

Report# 103

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Fertile Crescent

Aisha Rehman

From 15th-22nd January 2009

Presentation: 27th January, 2010

Outline

Summary

Egypt

Political front:

- KEFAYA COORDINATOR RETAINS SEAT FOR ANOTHER YEAR
- EX-IAEA CHIEF INJECTS LIFE INTO EGYPT'S POLITICS
- NEW MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD SUPREME GUIDE TO BE ANNOUNCED TODAY
- MB ELECTS NEW SUPREME GUIDE
- NEW BROTHERHOOD SECRETARY-GENERAL A CONSERVATIVE

Geo strategic front:

- EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DELEGATION TO VISIT GAZA
- ATTACK ON EGYPT COPTS SHOWS 'INTOLERANCE', SAYS US OFFICIAL
- TENSE RELATIONS WITH EGYPT THREATEN HAMAS'S GAZA LIFELINE
- INDONESIA, LEBANESE PROTEST EGYPT'S GAZA WALL
- ATTACK ON EGYPT COPTS SHOWS 'INTOLERANCE', SAYS US OFFICIAL
- ISRAEL 'COLLECTIVELY PUNISHING' GAZA, SAYS AMNESTY
- US ENVOY DISCUSSES MIDEAST PEACE IN SYRIA, LEBANON
- REPORTS THAT HAMAS CHIEF TO COME TO EGYPT TO APOLOGIZE FOR SOLDIER DEATH

Economic front:

- EGYPT MAY STALL PROPERTY TAX LAW
- HIGH FOOD IMPORTS WILL WEIGH ON EGYPT'S ECONOMY: WORLD BANK

Social front:

- ANTIQUITIES PROTECTION DRAFT LAW CONTINUES TO IGNITE DEBATES AT PA
- HUMAN RIGHTS NGO CALLS FOR QENA GOVERNOR'S RESIGNATION
- EGYPT TO SEND AID TO HAITI
- EGYPT FLOODS CLAIM 15 LIVES UNTIL NOW
- FOUR MORE SWINE FLU DEATH BRINGS TOTAL TO 228 IN EGYPT

- EGYPT SAYS COPTIC KILLINGS WERE CRIMINAL, NOT SECTARIAN - FOCUS
- TRIAL OF COPTIC MAN ACCUSED OF RAPE POSTPONED
- US BAN ON TARIQ RAMADAN OTHER MUSLIM SCHOLAR CRITICAL OF US POLICY LIFTED
- VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN CLAIMS 301 LIVES IN 2009, SAYS REPORT

Iraq

Political front:

- Iraqi Expats To Cast Votes In 14 Countries
- Banned candidates can appeal to a special seven-judge panel.

Geo strategic front

- U.S. cannot solve Iraq's problems, senior Kurdish official says

Economic front:

- Iraq Signs Final Oilfield Contract With Italian Company
- Iraqi Kurds accept most government conditions for exporting their oil
- Iraq Setting Up Economic Zones In Border Regions

Social front:

- Iraq Parliamentary Campaign Raises Fears Of Sectarian Strife
- Several attacks in Mosul late last year targeted Christian churches.

Lebanon

Political front:

- LADE warns against insufficient electoral reform
- Hariri commemoration litmus test for March 14
- Cabinet to debate Baroud's proposal on municipal polls

Geo strategic front:

- Palestinian group refuses to disarm outside Lebanon camps
- US Mideast envoy Mitchell expected in Beirut
- Lebanese protest Egypt's Gaza barrier
- Iranian dissident Masoud Ali Mohammadi 'killed by Hezbollah member'
- Lebanon's Jumblatt: Syria reconciliation nearly complete
- Hezbollah says Arab leaders bow to U.S. pressure
- Israeli army crosses into Lebanon: state media
- Sarkozy concerned with just peace for Lebanon - Hariri
- France to help boost number of green spaces, improve lighting in Beirut
- Iraq's Hakim arrives in Beirut for talks with Lebanese officials

Economic front:

- Rising property-sale indicators in Lebanon buck global trend

Social front:

- Lebanese delegation heads to Haiti with aid
- Lebanon says 2009 was best on record for tourism

Palestine

Political front

- Fatah al-Islam 'plotting attack' against judges

Geo strategic front

- Palestinians Want U.S. to Negotiate in its Place
- Abbas: USA Needs to Resolve Decades of Conflict
- Hamas denies report on readiness to accept Israel's right to exist
- UAE Source: Israel Attendance of Conference Does Not Mean Start of Diplomatic Ties
- Fatah: Abbas won't attend Kuwait talks until Hamas signs document

Social front:

- UN 'Deeply Concerned' About Health System in Gaza
- Israel Withholding NGO Employees' Work Permits
- Palestinian Families Evacuated From Haiti
- PNA: Mitchell to Push for Settlement Halt in East Jerusalem

Economic front:

- EU official to PNA: Financial support won't continue forever

Summary

Egypt

Political front:

The Kefaya Movement for Change's coordinating committee renewed incumbent coordinator Abdel Halim Qandil's term for one more year amid tension between the opposition movement's leaders. A meeting at the movement's headquarters saw clashes between members of the coordinating committee, where 25 members voted for retaining Qandil's position for another year, while 20 members voted against it, highlighting the need for elections. Before the vote, Kefaya's leaders disagreed over who has the right to vote among the committee's 67 members.

The Muslim Brotherhood elected a new supreme guide, Mohamed Badae' Sami, to head the group's Guidance Office, which is their highest authority. Badae' will be succeeding Mohamed Mahdi Akef. In his first statement as Supreme Guide, Badae' said that the Muslim Brotherhood will work on portraying the true image of Islam. The newly-elected Supreme Guide Muslim of the Muslim Brotherhood Mohamed Badae', appointed Mahmoud Hussein as the new secretary general to replace the former. Hussein, 62, is a professor at the Faculty of Engineering in Assuit. In 2006, he was the head of the Muslim Brotherhood's Administrative office in Assuit. He was then appointed to the Guidance

Office to replace a member who had died. Hussein was then assigned to supervise the group's activities in South Sinai. He was elected to the Guidance Office in the elections that took place in December 2009. **Geo strategic front:** Fifty European MPs from 12 different countries are scheduled to visit the Gaza Strip via the Rafah border crossing in a trip organized by the European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza. The delegation, after having criticized the foreign ministry for procrastinating the coordination of the visit, finally announced that they had received approval from the ministry. The group is also due to meet with Egyptian officials as well as the Secretary-General of the Arab League Amr Moussa to discuss the situation in Gaza and the continued siege which has now extended into its third year.

A Christmas Eve attack in southern Egypt in which six Coptic Christians and a Muslim policeman were killed reveals an "atmosphere of intolerance," US Assistant Secretary for Human Rights Michael Posner said. The United States is "very concerned about the tragic events in Nagaa Hammadi," Posner told reporters in Cairo. "It's part of what we see as an atmosphere of intolerance."

More than 200 Indonesian Muslims protested in Jakarta against an underground wall being built to block a network of tunnels crossing Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile in Lebanon about 200 people took part in the protest near Egypt's embassy, accusing Egyptian authorities of acting like an agent of Israel. Crowds set fire to US and Israeli flags. **Economic front:** Although Egypt's GDP growth rate is expected to rise to 5.2 percent in 2010 and 6 percent by 2011, high food imports represent a significant burden on the economy, according to a recent World Bank report. The Global Economic Prospects 2010 report evaluates the economic climate post-financial crisis on the national, regional and global scale. Santiago Herrera, the lead economist for the World Bank in Egypt, commented on the country's food imports as a matter of food security. Attempts to boost Egyptian exports have long been incorporated into Egypt's trade strategy, with expanded trade relationships with the US, China, Russia and India planned or under implementation. A free trade agreement with Russia, for example, has been expected and should be implemented this year, according to the Ministry of Trade and Industry. But the slowdown in global trade during the crisis remains a concern. **Social front:** President Hosni Mubarak announced Egypt's plans to send medical and humanitarian supplies to Haiti, which was struck by a tragic earthquake last week.

Floods in several parts of Egypt have claimed the lives of 15 people in the past four days and left a trail of destroyed houses in its wake. In Aswan, 720 homeowners will be compensated with LE 25,000 each for the destruction of their homes. Homeowners in other governorates will be compensated with the same amount. Initially they were to be paid LE 15,000 but the amount was raised. Three-hundred and twenty of these homes were completely destroyed while the remaining 400 were partially damaged in the flooding.

One-hundred and twenty-nine women died due to crimes of violence in the second half of 2009, bringing the annual toll to 301 victims, according to a human rights report released. The report, published by the Land Center for Human Rights, referred to incidents of violence against women that have been published in local newspapers during the second half of 2009; it points to a campaign of abuse and violence against women that amounted to 256 crimes of violence, of which 129 were fatal. Reported incidents of abductions and sexual assault against women reached 33, three perpetrated by members of the family and

30 by members from the outside community. Eleven of the total claimed the victims' lives.

Iraq

Economic front: Iraqi Kurds say they would not mind if royalties of oil exports originating in their region are collected by the central government in Baghdad. However, they said they would only want the central government to use part of the proceeds to pay the foreign contractors who developed their fields. The concession may ease tension over sharing of oil royalties and allow Iraqi Kurds to use the national pipeline network for exports.

An Iraqi minister says the government plans to set up special economic zones near the borders of neighboring countries. Iraqi Industry Minister Fawzi al-Hariri told RFI the project will include building industrial projects and business parks, and that agreements have been reached to create special economic zones with Turkey, Iran, Syria, Jordan, and Kuwait. **Social front:** The list of nearly 500 candidates barred from running in Iraq's upcoming parliamentary poll has yet to be finalized, but it is already fanning sectarian tensions. Many Sunnis are among those banned last week by an Iraqi electoral committee from participating in the March 7 poll due to their purported ties to the banned Ba'ath Party. Disqualified candidates have the right to appeal and several have already done so ahead of the Committee for Integrity and Accountability's final ruling, expected on January 19. The ban highlights the alienation felt by many Sunnis going into the election, as well as the lingering resentment Shi'ite leaders harbor against those with ties to Saddam Hussein's former regime. That situation has led to fears that the tensions could spark sectarian violence like that seen before the last parliamentary elections, in 2005, which Sunni groups boycotted.

