



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

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1. IRAQ

- **Thousands of demonstrators in Mosul merge in "Friday of Iraqna wahid " under tight security.**

Mosul / NINA /--Thousands of protesters merged in Mosul after Friday prayers today under tight security in Ahrar Square under the slogan / Friday of Iraqna wahid/ demanding implementation of their demands by the central government.

The governor of Nineveh Ethel Nujaifi, who leads the demonstration said to NINA reporter : "The demonstrators merged from Alnouri Alkabeer mosque heading to Ahrar square under tight security in order to emphasize the implementation of their legitimate demands by the central government most notably the release of detainees and to vote on the amnesty law.

Nujaifi ended as saying : "clergy in the province prevented raising of any slogans intersect with the demands of the demonstrators," stressing that "the demonstrations will continue ahead.

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

- **Strict measures taken by security forces amid demonstrations of anger in Anbar.**

Ramadi / NINA /--Joint army and police forces tightened security measures around the protesters on the international highway where more than million protestors held prayers of /Fri of Ribat / with the participation of hundreds of delegates from many Iraqi cities.

A security source said to NINA reporter : " More than

Million demonstrators gathered in the streets of the sit-in of Anbar province, were demonstrators stationed since about 20 days ago to claim their rights.

Protesters carried in the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar province, carried Iraqi flag and denounced the government's policy of deception and attempts to suppress the demonstrators.

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

- **A unified prayers in Um al-Qura mosque and a demonstration in solidarity with the protests of / Fri of Ribat/.**

Baghdad/ NINA /--A unified prayers held in Baghdad's Um al-Qura mosque, headed by Sunni Endowment Chairman .Ahmad Abdul Ghafoor Samarrai, followed by a peacefully demonstration in the courtyard of the mosque called for the strengthening of national unity , rejecting sectarian strife and abolition of Article 4/ terrorism, as well as accountability and justice.

Samarrai addressed sermon in which he called on the government and parliament to: "meet the demands of the demonstrators," stressing "the importance of promoting the concepts of national unity between all Iraqi people factions from north to south, and prevent anyone who tries to stir up sectarian strife between the people's components.

A multiple delegations and convoys of worshipers coming from different areas of the capital Baghdad where all mosques closed and called on worshipers to head to Um al-Qora mosque participate in the Unified prayers of Um al-Qura Mosque western Baghdad including delegations of Shiit worshipers.

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

- **Daraji: Kurdistan Region will create new crisis by exporting oil without consulting Federal Government**

Baghdad (NINA) – Lawmaker from State of Law Alliance, Shaker al-Daraji, said that exporting oil by Kurdistan Region's Government, without going back to the Central Government, is overstepping the Government's authority.

Daraji's Press Office quoted Daraji on Thursday, Jan. 10, saying that exporting oil by the Region's Government, at present, is unsuitable action and will cause in increase the crisis again.

Daraji called on the Region's Government to solve its disputes through dialogue and end the crisis, as well as outstanding issues by getting adversaries to talk, because current situation, Iraq is witnessing does not allow for creating new crisis.

Two days ago, the Government of Kurdistan Region announced that it has started exporting oil, in tankers, to Turkey, away from the Central Government.

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

- **US, Israel want to start civil war in Iraq: Iran cleric**

Tehran's Interim Friday Prayers Leader Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati says the United States and Israel are trying to throw Iraq into chaos and civil war.

“The United States and the Zionist regime [of Israel] have devised a scheme for Iraq and seek to ignite the flames of sedition and civil war in the country,” Ayatollah Jannati said.

He went on to say that the United States and Israel are trying to create in Iraq the unrest which they have caused in Syria.

The senior Iranian cleric further stressed that the people of Iraq should remain vigilant and not pay attention to the enemy efforts which aim to sow discord among Iraqis.

Iraq has been the scene of anti-government demonstrations since December 23, 2012, when bodyguards of Finance Minister Rafie al-Issawi were arrested on terrorism-related charges.

The demonstrators allege that the arrests were made on sectarian grounds and demand an end to anti-terrorism laws. But the government says it is up to parliament to decide on abolishing those laws.

On January 6, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maleki warned against foreign interference, saying it would push the country toward sectarian violence.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282991/us-israel-want-civil-war-in-iraq/>

2. IRAN

- **Iran-P5+1 to meet in Istanbul late January: Russian source**

Iran and the six major world powers (P5+1) will meet in the Turkish city of Istanbul at the end of January to discuss the outstanding issues related to Tehran's nuclear energy program, a Russian official says.



An unnamed Russian source told the state RIA Novosti news agency on Thursday that the next meeting between Iran and the P5+1 - Russia, China, France, Britain, France, the US and Germany -- has been provisionally scheduled for the end of January in Istanbul which hosted the first round of such talks in April 2012.

The source; however, did not name a specific date.

The last round of talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany was held in Moscow in June.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said on Wednesday that the pause in the talks between Iran and the P5+1 has sent a “wrong signal.”

Ryabkov stated that during the Christmas holidays, Moscow proceeded with efforts to organize a schedule for Iran-P5+1 talks and expected a clear result as soon as possible.

Russia, a veto-wielding member of the UN Security Council, has repeatedly reaffirmed Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy.

Iran and the P5+1 have held several rounds of talks with the main focus being on Iran’s nuclear energy program.

On January 4, Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili said that Tehran welcomes the readiness of the six major world powers to hold constructive talks with Iran.

“Just as Iran feels obligated to act within the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regulations and in line with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it is adamant on asserting its rights within the same framework,” Jalili stated.

The United States, Israel and some of their allies have repeatedly accused Iran of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program.

Iran argues that as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is entitled to develop and acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282964/iranp51-talks-set-for-late-january/>

- **Sanctions aim to paralyze Iran economy: Minister**

Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Mehdi Ghazanfari says sanctions against the Islamic Republic aim to paralyze the country's economy.



"The aim of [anti-Iran] sanctions is to paralyze our economy and to put people under pressure and in distress," Ghazanfari said on Thursday.

The ultimate target of these sanctions is the entire economy, he stressed, adding that enemies of the Islamic Republic seek to damage Iran's economy as well as the country's economic growth.

He said the reason behind the imposition of sanctions on Iran is not the country's nuclear energy program or the human rights issue but Iran's refusal to obey orders of enemies.

Ghazanfari said that Iran has been hit by sanctions under false pretexts adding, Iran has repeatedly presented documents rejecting the claims but the enemies maintain their policies because the Islamic Republic opposes their domination in the world.

