



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

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1. IRAQ

- **Iraq PM trades blame with Kurd leader in row**

BAGHDAD, Jan 20, 2013 (AFP) Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and the leader of the Kurdish region traded barbs on Sunday, each blaming the other for an ongoing political crisis amid weeks of anti-government protests.

The two issued rival statements in the latest in a series of disputes that have hardened opposition against Maliki and pitted him against several of his erstwhile government partners, including Iraq's main Kurdish political faction, who accuse him of authoritarianism and sectarianism.

"The federal government... has increased the crisis through neglect and threats that have led to dangerous consequences," Kurdish regional president Massud Barzani said in a statement issued late on Saturday.

"Iraq has, for a long time, been going through a major crisis because of the neglect of services for citizens, and not implementing the constitution and agreements."

Barzani also backed "the legitimate demands" of demonstrators in mostly Sunni areas of Iraq who have for weeks railed against the Shiite-led authorities for allegedly holding members of their community without charge and misusing anti-terror laws to target Sunnis.

Maliki, meanwhile, issued his own statement on Sunday in which he expressed surprise at Barzani's statement, which he said "reveals a desire to hinder dialogue among the Iraqi people and components, and revive ugly sectarian strife."

"It seems that these factions do not like to see agreement between Iraqis," he said, in the statement issued by his office.

<http://uk.news.yahoo.com/iraq-pm-trades-blame-kurd-leader-row-143931587.html>

- **Peshmerga clarifies reason of postponing its meeting with Baghdad delegation**

Baghdad, Jan. 20 (AIN) -The Peshmerga Ministry within Kurdistan Region clarified the reason behind postponing the planned meeting of the joint supreme action commission with Baghdad delegation over running the security in the disputed areas.

The secretary general of Peshmerga Ministry, Maj. Ge. Jabaar Yawar said in a statement received by AIN on Sunday "The meeting that was planned to be held on today Sunday has been postponed because of the official preoccupations and obligations of Baghdad delegation's members."

"Today meeting was postponed till next week," Yawar added noting "Our meetings will continue until resolving all the problems."

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26993:peshmerga-clarifies-reason-of-postponing-its-meeting-with-baghdad-delegation-&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **Araji, Shimmari stress unifying INA efforts to confront challenges (alliraqnews)**

Baghdad, Jan. 20 (AIN) –The head of Ahrar Parliamentary bloc, Bahaa al-Araji, and the Minister of Justice, Hasan al-Shimmari, stressed the necessity of unifying the efforts of the Iraqi National Alliance to confront the challenges.

A statement by Arajı's office received by AIN cited "Arajı met Shimmari and they discussed the political crisis in the country as well as the details related to the performance of the Ministry of Justice especially concerning the women detainees."

"Both sides reviewed the means of providing the required services for the detainees and they agreed upon certain views concerning developing the detentions in harmony with the Human Rights," the statement mentioned.

"Arajı stressed the importance of intensifying the protection of the detentions to prevent the prisoners' escape," the statement continued.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=27006:araji-shimmari-stress-unifying-ina-efforts-to-confront-challenges&catid=35:political&Itemid=2

- **Kuwait, Iraq eager to turn page - Al-Rashed (KUNA)**

KHARTOUM, Jan 20 (KUNA) -- Head of the Kuwaiti parliamentary caucus, House Speaker Ali Fahad Al-Rashed asserted here on Sunday that Kuwait and Iraq are seeking to turn the page of the past and strengthen their bilateral relations for the sake of the two countries and peoples.

This came in a press statement made by Al-Rashed after meeting head of the Iraqi delegation attending the conference of the Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUOIC) MP Hammam Hammoudi.

Al-Rashed quoted Hammoudi as saying that the former Iraqi regime had carried out criminal acts against the Iraqi people and Kuwait, adding that both countries' parliaments have a big responsibility to restore relations.

He said in this context that he had received an invitation from the Iraqi parliament speaker to visit Iraq in the next few months.

Al-Rashed expressed satisfaction over the recent actions that took place between the Kuwaiti and Iraqi governments, calling for continued efforts in this respect.

He said that governments "agree and disagree on certain issues, but parliamentary relations is a popular diplomacy that make distances between people closer." On his assessment of deliberations of the current PUOIC session, Al-Rashed said that the conference is moving in the right direction as planned, adding that "there are good proposals submitted by some countries and are being discussed now." For his part, Hammoudi said that Kuwaiti-Iraqi ties have witnessed positive developments, recalling the recent settlements made by the two countries regarding the files of Iraqi Airways and border signs.

<http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2288017&language=en>

- **Jordanian-Iraqi-Syrian forum on industrial cooperation starts (Petra News Agency)**

Amman, Jan. 20 (Petra)-- A Jordanian-Iraqi-Syrian economic forum was organized on Saturday to promote cooperation between the three countries, especially in the industrial field.

The forum was organized by the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (ASME) in cooperation with Jordan Enterprise Development Corporation (JEDCO) and the Amman Chamber of Industry (ACI).

Director of the Economic and Social Council Jawad Al Anani stressed the importance of promoting trade relations between the three countries, praising the Iraqi decision to construct oil pipeline to Jordan. ASME President Fathi Jaghbeer outlined investments opportunities in Jordan, calling on businessmen from the three countries to cooperate and start joint projects.

He also stressed the role of the private sector in enhancing cooperation and promote industrial ties, noting the need to remove obstacles that hinder cooperation between the three countries.

A number of bilateral meetings were held on the sidelines of the forum on means to enhance industrial relations between the three countries.

http://www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?Site_Id=1&lang=2&NewsID=97396&CatID=13&Type=Home>ype=1

- **Iraq takes anger out on Saudi detainees after losing football match (Al Arabiya)**

Twenty Saudi detainees in Iraqi prisons were tortured after the Iraqi national team lost the Gulf Cup football tournament to the UAE in a match supervised by a Saudi referee, according to Thamer Balheed, head of the Saudi detainees in Iraq.

Balheed told Al Arabiya TV that the Saudi prisoners were severely beaten and insulted by Iraqi prison guards who blamed the Saudi referee for their national team's 1-2 defeat to the UAE.

A sport commentator on an Iraqi television network lost his temper during the match, issuing live prayers against Saudi referee Khalil al-Ghamdi and accusing him of being unfair to Iraq.

Iraq and Saudi Arabia have recently resumed security cooperation talks, including discussion on a prisoners exchange deal.

This came after a Saudi man was released from an Iraqi jail and said he was tortured by Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

Balheed has previously stated that up to 60 Saudi detainees are being held in Iraqi prisons. He noted that they are being kept in different prisons and are all staying in deplorable conditions and exposed to various forms of torture.

However, when the issue of exchanging prisoners was introduced, the 'Iraqi government refused it," according to Balheed.

“We were met with extreme intransigence on the part of al-Maliki’s government,” Balheed said.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/01/20/261573.html>

- **Fresh Charges for UK Troops' Torture, Killing in Iraq (fars news)**

TEHRAN, Jan. 20 (FNA)- Britain will face fresh charges of breaching international law over the torture and killing of prisoners during the war in Iraq, which began almost exactly 10 years ago.

