatta comes from the largest ethnic group in the country. William Ruto comes from the third most popular tribe in Kenya. So together, they actually make the winning ticket," Adow said.

Adow said a future administration combining these two politicians is worrisome to many Kenyans.

"These are two men who've got charges of crimes against humanity hanging over their heads. Although they deny them, these are very serious charges and the International Criminal Court is trying to pin down convictions," he said.

"They want to save themselves and they will do anything within their powers to make sure they survive any conviction and even if it means defying the ICC.

"To defy the ICC, they need to win the elections."

Kenya, as a signatory of the Rome Statute of the ICC, would be forced to act on any arrest warrant issued by the court should the pair refuse to attend trial.

Worst wave of violence

The ICC trials, set to begin on April 10, could coincide with the elections, set for March 4, but which potentially could enter a second round vote within a month.

The pair received a boost this week after the unexpected withdrawal of a petition seeking a court ruling on whether they are eligible to run, as under a new constitution adopted in 2010 those holding public office and charged with a crime must step down.

The violence shattered Kenya's image as a beacon of stability in east Africa when the then-opposition leader Raila Odinga accused President Mwai Kibaki of rigging his way to re-election.

What began as political riots quickly turned into ethnic killings of Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe, which launched reprisal attacks, plunging Kenya into its worst wave of violence since independence in 1963.

Despite efforts to heal the wounds of the ethnic killings four years ago, tensions still run deep between communities, with many key grievances that fed into the violence -- most notably land ownership rights -- still unresolved.

Several presidential hopefuls are expected to unveil alliances ahead of a Tuesday deadline, including Kenyatta's expected main challenger, Prime Minister Raila Odinga, himself a former ally of Ruto.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/12/201212293351420258.html>

- **Egypt's top court shuts down, blames protesters**

CAIRO, (Reuters) - Protests by Islamists allied to President Mohamed Mursi forced Egypt's highest court to adjourn its work indefinitely on Sunday, intensifying a conflict between some of the country's top judges and the head of state.

The Supreme Constitutional Court said it would not convene until its judges could operate without "psychological and material pressure", saying protesters had stopped the judges from reaching the building.

Several hundred Mursi supporters had protested outside the court through the night ahead of a session expected to examine the legality of parliament's upper house and the assembly that drafted a new constitution, both of them Islamist-controlled.

The cases have cast a legal shadow over Mursi's efforts to chart a way out of a crisis ignited by a November 22 decree that temporarily expanded his powers and led to nationwide protests against him and his Muslim Brotherhood group.

The court's decision to suspend its activities appeared unlikely to have any immediate impact on Mursi's drive to get the new constitution passed in a national referendum on December 15.

Judges supervise voting in Egypt, and Mursi will need them to oversee the referendum.

But in a blow to the president, an influential body representing judges decided on Sunday not to oversee the vote, the state news agency reported. The Judges' Club's decisions are not binding on members, however.

Vice President Mahmoud Mekky said on Sunday he was confident the judges would perform that role, despite calls by Mursi's critics in the judiciary for a boycott.

Three people have been killed and hundreds wounded in protests and counter-demonstrations over Mursi's decree.

At least 200,000 of Mursi's supporters attended a rally at Cairo University on Saturday. His opponents are staging an open-ended sit-in in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the cradle of the uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

The National Salvation Front, an alliance of liberal, leftist and socialist opposition groups, called for protests in Tahrir Square on Tuesday against Mursi holding the referendum on what it branded an "illegitimate constitution".

Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood, which propelled him to power in a June election, hope to end the crisis by pushing through the new constitution hastily adopted by the drafting assembly on Friday. The next day the assembly handed the text to Mursi, who called the referendum and urged Egyptians to vote.

"The Muslim Brotherhood is determined to go ahead with its own plans regardless of everybody else. There is no compromise on the horizon," said Hassan Nafaa, a professor of political science at Cairo University.

DEEP SUSPICION

Outside the Supreme Constitutional Court, Muslim Brotherhood supporters rallied behind the referendum date. "Yes to the constitution," said a banner held aloft by one protester. Chants demanded the "purging of the judiciary".

The interior minister told the head of the court that the building was accessible and that the protests were peaceful, according a statement from the ministry.

