



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

Domestic Policy in the Middle East Countries

Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

The Restructuring Procces of Iraq

Irak'ın Yeniden Yapılanma Süreci

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1. IRAQ

- **Delegation from UN Mission in Iraq visits Samara, Tikrit to discuss demonstrators' demands (NINA)**

Tikrit (NINA) – A delegation representing the UN Mission in Iraq visited on Tuesday, Feb. 26, the Salaheddin Governorate building, meeting with Governor of Salaheddin province, Ahmed Abdullah, and a number of the province's officials, as well as representatives for the demonstrators.

Source at Salaheddin province told NINA that the delegation, headed by Marwan al-Ali, informed the demonstrators' representatives that the UN is interested in their legitimate demands, and called on the Central Government to listen to the demonstrators' demands.

Al-Ali pointed out that "Peaceful demonstrations granted by the Constitution, our role is to bring the views of the Government and demonstrators close and to provide consultation and expertise." Pointing out that their role is neutral hoping to succeed to overcome the crisis, without being biased for any side.

PIO Comment: The UN delegation on 26 February only visited Tikrit.

- **UN: Ministerial commissions tasked to consider masses' demands need to be more active (alliraqnews)**

26 Feb 2013

Salah il-Din (AIN) -The UN delegation that has visited Tikrit on Tuesday stressed that "The commissions formed by the Iraqi Government to consider the demonstrators' demands need to be more active, stressing that the "UN's role is just to offer advice no more no less."

Marwan Ali, the head of the UN delegation clarified during a press conference he held in Tikrit city "The ministerial commissions the Iraqi Government has formed to follow up the demonstrators' demands need to be more active," noting "the UN respects the human rights and it is eager to preserve them on condition that these protests stick to the law."

The UN delegation has met with Salah il-Din Governor and a number of the protests' representatives in Tikrit in a second visit after visiting Samara in last

January to see the demands of the demonstrations there.

- **Call to determine negotiation of responsibilities for demonstrators (Aswat al-Iraq)**

26 Feb 2013

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: Free Iraqiya MP Alia Nsaif called the demonstrating provinces to determine the negotiating responsibilities with the ministerial committee to determine the accomplished segments of their demands.

In a press statement, copy received by Aswat al-Iraq, she called "for determining the demands according to the law and the constitution".

She confirmed that this step will solve all question, "if they wanted Iraqi solutions". Since 22 December 2012, Anbar province witnessed massive demonstrations and sit-in, in addition to Ninewa, Salahal-Din, Diala, Kirkuk and Baghdad demanding the release of innocent detainees and prisoners, while others called for toppling Maliki's government.

- **MP calls demonstrators to dismiss sectarian advocators from protest squares (alliraqnews)**

26 Feb 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -MP Ali al-Timimi of the Sadr trend called the demonstrators of the western provinces to dismiss the sectarian rhetoric callers from the protest squares so as to keep the legitimacy of the demonstrations and preserve Iraq's unity.

Timimi mentioned according to statement received by AIN "The demonstrators in Anbar and Nineveh are requested today to dismiss the agitators and those who promote for sectarianism from the protest square as their existence would weaken those demonstrations' legitimacy."

- **Sadrist MP accuses Maliki of seducing MPs of Ahrar bloc to support him (alliraqnews)**

26 Feb 2013

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Mohammed al-Khafaji, of al-Ahrar bloc within the Sadr Trend accused the head of the State of Law Coalition and the Premier, Nouri al-Maliki, of seducing the MPs of al-Ahrar bloc to support him.

He stated to All Iraq News Agency (AIN) "Some of the MPs of the SLC attempted to seduce the MPs of al-Ahrar bloc by giving promises related to granting them money and protection forces in addition to armored vehicles where our MPs informed the political committee of the Sadr Trend and we informed them to check this issue."

"These MPs contacted Maliki personally and he promised the same privileges to show his political deterioration as he did with some MPs who left from their blocs to join him," he added.

"We would like to inform Maliki that it is incorrect to make these attempts by using the public funds which are for the Iraqi people and not for you to achieve your personal interests," he pointed out.

- **Kurdish MP describes calls inviting Barzani to return to his sect as provocative (alliraqnews)**

26 Feb 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -MP Haval Kwistani of the Kurdish Change bloc described the calls that were forwarded to the President of Kurdistan Region, Masoud Barzani, which invited him to give up his nationality and

head towards the sectarian alignment, as provocative and sectarian.

Kwistani told All Iraq News Agency "These calls that were released by some sides inviting Barzani to give away his nationality and stand with certain sect against other sect are sectarian and provocative calls where they would deepen the crisis."

Earlier, Friday prayer's orator in Faluja district has called on last Friday, Barzani to give up his nationality, saying that "You owe us as we taught you the Islam.

- **KR to dispatch delegation to Baghdad to discuss pending issues, says KA MP (alliraqnews)**

26 Feb 2013

Baghdad (AIN) –MP, Azad Aobakir, of the Kurdistan Alliance stated that Kurdistan Region will send a delegation to Baghdad in the next couple of days to discuss the pending issues.

Speaking to All Iraq News Agency (AIN), he said " The delay in endorsing 2013 General Budget is an artistic issue where there are some pending issues related to it, but the

issue of the oil and the oil companies is the current pending one."

"The two governments must conduct dialogue to discuss this issue," he added, noting that "The parliament cannot vote on the Budget without settling the issues between these governments."

"The current atmosphere is suitable to conduct talks over the Budget between these governments," he concluded.

- **23,000 ex-army personnel returned to service (Aswat al-Iraq)**

26 Feb 2013

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: Iraqi Cabinet announced here today its approval of returning 23.000 of ex-army personnel in preparation to have their pension formalities.

In a statement, copy received by Aswat al-Iraq, the decision covers the ex-military industry department personnel.

- **Rocket full of threatening leaflets falls in Kirkuk (Aswat al-Iraq)**

26 Feb 2013

KIRKUK/ Aswat al-Iraq: Police sources said here today that a Katyousha rocket full with threatening leaflets against the federal police fell in the yard of a Kurdish party mid of Kirkuk.

The source told Aswat al-Iraq that the rocket was wrapped with 500 leaflets signed by a new group called "Iraqi National Resistance".

The leaflets were threatening the federal police, describing the Iraqi government as "denominational" that implements the orders of the Iranian government.

Kirkuk, center of the province, lies 280 km north east of the capital, Baghdad.

It is one of the disputed areas that witnesses violent actions against the security forces and the civilians, alike.

- **Maliki meets with Belgium Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs (NINA)**

26 Feb 2013

Baghdad/ NINA /-- Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, received Belgium Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs Didier Rendeux in his office today.

A familiar source said to NINA : "Maliki touched with his guest and the accompanying delegation bilateral relations and ways of strengthening them in different fields in the common interest of the two countries .

- **Iraqi-Belgium political and diplomatic MoU signed (Aswat al-Iraq)**

26 Feb 2013

BAGHDAD/ Aswat al-Iraq: The visit of Belgium deputy premier to Baghdad resulted in signing a memorandum of understanding for political and diplomatic cooperation between foreign affairs ministries.

In a foreign ministry statement today, Belgium deputy premier Didier Reynders paid an official visit to Iraq, heading a high ranking delegation.

Premier Nouri al-Maliki met today Mr. Reynders and discussed expanding bilateral relations in all fields, according to Maliki's office.

Maliki evaluated Belgium move to open a consulate in Baghdad, as prelude to open its embassy in the near future.

The statement pointed out that Belgium deputy premier expressed the intention of his country to develop bilateral relations with Iraq.

- **Hakim, US Ambassador to Iraq discuss efforts to settle Iraq's crisis (alliraqnews)**

26 Feb 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The head of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, Ammar al-Hakim, discussed with the UN Ambassador to Iraq, the bilateral relations between both countries.

A statement by the SIIC reported on Tuesday "Hakim received at his office in Baghdad, the US Ambassador to Iraq, Steven beecroft, where they discussed the US-Iraqi bilateral relations and ways of developing them."

Hakim stressed during the meeting that "Iraq adopts openness policy with all world countries."

"For his part, the US Ambassador praised Hakim's efforts to resolve the political crisis in Iraq, appreciating his calls for all the politicians to follow dialogue and

calmness in coping with the crises," the statement added

- **Iraq Kurdish leaders deny secret armament deal with Moscow (Alsumaria TV)**

26 Feb 2013

Up till now, Kurdish leaders have denied any news about a secret armament deal with Moscow, confirming that such a step should be an initiative taken by the central government; at a time when other leaders expected a certain change to take place especially that arming the Peshmerga is legal.

Kurdistan region leader Massoud Barazani admired the Kalashnikov rifle and other Russian made weapons during his stay in Moscow; however this did not mean that Kurds are inclined towards signing a secret armament deal without the consent of the central government. Kurdistan Alliance members consider such news to be untrue fabrications.

"Every day we undergo political and media targeting. This information is untrue and that was an ordinary visit to a friendly country approved by the Iraqi constitution in the economic context", said Kurdistan

Alliance member, Shawan Mohammed Taha.

Kurdistan might not abstain from signing unconstitutional armament deals, according to some political and legal Kurdish authorities, stressing that it was unacceptable for Baghdad to refrain from supplying the Peshmerga forces and the Internal Security Forces with modern weapons as part of Iraq's defense system.

"The region must provide means of defense if Baghdad refrains from arming the Peshmerga which makes part of the Iraqi defense system according the constitution. Kurdistan is a historical and political entity which obliges the central government to respond to its weapon needs", commented Dr. Mohammad Sherif, previous member in the Iraqi Parliament.

"Providing weapons for the Peshmerga is a legitimate right, since it was stipulated in the constitution, the central government is obliged to provide weapons to the Peshmerga in the same way it does for the Iraqi Army", noted Dr Beshara Zankana, Law Professor in Salahuddine University.

