



MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU BÜLTENİ

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Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset

The Restructuring Procces of Iraq

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1. IRAQ

- **Iraq: Ban urges dialogue amid increased tensions, welcomes offer to Iranian group (UN News Centre)**

18 March 2013 – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, in a new report, voices concern about political tensions and security incidents in Iraq, which have increased in recent months, and calls on all parties to resolve outstanding issues through dialogue.

Separately, Mr. Ban and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, today welcomed a generous offer by Albania of humanitarian admission for 210 residents from Camp Hurriya, located near the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

The camp serves as a transit facility for more than 3,000 exiles, most of them members of a group known as the People’s Mojahedeen of Iran, where a process to determine their refugee status is being carried out by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR). An attack on the camp last month left seven people dead and more than 40 injured.

“He expects and urges the residents to positively respond to Albania’s offer and to cooperate with UNHCR to relocate in the coming days,” said a statement issued by Mr. Ban’s spokesperson. “The Secretary-General urges other Member States to follow suit and to offer residents a safe relocation outside of Iraq, in light of their need for international protection.”

The statement added that Mr. Ban “unequivocally supports” the efforts of his Special Representative for Iraq, Martin Kobler, “to courageously and creatively, in exceptionally difficult circumstances, help resolve this situation.”

In his report, Mr. Ban urges those who express support for the residents of Camp Hurriya and the remaining residents of another camp, New Iraq, to stop spreading insults and falsehoods about Mr. Kobler, who heads the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), and instead help to promote a durable solution.

He adds that the significant funds evidently spent on high-profile lobbying could be more usefully utilized to improve aspects of the humanitarian conditions

often cited in media and lobbying campaigns.

More generally, Mr. Ban writes in the report that the security environment in Iraq remained “volatile and unpredictable” in recent months, fuelled by political and sectarian tensions.

He appeals to all parties to intensify their efforts to find solutions to longstanding political, legislative and legal issues through dialogue and in a spirit of compromise and flexibility.

The protests that erupted in late December in various parts of the country, as well as the relations between the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, which deteriorated in late November over the issue of security coordination in the disputed territories, has presented “major challenges” for the Government of Iraq ahead of the upcoming governorate council elections scheduled for 20 April, notes Mr. Ban.

He urges the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government to resume dialogue, noting that transparent and accountable sharing of power and

resources is essential for ensuring further political stability, economic growth and prosperity for all. “There is no alternative to peaceful coexistence in a united federal Iraq,” he stresses.

Commenting on the upcoming elections, Mr. Ban urges the relevant authorities to ensure the fair representation of women and minorities in elected bodies, including by adopting the recommendation of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) that a 25 per cent quota for women be enshrined in the electoral laws, applicable to all elections.

Meanwhile, he continues to have serious concerns about some aspects of the administration of justice in Iraq, including reports of abuse and mistreatment of prisoners and detainees, failure to respect due process and shortcomings in meeting fair trial standards.

“I am also concerned by the particular difficulties faced by women who come in contact with the criminal justice system,” he writes. “I urge the Government of Iraq to ensure that due process is fully respected in line with the Constitution, as well as international human rights law

obligations, while at the same time ensuring that alleged cases of abuse and mistreatment are thoroughly investigated and that those responsible are held to full account.”

He also calls on the Government to investigate the 9 February attack on Camp Hurriya, and to show flexibility in finding a constructive solution for the resolution of the property issue in Camp New Iraq.

The residents there, numbering 100, insist that their relocation cannot occur until the issue of movable and immovable property is resolved. He urges the residents to engage on this issue, as well as to engage with the UNHCR resettlement process.

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44418&Cr=&Cr1=>

- **Ki-moon expresses concern about the situation in Iraq, calls on the government for self-restraint (NINA)**

18 March 2013

Baghdad (NINA) – The United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, expressed concern over about the tension in Iraq, especially since protests and

demonstrations started in a number of the provinces.

In his periodical report to the Security Council, for the period from mid November 2012 until 12 March 2013, Ki-moon said that he is concerned about increasing tension in Iraq, especially since protests started in the country's western parts, urging the government of Iraq to continue exercising highest level of self-restraint in dealing with demonstrators.

He added that it is for the demonstrators to continue expressing their demands through peaceful means, calling on the government to carry out immediate and transparent investigations about claims in human rights violations.

Ki-moon welcomed forming a joint ministerial committee hoping that the committee quickly finalize reviewing the protestors' demands in accordance with the Constitution and law supremacy.

Ki-moon called on all sides to intensify their efforts toward finding solutions to the long outstanding political, legislative and legal issues, through serious dialogue in the spirit of flexibility and compromise.

He expressed the UN Mission's readiness to help the Iraqi government and its institutions through its good office in this regards.

Ki-moon added that he is very concern about justice in Iraq, according to reports that prisoners and detainees are being mistreated, with no respect to required legal procedures and just trial; demanding that officials responsible for such violations be accountable.

- **UN chief urges Iranian opposition group in Iraq to accept Albania's asylum offer (AP)**

By The Associated Press

March 18, 2013

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is urging members of an Iranian opposition group living at a former U.S. military base near Baghdad to accept Albania's offer of asylum.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran, which oversees the opposition Mujahedeen-e-Khalq known as the MEK, has rejected the offer because Albania is only willing to accept 210 members. The

U.N. says more than 3,000 MEK members live at the base.

Ban urged other U.N. member states to follow Albania's lead and offer MEK members asylum, U.N. deputy spokesman Eduardo del Buey said Monday.

Iraq's government is eager to get rid of the MEK, which fought alongside Saddam Hussein's forces in the 1980s Iran-Iraq war. The group opposes Iran's clerical regime and carried out assassinations and bombings in Iran until renouncing violence in 2001.

- **Iraq making progress on maternal health but still short of development goals, says UN (UN News Centre)**

18 March 2013 – Despite sustained progress in reducing maternal deaths in Iraq, concerted efforts are still required to push the country closer to achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on maternal health, says the United Nations health agency.

In a press statement released today, the World Health Organization's (WHO) Iraqi field office reported that in the 20 years spanning 1990 to 2010, the maternal

mortality ratio in the country fell by 29 per cent, while the proportion of deliveries attended by skilled health personnel rose “considerably” from 50 per cent in 1990 to 88.5 per cent in 2011.

Dr. Syed Jaffar Hussain, the WHO representative in Iraq, acknowledged that the last two decades had witnessed “slow but sustained progress” for the health of Iraqi mothers. But, at the same time, his office warned that this progress would “still not be enough for Iraq to meet the planned MDG target of reducing the maternal mortality ration by 75 per cent in 2015.”

“Concerted efforts and innovation are still needed to prevent maternal deaths, in order to save a greater number of mothers’ lives, accelerate the pace of reduction of maternal mortality and bring the country closer to the MDG target,” WHO stated in the news release.

The UN agency added that the appropriate allocation of necessary human and financial resources coupled with the creation of a “strong monitoring system to measure progress” would help to achieve the goals.

According to a 2009 study by Iraq’s Ministry of Health and cited by WHO, the leading direct cause of pregnancy-related death in the country was haemorrhaging, with one in four delivering women facing “serious complications during pregnancy and child birth.”

WHO noted that the Ministry of Health, along with other UN partners, had begun to work on improving the accessibility and provision of high quality health services to children and mothers across the country as part of what it called “a key strategy” in addressing the continuing problem.

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44413&Cr=maternal&Cr1=#.UUd0oUqKn2h>

- **WFP provides food aid for Syrian refugees in Iraq (alliraqnews)**

18 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) announced that the UN World Food Programme (WFP) provided food aids to the Syrian refugees in Iraq.

A statement received by AIN on Monday reported that "The WFP supplies the

Syrian refugees with food cardboards which cover the basic needs of food for each member per month. Each cardboard weighs 19,2 kg during the winter (January-March), and 16,5 kg during the summer."

- **World Food Program in Iraq begins distributing food parcels for Syrian refugees (NINA)**

18 March 2013

Baghdad/ NINA /-- World Food Program in Iraq / WFP / began distributing food parcels for Syrian refugees who fled to Iraq to escape the fighting and violence in their home.

Iraq is harboring more than 60 thousand Syrian refugees who are hosted by several refugees camps in Anbar province and Kurdistan region.

- **U.S. pushes Iranian dissidents to accept Albanian asylum offer (Washington Times)**

By Ashish Kumar Sen

The Washington Times, March 18, 2013

The Obama administration said Monday that an Iranian dissident group must immediately accept an offer of asylum

from Albania for some its members being housed at a camp in Iraq.