The protest reflected the deep suspicion harbored by Egypt's Islamists towards a court they see as a vestige of the Mubarak era. The same court ruled in June to dissolve the Muslim Brotherhood-led lower house of parliament.

Since then, several legal cases have challenged the legitimacy of the upper house of parliament and the 100-member constituent assembly that wrote the constitution.

Those against the upper house have focused on the legality of the law by which it was elected, while the constitutional assembly has faced a raft of court cases alleging that the way it was picked was illegal.

Mursi believes securing approval for the new constitution in a popular referendum will bury all arguments on the legality of the constituent assembly, as well as controversy over the text it worked through the night to finish on Friday.

It will also override the November 22 decree that drew concern from Western governments and a rebellion by sections of the judiciary. The decree shielded Mursi from judicial oversight.

While the Islamists' critics, including representatives of the Christian minority, have accused the Brotherhood of trying to hijack the constitution, investors appear to have seen Mursi's moves as a harbinger of stability. They were also relieved that Saturday's mass Islamist protest went off calmly.

The main stock market index, which lost a tenth of its value in response to Mursi's November 22 decree, rallied more than 2 percent when the market opened on Sunday.

"The events that took place through the weekend, from the approval of the final draft of the constitution and the president calling a referendum, gave some confidence to investors that political stability is on track," said Mohamed Radwan of Pharos Securities, an Egyptian brokerage.

OPPOSITION INFURIATED

But opposition parties have been infuriated by what they see as the Brotherhood's attempt to ram through a constitution that does not enjoy national consensus. Mursi's opponents warn of deeper polarization ahead.

Liberal figures, including former Arab League chief Amr Moussa, pulled out of the constituent assembly last month, as did Christian representatives.

The draft constitution contains Islamist-flavored language which opponents say could be used to whittle away human rights and stifle criticism. It forbids blasphemy and "insults to any person",

does not explicitly uphold women's rights and demands respect for "religion, traditions and family values".

New York-based Human Rights Watch said the draft constitution protected some rights while undermining others.

The text limits presidents to two four-year terms, requires parliamentary approval for their choice of prime minister, and introduces some civilian oversight of the military - although not enough for critics. Mubarak ruled for three decades.

Mursi described it as a constitution that fulfilled the goals of the revolution that ended Mubarak's rule. "Let everyone -- those who agree and those who disagree -- go to the referendum to have their say," he said.

The Islamists are gambling that they will be able to secure a "Yes" vote by mobilizing their core support base.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=32026>

6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Judge probes Saqr's calls over arms to Syrian rebels**

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Prosecutor Judge Hatem Madi Tuesday tasked the Central Criminal Investigations Bureau with examining audio recordings implicating a Lebanese lawmaker in arms transfers to Syrian rebels, judicial sources told The Daily Star.

Future MP Oqab Saqr admitted Monday in comments to pan Arab Ash-Sharq al-Awsat that his voice could be heard in recordings published by a local newspaper discussing supplying weapons to alleged Syrian rebels.

On the series of recordings, published by Al-Akhbar daily, Saqr and a man Al-Akhbar describes as a leader of a militant group in the Syrian opposition make arrangements for the drop-off of weapons to rebels.

Investigators will listen to the audio recordings by Saqr to decide on the correct judicial measures according to Lebanese law and the judicial cooperation agreements between Lebanon and Syria, said the sources.

In his Monday comments, Saqr said he was ready to face any potential legal measures against him over the affair. The MP said he has always abided by the law and does not hide behind his parliamentary immunity.

In the wake of the uprising against President Bashar Assad, Lebanon has adopted a policy of dissociation over events in Syria. In mid-2012 rival political leaders, who are divided over the Syria crisis, vowed to keep Lebanon neutral from developments in its neighbor.

The Future Movement, a major component of the Lebanese opposition, has repeatedly insisted that its support to Syrians is solely of a moral and humanitarian nature.

Speaking earlier to The Daily Star, a former MP and legal expert Mikhael Daher said the public prosecutor's office can request that immunity be removed if there is a case against an MP, adding that inciting violence in another country is a crime.