Kurdish generals confirm that they depend on a worn-out military arsenal comprising war prizes gathered after the fall of the previous regime. They noted that they have the right to provide their forces with light weapons considering that avoiding the armament of the Peshmerga means that the central government is doing so for political purposes.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/71988/iraq-kurdish-leaders-deny-secret-armament-deal-wit/en>

- **KSA condemns remarks of Mukhtar Army's leader (alliraqnews)**

26 Feb 2013

(AIN) -The Saudi Arabia commented on the statements of the leaders of Mukhtar Army associated to Hezbollah Party, describing these statements as irresponsible.

The Saudi Watan newspaper reported that "The kingdom of Saudi Arabia will not hesitate in preserving its security and interests towards any threat."

The Saudi Foreign Ministry stressed the condemnation of Riyadh to the recent statements of the Iraqi Hezbollah Party

which were widely reported by the media outlets.

It is worth mentioning that some media outlets have attributed some documents to the leader of Al Mukhtar Army of the Iraqi Hezbollah Party in which he threatened the KSA to target it, also these statements threatened the labors at the Kuwaiti Mubarak Port of shelling them.

- **Khuzai: Middle East's situation does not tolerate any further wars (alliraqnews)**

26 Feb 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The Iraqi Vice President, Khudhayir al-Khuzai, stressed that "The situation of the Middle East does not tolerate any further wars, and it is necessary to spread the concepts of dialogue to resolve all the crises especially the security of the Gulf region concerns the world, region and Iraq."

A statement by Khuzai's office reported "Khuzai met in Geneva on sidelines of the 22nd round of the Human Rights Council, with the ambassadors of the permanent members countries at the UN Secretary Council (The USA, Britain, China, Russia, and France) where they discussed the

successive crises in the region and ways to settle them."

"The VP Khuzai called not to resort to the military solution in resolving the Syrian crisis because this would incur serious consequences on the security of Iraq and the region at large," the statement added.

http://www.alliraqnews.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=29226

- **Iraq and Tunisia, transport cooperation (NINA)**

26 Feb 2013

Baghdad/ NINA /--Transport Minister Hadi al-Amiri discussed with the Tunisian Chargé d'affaires possibility of flights resumption between the two countries.

The ministry said in a statement: "The two sides also discussed prospects for cooperation between the two countries.

The meeting was attended by director of Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority and the director of Iraqi Airways, The Tunisian delegation included the Director of the Tunisian aviation authority and director of Tunisair.

- **French reporter free to leave Iraq soon (Arab News)**

BAGHDAD: A French reporter released after being held for three weeks in Iraq will be free to leave in two days, when his case is closed after bail proceedings are finalized, a security official said yesterday. Nadir Dendoune, who was detained in January for allegedly taking unauthorized photographs of security installations but freed earlier this month, is currently at the French embassy in Baghdad, the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Dendoune was arrested while reportedly visiting Iraq to compile a series of stories on the upcoming 10th anniversary of the US-led invasion of the country for French magazines Le Monde Diplomatique and Le Courier de l'Atlas.

Iraqi judicial sources claimed that Dendoune, who also holds Australian and Algerian passports, was arrested carrying a camera with which he took pictures of the Iraqi intelligence service headquarters, army and police.

Dendoune's sister Houria told AFP from Paris, however, that her brother was arrested while taking pictures of a water treatment plant.

<http://arabnews.com/middle-east/french-reporter-free-leave-iraq-soon>

- **Shiite militant threatens Iranian exiles in Iraq (AP)**

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA and ADAM SCHRECK

Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) -- The head of a new Shiite militant group in Iraq on Tuesday threatened to carry out more attacks on a camp for Iranian exiles that was struck by dozens of rockets and mortar shells earlier this month.

Tuesday's comments from Wathiq al-Batat suggest he shares the government's goal, even if he disagrees with its handling of the exiles. In a phone interview with The Associated Press, al-Batat said his newly formed Mukhtar Army group was behind the attack and promised more attacks to come.

Seven people were killed in the Feb. 9 attack on the camp near Baghdad airport that houses members of Mujahedeen-e-Khalq, or MEK, the militant wing of a Paris-based Iranian opposition group. Iraq's

government, which maintains friendly ties with Tehran, considers the MEK a terrorist group and wants its members out of country.

Tuesday's comments from Wathiq al-Batat suggest he shares the government's goal, even if he disagrees with its handling of the exiles. In a phone interview with The Associated Press, al-Batat said his newly formed Mukhtar Army group was behind the attack and promised more attacks to come."

"It is time for the people of the MEK to leave Iraq. We have demanded that the government kick the group out of the country, but the Iraqi government did not respond positively to our demand," he said. "We will strike them again until they leave."

It was not possible to independently confirm al-Batat's claim that his group was behind the attacks, but Iraqi officials and MEK members say they are taking his threats seriously. No other groups have taken responsibility.

"Mukhtar Army" appeared on threatening leaflets delivered to Sunni households in a

Baghdad neighborhood last week warning residents to leave or face grave consequences.

[...]

The Iranian opposition group that oversees the MEK, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, sees al-Batat and his followers as an arm of Iran's Quds Force, which oversees external operations of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

"In reality the operation against Camp Liberty was carried out by the Iranian regime with the cooperation of the government of Iraq," alleged Shahin Gobadi, a spokesman for the Paris-based opposition group. "Al-Batat is part of this terror machine."

Gobadi called for the MEK members to be returned to Camp Ashraf, where the refugees feel they would be more secure.

In Tuesday's interview, al-Batat described himself as a follower of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He said his group receives weapons and other support from Iran, but declined to provide

details. He has previously said he is advised by Iran's Quds Force.

The U.N. envoy to Iraq, Martin Kobler, urged Baghdad to thoroughly investigate the Camp Liberty attack and to share their findings with the UN. The Iraqi government is responsible for the safety of camp residents.

"We continue to remind them of their obligation and urge them to take all appropriate measures to protect residents and ensure their security," Kobler told the AP.

Iraq's Interior Ministry spokesman, Lt. Col. Saad Maan Ibrahim, said security measures have been intensified after the recent rocket attack on camp.

Associated Press writers Sameer N. Yacoub in Baghdad and Nasser Karimi in Tehran contributed reporting.

http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/M/ML_IRAQ?SITE=FLPET&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT

- **Iraq war anniversary sparks warning (UPI)**

LONDON, Feb. 26 (UPI) -- An international group monitoring the safety of foreign journalists issued a notice warning that Iraq remains a very dangerous place to work.

March 20 marks the 10th anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. U.S. forces in December 2011 left under the terms of a bilateral status of forces agreement. Iraq since the invasion has had a series of successful democratic elections, though internal divisions and sectarian violence have undermined the country's progress.

The International News Safety Institute warned journalists who traveling to Iraq for the anniversary to be cautious.

"The security situation in Iraq has changed over the last 10 years and continues to change on a daily basis," the ISNI warning reads. "Iraq remains a dangerous place to work; kidnap, bombs, targeted killings or improvised explosive devices are still a daily threat.

ISNI warns that security may deteriorate in Iraq with little advance warning, noting that worst threat may be that a journalist

could be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

It added that, with Iraq responsible for its own security, national forces and police might not be able to respond as quickly as U.S. or other foreign forces would.

http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2013/02/26/Iraq-war-anniversary-sparks-warning/UPI-66891361888339/

- **Baghdad Security Tightened amid Budget Demo (Naharnet)**

by Naharnet Newsdesk

Security forces on Tuesday sealed entrances to Baghdad, set up checkpoints and searched cars during a protest to demand the approval of Iraq's state budget, an interior ministry official said.

The security measures were to "prevent the entrance of strangers and to control the security situation," the official said, adding there was a sit-in by supporters of powerful Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in Tahrir Square in central Baghdad calling for parliament to pass the budget.

Votes on the 2013 budget have been repeatedly postponed.

Witnesses reported demonstrations in other parts of the city as well.

It was not immediately clear if the additional security measures, which the ministry official said have caused heavy traffic jams across the city, were aimed at preventing people from joining the protests, or guarding them against attack.

- **10 killed, 22 wounded in Iraq's violence (Xinhua)**

BAGHDAD, Feb. 26 (Xinhua) -- A total of 10 people were killed and 22 others wounded in separate shootings and bombings, including a car bombing, across Iraq on Tuesday, the police said.

The deadliest attack reportedly occurred in Iraq's eastern province of Diyala when a car bomb went off at a marketplace in the town of Bani Saad, some 50 km northeast of Baghdad, killing at least four people and wounding 15 others, a provincial police source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity.

In a separate incident, a civilian was killed and four wounded in a roadside bomb explosion in front of their house in western the provincial capital city of Baquba, some 65 km northeast of Baghdad, the source said.

Also in the province, a civilian was wounded when gunmen opened fire on him near the town of Udhiem, some 60 km north of Baquba, the source added.

In northern Iraq, an Iraqi army soldier was killed and two were wounded in a roadside bomb explosion near their patrol in al- Muthanna neighborhood in eastern the city of Mosul, some 400 km north of Baghdad, a local police source told Xinhua.

Elsewhere, gunmen wearing military uniforms broke into a house in the town of Madin, some 30 km southeast of Baghdad, and dragged a man and his son outside the house and shot them dead, an Interior Ministry source anonymously told Xinhua.

In Baghdad, gunmen shot dead an employee of the Iraqi Education Ministry while he was driving his car on al-Qanat

Street in eastern the capital, the source said.

In addition, gunmen attacked a security checkpoint manned by the government-backed Awakening Council group members in the city of Shirqat, some 280 km north of Baghdad, killing one of the group members, a local police source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity.

After the attack, the Iraqi security forces carried out a search operation in the area and captured nine suspects, along with seizing 10 roadside bombs, the source said.

Violence and sporadic high-profile bomb attacks are still common in the Iraqi cities despite the dramatic decrease in violence since its peak in 2006 and 2007, when the country was engulfed in sectarian killings.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-02/26/c_124391018.htm

2. IRAN

• G5+1 Offers to Take Tangible Steps in Next 6 Months

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iran's lead negotiator Saeed Jalili announced on Wednesday that the Group 5+1 have in Almaty talks proposed that both Iran and the world powers take certain tangible steps to build each other's confidence more.