Iran has been put under various sanctions, mostly imposed by the United States, since the victory of the Islamic Revolution three decades ago.

Part of the economic sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic is under the false allegation that Iran is pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program.

Tehran refutes the allegations and argues that as a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is entitled to develop and acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282953/sanctions-aim-to-paralyze-iran-economy/>

- **Shia-Sunni conflicts plotted by Islam enemies: Iran FM**

Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi says the so-called issue of divide between Shia and Sunni Muslims is a plot hatched by the enemies of Islam.



In a meeting with the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayeb in Cairo on Thursday, Salehi also called on Muslims to avoid conflicts and rely on commonalities instead.

“Enemies have made great efforts during recent years to cause a rift among Muslims and also to intensify it,” he added.

Salehi invited the Sheikh of Al-Azhar to visit Iran to hold talks with Iranian clerics and observe the peaceful coexistence of Shia and Sunni Muslims in the Islamic Republic.

Al-Tayeb, for his part, urged Muslims to foster unity and said enemies should not be allowed to achieve their objectives to create conflicts in the Muslim world.

Meanwhile, in a meeting with Patriarch of Egypt's Coptic Christians Pope Tawadros II, the Iranian minister highlighted the significance of peaceful coexistence of Muslims and Christians.

Pope Tawadros, for his part, said Iran has a historical civilization and followers of different religions, including Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Muslims, have had a brotherly coexistence in the country.

Salehi wrapped up his day-long visit to Egypt and arrived in Tehran early on Friday.

During his Cairo trip, the Iranian minister held talks with senior Egyptian officials, including President Mohamed Morsi and Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr on Thursday.

Salehi also exchanged views with UN-Arab League special envoy to Syria Lakhdar Brahimi and Arab League Secretary-General Nabil al-Arabi on the latest developments in the region and the Syrian unrest in particular.

The Iranian minister began his tour of African countries on Saturday and visited Benin, Ghana and Burkina Faso.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282932/shiasuuni-rift-islam-enemies-plot/>

- **Iran FM, Arab League chief discuss regional issues in Cairo**

Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi and Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi have met and held talks on the latest developments in the region, including the Palestinian issue and the Syria unrest.



During the Thursday meeting in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, both officials underlined the need to employ the potential of all regional countries to restore the legitimate rights of the Palestinian nation and confront Israel's expansionism.

“It is the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran to support all efforts to help the Palestinian cause materialize,” Salehi said.

He added that Iran, as the rotating president of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), is ready to cooperate with Arab League on Palestine.

Al-Arabi, for his part, described Israel’s occupation of Palestinian lands as the biggest challenge in the Middle East and called for continued consultations between the Arab league and Iran on the Palestinian issue.

Regarding the situation in Syria, both sides exchanged viewpoints on solutions to the ongoing unrest.

Salehi stressed Iran’s policy, which calls for the realization of public demands through a domestic solution, non-interference of foreign parties, halt of violence and start of national dialog.

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

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282921/iran-fm-meets-arab-bloc-chief-in-cairo/>

3. SYRIA

- **Syrian government played key role to free abducted Iranians: Lawmaker**

A senior Iranian lawmaker has hailed the key role of the Syrian government in securing the release of 48 Iranian pilgrims who were abducted by foreign-backed militants in Damascus several months ago, Press TV reports.

“[Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad played a very valuable role in the release of 48 Iranian pilgrims kidnapped in Damascus and if the Syrian government had not cooperated, the Iranian nationals would not have been set free,” Chairman of the Majlis (parliament) Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy Alaeddin Boroujerdi said on Thursday.

He added that the release of Iranian pilgrims after 159 days of captivity has been made possible through an orchestrated effort and intensive talks.

He noted that Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, Foreign Ministry and Intelligence Ministry also played a role in the release of the pilgrims.

The legislator said that the Iranian nationals were finally released despite the destructive measures by a number of regional countries that tried to impede our efforts.

Boroujerdi added that Iran had been in contact with Qatar and Turkey which played a constructive role in the success of the efforts made to bring about the Iranians’ freedom.

The 48 Iranian pilgrims arrived at Tehran’s Mehrabad International Airport Thursday afternoon, a day after they were released in a swap deal between the Syrian government and armed opposition groups.

The Iranian pilgrims, who were traveling on a bus from Damascus International Airport to the shrine of Hazrat Zainab (AS) on the outskirts of the Syrian capital, were abducted by the militants on August 4, 2012.

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

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282944/syria-played-key-role-to-free-iranians/>

- **Iran Majlis speaker lauds Syria efforts to secure Iranian pilgrims release**

Iran's Majlis (parliament) Speaker Ali Larijani has praised efforts by Syria to secure the release of 48 Iranian pilgrims abducted by foreign-backed militants in the Arab country.



Larijani extended gratitude to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a message on Thursday. He said that pursuing the matter by the Iranian Foreign Ministry and other relevant bodies as well as efforts of the Syrian government led to the release of the pilgrims, who had been detained by militants for six months.

Larijani also expressed hope that security and stability will be fully restored and violence and conflicts will be halted immediately in Syria. He also expressed optimism that the ongoing unrest in the country will come to an end through the peace plan offered by Syrian president.

On August 4, 2012, the 48 Iranian pilgrims, who were traveling on a bus from Damascus International Airport to the shrine of Hazrat Zainab (AS) on the outskirts of the Syrian capital were abducted by the militants.

They were freed in a prisoner swap on Wednesday and returned home on Thursday. An undisclosed number of Turkish nationals arrested by Syria's security forces in the recent months were also among those released by Damascus in the swap deal.

In a separate message to his Syrian counterpart Mohammad Jihad al-Laham, Larijani once again hailed Syria's efforts to secure the release of the Iranian pilgrims.

He said that full security and stability will be established in Syria and the unrest will be settled through the resolve of the government, people and parliament, adding that the Syrian nation will surely emerge victorious from the ordeal.

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

In a key speech on January 6, Assad called for an end to the terrorist operations inside Syria and urged "concerned states and parties" to stop funding, arming and harboring militants.

He said his government is always ready to hold talks with the opposition and political parties and will call for a "comprehensive national dialog" after foreign parties end their support for the militants and the terrorist activities cease in the country.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282935/iran-praises-syria-for-pilgrims-release/>

- **Russia to hold major naval drills off Syria coast**

Russia says it is planning to hold a series of major naval drills off the Syrian coast in the Mediterranean as the US and its allies plan to deploy missiles on Syria's border.



Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday that vessels from the country's Black Sea and Baltic fleets will take part in the exercises, which are set to be held in the eastern Mediterranean.

According to the ministry, the drill will involve anti-submarine, anti-ship and air defense operations. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu had earlier said that the naval exercises would be "the biggest in the history of the country."

"A tactical group of Black Sea Fleet warships led by the Moskva cruiser will stage a naval exercise in the eastern Mediterranean," the Ministry said without giving an exact date for the exercises.

Russia has a naval base at Syria's port of Tartus. In August 2012, three Russian warships performed maritime exercises in the Mediterranean.

The upcoming drill comes against a backdrop of tensions between Moscow and the West over Syria. While Russia has repeatedly warned against any military intervention in Syria, Western states have threatened to intervene if necessary.

Russia and the West are also at loggerheads over the deployment of NATO's Patriot missiles along Turkey's border with Syria.

Meanwhile, top US and Russian officials have held talks with the UN-Arab League Joint Special Envoy on Syria Lakhdar Brahimi at the UN headquarters in Geneva over the crisis in Syria.

They made no comment as they arrived for the closed-door talks.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282996/russia-to-hold-major-drills-off-syria-coast/>

- **Rebels say they seized helicopter base in Syria**

Syrian military strikes back with air strike after rebels capture strategic base in northern Syria, weakening Assad's grip in region.



BEIRUT - Rebels seized a strategic air base in northern Syria on Friday after months of fighting, activists and insurgents said, further weakening President Bashar Assad's grip on the region.

The Syrian military struck back hours after fighters captured the base, launching air strikes on the area, the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

"Taftanaz base is being bombarded by Syrian war planes, which are trying to destroy the airport after it was seized by fighters," it said. These came from several Islamist battalions strong in northern Syria such as Ahrar al-Sham, the Islamic Vanguard and al-Nusra Front, which has links to al-Qaida.

For months, rebels had fought for the base used by military helicopters in Idlib province. But it only fell after Islamist units reinforced them earlier in January.

The United States has branded Nusra a terrorist organization although it enjoys wide support in Syria for its combat skills.

Rebels from the Islamic Front, an alliance of several Islamist units, said Taftanaz is the largest helicopter base in northern Syria and the second largest in the country.

They posted an online video showing armed men in camouflage jackets tearing down posters of Assad and shouting "Allahu akbar (God is Greatest)" at what they said was the Taftanaz base.

The videos could not be verified independently. The government has imposed strict curbs on foreign media access.

Another video showed men picking through crates of ammunition said to be stored in the air base's armory.

The United Nations says at least 60,000 people have been killed in Syria since peaceful protests began in March, 2011 and then developed into an armed revolt after a security crackdown.

<http://www.ipost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=299266>

- **Syria calls joint envoy Brahimi 'biased'**

A day after UN-Arab League emissary says Assad is dispensable, foreign ministry in Damascus replies with accusations.

Syria has denounced international envoy Lakhdar Brahimi as "flagrantly biased", casting doubt on how long the UN-Arab League mediator can pursue his peace mission.



The Syrian foreign ministry was responding to remarks by Brahimi, a veteran Algerian diplomat, a day after he ruled out a role for President Bashar al-Assad in a transitional government and effectively called for the Baath Party leader to quit.

"In Syria ... what people are saying is that a family ruling for 40 years is a little bit too long," Brahimi told the BBC, referring to Assad, who inherited his post from his father Hafez, who seized power in 1970 and ruled for 30 years.

"President Assad could take the lead in responding to the aspiration of his people rather than resisting it," Brahimi said, hinting that Assad should go.

The foreign ministry in Damascus said it was very surprised at Brahimi's comments, which showed "he is flagrantly biased for those who are conspiring against Syria and its people".

Syria's Al Watan newspaper daily said Brahimi had removed his "mask of impartiality" to reveal his true face as a "a tool for the implementation of the policy of some Western countries".

Brahimi has had no more success than his predecessor Kofi Annan in his quest for a political solution to a 21-month-old conflict in which more than 60,000 people have been killed.

Regional rivalries

William Hague, UK foreign secretary, gave warning that violence in Syria might worsen, saying that the international community must "step up" its response if it does.

So far regional rivalries and divisions among big powers have blocked any concerted approach to the upheaval, one of the bloodiest to emerge from a series of revolts in the Arab world.

Russian and US diplomats, who back opposing sides of the war, are due to meet Brahimi in Geneva on Friday.

On Sunday Assad, making his first public speech in six months, offered no concessions and he said he would never talk to foes he branded terrorists and Western puppets.

As peace efforts floundered, rebels battled for a strategic air base for a second day, pursuing a civil war that had briefly receded for some Damascus residents who set aside their differences to play in a rare snowfall that blanketed the city.

For a few hours, people in the capital dropped their weapons for snowballs and traded hatred for giggles.

There was no respite on other battlefronts, with heavy fighting around the Taftanaz base in northwestern Syria, which rebels are trying to capture to extend their grip on Idlib province and weaken Assad's control of the skies.

Rebels assaulted the airport's main buildings and armoury using heavy guns, tanks and other weapons and appeared to have overrun half the area of the base, Rami Abdelrahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights activist group, said.

Having tried to take the base for months, rebels have been bolstered by the recent arrival of Islamist fighters including the allegedly al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, he said.

Opposition forces have seized chunks of territory in northern Syria in recent months, but remain vulnerable to attack by the military's jets and helicopters.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013110183349199705.html>

4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Netanyahu tells US Senators: My priority is Iran nuke march**

In meeting with visiting US Senators, Netanyahu expresses appreciation of US moves against Tehran; Minority Leader McConnell touts "broad bipartisan support for Israel"; IAEA chief "not optimistic" about upcoming Iran talks.



Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu told a group of visiting US Senators on Friday that if reelected he will work to stop Iran's illicit nuclear march.

"My priority, if I'm elected for a next term as Prime Minister, will be first to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons," he told the group, which included Senate Minority Leader Mich McConnell (R-KY). "I think that was and remains the highest priority for both our countries. I appreciate the American support and your support for that end."

Even as Netanyahu refocused on the Iranian threat, the UN nuclear agency chief said Friday he was not optimistic about talks with Iran next week on getting access to a military base Western powers suspect has been used for atomic-weapons related work.