Albania has agreed to take in 210 members of the Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MeK), a dissident group that seeks to overthrow Iran's theocratic regime.

The MeK has rejected the offer.

The U.S. wants the MeK leadership to "accept the government of Albania's humanitarian offer immediately, and urges the residents of Camp [Liberty] to resume participation in resettlement interviews to ensure that individuals avail themselves of safe and secure relocation opportunities outside Iraq," said State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland.

The dissidents are housed at Camp Liberty, a temporary location near Baghdad's international airport.

"We further urge the MeK leadership to place the highest priority on the safety and security of the former residents of [Camp] Ashraf through full and unconditional cooperation with the resettlement process," Mrs. Nuland said.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has been interviewing Camp Liberty residents to determine their eligibility for refugee status.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki wants the Iranians out of his country.

The Iraqi government is “working closely with the U.N. and the international community to find a permanent places for the residents of the Camp Hurriya outside Iraq,” an Iraqi official said on background.

The Obama administration welcomed the Albanian offer, which it described as “generous,” and thanked Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha “for the humanitarian gesture to provide a safe haven” for the Iranians, said Mrs. Nuland.

“We believe the permanent resettlement of former Ashraf residents outside Iraq is the only sustainable solution and remain committed to assisting [U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees] and the government of Iraq in this endeavor,” she said.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/mar/18/us-iranian-dissidents-accept-albanian-asylum-offer/>

- **US welcomes Albania's resettlement offer for former Camp Ashraf residents (KUNA)**

WASHINGTON, March 18 (KUNA) -- The United States welcomed on Monday the Albanian government resettlement offer for former Camp Ashraf residents.

"The United States welcomes the Government of Albania's generous offer to resettle 210 former residents of Camp Ashraf temporarily based at Camp Hurriya, and thanks Prime Minister Berisha for the humanitarian gesture to provide a safe haven for these individuals. Albania has been a strong partner of the United States in the effort to bring stability and peace to Iraq", said State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland in a statement.

"We believe the permanent resettlement of former Ashraf residents outside Iraq is the only sustainable solution and remain committed to assisting UNAMI, UNHCR and the Government of Iraq in this endeavor," she added.

Nuland affirmed that the United States "calls on the leadership of the MEK (Mujahideen-e-Khalq) to accept the Government of Albania's humanitarian offer immediately, and urges the residents of Camp Hurriya to resume participation in resettlement interviews to ensure that individuals avail themselves of safe and secure relocation opportunities outside Iraq.

"We further urge the MEK leadership to place the highest priority on the safety and security of the former residents of Ashraf through full and unconditional cooperation with the resettlement process." "The United States strongly supports the work of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), UNHCR, and the Special Representative of the Secretary General Martin Kobler. We continue to emphasize that the camp and its residents must be secured in accordance with the December 25, 2011 Memorandum of Understanding between the United Nations and the Government of Iraq, and urge all involved parties to work together effectively on this," she concluded.

- **Delegation from Niniveh tribes visit protestors in Haweeja (NINA)**

18 March 2013

Kirkuk (NINA) – A delegation representing tribes of Niniveh province visited the protest square in Haweeja district to express solidarity with the protestors and supporting their demands.

In a statement to NINA on Monday, March 18, the delegation's head, Sheikh Juma al-Dawar, said, "Our visit to Haweeja comes to assert the support of Niniveh tribes with the protestors and demanding the government to implement their demands."

Dawar, who is the Head of Sadeh Bakareh Tribe in Iraq, added that, "The government's disregard to the protestors' demands makes us to call our tribes' members, participating in the political process, to resign their posts and separate themselves from the political process."

He pointed out that, "The only way to solve the crisis is through our peoples' peaceful resistance, until the demands are met."

Spokesman for the protestors in Haweeja, Hamed al-Jabouri, pointed out that in last few days, delegations represent the tribes of Anbar, Salaheddin, Diyala and Baghdad have visited the protestors to coordinate their actions and demands.

- **Recent surge of violence in Iraq aims at disturbing demonstrations, says MP (alliraqnews)**

18 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -MP Qais al-Shadhir, of the Iraqiya Coalition described the recent security breaches in Iraq as attempting to disturb the legitimate demands of the demonstrators.

Shadhir told All Iraq News Agency "The recent security instability is caused by many reasons including the security commanders' lack of professionalism," noting "The aim of the armed operations is to confuse the demonstrators' legitimate demands."

"Enforcing law cannot be achieved only by intensifying military deployment in the streets, but also it could be achieved by following reliable intelligence system," he added.

Shadhir attributed "The recent bombings to the regional agendas which have interests in Iraq."

- **Khuzai, Sihail call on politicians to adopt dialogue to settle crisis in Iraq (alliraqnews)**

18 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -The Iraqi Vice President, Khudhaiyr al-Khuzai, and the First Deputy Speaker, Qusai al-Sihail called the politicians to preserve Iraq's unity and give away the sectarian rhetoric which threaten the civil peace and disrupt the social texture.

A statement by Khuzai's office cited on Monday "Khuzai welcomed Sihail on Monday where they discussed the developments of the political process in the country and the ways to settle the pending issues and get rid of the current crisis in Iraq."

"The VP Khuzai urged to intensify the dialogue and the meetings among the political sides," noting "The majority of the political leaders started to move towards resolving the political crisis and adopt dialogue," the statement concluded.

- **Sadrist MP calls on Maliki to resign (alliraqnews)**

18 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) -MP Hassan al-Mansouri of Ahrar bloc associated to Sadr Trend called the Premier, Nouri al-Maliki to resign due to his failure in providing the services and security to the citizens.

Mnsouri stated to AIN on Monday "Maliki proved great failure in providing services and security, therefore he has to quit his post along with the other failed officials, but Iraq lacks the culture of submitting the resignation."

"The Premier is the one who created the crisis and he does not know how to resolve it when he released the terrorists, so he bear the responsibility of what is going on in the country," he stressed.

"Al Qaeda acts under governmental coverage, this is obvious when the terrorists managed to storm the Justice Ministry's building, this means that the terrorists could penetrate the security checkpoints at any place and in anytime," Mansouri concluded

- **Mohamadawi urges to vote on Infrastructure Law away from political disputes (alliraqnews)**

18 March 2013

Baghdad (AIN) –The Secretary General of the Sons of Iraq Alliance, Abbas al-Mohammadawi, called the political blocs to vote on the Infrastructure law draft away from the political disputes.

In a press statement received by AIN, he said "The Infrastructure law draft is one of the important laws to the citizens and they are the only beneficiaries from this law."

"This law draft does not have any defects or gaps that the corrupted officials can steal the public fund through," he added, noting that "The stance of the Iraqiya Slate form this law draft is already known where it will try to involve it in the political disputes."

He called the political blocs to "Vote on this law draft in the same way that was done while voting on the General Budget of 2013."

- **Iraqi Kurdish ministers will not return to Baghdad until April - minister (PUK Media Website)**

Source: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) media website in Sorani Kurdish 18 Mar 13; Iraqi Kurdistan Region Presidency website in Arabic 18 Mar 13

Kurdish ministers in the Iraqi government will not go back to Baghdad until April, Trade Minister Khayrallah Babakr said, as the country's political crisis continues, PUKmedia website of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan reported on 18 March.

Babakr, a Kurd, other Kurdish ministers in the central government, as well as head of Kurdish blocs in the national parliament attended a meeting in Arbil chaired by Kurdistan Region President Mas'ud Barzani on 18 March, the report said.

Kurdish ministers and MPs have left Baghdad in protest against Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's policies.

Babakr said that Kurdish ministers and MPs would not return to Baghdad until April. He also said that a follow-up committee had been set up, while another

meeting would be held after the New Year Nowruz festival, which starts on 20 March.

A statement issued by Barzani's office after the meeting did not mention any decisions taken there, including any possible dates for the return of Kurdish officials to Baghdad.

This comes as the country goes through a prolonged political crisis, with Sunni and Kurdish officials increasingly critical of the Shi'i-dominated cabinet.

- **Kurds' meeting results in no final decision yet...and boycotting continues to the post-election period (Shafaq News)**

18 March 2013

Shafaq News/Kurdistan regional Government announced that a final decision towards the Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has not been made yet.

The declaration has been made post a formal meeting made between KRG's president and the Kurdish legislators and ministries based in Baghdad.

A statement issued after the meeting and received by "Shafaq News" reads that the

"policy adopted by Baghdad if continued will lead to the collapse of the entire political process".