"The Group 5+1 (the US, Britain, France, Russia and China plus Germany) proposed that some tangible steps be taken in the next 6 months to build confidence, and certain proposals were presented in this regard," Jalili said in a press conference in Almaty, Kazakhstan, after two days of talks with the world powers on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The Iranian top negotiator said that during the talks "Tehran emphasized that the steps should be taken concurrently and in a balanced way and that the proposals shouldn't violate Iran's rights"

"Yesterday, the other side presented some proposals in response to some of

the main items of Iran's proposals (offered to the world powers in Moscow)," he said, referring to the first round of talks in Rixos hotel in Almaty.

"Certain points in this response were more realistic compared to the past and effort has been made to come closer to Iran's viewpoints," Jalili added.

"It was decided that the experts meeting be held in Istanbul on March 17-18 and the political meeting will be held in Almaty again on April 6," he said.

"We assume the talks as a positive step which can be completed with a constructive approach and reciprocal steps," Iran's lead negotiator concluded.

The first round of talks between Iran and the G5+1 was held in Almaty's Rixos Hotel in the Kazakh city of Almaty yesterday. The second and last round of the fresh talks between Tehran and the Group 5+1 ended earlier today.

Jalili headed the Islamic Republic's negotiating delegation. The G5+1's representatives were led by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

Before Almaty meetings, Iran and the G5+1 held three rounds of talks in Geneva, two rounds in Istanbul, one round in Baghdad and one round in Moscow. The last round of talks between Iran and the Group 5+1 was held in Moscow in June.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107148248>

- **Diplomats: G5+1 Retreat from Previous Stance in Almaty Talks**

TEHRAN (FNA)- The Group 5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) had an "unprecedented" retreat from their previous stance during the Almaty talks, diplomatic sources said.

According to FNA dispatches, during the Almaty talks between Iran and the G5+1, the six world powers have retreated from their previous stances "in an unprecedented manner", several diplomatic sources present in Almaty talks said.

The last round of the fresh talks between Tehran and the Group 5+1 ended in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on Wednesday.

Representatives of Iran and the world powers held the second round of talks in Almaty's Rixos Hotel, Kazakhstan, this morning.

Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Saeed Jalili headed the Islamic Republic's negotiating delegation. The G5+1's representatives were led by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

The first round of talks between Iran and the G5+1 was held in Almaty's Rixos Hotel yesterday and lasted for almost three hours.

During the talks Iran and the world powers agreed to hold an experts meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, on March 17-18 and then continue their talks at the level of their top negotiators in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on April 5-6.

Iran and the G5+1 have already held three rounds of talks in Geneva, two rounds in Istanbul, one round in Baghdad and one round in Moscow. The last round of talks between Iran and the Group 5+1 was held in Moscow in June.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107148222>

- **Source: No New Proposals Presented to Iran in Almaty Talks**

TEHRAN (FNA)- The world powers have not presented any new proposal to Iran during the talks in Almaty, Kazakhstan, an informed source said at the end of the second day of talks between Iran and the six world powers.

"In fact, Iran has received no new proposal from the Group 5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council plus Germany) but it (Iran) has received the answer to the proposals that it had offered to the opposite side in the Moscow talks," a source close to the talks revealed on Wednesday.

"The correct statement is to say that the Group 5+1 has rewritten the Baghdad proposal in a way that it can be a response to Iran's proposal presented in the Moscow talks," he explained.

"Therefore" the source said "what has been presented to the Iranian team (of negotiators) on Tuesday was an answer not a new proposal".

Thus we need to study to see how much this response is acceptable, he added.

Earlier, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton who leads the delegations of the world powers in talks with Iran said that the Group 5+1 (Russia, US, China, France, Britain plus Germany) is attending the talks in Almaty, Kazakhstan, "with a revised offer" and hopes that the meeting would yield results.

"We are holding these talks with a view to making progress towards allaying the concerns of the international community on the nature of the Iranian nuclear program, and this round is no exception. We have come here with a revised offer and we have come to engage with Iran in a meaningful way, our purpose being to make sure that we've had a good and detailed conversation, with the ambition that we see progress by the end of the meeting," Ashton said before the first round of Tuesday meeting.

"Of course, the situation keeps changing: first of all we have to look at the situation within Iran. We also have to take account of what our previous discussions have told

us, the issues that have been raised by Iran and the issues that have been raised within the E3+3 (G5+1) and in our discussions with the IAEA. All of that is taken into account in this revised offer," she added.

"The E3+3 are united. We work very closely together to make sure that the proposals we put forward are in all our names. We will, of course, take them forward with Iran should they be willing to engage," Ashton concluded.

Iran and the Group 5+1 have held three rounds of talks in Geneva, two rounds in Istanbul, one round in Baghdad and one round in Moscow. The last round of talks between Iran and the Group 5+1 was held in Moscow in June.

Washington and its Western allies accuse Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons under the cover of a civilian nuclear program, while they have never presented any corroborative evidence to substantiate their allegations. Iran denies the charges and insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only.

Tehran stresses that the country has always pursued a civilian path to provide power to the growing number of Iranian population, whose fossil fuel would eventually run dry.

Despite the rules enshrined in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) entitling every member state, including Iran, to the right of uranium enrichment, Tehran is now under four rounds of UN Security Council sanctions and the western embargos for turning down West's calls to give up its right of uranium enrichment.

Tehran has dismissed West's demands as politically tainted and illogical, stressing that sanctions and pressures merely consolidate Iranians' national resolve to continue the path.

Tehran has repeatedly said that it considers its nuclear case closed as it has come clean of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s questions and suspicions about its past nuclear activities.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9107148172>

- **Russia Sees Iran-G5+1 Talks as "Useful"**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Russia said that the first round of talks between Iran and the Group 5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) in Almaty, Kazakhstan, was useful.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Iran the G5+1 (Russia, China, France, Britain, and the United States plus Germany) had useful meeting in the first day of talks in Almaty on Tuesday.

Ryabkov, who is leading the Russian delegation in Almaty talks, announced that delegations from Russia and Iran also held a bilateral meeting on Tuesday.

Representatives of Iran and the Group 5+1 started the second round of talks in Almaty's Rixos Hotel, Kazakhstan, a few minutes ago.

Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Saeed Jalili heads the Islamic Republic's negotiating delegation. The G5+1's representatives are led by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

The first round of talks between Iran and the G5+1 was held in Almaty's Rixos Hotel yesterday and lasted for almost three hours.

Earlier, Michael Mann, the spokesman for EU foreign policy chief, said, "We have prepared a good and updated offer for the talks, which we believe is balanced and a fair basis for constructive talks."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqUBkCAmldM>

- **Iran, P5+1 experts to meet in Istanbul in March: Russian official**

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov says the expert-level meeting between Iran and the group of six major world powers will be held in March.

"As a result of two days of negotiations, an agreement has been reached for a meeting at expert level in Istanbul on March 17-18," Ryabkov said on Wednesday.

Iran and the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States plus Germany) wrapped up two days of

negotiations earlier in the day in southeastern Kazakh city of Almaty.

The last round of negotiations was held in Moscow in June 2012. Baghdad talks were held on May 23-24, 2012.

The United States, the Israeli regime and some of their allies have repeatedly accused Iran of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program. Over the false allegation, Washington and the European Union have imposed several rounds of illegal unilateral sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Iran refutes the allegation and argues that as a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, it is entitled to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/27/291045/iran-p51-experts-to-meet-in-march/>

- **US lawmakers to tighten sanctions on Iran amid Tehran-P5+1 talks**

US lawmakers plan to tighten economic sanctions against Tehran over the country's nuclear program as Iran and the

group of six major world powers continue their talks in Kazakhstan.

Reuters reported that a bill, slated to be introduced in the Congress on Wednesday, would enable US President Barack Obama to “impose financial penalties on foreign companies and entities that provide Iran with goods that are critical to its economy.”

The bill is also designed to force countries like China to buy less Iranian crude oil, according to a copy of the legislation obtained by Reuters on Tuesday.

The measure, that expands current sanctions imposed against Iran, also attempts to cut off the country’s access to hard currencies such as the euro by pressuring EU to block Iran from the European Central Bank's payment system.

In a letter to President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy on Monday, 36 US senators urged to union to close “a significant loophole in US-EU sanctions policy” in order to increase pressures against Iran.

“We strongly urge you to take all the necessary measures to cut off Iran’s ability to use its foreign-held euros,” the Financial Times quoted the letter as saying.

The measures come as Iran and the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States plus Germany) started the second day of the latest round of negotiations in southeastern Kazakh city of Almaty on Wednesday.

Iran and the P5+1 group have held several rounds of talks with the main focus on Iran’s nuclear energy program. The last round of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group was held in Moscow in June 2012.

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

Over the false allegation, Washington and the European Union have imposed several rounds of illegal unilateral sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/27/291022/us-to-tighten-iran-sanctions-amid-talks/>

- **John Kerry insists on diplomatic path for Iran nuclear energy program**

US Secretary of State John Kerry (L) and his German counterpart, Guido Westerwelle attend a joint press conference in Berlin on February 26, 2013. US Secretary of State John Kerry (L) and his German counterpart, Guido Westerwelle attend a joint press conference in Berlin on February 26, 2013.

US Secretary of State John Kerry has expressed hope that a diplomatic path can be forged with Iran over its nuclear energy program.

He made the remarks at a joint press conference with his German counterpart, Guido Westerwelle, in Berlin on Tuesday, Reuters reported.

Kerry said that he hopes Iran will address what he called the international community's concern over its nuclear energy program.

He added that he wanted to express "hope that these talks can advance" and "that Iran itself will make its choice to move down the path of a diplomatic solution. There is a diplomatic path, there is a clear way through this and I want these talks to have a chance to work through before I comment further."

Iran and the P5+1 group -- Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, and Germany -- have wrapped up their first round of talks in Kazakhstan's biggest city, Almaty, with each side offering its own package of proposals.

The P5+1 reportedly demanded that Iran stop enriching uranium up to 20 percent, ship out its stockpile of enriched uranium and shut down the Fordow uranium enrichment facility in the province of Qom, and in return, the Western governments would ease gold, petrochemical and banking sanctions against Iran.

Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili is heading the Islamic Republic's negotiating delegation. The P5+1 representatives are led by European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

Iran and the P5+1 group have held several rounds of talks with a focus on Iran's nuclear energy program. The last round of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group was held in Moscow in June 2012.

Kerry flew to Berlin late Monday to meet with senior German officials and is set to travel to Paris to hold talks with French President Francois Hollande before heading for Rome. The last leg of his tour will take him to Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.

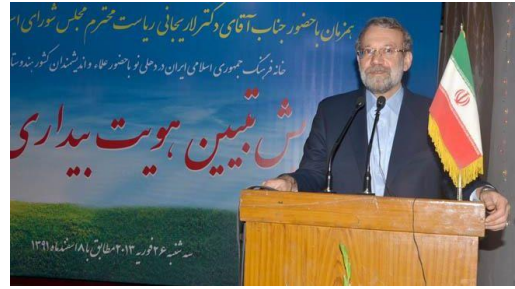
<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/27/290998/kerry-urges-diplomacy-on-iran-nprogram/>

- **Larijani calls for convergence among Muslims**

Larijani made the remarks in an address to Indian Shia and Sunni scholars at a conference on the Islamic Awakening in

New Delhi on Tuesday night, IRNA reported.

He noted that division is the main problem of the Islamic world and called on all Muslims to work to create synergy.



The Islamic Awakening is a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and anti-government uprisings that began sweeping across the Arab world in December 2010. A revolution in Tunisia ended the 23-year rule of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, another revolution led to the ouster of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak after three decades of authoritarian rule, and the Libyan ruler was also ousted. Revolutions have also begun in Yemen and Bahrain, while anti-government demonstrations have been held in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, and Algeria.

Larijani arrived in India on February 24 for a five-day official visit upon the invitation of Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar.

In a meeting with the speaker of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly in Mumbai on Monday, Larijani said Iran and India should increase their cooperation in order to prevent powerful countries from taking control of energy chokepoints, adding that certain governments are using the anti-Iran sanctions to disrupt the energy flow.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/27/290986/larijani-calls-for-unity-among-muslims/>

- **Pakistan president to visit Iran to sign oil refinery deal**

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari is traveling to Tehran on Wednesday to finalize a major deal for Iran to build an oil refinery in its eastern neighbor.

"The president has been urging for further strengthening of the bilateral relations [with Iran] and for early completion of the mega projects between the two countries and (he) expressed the hope that the visit would lend further impetus to the efforts

aimed at early completion of the bilateral projects," Zardari spokesman Farhatullah Babar said in a statement on Tuesday.

The Pakistani president is also expected to hold talks with the Iranian officials on various regional and bilateral issues.

According to official sources, Zardari plans to sign an oil refinery deal worth 4 billion dollars with Tehran, while also discussing the Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline project that will carry Iran's natural gas to its eastern neighbor.

"The multi-billion-dollar oil facility will produce about 400,000 barrels per day [of various oil products]," an official at Pakistan's Finance Ministry said on condition of anonymity, adding, "This production capacity is beyond our needs."

Iran has agreed to help Pakistan set up an oil refinery in Gwadar, a town off the country's southern coast, the official added.

On January 29, an Iranian deputy oil minister said Tehran would also finance

and help build the 700-kilometer tranche of the IP gas pipeline on the Pakistani side.

“Aside from a 250-million-dollar loan, Iran will also provide the supplies and equipment necessary for the construction of the part of the pipeline on Pakistani soil,” Javad Owji, who is also managing director of the National Iranian Gas Company, said.

This is while Pakistan has constantly dismissed rumors that it might pull out of the project amid efforts by the United States to convince the country to abandon the pipeline.

Iran has already built more than 900 kilometers of the pipeline on its soil.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/26/290943/zardari-to-visit-iran-for-refinery-deal/>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **Israeli forces detain two Palestinians in Hebron village**



HEBRON (Ma'an) -- Israeli forces detained on Wednesday two Palestinians from Beit Kahel northwest of Hebron, locals said.

A Ma'an reporter said that Mohammad Suliman al-Atawneh, 22, and Iyad Ahmad Mohammad Salih Atawneh, 21, were detained and taken to an unknown location.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=569535>

- **Egyptian court orders Gaza tunnels destroyed**

Porous border a threat to Egypt's security and destabilizes the Sinai Peninsula, security official says

By Gabe Fisher February 27,

The smuggling tunnels linking the Gaza Strip to Egypt are a security threat and must be destroyed, a Cairo court ruled on Tuesday, responding to a petition brought

by a group of lawyers and activists in the wake of a cross-border attack that killed 16 Egyptian border guards in August.

That attack, which Egypt initially attributed to a Gazan offshoot of the ruling Hamas movement, also saw two Egyptian army vehicles commandeered by terrorists and driven across the Israeli border before being destroyed in an IAF airstrike.

“The court ruled to make it obligatory that the government destroy the tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza Strip,” Judge Farid Tanaghrou wrote in his decision, according to Reuters.

Despite the Islamic Hamas’s historic ties to Egypt’s ruling Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt cannot tolerate a porous border that will continue to destabilize the Sinai Peninsula, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi’s national security adviser Essam Haddad reportedly said.

Gaza, which is home to 1.7 million people, has lived with border restrictions by Israel and Egypt since the Hamas takeover of the territory in 2007. Smuggling under the 15-kilometer (9-mile) border has

circumvented official crossings and bypassed restrictions for many years.

Israel restricts the influx of goods into the territory from its side of the enclave, so Gazans smuggle in construction materials, cars and fuel. Hamas also receives weapons and cash through the illegal tunnels. Hamas officials are known to collect fees from tunnel operators.

Lawyer Wael Hamdy instigated the case “because I was worried about the state of national security in my country after the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power and its unclear policies and links with Hamas.”

Hamdy also said that despite recent efforts by Cairo to close some tunnels – according to The New York Times, Egypt has even attempted to flood them with sewage — around 2,000 remain active.

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/egyptian-court-orders-gaza-tunnels-destroyed/>

- **Tamar partners, Gazprom agree to join forces to export liquefied gas**

The agreement, which comes after a year of negotiations, calls for Gazprom to

oversee annual sales of 3 million tons of LNG, or about 4.2 billion cubic meters, over 20 years.

Delek Drilling, a partner in the Tamar natural gas field, said Tuesday that Russian gas giant Gazprom had agreed in principle to finance an offshore liquefied natural gas facility and to sell LNG to customers abroad.

<http://www.haaretz.com/business/tamar-partners-gazprom-agree-to-join-forces-to-export-liquefied-gas.premium-1.506060?localLinksEnabled=false>

- **Likud MK may be implicated in cash-for-votes scandal**

Jewish Home activist says he employed the same system he used to boost Slomiansky with a member of the ruling party

The man who allegedly used cash to solicit votes for Jewish Home MK Nissan Slomiansky in the party's primary elections last year now says he had similar dealings with a well-known Likud MK.

Party activist Avihai Amarusi told Channel 2 news Tuesday that just as Slomiansky

paid tens of thousands of shekels to get people to vote for him and thus improve his ranking on the party's slate, a similar arrangement was made with a member of Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling party. No indication was given as to the identity of the Likud MK.

In both cases, Amarusi said, the aspiring politicians would pay him for every vote that went their way. In Slomiansky's case, he was recorded telling a private investigator, hired by Jewish Home leader Naftali Bennett, that each voter had been paid NIS 1,000 in cash (about \$270) and sent off to vote.

During the conversation between the two, Amarusi was recorded telling the private detective that "the guy with the complicated name" — Slomiansky — delivered to him large amounts of cash hidden inside cigarette cartons.

"Fifty thousand dollars inside two cartons of Marlboro cigarettes," Amarusi said.

Slomiansky delivered the money in person, disguising it as a package from the Duty Free shops, though he used a courier for some of the deliveries, Amarusi also

said. He added that the personal delivery was necessitated by the impossibility of sneaking such sums into the Knesset, where visitors are subjected to strict security checks.

“I made a deal with him,” said Amarusi. “My [Slomiansky's] people will help you for 250,000 shekels.” He said that Slomiansky had already paid half of the sum, noting that he had associated with the MK because the latter had access to party funds.

The Channel 2 report noted that Amarusi did not use the money for his own benefit, but rather used it to promote the finances of a Netanyahu yeshiva that he heads. The report added that Amarusi was considering signing a witness agreement with the State Attorney's Office and may be seeking to increase his value to the prosecution by implicating politicians from other parties.

Bennett on Tuesday denounced ostensible corruption in his party.

In a Facebook post, Bennett confirmed that people had been caught selling their votes during the November primaries. He

said he had ordered an internal investigation into the affair at the time, which resulted in the disqualification of thousands of illegitimate registrants to the party, who either didn't exist or were still registered as members of other parties. Bennett handed the private detective's findings over to the police after making the discovery.

Slomiansky has denied all allegations of wrongdoing, insisting he was the victim of unfounded gossip stemming from political rivalries. He noted that he had a lifetime of public service behind him, and had “never been tainted” by any hint of corruption.

Besides Slomiansky, the police questioned four other people regarding possible involvement in the buying of votes. According to Channel 2 one of those questioned had made a failed attempt to enter the Knesset on the right-wing party's list.

People joining parties for money and voting according to the will of their sponsors “is illegal and corrupts parties,” Bennett said.

Primary elections are supposed to express the will of a party's constituency, "but when votes are bought it gives enormous power to a small number of people," he said. "This is one of the problems with the primaries system. I'm sorry it reached us."

Bennett wrote that the findings of the internal investigation were handed over to the police, challenging "those who claim it's simply a flaw in the system and there's nothing to do about it."

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/likud-mk-may-be-implicated-in-cash-for-votes-scandal/>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Opposition Will Boycott Egypt's Vote for Assembly**

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

CAIRO — Egypt's main opposition coalition declared Tuesday that it would boycott the coming parliamentary elections, all but ensuring that Islamists will continue to dominate the legislature and that their rivals will continue to question their legitimacy.

With the elections scheduled to begin in April, the Islamists who dominated the 2011-12 parliamentary and presidential votes appear more vulnerable than at any time since the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak two years ago. President Mohamed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm, is presiding over a period of political polarization, street violence, economic hardship and the first steps of cutting public subsidies. Among the pockets of vocal discontent are the cities along the Suez Canal, which are revolting against his government and apparently eager to vote for almost any viable alternative.