"The outlook is not bright," Yukiya Amano, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said in Tokyo.

Western powers say Iran is trying to develop the capability to make atomic weapons, a charge the Islamic Republic denies.

Amano said in Japanese comments translated into English: "Talks with Iran don't proceed in a linear way. It's one step forward, two or three steps back ... So we can't say we have an optimistic outlook" for the January 16 meeting.

At the meeting with Netanyahu, Senator McConnell touted strong bipartisan support for Israel in the United States, even while the Republican and Democrat parties face off on other issues.

"As everybody in Israel knows, there are a lot of things we disagree on in America, we've had big battles over deficit and debt, but there's broad bipartisan support for Israel, and our agenda in this part of the world is the same as your agenda," he said. "You're one of our best friends and we're happy to continue that relationship."

US President Barack Obama's nomination of Chuck Hagel to the defense secretary position raised eyebrows in Jerusalem and among pro-Israel politicians in the US, concerned over the former Senator's Israel record. Critics accuse Hagel of opposing sanctions and being satisfied with containing Tehran, as opposed to preventing it from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

<http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?id=299272>

- **'Post' poll: Likud Beytenu gains, Bennett loses support**

According to Smith Research poll, Netanyahu and Liberman's joint list gains support for the first time in over a month while Bayit Yehudi falls by two seats; Likud credits list's rise to Livni's efforts to unite Center-Left.



Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and former foreign minister Avigdor Liberman's joint Likud-Yisrael Beytenu list has gained support for the first time in more than a month, according to a Smith Research poll conducted this week for The Jerusalem Post and the financial newspaper Globes.

The poll found that Likud Beytenu rose two seats from 32 to 34, while Naftali Bennett's Bayit Yehudi party, which had risen steadily over the past month, fell from 16 seats to 14.

The Likud credited former foreign minister Tzipi Livni for the list's rise. Party officials said her failed efforts over the past week to unite the Center-Left persuaded voters to return to Likud Beytenu from its satellite parties.

"Right-wing voters are returning, because they are starting to understand that in this election, it is important to strengthen the Likud in the face of attempts by the Left to return to power and

push Israel to divide Jerusalem and return to pre-1967 borders,” said coalition chairman MK Ze’ev Elkin, who heads the party’s campaign in the national- religious sector.

Elkin said it was important for Likud Beytenu to win more votes than the three largest Center-Left parties combined in order to prevent President Shimon Peres from allowing them to form the next government.

The poll found that Likud Beytenu’s 34 seats trailed the 36 from the combination on the Left: Labor would win 18 mandates, Yesh Atid 10 and The Tzipi Livni Party eight if the election were held now. Livni’s party, which was expected to win 10 mandates, fell in other polls as well, due to her unsuccessful political maneuver.

Senior Likud officials expressed satisfaction with Livni’s fall in the polls. They expressed hope that Kadima would rise at The Tzipi Livni Party’s expense and become a convenient coalition party that could balance out right-wing parties.

“It is clear as the sun that we would be much more comfortable with Kadima than with Livni,” a senior Likud official said.

Labor chairwoman Shelly Yacimovich downplayed the Likud’s rise, noting at a party event in Beersheba that only 21 of the top 34 candidates on the joint Likud Beytenu list are Likudniks.

She predicted that Labor would rise from 18 seats and overcome Likud as the largest faction.

The poll, which was conducted on Tuesday and Wednesday, predicted that Shas would win 10 seats and United Torah Judaism would take six. Meretz, Ta’al-United Arab List and Hadash would each earn four seats, while Am Shalem and Balad would take three apiece, and Kadima would win two mandates. The poll surveyed 870 people representing a statistical sample of the adult population and had an error margin of just 3.3 percentage points.

The hawkish Strong Israel party was close to passing the 2% electoral threshold, as was the anti-corruption party Eretz Chadasha and Sephardi preacher Amnon Yitzhak's Koah Lehashpia (The Power to Influence) party. Both parties stood out in election ads, with Eretz Chadasha accusing Attorney- General Yehuda Weinstein of being part of a corrupt conspiracy and Yitzhak promising that he would lower the cost of bread to NIS 1.

A Sarid Institute poll broadcast on Israel Radio predicted that Koah Lehashpia would win four seats. A Geocartography poll predicted that the pro-marijuana Green Leaf party would enter the Knesset with three mandates.

Other polls also found that Likud Beytenu had risen. A Ma'agar Mohot poll broadcast on Thursday night on Channel 2 predicted 38 seats for Netanyahu's list.

Netanyahu expressed optimism that his list would continue to rise in the polls, speaking at a Likud Beytenu event on Thursday night in Rishon Lezion.

He promised that Rishon Lezion Councilman David Bitan, who is No. 35 on the list, would enter the Knesset along with additional candidates.

"Running a country is not a children's game," the prime minister told the crowd. "It requires a team."

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=299240>

- **Palestinians pitch tents in sensitive E1 corridor**

After Netanyahu attacked by int'l community for announcing plans to build in E1, Palestinians erect 20 steel-framed tents in



area.

Palestinians from villages in the West Bank near Jerusalem pitched tents on Friday on land Israel has earmarked for a new urban settlement, looking to preserve the area for an independent Palestinian state.

Scores of Palestinians erected about 20 large, steel-framed tents on a windswept hillside in an area known as E1, a geographically sensitive area where Israel announced last month it would build homes for hundreds of settlers.

"We are setting up a Palestinian village here where people will stay permanently in order to protect this Palestinian land," said Mohammad Khatib, one of the organizers of the tent village.

The tents were erected in an area close to established Palestinian villages that lie on slopes north-east of Jerusalem and overlook the descent to the Dead Sea.

Palestinians named their encampment "Bab el Shams," which means "Gateway to the Sun" in Arabic.

"This is not a symbolic act, but comes in response to Israeli settlement building and we are sending a message to the international community that urgent action must be taken against Israel's settlement construction," Khatib said.

Although there was no immediate response from the Israeli authorities, police and soldiers in the past have moved quickly to shut down any such spontaneous Palestinian camps

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has come in for heavy international criticism for a wave of recent announced settlement building in the West Bank.

However, his pledge last November to build on E1 caused an especial outcry, with European diplomats warning that it could kill off any hope of creating a contiguous Palestinian state.

The site covers some 4.6 square miles (12 square km) and is seen as particularly important because it not only juts into the narrow "waist" of the West Bank, but also backs onto east Jerusalem, where Palestinians want to establish their capital.