Lebanon

Political front: Failure to implement sufficient electoral reform ahead of municipal elections will raise tensions among voters, Lebanon's leading democracy campaign group said. The executive director of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), said that NGOs were seeking electoral reform "in order to achieve the highest levels of citizen participation, the right representation as well as development on the local and national levels alike." **Geo strategic front:** The head of a Syrian-backed Palestinian militia in Lebanon has said Palestinians will never be disarmed inside or outside of refugee camps in Lebanon, newspapers reported. "We categorically reject the disarmament of Palestinians outside refugee camps in Lebanon," said Fatah al-Intifada chief Said Mussa, who is also known as "Abu Mussa." "This is solely a Palestinian decision and not in the hands of any other power," he told reporters in the southern port city of Sidon after a meeting with the mayor. The statement came less than a month after Prime Minister Saad Hariri's landmark visit to Syria, after which Hariri said he and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had discussed the arms of Palestinian groups outside camps in Lebanon. **Economic front:** Figures released by the Directorate of Real Estate indicate that the number of property-sale transactions in Lebanon and the value of such transactions witnessed an increase in 2009, bucking the trend of dwindling real-estate activity across the MENA region and the world at large. The figures were released by Bank Audi's Weekly Monitor Monday. But it added that during the next two quarters, indicators of the sector displayed signs of weakening, which could to a certain extent be the result of the high base recorded in the same period of 2008. **Social front:** The official

Lebanese delegation carrying aid to the Lebanese diaspora in Haiti was to leave the Rafik Hariri International Airport with tons of medical and other aid. The delegation is to follow up on the situation of the Lebanese in Haiti after the earthquake that hit the Caribbean country last week. It will carry 35 tons of non-monetary aid, including 29 tons of tents, three tons of powdered milk and three tons of various medications.

The Tourism Ministry says about 1.9 million tourists came to Lebanon in 2009, the highest number of visitors to come to the mountainous Arab nation ever. The new figure exceeds those from the time before Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war, when Beirut was dubbed the "Paris of the Middle East." Figures released this week show that 1,851,081 tourists visited Lebanon in 2009, a 39 percent increase from the previous year.

Palestine

Political front: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has proposed that the Obama administration negotiate the final borders of a Palestinian state with Israel, a Palestinian official said, as a U.S. envoy headed to the region for another attempt to restart Mideast peace talks. Such a proxy arrangement could provide a way around the current deadlock over reviving Israeli-Palestinian talks, which broke off more than a year ago. Abbas says he won't return to the table without a complete Israeli settlement freeze, something Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has refused to do.

Hamas on denied a report in an Israeli newspaper that the Resistance Movement is ready to accept Israel's right to exist. The JPost added that Hamas' senior representative in the West Bank and speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, stated also that Hamas is ready to nullify its charter calling for the destruction of Israel. According to the report, he made the comments during a meeting with British tycoon David Abrahams in Hebron.

Twelve members of three Palestinian families in Haiti were evacuated from the earthquake stricken country with the assistance of the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The family members were taken to Jordan by a Jordanian aircraft, where they were received by members of staff from the Palestinian Embassy.

A European Union official said that the EU will continue to sustain financially Palestinian efforts to build their independent state, but cautioned that this support would not continue without clear progress in the peace process with Israel. EU representative to the Palestinian Authority Christian Burger made the comment after signing an agreement with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in Ramallah to provide the PNA with more than 158 million euros (\$220 million) in financial aid. He said that the EU will continue to support Palestinian state- building efforts if there are clear signs that this money will lead to that goal "Support can only be sustained if there is a clear indication that a Palestinian state will be established in a foreseeable future," Burger said.

Detailed news Egypt

Political front:

KEFAYA COORDINATOR RETAINS SEAT FOR ANOTHER YEAR

Special to Daily News Egypt: January 14, 2010: The Kefaya Movement for Change's coordinating committee renewed Wednesday incumbent coordinator Abdel Halim Qandil's term for one more year amid tension between the opposition movement's leaders. A meeting at the movement's headquarters saw clashes between members of the coordinating committee, where 25 members voted for retaining Qandil's position for another year, while 20 members voted against it, highlighting the need for elections. Before the vote, Kefaya's leaders disagreed over who has the right to vote among the committee's 67 members. A group led by Qandil saw that the right to vote should be exclusive to active members, while another group led by assistant coordinator and co-founder George Ishaq saw that all the committee's members have the right to vote. Eventually the dispute was settled by allowing the 45 present members to vote, on condition that the committee filters all the members that are not actively participating in its events and meetings. Kefaya doesn't have executive bylaws outlining rules for electing the general coordinator, but a custom among its leaders that turned into a tradition allows the committee's members to choose the man for the position. George Ishaq was the movement's first general coordinator when it was established in 2004, followed by Abdel Wahab El-Messiry, Abdel Gelil Moustafa and finally Qandil who took over in 2009. "The movement is in bad condition and the only solution is that we work together to form a collective leadership committee so that we don't leave decisions only in the hands of the general coordinator," he added. However, Qandil told Daily News Egypt that "some of the leaders, myself included, objected to allowing a committee member who hasn't actively participated in any of the movement's meetings in three years to vote." "During the meeting I suggested allowing the coordinating committee's members to vote provided that they attended at least one meeting during the past two years, and when my suggestion was turned down, they allowed all those present to vote," he added. Qandil explained that members of the Kefaya movement agreed to reevaluate the coordinating committee's membership, and replace the members who stopped participating with active members.

EX-IAEA CHIEF INJECTS LIFE INTO EGYPT'S POLITICS

Associated Press: January 15, 2010: The UN's former nuclear chief has yet to return home to his native Egypt after almost a quarter century monitoring the world's atomic programs, but the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize winner has already created the biggest political stir in his homeland in years by hinting at a new career in politics. Mohamed ElBaradei may one day regret plunging into Egypt's politics — where challenges to the regime have been few and swiftly dealt with — but his move has injected fresh hope into the country's stagnant political atmosphere. Egypt has been ruled for nearly 30 years by Hosni Mubarak, now 81, who appears to be trying to set up a political dynasty by grooming his son to succeed him. Respected throughout the world and untouched by the corruption tainting much of the current regime in Egypt, ElBaradei could well be the most credible opposition leader to emerge in this US-allied country in living memory. Except that the

chances of ElBaradei of even being allowed to run in the 2011 presidential race are slim, thanks to a series of constitutional amendments pushed through by the government in 2005 and 2007 that practically limit the candidacies to senior members of the ruling party or a few token, officially sanctioned, opposition parties. Even if he did run, he would be faced by a ruling party candidate backed by the government's vast resources and enjoying the support of the security agencies, the most powerful players in Egyptian elections. ElBaradei is not expected to return home from Vienna for another month, but in an open letter responding to a campaign by young Egyptians urging him to run for president, he said he would only run if there were guarantees that elections would be free, fully supervised by the judiciary and monitored by the international community. He also wants the constitution amended to remove restrictions on who is eligible to run. Egypt's authoritarian ruler of 28 years, Mubarak has not named a successor and never had a vice president since he took office in 1981. His son Gamal is the most dominant figure in the ruling National Democratic Party and is widely expected to succeed his father — something most Egyptians don't necessarily support. The uncertainty surrounding the succession, analysts say, poses a threat to stability of this close-US ally, given the growing popular discontent over high unemployment, rising prices, corruption and the stranglehold over the country by security agencies and a clique of regime-linked businessmen and politicians. It is against this potentially explosive backdrop that the announcement by the 67-year-old ElBaradei that he would enter politics has taken Egypt by storm, dominating TV talk shows, inspiring thousands of internet postings and making front pages. But some commentators say the soft-spoken ElBaradei could be of more use to Egypt if he did not seek the presidency and focused instead on creating a popular movement to press for reform. But whichever way he chooses, the ex-IAEA chief, who has law degrees from Cairo and New York, has already entered the ring and will face opponents who have in the past ruthlessly dealt with competition. That became clear soon after ElBaradei's open letter was published last month. His criticism of the Mubarak regime and his calls for reform drew an immediate rebuke from the government controlled press. In a series of articles, he was branded an American stooge, blamed for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and accused of knowing little about Egypt because of his long years abroad. ElBaradei need not look too far back to find examples of what the regime can do to its foes. Opposition leader Ayman Nour, Mubarak's main challenger in the 2005 presidential elections, was later jailed for nearly four years on forgery charges said by his supporters to be fabricated. Backed by emergency laws in force for nearly three decades, the regime frequently jails journalists, pro-reform activists and opposition politicians. It may not be easy for the regime to treat ElBaradei the same way given the respect he has earned for leading the International Atomic Energy Agency during difficult times. But the Mubarak regime is not known to pull any punches either. The momentum, however, is on ElBaradei's side. Some commentators say he could be the country's savior, delivering its 80 million people from what is widely seen as policies biased in favor of the rich and against the poor. Others say he could force Mubarak, or his successor, into introducing genuine reforms. Adel Hammouda, a prominent columnist and editor of the independent Al-Fagr weekly, said the attacks on ElBaradei in the government-controlled press suggest that the regime was running scared, but he also noted that ElBaradei's threat lies in his emphasis on reform rather than seeking power.

NEW MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD SUPREME GUIDE TO BE ANNOUNCED TODAY

Daily News Egypt: January 15, 2010: The new Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is to be announced at a press conference today. The new chairman will replace outgoing leader Mohamed Mahdi Akef and will have to preside over a schism within the group erupting from the fallout of the appointments of the new Guidance Office as well as the top post. Tension marred the appointments to the Guidance Office, creating a rift between the conservatives and reformists in the group, with the hardliners — led by the group's secretary general Mahmoud Ezzat — seeming to have won out in the end. Prominent reformists like Abdel-Moneim Aboul-Futouh were excluded from the new council and Deputy Supreme Guide Mohamed Habib seemed to have been frozen out of the entire process. Habib told Al-Shorouk newspaper that he had refused attempts to have him attend today's press conference and to pledge allegiance to the new Supreme Guide, stating that depending on how things continued he may even leave the Muslim Brotherhood group altogether. Habib had previously spoken out against not having been informed of the decision to appoint the new Guidance Office nor the Supreme Guide, which rendered the process unconstitutional, according to the group's charter. Habib could not be reached for comment Friday, nor could members of the new Guidance Office. The new leader was supposed to be announced before Jan. 13, but due to the continuing internal deliberations, the deadline for choosing the Supreme Guide was extended till Jan. 16. One of the few reformists to make it into the new Guidance Office, Essam El-Erian, had previously told Daily News Egypt, ""There are differences [in the MB], but they are not as pronounced as is made out in the media." Some members had argued that the previous Guidance Office did not have the mandate to select the new one because its term had already expired. The Muslim Brotherhood was formed in 1928 by Hassan El-Banna but was declared an illegal organization by the state in 1954, and remains so till this day. Brotherhood MPs, however, dominate one fifth of seats in the People's Assembly as they run as independents during legislative elections. Although an uneasy truce exists between the group and the state, crackdowns on group members are commonplace and arrests of both senior and junior members are prevalent.