At a hearing scheduled over three days from 29 January, lawyers for 180 Iraqis who claim they are victims of abuse, or that their family members were unlawfully killed, will place a file of statements before two judges presiding over the court in London accusing British soldiers and intelligence officers of unlawful interrogation practices, Guardian Newspaper reported.

These include hooding and the use of "stress positions", sexual abuse, beating and religious abuse of illegally detained prisoners. In some cases, the testimonies allege, the torture led to the death of the prisoner.

The statements were compiled during meetings with victims and relatives, mostly in Lebanon, by human rights lawyer Phil Shiner of the Public Interest Lawyers group, based in Birmingham.

The court will rule on whether the abuses were isolated incidents of which commanders, senior ministry officials and politicians were unaware, as the government insists, or "systemic" and authorized as policy. The MoD contends that any general problems of detention and interrogation were dealt with by an inquiry into the death of Baha Mousa, an innocent hotel worker killed while in British invasion of Basra in 2003, and continuing internal investigations by its own Iraq Historic Allegations Team.

The 2003 Invasion of Iraq (19 March - 1 May 2003), was the start of the conflict known as the Iraq War, in which a combined force of troops from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Poland invaded Iraq and toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein in 21 days of major combat operations.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107137329>

- **Explosion hits Iraq oil pipeline to Turkey (PRESS TV)**

An explosion has hit the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik oil pipeline that transfers crude from Iraq to Turkey.

The oil supply was temporarily disrupted due to the explosion that occurred on Turkey's soil in the province of Mardin on Friday night and caused a fire.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack, but the finger of blame was immediately pointed at the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The separatist group has been fighting for an autonomous Kurdish region inside Turkey since the 1980s and the conflict has left tens of thousands of people dead on both sides.

The 970 Kilometers-long Kirkuk-Yumurtalik pipeline stretches from Kirkuk in the north of Iraq to Ceyhan port in southern Turkey.

The pipeline's contract between Iraq and Turkey was extended for another 15 years in 2010 after lengthy negotiations.

<http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/01/20/284571/explosion-hits-iraqturkey-oil-pipeline/>

- **Iraq finds extra billion barrels of oil: ministry (AFP)**

BAGHDAD, Jan 20, 2013 (AFP) Iraq said on Sunday it has discovered deposits of crude equivalent to one billion barrels of oil after the first exploration work by state-owned firms in almost 30 years.

The deposits were found after exploration in Maysan province, in southern Iraq near the border with Iran, and could potentially make a significant addition to Baghdad's already substantial reserves.

"Exploration began in Maysan, south of (provincial capital) Amara" last year, oil ministry spokesman Assem Jihad told AFP.

"Today, it completed 100 percent and achieved a big success.

"The initial assessment from this discovery is about one billion barrels of oil," he said, adding: "It will increase production capacity for (state-owned) Maysan Oil Company."

Jihad said the state-owned oil exploration firm had been carrying out its first exploration work within Iraq in nearly three decades.

Iraq, which is highly dependent on oil sales for government revenue, has sought in recent years to dramatically ramp up production and exploration in order to help rebuild its conflict-battered economy and infrastructure.

The country has proven reserves of 143.1 billion barrels of oil and 3.2 trillion cubic metres (111.9 trillion cubic feet) of gas, both of which are among the largest in the world.

http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i_ZiFXU7zg2ySTneKNt5OewEGnVg?docId=CNG.ff67847b4641455470e3d885ef5416eb.2b1

- **Iraq's Kurds Reject Baghdad's Kirkuk Oil Deal (rudaw)**

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region, Jan. 20 - The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq said that a deal between Baghdad and oil major BP for oil fields in disputed Kirkuk was "illegal and unconstitutional."

The autonomous region defended its own policy of developing fields with foreign help and exporting crude to Turkey without involving the central government.

In a statement Thursday, the KRG challenged remarks made the previous day by Iraq's Oil Minister Adbul Kareen Luaibi.

Speaking to the Reuters news agency, Luaibi threatened to cut the KRG's share of the federal budget, sue companies that export crude oil directly from the KRG and announced details of an alleged deal in the making with BP in Kirkuk.

Kirkuk sits atop one of the country's largest oil reserves, but lies in a disputed territory that is claimed by both the central government and the autonomous Kurds.

Luaibi "reveals details of an illegal and unconstitutional plan to allegedly allow BP to enhance the recovery of some of the depleted fields in Kirkuk... without consulting and obtaining approval of the other parties to the dispute," the KRG said.

"Such remarks reflect a lack of respect for the constitution of Iraq and for the people of Kurdistan," the statement added. "They represent a degree of panic and desperation."

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurds/5674.html>

- **Saudi Arabia, Iraq export less crude in November (times of oman)**

Manama, Jan. 20: Saudi Arabia exported 1.7 per cent less crude in November than in the previous month, while Iraq and five other Opec producers also curbed shipments, according to the Joint Organisations Data Initiative (Jodi). The kingdom shipped 7.15 million barrels a day in November as it reduced monthly output by 2.4 per cent to 9.49 million barrels a day.

Iraq trimmed its exports by 3.3 per cent to 2.62 million barrels a day even as it pumped 1.7 per cent more oil, data posted yesterday showed. Angola cut crude exports by 5.6 per cent, the UAE pared shipments by 3.1 per cent, and Qatar, Ecuador and Venezuela also reduced exports, the data showed.

Algeria's shipments surged 42 per cent in November to 725,000 barrels a day, while its production slipped 2.7 per cent, according to the initiative known as Jodi. Opec said in a monthly report on January 16 that its total output in December dropped by 465,000 barrels a day to 30.4 million, the lowest level since October 2011.

<http://www.timesofoman.com/News/Article-6704.aspx>

2. IRAN

- **Iran's 24th fleet leaves southern port for international waters**

The 24th fleet of Iran's Navy has left a port in the south of the country for international waters to provide maritime security in the region.



The 24th fleet, comprising of Sabalan destroyer and Kharg helicopter carrier, left Iran's Bandar Abbas port on Sunday.

Kharg helicopter carrier is 207 meters long and the largest of its kind in West Asia. The carrier operates as a backup aircraft transport for the Iranian Navy's destroyers in international waters.

The deployment is aimed at providing security for the region and ensuring the security of shipping lines.

Iran Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari said on January 16 that the 24th fleet would "patrol the north of the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, Bab-el-Mandeb, the Red Sea, the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea for three months."

In recent years, Iran's Navy has been increasing its presence in international waters to protect naval routes and provide security for Iranian merchant vessels and tankers.

In addition, in line with the international efforts to combat piracy, the Iranian Navy has been conducting anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since November 2008 to safeguard the vessels involved in maritime trade, especially the ships and oil tankers owned or leased by Iran.

Meanwhile, Oman's naval vessel Nasr al-Bahr docked at Iran's Bandar Abbas port along with a helicopter on Sunday.