According to Daher, Parliament is able to strip an MP of his immunity from criminal prosecution with a quorum of 65 lawmakers and a simple majority.

"When the General Prosecutor's Office decides to pursue someone, it asks for him to be stripped of his parliamentary immunity," Daher said.

“Once the speaker receives a request for stripping [an MP] of [his] immunity, he informs Parliament’s secretariat about it and subjects it to a vote before the General Assembly,” Daher added.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Dec-04/197154-judge-investigates-mp-sagr-audio-recordings.ashx#axzz2E5A0UrA6>

- **Syria considering returning bodies of Lebanese fighters**

BEIRUT: Syria is considering handing over the bodies of Lebanese nationals killed in an ambush in Syria’s Tal Kalakh, the country’s ambassador said Tuesday.

“Syria’s Cabinet is examining a request by Lebanon’s Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour to hand over the bodies of the fighters who died in Tal Kalakh, for humanitarian reasons,” Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon Ali Abdel-Karim Ali said in a statement.

Mansour contacted the Syrian ambassador Monday to forward a request to Syrian authorities to hand over the bodies of the fighters from the north Lebanon city of Tripoli “for humanitarian reasons.”

Ali said that the Syrian Cabinet is examining the case and will determine later the right steps and mechanisms to address the issue.

“The steps will be in coordination with minister Mansour,” said the ambassador.

Syrian state television broadcast images Sunday of more than five dead bodies with Lebanese identification, reporting that the men were among 21 Lebanese Salafist fighters who fell into a Syrian Army ambush last Friday.

Amid conflicting reports about the number of casualties, Prime Minister Najib Mikati Monday asked the International Committee of the Red Cross to help retrieve the bodies of the slain Lebanese and obtain information about the fate of the others.

Also Monday, the families of the slain Lebanese staged a sit-in in Tripoli's Tal Square, demanding that Lebanese authorities act to reveal the fate of their loved ones.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Dec-04/197134-syria-considering-returning-bodies-of-lebanese-fighters.ashx#axzz2E5A0UrA6>

- **Jordan raises overnight rate to bolster dinar**

AMMAN: Jordan raised its overnight rate on dinar deposits on Monday by 75 basis points to 4 percent, acting to bolster the currency and guard against capital flight at a time of domestic unrest.

It was the third time the Central Bank of Jordan has raised the deposit rate this year as it seeks to encourage investments in dinar-denominated assets.

The bank said it also raised its one week repo rate, by 50 basis points to 4.25 percent.

Bankers said transfers of dinar assets into dollars have increased following nationwide protests last month after the government ended fuel subsidies, pushing through steep price hikes to keep a lid on a budget deficit that has widened to \$3 billion.

The lifting of the subsidies was a condition for a \$2 billion standby loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), improving chances of foreign donor support for the ailing economy.

"The central bank is concerned about consolidating monetary stability and creating the right climate to spur domestic and foreign investment," it said in a statement.

Jordan faces a period of slow economic growth and investor sentiment has been soured further by the civil unrest.

Economists said the hike, which will hurt companies struggling during the downturn by raising cost of credit, showed policymakers were focused on bolstering the dinar's attractiveness rather than spurring the economy.

Bankers said the rise in the overnight dinar rate would push the differential between returns on three-month dinar and dollar deposits with commercial banks to above 4.5 percent, acting as a brake on capital flight.

"The central bank has no other instrument except to raise interest rates to protect the dinar," one banker said.

Jordan's \$7 billion of foreign reserves have come under severe pressure from the wave of unrest triggered by the Arab Spring, falling to almost half their levels of a year ago, according to central bank data.

The bank said it kept other key interest rates unchanged, with the discount rate staying at 5.00 percent and the one day repo rate at 4.75 percent.

The bank raised rates last year after a period of cuts that ran from 2008, when it eased monetary policy to cushion the economy against the impact of the global financial crisis and to curb inflation.

Bankers predicted Monday's hikes could be followed by other rate increases and would bolster dinar accounts in a banking sector with over \$34 billion deposits.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Business/Middle-East/2012/Dec-03/196981-jordan-raises-overnight-rate-to-bolster-dinar.ashx#axzz2E5A0UrA6>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Unity of Syrian opposition was most crucial step, Saudi FM says**

Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal on Tuesday praised the unity of Syrian opposition factions, saying this became “the most important step which has finally happened.”