Israeli building in E1 would create a linked-up stretch of Jewish neighborhoods in the West Bank between Pisgat Ze'ev on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and Ma'ale Adumim, an urban settlement of some 30,000 Israelis.

For years Israel froze building in E1, which currently houses only a police headquarters, after coming under pressure from former US President George W. Bush.

But Netanyahu announced a wave of settlement initiatives, including in E1, after the Palestinians won de-facto statehood recognition at the United Nations General Assembly last year.

Palestinians want to establish an independent state in the West Bank, which is partially controlled by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and the Gaza Strip, which is run by a rival faction, the Islamist group Hamas.

Approximately 500,000 Israelis and 2.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. Direct peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians broke down in 2010 over the issue of continued settlement building.

<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=299267>

5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Half ton of explosives seized in Suez**

Suez police forces seized 500 kilograms of explosives on Friday believed to have been en route to South Sinai.

Major General Abdel Refaat, the Suez security chief, was notified that smugglers in Cairo were preparing to transport the explosives, which are used to create tunnels through mountains for mining.

Police set up ambushes along the Suez-Ahmed Hamdy Tunnel Road and apprehended the smuggler's vehicle, arresting the suspect. The suspect confessed to being on his way to South Sinai to hand the explosives over to other smugglers.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/half-ton-explosives-seized-suez>

- **Rally planned to protect Supreme Constitutional Court from Islamists**

The Popular Current announced it would participate in a rally in front of the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) on 14 and 15 January alongside revolutionary forces.

The rally will take place on the day of the SCC's first assembly since it was besieged by Islamists, with the goal of protecting the court from such an attack happening again.

Heba Yassine, the party's spokesperson, said the rally would meet on Monday at the Ettihad Square in Maadi, then march to the SCC. The rally would last until Tuesday to protect it, and the judges, from the alleged "Muslim Brotherhood militias" who besieged the court at the end of 2012.

“The rally aims to enable the court to review cases demanding the dissolution of the Shura Council and the Constituent Assembly ... to uphold the state of law and independence of judiciary,” Yassine said.

Yassine told Al-Masry Al-Youm that the rally would be peaceful and that participants would exercise self-control if Islamists protesters arrive. She demanded that security forces take responsibility in case clashes erupt, and to ensure that judges are able to enter and exit the court.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/rally-planned-protect-supreme-constitutional-court-islamists>

- **Our journalists have never been freer, Morsy proclaims**

The country has never known anything like the past six months in terms of the sheer freedom of the media, President Mohamed Morsy declared during a meeting with a delegation from the Arab Journalists Union on Thursday.



Karem Mahmoud, the syndicate’s secretary general and financial secretary of the union, said that he called on Morsy during the meeting to halt the lawsuits filed by his office against media figures and journalists accused of defaming the president.

Presidential spokesperson Yasser Ali responded to those calls in a press conference at the Ettelhadiya Presidential Palace, claiming that “the president welcomes constructive criticism” and “is most keen on expressing opinions freely. [The Morsy administration] doesn’t object to criticizing opinions, but rather objects to false news that includes clear accusations against the president. Therefore, the legal affairs department has to press charges to prove if they are true or false.”

“Litigation is a right. Those lawsuits are part of it. We didn’t call for banning ideas or journalist’s right to express opinion. However, when it comes to accusing the president of being an agent for the US or endangering national security, it should be referred to judiciary,” Ali added.

“Everyone now knows the ceiling on these freedoms,” he cautioned. “No single exceptional decision has been taken yet against media. The first decision the president took was to ban preventive detention for journalists,” he added.

When asked if the president’s office would drop its lawsuit against Gamal Fahmy, deputy of the Journalists Syndicate, Ali said, “It’s up to the judiciary.”

The delegation of the Journalists Union was in Cairo for the elections of the union chief and general secretariat, which took place on Wednesday. Kuwaiti journalist Ahmed Youssef al-Bahbahany secured the chief post, succeeding the Egyptian Ibrahim Nafei, who has been in office for 17 consecutive years.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/our-journalists-have-never-been-freer-morsy-proclaims>

- **Nour Party to run for Parliament on its own ballot**

Salafi parties have reportedly chosen to run in the upcoming parliamentary elections on two lists.

The Nour Party has decided to run independently.

The second list, al-Watan al-Hor (The Free Homeland), includes six political parties: al-Watan Party, Jama’a al-Islamiya’s Construction and Development Party, the political branch of the Islamic Jihad movement, Hazem Abu Ismail’s Egyptian Nation Party, the Asala Party and the New Labor Party.

Nour Party leader Shaaban Abdel Alim said his party would coordinate with the Freedom and Justice Party in regard to nominations in different constituencies across the nation.

The party has finished preparing its list of candidates, he added. The list includes Nour Party deputy head Sayed Mostafa and party leaders Ashraf Thabet, Ahmed Khalil, Talaat Marzouq, Salah Abdel Maboud and Nader Bakkar.

Watan Party spokesperson Ahmed Badei said his party has been meeting with the Construction and Development party to finalize their list of candidates. There are also currently negotiations with the Wasat Party and the Hadara Party to join the al-Watan al-Hor alliance.

Jama'a al-Islamiya and its political arm are also coordinating with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nour Party for the independent seats, said Construction and Development party spokesperson Khaled al-Sherif. So far the party plans to nominate members Assem Abdel Maged, Osama Hafez, Abdel Aher Hammad and Alaa Sedeq. He added that women would also be included on the list.

Sources from Jama'a al-Islamiya told Al-Masry Al-Youm that the group would vote on Saturday to conclusively decide whether or not to join the al-Watan al-Hor alliance.

The former presidential candidate and the Muslim Brotherhood had failed to agree on a joint legislative agenda, leading to a breakdown in their alliance, sources close to Abu Ismail told Al-Masry Al-Youm.

The Freedom and Justice Party is seeking an alliance with the Wasat Party and some liberal parties, Sherif added.

"The alliance does not mind nominating Copts or liberals on its lists as long as they are not against the application of Sharia. Abu Ismail and other alliance members have no objection to

that," Sherif said, adding that the alliance seeks to contest all seats and hopes to garner 60 percent of the House of Representatives.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/nour-party-run-parliament-its-own-ballot>

- **PM forms committee to prepare and study draft laws**

Prime Minister Hesham Qandil has moved to form a High Committee for Legislative Affairs that would prepare and study draft laws, presidential decrees and the prime minister's resolutions.