The development is in line with measures to strengthen the friendly ties between the armed forces of the two neighboring countries.

Sayyari said in February 2012 that the naval forces of a number of neighboring countries had expressed desire to send fleets to Iran and that Tehran was ready to welcome them.

In December 2012, Russian destroyer Marshal Shaposhnikov docked at Bandar Abbas port.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/21/284725/iran-24th-fleet-sets-sail-for-intl-waters/>

- **IRGC Navy closely monitoring foreign movements: Cmdr.**

A senior Iranian commander says the naval forces of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) are closely monitoring all the movements of foreign forces in the international waters south of the country.

“The IRGC Navy enjoys full command over all maritime borders; and today we are at the highest level of readiness and might,” Deputy Commander of the IRGC Navy Rear-Admiral Alireza Tangsiri said on Monday.

The IRGC Navy recently conducted military exercises in the waters of the Persian Gulf near the port city of Bandar Abbas, as part of their tactical training for modern warfare.

The exercises were conducted to boost the combat preparedness of IRGC forces, familiarize them with the latest military achievements, increase their response time and ensure well-timed responses to natural and manmade disasters.

Over the past few years, Iran has held several military drills to enhance the defensive capabilities of its armed forces and to test modern military tactics and equipment.

The Islamic Republic has repeatedly assured other nations, especially its neighbors, that its military might poses no threat to other countries, insisting that its defense doctrine is based on deterrence.

To display Iran's capabilities in defending its maritime borders, the Iranian Navy launched a six-day naval drill codenamed Velayat 91 on December 28 in a vast area stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to the Gulf of Oman and the northern parts of the Indian Ocean.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/21/284723/irgc-navy-keeps-eye-on-foreign-moves/>

- **Larijani hopes IIPU be beneficial**

Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani says he hopes the General Assembly Meeting of the Islamic Inter-Parliamentary Union (IIPU) be beneficial for all the member states.

Larijani made the remarks to the reporters as he arrived in Khartoum International Airport in Sudan on Sunday.

Larijani, who is scheduled to attend the eighth IIPU meeting, was welcomed by Sudanese Interim National Assembly Speaker, Ahmed Ibrahim al-Tahir, at the airport.

Before leaving Tehran, Larijani stressed the importance of the IIPU, noting that “the issue of Palestine and the Zionist regime [of Israel]’s behavior against women and children” is one of the important topics to be discussed at the meeting.

The meeting will be held in Khartoum on January 21-22. The last meeting of the union was held in the Malaysian city of Palembang in January 2012.

Major topics of discussion in the seventh assembly included Islamic Awakening, Palestine's membership in the United Nations, modern technologies, counterterrorism, sustainable development, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy in the Middle East.

The IIPU was established in 1999 based on an initiative by Iran. It seeks to strengthen parliamentary cooperation among Islamic countries in order to solve challenges facing the Islamic world.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/20/284670/larijani-hopes-iipu-proves-beneficial/>

- **IAEA must recognize Iran right to enrich uranium: Analyst**

Any proposal from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to Iran on its nuclear energy program should recognize Tehran's right to uranium enrichment, a US-based professor tells Press TV.

In an interview with Press TV, Nader Baqerzadeh, a professor at the University of California on Sunday, said Iran's right to having a nuclear energy program is non-negotiable and the international community should recognize this in future talks with Tehran.

"The proposal has to include some level of enrichment for Iran and I think they should understand that that issue is basically not negotiable," he added.

Baqerzadeh said the fatwa (religious decree) issued by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on the prohibition of nuclear weapons confirms intelligence agencies' report that there is no record of Iran working on the military applications of nuclear technology.

"I think the background is being set up that the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear activity could be presentable to the world as long as the Agency's involved. I think this is a good point to that, to be reminded of," he said.

Iran and the United Nations nuclear watchdog wrapped up two days of talks in Tehran on Thursday, and agreed to hold a new round of talks again in the Iranian capital on Feb 12.

The talks between Iranian and IAEA negotiators were focused on finding a structured framework for mutual cooperation.

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 committed signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and a member of the IAEA, it is entitled to develop and acquire nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/20/284644/iaea-must-accept-iran-enrichment-right/>

- **Bashar Assad, Iran’s red line: Velayati**

A senior Iranian official has warned against efforts to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, describing his fate as a “red line” for the Islamic Republic.

Ali Akbar Velayati, adviser to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on international affairs, said the fall of al-Assad will damage the resistance front against Israel.

“The main reason behind our focus on the Syrian issue is to prevent the fall of the resistance line against Israel. If Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, falls the resistance line against Israel will break up,” Velayati stated.

However, he stressed that Tehran’s support for Assad does not mean that Iran is neglecting the Syrian nation’s right to choose their rulers.

“We believe in the necessity of reforms in Syria based on the demands of the Syrian nation without recourse to violence and any [form of] US support,” Velayati said.

“Certain reactionary states like Qatar supplied terrorists [in Syria] with arms, and with the aim of overthrowing Assad...recruited gunmen from Somalia and Afghanistan to commit massacres and this is an indication of foreign conspiracies.”

Velayati stressed that nobody outside Syria is allowed to decide for Assad to stay or to leave.

Earlier on Sunday, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem said any discussion of the removal of Assad in a future transitional government is “unacceptable.”

He called on the “nationalistic opposition” groups to lay down their weapons and join talks to form a new government.

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

Damascus has repeatedly said that the chaos is being orchestrated from outside the country, and that a very large number of militants operating in the country are foreign nationals.

According to a UN report, militants from 29 countries -- most of whom are extremist Salafists -- have infiltrated into Syria to fight against President al-Assad’s government.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/20/284641/bashar-assad-irans-red-line-velayati/>

3. SYRIA

- **Syrian troops kill dozens of militants on Damascus outskirts**

Syrian Army soldiers have killed dozens of foreign-sponsored militants during mop-up operations on the outskirts of the capital city of Damascus.



A number of gunmen were killed during intense clashes with Syrian troops in the city of Harasta, located about 25 kilometers (15 miles) northeast of Damascus, on Sunday, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported.

Government forces also destroyed a pickup truck mounted with a Dushka machinegun during clashes in the town of al-Hejjeira.

Also on Sunday, Syrian troops raided a terrorist hideout in the town of al-Ziyabiyeh, killing dozens of anti-government gunmen in the process and seizing an assortment of weapons and munitions.

Furthermore, a unit of government forces killed a number of foreign-backed militants in the town of Aqraba, situated roughly 6 kilometers (4 miles) southeast of Damascus.

Syrian soldiers also killed dozens of gunmen in clashes in the town of Daraya, located 8 kilometers (5 miles) southwest of Damascus.

Moreover, Syrian Army forces killed tens of foreign-sponsored militants in the town of al-Meleiha. The troops also defused an explosive device, weighing over 30 kilograms, in a district of the town.