"The dominant policy does not only affect the relation with the region but it will show its impact on the future of Iraq as well", the statement added.

The conferees agreed on keeping the meeting open and to continue consultation in order to reach a decision regarding the current situation in the country.

<http://www.shafaaq.com/en/news/5572-kurds-meeting-results-in-no-final-decision-yetand-boycotting-continue-to-the-post-election-period.html>

2. IRAN

- **Iran's 24th fleet to dock at Sri Lankan port: Navy commander**

Iranian Army's Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari



The Iranian Navy's 24th fleet of warships, comprising Sabalan destroyer and Kharg helicopter carrier, docked in Zhangjiagang port on March 4 after sailing 13,000 kilometers in 40 days.

Iranian Army's Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari says the country's 24th fleet will dock at a port in Sri Lanka in a few days' time.

"The 24th fleet of Iran's Navy will dock at a port in Sri Lanka on March 21," Sayyari said on Sunday.

Sayyari underscored the capabilities of the naval forces of the Iranian Army, adding, "We sailed the Pacific Ocean and docked at China's port city of Zhangjiagang for the first time last week," he added.

The Iranian Navy's 24th fleet of warships, comprising Sabalan destroyer and Kharg helicopter carrier, docked in Zhangjiagang

port on March 4 after sailing 13,000 kilometers in 40 days.

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

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

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/18/294186/iranian-fleet-to-dock-at-sri-lankan-port/>

- **Larijani condoles with Afghan counterpart over relatives' death**

Speaker of Afghanistan's Lower House Abdul Rauf Ibrahimi's brother, father, nephew and cousin were killed alongside six others in a bombing on March 13 in the northern Afghan province of Kunduz.

Iran's Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani has expressed condolences to Speaker of Afghanistan's Lower House Abdul Rauf

Ibrahimi over the death of his relatives in a recent terrorist attack.



Ibrahimi's brother, father, nephew and cousin were killed alongside six others in a bombing on March 13 in the northern province of Kunduz.

Two police officers also were killed and at least 13 people were wounded in the bombing that reportedly targeted Ibrahimi's family.

In a message to Ibrahimi on Monday, Larijani stressed the danger of terrorist groups for the security, peace and progress of regional countries, adding however, that such measures would have no effect on the Afghan nation's resolve to fight threats.

Larijani reiterated Iran's readiness to cooperate with Afghanistan in order to

promote sustainable security and stability in the region.

The United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in 2001 under the pretext of fighting terrorism. While the US-led invasion removed the Taliban from power, insecurity remains rampant across the war-torn nation.

The US-led war in Afghanistan, which has caused record-high civilian and military casualties, has become the longest military conflict in the American history.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/18/294181/larjani-condoles-with-afghan-counterpart/>

- **Iran, P5+1 begin second day of expert-level talks in Istanbul**

Iran and P5+1's negotiators talking during a meeting in the Kazakh city of Almaty in late February

Iran and P5+1's negotiators talking during a meeting in the Kazakh city of Almaty in late February



In an interview with the Austrian broadcaster, ORF, on March 1, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi described the latest round of the talks as a "milestone" and a "turning point in the negotiations."

Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) have started their second day of expert-level nuclear talks in the Turkish city of Istanbul.

Iran and the P5+1 - Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States plus Germany - agreed to hold the expert-level meeting during their previous negotiations in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on February 26-27. The two sides agreed to convene again in the city on April 5-6 to continue talks.

Earlier, EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton called on the P5+1 group of world

powers to be "determined and creative" in the upcoming talks with Iran.

Ashton said on Saturday that the P5+1 should take more measures in order to build "communication" and "trust" with Iran.

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

After the Almaty talks, both sides expressed hope and optimism about the future of the negotiations. On February 28, Reuters quoted an unnamed Western diplomat as saying that the Almaty talks had been "more constructive and more positive than previous meetings because they were really focusing on the proposal on the table."

In an interview with Austrian broadcaster ORF on March 1, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi also described the latest round of the talks as a "milestone" and a "turning point in the negotiations."

The United States, Israel, and some of their allies have repeatedly accused Iran

of pursuing non-civilian objectives in its nuclear energy program.

Iran rejects the allegation, arguing that as a committed signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), it has the right to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/18/294159/iran-p51-experts-begin-2nd-day-of-talks/>

- **Former housing minister puts name up for Iran's presidency**

The Islamic Republic's eleventh presidential election will be held in June and presidential hopefuls will register from May 7 to May 11.

Iran's former Minister of Housing and Urban Development Mohammad Saedi Kia has officially announced his candidacy for the country's upcoming presidential election.



Saeedi Kia has announced “Peace, National Unity and Global Cooperation” as his electoral slogan, Fars news agency reported on Monday.

The former Iranian minister is scheduled to hold a press conference on February 7 in this regard.

The Islamic Republic’s eleventh presidential election will be held in June and presidential hopefuls will register from May 7 to May 11.

So far, Head of the State Inspectorate Organization of Iran Mostafa Pourmohammadi, senior member of Iran's Expediency Council Hassan Rohani, First Vice Speaker of the Majlis Mohammad Reza Bahonar, Secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen Rezaei, former Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, and former Foreign Minister Manouchehr

Mottaki have declared their intention to run for president.

The president of Iran is elected for a four-year term in a national election. The country’s Guardian Council vets the candidates for qualifications.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/18/294173/iran-exminister-to-run-for-president/>

- **‘Iran asked to increase petchem exports’**

The managing director of the National Petrochemical Company says the Islamic Republic of Iran’s neighboring countries have demanded an increase in the export of the country’s petrochemical products.

Abdolhossein Bayat made the remarks in an interview with the Oil Ministry's official news agency, SHANA, on Sunday.

“Despite all challenges in the way of petrochemical products exports in 1391 (the current Iranian calendar year, started March 20, 2012), neighboring countries have demanded an increase in the export capacity of our country thanks to high quality and variety of the goods produced

in petrochemical complexes of Iran,”
Bayat stated.

He added that petrochemical products
have had a 38-percent share in the non-oil
exports of the country in the current
(Iranian calendar) year.

He also expressed hope that
petrochemical products’ exports can
develop further in the following (Iranian
calendar) year.

Iran has significantly expanded the range
and volume of its petrochemical products
over the past few years, and the National
Iranian Petrochemical Company has
become the second-largest producer and
exporter of petrochemicals in the Middle
East after Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic Republic exported a total of
18.2 million tons of petrochemical and
polymer products, worth about USD 14.2
billion, to more than 60 countries in the
previous Iranian calendar year (ended
March 19, 2012).

[http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/18/
294109/iran-asked-to-increase-petchem-
exports/](http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/18/294109/iran-asked-to-increase-petchem-exports/)

- **Iran tests border patrol drones**

The implementation of this project has
begun in South Khorasan and Sistan and
Baluchestan Provinces, and multiple daily
flights are conducted to evaluate the
performance of the drones.”

Iran Border Guard Commander Brigadier
General Hossein Zolfaqari

A senior Iranian commander says border
guards have begun testing unmanned
aerial vehicles (UAVs) for patrolling the
country’s eastern borders.

“The implementation of this project has
begun in South Khorasan and Sistan and
Baluchestan Provinces, and multiple daily
flights are conducted to evaluate the
performance of the drones,” Border Guard
Commander Brigadier General Hossein
Zolfaqari said on Sunday.

He added that upon the completion of the
pilot project, Iranian border guards will
use UAVs to patrol borders.



On Tuesday, Iran's police teamed up with the Border Guard Command to counter narcotics, human trafficking, and gasoline smugglers on the Iran-Afghan border in southeastern Iran.

Iran has a 900-kilometer border with Afghanistan and has frequently been used as the main conduit for the smuggling of Afghan drugs to narcotics kingpins in Europe.

On December 17, 2012, Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi said Iran had launched the production line of ScanEagle drones, adding that the IRGC Naval and Aerospace Division was employing the UAVs.

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/03/17/294080/iran-tests-border-patrol-drones/>

- **Iran increasing gas storage capacity, end gas import dependence**

TEHRAN, March 17 (MNA) – An Iranian energy official says Iran plans to increase its underground gas storage capacity by inaugurating its second natural gas

storage facility in the central city of Kashan.

Massoud Samivand, managing director of Natural Gas Storage Company (NGSC), said on Friday that the Nasrabad facility would end Iran's need to import gas from neighboring Turkmenistan.