The committee would be headed by the prime minister, and comprised of the justice minister and the chairman of the Shura Council's Legislative Committee, as well as representatives of the president's office, the Cabinet, Parliament, the National Council for Human Rights, Al-Azhar, the Church and the assistant justice minister for legislative affairs. At least 10 legal experts and public figures would also sit on the committee.

According to the state-run news source MENA, the committee would be responsible for two main tasks.

The first would include preparing and studying draft laws, presidential decrees and resolutions made by the prime minister, and ensure that they are in accordance with existing legislation.

The other main task would consist of forming sub-committees to prepare economic, administrative and education legislation, which would include conducting community dialogue on each proposed bill.

The committee would then submit draft laws and decisions to the Cabinet.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/pm-forms-committee-prepare-and-study-draft-laws>

- **Arab Maghreb Union launches investment bank**

Bank with \$100m of capital will finance infrastructure projects in Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

The Arab Maghreb Union has launched a bank with \$100m of capital to finance infrastructure projects in the region.



Sid Ahmed Ould Raiss, the governor of the Central Bank of Mauritania, said that the investment bank will finance projects in Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia, the five member states of the union.

Speaking at a meeting held in Noukachott, the Mauritanian capital, on Wednesday, Raiss said: "The bank is intended to finance development projects, such as highways, promoting new technologies and also investing in energy.

"The bank is destined to finance infrastructure programmes in the energy sector."

Christine Lagarde, the head of the International Monetary Fund, lauded the creation of the bank saying it would foster integration and spur investments in the region.

"It's the first foundation for an edifice being built," said Lagarde, who was present at the meeting.

"[It is] something everyone thought necessary, from the economic activity point of view, which can be better shared, and true prosperity as well as from the point of view of job creation."

The banks were first proposed in 1991, but the launch was delayed by tension between Morocco and Algeria over Western Sahara.

The tension hindered decision-making and the operation of the union, with no summit organised since 1994.

It is hoped the creation of the bank will create jobs and increase security in the region.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/2013110101120697531.html>

6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **EDL to suspend strike as complaints over repairs soar**

BEIRUT: Electricite Du Liban will suspend their strike and resume repairs in the country, Charbel Abi Saleh, the head of the EDL employees' union, told The Daily Star Friday as complaints soared over power supply failures in different parts of Lebanon.

"We will suspend the strike until the end of the month and will start repairs starting from now," Abi Saleh said.

He said the decision to suspend the strike was reached following a meeting with Energy and Water Ministry Minister Gebran Bassil.

Abi Saleh said Bassil had contacted the Finance Ministry which "promised to include in the new, reformulated budget the allocations that had been removed."

Following his meeting with a delegation of EDL employees, Bassil voiced optimism that talks with the workers would result in a positive breakthrough.

“We hope that after this positive meeting that we can start thinking about people’s interests,” the minister said.

“The workers have many demands, most of which are righteous ones. However, their objections should not affect the rights of people,” he said.

EDL workers, who launched their strike Monday, argue that their allocations and benefits have been slashed in the 2013 EDL draft budget and hold the Finance Ministry responsible.

Residents in different parts of Lebanon continued to complain Friday over the deteriorating power supply in the country brought on by a lack of repairs.

“Residents are suffering tragic conditions and urge relevant authorities to help restore the electricity services in their villages,” a statement issued by the residents of Dinnieh in north Lebanon.

Residents of Adonis-Zouk Mosbeh in Kesrouan also voiced their complaints Friday and threatened to protest at the EDL’s headquarters in Jounieh.

“We informed the EDL offices in Jounieh about the [power] failures but we haven’t had any response. If the EDL doesn’t answer our call, we will protest Monday at its Jounieh office,” said the statement.

Similarly, some residents of Mreijeh, Baabda, complained that their neighborhood has been without electricity for three days.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Jan-11/201848-edl-strike-to->

- **Winter storms pound Levant region**

More than a dozen people die as Eastern Mediterranean countries face severe mix of snow, wind and cold temperatures.

Severe winter weather has killed at least 12 people across the Levant region this week, as low temperatures and precipitation sweep across Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories.



The UN appealed on Thursday for urgent aid to help thousands of Syrian refugees in a Jordanian camp who are battling mud, water and freezing cold in the worst winter storm in a decade.

The 7sq km Zaatari camp, home to more than 62,000 Syrian refugees, was almost entirely inundated by water on Wednesday.

Heavy wind and rains knocked down at least 500 tents, which normally house five people, as camp residents elsewhere dug shallow trenches around their tents in a vain attempt to keep the water out.

Meanwhile, cars were stranded in snow and children took advantage of school closures in Amman as wintery weather hit the Jordanian capital on Wednesday. Wintery conditions also forced official buildings to close.

Weather reports said the conditions were expected to continue into Thursday with a front carrying hail and snow.

For a few fleeting hours, residents of Syria's capital dropped their guns for snowballs and traded hatred for laughter.

A rare snowfall that covered Damascus in white on Wednesday sparked an overnight outbreak of playfulness among Syrians, who momentarily ignored their bloody civil war.

'No hot water'

Snow and rain across Lebanon have caused blackouts across the country, where electricity workers have also been on strike for several days.

Residents in several Beirut districts and in snow-capped mountain areas reported via social network sites that the blackout began on Wednesday night affecting electrical supply, heating and hot water boilers.

The storm that has been battering the region since the weekend has killed at least four people, including a man who froze to death as he fell asleep drunk in his car in the eastern Bekaa Valley and a baby swept away in a flash flood.

Schools have been shut nationwide since Tuesday.

Jerusalem was transformed into a winter wonderland on Thursday after heavy overnight snowfall of at least 10cm turned the Holy City and much of the region white.

Three people died after their car was blown to the side of the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway through central Israel.

During the height of the snowfall, buses were cancelled, but service gradually resumed as the storm tapered off.

With snow a rarity in the normally temperate Middle East, many resorted to using trays or bin bags to slide down some of the city's many steep hills.

A handful of visitors also turned up from Tel Aviv, where snow is almost unheard of, to join in the winter fun.

With less than two weeks until Israel's January 22 general election, campaign plans were put on hold for the day, and many electoral posters were almost obliterated by snow.

The winding streets of Jerusalem's Old City were almost completely deserted, with only a handful of shops open.