Syria has been experiencing unrest since March 2011. 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/2013/01/21/284713/dozens-of-militants-killed-near-damascus/>

- **Syrian opposition seeks to pick PM-in-exile**

Differences reported over choice of new executive's leader as Syrian minister rejects calls for Assad to step down.

Syria's opposition umbrella group have met in a bid to name a prime minister-in-exile, a day after Syria rejected the idea that President Bashar al-Assad will be overthrown.

The diplomatic developments came on Sunday as five members of one family were killed in government air attacks on a village in Damascus province, according to a watchdog.

The National Coalition, which many Western and Arab powers recognise as the sole representative of the Syrian people, was discussing the idea of a government-in-exile in Istanbul, Turkey, but differences have emerged over who should lead the new executive, an opposition official told the AFP news agency.

"The US continues to have the president's departure as a condition of regime change, ignoring the fact that the captain of a capsized ship does not jump into the first boat," he said.

"A proposal was made to name Riad Hijab but it has run into much criticism," the official said on condition of anonymity.

Hijab, a former prime minister in the Assad regime, defected last August and has worked closely with Turkish leaders to help restructure the fragmented Syrian opposition.

The opposition bloc, which has called for the establishment of an interim government with full executive powers in rebel-held areas inside Syria, is due to meet on January 28 in Paris, Laurent Fabius, French foreign minister, said.

Defending the presidency

Earlier, Walid Muallem, Syria's foreign minister, struck a defiant tone, telling state television late on Saturday that those who demand Assad's removal wanted only bloodshed in the country.

"Nobody can afford to undermine the presidency - it is unacceptable," he said.

His statements came amid reports that Assad's mother, Anisa Makhluף, had left Syria and joined her daughter in Dubai, Syrian expatriates in the United Arab Emirates and an activist said on Sunday.

Makhluף's "departure from Syria is another indication of Assad losing support even from within his family", Ayman Abdel Nour, head of the newly formed group Syrian Christians for Democracy, said.

Analysts say Assad is increasingly relying on the tight-knit circle surrounding him, which includes Maher, his only brother still alive and who commands the army's notorious Fourth Brigade.

Meanwhile, a senior aide to Iran's supreme leader warned against the overthrow Assad, saying his fate was a "red line", in one of the Islamic state's strongest messages of support for the Damascus government.

Iran has steadfastly backed Assad's rule since an uprising against his rule began almost two years ago and regards him as an important part of the axis of opposition against arch-foe Israel.

"If the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is toppled, the line of resistance in the face of Israel will be broken," Ali Akbar Velayati, who is seen as a potential contender in Iran's June presidential election, said in an interview broadcast on Sunday.

"We believe that there should be reforms emanating from the will of the Syrian people, but without resorting to violence and obtaining assistance from the [United States of] America."

Humanitarian crisis

The developments come as John Ging, director of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), attempts to assess Syrians' humanitarian needs.

Ging, who has been in the country since Friday, aims to assess how much humanitarian help is needed in Syria, where an estimated four million people, half of them displaced, are in need of emergency assistance.

The OCHA mission was received on Sunday by Faisal Mekdad, deputy foreign minister, and then travelled to Homs, even though a watchdog group reported government raids on besieged districts of the city.

In Damascus province, a couple and their three children were among nine civilians killed in air strikes on a village, while three people including a child died in shelling northeast of the capital, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Britain-based watchdog also reported one man killed by a sniper amid artillery shelling and warplane raids on Daraya, a strategic town next to the Mazzeh military airport, east of Damascus.

Al-Watan, a pro-government newspaper, said "terrorists on the outskirts of Daraya ... have appealed for help after being hit very hard by the Syrian army, which destroyed several of the hideouts where they barricaded themselves".

It said the army would press on with a ground operation to "root out the remaining terrorists".

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/01/201312016215324729.html>

4. ISRAEL-PALESTINE

- **Malaysian PM to visit Gaza on Tuesday: aide**

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak is scheduled to visit the Gaza Strip, which has been under an Israeli blockade for the past five years.

An aide to the Malaysian prime minister said on Sunday that Foreign Minister Anifah Aman and other high-ranking officials will also accompany Najib on the one-day visit, AFP reported.

The aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to journalists, did not provide details of the visit or its purpose.

However, he said that an official statement would be issued on Monday.

In November 2012, an eight-day Israeli offensive in Gaza killed about 170 Palestinians, including many women and children, and injured over 1,400 others.

A ceasefire agreement, which took effect on November 21, ended the Israeli onslaught on the Gaza Strip, which has been blockaded since June 2007, a situation that has caused a decline in the standard of living, unprecedented levels of unemployment, and unrelenting poverty.

During the offensive in Gaza, the Malaysian prime minister called on international powers to influence Israel to halt Israeli aggression against the Palestinians.

The apartheid regime of Israel denies about 1.7 million people in Gaza their basic rights, such as freedom of movement, jobs that pay proper wages, and adequate healthcare and education.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/21/284688/malaysian-pm-to-visit-gaza-strip/>

- **Israeli troops evict Palestinians from protest camp**

Israeli troops have attacked Palestinians at a protest encampment consisting of four tents set up by activists at a site designated for new illegal settler units.

On Sunday, Israeli troops clashed with residents and activists who had set up the makeshift tents in the occupied West Bank to prevent the Tel Aviv regime from building new settler units.

Activists established the encampment on Friday to protest against Israel's plan to seize 124 acres (50 hectares) of land near the Palestinian village of Beit Iksa, located on the northwestern outskirts of al-Quds.

Saeed Yaqin, one of the organizers of the protest, stated that "the first thing we did was to tear up the order and throw it in the (Israeli) soldiers' faces. We and all the Palestinian people object and reject the (Israeli) military order."

"This is the first time since 1967 somebody's torn up a military order," he said.

"The land here is under occupation, and international law prohibits touching it," Yaqin added.

On January 17, Israeli police dismantled an encampment that was set up by Palestinians in the occupied West Bank on January 11 in protest against the Tel Aviv regime's plans to construct a large settlement at E1 area near al-Quds.

The E1 project aims at connecting the West Bank settlement of Maale Adumim to East al-Quds, about six kilometers away. The plan will cut off the northern part of the West Bank from the south.

More than half a million Israelis live in over 120 illegal settlements built since the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East al-Quds.

Israel's annexation of East al-Quds is in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 and has never been recognized by the international community.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/21/284681/israel-attacks-palestinian-protest-camp/>

- **US watchdog ranks Israel as region's only 'free' state**

Freedom House report says that while in recent years controversies have surrounded proposed laws threatening freedom of expression, in most cases they have been quashed by gov't, Knesset or Supreme Court.

Israel is the Middle East's only "free" state, the US-based Freedom House wrote in its annual report last week, a ranking in stark contrast to claims by the country's critics – both domestic and international – who argue that the Jewish state's democratic values are steadily eroding "Israel remains the region's only free country," read the report, called Freedom in the World 2013, released just days before Israel goes to the polls.



"In recent years, controversies have surrounded proposed laws that threatened freedom of expression and the rights of civil society organizations," the report read.