The official said Iran currently ranks 19th in the world in terms of natural gas storage capacity, and will claim the 5th place when the new facility in Kashan and another facility under construction in Khorasan Province, northeast of Iran, are made operational.

Samivand stated that according to the Fifth Five-Year Economic Development Plan (2011-2015), Iran should be able to store between 120 and 130 million cubic meters of natural gas.

The first natural gas storage facility in Iran and the Middle East was officially inaugurated near the village of Sarajeh -- located approximately 124 kilometers south of Tehran -- in early January.

The Sarajeh facility is said to have the capacity to store 1.2 billion cubic meters

of gas in its first phase and 3.3 billion cubic meters in the second phase.

Over 750 million cubic meters of natural gas has already been stored in the facility.

In November 2012, managing director of the National Iranian Gas Company Javad Owji said Iran plans to establish 40 gas storage facilities in the coming years.

<http://old.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1818877>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

2 injured in explosion near Gaza City

Published today 13:09

GAZA CITY (Ma'an) -- Two men were injured Sunday in an explosion near Gaza City, medics said.

Medics at Shifa Hospital told Ma'an that one man sustained moderate injuries and another lost his hand in the blast.

It was not immediately clear what caused the blast, but witnesses reported hearing a large explosion west of Gaza City.

<http://www.maanneews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=576196>

● US helicopters fly across West Bank

RAMALLAH (Ma'an) -- US helicopters flew across the West Bank on Monday ahead of President Barack Obama's visit later this week.



Three batches of helicopters arrived at the presidential heliport in Ramallah and the Abu Ammar heliport in Bethlehem, before heading toward Jordan.

Palestinian security sources told Ma'an the helicopters were sent ahead of Obama's visit for security purposes, but they declined to provide further details.

Obama will arrive in Israel on Wednesday. He is expected to meet President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah on Thursday, and to visit the Nativity Church in Bethlehem on Friday, before heading to Jordan.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=576201>

- **Most Americans support Israel, are skeptical on peace process, poll finds**

(JTA) -- A new poll shows that most Americans support Israel, but do not want the U.S. to take the lead in an Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Fifty-five percent of Americans, according to the ABC News/Washington Post poll released Monday, sympathize more with Israel than with the Palestinian Authority. Nine percent sympathize more with the P.A., 14 percent sympathize with neither side and 18 percent had no opinion on the question.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents, though, said the U.S. should leave peace talks to the Israelis and Palestinians, while 26 percent said the U.S. should lead the negotiations.

The 69 percent figure is 15 percentage points higher than when the poll last asked about the U.S. role in peace talks 11 years ago, during the second intifada.

Even numbers of Americans, according to the poll, believe the U.S. puts too much or too little pressure on Israel. The poll also showed that 34 percent of Americans think the U.S. puts too little pressure on the P.A., while eight percent said the U.S. pressures the P.A. too much.

More than seven in 10 Republicans support Israel over the P.A., while that number drops to 49 percent among Democrats. Only 11 percent of Democrats and 4 percent of Republicans sympathize more with the P.A. than with Israel.

Conducted by Langer Associates, the poll sampled 1,001 respondents and had a margin of error of 3.5 percent.

<http://www.jta.org/news/article/2013/03/18/3122321/most-americans-support-israel-are-skeptical-on-peace-process-poll-finds>

- **Israel to request U.S. support for strike on potential Syrian weapons transfers**

(JTA) – Israel will ask President Obama for U.S. support should Israel strike a Syrian weapons convoy bound for Hezbollah.

The request, according to the Guardian, will come during Obama's visit to Israel later this week. It may include a request for U.S. participation in the strike, according to an unnamed Israeli official.

"Maybe it would be better if Israel doesn't do it, but who is going to deal with it?" the official told the Guardian. "These missiles are not just a problem for Israel."

Israel reportedly destroyed a Syrian weapons convoy bound for Hezbollah in December.

The U.S. has committed to taking military action should Syria deploy any of its chemical or biological weapons, or transfer them to extremist groups. The Israeli request, by contrast, would pertain to all missiles.

Obama is scheduled to land in Israel on Wednesday afternoon and will be in the country until Friday. Syria is one of the topics the president is set to discuss with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the trip.

<http://www.jta.org/news/article/2013/03/18/3122316/israel-to-request-us->

[support-for-strike-on-potential-syrian-weapons-transfers](#)

- **Haniyeh: Egypt-Hamas relations strong**

GAZA CITY (Ma'an) -- Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh said Sunday that efforts to sabotage relations between Hamas and Cairo would fail.

"Hamas will remain a protecting shield of Egypt and all attempts to drive a wedge between Palestine and Egypt will fail," Haniyeh said.

Speaking at a conference on the Arab Spring, organized by a student bloc affiliated to Hamas, Haniyeh said Palestine encouraged Arab countries during their revolutions.

"It is not strange to link Jerusalem with the Arab revolutions because Palestine is the one the main engines of the revolutions," Haniyeh said.

Palestinians are hopeful of the Arab youth but concerned by efforts to counter the revolutions, particularly in Egypt, the Hamas premier said.

He said Arab revolutions faced external interference, and that the West and the US were seeking influence in uprisings which they could not dominate.

Haniyeh urged the Arab youth to protect the achievements of their revolutions.

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=576138>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **IMF delegation leaves Cairo after 'constructive' loan talks**

Loan discussions slated to continue 'over the coming weeks' to secure 'possible financial support' for Egypt, says senior IMF official



An International Monetary Fund [IMF] delegation left Cairo on Monday morning after day-long talks with the Egyptian

government over a \$4.8 billion loan which both parties portrayed as positive.

Discussions were based on a revised economic programme, suggested by the government, which involves more gradual measures to tackle Egypt's budget deficit than the programme it presented to the fund last November. The revised programme will "preserve growth rates, jobs, and protect the poor," the Egyptian government said.

Loan negotiations stalled in December after President Morsi's government failed to implement a stringent economic reform plan, including a raft of tax hikes, as part of its preliminary agreement with the fund.

"We've made very good progress, and we had very constructive discussions," said Masood Ahmed, director of the IMF's Middle East and Central Asia department, after meeting Egyptian Prime Minister Hisham Qandil in Cairo.

"We agreed that our discussions would continue diligently over the coming weeks with the aim of reaching agreement on possible financial support from the IMF,"

added Ahmed, who headed the delegation which met with Central Bank of Egypt Governor Hisham Ramez, as well as Egypt's finance and planning ministers.

The IMF has offered Egypt emergency funding until it implements the reforms necessary to secure the larger \$4.8 billion package, which might not happen until after the country's legislative elections.

Elections for Egypt's lower house of parliament, which was dissolved in June 2012, were scheduled to start on 22 April until a court ruled the electoral law to be unconstitutional, forcing the country's electoral commission to scrap its timetable.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/67130/Business/Economy/IMF-delegation-leaves-Cairo-after-constructive-loa.aspx>

- **President Morsi arrives in Pakistan on South Asia tour**

Morsi will meet with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari during the one-day visit, the first to Pakistan by an Egyptian leader since Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s

Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi arrived in Pakistan on Monday, on a South Asian tour that will also take in India as he works to promote trade and investment in his nation's troubled economy.

Morsi will meet with President Asif Ali Zardari during the one-day visit, the first to Pakistan by an Egyptian leader since Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s, Pakistan's foreign ministry said.

The ministry said the visit is a "watershed and a landmark" in relations between the two Muslim nations which would "give a new impetus to economic, trade and cultural relations."

"President Morsi's decision to choose Pakistan as the first South Asian country for a bilateral visit manifests Egypt's desire to add a new chapter to its bilateral ties with Pakistan," it added.

Officials from the two countries signed agreements to promote cooperation in shipping, investment, information technology and science and technology.

Pakistani state television showed live footage of the ceremony at the

presidential palace where Morsi was greeted and presented with a military honour guard.

Late Monday he is due to travel to India, where he will meet with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and business groups to bolster a blossoming trade relationship worth \$4.5 billion in 2012/11 compared to \$3.2 billion the previous financial year.

"Our trade with Egypt has increased so rapidly in the last three years that India is now Egypt's seventh-largest trading partner," India's ambassador to Egypt Navdeep Suri told reporters ahead of the visit.

"We talk often in general terms about space, technology and cooperation but during this visit we are talking in specific terms about launching an Egyptian satellite," he added.

Egypt is struggling to restore investor and foreign lenders' confidence in the nation, which has suffered a sharp economic decline since the uprising that overthrew president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.