Nonetheless, the boycott by the coalition, known as the National Salvation Front, underscores the depth of its animosity toward the governing Islamists. And it reveals the opposition's continuing distrust of Egypt's nascent political process.

"The National Salvation Front has decided not to take part in the upcoming parliamentary elections because we were not consulted about the election law," the group said in a statement read aloud by a spokesman, referring to the district map

and election rules recently approved by Mr. Morsi and the interim legislature. “And also because all our demands have been ignored, topped by the formation of a neutral government.”

In addition to the immediate replacement of the cabinet with a unity government, the front has demanded the removal of the prosecutor general appointed by Mr. Morsi, the spokesman said. He said it also continued to demand “the formation of a committee to redraft the Constitution,” which voters approved in a referendum in December. The coalition opposed the Constitution at the time.

The group did not elaborate Tuesday on any specific criticism of the Constitution or the election law, but its officials did criticize Mr. Morsi over issues including soaring prices and unrest in the canal zone.

The spokesman said the coalition also refused to take part in a so-called national dialogue that Mr. Morsi said he was attempting to hold Tuesday with other political leaders about how to ensure fairness and confidence in the elections. Mr. Morsi has been calling for these

dialogues for months, and the opposition has resolutely denounced them as a sham for the cameras.

The front refuses to join any dialogue “when we do not know its agenda and we do not know its means of implementation,” the group said in its statement.

United mainly by opposition to the Islamists, the front is an alliance of liberals, leftists and members of Mr. Mubarak’s former governing party. It is led by Mohamed ElBaradei, the liberal former head of the United Nations atomic energy agency; Hamdeen Sabahi, a populist in the tradition of Gamal Abdel Nasser; and Amr Moussa, a diplomat under Mr. Mubarak.

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/world/middleeast/opposition-in-egypt-will-boycott-elections.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0

- **U.S. Officials Propose Sharing Drone Surveillance Data With Algerians**

By MICHAEL R. GORDON and ERIC SCHMITT

WASHINGTON — The American ambassador to Algeria and senior counterterrorism officials have proposed sharing more information with Algerian security forces to help them kill or capture militants in their own country and in areas just across their borders.

Their approach reflects the growing support within the administration for more forceful action against extremists in the area since the attack on a gas field in eastern Algeria last month left 37 dead, including three Americans, and focused new concerns on terrorist activity in Africa.

Under one plan, information from American surveillance drones would be provided to Algerian forces to enable them to engage in operations both inside Algeria and possibly, in a limited way, across its borders. The United States is already providing surveillance information to the French-led military operation in Mali to help combat militants there who last year seized the northern half of the country.

In a cable to the State Department last week, according to administration officials, Henry S. Ensher, the United States envoy in Algiers, urged that the pursuit of the Algerian militant Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the mastermind of the gas field attack, be made a priority. Toward that end, he recommended that the Obama administration tell the Algerians that if they allowed the United States to fly unarmed drones over the border area of Algeria as well as over Mali, the Americans would share the information with the Algerian government.

There was broad agreement among policy makers and intelligence officials at a meeting of President Obama's top national security deputies at the White House last week that Mr. Belmokhtar and members of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb should be aggressively pursued, according to one senior American official who insisted on anonymity so he could discuss internal deliberations. But no decision appears to have been reached on whether to make a formal proposal to the Algerians.

The idea of taking stronger action in the region has been supported in recent

months by Michael Sheehan, the senior counterterrorism official at the Pentagon, and Daniel Benjamin, who until December was the senior State Department counterterrorism official. In the past, State Department lawyers have questioned whether the military action approved by Congress against Al Qaeda after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks authorized efforts to target extremists who were not clearly linked to the group. But according to some officials, those legal arguments have recently been overcome.

The United States has long sought Algeria's cooperation in antiterrorism efforts, and sharing information with a government that has jealously guarded its sovereignty would be a significant step toward that goal. During the siege of the gas plant at In Amenas, Algeria permitted the United States to fly a Predator surveillance drone over the complex, though it insisted that the drone be withdrawn after the assault was over.

Mr. Obama announced last week that about 100 American troops had arrived in Niger in West Africa, next to Mali, to set up a new drone base to conduct surveillance flights in the region.

American officials also sense a possible change of heart by Algerian officials to move away from their longstanding policy not to conduct military operations outside the nation's borders. Algerian officials recently told the United States that they were prepared to conduct operations in border areas, one American official said.

Mr. Belmokhtar, 40 — sometimes known as "Laaouar," or the one-eyed, after he lost an eye to shrapnel — was deemed to be a menace long before he drew international attention for last month's attack. As the Algerians pressed their campaign against the militants, he took refuge in Mali, where he engaged in smuggling and kidnapped foreigners for ransom, including Robert Fowler, a Canadian diplomat and United Nations special envoy who was abducted in 2008.

By the spring of 2012, northern Mali had become a gathering place for Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Other militant factions in northern Mali included Ansar al-Dine, a group largely made up of members of Mali's nomadic Tuareg minority. Its leader, Iyad ag Ghali, has been officially designated as a global

terrorist, the State Department announced Tuesday. The growing extremist presence in Mali became an increasing concern for Mr. Ensher as well as for Gen. Carter F. Ham, the head of the Africa Command, and counterterrorism officials at the Pentagon and the State Department.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/27/world/middleeast/john-kerry-diplomatic-trip.html?partner=rss&emc=rss>

- **Obama urges Egyptian president Morsi to protect democratic principles**

President Barack Obama urged Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi to protect democratic principles in Egypt and work to build political consensus as he prepares for parliamentary elections.

Obama and Mursi spoke by telephone on Tuesday, a White House statement said.

Liberal and leftist parties in Egypt have vowed to boycott the parliamentary elections to protest against a law they say favors Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood.

This has raised the prospect of an election fought mostly between the Muslim Brotherhood and more hardline Islamist groups. The elections are planned in four stages between late April and June.

"The president welcomed President Morsi's commitment to serving as a president for all Egyptians, including women and people of all faiths, and emphasized President Morsi's responsibility to protect the democratic principles that the Egyptian people fought so hard to secure," the White House said.

Obama encouraged Morsi and all political groups within Egypt, to try to build consensus and advance the political transition, according to the statement.

The two leaders also discussed Egypt's economic situation and efforts to advance regional peace and maintain a ceasefire in Gaza.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/65688/Egypt/Politics-/Obama-urges-Egyptian-president-Morsi-to-protect-de.aspx>

- **Tunisia police launch manhunt for politician's killer**

Tunisian police have identified the killer of opposition leader Chokri Belaid as a member of a radical Islamist Salafi group who is on the run

Tunisian police have identified the killer of opposition leader Chokri Belaid as a member of a radical Islamist Salafi group who is on the run, Prime Minister-designate Ali Larayedh said on Tuesday.

Larayedh, who remains Interior Minister until his government is formed, told a news conference police had arrested three accomplices who are also ultra-orthodox Salafis.

The assassination of secular politician Belaid on Feb. 6 ignited the biggest street protests in Tunisia since the overthrow of strongman Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali two years ago.

A security source said on Monday a Salafi had been arrested in connection with the killing, while Tunisia's Express FM radio cited a senior security official as saying

police had arrested three Salafis, including a police officer, over the murder.

"Now we have identified the killer of Belaid and he is on the run. The police are looking for him," Larayedh said.

One of the arrested suspects had accompanied the gunman who shot Belaid outside his home before escaping on a motorcycle, he said, adding that the group had mounted surveillance of Belaid's home and a nearby square for several days before the attack.

The Interior Minister did not confirm the Express FM report that one of those detained was a police officer.

"Identifying the killers of Belaid reinforces confidence in the judiciary and in the neutrality of security (forces)," said Larayedh, who belongs to the moderate Islamist Ennahda party.

After his announcement, Belaid's widow Basma said it was still not clear who had orchestrated her husband's assassination, which was the first in Tunisia for decades.

"It's good to know who killed Chokri, but it is very important to know who gave the order because it was a very organised crime," she told Europe 1 radio in Paris.

No one has claimed responsibility for the killing. Ennahda and the Interior Ministry have denied accusations by some in the opposition that they were behind it.

Last year, Salafi groups prevented several concerts and plays from taking place in Tunisian cities, saying they violated Islamic principles. Salafis also ransacked the U.S. Embassy in September, during international protests over an Internet video.

Secular groups have accused the Islamist-led government of a lax response to Salafi attacks on cultural venues and individuals in recent months.

After Belaid's death, Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali tried to restore calm by proposing an apolitical cabinet of technocrats to organise a parliamentary election, but resigned after opposition from within his own Ennahda party scuppered the plan.

On Friday, President Moncef Marzouki asked Ennahda's nominee Larayedh to form a new government within 15 days.

The so-called Jasmine Revolution that toppled Ben Ali in January 2011 was the first of several Arab uprisings.

Tunisia's political transition has been more peaceful than those in other Arab nations such as Egypt, Libya and Syria, but tensions are running high between Islamists elected to power and liberals who fear the loss of hard-won liberties.

While Islamists did not play a major role in the Tunisian revolt, the struggle over Islam's role in government and society has emerged as one of the most divisive political issues.

Salafis, some of whom sympathise with al Qaeda, want a broader role for religion in Tunisia, alarming secular elites who fear they will seek to impose their strict views at the expense of individual freedoms, women's rights and democracy.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65648/World/Region/Updated->

[Tunisia-police-launch-manhunt-for-politici.aspx](#)

- **FJP reiterates calls to keep Egypt's military out of domestic politics**

After calls from some quarters for military's return to political stage, Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) condemns 'attempts to drive wedge' between Egyptian army, people

The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) has urged Egyptian political leaders to support the notion of keeping the military out of the country's chaotic political scene.

In a Tuesday statement, the FJP – the political arm of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, the group from which President Mohamed Morsi hails – slammed what it described as attempts by certain political forces "to drive a wedge between the people and the armed forces."