MB ELECTS NEW SUPREME GUIDE

Daily News Egypt: January 17, 2010: The Muslim Brotherhood elected a new supreme guide, Mohamed Badea' Sami, to head the group's Guidance Office, which is their highest authority. Badea' will be succeeding Mohamed Mahdi Akef, who made the announcement at a press conference. In his first statement as Supreme Guide, Badea' said that the Muslim Brotherhood will work on portraying the true image of Islam. "The Islam of peace, moderation and tolerance [...] respects pluralism and cooperation on the good of humanity as a whole," he said. Badea' is a 66-year-old veterinary professor at Beni Suef University who has been an active member of the Muslim Brotherhood since he first joined the group as a member of the Mahalla Administrative Office in 1975. He has been a member of the Guidance Office since 1996 and a member of the International Guidance Office since 2007. In his last statement as Supreme Guide, Akef advised the Muslim Brotherhood to constantly reform and review their agenda, regulations and positions in order to develop. Badea' is known for his conservative views, and, according to expert on Islamic movements, Daa Rashwan from Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic

Studies, could lure the group away from political activism and instead focus on religious and social work. The government crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has intensified with the arrest of many of its members; which has affected their political presence. In addition, leaders of the group have been preoccupied lately with the Guidance Office elections. Analyst Khalil Al-Anani told BBC news that “the Brotherhood’s withdrawal from political life, coupled with the government’s continuing crackdown on Islamists, might leave a vacuum that more militant voices could fill in the future.” Electing Badae’ was the Guidance Office’s members’ first task since its election last month. Before the announcement was made, news reports speculated that the new Supreme Guide would either be Mohamed Habib, Mahmoud Ezzat, Gomaa Amin, Abdel Rahman Al Bar or Badae’. Habib, the deputy supreme guide, resigned from his post in the group in objection to the Guidance Office elections, from which he was left out. He previously told Egyptian daily Al-Shorouk that there was a split in the group between a camp that demands a more active role on Egypt’s political scene and another that wants to maintain the status quo. Others, including Habib and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, have called for more participation in mainstream politics which has become a contributing factor to their being sidelined, he said. The Muslim Brotherhood is officially banned, but enjoys a substantive parliamentary presence, its MPs run as independent candidates, as well as popular support.

NEW BROTHERHOOD SECRETARY-GENERAL A CONSERVATIVE

Daily News Egypt: January 21, 2010: The newly-elected Supreme Guide Muslim of the Muslim Brotherhood Mohamed Badae’, appointed Mahmoud Hussein as the new secretary general to replace the former Mahmoud Ezzat. Hussein, 62, is a professor at the Faculty of Engineering in Assuit. In 2006, he was the head of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Administrative office in Assuit. He was then appointed to the Guidance Office to replace a member who had died. Hussein was then assigned to supervise the group’s activities in South Sinai. He was elected to the Guidance Office in the elections that took place in December 2009. Electing Hussein was the Supreme Guide’s first task after his appointment earlier this week. In a press statement, Badae’ “extended his warmest wishes to Dr. Hussein praying to Allah that the road ahead be full of flourishing accomplishments for the movement in general and for Dr. Hussein in particular.” According to analysts, Hussein’s appointment reflects the group’s adamant movement towards conservatism; both Hussein and Badae’ are known for their staunch religious views. This could lure the group away from political activism and instead focus on religious and social work, explained expert on Islamic movements Diaa Rashwan from Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. The government crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has intensified with the arrest of many of its members, which has affected their political activity. In addition, leaders of the group have been preoccupied lately with the Guidance Office elections and electing a new Supreme Guide. Furthermore, there has been speculation that the recent movement through which new senior members of the banned group have been appointed has intentionally sidelined members who have called for more participation in mainstream politics, such as Mohamed Habib, former deputy supreme guide, and now Ezzat, both of whom enjoyed strong political influence. The changes come in a year of parliamentary elections. The

group now enjoys a substantive parliamentary presence after winning a record 88 seats in the 2005 elections, almost fifth of the seats in the People's Assembly.

Geo strategic front:

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DELEGATION TO VISIT GAZA

Daily News Egypt: January 14, 2010: Fifty European MPs from 12 different countries are scheduled to visit the Gaza Strip today via the Rafah border crossing in a trip organized by the European Campaign to End the Siege on Gaza. The delegation, after having criticized the foreign ministry for procrastinating the coordination of the visit, finally announced that they had received approval from the ministry. The delegation stated that they had contacted the foreign ministry two months ago in preparation for the visit. The group is also due to meet with Egyptian officials as well as the Secretary-General of the Arab League Amr Moussa to discuss the situation in Gaza and the continued siege which has now extended into its third year. Prior to the coordination, the delegation had criticized the foreign ministry, alluding in a statement to "Egypt's intention to hamper arrangements for this visit." The visit from the European parliamentary delegation comes after a tumultuous few weeks regarding events on the border with the Gaza Strip. **First** there was the construction of an underground steel wall by Egypt on the border to stem the tide of smuggling through underground tunnels that permeate the border. Then there was the trouble that erupted due to the visit of the Viva Palestina convoy headed for Gaza and led by British Respect MP George Galloway. A plethora of obstacles culminated in a clash between convoy members and security forces in Al-Arish. The convoy eventually entered Gaza on Jan. 6 but a Palestinian demonstration on the border resulted in the death of an Egyptian border guard, Ahmed Shaaban, and the injury of some 10 Palestinians. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said Wednesday that Shaaban was not killed by Hamas snipers, as Egypt had claimed, but was killed mistakenly by the Egyptian side who were aiming for two Palestinian teenagers near him. He cited the comments of the Ministry of Health representative in Northern Sinai Tarek Al-Mahalawy, who had said that Shaaban was killed by two shots received in the back. On Monday Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said Egypt knew the names of the snipers that killed Shaaban and would request from Hamas that they be arrested. Abu Zuhri, whose brother Yousef died in an Egyptian prison last year, expressed his astonishment with Aboul Gheit's comments, saying it was an attempt to flee responsibility and cover up the Egyptian attempts to fire at Palestinian youths.

ATTACK ON EGYPT COPTS SHOWS 'INTOLERANCE', SAYS US OFFICIAL

Agence France-Presse: January 15, 2010: A Christmas Eve attack in southern Egypt in which six Coptic Christians and a Muslim policeman were killed reveals an "atmosphere of intolerance," US Assistant Secretary for Human Rights Michael Posner said. The United States is "very concerned about the tragic events in Nagaa Hammadi," Posner told reporters in Cairo. "It's part of what we see as an atmosphere of intolerance." On Jan. 6, the eve of the Coptic Orthodox Christmas, three gunmen raked worshippers emerging from mass in Nagaa Hammadi with bullets, in the deadliest attack since 2000 when 20 Copts were killed in sectarian clashes. Reconciliation efforts between Christians and Muslims alone are not enough, Posner said. Following the attack, residents of Nagaa Hammadi were furious at what they called government attempts to hush up Egypt's

sectarian problem. Three people were arrested and charged with premeditated murder after the attack. But Posner said more information needed to come to light. Copts, who account for nearly 10 percent of Egypt's population of 80 million, are the Middle East's largest Christian community but complain of routine harassment and systematic discrimination and marginalization. Posner was on his first visit to Egypt in his capacity as Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, as part of a tour that also took him to Jordan and Israel. While he was openly critical of the human rights situation in Egypt, he insisted that democracy could not be imported. A report by 16 Egyptian human rights groups published in December described Egypt as a police state where citizens receive no protection from torture. Egypt has been operating under a state of emergency since the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat, which has been renewed repeatedly since then, despite protests from rights groups and regime opponents. The state of emergency allows for the detention of anyone who falls under the broad category of constituting "a danger to public security." US President Barack Obama has placed less emphasis on political reform in the region than his predecessor George W Bush. His administration's rhetoric has backed away from Bush's robust calls for Egypt to release dissidents and ensure fair elections.

TENSE RELATIONS WITH EGYPT THREATEN HAMAS'S GAZA LIFELINE

Agence France-Presse: January 15, 2010: The construction of a new underground wall and recent border clashes have frayed relations between Hamas and Egypt and could threaten the Islamist movement's main lifeline in Gaza, analysts say. Since Hamas seized power in Gaza in 2007 it has relied on smuggling tunnels under the border with Egypt to defy the Israeli blockade and its leaders have used frequent trips to Cairo to escape international isolation. But the group's refusal to sign a reconciliation agreement with its secular Fatah rivals or agree to a prisoner swap with Israel through Egyptian mediation now appear to be endangering relations. After years of largely ignoring the tunnel smuggling — which primarily brings in much-needed household goods but is also used by Hamas to import weapons and money —Egypt has begun building a massive underground wall. "From now on, Hamas is in a tight spot. It is under a full blockade, the tunnels used to smuggle funding from Iran will be shut down and the population will only have the bare minimum needed to survive," he adds. Until now Egypt has been Hamas' primary diplomatic intermediary and key to its plan to one day permanently reopen the Rafah border crossing, the only Gaza terminal not controlled by Israel. "Hamas realizes the pivotal role Egypt plays, and it wants more than just an opening of the crossing," says Naji Sharrab, a professor at Gaza's Al-Azhar University. Egypt has said Rafah can only be reopened after Hamas is reconciled with the Western-backed president Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah movement and has demanded it sign a reconciliation agreement already signed by the secular group. "We want Palestinian reconciliation because without stopping the internal fighting there will never be a Palestinian state," says Mohamed Bassiouni, a former Egyptian ambassador to Israel who is close to Cairo's talks with Hamas and with Israel. The diplomat warns, however, that Egypt is not willing to renegotiate the unity deal proposed last autumn. "The ball is in Hamas' court." If the new wall succeeds in closing off the tunnels it could pave the way for the easing of the closures and increased trade above ground. However, in the short term the construction of the barrier could backfire by spurring protests against Egypt in Gaza and the wider Arab

world. Last week an Egyptian soldier was shot dead when gunfire erupted along the border after a protest against the wall in which some 200 Palestinians hurled stones. Hamas described the incident "regrettable," despite having called for the protest. Sharrab doubts whether Egypt will completely shut down the tunnels and says Cairo's fear of instability in Gaza will prevent it from escalating tensions with Hamas. "Egypt knows it cannot close the Rafah crossing and the border completely despite this so-called wall," he says. "I think the two sides are determined to avoid tensions." The Israeli closures have largely failed to undermine Hamas because the anger they have fueled has been mainly directed at the Jewish state. Walid Mudallal, a professor at Gaza's Islamic University, believes something similar may happen to Egypt if it is seen helping to tighten the siege. "I don't think Hamas will be affected (by the wall) because it has the financing and the organization to face these limitations," he says.