Morsi's administration has been plagued by unrest and deadly clashes between protesters and police, blocking efforts to build broad-based support for a needed program of economic reform.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/67137/Egypt/Politics-/President-Morsi-arrives-in-Pakistan-on-South-Asia-.aspx>

- **Islamist military men on trial for Sudan plot: Lawyer**

A group of Islamist military officers in Sudan are facing trial on charges of plotting against the regime

A military trial has begun in Sudan for hardcore Islamist officers who allegedly plotted to destabilise the regime late last year, a lawyer said on Sunday.

The government announced in November the arrest of 13 people, including high-profile members of the security forces and a former intelligence chief, for targeting "the stability of the state and some leaders of the state".

"The military court began on Thursday and today (Sunday) was the second hearing.

They are charged under Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) law and the court was headed by SAF generals," said Hashiem Al-Jali.

He could not provide further details but said he is representing one of his relatives, Brigadier Mohammed Ibrahim.

Ibrahim is the most prominent accused soldier and played a role in the 1989 coup which brought the current regime of President Omar al-Bashir to power.

It was not clear exactly how many officers are on trial.

The plot allegations highlighted turmoil within Bashir's Islamist regime, analysts said at the time.

Most of the detained military men are close to a vocal group of ex-civil war volunteer mujahedeen fighters and an elite group within them called Al-Saeohoon or "tourists for the sake of God".

The war veterans, along with a youth movement within the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), have called for new

national leadership and a return to Islamic values because they said the government is tainted by corruption and other problems.

The alleged plotters were detained without any shots being fired and government officials have released only vague details about the incident.

"The case is not very clear" and the evidence is scant, said a regional political expert who expects the case to last all year.

If convicted, the accused are not likely to face the firing squad, he said, because the government is "scared of Saeohoon."

Authorities also detained Salah Gosh, who served as national intelligence chief until 2009. As he is not a military officer his case will be heard later.

Gosh's brother told AFP he had no information about the trials.

Sudan has experienced at least seven coups or attempted coups in its 56-year history.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/67099/World/Region/Islamist-military-men-on-trial-for-Sudan-plot-Lawy.aspx>

- **Somali Islamists 'retake key town'**

Al-Qaeda-linked Shebab group take over the the key southern town of Hudur after Ethiopian troops who had held it since late 2011 left

Somalia's Islamist fighters retook the key southern town of Hudur on Sunday, residents and the militants said, in the first territorial fight-back by the Al-Qaeda-linked Shebab for several months.

Heavily armed Shebab fighters swept into the regional capital of the Bakool region early on Sunday, taking the town peacefully just hours after Ethiopian troops who had held it since late 2011 left, said resident Hussein Madker.

"Hudur is now under the control of the Shebab fighters again after the Ethiopian soldiers moved out late last night," Madker said.

The Ethiopian troops left the town late Saturday with their heavy weaponry, alongside allied Somali forces and residents who feared what would happen after their pull-out, locals said.

"The city is now firmly in the hands of the mujahedeen," the Shebab said in a message on their Twitter account, boasting of how the "Ethiopian invaders fled the city".

The recapture of Hudur marks a sharp turnaround for the Shebab, who have lost a string of towns in recent months to the 17,000-strong African Union force, which fights alongside Somali government forces.

However, it was not immediately clear whether Ethiopian forces had pulled out due to pressure by the Shebab, or for how long the Islamists intended to hold the town.

"The Somali government troops also went along with the Ethiopian soldiers, as well as some civilians who feared for their lives", said resident Hudow Mohamed.

Hudur lies some 180 kilometres (110 miles) west of the Ethiopia's main base in Somalia, the city of Baidoa.

Ethiopian troops crossed the border into southwestern Somalia in late 2011 to attack Shebab bases, shortly after Kenyan troops invaded Somalia from the far south.

While Kenyan troops have since joined the AU force, Ethiopian troops have remained separate.

Somali military commanders in Baidoa confirmed the Shebab had taken Hudur but would not give further details.

Despite recent losses the Shebab remain a potent threat, still controlling rural areas as well as carrying out guerrilla attacks in areas apparently under government control.

Some, retreating ahead of AU-led assaults, have relocated to the northern Golis mountains in Somalia's semi-autonomous Puntland region.

Somalia has been ravaged by conflict since 1991 but a new UN-backed government

took power in September, ending eight years of transitional rule by a corruption-riddled administration.

Many have said the new government offers the most serious hope for stability since the fall of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/67084/World/Region/Somali-Islamists-retake-key-town.aspx>

- **Detention of Christians roils Egypt-Libya relations**

Longstanding tensions between Egypt and its western neighbour are aggravated following recent detention in Libya of Egyptian Christians charged with proselytising

Pope of Egypt's Coptic Church Tawadros II on Sunday afternoon received the Libyan ambassador in Cairo to discuss the fate of three Egyptian Coptic-Christians – along with another Egyptian national from Egypt's Evangelical Church – currently detained in Libya on charges of 'promoting Christianity' in the North African nation.

According to sources who spoke to Ahram Online, the Libyan ambassador told Tawadros that Libyan law categorically prohibits the promotion of any religion other than Islam. At the meeting, the Coptic pope reportedly expressed dismay over the recent death of an Egyptian Evangelical Christian in Libya who had been detained in Libya on the same charges.

Talks between the Coptic pope and the Libyan ambassador came less than 24 hours after the Libyan embassy temporarily suspended operations in Egypt amid concerns over the safety of its staff.

“Our people have been attacked as they enter and exit the embassy building; we need better security arrangements,” said an embassy source.

Egyptian authorities, who had earlier told Ahram Online that the chants of a few Christian protestors do not amount to a “physical threat” to the wellbeing of Libyan embassy workers, promised to step up security measures around the embassy.

Meanwhile, Coptic Church sources told Ahram Online that Tawadros promised to try and convince protestors to strictly adhere to peaceful protest, pending the handover of the four Egyptian Christians still held in Libya.

No clear date has been given yet by the Libyan side for the handover of the detained Egyptian nationals.

Along with the return of the body of slain Evangelical Christian Ezzat El-Hakim, 55 Egyptians were allowed to return home following the suspension of the charges lodged against them.

A government source predicted the handover “soon” of the “three Copts who seem able to prove that they have no association with the missionising charges. But we are still working on the case of the Evangelical Christian who was arrested [in Libya], along with other followers of the Evangelical Church in other countries.”

The arrest and partial release of Egyptian Christians in Libya came against the backdrop of repeated attacks on a Coptic Church in Libya.

The latest incidents only add to the state of on-again-off-again tension between Egypt and Libya, which had also existed under the previous regimes of ousted president Hosni Mubarak and assassinated Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

According to one informed Egyptian source, “tension today involves a business rivalry between a leading Muslim Brotherhood figure” in Egypt and a key member of the Libyan government who was originally a businessman.

“We must be very careful in handling this matter; our relations with Libya are a very delicate matter due to the fact that we have over a million Egyptians working in Libya and it would be a catastrophe if they were all forced to leave,” said the same government source.

Egypt is also concerned with arms smuggling from post-Gaddafi Libya into Egypt. For its part, Libya voices concern over what it describes as ‘infiltration’ by Islamist activists from Egypt into Libyan territory and the latter’s “association with Islamist militias,” according to Libyan source.

Earlier this month, Libyan Prime Minister Ali Zidane was in Cairo for talks with top Egyptian officials, the outcome of which was generally viewed as positive.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/67074/Egypt/Politics-/Detention-of-Christians-roils-EgyptLibya-relations.aspx>

5. JORDAN and LEBANON

• Hariri holds Assad responsible for assault on Sheikhs

Future Movement leader Saad Hariri blamed the Syrian regime for the unrest Lebanon has been witnessing in past months, the latest incident being the Sunday attack on four Sunni Sheikhs.

“[Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad’s regime does not want [peace] for Lebanon... Assad wants to save his regime with the blood of Lebanese [citizens],” Hariri said in a statement released by his press office on Monday.

The Future Movement chief elaborated that the Syrian president is trying to incite strife between Lebanon’s Sunnis and Shiites in order to use this conflict as a

“weapon in the face of the Arabs and the world to save his regime from falling.”

The opposition leader expressed his strong and firm condemnation of the assault on four Sunni Sheikhs in two separate Shiite Beirut neighborhoods and labeled the attacks as “an attempt to drag Lebanon into a [grave] strife.”

He went on to warn about the dangers of sectarian instigation and urged the country’s parties to work together in order to avoid any clashes.

He also called on security and judicial authorities to reveal the motives behind these assaults.