"The party acknowledges the key role played by the army in Egypt's [25 January 2011] revolution," read the statement. "The armed forces efficiently administered a historical electoral process and safeguarded the Egyptian popular will

until it successfully handed over power to an elected president."

The FJP statement came amid calls by certain Egyptian opposition figures for the military's reinsertion into domestic politics. They have argued that such a move would be justified, in light of the country's deteriorating political and economic circumstances.

"If Egypt is on the brink of default, if law and order is absent, [the army] has a national duty to intervene," Mohamed ElBaradei, co-founder of Egypt's opposition National Salvation Front, told the BBC on Sunday.

On the same day, hundreds of people staged a rally at the Memorial of the Unknown Soldier in Cairo's Nasr City district to call for the reengagement of the military in Egyptian politics.

Military leaders, for their part, have repeatedly voiced their reluctance to resume playing any kind of political role.

Nevertheless, Army Chief-of-Staff Sedki Sobhi recently affirmed that, while the army had no intention of returning to

politics, it "could still play a role if the situation becomes more complicated."

For six decades until last summer's presidential elections, Egypt has been run by leaders drawn from the ranks of the military. Ousted president Hosni Mubarak had served as an air force commander before assuming the presidency in 1981.

In its Tuesday statement, the FJP repudiated "any prejudice against the armed forces," vowing to "take disciplinary action against anyone convicted of slandering the army."

The statement followed recent reports that a Muslim Brotherhood leader had accused the military of engineering an attack last August in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula in which 16 Egyptian soldiers were killed near the border with Israel.

On Monday, Ali Abdel-Fattah, a leading Brotherhood member in Alexandria, quashed allegations that he had accused the army of complicity in the attack.

"No one sensible would accuse the army of killing its own people," Abdel-Fattah asserted. "But some analysis suggests that

the attack was masterminded by foreign elements only days after President Morsi took office."

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/65650/Egypt/Politics-/FJP-reiterates-calls-to-keep-Egypt-s-military-out-o.aspx>

- **Tunisia ruling Islamists to give up key ministries**

Tunisia's ruling Islamists said Wednesday they have agreed to give up key ministries to independents, a key concession that could speed up the formation of a new government and end a political crisis.

"We confirm the 'neutralization' of the four sovereign ministries," Rached Ghannouchi, leader of the ruling Ennahda party, said on Radio Kalima, referring to the interior, justice, foreign and defense portfolios.

Ennahda controls the ministries of the interior, justice and foreign affairs.

The defense portfolio is already in the hands of an independent, Abdelkarim Zbidi, who has held the function since the

revolution that brought down the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011.

Ennahda was responding to a demand by almost all of the opposition and the government's two secular, center-left partners, Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic of President Moncef Marzouki.

Its leader Ghannouchi has said the new cabinet would be made up of "five or six parties," and suggested the Wafa movement, the Freedom and Dignity bloc and the Democratic Alliance as potential partners.

Interior Minister Ali Larayedh was charged last week with forming a new government following the resignation of prime minister Hamadi Jebali, after his plan for a non-partisan government failed.

Jebali announced the plan on February 6, the day that leftist opposition Chokri Belaid was gunned down outside his home in an assassination that exacerbated a long-running political crisis.

Larayedh, also an Ennahda member, has until March 8 to form a new government,

which he has vowed will be "for all Tunisians."

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/international/tunisia-ruling-islamists-to-give-up-key-ministries>

5. JORDAN and LEBANON

• Soueid demands troop deployment on Lebanon-Syria borders

March 14 General Secretariat coordinator Fares Soueid demanded that Lebanese Armed Forces assisted by UNIFIL troops be deployed along the borders with Syria.

"The only solution to avoid getting Lebanon involved in Hezbollah's actions [in Syria] is... to deploy LAF and UNIFIL troops along the Lebanese-Syrian border," Soueid told Al-Anbaa Kuwaiti newspaper in remarks published Wednesday.

The March 14 official voiced his coalition's "rejection of the Free Syrian Army's threats to shell Lebanese territory, even if it was just an effort to target Hezbollah military sites."

Soueid also called on "the government of [Prime Minister Najib] Miqati to stop

Hezbollah from intervening in Syria and speed up the deployment of LAF troops on the Lebanese-Syrian borders.”

Last week, the FSA issued a statement warning Lebanese in the northern Beqaa town of Hermel to avoid Hezbollah military sites and rocket launching positions.

FSA chief of staff General Selim Idriss said that the rebel army is poised to launch a military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon after a top commander last Wednesday formally confirmed a 48-hour ultimatum for the Shiite group to stop “firing” on rebel positions in the Homs province.

Meanwhile, Al-Arabiya television quoted the Syrian Revolution General Commission as saying that Hezbollah was sending reinforcements to Lebanese villages along the border with Syria and setting up operational centers.

Hezbollah has systematically denied sending fighters into Syria, though its leader Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged in October 2012 that party members had fought Syrian rebels but said they were

acting as individuals and not under the group's direction.

Lebanon is sharply divided with regards to the Syrian conflict, with the Sunni-led March 14 movement supporting the revolt against President Bashar al-Assad and the Shiite Hezbollah and its allies backing the regime.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonne/ws/soueid-demands-laf-unifil-deployment-on-lebanese-syrian-borders>

- **LF leader rejects cabinet electoral proposal**

Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea reiterated his rejection of the cabinet's draft electoral law based on proportionality and 13 electoral districts.

“[Operating within] the cabinet’s law means that all the effort [spent]... to reach a new law will go down the drain. In other words, we will go back to square one,” Geagea told Al-Akhbar newspaper in remarks published Wednesday.

The LF leader also said that “whoever wants to reach a consensual law must pick up where the parliamentary sub-

committee left off. This means they must stand in favor of one of the two mixed laws – either the one based on the proposal suggested by Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri or the one suggested by the LF.”

Geagea called on “all the parties who wish to reach a new consensual law that ensures fair representation to start working on these two laws or else time will go to waste.”

The draft presented by Berri proposes that 50% of the MPs be elected on the basis of a majoritarian voting system, while the remaining 50% be elected by way of proportional representation.

The LF’s proposal, on the other hand, is based on the fundamentals of the Fouad Boutros proposal without changing the distribution of districts and proportional voting.

The Fouad Boutros law stipulates that half of the deputies within a single district would be elected by proportional representation and the other half by majority representation.

Earlier in February, Lebanon’s joint parliamentary commissions approved the Orthodox law, which prompted criticism from a number of political figures.

This draft was endorsed by the Christian Free Patriotic Movement and Marada Movement, as well as the opposition LF and Kataeb Party. However, the Future Movement, Progressive Socialist Party, National Liberal Party, and independent March 14 Christians refused it on the grounds that it could lead to sectarian divisions in the country.

This rift has continued despite the cabinet’s approval in September 2012 of a draft law based on proportionality and 13 electoral districts.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/lf-leader-reiterates-rejection-of-proportionality-law>

- **Future MP blames government for Lebanon’s electoral crisis**

Lebanon’s Future bloc MP Nidal Tohme blamed the government for the country’s crisis regarding the electoral law issue.

“The current government caused the country’s crisis because it bet on the proportionality law without making sure it will receive the majority of the parties’ approval,” Tohme told Free Lebanon (102.3) radio on Wednesday.

The opposition lawmaker also said that “the Progressive Socialist Party is collaborating with both the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party in formulating a mixed law.”

“This law might gain the approval of everyone and it is based on 26 electoral law and nine governorates,” he added.

Earlier in February, Lebanon’s joint parliamentary commissions approved the Orthodox law, which prompted criticism from a number of political figures.

This draft was endorsed by the Christian Free Patriotic Movement and Marada Movement, as well as the opposition LF and Kataeb Party. However, the Future Movement, PSP, National Liberal Party, and independent March 14 Christians refused it on the grounds that it could lead to sectarian divisions in the country.

The meeting came after weeks of deliberation at the end of which the country’s competing political forces failed to reach a unanimous agreement to choose a proposal that would replace the 1960 law despite the cabinet’s approval in September 2012 of a draft law based on proportionality and 13 electoral districts

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/future-mp-blames-government-for-lebanons-electoral-crisis>

6. SYRIA

• Israel returns six wounded to Syria, one remains

IDF says men completed treatment and crossed border at an undisclosed location; last member of group still in hospital

The IDF on Wednesday said that six wounded Syrians have been returned to their country after receiving medical treatment in Israel.

The six had completed their treatment, and the military took them to an undisclosed location where they were returned to Syria. The military would not comment on why they were sent back.

Two weeks ago, seven Syrian men approached the frontier between Syria and the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. They reached the Israeli border with a larger group of refugees escaping the violence in Syria.

They were given preliminary treatment on the border after they were found to be unarmed. They were then transferred by IDF troops to Ziv Hospital in Safed in military ambulances — a first since the violence in Syria began nearly two years ago.

The military said the seventh Syrian, who was severely wounded, remained in an Israeli hospital for further treatment.

After the hospitalization of the Syrians, the UN was quick to point out that Israel was obligated to grant them asylum and would be contravening international law if it decided to repatriate them after their recovery.

Military sources said the event was isolated, and that Israel would not grant humanitarian assistance to Syrian nationals on a regular basis.

The incident coincided with a report that the IDF would construct a field hospital in the no-man's zone between Israel and Syria so as to offer treatment at the border and prevent an influx of wounded Syrians. A Foreign Ministry official on Sunday confirmed to The Times of Israel that the project was indeed in the offing.

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-returns-six-wounded-to-syria-one-remains/>

- **Syria rebels bolstered by new arms but divisions remain**

Syrian rebels have received advanced weapons aimed at narrowing the arms gap with Al-Assad's forces and reinforcing a new rebel military command

Syrian rebels have received advanced weapons aimed at narrowing the arms gap with President Bashar al-Assad's forces and reinforcing a new rebel military command which Western countries hope can dilute the strength of Islamist fighters.

Several rebel commanders and fighters told Reuters that a shipment which reached Syria via Turkey last month

comprised shoulder-held and other mobile equipment including anti-aircraft and armour-piercing weapons, mortars and rocket launchers.