"In most cases, however, these measures have either been quashed by the government or parliament, or struck down by the Supreme Court. Israeli politics have also been roiled by an escalating controversy over the role of ultra-Orthodox Jews and their positions on issues such as military service and gender equality."

Israel's ranking is completely dissimilar to that given the West Bank and Gaza – one under Palestinian Authority control and the other under Hamas rule – which are both classified as "not free."

Likewise, the report found, Israel is surrounded by countries where freedom is not exactly the watchword.

The report, which ranks the world's countries by political rights and civil liberties, characterized Jordan and Syria as “not free,” and Egypt and Lebanon as “partly free.”

Of the “worst of the worst” countries, the nine countries given the absolute worst ratings in the world, two were in the region: Saudi Arabia and Syria. Sudan was also rated in the bottom nine.

Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen all also received the “not free” ranking, and Tunisia, Kuwait, Libya and Morocco were defined as “partly free.”

Interestingly, while Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan consistently slams Israel for alleged human rights violations, his country earned only a “partly free” ranking from Freedom House.

According to the report, during his early years in power Erdogan pushed through important reforms that enshrined civilian rule, enhanced fairness at the polls, and made halting steps toward greater minority rights.

“More recently, however, his government has jailed hundreds of journalists, academics, opposition party officials, and military officers in a series of prosecutions aimed at alleged conspiracies against the state and Kurdish organizations,” the report read.

“Turkey currently leads the world in the number of journalists behind bars, and democracy advocates are expressing deep concern for the state of press freedom and the rule of law,” the report read.

According to the report, “the past year has provided more evidence that Middle Eastern countries long subject to the dictator's heel are quickly developing resilient and informed civil societies willing to push back against attempts to curb freedom of expression and thought, distort the electoral process, or concentrate power in the hands of military or religious authorities.

“In this context, factions or governments that seek to reduce freedom could find it increasingly difficult to do so.”

At the same time, “while the Middle East experienced some of the most significant improvements, it also registered major declines, with a list of worsening countries that includes Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates.”

In the Freedom House ratings, a “free” country is one where there is open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and independent media.

A “partly free” country is one in which there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties, and a “not free” country is one where basic political rights are absent and civil liberties widely and systematically denied.

<http://www.jpost.com/NationalNews/Article.aspx?id=300287>

- **Bayit Yehudi candidate calls for resettling Gaza Strip**

As US-born Bayit Yehudi candidate Gimpel dismisses claims that he's an extremist for Temple Mount comments, no. 13 on party list Horowitz calls to return Gush Katif evacuees to the Strip, rebuild dismantled W. Bank settlements.

Naftali Bennett's Bayit Yehudi faced new charges of extremism Sunday after a religious Zionist website revealed that one of the party's candidates called for returning Gush Katif evacuees to the Gaza Strip and rebuilding dismantled West Bank settlements.

The website, Kipa, reported that in a parlor meeting last week, Hebron rabbi Hillel Horowitz, who is 13th on the Bayit Yehudi list, said his party would do the maximum possible to return Israel to a full presence in the communities it evacuated in 2005.

“We will do everything we can to work to return the people of Israel to Homesh in northern Samaria and to Gush Katif,” Horowitz said.

“We will take action to bring about Israel’s annexation of the Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria. It is simple: We will act with all our strength on behalf of the land of Israel, the Torah of Israel, and the people of Israel.”

Parties on the Center-Left attacked Horowitz and warned potential Bayit Yehudi voters to support Bennett.

Former foreign minister Tzipi Livni told supporters in Sderot Sunday night that she was glad Horowitz’s statements were revealed before the election and not after.

“There are not 15 Bennetts,” said MK Yoel Hasson (The Tzipi Livni Party).

“Behind Bennett’s charismatic smile, there is an extremist, delusional gang who will bring about their share of extremist acts that will harm our democracy.

Anyone who votes Bennett who is not a right-wing extremist should know who they are voting for.”

Labor MK Eitan Cabel, who heads the party’s response team, responded to Horowitz by saying “Insanity has no god.”

The attacks on Horowitz came the same day that Jeremy Gimpel, who follows Horowitz on the Bayit Yehudi list, clarified what he told Christian Zionists in Florida in 2011 about blowing up Jerusalem’s Temple Mount mosques. He said that in the speech he was mocking those who called for such a thing.

“I gave a Bible lesson,” Gimpel said. “I wasn’t a politician then, I wasn’t running for anything. It was a parody on the fanatics who want to blow up the Temple Mount. Of course I oppose it.

No one in Bayit Yehudi supports violence on the Temple Mount or calls for blowing up anything. The Holy Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred and will be built on love.”

Gimpel scoffed at Hasson for filing a motion to disqualify him from Bayit Yehudi’s list of Knesset candidates.

He said it would be funny if Balad MK Haneen Zoabi were allowed to run and he were not.

In a press release in English, Gimpel said: “I unequivocally oppose any violence at any holy site, whether it be the Kotel Plaza, the Temple Mount, or sites sacred to any other faith.”

Gimpel said splinter parties on the left were desperately seeking to make headlines by twisting the truth and taking remarks out of context.

“The voters will see through it,” he said. “There are serious issues at stake in these elections: Israel’s security, Jewish identity, housing prices, cost of living, and more. I am calling on the public to see past the sensationalism and cheap shots and seriously consider which party represents their values, views, and hopes for Israel.”

Gimpel said he was particularly upset that the report that maligned him was broadcast on Friday night when he could not immediately react due to Shabbat.

There were also Shabbat attacks on Bennett. He said that every Friday night during this election season different parties have taken shots at Bayit Yehudi, leaving them defenseless for 24 hours, not being able to respond until Saturday night as the party refrains from any media interviews during Shabbat.

“It’s dirty politics and people are sick and tired of it,” Gimpel said.

“We are offering an alternative. As many parties have attacked us to compensate for their lack of new and innovative ideas, we have run a positive campaign aimed at uniting all sectors in Israel.”

Bayit Yehudi’s spokeswoman did not respond to a request for comment.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=300248>

- **Livni: A vote for me is one against Yigal Amir**

Tzip Livni Party copies virginity ad from Obama campaign; Peretz: "Tzipi and I have both beaten all the pollsters in the past."

Former foreign minister Tzipi Livni has spent most of the election campaign attacking her two rivals on the Center-Left, Labor leader Shelly Yacimovich and Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid.

But she found a new adversary on Sunday: Former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin’s assassin, Yigal Amir.

Vandals sprayed graffiti on the wall of the Tzipi Livni Party’s Tel Aviv headquarters Saturday night with the words “Yigal Amir was right.” Livni used the graffiti to reach out to voters on the Center-Left. She reached out to them at her party’s closing rally Sunday night in Sderot.

“I think that it’s good that [the vandalism] happened a day before the election and not after because it makes [the election’s importance] clear,” Livni said at the event. “The time has come to wipe the smile off the face of Yigal Amir. It is possible to restart diplomatic negotiations, to enlist the United States and even Turkey and remove Israel from international isolation, but for that you need power. That’s why I need you to go wake people up and tell people when they go into the polling station that they should think of their children.”