Meanwhile, Hariri questioned the “suspicious concurrence of the two attacks.”

The Future Movement leader warned against “anyone justifying the crime or covering up for the criminals under any circumstances.”

Another Future official, MP Ahmad Fatfat, also commented on the incident, holding Hezbollah and the current government

responsible for any future strife that might strike Lebanon.

“The problem in the country is the presence of illegitimate weapons,” Fatfat told Voice of Lebanon Radio on Monday.

Disturbances rocked Beirut on Sunday evening following attacks against two Sunni Sheikhs in the Shiite Beirut neighborhood of Khandaq al-Ghamik and two Dar al-Fatwa clerics in the South Beirut suburb of Shiyah.

Following the incident, protesters in Sunni areas of Lebanon’s capital began cutting roads, causing tensions to rise in the city and army units to deploy to the scene.

The incidents have sparked a wave of condemnation from the majority of Lebanon’s political parties, with the Shiite Hezbollah and Amal Movement also expressing their firm rejection of these attacks.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/future-movement-leader-mp-saad-hariri-issues-statement-warning-of-risk-of-sectarian-incitement>

- **Suleiman: I will rescind Orthodox law a million times**

Lebanese President Michel Suleiman reiterated his firm objection to the adoption of the sectarian-based Orthodox draft for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

“I have announced that I will repeal the Orthodox law... and I will revoke it a million times after it is referred [to parliament] for signing,” Suleiman wrote on Monday on his Twitter account.

The head of state also tackled concerns over the postponement of the elections, saying that there is still time for the country’s political parties to reach a consensus on a new electoral proposal.

“I do not accept talks on delaying the elections. We cannot think of that, because there is still time for a new law [to be agreed on],” Suleiman said in a different tweet.

The president has expressed fierce criticism of the Orthodox law, which calls for proportional voting along sectarian lines. Suleiman claims, along with Prime Minister Najib Miqati, the Future

Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party and independent March 14 Christians, that this draft would lead to sectarian divisions within the country.

Earlier this month, Suleiman and Prime Minister Najib Miqati signed a decree to hold the elections on June 9, a move that would have the elections take place according to the current 1960 law if the country’s political parties fail to reach a consensus on a new electoral draft.

This decision sparked angry responses from the March 8 coalition, who refuse to contest an election under the 1960 electoral law and advocate for the adoption of the Orthodox proposal, which was approved by the joint parliamentary commissions in February.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonews/suleiman-i-will-rescind-orthodox-law-a-million-times>

- **Suleiman won’t allow adoption of sectarian electoral law**

Lebanon’s President Michel Suleiman reiterated his refusal of the Orthodox electoral proposal as an alternative to the

current 1960 law for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

“I will not accept the [adoption] of a sectarian electoral law during my term,” Suleiman said on Sunday on his Twitter account.

The head of state went on to say that “no Lebanese president would accept the state imposing its opinion on the electoral law.”

Suleiman explained in another tweet that the new electoral draft should be a “modern” law that would respect the Taif Accord, the negotiated settlement that brought an end to Lebanon’s 15 year civil war.

The president has previously voiced his objection to the sectarian-based Orthodox law, which was endorsed by Lebanon’s four major Christian parties and approved by the joint parliamentary commissions in February.

Suleiman, along with Prime Minister Najib Miqati, signed a decree to hold the elections on June 9, a move that would have the elections held according to the

current 1960 law if the country’s political parties fail to reach a consensus on a new electoral draft.

This decision sparked angry responses from the March 8 coalition, who refuse to contest an election under the 1960 electoral law and advocate for the adoption of the Orthodox law, which proposes proportional representation and voting along sectarian lines. However, the Orthodox law was met with vocal opposition and claims that it would lead to sectarian divisions within the country.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonews/suleiman-wont-allow-adoption-of-sectarian-electoral-law>

6. SYRIA

• Syria opposition meets in Turkey to elect prime minister

Syria's opposition on Monday opened a meeting in Istanbul to choose a rebel prime minister to head an interim government for large swathes of territory freed from regime control.

The meeting brought together members of the opposition Syrian National

Coalition, which is recognized by dozens of countries and organizations as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

It comes two years into a war that has divided the population and left 70,000 people dead.

Coalition members have warned there is no guarantee the group will reach a consensus at this meeting. Several previous attempts at setting up an interim government have been postponed.

The vote by 73 coalition members for a prime minister is due to take place Monday or Tuesday.

A former agriculture minister, an economist and a communications executive lead the race in a meeting that could change the course of Syria's conflict, which has forced more than 1.1 million people out of their country.

The rebel premier's first task would be to appoint a new government, which would be based inside Syria. The premier's choice would have to go before another coalition vote.

While it would boost the opposition's credibility, a rebel government could reduce chances of dialogue with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/afp-syria-opposition-meets-in-turkey-to-elect-prime-minister>

- **Syrian rebels seize arms depots in Aleppo**

Syrian rebels have seized several weapons depots in the village of Khan Toman in Aleppo province after days of fierce clashes, a military source told AFP on Sunday.

"Opposition fighters gained control over weapons and ammunition stores in the village of Khan Toman in southern Aleppo province on Saturday after fierce fighting that went on for more than three days," the source said.

He said the stores contained "a small number of ammunition boxes remaining after the main stock was transferred over a period of more than four months."

But activists said the opposition had taken control of "huge reserves," and video

posted online showed fighters examining dozens of crates containing weapons and ammunition inside one warehouse.

"These are spoils from [Syrian President] Bashar al-Assad," the person filming the warehouse says, as fighters move from crate to crate, urging the camera to film the weapons.

"Rockets, film these rockets," they say. "These are 107-mm caliber, made in Iran," they add. "These are the rockets that Bashar al-Assad was hitting us with."

The video says the capture of the depots was led by the Martyrs of Syria and the Hittin Brigades of the rebel Free Syrian Army.

The capture of the arms depots was confirmed by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights watchdog, which also reported "heavy fighting between regime forces and rebel fighters in the area of Khan Toman" on Sunday.

The Observatory said most of the warehouses were under the control of Islamist fighters, adding that weapons captured included Grad rockets, mortar

and tank shells and hand grenades, as well as three tanks and several military vehicles.

In Aleppo, it said, clashes erupted between Islamist fighters belonging to an Islamic court body in the city and members of the rival opposition brigade in the Sakhur neighborhood.

"Three civilians were killed, along with four members of the court's police and a judge for the court," the group said, adding that the clashes erupted when members of the body tried to arrest a member of the rival brigade.

The dead included the head of the body's police force, the Observatory said, a Syrian who fought in Iraq and was imprisoned there.

Elsewhere, pro-regime militants battled Bedouin and opposition fighters in the village of Dama in southern Sweidah.

"The clashes lasted several hours and killed at least three members of the [pro-regime] Popular Committees," the Observatory said, adding that eight

Bedouin and opposition fighters were also killed.

In Damascus, regime forces were shelling the southern district of Al-Hajar al-Aswad, the group said, adding that fighting continued in the northern Barzeh neighborhood, which residents began fleeing a day earlier under heavy fire.

The Observatory said at least 96 people had been killed throughout the country, according to a preliminary toll for Sunday.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/syrian-rebels-seize-arms-depots-in-aleppo>

- **Syrian opposition to choose rebel PM**

A former agriculture minister and an economist are leading candidates to be named Syria's first rebel prime minister when the opposition Syrian National Coalition meets to vote in Turkey this week.

The two men are among around 10 opposition figures Coalition members are expected to consider during their gathering in Istanbul on March 18 and 19.

The list includes virtual unknowns, as well as some prominent members of the opposition to President Bashar al-Assad's regime, with former agriculture minister Asaad Mustapha and economist Osama Kadi believed to be leading the pack.

In moving to select a rebel premier, who will choose a cabinet to be approved by the Coalition, the opposition is hoping to show it can administer large swathes of captured territory where there is now a power vacuum.

"There is a real need in the liberated areas for better administration of daily life," Damascus-based activist Matar Ismail told AFP.

"There should be a civilian authority that acts as an alternative power to the Assad government."

Opposition members said they wanted a good administrator with long-standing ties to the uprising, although nations backing the rebels, including Qatar and Saudi Arabia, are also likely to influence the choice.

"The prime minister must be a man who is completely with the revolution, and it is better that it be someone who was in Syria until recently, not someone who has lived abroad for a long time," opposition figure Haytham al-Maleh said.