INDONESIANS, LEBANESE PROTEST EGYPT'S GAZA WALL

Agencies: January 17, 2010: More than 200 Indonesian Muslims protested in Jakarta Sunday against an underground wall being built to block a network of tunnels crossing Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile in Lebanon about 200 people took part in the protest near Egypt's embassy, accusing Egyptian authorities of acting like an agent of Israel. Crowds set fire to US and Israeli flags. In Indonesia, demonstrators from the Voice of Palestine support group carried banners reading "Stop Building Steel Wall on Gaza" and chanted "Die America, Die Egypt" in front of the Egyptian embassy. After years of ignoring the tunnel smuggling — which is used to bypass Israeli sanctions — Egypt began building the wall after falling out with Hamas, which rules Gaza. The network, which Hamas has been accused of using to smuggle weapons into the territory, has withstood Israeli air strikes and Egyptian attempts to flood the tunnels with water and gas. Citing national security, Egypt is now building an underground iron wall in a bid to tighten its Sinai border with the restive Palestinian territory. The United States has voiced its support for the wall's construction, saying it will stop arms smuggling. Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, with 234 million people, is a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause. The Gaza barrier has angered many Arabs and Muslims. Egypt calls it a matter of national security. Hamas' exiled political leader, Khaled Mashaal, visited Beirut last week and urged Egypt to stop construction of the barrier, saying walls are built "between enemies, not brothers."—Agencies

ATTACK ON EGYPT COPTS SHOWS 'INTOLERANCE', SAYS US OFFICIAL

Agence France-Presse: January 15, 2010: A Christmas Eve attack in southern Egypt in which six Coptic Christians and a Muslim policeman were killed reveals an "atmosphere of intolerance," US Assistant Secretary for Human Rights Michael Posner said. The United States is "very concerned about the tragic events in Nagaa Hammadi," Posner told reporters in Cairo. "It's part of what we see as an atmosphere of intolerance." On Jan. 6, the eve of the Coptic Orthodox Christmas, three gunmen raked worshippers emerging from mass in Nagaa Hammadi with bullets, in the deadliest attack since 2000 when 20 Copts were killed in sectarian clashes. Reconciliation efforts between Christians and Muslims alone are not enough, Posner said. Following the attack, residents of Nagaa Hammadi were furious at what they called government attempts to hush up Egypt's sectarian problem. Three people were arrested and charged with premeditated murder

after the attack. But Posner said more information needed to come to light. Copts, who account for nearly 10 percent of Egypt's population of 80 million, are the Middle East's largest Christian community but complain of routine harassment and systematic discrimination and marginalization. Posner was on his first visit to Egypt in his capacity as Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, as part of a tour that also took him to Jordan and Israel. While he was openly critical of the human rights situation in Egypt, he insisted that democracy could not be imported. But "we know that in any society change occurs from within ... In Egypt we take our lead from what Egyptians are saying or doing. It's an Egyptian discussion," said Posner who met ministers, officials, NGOs and activists during his visit. A report by 16 Egyptian human rights groups published in December described Egypt as a police state where citizens receive no protection from torture. "The basic feature of human rights in Egypt today is the prevalence of a policy of exception in which those responsible for violations usually escape punishment amid a climate of impunity intentionally created and fostered for several decades," said the report. Egypt has been operating under a state of emergency since the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat, which has been renewed repeatedly since then, despite protests from rights groups and regime opponents. The state of emergency allows for the detention of anyone who falls under the broad category of constituting "a danger to public security." US President Barack Obama has placed less emphasis on political reform in the region than his predecessor George W Bush. His administration's rhetoric has backed away from Bush's robust calls for Egypt to release dissidents and ensure fair elections.

ISRAEL 'COLLECTIVELY PUNISHING' GAZA, SAYS AMNESTY

AFP: January 18, 2010: Amnesty International on Monday accused Israel of "collectively punishing" the population of Gaza with border closures tightened after the Islamist Hamas movement's 2007 takeover. The British-based rights group said the firing of rockets by Palestinian militants — which the Israeli military says has dropped by about 90 percent since its offensive in Gaza last year — did not justify the sanctions. Amnesty said Egypt was partly to blame because it only occasionally opens its Rafah crossing with the Gaza Strip — the only terminal bypassing Israel. It also faulted Cairo for starting work on an underground border wall in a bid to halt the smuggling tunnels that have become an economic lifeline to the territory but are also used by Hamas to smuggle in weapons and money. "However, as the occupying power, it is Israel that bears the foremost responsibility for ensuring the welfare of the inhabitants of Gaza," Amnesty said. Responding to the report, Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev blamed Hamas. "The Palestinians in Gaza are under the thumb of the brutal Hamas regime that places violent jihad against Israel above the well-being and the welfare of the people of Gaza," he said. Monday was the one-year anniversary of the mutual ceasefires that ended the 22-day Gaza war, which killed about 1,400 Palestinians and flattened entire neighborhoods. Thirteen Israelis were killed during the fighting. Israel imposed strict sanctions on Gaza in 2006 following the capture of an Israeli soldier by Hamas and other militants in a deadly cross-border raid. It tightened the blockade when Hamas — which is pledged to Israel's destruction — seized power in June 2007 after a week of bloody street battles with forces loyal to the Western-backed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. — AFP

US ENVOY DISCUSSES MIDEAST PEACE IN SYRIA, LEBANON

AFP: January 20, 2010: US envoy George Mitchell on Wednesday met President Bashar Al-Assad and said Syria had an important role to play in the search for peace in the Middle East. Mitchell reaffirmed President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's commitment "to a comprehensive peace in the Middle East that includes peace between Israel and the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon. "Syria certainly has an important role to play in all these efforts," he told reporters on his third visit to the country since being appointed Obama's special envoy to the Middle East. In Beirut, Mitchell met with Sleiman, reiterating Washington's commitment to the stalled Middle East peace process and Lebanon's independence. According to a statement released by the US embassy in Lebanon, in his meeting with Prime Minister Hariri late Tuesday, Mitchell confirmed that Washington would not support the full naturalization as Lebanese citizens of an estimated 250,000 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon. "Senator Mitchell reiterated that Lebanon would play a key role in the long-term effort to build lasting and comprehensive peace and stability in the Middle East region and that there would not be a lasting solution reached at Lebanon's expense," the statement said. Mitchell is also due to meet Israeli and Palestinian leaders on his trip as Washington strives to revive long-stalled peace talks, stymied when Israel launched an offensive on the Islamist-ruled Gaza Strip in December 2008. Since Obama came to office exactly one year ago, official visits to Syria by US officials have multiplied as Washington believes Damascus can also help with issues relating to Iraq and Lebanon. Mitchell's latest tour comes less than a week after Obama's national security adviser James Jones met Palestinian and Israeli leaders aimed at furthering US-led peace efforts. The Palestinians say they will not resume talks until Israel halts all settlement building in the occupied territories. – AFP

REPORTS THAT HAMAS CHIEF TO COME TO EGYPT TO APOLOGIZE FOR SOLDIER DEATH

Daily News Egypt: January 20, 2010: Reports have emerged from Qatar that Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal will come to Egypt this week to apologize for the death of an Egyptian soldier on the border with Gaza earlier this month. The Qatari Al-Sharq newspaper quoted unnamed sources that Meshaal will meet with Intelligence chief Omar Suleiman and Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit to discuss the prisoner-exchange issue Egypt is mediating with Hamas and Israel as well as the Palestinian reconciliation talks that Egypt is also mediating. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri had announced that Hamas snipers did not kill the guard, as Egypt had claimed, but was killed mistakenly by the Egyptian side who were aiming for two Palestinian teenagers near him. He cited the comments of the Ministry of Health Representative in Northern Sinai Tarek Al-Mahalawy, who had said that Shaaban was killed by two shots received in the back. Aboul Gheit had said the day before Abu Zuhri's announcement that Egypt knew the names of the snipers that killed Shaaban and would request from Hamas that they be arrested. Al-Masry Al-Youm had reported last week that Meshaal had said he was willing to visit Cairo at "anytime", provided he was welcome. Talking about the shooting of Ahmed Shaaban, the border guard who was killed as Palestinians demonstrated on the Gazan side of the border near Rafah, as well as the entry of the Viva Palestina Lifeline 3 convoy into Gaza Jan. 6, Meshaal asked Aboul Gheit to reveal the names of the alleged Hamas perpetrators he had

claimed were behind the shooting. Meshaal also said, “ Hamas has no problem with Egypt, but the steel border barrier causes us pain, especially since we respect the borders of all Arab countries.” This source of contention is the building of an underground steel wall that Egypt began construction on a month ago, in an apparent effort to stem the number of tunnels beneath the border being used to smuggle mainly goods but also weapons into Gaza. Egypt at first denied the reports then — after footage and images of the work and new wall emerged — alluded to construction on the border, which it stated was related to national security and sovereignty and not the concern of anyone else. It refuses to call it an underground wall and insists it is merely an extension of the regular wall that delineates the border.

Economic front:

EGYPT MAY STALL PROPERTY TAX LAW

Daily News Egypt: January 18, 2010: President Mubarak said Sunday that the property tax law is not finalized yet, and that he is “thinking of ways to render the implementation gradual.” Finance Minister Youssef Boutros Ghali, clarified, stating that the law would not undergo amendments, and that the current considerations pertain merely to its rate of implementation. Reham ElDesoki, senior economist at Beltone Financial, considered that the president’s comments may have resulted from extensive media coverage and protestations from members of parliament regarding the law. She explained that some critics demand that each taxpayer be permitted to exempt their place of residence from the tax. Businesses, on the other hand, have declared that Egypt’s economic condition is still too volatile, following the global economic crisis, and that the tax should not be levied until greater economic stability has returned. Vacillations on the implementation and scope of the property tax have left property owners confused. The president’s announcement will likely “increase the confusion currently prevalent in the market,” ElDesoki predicted in an emailed statement from Beltone. ElDesoki expects that the new law, “will not add significant financial burdens to property owners in Egypt.” The annual tax on property that is worth LE 500,000 will be LE 30, while the annual tax on property that is valued at LE 1 million will be LE 660. Beltone has released its opinion that “the tax is a good step by the government to increase its revenues... Under the new Law 196 of 2008, the tax rate was cut from 40 percent to 10 percent and the tax base expanded to include all property in Egypt” other than agricultural land and specific types of property. As pointed out by Tarek Farrag, chairman of the Real Estate Tax Authority, 95 percent of the Egyptian population is exempt from the tax. However, of those taxed, Beltone predicts revenues could increase to LE 3 billion or LE 4 billion, as compared to the current annual average of LE 680 million. Beltone believes that the tax could have additional positive benefits, causing property owners to “make economic use of their unused assets,” thus raising property stock in economic activity as well as the number of residential units available, a welcome development in a country hobbled by an acute housing shortage. Many believe the new law has received undue attention due to its impact upon Egypt’s upper class. Some analysts expressed confusion at the president’s decision to raise the specter of the controversial property tax law. Abdel Fatah El-Gabaly, head of the Al-Ahram Center for Strategic and Political Studies’ economics unit, laughed, “I don’t know why he [Mubarak] mentioned it.” Asked about the possibility that upcoming parliamentary elections in 2010 and the presidential election in 2011 could be

a source of pressure regarding the law, El-Gabaly dissented. El-Gabaly expressed mild disgust that the property tax law is now receiving attention, a year and a half after its legislative implementation. El-Gabaly did acknowledge that the law will take time to implement, “This is a very difficult law to carry out. It takes time to evaluate properties, [individuals and corporations had to submit their assets by December 31, 2009 to be evaluated]. You need to set up a big institution to carry it out... The expected revenues were not included in this fiscal year... [Revenues] increase to 5 or 600, this fiscal year, because the new law includes properties in New Cairo that were formerly exempt.”