MK Yoel Hasson filed a complaint with the police.

In an effort to reach out to young voters, whom polls have shown are giving her party almost no support, Livni copied an advertisement from the recent campaign of US president Barack Obama.

In the ad, youngsters talk about “doing it for the first time.” At the end of the sexually suggestive ad, it becomes clear that they are talking about their vote, not their virginity.

Former defense minister Amir Peretz, who is third on the party’s list, downplayed polls indicating that the Livni Party would only win five or six seats.

“Tzipi and I have both beaten all the pollsters in the past,” Peretz said. “I believe there will be a big surprise on election day.”

Yesh Atid party’s website was attacked several times on Sunday by hackers in an attempt to crash the site.

The party found the denial-of-service attacks originated from IP addresses in Israel and abroad and worked to stop them.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=300272>

- **Abbas arrives in Saudia Arabia for economic summit**

PA president, joined by other senior figures, expected to use gathering to ask for urgently needed financial aid.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas arrived in Saudi Arabia on Sunday to attend the Third Arab Economic, Social and Developmental Summit.

At the summit, Arab leaders are expected to discuss economic and social issues in their countries, including railway land linkage, increase of investment, trade and aviation.

Abbas will seize the opportunity to renew his call on Arab countries to provide the Palestinians with urgent financial aid, a PA official in Ramallah said.

Arab League members have thus far failed to fulfill their promise to give the PA \$100 million each month in compensation for Israel's decision to confiscate Palestinians' tax revenues to pay their debt to the Israel Electric Corporation.

Last week, Saudi Arabia announced that it would give the PA \$100m. in emergency aid to help it pay salaries to more than 100,000 Palestinian public employees.

Abbas is accompanied by PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, Foreign Minister Riad al- Malki and Finance Minister Nabil Qassis.

The PA government has been unable to pay full salaries to its employees for the past two months due to the severe financial crisis it has been facing.

On the eve of Abbas's visit to Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian public employees' union declared a general strike Wednesday to protest against the failure of the PA government to pay full salaries.

<http://www.jpost.com/MiddleEast/Article.aspx?id=300264>

5. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Calm returns to Alexandria after protests rage near court**

The area outside the Alexandria's Criminal Court was calm Monday, after Sunday's clashes between security and demonstrators during a court session in the trial against police officers accused of killing protesters during the 2011 uprising.



The clashes, which spread to the area around Al-Qaed Ibrahim Mosque and the Italian Consulate, continued into the night after judges adjourned the case, saying they were unable to continue the session after fights erupted inside the courtroom between defense lawyers and plaintiffs, according to state-run news agency MENA.

Security forces were deployed outside of the court building on Monday. Protesters had started several fires at the building, which Civil Defense forces extinguished. Protesters also set three police on fire Sunday and assaulted a court security guard and stole his gun.

Police had fired tear gas to disperse protesters and arrested 10 people. Court documents were seen strewn around the streets as protesters began to disperse.

Several security officials have been acquitted on charges of killing protesters during the revolution that toppled former President Hosni Mubarak. A fact-finding committee formed by President Mohamed Morsy to reopen investigations into the killings has finished a report believed to provide new evidence against some of the acquitted defendants.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/calm-returns-alexandria-after-protests-rage-near-court>

- **FJP: New evidence could mean death penalty for Mubarak**

The Freedom and Justice Party's legal committee claims that new evidence that will be presented in the retrial of former President Hosni Mubarak may lead to him being sentenced to death.

The party's legal committee chairman Mokhtar al-Ashry said that new evidence has been presented to the fact-finding committee formed by President Mohamed Morsy to investigate the killing of protesters during the revolution. However, Ashray refused to disclose what the new evidence was, saying he was not authorized to reveal it.

Mubarak, 84, was jailed for life last year after being found guilty of failing to prevent the killing of protesters by security forces trying to quell mass demonstrations. But this month, a higher court accepted an appeal from him and former Interior Minister Habib al-Adly and ordered a retrial.

No date has been set yet for the new trial of the former president.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/fjp-new-evidence-could-mean-death-penalty-mubarak>

- **French troops inch north in Mali as Islamists melt away**

NIONO, Mali - French troops in armored vehicles advanced on Sunday towards a central Malian town abandoned by Islamist rebels after days of air strikes, moving cautiously for fear of guerrilla-style counterattacks by the al Qaeda-linked fighters.



Television showed the wreckage of the Islamists' white pick-up trucks, some mounted with heavy machine guns, lying charred and twisted among the mud-brick buildings of the village of Diabaly.

Commanders of French and Malian forces, who have set up their operations centre in the nearby town of Niono, some 300 km (190 miles) northeast of the capital Bamako, said the whereabouts of the Islamist fighters remained unclear.

"Our principal concern is that a section of the population may have joined the jihadists," said Colonel Seydou Sogoba, head of Malian military operations in the area.

"The war against the Islamists is not an easy one. They come in and mix with the local population," he said.

Some Islamist fighters had shaved off their beards and swapped their robes for jeans to blend in with local residents, he said.

France has deployed 2,000 ground troops and its war planes have pounded rebel columns and bases for 10 days, effectively halting an Islamist advance on the riverside capital.

French intervention was aimed at stopping the loose coalition of Muslim militants from using Mali's north as a training ground and springboard for attacks in Africa and on the West.

The Islamist alliance, grouping al Qaeda's North African wing AQIM and home-grown Malian militant groups Ansar Dine and MUJWA, has imposed harsh sharia law in northern Mali, including amputations and the destruction of ancient shrines sacred to moderate Sufi Muslims.

In Niono, more than two dozen French military vehicles stood in a dusty field outside the headquarters of the regional prefect. Some soldiers cleaned their guns and chatted next to their armored personnel carriers. Others bought cell phones, bread and other necessities from a local shop as they prepared for their next move forward.

In Paris, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius brushed off suggestions that France risked becoming embroiled in a guerrilla war. Islamist fighters have pledged to turn Mali into a new Afghanistan.

"In Afghanistan, there was no democratic regime. Here, there's a democratic regime even if it needs to be perfected," he told a news conference. "The common point is it's a battle against terrorism."

The stakes in Mali rose dramatically this week when Islamist gunmen cited France's intervention as the reason why they attacked a desert gas plant in neighboring Algeria, taking hundreds of hostages. Algeria carried out an assault on Saturday to end the siege and said on Sunday it expected a heavy death toll.

Veteran jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar claimed responsibility in the name of al Qaeda for the Algeria attack, Mauritanian news website Sahara Media said on Sunday.

"We are ready to negotiate with the West and the Algerian government provided they stop their bombing of Mali's Muslims," Belmokhtar said in a video, according to Sahara Media.