Rebels told Reuters the weapons, along with money for cash payments for fighters, were being distributed through a new command structure, part of a plan by foreign backers to centralise control over rebel units and check Islamists linked to al-Qaeda. However, in a sign of the difficulty in uniting disparate fighting groups, some rebels said they had turned down the arms and refused to submit to the new command.

While not nearly enough to tip the military balance against Assad, who is able to deploy air power, missiles and artillery to devastating effect against rebel areas, any significant arms shipment is a boost to rebels who have long complained about the lack of international support.

The rebels refused to specify who supplied the new weapons, saying they did not want to embarrass foreign supporters, but said they had arrived openly via Turkey "from donor countries".

"We have received this shipment legally and normally. It was not delivered through smuggling routes but formally through Bab al-Hawa crossing," said a rebel commander in Homs province, referring to a rebel-held crossing with Turkey.

"But it is not enough to help us win," he told Reuters by Skype. "Another shipment has arrived in Turkey but we haven't received it yet," he added, saying he believed foreign donors were waiting for the Syrian opposition to form a transitional government to work with the rebel command.

The political opposition will meet in Istanbul on Saturday to choose a prime minister in the transitional government, which is also supposed to choose a civilian defence minister - creating the basic structure for a future state and army.

The Syrian revolt erupted nearly two years ago, starting with peaceful protests for reform but developing into an armed insurgency and then civil war as Assad responded to the uprising with ever-growing force. The United Nations estimates that 70,000 people have been killed in the relentless violence.

Although many countries backed Assad's opponents, few have actively supported arming the rebels, fearing that weapons might end up in the hands of hardline Sunni Muslim militants and lead to a repeat of Western conflicts, such as the wars against the Taliban in Afghanistan and al Qaeda-affiliated groups in Iraq.

So far rebels have relied mainly on light weapons smuggled from neighbouring countries, many of them financed or sent from sympathisers in Gulf states, and from supplies seized from captured army bases inside Syria.

But video footage and pictures from across the country appear to support assertions that advanced weapons - with origins as varied as the former Yugoslavia and China - have ended up in rebel hands.

A Reuters photographer in Damascus over the last month saw several Western-built rebel firearms- including U.S. pattern M4 and Austrian Steyr assault rifles - that almost certainly came from outside the country.

STRENGTHENING REBEL COMMAND

Assad's strongest regional supporter has been Shi'ite Muslim Iran, while the leading campaigners for arming the rebels are the Sunni Muslim Gulf Arab powers Qatar and Saudi Arabia, reflecting the strong sectarian currents of the Syrian uprising.

Although Saudi Arabia and Qatar do not discuss specific weapons shipments to the rebels, both countries have been open about their support for arming them in principle.

Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal bluntly told a news conference in Riyadh on Feb. 12: "My country believes that the brutality of the Syrian regime against its own people requires empowering the people to defend itself."

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr al-Thani said last week: "As there is no clear international opinion to end the crisis in Syria...we are supporting the opposition with whatever it needs, even if it takes up arms for self-defence."

Western countries have been more cautious, and have so far committed

publicly to sending only "non-lethal" aid, like radios and body armour.

International powers are alarmed by the growing influence of Islamist hardliners in a country which lies at the crossroads of the Middle East between Iraq, Israel, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. They have made efforts to unite Syrian rebels under a clear leadership. A body was formed in December to bring the rebel units, or brigades, together under a unified command.

"One of the reasons for the change in the donors' minds is that they want to empower the new military command. They want to help it organise the weapons and the fighters," said an aide to a rebel commander in a province which has seen some of the heaviest fighting.

"If the brigades join then they get their share of these weapons and also monthly payment for the fighters."

The new military command divides Syria into five fronts - southern, western, eastern, northern and central.

"Each front has received its share. All equally distributed," the rebel said, adding that 'payment' for the weapons would come in the form of post-conflict reconstruction contracts in Syria awarded to countries that helped.

"So basically its like we have paid in advance. It is funded by the countries that will be involved in reconstruction of Syria," he said.

But in a sign of the continued divisions among Assad's foes, some rebels complain that the "military councils" who received the weapons - and are seen by the West as more likely allies than the hardline Islamists - were the wrong groups to arm.

"There is a dispute in Damascus. The people who received these weapons are not the real fighters. They gave it to the military council which is not fighting," said a rebel commander operating around the Syrian capital. "We are the ones that are on the frontline and we are the fighters."

He said his fighters had rejected an offer of weapons in return for their allegiance to the military councils.

"There was a meeting and they asked for our brigade to join so they will give us between 10 to 20 rockets and armour-piercing ammunition and other stuff," he said. "They wanted everything to be under their supervision, but we refused."

"They are giving these weapons to people to allow them to create a (fighting) presence on the ground. Why don't they give it to people who already have a presence?"

Another commander said he would have no qualms about seizing weapons destined for rebels nominally fighting on the same side as him, if he knew they were passing through his territory.

REBELS NEED "ARMS, NOT MEN"

Several fighters from across the country who spoke to Reuters in February said they feared the ultimate plan of outside powers was to push the rebel Free Syrian Army and other "moderate" Islamist fighters into confrontation with radicals.

Fighters from hardline groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham have waged some of the deadliest

attacks in Syria, including car bombings in Damascus, Aleppo and elsewhere. Their ranks have been swollen by jihadi fighters from around the Muslim world.

The chief of staff of the rebel military command, Brigadier Selim Idris, said the presence of foreign fighters

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65685/World/Region/Analysis--Syria-rebels-bolstered-by-new-arms-but-d.aspx>

- **Kerry, Lavrov seek common ground in Syria talks**

US Secretary of State John Kerry began talks with his Russian counterpart aimed at bridging differences over Syrian crisis

US Secretary of State John Kerry began talks with his Russian counterpart Tuesday aimed at bridging differences over Syria after voicing confidence the two could find "common ground".

Shaking hands at the start of the meeting in Berlin, Kerry commented he was "happy to see" Sergei Lavrov since "we know each other" while the Russian minister quipped he would sit down when journalists allowed him to get to his chair.

Moscow and Washington have differences over Syria -- Russia is one of the few big powers to keep ties with the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and, with China, has vetoed UN Security Council resolutions that would have introduced sanctions against Damascus.

Hours ahead of his talks with Kerry, Lavrov had slammed "extremists" within the Syrian opposition who he said were blocking the start of dialogue in the war-torn country by making unrealistic demands.

He said that recent faint hopes that dialogue was possible between the opposition and the Assad regime had dissipated.

"It seems that extremists who bet on an armed solution to the Syrian problem have prevailed in the ranks of the opposition at this time, including the so-called (Syrian) National Coalition, blocking all initiatives that could lead to the start of dialogue," Lavrov told reporters in Moscow.

Lavrov said there was "an increasing understanding of the need to influence both the government and especially the opposition in order to persuade them against putting forward unrealistic demands as the prerequisite conditions for the start of dialogue".

"During our latest phone contact it seemed to me that he (John Kerry) understands the acuteness of the situation," he added.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem had said in Moscow Monday that the authorities in Damascus were ready to talk to armed rebels, the first time a senior official of the Assad regime had made such a proposal.

But the rebel Free Syrian Army's chief of staff Selim Idriss said that before any dialogue could begin, Assad's regime must fall, among other pre-conditions.

"I am not going to sit down with him or with any other member of his clique before all the killing stops, or before the army withdraws from the cities," he told pan-Arab broadcaster Al-Arabiya.

Kerry, on an 11-day tour of Europe and the Middle East, his first foreign trip since taking over the office, earlier told an event in Berlin with German youngsters that he and Lavrov had a "good relationship".

"I am confident we will find common ground," he said.

Washington has recently toned down its criticism of Moscow's intransigence over Syria.

"We've been absolutely clear that there needs to be a political transition, and we felt that Russia could play a key role in convincing the regime... that there needs to be that political transition," a State Department official told reporters.

However the talks are not expected to produce a "big breakthrough", the official added.

As diplomatic efforts intensified, fierce clashes erupted Tuesday around the historic Umayyad Mosque in Syria's second city Aleppo, as rebels battled troops on the grounds of a police academy elsewhere in the province, a watchdog said.

And a record 150,000 people this month fled the worsening conflict, according to the top UN political official.

Syria's opposition has been calling for the international community to do more -- the United Nations says the fighting has claimed 70,000 lives since the conflict began in March 2011 -- and warned last week it would withdraw from an international conference in Rome planned for Thursday.

But Kerry and British Foreign Secretary William Hague convinced the opposition to revoke its boycott of the Friends of Syria conference.

Syrian National Coalition chief Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib said his group would attend after Kerry and Hague "promised specific aid to alleviate the suffering of our people".

In London, Kerry insisted he wanted the Syrian opposition to know "that we are not coming to Rome simply to talk. We are coming to Rome to make a decision on next steps."

The trip sees Kerry, the son of a diplomat, back on familiar ground. He spent part of his childhood in Berlin and has family in France.

Kerry also met German Chancellor Angela Merkel and standing next to her reminisced in a statement to reporters how he had cycled through Berlin past the then-destroyed Reichstag in his youth.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65684/World/Region/Kerry,-Lavrov-see-common-ground-in-Syria-talks.aspx>

- **Battles rock Damascus province, NGO says**

Fierce battles pitting Syria's army against rebels rocked towns near Damascus on Wednesday as the regime renewed its campaign to suppress the insurgency around the capital, a watchdog said.

Army tanks pounded the rebel-held town of Daraya southwest of Damascus, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, while fresh clashes broke out in Irbin, northeast of the city.

State television reported meanwhile that "two mortar rounds fell near the Faculty

of Literature in Damascus", without elaborating.

Pro-regime daily Al-Watan ran a headline that read: "New attempt [by insurgents] to break security in the capital, hundreds of terrorists killed."

Using the regime's term to refer to insurgents, the newspaper said the army was locked in a bid to keep encroaching rebels out of Damascus on Tuesday night.

"In the northeastern entrance into Damascus, on the edges of Qabun district, there was a new bid to stage an incursion into the capital... but the attempt resulted in the death of more than 100 attackers who committed a kind of collective suicide," said Al-Watan.