HIGH FOOD IMPORTS WILL WEIGH ON EGYPT’S ECONOMY: WORLD BANK

Daily News Egypt: January 21, 2010: Although Egypt’s GDP growth rate is expected to rise to 5.2 percent in 2010 and 6 percent by 2011, high food imports represent a significant burden on the economy, according to a recent World Bank report. The Global Economic Prospects 2010 report evaluates the economic climate post-financial crisis on the national, regional and global scale. Santiago Herrera, the lead economist for the World Bank in Egypt, commented on the country’s food imports as a matter of food security. Attempts to boost Egyptian exports have long been incorporated into Egypt’s trade strategy, with expanded trade relationships with the US, China, Russia and India planned or under implementation. A free trade agreement with Russia, for example, has been expected and should be implemented this year, according to the Ministry of Trade and Industry. But the slowdown in global trade during the crisis remains a concern. An additional report by the World Bank evaluated each country on a rubric of its relative “ease of trade,” ranking infrastructure, customs, timelines, logistical competencies, and tracking on a scale of 0 to 5. Egypt’s Logistics Performance Index (LPI), at 2.61, ranked significantly better than worst performer, Somalia at 1.44 LPI. Even the top country, Germany, achieved a total score of only 4.11 LPI. Egypt’s ranking was approximately equal to the Middle East’s performance as a region. The Ministry of Trade and Industry maintains an Egyptian Exports Development Strategy, wherein “impediments preventing exports from flourishing were transparently and objectively addressed and, constructive systems to mitigate such impediments have been initiated” according to the ministry’s website. *Hedging import risks* In the meantime, Herrera pointed out, Egypt can hedge the risks of volatile food prices. Egypt’s risk to the volatility of wheat prices became abundantly apparent during the 2007/2008 “food fuel crisis,” cited by the GEP report as disproportionately affecting the entire region, which was simultaneously punished by the low price of petroleum and the rising cost of food. He contrasted this to derivatives traders in the US and UK who intentionally exposed themselves to increased risk, looking to make high returns. Herrera also acknowledged that governments sometimes draw criticism for purchasing commodities futures, because if prices fall, they have wasted public money. However, he compared purchasing wheat futures to having fire insurance: a small price to pay for peace of mind. Another alternative for establishing food security and lessening the burden of food imports is the practice of purchasing agricultural land abroad for the express purpose of growing crops intended for Egypt. The trend is growing worldwide, with Egypt particularly focusing its attention on agricultural investment in Africa. Herrera agreed that the practice could help minimize Egypt’s import burden, he said, “If using public money [to purchase land] my concern is choosing between all the

other needs the country has. I don't know that the priority of government investment should go to invest in other countries." In his opinion, such investments are more suited to private companies, or potentially through public/private partnerships. **Global perspective** From a global perspective, the primary findings of the GEP report indicate that while GDP growth is rising, the pace of recovery will "depend on private sector demand and the withdrawal of fiscal stimulus." The global economy is poised to grow 2.7 percent this year after shrinking in 2009, the World Bank said, highlighting risks to a "fragile" recovery, AFP reported. Financial analysts all over the world have warned that although 2010 looks to start strong, economic growth may falter as effects of stimulus packages wear off, simultaneously across the globe. Chief Economist at the World Bank Justin Lin commented on the GEP report, emphasizing the impact of the global crisis on poverty, "The crisis has deeply impacted virtually every economy in the world, and although growth has returned, much progress in the fight against poverty has been lost. Key impediments to growth are troubled financial markets and sluggish private sector demand amid high unemployment, the report said. Overall, global gross domestic product (GDP) — a broad measure of the output of goods and services that fell by 2.2 percent last year — is expected to expand 2.7 percent in 2010 and 3.2 percent in 2011, AFP reported. Rich countries, impacted the most by the global financial crisis, would not recover so quickly. Developed economies, which experienced a 3.3 percent plunge in GDP last year, were projected to grow 1.8 percent in 2010 and 2.3 percent in 2011. The United States, the world's biggest economy and the epicenter of the financial crisis that triggered the downturn, would see 2.5 percent growth in 2010 and 2.7 percent in 2011. Hans Timmer, an author of the report, said data indicates that unemployment will only get worse. Developing countries are suffering a high human cost because of the crisis, the bank said. As many as 50,000 additional children may have died of malnutrition in 2009 and by the end of 2010, 90 million more people are expected to be living in poverty than would have been the case without the crisis. –Additional reporting by AFP

Social front:

ANTIQUITIES PROTECTION DRAFT LAW CONTINUES TO IGNITE DEBATES AT PA

Daily News Egypt: January 20, 2010: Protection of Egypt's antiquities was the subject of heated debate at the People's Assembly as steel mogul and senior National Democratic Party MP Ahmed Ezz and Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni argued over private ownership of antiquities. The point of contention was Article 8, which bans the trade, or any other form of disposal, of antiquities unless there is a written consent from the Supreme Council for Antiquities (SCA). It also states that the council has the right to take the antiquity from the owner and offer a reasonable compensation. Ezz argued that the majority of Egyptians don't know the characteristics of an antiquity and some people inherit an antiquity unknowingly, and so penalizing them would be unfair. However, Hosni, who cancelled a trip to Luxor to attend the draft law's discussion at the PA, said there are set criteria for identifying antiquities and such owners should report these inherited pieces to the SCA. Minister of State for Legal Affairs and Parliamentary Councils, Mofid Shehab, proposed to add a clause to the articles which states that anyone in possession of an antiquity has to notify the council within a year of the law coming into force. Parliament Speaker Ahmed Fathi Sorour said that the crime of owning an

antiquity is only punishable if the owner knows that it is an antiquity and doesn't report it, and he postponed the discussion of this article until the entire law is discussed. Independent MP Alaa Abdel Meniem says that the law needs more work especially in defining what constitutes an antiquity. In its Tuesday edition, independent daily, Al-Masry Al-Youm, reported that Ezz proposed, to much uproar, to permit the trading of antiquities inside Egypt. On Wednesday, the newspaper then reported that when asked about this, Hosni said, "We have closed this subject and it will not be discussed any more." Other parts of the draft law include raising the entry fees to historical places, which got a strong disapproval from MPs who said that it should be decreased to allow Egyptians to visit them. Citing a worldwide hike in entry fees, Hosni said the increase will be used for maintenance and protecting these places, according to official news portal Egynews.net. SCA Chief Zahi Hawass was also present at the PA for the discussion of the law, along with the council's legal advisor, judge Ashraf El-Ashmawy. He told the media that a harsher punishment of smuggling antiquities is needed. "Smuggling is a great crime and its continuous existence means that the current law is ineffective and a harsher penalty needs to be enforced," Hawass said. An article which has unanimous approval is requiring royalties be paid whenever replicas are made of museum pieces or ancient monuments. Independent MP Gamal Zahran personally supports the law as it protects Egypt's heritage. "Lately there have been numerous cases of antiquities smuggling which calls for further protection measures. In addition it is only fair that we profit when people use our civilization for commercial purposes," he explained.

HUMAN RIGHTS NGO CALLS FOR QENA GOVERNOR'S RESIGNATION

Special to Daily News Egypt: January 21, 2010: Al Kalima Human Rights Center filed a case to the Administrative Court calling for the resignation of Qena Governor Magdy Ayoub, citing repeated sectarian clashes in the area. Al Kalima is accusing Ayoub, Egypt's only Coptic governor, of being responsible for "repeated incidents of sectarian strife in his governorate and the escalation of violence against Copts," amid growing tension in the aftermath of the shooting of six Copts and a Muslim guard on Christmas Eve in Nagaa Hammadi early January. The official complaint appeals decision 115 of 2008 made by President Hosni Mubarak which reinstated Ayoub as governor. Ayoub was appointed governor for the first time in January 2006. "He has not issued one permit to renovate churches," the statement continued. "Instead, he has hindered the bureaucratic procedures necessary for building new churches" ever since the right to sign off on these permits went from the president himself to governors. "Even after the president authorized governors to issue renovation licenses for churches, Ayoub did not issue a single one despite the fact that Qena is home to a lot of rundown churches," added Nakhla. Ayoub is also being accused of discriminating against Copts. The complaint claims that Ayoub ordered compensation and a pension only for the Muslim guards' family. At the same time, he refused to issue compensation for the Coptic victims and those wounded in the attacks. "The governor has lost credibility by violating the oath. Allowing him to remain in his position will have grave consequences on the governorate and, in turn, will affect the entire country," the statement continued.

EGYPT TO SEND AID TO HAITI

Daily News Egypt: January 22, 2010: President Hosni Mubarak announced Monday Egypt's plans to send medical and humanitarian supplies to Haiti, which was struck by a tragic earthquake last week. "Egypt plans to send medical supplies whose value has not yet been determined," said Ambassador Hisham El-Zemaity, assistant foreign minister for American Affairs, "These supplies will be sent through the Red Cross." El-Zemaity added that Egypt might also send a delegation of doctors, however acknowledging that the language barrier might be a problem. While countries such as the United States are acting on more pressing issues such as the deaths in Haiti, the Egyptian government plans on providing aid for a more long-term solution. He explained that all of the government's initiatives are done in collaboration with the Egyptian Red Crescent. Furthermore, official spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Ahmed Aboul Gheit is trying to find the fastest way to send the supplies, in collaboration with Arab and Latin American governments. Additionally, an anonymous government source told Daily News Egypt that the government plans on sending "field hospitals." Egypt is collaborating in helping the people of Haiti as part of the UN's Flash Appeal. In related news, the United Arab Emirates' Red Crescent Authority is sending planes to the neighboring Dominican Republic, where it will purchase "food supplies worth \$500,000," Abdul Rahman al-Taniji, manager of RCA's media and public relations department, told IRIN. Also, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, ruler of Kuwait donated \$1 million to Haiti and sent 100 tons of supplies that include medical supplies, food and blankets. Qatar, Lebanon, Jordan and Iran have all also joined in the efforts.