Slow African deployment

The conflict in Mali and the hostage crisis in Algeria have raised concerns about the radicalization of the broader Sahel region, which is awash with weapons pillaged from the armories of toppled Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

At a meeting with ECOWAS heads of state in Ivory Coast on Saturday, Fabius appealed for international help to fund a U.N. mandated African mission to oust the Islamists from the region. A donors conference will be held in Ethiopia on January 29.

Military experts say France and its African allies must deploy ground forces quickly to capitalize on recent gains and prevent the insurgents from regrouping in the desert.

The African deployment is hampered by a lack of transport and supplies, however. Nigeria, Niger and Togo have deployed a few hundred troops and a first contingent of 50 Senegalese troops left for Bamako on Sunday.

Underscoring the scale of the challenge, diplomats said full deployment of Senegal's full contingent of 500 soldiers was being held up by the lack of ammunition for their artillery.

Chad's President Idriss Deby, visiting a battalion of 600 Chadian troops awaiting deployment in neighboring Niger, said his government would do everything to ensure the maximum number of African troops in Mali.

"It's not that we have a lot of soldiers to spare but it's because we want to ensure the maximum number of soldiers on the ground," said Deby, who has promised to send 2,000 soldiers.

Human Rights Watch warned on Saturday it had received reports of serious abuses, including killings, being committed by Malian security forces against civilians in Niono.

Residents in the northern Malian town of Gao on Saturday lynched a prominent Islamist leader in retaliation for the killing of a local journalist earlier in the day, heightening fears of ethnic violence and reprisals following the liberation.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/french-troops-inch-north-mali-islamists-melt-away>

- **French and Malian troops enter Diabaly**

Troops take key town with little resistance from rebel fighters as troops from Chad arrive in Mali.

French and Malian troops have entered the key central Malian town of Diabaly, which has faced heavy airstrikes and fighting since being seized by al-Qaeda-linked rebels a week ago.



A convoy of about 30 armoured vehicles carrying some 200 French and Malian soldiers moved into the town on Monday at about 9 GMT, without meeting resistance.

Diabaly, 350 km north of the capital Bamako, had harboured the main cluster of rebels south of the front-line towns of Mopti and Sevaré until French airstrikes forced them to flee or attempt to blend in with locals, residents said.

A colonel in the Malian army had said earlier that a "fringe of the Diabaly population adheres to the jihadists' theories and we must be very careful in the coming hours".

French television footage from Diabaly has shown charred pick-up trucks abandoned by al-Qaeda-linked rebels amid mud brick homes.

One resident said the rebels had fled the town which was abandoned by many of its residents, and those remaining lacked food and other essentials.

Al Jazeera's Jacky Rowland, reporting from the capital Bamako, said that the French military has not yet declared control of the town.

“They want to check the area for landmines, booby traps, before they can confidently say they have completely retaken that town from the rebels,” Rowland said.

As French troops began a deployment towards the rebel-held north, moving into the strategic central towns of Niono and Sevare on Sunday, Paris said the aim of the 11-day old military offensive was total victory.

"The goal is the total reconquest of Mali," French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said in televised remarks. "We will not leave any pockets" of resistance.

Logistical constraints

France began its military offensive in Mali on January 11, and has said that African nations must take the lead though it could be some weeks before they are ready to do so.

Rebels in Mali were reported Sunday to be abandoning some of their positions and converging on the mountainous region of Kidal, their northernmost bastion, 1,500 kilometres from Bamako and near the border with Algeria.

Kidal was the first town seized by an amalgam of militants, some linked to al-Qaeda, and Tuareg separatist groups that started the rebellion in March last year.

Al Jazeera's Rowland said there are reports of further Tuareg defections from the rebels as they feel their rebellion has been "hijacked" by the al-Qaeda affiliated groups.

“The Tuareg have sensed which way the wind is blowing and they’re afraid of ending up on the wrong side as and when this conflict is resolved,” Rowland added.

Meanwhile the planned deployment of nearly 6,000 African soldiers continued slowly into Bamako, hampered by cash and logistical constraints. Only 150 African troops had arrived by Sunday.

Senegal, Benin and six other West African nations are contributing to the African mission which is expected to take over the baton from France, and Chad has also pledged 2,000 soldiers.

The head of the Commission of regional west African bloc ECOWAS, Desire Kadre Ouedraogo, estimated the cost of an African offensive against the armed Islamist groups at about 500 million dollars.

The European Union has pledged 50 million euros to the International Support Mission for Mali.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/201312110210692285.html>

- **Algeria warns hostage death toll to worsen**

At least 48 hostages believed to have been killed at Sahara gas plant, with as many as 20 workers still unaccounted for.

Algeria has warned other nations to prepare for a higher body count from a hostage bloodbath at a gas plant that was overrun in what France called an "act of war" by al-Qaeda-linked fighters.

Algerian troops on Sunday reportedly found the bodies of 25 hostages and captured five kidnappers at the In Amenas gas plant, deep in the Sahara desert, a day after storming the remaining part of the complex still in rebel hands.

Governments scrambled to track down missing citizens as more details emerged after the final showdown between special forces and fighters who had taken hundreds hostage, demanding an end to French military intervention in Mali.

Dozens of hostages appear to have died. Survivors' photos seen by AFP news agency showed bodies riddled with bullets, some with their heads half blown away by the impact of the gunfire.

"They were brutally executed," said an Algerian who identified himself as Brahim, after escaping the ordeal, referring to Japanese victims shot dead by the hostage-takers.

Japanese executed

Witnesses have said nine Japanese people connected to plant builder JGC were killed in the 72-hour ordeal. One Japanese man who survived gave a chilling account published on Monday in the Daily Yomiuri newspaper.

The unidentified man was quoted as telling colleagues how the gunmen had dragged him from his barricaded room, handcuffed him and executed two hostages standing nearby.

"I was prepared to die," he said, before his captors abandoned him and other hostages who had been bundled into a vehicle that came under a hail of bullets. He then trudged for an hour through the desert to safety.

Al Jazeera's Jamela Alindogan, reporting from the Philippines, said the ministry of foreign affairs in the capital Manila announced that six Filipinos died in the hostage crisis.

"Sixteen Filipinos have been accounted for, four remain missing, four remain hospitalised in Al-Azhra hospital in Algiers, and four have already arrived in the Philippines. Almost all of them work for the Japanese company," our correspondent said.

At least 23 foreigners and Algerians had been confirmed killed since the crisis erupted on Wednesday.

Ennahar television reported that the bodies of 25 hostages were found on Sunday by security forces combing through the plant, and that five hostage-takers had been captured alive.

Thirty-two kidnappers were also killed in the standoff, and the army freed 685 Algerian workers and 107 foreigners, the interior ministry said.

"I fear that it (the death toll) may be revised upward," Algerian Communications Minister Mohamed Said told a radio station, ahead of a news conference at 1330 GMT on Monday by Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French defence minister, described the hostage-taking as an "act of war" because of the large number of hostages involved.

The one-eyed mastermind of the hostage-taking, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, said in a video posted online that it was carried out by 40 fighters from the Muslim world and "European countries".