In Gaza, cold weather and heavy rain flooded several of the tunnels running between the territory and Egypt, and civil defence officials rescued two people trapped inside.

The storm has also taken its toll in the West Bank, where five people have been killed in weather-related incidents. The latest casualty to be named was Maher al-Bariya, a lawyer whose car was swept away in floods earlier this week.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/weather/2013/01/2013110193719915595.html>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Bahrainis hold anti-regime demos in Diraz, Sanabis**

Bahraini protesters have once again held demonstrations to condemn prison sentences handed down to a group of prominent activists.



On Thursday, outraged demonstrators took to the streets in the northwestern village of Diraz and the northern village of Sanabis, about 5.5 kilometers (3.5 miles) west of the capital, Manama.

Reports say Bahraini regime forces fired tear gas to disperse the demonstrators, who were chanting slogans against the Al Khalifa regime.

On January 7, Bahrain's highest court upheld sentences handed down to 13 prominent political activists for organizing demonstrations against Al Khalifa.

The court's verdict sparked protests in several towns, where demonstrators set tires on fire and blocked main roads.

A military court originally handed down the sentences in 2011. The rulings, which range from five years in prison to life sentences, were upheld by a civilian court in September 2012.

Those given life sentences include imprisoned human rights activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and opposition leader Hassan Mushaima.

Amnesty International has described the decision unjust and called for the release of the 13 people who have been imprisoned "simply for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly."

The Bahraini uprising began in February 2011. The Manama regime promptly launched a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests, calling in Saudi-led Arab forces from neighboring states.

Bahraini 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/2013/01/11/282933/bahrainis-hold-demos-in-diraz-sanabis/>

- **Yemeni protesters hold demonstration in Sana'a**

Yemenis have staged a demonstration in Sana'a to voice discontent with the government's failure to meet their demands following the ouster of former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, Press TV reports.

Thousands of protesters took to the streets of the capital on Thursday, chanting, "The revolution will continue."

One of the protesters told Press TV, "We want the ouster of all corrupt officials in the military and government institutions. If these demands are not met, our revolution will continue."

The demonstrators also censured the increasing presence of military checkpoints and armored vehicles across the capital.

They called on President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi to address the current situation of the military and the political instability in the country before a national dialogue takes place.

"The national dialogue cannot take place unless the army is fully reorganized and armored manifestations cease to exist," said Abullah Sulwi, another demonstrator.

Saleh formally stepped down and handed over power to then Vice President Hadi in February 2012. The power transfer occurred under a Saudi-backed deal brokered by the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council in April 2011 and signed by Saleh in Riyadh on November 23, 2011.

Hadi, who is a UK-trained field marshal, was sworn in on February 25, 2012, following a single-candidate presidential election on February 21, which was supported by the United States and the Saudi regime.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/11/282915/yemenis-protesters-hold-demo-in-sanaa/>

- **Anger at Saudi beheading of Sri Lankan maid**

Human rights groups condemn execution of Rizana Nafeek, convicted of killing an infant in her care in 2005.

Rights groups have criticised Saudi Arabia over the beheading of a young Sri Lankan domestic worker accused of killing an infant left in her care in 2005.

The Saudi Interior Ministry said in a statement run by the official SPA news agency that Rizana Nafeek was executed in the town of Dawadmy, near the capital Riyadh, on Wednesday morning.

Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry said Nafeek was sentenced to death in 2007 after her Saudi employer accused her of killing his infant daughter while she was bottle-feeding.

"President Mahinda Rajapaksa made a personal appeal on two occasions immediately after the confirmation of the death sentence, and a few days ago to stop the execution and grant a pardon to Miss Rizana Nafeek," the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

London-based Rights organisation Amnesty International said the passport Nafeek used to enter Saudi Arabia in May 2005 stated she was born in February 1982, but her birth certificate states she was born six year later, which would have made her 17 at the time of the infant's death.

Condemning the execution, Nisha Varia, senior women's rights researcher for Human Rights Watch, said: "Saudi Arabia is one of just three countries that executes people for crimes they committed as children.

"In executing Rizana Nafeek, Saudi authorities demonstrated callous disregard for basic humanity as well as Saudi Arabia's international legal obligations."

Saudi Arabia follows the strict Wahhabi school of Islam and applies Islamic law. Judges base decisions on their own interpretation of the law rather than on a written legal code or on precedent.

Saudi households are highly dependent on domestic workers from African and South Asian countries.

In a statement before the execution, Amnesty International said that it appeared Nafeek had no access to lawyers either during her pre-trial interrogation or at her trial in 2007.

"It appears that she was herself a child at the time and there are real concerns about the fairness of her trial," Philip Luther, Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa programme director, said the day before the execution.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/20131107434432906.html>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Thousands protest Quetta sectarian attacks**

At least 81 Shias killed in southwestern Pakistan, with dozens more dead in separate attacks elsewhere on Thursday.

Thousands of people have held a demonstration against the Pakistani government in the southwestern city of Quetta, a day after more than a hundred people were killed in a series of attacks and shootings there and elsewhere in the country.

At least 95 people, mostly Hazara Shia Muslims, were killed in a bombing in Quetta on Thursday.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a Sunni Muslim extremist group, has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Bomb explosions and violent deaths also rocked the Swat Valley in the northwest, and the port city of Karachi on Thursday.

On Friday, at least 2,000 people gathered in Quetta to demand a targeted military operation against those who killed their loved ones in a twin bombing attack on Alamdar Road.

"The protest will continue until Quetta is handed to the army," said Hashim Mousavi, one of the organisers from the Shia Wahdatul Muslimeen party. "The government is either incapable of bringing the situation under control or does not want to do anything," he added.

In total, at least 106 people were killed and scores of others wounded in the attack that targeted the Hazara Shias and in a separate explosion that targeted government paramilitary forces.

The government has beefed up security in the Baloch provincial capital following the attacks, with eight Frontier Corps paramilitary platoons being deployed in the city.

Al Jazeera's Kamal Hyder, reporting from Islamabad, spoke of the main attack on Alamdar Road, a predominantly Hazara Shia Muslim neighbourhood of Quetta.

"In that particular attack, the suicide bomber seemed to have penetrated into a snooker club situated close to a police station and a Shia mosque," he said.

"After the blast the entire building came down. As the rescue teams and journalists rushed to the scene, a second explosion took place."

In addition to the 95 dead, more than 120 people were wounded in the double bombing, said police officer Zubair Mehmood.