The foreign minister, who spoke in a press conference in Riyadh, described the Syrian oppositional coalition as a “positive step forward.”

Syria’s new opposition coalition created a new executive body at a meeting in Cairo on Friday, less than a month after the group came into being with Western and Arab support.

France, Britain, Turkey and Gulf Arab states have already recognized the coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

Prince Al-Faisal announced that a Saudi delegation would attend the “Friends of Syria” meeting later this month.

The 4th Friends of Syria conference will be held in Marrakech in central Morocco on Dec. 12, in an attempt to increase pressure on the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The National Coalition for the Opposition Forces, which was formed by Syrian opposition groups early November in the Qatari capital of Doha, as well as more than 100 senior government officials from “Friends of Syria Group” countries supporting the Syrian opposition will attend the meeting.

The Saudi minister also discussed the United Nations winning bid last week for observer status, saying that he hopes the U.N. would “consider the majority’s decision on Palestine and end Israeli policy of delaying matters.”

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/04/253278.html>

- **Mideast Quartet ineffective: Arab League chief**

Arab League chief has described the so-called Middle East Quartet as ineffective, saying Arab countries must approach the UN to pressure Israel into withdrawing from occupied territories.

The UN Security Council says "let's have more committees... to follow up this, at close rooms, and nobody knows what is happening and nothing happens and that is the Quartet," Nabil al-Arabi said in an interview with the AFP on Monday.

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.

"I expect that the Arabs go to the Security Council very soon and say we don't want all this. You have 242, which said territories occupied have to be de-occupied. Let's carry out that," he said referring to an UN resolution.

The Arab League Ministerial Committee will meet in Qatar on Sunday 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 withdrawal from Palestinian lands and an equitable solution for Palestinian refugees.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/12/03/275996/mideast-quartet-ineffective-arab-league/>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **PM approves appointment of rights defenders**

SLAMABAD: Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf gave a go-ahead on Monday to the ministry of human rights to appoint human rights defenders whose job would be to help poor victims.

A government official privy to a meeting between the prime minister and his Adviser on human rights, Mustafa Nawaz Khokhar, said it was just a proposal to which the prime minister had agreed and now the ministry would work on nitty-gritty of the move.

The basic idea to have human rights defenders in the country was to help those poor victims who could not afford to plead their cases in courts or seek other remedial measures against oppressors. “The number of human rights defenders and their service structure will be worked out by the ministry in collaboration with other ministries,” the official said. However, critics of the government say as elections were just a few months away, new positions are being created to accommodate pro-PPP voters.

This decision was taken by the prime minister during a presentation made by the ministry on its working and performance at the PM House this afternoon. Mr Ashraf was informed during the briefing that the ministry this year had received 1886 cases of human rights violations in the country. The prime minister also directed Mr Khokhar to strengthen his ministry so that the government could effectively implement its international and constitutional obligations in letter and spirit. The prime minister said that Islam laid great emphasis on human rights.

Shaigan Shareef, Secretary of Human Rights, informed the prime minister that Pakistan had been elected a member of United Nations Human Rights Council for three years and had secured 171 votes.

The prime minister said that the election of Pakistan to the Human Rights Council was a testimony of international recognition of the country’s commitment to human rights as well as its role in international relations.

The prime minister said that the ministry had been established during the PPP government in 1995 and this showed the PPP’s commitment to the cause of human rights.

Mr Khokhar said that due to efforts of the ministry, the government had ratified an international treaty on Committee Against Torture (CAT) and recognised International Covenant on Civil and

Political Rights. It sent a clear message to the international community that Pakistan was serious and committed to upholding human rights, he added.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/04/pm-approves-appointment-of-rights-defenders/>

- **Pakistan ‘working with US’ for Afghan peace**

WASHINGTON: Pakistan was pressing forward with facilitating the peace process in Afghanistan and had showed no hesitation in enabling talks between Afghan and Taliban leaders, a senior US official said on Monday.

The official, while briefing the media on key US-Pakistan talks in Brussels on Monday night, noted that Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States had already formed a group for providing safe passage to Taliban leaders for talks with Afghan officials.