Elsewhere, six rebel fighters were killed in fighting near the police academy in Khan al-Assal, said the Britain-based Observatory.

Clashes over the academy have raged for the past week, as insurgents have been attempting to seize one of the last regime bastions in the northern province of Aleppo.

Wednesday's violence came a day after at least 134 people were killed in violence across Syria, among them 52 civilians, said the Observatory, which relies on a network of sources on the ground for its information.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/battles-rock-damascus-province-ngo-says>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Yemen court freezes assets of 2 Saleh-era officials**

A Yemeni court ordered the freezing of the assets of two top security officials who served under ousted strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh for refusing to testify in the case of a deadly Sanaa suicide bombing

A Yemen court Tuesday ordered the freezing of the assets of two top security officials who served under ousted strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh for refusing to testify in the case of a deadly Sanaa suicide bombing, a judicial source said.

The source named the officials as former commander of the central security services General Abdulmalik al-Taieb and his deputy General Yehya Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, a nephew of the former president.

Both men were regarded by court as "fugitives from justice" after they failed to appear, the source said, without specifying whether they were to appear as witnesses or defendants.

The Sanaa court specialising in terrorism cases has also imposed a travel ban on the pair, the source added.

Taieb was sacked on the day of the suicide attack -- May 21, 2012 -- which killed 86 soldiers and was claimed by Al-Qaeda. Yehya was dismissed in December.

On January 14, Yemen began the trial of nine Al-Qaeda suspects accused of involvement in the attack.

Al-Qaeda said the assault, in which a man dressed as a soldier detonated explosives in the middle of a battalion, was aimed at Defence Minister Mohammed Nasser

Ahmed and his aides. The minister escaped unharmed.

It was the biggest assault on Yemeni troops since President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi came to power in February last year, following a year long uprising that ousted his predecessor Saleh.

During the first court hearing, one of the defendants, 24-year-old Hisham Sharaabi, had shouted out that "this case is political and involves high-ranking officials."

Saleh who had ruled Yemen for 33 years, had a closely-knit regime, appointing relatives to head sensitive security and military posts.

But since he took office, Hadi -- who must restructure the security and military apparatus based on the UN-backed deal that brought him to power -- has sacked many officers close to Saleh.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/65681/World/Region/Yemen-court-freezes-assets-of--Salehera-officials.aspx>

- **Show of might in Kuwait's GCC military exercise**



A pictorial on the joint GCC military drill which took place during celebrations to mark the 52nd Independence day of Kuwait and the 22nd anniversary of the end of the first Gulf war with the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.

Soldiers from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries participate in a military show held at Failaka island, about 30 kilometres off the Kuwaiti coast.

<http://gulfnews.com/pictures/news/show-of-might-in-kuwait-s-gcc-military-exercise-1.1151593>

- **Yemen, GCC review difficulties hindering funds allocation**

SANA'A, Feb. 26 (Saba) - The 13th meeting of the Yemen-GCC joint technical committee held on Tuesday in Sana'a with the participation of representatives from GCC States' finance and foreign ministries,

development funds and GCC office in Sana'a.

The committee reviewed a report of the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation on the implementation progress in the GCC-funded projects in Yemen.

It also reviewed the achievements made so far of the allocation of the funding granted by donors to Yemen during the Riyadh donors meeting and the fourth meeting of Friends of Yemen in New York, both held last September.

In the opening of the meeting, Planning and International Cooperation Minister Mohammed al-Sa'adi delivered a speech, reviewing the economic challenges Yemen faces in the current transitional stage as well as the difficulties hindering the allocation progress of the donors' funds to Yemen.

Al-Sa'adi hailed the keenness of the GCC States on backing the stability and development trends in Yemen, saying that GCC is the biggest donor to Yemen.

Director of the GCC office in Sana'a Saad al-Arifi reiterated the GCC States' commitment to continue offering the assistance required to help the Yemeni government overcome the current and future urgent problems.

<http://www.sabanews.net/en/news300164.htm>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• Karzai's order of expulsion surprised US commanders: Officials

Press TV

February 26, 2013

Afghan President Hamid Karzai's demand for the withdrawal of US Special Forces from Wardak province has surprised US commanders in the war-ravaged country, officials say.

"We're not aware of any incident that would have generated this kind of response," AFP quoted one US official as saying on condition of anonymity on Monday.

"We're trying to see clarity from the government of Afghanistan," Pentagon

spokesman George Little told reporters, adding that a special panel of Afghan officials and officers from the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) were looking into what made Karzai issue the announcement.

However, Little did not say if the United States would pull out its elite special operations units from the province, saying, "It's premature to speculate on what the outcome of what our discussions [with Afghan officials] would be."

On Sunday, Karzai ordered the withdrawal of US Special Forces from Wardak and Logar provinces within two weeks, accusing them of fuelling "insecurity and instability."

"In today's national security council meeting, Afghan President Hamid Karzai ordered the ministry of defense to kick out the US Special Forces from Wardak and Logar provinces within two weeks," presidential spokesman Aimal Faizi said during a press conference.

"After a thorough discussion, it became clear that armed individuals named as US special force[s] stationed in Wardak

province engage in harassing, annoying, torturing and even murdering innocent people," Faizi said.

Karzai's issued the order only days after US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta unveiled a proposal during a NATO meeting in Brussels, suggesting that US and European forces remain in Afghanistan beyond the 2014 withdrawal plan.

The US invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 under the pretext of combating terrorism.

The offensive removed the Taliban from power, but insecurity continues to rise across the country despite the presence of thousands of US-led soldiers.

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

- **Karzai bans US troops from key province based on fault information**

By Sayed Jawad - 26 Feb 2013, 4:21 pm

Khaama Press

Afghan political and military observers blame misrepresentation of information

behind president Hamid Karzai's decision to order US special forces for an immediate withdrawal from Maidan Wardak province of Afghanistan.

The analysts also believe that incorrect information have been provided to Afghan president Hamid Karzai regarding the issue and criticize lack of coordination among the Afghan security institutions and coalition security forces.

Military analyst, Jawid Kohistani quoted by Tolo News said, "Lack of coordination among the Afghan security institutions and coalition security forces could be one of the main reason behind the issue and on other hand reliable information has not been provided to president Hamid Karzai."

The decision was reportedly taken after residents in the province have complained to human rights groups and provincial leaders of being terrorized in recent months by an Afghan militia that works with U.S. commandos and calls itself "special forces" or "campaign forces."

In the meantime Afghan defense ministry is preparing to fill the vacuum following US special forces withdrawal from central

Maidan Wardak province within the next two weeks.

According to Afghan officials they demanded the pullout of U.S. Special Operations forces from an insurgency-wracked province because the U.S.-backed NATO command here for months has ignored residents' allegations of severe abuses committed by the elite American troops and armed Afghan irregulars working with them.

However NATO said its past inquiries found no evidence to support allegations of misconduct by U.S. Special Operations forces in Wardak province, southwest of Kabul.

Meanwhile a commission jointly formed by Afghan and NATO officials is expected to investigate the issue in coming days, including allegations of the arrest, torture and extrajudicial killing of civilians.

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

- **US, Afghans Investigate Atrocities Claims**

Luis Ramirez

VOA News
February 25, 2013

THE PENTAGON — U.S. military officials said they have set up a joint U.S.-Afghan commission to look into Afghanistan's complaints that Afghan forces supported by U.S. troops have been torturing and murdering innocent civilians.

The joint commission will look into the complaints, which on Sunday prompted Afghan President Hamid Karzai to order all U.S. special operations forces out of Wardak, a strategically important province near Kabul.

Pentagon spokesman George Little told reporters Monday U.S. officials will try to find out what prompted the government of President Karzai to make the decision, which military officials said they were not expecting.

"We're working with the government of Afghanistan to define precisely what their concerns were. Obviously, we take all of their concerns very seriously," he said.

Mr. Karzai's decision comes shortly after his government banned NATO air strikes

in populated areas - a move analysts say demonstrates the Afghan government's growing anxiety about civilian casualties as most U.S. and foreign troops prepare to exit the country at the end of next year.

Michael O'Hanlon, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution research organization in Washington, said there is a problem of confidence.

"It's pretty clear that President Karzai does not fully believe in the war strategy," he said. "I think it's been true for a while, frankly, partly because the war's been so frustrating for him and for us. But his confidence level that the downsides of war are worth it has declined."

Building the confidence of Afghans is key at this stage in efforts to hand over security responsibility to Afghan national security forces, a process expected to be complete by the time most international troops withdraw at the end of 2014.

Senior NATO officials say they do not believe the growing Afghan restrictions on the operations will ultimately hinder their overall mission. As one NATO official put it, some tactical successes are not worth

the strategic risk of losing the confidence of the Afghan people.

O'Hanlon saw a positive sign in the Afghan government's growing assertiveness. He said, "Afghans or at least President Karzai are behaving like they control their own country and they're taking on sovereign responsibility. That's a transition that needs to be happening, is happening, and needs to be complete pretty soon. That mentality is actually appropriate. We don't want a dependent state."

President Obama has announced that more than half of the 66,000 U.S. troops now in Afghanistan will be out by this time next year. The U.S. says that exit will be gradual so as to keep enough troops in place to advise, train and assist Afghan forces during this year's fighting season and next year's elections.

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

- **10 Taliban militants give up fighting in S. Afghan province**

GHAZNI, Afghanistan, Feb. 26 (Xinhua) -- Ten Taliban militants gave up fighting and joined the government-backed peace

process in Ghazni province 125 km south of Afghan capital Kabul on Tuesday.

"Today 10 dissident brothers gave up fighting, laid down arms and joined the peace process. We welcome them," provincial governor Musa Khan Akbarzada said in a ceremony here to welcome the former militants.

Akbarzada also called on all anti-government militants to give up fighting and join the peace process.

Meantime, the commander of the group Mullah Habib in talks with media called on the government to find job opportunities for the former militants and ensure their security.

Taliban militants fighting the government have yet to make comment.

More than 3,500 Taliban fighters, according to government officials, have joined the government-backed peace process over the past year, a claim rejected by the armed outfit as groundless.

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



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