Hospitals and a local mortuary were overwhelmed as the dead and wounded arrived throughout the evening. Weeping relatives gathered outside the emergency room at Quetta's Civil Hospital. Inside the morgue, bodies were laid out on the floor.

It was the worst bombing in Balochistan since December, when a car bomb killed at least 19 Shia Muslim pilgrims en route to Iran in Mastung district, about 30km south of Quetta.

Earlier on Thursday, a separate explosion targeted a vehicle belonging to the regional paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) force, killing at least 11 people. Two officers were among the dead.

Pools of blood, smashed windowpanes and charred pieces of metal littered the street after the blast.

"Eleven people were killed and 30 injured in the blast. [...] it was a crowded place," Mir Zubair Mehmood, Quetta police chief, was quoted as saying by AFP news agency.

Abdul Razzaq, a bomb disposal official, said the device was packed with between 20 and 25kg of explosives, and was detonated by remote control.

Balochistan is the site of a nearly decade-old armed campaign against the Pakistani state.

Rebels in the province want political autonomy and a greater share of profits from the region's wealth of oil and gas deposits. The United Baloch Army, one such rebel group, claimed responsibility for the attack against the paramilitary forces.

Deaths in Swat

In Swat, at least 25 people were killed and 70 wounded after an explosion at a religious gathering on Thursday, according to police officials.

Akhtar Hayat, the regional police chief, said the explosion occurred at a weekly meeting of the local Tableeghi Jamaat at its primary centre in the outskirts of Mingora, the main town in the northwestern district.

There were around 1,500 people listening to the speech of a Muslim leader at the centre when the explosion occurred, he said.

"The explosion occurred due to a bomb. Around five kilograms of explosives were used in the blast," Shafqat Malik, a senior bomb disposal official in Peshawar, told AFP.

The Pakistani Taliban seized much of Swat during a 2007-2009 armed campaign but the army declared the region back under control after an offensive in July 2009.

Karachi shootings

In addition to the deaths in Quetta and Swat, nine people were shot dead in separate incidents in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and its commercial hub.

Seven people were killed near Dr Nadir Homeopathic Hospital on the Karachi-Hyderabad Superhighway.

Retailers in the area closed their shops in fear of the incident.

A man was also shot in the Gulbahar vicinity while another was killed near Singer Roundabout in Korangi.

Two people were also killed in another shooting near Sir Syed University in Karachi's Gulshan-i-Iqbal neighbourhood.

According to local publication Dawn News, the dead were robbers and were shot by police in a fire exchange.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/2013110113442325208.html>

- **Pakistan says soldier killed by Indian fire**

Military says "unprovoked" shooting caused death in Kashmir, just days after India blamed Pakistan for two fatalities.

A Pakistani soldier has been killed by Indian troops in the divided Kashmir region, according to the Pakistani military.



Thursday's incident comes two days after the Indian army said that two Indian soldiers were killed by Pakistani troops who crossed the ceasefire line in the Himalayan region.

Pakistan has denied such an incident occurred.

A Pakistani army spokesperson said that the soldier was killed by "unprovoked" Indian fire while manning a post in the Battal sector of Kashmir, which is split between the two sides by a heavily fortified border known as the Line of Control (LOC).

"Pakistan Army soldier, Havildar Mohyuddin, embraced shahadat [martyrdom] due to unprovoked firing by Indian troops at Hotspring sector in Battal at 2:40 pm (0940 GMT) today," the military said.

In a major diplomatic move on Wednesday, Pakistan's high commissioner was summoned to New Delhi to discuss Tuesday's incident, as the country lodged a protest with Pakistan after the incident at the LOC.

The Pakistani military has said that its investigations had revealed no evidence of the deaths of the two Indian soldiers.

Pakistanis 'concerned'

Al Jazeera's Kamal Hyder, reporting from Islamabad, said: "The Pakistani media and government are quite concerned that there is a war hysteria being whipped up by the Indian military. The Indians have rejected Pakistani claims that there should be an Independent enquiry into the recent deaths of the two Indian soldiers by the UN.

"There are also contradictory reports coming from the Indian military's northern command which maintains that there was no alleged mutilation of the Indian soldier, as was reported in the Indian media."

The alleged retaliatory attacks threaten to reverse the recent progress Pakistan and India have made in improving their historically antagonistic relationship.

The escalations on the Line of Control will be a source of worry for both sides in light of the ceasefire that has held since 2003.

The two countries have fought three major wars since they achieved independence from British India in 1947, two of them over Kashmir.

Their relationship reached a recent low point in 2008 when Pakistani men killed 166 people in the Indian city of Mumbai. It has improved significantly since then, and the two countries have taken steps to improve cross-border trade and ease travel restrictions. But key issues, including Kashmir, remain unresolved.

Media frenzy

Al Jazeera's Divya Gopalan, reporting from New Delhi, said: "The lines Indian media are putting out are that 'Pakistan alleges that a Pakistani soldier was killed by Indian troops'.

"Very little is being said about this new incident. The focus is still on what happened two days ago when two Indian soldiers were shot by Pakistani troops. TV stations are playing out how many Pakistani violations there have been in the past year.

"After going through a period of thawing relations where both countries were extending hands of friendship to each other. People are now concerned, especially on a political level, about how that is going to affect relations especially after this new shooting.

"The Indian home minister has made no mention of backtracking on any of the diplomatic progress made between the two countries.

"The neighbouring countries have been going through a period of thawed relations extending hands of friendship to each other - but all that could change especially since the renewed rhetoric is ratcheting up."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/2013110121216788587.html>

- **Obama and Karzai to discuss Afghan exit plan**

US and Afghan presidents to meet at White House to discuss US role in Afghanistan after war formally ends in 2014.

United States President Barack Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai are set to meet at the White House to discuss the future of the US role in Afghanistan.



Obama and Karzai have announced plans for a joint news conference on Friday afternoon.

White House officials say Obama will not announce any decisions on the next phase of troop withdrawals or whether any US forces will stay behind in Afghanistan after the war formally ends in 2014.

US commanders in Afghanistan have proposed keeping 6,000 to 15,000 US troops after 2014 to continue pursuing armed groups and training Afghan security forces.

The White House tends to favor lower troop levels than military generals.

Officials say Obama would be open to pulling all US forces out of Afghanistan at the end of 2014.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2013/01/201311185310956108.html>

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

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