Responding to a question from a journalist that Pakistan was reluctant to allow Pakistan-based Taliban leaders to join the reconciliation talks, the official said: “I’ve not sensed that at all. I’ve not sensed any Pakistani hesitation... the statements that they issued, the work they’ve been doing, I don’t think they’re holding back at all.”

The Pakistanis, the official said, were keen to help the process as they demonstrated in recent meetings with senior Afghan officials in Islamabad where they also released some Taliban prisoners.

“I think the Pakistanis actually are pressing forward because, like a lot of people in the region, they recognise that 2014 is not so far away. And so I don’t find any hesitancy at all,” he said.

The official told journalists that Pakistan and the United States were systematically identifying their shared interests so that they could act on them jointly.

“Our philosophy has been that it ought to be possible between Pakistan and the United States to systematically identify our shared interests and act on them jointly.”

The US official noted that in April this year, the Pakistani parliament underlined the fundamentals of US-Pakistan relations “and we found those to be very positive to start us to get back into business with them.”

At a meeting with President Asif Ali Zardari in Chicago in May this year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton laid out four or five “very practical things to make 2012 a little bit better year than 2011”, the official said.

The five points included: enhancing counter-terrorism cooperation; work together on Afghanistan; reopening the ground lines of communications, focus on countering improvised explosive devices; and to move towards a relationship with Pakistan based more on trade, market access, and not aid.

Explaining each of these points, the official described a recent Pakistani decision to release some Taliban leaders as a very important step.

He also noted that the core group, which includes Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US, recently formed a sub-group for providing safe passage to Pakistan-based Taliban who “may wish to move someplace for a reconciliation conversation, peace conversation”. The core group was now working on how to manage that safe passage, he added.

The Pakistanis also played “a very good and constructive role” on another process, which brings the “region together to talk about a secure, stable, prosperous Afghanistan inside of a secure, stable, prosperous region,” the official said.

On bilateral relationship, the US and Pakistan agreed in May to get back into having some meetings and some working groups and instead of going into “dozens and dozens of working groups”, they chose four or five key areas, the official said.

The US official pointed out that since October, when Pakistan's interior minister visited Washington to attend a working group; the two countries had held a series of such meetings.

<http://dawn.com/2012/12/04/pakistan-working-with-us-for-afghan-peace/>

- **Powerful Afghan Minister Survives Impeachment**

Afghanistan's lower house of parliament has cleared the country's powerful minister of water and energy of wrongdoing in impeachment proceedings in the capital.

Mohammad Ismail Khan, a former guerrilla commander with enormous influence in western Afghanistan, faced allegations of budgetary irregularities and charges that he remobilized his militia.

Khan rejected accusations that he distributed arms to his supporters or failed to properly utilize his ministry's resources.

A majority of lawmakers voted in favor of keeping him in his cabinet post.

Khan emerged as a major anti-Soviet mujahedin commander in the western Herat Province in the 1980s.

He fought against the Taliban and was imprisoned by their regime in the 1990s.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Khan became governor of Herat Province.

In 2004, he was appointed to his post in the national cabinet.

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

- **Bomb attack kills Afghan soldiers, civilians in Uruzgan**

Five people have been killed and several others injured in a bomb attack on an Afghan army vehicle in southern Afghanistan, Press TV reports.

The bombing on Monday targeted an army patrol truck in Trin Kot, the capital of Uruzgan Province.

“Two Afghan army soldiers and three civilians were killed in the blast,” said provincial police spokesman Farid Ayal. Two of the civilian victims were women.

Abdullah Hemat, Uruzgan governor’s spokesman, said at least eight people were injured in the bombing.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

However, Afghan officials usually blame such attacks on the Taliban militants.

The militants use improvised explosive devices, including roadside bombs, against Afghan forces, foreign troops, and civilians.

In the first six months of 2012, over 1,140 Afghan civilians were killed and around 2,000 were wounded, mostly by roadside bombs, according to statistics released by the United Nations. Thirty percent of the casualties were women and children.

The United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001 as part of Washington’s so-called war on terror. The offensive removed the Taliban from power, but insecurity remains across the country.

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



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