His al-Qaeda-linked group "Signatories in Blood" threatened to stage attacks on nations involved in the French-led operation to evict Islamists from Algeria's neighbour Mali, and said it had been open to negotiations.

"But the Algerian army did not respond... preferring to stage an attack which led to the elimination of the hostages," it said in a message published by the Mauritanian news agency ANI.

'We're looking for Christians'

Most hostages were freed on Thursday in the first Algerian rescue operation, which was initially viewed by foreign governments as hasty, before the focus of public condemnation turned on the hostage-takers.

Among the hostages killed were at least one Algerian, one Colombian, one American and two Romanians. Those still unaccounted for include several Japanese nationals, five Norwegians, two Americans and two Malaysians.

The plant is run by Britain's BP, Norway's Statoil and Sonatrach of Algeria.

An Algerian employee of BP who identified himself as Abdelkader said he was at a security post on Wednesday with colleagues when he saw a jeep with seven people inside smash through the barrier and screech to a halt.

One of the fighters demanded their mobile phones and ordered them not to move, before disabling the security cameras.

"He said: 'You are Algerians and Muslims, you have nothing to fear. We're looking for Christians, who kill our brothers in Mali and Afghanistan and plunder our resources'."

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/20131215502836355.html>

6. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Electoral subcommittee faces crucial week: Berri**

BEIRUT: Rival lawmakers launched Monday discussions into the possibility of adopting a hybrid electoral proposal for the upcoming elections in what Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri has described as a "crucial week."



"This week will be crucial in terms of the work of the parliamentary electoral subcommittee," Berri told As-Safir newspaper.

He added there was a possibility of extending the meetings of the subcommittee studying a new electoral law if the outcome of the talks was positive.

“If I feel that some positive developments have emerged from the subcommittee’s discussions, then I will extend the mission of the subcommittee,” the speaker said.

However, Berri warned that he would refer the proposed electoral draft laws to the joint parliamentary committees if the lawmakers fail to find common ground.

The hybrid draft law, combining proportional representation and a majority system, is seen as the optimal proposal for the country given the sharp divide among the main political parties over the proposed drafts so far.

Hezbollah MP Ali Fayyad told reporters before stepping into the meeting that lawmakers are expected to voice their parties’ stance over the proposal following days of inter-party talks.

Free Patriotic Movement MP Alain Aoun said the committee was waiting for the response of the Future Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party over the hybrid electoral law.

The idea to combine two electoral systems surfaced after former Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s Future Movement, Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt, President Michel Sleiman, Prime Minister Najib Mikati and a number of independent Christians opposed the Orthodox Gathering proposal put forward by the Maronite church that won consensus from the four major Christian parties.

The Orthodox proposal stipulates each sect elects its own lawmakers under a system of proportional representation with Lebanon as a single district.

The Lebanese Forces has said that the Orthodox law should be referred to Parliament for a vote if the joint parliamentary committees fail to reach a consensus over a certain proposal.

Speaking to As-Safir, Berri said that all efforts should be exerted to reach a consensus over an electoral law agreed upon by all parties before resorting to Parliament and the joint committees supposed to discuss the electoral proposals.

“This will be the last option ... before resorting to Parliament, we should try to reach a consensus over an electoral law and that requires steps forward from all parties to eventually meet halfway,” said Berri.

Other proposals including ones put forward by the March 14 coalition and the Cabinet have been rejected by various parties.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2013/Jan-21/203111-electoral-subcommittee-faces-crucial-week-berri.ashx#ixzz2IbwDNW4Q>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Bahrain security forces beat woman protester**

A video has emerged showing Bahrain security forces beating a woman and removing her hijab during an anti-regime protest.

The video posted by media outlets on Friday, shows dozens of riot policemen surrounding a woman and dragging her as she screams and cries while bleeding from her mouth.

Another video shot from a different angle showed how policemen stripped her of her Hijab.

The woman was later identified as Zahra al-Shaikh, an activist who was released from prison in July 2012 after being detained and tortured for taking part in anti-regime protests.

Many pictures of Zahra were posted online within hours of the assault; however, users deleted her pictures, which showed her without the Hijab, and instead posted pictures with her hair blackened.

Since mid-February 2011, thousands of pro-democracy protesters have staged numerous demonstrations in Bahrain, calling for the Al Khalifa royal family to relinquish power.

On March 14, 2011, troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates invaded the country to assist the Bahraini government in its crackdown on peaceful protesters.

According to local sources, scores of people have been killed and hundreds arrested.

Despite the foreign-backed clampdown, the Bahraini regime has failed to stop the demonstrations that continue on an almost daily basis.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/20/284660/bahrain-security-forces-beat-woman/>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

- **Hours-long Kabul gunfight comes to an end**

Taliban claim responsibility for suicide blasts and eight hours of fighting that killed three police and five attackers.

Bomb blasts followed by an eight hour-long battle in the west of the Afghan capital have left at least three Kabul traffic police and five Taliban attackers dead.

Fearing night guards and traffic operators were trapped inside, the Afghan National Security Forces worked cautiously on Monday to contain Taliban fighters in the four-storey building housing the Kabul traffic police headquarters.

"Two of the bombers were shot dead at the entrance," Mohammad Zahir, of the Kabul police, said.

A witness described the initial explosion, a car bomb at the front gate of the building, as "very very big -- it was massive". That initial blast was followed by subsequent explosions and gunfire that carried on several hours.

Local media reported the attackers were believed to be hiding under a staircase in the four-storey building.

The fighting left four traffic police and eight nearby civilians wounded.

Al Jazeera's Jennifer Glasse, reporting from Kabul, said at least two of the rooms in the traffic police compound were on fire.

Sediq Sediqqi, ministry of interior spokesman, speaking to Al Jazeera from Kabul, said the Taliban had been contained and that police were "going floor-by-floor" to insure no other attackers remained.

Sediqqi cited "slight" wounds among police forces, as a sign that the Afghan National Police are "stronger; we can really contain their damage and give them a quicker response", he said.

A spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, ISAF, said: "Afghan security forces are doing a great job pressuring the insurgents. ISAF will continue to train, advise, assist the ANSF ... [The] Taliban are losing this fight, are growing weaker. Many are leaving the fight because they do not want to fight their Afghan brothers."

Though NATO would not disclose its role in the operation, an eyewitness speaking to Al Jazeera, reported seeing NATO forces "firing a rocket" at the attack site in Kabul's Deh Mazang area.

The Taliban, who claimed responsibility for the attack, told Al Jazeera their target was the border police offices next door to the traffic police compound.

Our correspondent said the initial attack occurred just before dawn, "a time when the streets of Kabul and the building itself would be quite empty," which would be an advantage if the group intended to use the traffic police compound as a staging site for another attack on the border police.

Monday's blasts were the second co-ordinated attack in the Afghan capital in five days. Last Wednesday, the National Directorate of Security, the Afghan spy agency, was targeted in an attack that left two security guards and five attackers dead.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/201312110329312102.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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