"The next prime minister won't be chosen on the basis of whose name is most circulated in the media, but on the basis of who is best able to lead a government that takes care of the Syrian people and addresses their most pressing needs," added Ahmed Ramadan, a member of the Syrian National Coalition.

Kadi, born in Aleppo in 1968, is founder of the Syrian Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in Washington and favored for his technocratic background.

Mustapha, born in Idlib in 1947, brings experience as a minister under Syria's former president Hafez al-Assad for eight years.

"If what's wanted is a technocrat then perhaps Osama Kadi will win. And if the choice is based on who has experience and is the most capable politically, it will be Asaad Mustapha," Ramadan told AFP.

"The latter has good experience... and he has been close to the revolution from its beginning and is respected."

At least one potential candidate, Christian dissident Michel Kilo, has already made clear he will not be standing, and neither former Syrian National Council head Burhan Ghalioun nor defected ex-premier Riad Hijab appear on the current list.

Ramadan said the Coalition was expected to hold an initial vote, followed by a run-off between the top two candidates.

"It would be good if there is consensus on one name, but if not it will be decided in a democratic fashion."

The decision to name a prime minister and form an interim government is opposed by some opposition figures, who favor the creation of an executive body with limited powers to administer rebel-held territory.

Council members speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity said those opposed to creating an interim government want dialogue with the regime and the formation of a

government composed of regime and opposition members.

That is believed to be Washington's preference, although Turkey and much of the Arab League favor an interim government.

For opposition supporters on the ground, the vote is an important opportunity to create a real alternative to the Assad government.

"An interim government will also bring the exiled opposition into direct contact with the people. So even if we haven't elected them, we can hold them accountable for their errors. Overall, I am hopeful," Ismail said.

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/newsyriala-testnews/syrian-opposition-to-choose-rebel-pm>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **South Yemen radicals stage strike in Aden, call protests**

Tribes in Southern of Yemen staged a strike in the city of Aden to protest the

national dialogue sponsored by President Ali Salem Al-Baid

Hardline southern separatists staged a general strike in the port city of Aden on Sunday and called for protests later in the day against a national dialogue that they are boycotting, activists said.

A six-hour general strike, mostly in schools and universities across Aden, paralysed the capital of the formerly independent South Yemen.

Activists said thousands of protesters are expected to gather later in the evening at a rally organised by radical factions of the separatist Southern Movement against the UN-backed national dialogue which is to begin on Monday in Sanaa and is to last for six months.

Qassem Askar, a leader of a hardline faction in the Southern Movement said that his group is mobilising the street to "express our rejection to the national dialogue in Sanaa, as some are trying to lure the people away from their real cause" -- independence of the south.

The talks, originally scheduled to start in mid-November, were delayed mainly due to the refusal of factions in the Southern Movement -- campaigning for autonomy or secession for the region -- to join the dialogue.

The dialogue aims to draft a new constitution and prepare for general elections in February 2014 after a two-year transition led by President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi.

The dialogue should take place under a deal that eased former strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh out of office after an 11-month uprising against his 33-year rule.

Most factions have finally agreed to take part after months of negotiations and under UN pressure.

But the movement's hardliners led by South Yemen's former president Ali Salem al-Baid have insisted that negotiations be held between two independent states in the north and south.

"It is a conspiracy against us by the international and regional community," said Askar, who belongs to Baid's faction.

"Several people have not been informed that they were appointed to represent southerners in the talks and some have withdrawn. Others representing southerners are of northern origins," he told AFP.

After North and South Yemen united in 1990, the south broke away in 1994. The secession triggered a short-lived civil war that ended with the region being overrun by northern troops.

In 2007, the Southern Movement emerged as a social protest movement of retired officials and soldiers. But it has gradually grown more radical in its demands.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/67087/World/Region/South-Yemen-radicals-stage-strike-in-Aden,-call-pr.aspx>

- **Yemenis launch tough talks on national reconciliation**

Representatives of Yemen's various political groups gather for talks aiming to draft a new constitution and prepare for general elections in February 2014

AFP , Monday 18 Mar 2013

Yemen, the only country where an Arab Spring revolt led to a negotiated settlement, on Monday launches a UN-backed national dialogue aimed at drawing the state's divisive players towards a reconciliation.

The talks are being boycotted by hardline southern factions who staged a general strike and protests in the port city of Aden on Sunday against the dialogue initiative.

The difficult talks, scheduled to run six months, bring together 565 representatives of Yemen's various political groups -- from secessionists in the south to Zaidi Shiite rebels in the north, in addition to civil society representatives.

They aim to draft a new constitution and prepare for general elections in February 2014, after a two-year transition led by President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi.

The dialogue should take place as per the UN-brokered deal that eased former strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh out of office following an 11-month uprising against his 33-year rule.

The talks, originally scheduled to start in mid-November, were delayed mainly due to the refusal of factions in the Southern Movement -- campaigning for autonomy or secession for the formerly independent south -- to join the talks.

Most factions have finally agreed to take part after months of negotiations and under UN pressure.

But the movement's hardliners led by South Yemen's former president Ali Salem al-Baid have dug in their heels, insisting instead on negotiations between two independent states in the north and south.

On Sunday, thousands of their supporters protested against the national dialogue, demanding that their region be seceded from the north.

Protesters carrying placards saying, "No dialogue under occupation!, Independence is our choice!" demonstrated in the port city of Aden waving flags of the formerly independent South Yemen which was united with the north in 1990.

"We are here by the thousands to reject the dialogue as it is an issue of northerners and those southerners who are involved in it do not represent the people," Khaled Junaidi, an activist told AFP.

The hardliners also held a six-hour general strike in Aden, capital of the formerly independent south.

Several anti-dialogue slogans and calls for the secession of the south were smeared on walls of many buildings, while flags of the former South Yemen were displayed in parts of the city.

On February 15, the United Nations voiced support for the national dialogue and threatened sanctions against any party impeding the talks, mainly referring to Saleh and Baid.

Despite his ouster, Saleh remains head of the formerly ruling General People's Congress Party (GPC).

But a source from the dialogue's preparatory committee told AFP that he will not represent his party at the talks, in

which it has been granted the lion's share of seats with 112 representatives.

In addition to the southern question, Zaidi Shiite rebels, who have mounted repeated uprisings in the far north since 2004, have clashed with Sunni Salafists in northern Yemen. They are both taking part in the dialogue.

But influential tribal chief Hamid al-Ahmar, who heads the powerful Sunni Islamist Al-Islah (reform) Party, will not represent his party at the conference in protest against the Zaidis being handed most seats representing the northern Saada province, organisers said.

The Southern Movement is represented at the talks by 85 seats while the Zaidi rebels have 35 representatives.

<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/67125/World/Region/Yemenis-launch-tough-talks-on-national-reconciliat.aspx>

- **Eight activists freed from Oman prison**

Muscat- Eight activists, granted bail by the Appeal Court during the retrial ordered by

the Supreme Court, were reunited with their families after release from high security Central Prison in Sumayil on Sunday. Writer and human rights activist, Saeed Al Hashmi, lawyer-activist Basma Al Kiyumi, media person Baasma Rajhi, along with Mukhtar Al Hinai, Nasser Al Ghilani, Badar Al Jabri, Mohammed Al Jamoudi and Abdulla Al Ghilani were released hours after the Court passed the bail order on Sunday and adjourned hearing to March 24. The Court will hear the defence arguments at the next hearing and lawyers are likely to cite example of recent case of demonstrations and protests outside the Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM).

The authorities had arrested about 49 for staging protests for two days outside the ROHM on March 7 and 8. They were protesting against a Muslim band member of American Jazz pianist Jason Moran for reciting verses of Al Fatiha during the performance on February 28. However, all were released without charges after written undertaking not to repeat their act. "The Opera case will surely have an impact on the case of wrongful gathering against 11," Khalfan Al Badwawi, who is also facing charges in court for cyber law

violations, told Gulf News before he was detained again last weekend. He added that both the cases were similar as people had gathered at a public place to express their opinion. According to some activists, Al Badwawi was warned on telephone not to express his opinion about any arrests made by security forces after he campaigned for release of 49 arrested outside the Opera House. Habiba Al Hinai, whose detention with two others had prompted activists to court arrest after demonstrating in Qurum in May 2012, also reckons that there's not much difference in two incidents of peaceful demonstrations. Yaqoub Al Harthi, a lawyer for activists, informed Gulf News that the facts may be similar in nature for both the cases but when it comes to applying the law there could be different interpretations. "The judges will not compare two cases but look at the case in their court," he added. Tariq Al Sabahi, husband of lawyer activist Al Kiyumi, was delighted for the time being that his wife was free on bail. "Yes it is upsetting that two different yardsticks are applied for similar cases of wrongful gathering at a public places," he told Gulf News from Cairo where he is attending a human rights training course along with some

other Omani activists. Khawla Al Hashmi, wife of writer and human rights activist Saeed Al Hashmi, pointed out that the demonstration by a crowd outside the Opera House was not the first since the one in May last year when her husband was charged with 10 others.