EGYPT FLOODS CLAIM 15 LIVES UNTIL NOW

Daily News Egypt: January 20, 2010: Floods in several parts of Egypt have claimed the lives of 15 people in the past four days and left a trail of destroyed houses in its wake. On Wednesday the body of a policeman was discovered in North Sinai after he was killed by the flash floods. The body of Eid Salah Ramadan, 22, of the Central Sinai Central Security Department was discovered in the area of El-Bert south of Rafah. In Aswan, 720 homeowners will be compensated with LE 25,000 each for the destruction of their homes. Homeowners in other governorates will be compensated with the same amount. Initially they were to be paid LE 15,000 but the amount was raised. Three-hundred and twenty of these homes were completely destroyed while the remaining 400 were partially damaged in the flooding. President Hosni Mubarak paid a visit to devastated areas in Aswan Wednesday while Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif visited Al-Arish in Northern Sinai to assess the damage there. The visits come in the wake of criticism by affected residents that the government response to the floods has been less than exemplary. Civil society groups have organized a campaign to send aid shipments to the areas affected by the torrential rains and floods and the victims who have complained of the government's slow response. The campaign is spearheaded by the Civil Forum for Human Rights, but also includes political opposition groups, including the Kefaya Movement for Change and the leftist Tagammu Party. Head of the Civil Forum for Human Rights Essam Saqr told Daily News Egypt, "We have already begun receiving donations from organizations and private citizens in the form of medicine, blankets and foodstuffs, and we are trying to send out the first shipment as fast as we can." Five governorates have been hit with the floods since Sunday, North and South Sinai, The Red Sea, Aswan and Qena, with strong rains in Suez, Ain Sokhna and Ismailia. Four members of the Tarabin Bedouin tribe died

Monday night in Central Sinai and three died — two Egyptian women and the British tourist — when their boat overturned in the Nile in Aswan. Power outages are still the norm in affected areas, though Minister of Electricity Hassan Younis said that electricity had returned to some areas and would return to the other affected areas as soon as the water had been pumped out. And while the Suez governorate sent extra medical teams to Al-Arish, as well as sending 20,000 loaves of bread daily to North and South Sinai, there is a palpable sense of anger in Al-Arish over the government response to the crisis. Around 1,000 residents of El-Tor in Sinai protested the government's response to the crisis Wednesday. They used trucks to block the main roads and threw stones at police. El-Tor is one of the towns most affected by the floods. Police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd. According to AFP, two policemen were injured in the clashes.

FOUR MORE SWINE FLU DEATH BRINGS TOTAL TO 228 IN EGYPT

DailyNewEgypt: January 19, 2010: The Ministry of Health reported four more H1N1 deaths bringing the total in Egypt to 228. These include a 41-year-old woman from Assiut, a 35-year-old woman from Alexandria, a 27-year-old woman and 59-year-old man from Sharqeya. Meanwhile, the governors of Giza and Minya ordered the closure of four more schools for a period of seven days. The Health Ministry announced that a total of 15,135 cases were reported in Egypt since the virus first appeared in Egypt last June. The number of those recovered reached 14,719 cases. There are currently 192 cases being treated at hospitals nationwide. Furthermore, 5,409 cases of swine flu were reported among students in schools and 839 in universities since the start of the academic year. — Daily News Egypt

EGYPT SAYS COPTIC KILLINGS WERE CRIMINAL, NOT SECTARIAN - FOCUS

Agence France-Presse: January 19, 2010: Egypt sought to minimize the repercussions of the recent killing of six Coptic Christians in the south by qualifying the incident as a "criminal" rather than sectarian affair. On Jan. 6, the eve of the Coptic Orthodox Christmas, three gunmen raked worshippers emerging from mass in Nagaa Hammadi with bullets, the deadliest attack since 2000 when 20 Copts were killed in sectarian clashes. Nearly two weeks after the incident, President Hosni Mubarak made indirect mention of the attack, calling on Muslims and Christians to unite, in statements carried by the state-owned Al-Ahram newspaper. Mubarak urged Egyptians to "rally together so as not to give anyone a pretext to sow discord" rejecting "sectarian disputes and extremism especially as there are some abroad seeking to deepen rifts between Muslims and Christians." Egyptian officials have denied a sectarian element in the attack, insisting it is a purely criminal act and have linked it to the alleged rape of a Muslim girl by a Coptic man in the nearby village of Farshut last November. "If it were an instant reaction (to the rape), why did it not happen earlier?" said political analyst Issandr Al-Amrani. While the events may have started with a criminal act, the fact that authorities refuse to recognize the sectarian element in events that followed is "absurd," Amrani said. The theory of a revenge killing does not hold because the three men charged with the Nagaa Hammadi killings are not members of the raped girl's family, said Sayyed, adding: "Why would they choose to shoot at Copts on their Christmas eve?" Egypt's minister of state for

parliamentary affairs, Mufid Shehab, said that the investigation into the attack revealed "no religious motivations." For his part, parliament speaker Fathi Sorour said "one isolated incident should not be taken as proof of a religious conflict." But on Sunday, Coptic MP Georgette Qellini insisted the incident should be recognized as sectarian, prompting strong opposition from lawmakers of her own ruling National Democratic Party. Amrani said that the position of the authorities was expected. International condemnations poured in after the attack with the United States saying the incident showed "an atmosphere of intolerance" in Egypt. Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini condemned the violence against Coptic Christians in Egypt as "horrific and outrageous" while Pope Benedict XVI said the attack has "caused indignation among many people." Copts, who account for nearly 10 percent of Egypt's population of 80 million, are the Middle East's largest Christian community but complain of routine harassment and systematic discrimination and marginalization. Three Muslims were arrested two days after the attack and charged with premeditated murder. They will stand trial before an emergency security court next month.

TRIAL OF COPTIC MAN ACCUSED OF RAPE POSTPONED

AFP: January 19, 2010: The trial of an Egyptian Coptic Christian man accused of kidnapping and sexually assaulting a 12-year-old Muslim girl has been adjourned till Feb. 17, the official MENA news agency reported. The hearing took place in the southern city of Qena, around 600 km south of Cairo. Girgis Baroumi Girgis, 21, is accused of having raped 12-year-old Youssra Mohamed in the southern village of Farshout in November last year. Authorities have said the rape prompted a revenge attack in which six Coptic Christians were gunned down as they emerged from their Christmas Eve mass in the southern town of Nagaa Hammadi on Jan. 6. In November, news of the alleged rape saw hundreds of Muslim protesters burn Christian-owned shops and attacking a police station where they believed Girgis was being held. Roughly 10 percent of Egypt's 80-million-strong population is Coptic Christians, who complain of discrimination and marginalization. –AFP

US BAN ON TARIQ RAMADAN OTHER MUSLIM SCHOLAR CRITICAL OF US POLICY LIFTED

Associated Press: January 21, 2010: Two prominent Muslim scholars once accused of having ties to terrorism, can reapply to travel to the United States now that the State Department has concluded they pose no danger to the country, federal spokesmen said. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has signed orders enabling the re-entry of professors Tariq Ramadan of Oxford University in England and Adam Habib of the University of Johannesburg in South Africa once they obtain required admittance documents, department spokesman Darby Holladay said. Clinton "has chosen to exercise her exemption authority for the benefit of Tariq Ramadan and Adam Habib," Holladay said. "We'll let that action speak for itself." In a prepared statement, Holladay noted the change in US posture since both professors, who are frequently invited to the United States to lecture, were denied admittance after making statements counter to US foreign policy. The American Civil Liberties Union sued in recent years to challenge the exclusion of the professors. It said the State Department's action means the scholars might now get visas within weeks of requesting them. The orders are "long overdue and tremendously important," said Jameel Jaffer, director of the ACLU National Security

Project. Habib, a well-known South African scholar who has criticized the war in Iraq, was denied a visa by the US government in a letter saying he "engaged in a terrorist activity," an accusation Habib has vigorously denied. The ACLU of Massachusetts sued in 2007, challenging Habib's exclusion on behalf of the American Sociological Association, the American Association of University Professors, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and the Boston Coalition for Palestinian Rights. Ramadan, 47, had his US visa revoked in 2004 as he was about to move to Indiana to take a tenured teaching job at the University of Notre Dame. He has spoken at Harvard and Stanford universities and elsewhere. Later, his visa applications were denied on the grounds that he had donated \$1,336 to a charity that gave money to Hamas, an Islamic militant group that has been designated a terrorist organization by the US. Ramadan has said he has no connections to terrorism, opposes Islamic extremism and promotes peaceful solutions. Ramadan said in a statement issued by PEN American Center, a human rights group, that he was "very pleased with the decision to end my exclusion from the United States after almost six years." In a statement on "The American Muslim" website, Ramadan wrote that the allegations used to exclude him "were nothing more than a pretense to prohibit me from speaking critically about American government policy on American soil." He added: "The decision brings to an end a dark period in American politics that saw security considerations invoked to block critical debate through a policy of exclusion and baseless allegation." He said he was looking forward to visiting the United States soon, and PEN said it planned to organize a forum in New York where he could speak. ACLU lawyer Jameel Jaffer said at a court hearing Wednesday that the ACLU planned to submit a new visa application on Ramadan's behalf by next Friday. In an ACLU statement, Habib said he was thrilled, calling it a victory both personal and "for democracy around the world." Habib, 44, lived in the United States from 1993-95 while earning a doctorate in political science from the City University of New York. He said he had been excluded since October 2006, when he was questioned by US Customs and Border Protection officials about his political views and was asked whether he belonged to or supported any terrorist organizations. In a 2007 interview with The Associated Press, Habib called the US approach to the Iraq war a disaster. He also said: "I'm confident that I can't be linked to things like terrorism. That is not what my politics is about." –Associated Press writer Matt Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN CLAIMS 301 LIVES IN 2009, SAYS REPORT

Special to Daily News Egypt: January 21, 2010: One-hundred and twenty-nine women died due to crimes of violence in the second half of 2009, bringing the annual toll to 301 victims, according to a human rights report released Wednesday. The report, published by the Land Center for Human Rights, referred to incidents of violence against women that have been published in local newspapers during the second half of 2009; it points to a campaign of abuse and violence against women that amounted to 256 crimes of violence, of which 129 were fatal. Reported incidents of abductions and sexual assault against women reached 33, three perpetrated by members of the family and 30 by members from the outside community. Eleven of the total claimed the victims' lives. The report cited 10 cases of domestic abuse and 44 cases of spousal dispute; 29 of the latter were fatal. Meanwhile, poor health care amounts to 29 of the recorded cases, of which

11 caused death. Suicide attempts reached 22, 17 of which succeeded in taking their own lives. Other categories included road accidents and premeditated murder, which claimed the lives of 14 and 50 women respectively. According to the report, violence against women is still on the rise. In the first half of 2009, 232 crimes of violence were recorded, of which 172 caused death, as opposed to the 256 cases reported in the second half. In 2009, 301 women died out of a total of 488 recorded cases of violence. On cases of familial sexual assault, the report included details of the three incidents, all of which took place in August, October and November. The first is of a student who attempted to rape his step mother, which eventually led to her death. The second is of a father who impregnated his daughter and the third is of a father who attempted to rape his three daughters. On the other hand, cases of sexual assault by members of the community were attributed to sexual assault, harassment and revenge. The report sheds light on the increase in gang rape and abductions, citing 22 cases of two to six men abducting women for the purpose of rape. In most cases, the attackers kidnap their victims for a period longer than two days as they take turns at raping them, after which they leave them on the street. The report also points to taxi and toktok drivers who kidnap women to rape them alone or in the presence of other men. In addition, 16 women have been subjected to violence from police officers, government personnel and people in high ranks, according to the report. Such violence resulted in physical and psychological damage and is manifested in detention, discrimination, lashing, sexual harassment and the lack of access to education and employment. Of the 16 cases, seven women are housewives, according to the report. The rest are either employees or students, which include journalists, helpers, a teacher, an accountant, a lawyer, a housing manager and a head of a school. The report calls on amending existing Egyptian legislation to abide by international standards that ensure women are not discriminated against. In addition, the report calls for criminalizing all acts of violence against women under the penal code. The report also called on school curricula and media outlets to promote non-violence and equality among all members of society.