“There have been other protests but charges were not pressed in any case,” she informed Gulf News while rejoicing the home coming of her husband, who was released on bail on Sunday. She said that even in the on-going case, 26 were arrested initially but some were released after they gave written assurances of not taking part in similar demonstrations. “My husband was not given that opportunity of singing any assurances,” claims Al Hashmi’s wife. “Yes we are upset that two similar cases are not treated equally,” she reiterated.

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/oman/eight-activists-freed-from-oman-prison-1.1159614>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• US soldier charged with killing Afghans to undergo medical mental review

Press TV

March 17, 2013

A US soldier charged with murdering 16 civilians near his army post in Afghanistan is to undergo a medical review of his mental state at the time of the killings.

Robert Bales, 39, will undergo a “sanity board,” to be conducted by three doctors at the joint Base Lewis-McChord in the US state of Washington, a US army spokesman said.

The examination, which is meant to determine if he is fit to stand trial, will begin on Sunday and completed by May 1.

Bales is accused of gunning down villagers, mostly women and children, in two separate rampages in the Kandahar Province, last March.

Prosecutors say Bales has acted alone with “chilling premeditation,” and are seeking death penalty for him.

This comes as he admitted to the killings before a military court in the US, last November.

Bales is the only American soldier charged with the killings. However, witnesses and an Afghan fact-finding mission have said that at least 20 troops were involved in the slaughter.

Defense lawyers have not offered an alternative theory as to what actually took place last March. Instead, they have focused on Bales' mental condition.

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

- **US special forces likely to remain in Wardak province**

By GHANIZADA - 17 Mar 2013, 2:28 pm

Khaama Press

Afghan and U.S. officials are working on a compromise deal to allow American special forces to stay in a strategically key province near the capital in return for full Afghan control of a controversial jail, Reuters reported.

A top Afghan official quoted by Reuters said "There might be a compromise on Wardak when the Afghan side is given full control of Bagram prison, which would help President Karzai who views the issue as a matter of sovereignty."

The US special forces are still operating in Wardak province of Afghanistan who were due to leave the province about a week ago following president Hamid Karzai's decree to expel US special forces.

Karzai's decree had angered U.S. defense officials who worry their exit could allow insurgents to strengthen their presence the area and use it as a base to attack Kabul, only 25 km (15 miles) away.

On Saturday, the influential Ulema Council, whose members are appointed by President Karzai and represent all of the country's Islamic clerics, issued a threatening statement demanding the withdrawal from Wardak as well as a transfer of the American-controlled prison at Bagram to Afghan control.

Also on Saturday, 300 demonstrators from Wardak Province staged a noisy but peaceful demonstration calling for Mr.

Karzai's order to be obeyed. Some were apparently relatives of people who disappeared in raids by Afghans who work alongside the Americans in Wardak, and they carried photographs of nine people who had disappeared after one of the night operations.

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

- **Afghan clerics warn US over Bagram prison**

Press TV

March 17, 2013

Afghanistan's leading religious body has called on the United States to hand over the notorious Bagram prison to the Afghan government.

The government-funded National Ulema Council said in a statement issued on Saturday that if Washington failed to hand over the Bagram prison, also called the Parwan Detention Facility, US troops in the country would be treated as occupiers and could face consequences.

"If the Americans do not act on their promises (to hand over Bagram)... then

that means occupation and they might like to see the reaction to that," it said.

In addition, the council stated that President Hamid Karzai's recent remarks against the United States were "the true voice of the Muslim people of Afghanistan".

Last week, Karzai accused the US of acting in cahoots with the Taliban to justify the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan.

Since March 2012, when Washington and Kabul reached an agreement to fully hand over the Bagram prison to the Afghan government, more than 3,000 detainees have either been handed over to the Afghan authorities or released.

In November 2012, Karzai ordered Afghan forces to take control of the prison and accused US officials of failing to fully comply with the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding on Detentions.

On March 9, the US canceled a ceremony where the US military was to hand over full control of the prison to Kabul.

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

- **Karzai agrees with U.S. request to transfer Bagram jail within week**

KABUL, March 17 (Xinhua) -- Afghan President Hamid Karzai has agreed with U.S. new proposal to hand over Bagram prison to Afghan government within week, a statement released by Presidential Palace here said.

The agreement has taken place in the wake of inflammatory remarks by President Karzai last week and frequent delay of transferring the notorious detention center by the U.S. military.

"In a telephone conversation with President Karzai, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel asked for a week time for a complete transfer of the Bagram Prison to Afghanistan sovereignty," the statement released Saturday night said.

"President Karzai agreed with the new time request and reminded Secretary Hagel that the transfer has been delayed several times in the past and that this time the handover should take place," the statement emphasized.

The transferring of Bagram prison in Bagram airbase, the main U. S. military bastion 50 km north of Kabul was scheduled to be handed over to Afghan government on March 9 during Hagel's first tour to Afghanistan but the program was cancelled which prompted Afghan president to lash out.

Frequent delay in handing over the Bagram prison where more than 2,000 suspected Taliban and al-Qaida operatives have been held was a source of tension between Kabul and its main ally Washington.

President Karzai has also announced to set free the innocent inmates after taking over the control of Bagram prison from American forces; while the U.S. military leadership according to media reports is reluctant to set free those detainees whom the U. S. commanders describe as very dangerous.

Earlier, President Karzai in a similar demand on February 24 had accused the U.S. military of harassing and torturing civilians in the central Wardak province and asked Defense Ministry to facilitate their withdrawal within two weeks from

the restive province, an order has yet to be implemented.

According to local newspapers, the ordinary Afghans and Ulema or religious scholars have shown their support to President Karzai's demand.

"Afghanistan's Ulema Council in a statement released on Saturday said that if the U.S. military does not hand over Bagram prison to Afghan control and withdraw from Wardak province, its continued presence will be regarded as an 'occupation' of Afghanistan," an English newspaper the Daily Outlook writes.

In a related development the Daily Outlook writes that, "More than 500 people staged a demonstration in Kabul on Saturday calling upon U.S. forces in Wardak's provincial capital Maidan Shahr to leave as directed by President Hamid Karzai."

Meantime, another newspaper the Daily Mandegar in its editorial on Sunday wrote that the "president has not achieved anything from its inflammatory statement and neither Taliban nor Pakistan has been satisfied of his anti-U.S. remarks."

It also says that President Karzai noted that his remarks with regard to U.S. had been misinterpreted.

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

- **Haqqani leader arrested in eastern Afghanistan**

Press TV

March 17, 2013

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) says a key leader of the Haqqani militant group has been arrested in Afghanistan's mountainous eastern province of Khost.

"An Afghan and coalition security force arrested a Haqqani (network) leader during an operation in Musa Khel district, Khost province, today," ISAF said in a statement issued on Saturday.

"The leader is accused of having operational control over multiple extremist cells and has personally led fighters in attacks against Afghan and coalition forces," it added.

The Pakistan-based Haqqani network has conducted many attacks on US-led forces in eastern Afghanistan and the capital Kabul.

Washington has often pressed Pakistan to take on the Haqqani network, the Afghan group fighting Western occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Pakistan says its forces are too stretched battling its own militants and cannot chase members of the Haqqani network in the semi-autonomous North Waziristan region, bordering Afghanistan.

On Friday, Afghan security officials said they had defused a massive truck bomb in Kabul, the biggest of its kind discovered in the war-torn country.

The National Directorate of Security (NDS) said it found nearly eight tons of explosives, wired and ready for detonation, hidden in cement bags in a truck, a trademark method of the Haqqani network.

"This truck bomb could have destroyed an area around 1.5 km (in radius). Now can you imagine that what kind of catastrophe

this would be?" NDS spokesman Shafiqullah Tahiri told a news conference.

Five suspected bombers were killed and two others arrested during a pre-dawn raid by security forces on Wednesday.

The US-led war in Afghanistan began in 2001. The offensive removed the Taliban from power, but insecurity continues to rise across Afghanistan, despite the presence of about 100,000 US-led troops.

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

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

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