Iraq

Political front:

Iraqi Expats To Cast Votes In 14 Countries

January 20, 2010- Iraq says that 14 countries have agreed to open voting centers for Iraqi expats for the upcoming parliamentary elections, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Miqdad al-Sharifi, head of the Irbil-based Iraqi expat voters bureau, told RFI that most of the preparations for the March 7 parliamentary elections have been completed and that voting stations for Iraqi expats are to open in Turkey, Iran, and Jordan in the next few days. He said Iraqi electoral workers are already in those countries. Sharifi said that in addition to those three countries, Iraqi expats will also be able to vote in Lebanon, Australia, the Netherlands, Austria, the United States, Sweden, Canada, Syria, Germany, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. He said approval to open voting stations in Britain and Denmark is still pending. Sharifi said the Independent High Electoral Commission estimates that there are 1.9 million Iraqi voters living abroad. He said that number is based on statistics provided by the Foreign Ministry, the Immigrants Ministry, and the United Nations refugee agency, and will be updated after the parliamentary vote.

Bomber Strikes Iraqi Army Headquarters, Wounds 45

Banned candidates can appeal to a special seven-judge panel.

January 21, 2010- Iraqi officials say they have met with Ba'athists and insurgent groups in neighboring countries recently in an effort to reintegrate them into the political process, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Abdel Halim Ahmad, a spokesman for the cabinet's reconciliation committee, told RFI that "the ministry of national dialogue has held talks with insurgent groups in Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Syria while the reconciliation committee's chairman has met in Damascus with Ba'athist groups that expressed a willingness to lay down their arms and join the political process." Ahmad added that some of the Ba'athists who took part in the negotiations vowed to return to Iraq and "lines of communication are still open with them," stressing that the Iraqi government's sole condition is for these people and groups to renounce violence. Deputy National Dialogue Minister Saad al-Muttalibi told RFI that meetings have indeed been held with Ba'athists "but those were individuals without real influence and much more important is the accommodation reached with armed groups that have laid down their arms to embrace the political process, thus contributing to national unity and improved security." Al-Muttalibi declined to name the groups, saying "from the very outset they asked not to reveal their names or ranks for their own reasons." Rashid al-Azzawi, a member of the parliament's Accountability and Justice Committee, told RFI that former Ba'athists who have helped build up Iraq's new security agencies and those who have joined the political process from the beginning should not be barred or disqualified from taking part in any political process. He said only those convicted of crimes are covered by de-Ba'athification. Al-Azzawi said "this is the only way out of the ongoing controversy" over a government commission's decision to ban hundreds of candidates and parties from contesting the March 7 national elections. Salman al-Jumaili, a member of parliament in former Premier Ayad al-Allawi's Iraqi List bloc, told RFI that "a lesson should be learned from the Kurdish leaders when they reintegrated former Kurdish Ba'athists who were high-ranking Ba'ath Party officials and even ministers under the former regime [of Saddam Hussein] and are now members of the Kurdish parliamentary bloc." A government committee tasked with vetting candidates has banned 511 politicians and some parties from running in the upcoming elections, raising fears of inflaming sectarian tensions. U.S. Vice President Joe Biden has discussed this issue via phone with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Shi'ite, President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, and Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni.

Geo strategic front

U.S. cannot solve Iraq's problems, senior Kurdish official says

Azzaman, January 22, 2010- Iraq's problems must be solved in Baghdad and not in Washington, Mahmoud Othman, a veteran Kurdish politician said. Othman said if Iraqis were incapable of making the necessary compromises among themselves not other power can force them to so. Othman made the remarks as U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden is trying hard to solve thorny issues regarding general elections. More than 500 Iraqi candidates have been barred from participating on allegations of links with the former regime. The exclusion of so many candidates and their groups, most of them Muslim Sunnis, is certain to fuel tensions. Asked on whether the U.S. or a third party could help bridge the gap between the central government and the Kurds, Othman said

Economic front:

Iraq Signs Final Oilfield Contract With Italian Company

January 22, 2010 (Reuters) - Iraq today signed a final contract with a group led by Italian oil major Eni to develop the 4-billion-barrel Zubair oilfield, one of a series of deals Iraq hopes will propel it to major producer status. Eni and its partners, U.S.-based Occidental Petroleum Corp and South Korea's KOGAS, set an output target for the field of 1.2 million barrels per day. The consortium plans to invest the approximately \$20 billion over the 20-year life of the contract, which has a possible extension to 25 years, Eni said in a statement. "Target production is expected to be progressively reached within the next six years and maintained for seven years thereafter," the statement said. The group won the right to develop Zubair last year following the country's first auction of oil contracts since the 2003 U.S. invasion. The field was not initially awarded in the auction in June, but a deal was reached in subsequent negotiations. The consortium will be paid a remuneration fee of \$2 a barrel on the contract. The Zubair deal is one of a series struck by Iraq last year that could lift it to third place from 11th among global oil producers with an output capacity of 12 million barrels per day in about six years, giving it the billions it needs to rebuild after years of war and economic decline. KOGAS said on January 20 that it would invest \$6.5 billion in developing the field. The deal is part of South Korea's drive to invest \$12 billion in overseas energy and resources this year to fuel its manufacturing-based economy.

Iraqi Kurds accept most government conditions for exporting their oil

Azzaman, January 19, 2010- Iraqi Kurds say they would not mind if royalties of oil exports originating in their region are collected by the central government in Baghdad. However, they said they would only want the central government to use part of the proceeds to pay the foreign contractors who developed their fields. The concession may ease tension over sharing of oil royalties and allow Iraqi Kurds to use the national pipeline network for exports. "The (Kurdish) regional government is prepared to enter in a serious dialogue on this issue. We are thoroughly prepared, and for the interests of the Iraqi people, to resume exports of not less than 100,000 barrels of oil a day," said Ashti Horami, the Kurdish regional government's minister of natural resources. He said the volume will be increased up to 200,000 barrels a day next year. Central government's insistence on having total control over all oil revenues in the country had prompted the Kurds to turn off their oil taps. Horami's new overtures, analysts say, signal new concessions on the part of the Kurds. In the past they wanted all the money from oil sales originating in their region for themselves. Horami even asked the oil ministry for the immediate resumption of oil exports from their region, with SOMO, Iraq's oil export arm collecting all the proceeds. However, an oil ministry spokesman said issues of oil exports had to be decided by the central government in Baghdad.

Iraq Setting Up Economic Zones In Border Regions

January 18, 2010- An Iraqi minister says the government plans to set up special economic zones near the borders of neighboring countries, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Iraqi Industry Minister Fawzi al-Hariri told RFI the project will include building industrial projects and business parks, and that agreements have been reached to create

special economic zones with Turkey, Iran, Syria, Jordan, and Kuwait. Yunadim Kenna, the deputy chairman of the Iraqi parliament's economic committee, told RFI that four free trade zones and special economic areas will be initially established in the border provinces of Basra, Anbar, and Nineveh, as well as in Baghdad. Al-Hariri said some \$10 million was allocated in the 2009 budget and more is expected in the 2010 budget for the plan, which aims to attract foreign investment but will rely heavily on private Iraqi companies. He said corporate tax holidays and other exemptions will hopefully attract foreign direct investment and stimulate local growth by creating jobs. Economic analyst Basil Jamil Antoine told RFI that many substandard goods are currently being sold in Iraq, but the establishment of special economic zones -- including the industrial areas -- would provide consumers with higher quality products.

Social front:

Iraq Parliamentary Campaign Raises Fears Of Sectarian Strife

January 18, 2010-- The list of nearly 500 candidates barred from running in Iraq's upcoming parliamentary poll has yet to be finalized, but it is already fanning sectarian tensions. Many Sunnis are among those banned last week by an Iraqi electoral committee from participating in the March 7 poll due to their purported ties to the banned Ba'ath Party. Disqualified candidates have the right to appeal and several have already done so ahead of the Committee for Integrity and Accountability's final ruling, expected on January 19. The ban highlights the alienation felt by many Sunnis going into the election, as well as the lingering resentment Shi'ite leaders harbor against those with ties to Saddam Hussein's former regime. That situation has led to fears that the tensions could spark sectarian violence like that seen before the last parliamentary elections, in 2005, which Sunni groups boycotted. Any new outbreaks of violence in Iraq could, in turn, postpone the departure of U.S. troops planned for the end of 2011. There are growing signs that those fears could become reality. In the central province of Najaf today, local officials warned Saddam loyalists to move out within 24 hours or face an "iron fist," according to AFP. The news agency cited a statement in which the officials said: "The Ba'ath gang of Saddam has one day to leave the province or we will use an iron fist against those who have failed to distance themselves from the Ba'ath and Al-Qaeda." Ba'athists have been accused carrying out a deadly triple bomb attack in Najaf Province last week. On January 17, key Hussein ally and cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid, better known as Chemical Ali, was sentenced to death for ordering the gas attacks on the Kurdish town of Halabja. The death sentence, his fourth, was seen by observers as a sign that Iraq's Shi'ite-dominated government is not about to forget the crimes committed by the former Sunni regime.

'Stop Interfering'

The United Nations has asked the Committee for Integrity and Accountability to overturn its decision to ban the nearly 500 candidates from running in the March poll. UN special envoy Ad Melkert met with members of the electoral commission on January 16, but no details of those talks were released. The Committee for Integrity and accountability, however, called on the UN representative to "stop interfering in the affairs of Iraq, a sovereign country governed by laws, which have been voted by the people." The electoral committee, which is tasked with approving candidates and removing unsuitable candidates, announced the ban on January 14. Iraq's chief electoral official Hamdia al-

Husseini told RFE/RL's Iraqi Service last week that the candidates were banned in accordance with laws designed to keep Ba'athists from power. The Ba'athist Party is outlawed by the constitution, but some Sunnis believe that ban is being used by the majority Shi'ite government to exclude Sunnis from state posts. Among the disqualified candidates are Iraq's current Defense Minister Jassem al-Obeidi, a Sunni member of Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition, and prominent Sunni lawmaker Saleh al-Mutlak, an outspoken critic of the government who has allied himself with former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi.

Several attacks in Mosul late last year targeted Christian churches.

January 20, 2010(Reuters) - More Shi'ite candidates than Sunnis have been barred from Iraq's election because of links to Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party, politicians said today, potentially defusing a row that threatened to reopen sectarian wounds. A decision by a panel to ban 511 candidates under a law outlawing the Ba'ath party outraged many Sunnis, who dominated Iraq for more than two decades under Saddam, and raised fears the legitimacy of the March 7 election could be undermined. The parliamentary election is a test of Iraq's growing stability as violence starts to fade and U.S. troops prepare to end combat operations in August and withdraw by the end of 2011. Sunni resentment could potentially fuel a lingering insurgency. But two-thirds of the list handed to electoral authorities by the Justice and Accountability Commission was composed of Shi'ites, according to a copy received by Reuters. The list appeared weighted more against secular alliances than Sunnis. The Ba'ath party is illegal under Iraq's constitution. The panel that drew up the lists of banned candidates replaced a "de-Ba'athification" committee set up by U.S. administrators to purge Saddam loyalists after the 2003 invasion. But two of the panel's most prominent members are also candidates in the election for the Iraqi National Alliance, a coalition dominated by the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (ISCI), an openly religious Shi'ite party formed in Iran. That gave rise to suspicions it was being used by factions in Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government to marginalize Sunnis ahead of the vote. Others believe it deliberately targeted secular rivals who had been expected to perform well against the overtly Islamist parties that have dominated Iraq since the invasion. The list included 30 or so candidates from Maliki's State of Law coalition and around 20 from ISCI's Iraqi National Alliance. The secular coalitions fared worse. Allawi's Iraqi Unity had 72 candidates on the list while Bolani's coalition had 67 of its candidates excluded.

Lebanon

Political front:

LADE warns against insufficient electoral reform

Daily Star staff- Saturday, January 23, 2010: Failure to implement sufficient electoral reform ahead of municipal elections will raise tensions among voters, Lebanon's leading democracy campaign group said. The executive director of the Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE), Ziad Abdel-Samad, said that NGOs were seeking electoral reform "in order to achieve the highest levels of citizen participation, the right representation as well as development on the local and national levels alike." Abdel-Samad spoke at the manifesto launch of the Civil Campaign for Electoral Reform, unveiled with amendments at UNESCO Palace on Friday in response to Parliament's

decision this week to delay the municipal vote. He labeled the current six-year terms for municipal councils “too long and inadequate,” and called for a reduction to four years.

A reduction in term length would reduce “the intensity of the tension arising from the sense of victory or frustration of winners and losers,” Abdel-Samad said.

LADE’s announcement follows a Cabinet discussion session on Tuesday in which it agreed to delay the municipal vote until June in order to implement the electoral reforms put forward by Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud. Such reforms include the adoption of proportional representation (PR) voting systems in larger municipalities, the use of pre-printed ballots and the introduction of a quota for female candidates. Abdel-Samad repeated LADE’s call for proportional representation to be universally adopted in all municipalities in Lebanon. PR voting, according to Abdel-Samad, “could be implemented during municipal elections, according to a formula that ensures a diverse representation,” he said. One sticking point in electoral reform could be the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18. Baroud did not include any stipulation on voting age in his initial reform proposal, but a clutch of MPs voiced opinions on voter age on Friday. Marjayoun-Hasbaya MP Ali Fayyad, from Hizbullah’s Loyalty to the Resistance bloc, told the Voice of Lebanon radio that lowering the voting age would require “easy” constitutional amendment. All political blocs agreed on an age reduction, MP Ali Fayyad added. In an interview published in Al-Mustaqbal newspaper on Friday, Beirut MP Hani Qobeissi, from Speaker Nabih Berri’s Development and Liberation bloc, said that his group supported a lowered voting age, but that electoral reform in general would be difficult to achieve without cross-party consensus. LADE also advocated a lowering of the age of candidates, from 25 to 22 “thus achieving better youth participation, which is also one of the consequences of lowering the voting age to 18 years,” according to Abdel-Samad. He voiced LADE’s support for pre-printed ballot papers, adding that they were vital to ensure voters’ anonymity. Abdel-Samad labeled the lack of a pre-printed ballot a “bizarre and abnormal practice which is still in place in Lebanon contrary to all the other countries in the world.” He also slammed the handling of disabled voters in last year’s parliamentary elections and called for organizers to redouble efforts in order to ensure all of the electorate can exact its democratic right. Disabled people were hampered last June as “proper measures were not implemented to equip polling stations and enable them to practice” their right to vote,” LADE’s briefing paper said. Other recommendations unveiled on Friday were the re-establishing of a supervisory committee to monitor electoral campaigning and the addition of clauses which recognize the right of civil society members to observe the voting process. President Michel Sleiman weighed in on the municipal election reform campaign, saying the division of Beirut into smaller constituencies for the spring wasn’t on the table. In remarks published by Al-Mustaqbal newspaper on Friday, Sleiman said that there would be “no postponement” of the local elections, despite reports that the government was planning such a step. Sleiman said that in the most recent Cabinet meeting, the possibility of a division of the capital into smaller districts wasn’t proposed. “No one raised this issue at the Cabinet meeting, not even Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud,” Sleiman was quoted as saying.

Hariri commemoration litmus test for March 14

Daily Star staff- Saturday, January 23, 2010: The coming commemoration of the February 14, 2005, assassination of former Premier Rafik Hariri should reveal much of

the emerging new identity of the March 14 political coalition, a number of analysts told The Daily Star on Friday. The March 14 camp has been teetering since last August 2, when March 14 co-founder and Progressive Socialist Party head Walid Jumblatt announced his departure from the coalition. The movement took its name from the massive political demonstration which took place one month after the killing of Hariri, whose Future Movement also formed one of the alliance's pillars. However, the Future Movement, led now by his son and Prime Minister Saad Hariri, has also at times edged away from the camp. How the Future Movement approaches the anniversary will provide a crucial litmus test of how the party envisions the prospects of the March 14 group, said political analyst Oumayma Abdel-Latif. In addition, the speeches certain to mark the anniversary should also serve as a bellwether of March 14's coming direction, as should details such as the location of the commemoration, said retired General Elias Hanna, who teaches political science at Notre Dame University. "You have to watch the celebration," he said. "You're going to see new realities." March 14 has seen its original shape crumble under the weight of the new political equation in the region, above all the return of Syria to a central role in Lebanon and the Middle East, Hanna added. March 14, which had built much of its identity on resisting Syrian hegemony over Lebanon – the movement blamed Damascus for Rafik Hariri's killing, a charge Syria has always categorically denied – has had to recalibrate its stance vis-a-vis Syria, taking a much more conciliatory approach toward the Syria-backed March 8 political alliance, said Oussama Safa, executive director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. Saad Hariri, for example, made a visit to Syrian President Bashar Assad last month. March 14 "is a coalition of political parties ... that's trying to reposition itself," the executive director said. "I can't really place it today. They're working on reinventing themselves. "A lot of this repositioning will bring them closer to March 8." Despite the conciliatory rhetoric likely to emanate from the February 14 rally, many of the differences that divided the followers of the two major blocs – such as positions toward Syria and disarming Hizbullah – have remained deeply ingrained, Safa added. With much of the population still passionately split over basic issues, March 14 still would have a distinct political identity to rely on as it adjusts to the new regional calculus, Safa said. "March 14 and March 8 still represent different visions," he said. While the two camps now have more common ground, the new shape of March 14 likely to arise on February 14 will almost certainly still draw on firm support for UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701, which call for normalized relations between Lebanon and Syria as well as the disarmament of Hizbullah, Safa said. On the other hand, the new presentation of March 14 will probably place less emphasis on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, said Abdel-Latif. Although the tribunal – long a key priority for March 14 – is established and largely outside Lebanon's political realm, the court has become a symbol of March 14's shortcomings, with the tribunal's lack of activity and the recent departures of high-ranking tribunal staff, Abdel-Latif added. Tribunal registrar David Tolbert and chief of prosecution Nick Khaldas announced within the last month that they were leaving the tribunal, while the court has said no indictments are on the short-term horizon. The most difficult pivot for March 14, however, will remain its stance on Syria, and March 14 leaders continue their "soul-searching" on how to deal with a resurgent Damascus, Safa said. At the same time, while Syria might be trying to put off demarcating its borders with Lebanon, the new dynamic between the two countries has largely returned to the

“traditional political game,” where each sovereign nation battles with the other in an effort to meet its interests, Hanna said. In the end, the restoration of this relatively standard political balance – and the withdrawal of Syrian troops after a 29-year presence in Lebanon – represent the greatest achievement of the March 14 coalition, whatever its future, Hanna added. No matter what form the faction takes in this new era, it can still take pride in engineering the withdrawal, which “nobody” believed was possible before Hariri’s assassination, Hanna said.

Cabinet to debate Baroud's proposal on municipal polls

Daily Star correspondent- Tuesday, January 19, 2010: A set of thorny issues will be dealt with during Tuesday’s Cabinet session at the Baabda Palace. One of the main items on the agenda will be the issue of municipal elections, and the government is expected to issue a final decision on the matter. The Cabinet will also discuss administrative appointments and the issue of Palestinian weapons outside of refugee camps. Meanwhile, United States Special Envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell is due to arrive in Beirut Tuesday for a two-day visit, during which he will meet with high-ranking Lebanese officials, the state-run National News Agency reported on Monday. A draft law on the amendment of the law for municipal elections submitted by Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud is expected to draw controversy at Tuesday’s Cabinet meeting. Baroud told LBC television on Monday that he would submit his proposal for the municipal elections to the session. Baroud said his proposal has kept 21 as the legal voting age because the grace period for amending the law has ended. Speaker Nabih Berri on Monday was quoted as saying he was surprised by the absence of any mention of lowering the voting age to 18. Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar on Monday ruled out radical changes to the electoral law on municipal elections. He hinted that the current municipal elections law is likely to govern the vote. Najjar said lowering the voting age to 18 requires a constitutional amendment. Another issue that might draw debate in the Cabinet is the question of whether to divide Beirut into separate electoral constituencies or to keep the capital as a one district. While Free Patriotic Movement and Marada ministers favor the first option, Prime Minister Saad Hariri opposes the idea of dividing Beirut. Future Movement sources told the pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat that Hariri’s rejection stems from his belief that Beirut should not be divided into three constituencies “because he does not want to take the country backward, but instead he is looking forward to more coexistence among the Lebanese.” As-Safir newspaper said opposition ministers are expected to meet to decide on a unified stance regarding the draft law on municipal elections and the mechanism for administrative appointments amid divisions on the latter issue. Tuesday’s Cabinet meeting will decide on the proper mechanisms to conduct the appointments. The Cabinet might also tackle, outside of its agenda, the issue of the latest remarks made Sunday by Fatah al-Intifada leader Abou Moussa. Abou Moussa said Palestinian armed groups outside camps should not surrender their weapons.

On Monday, the Phalange Party lashed out at Abou Moussa, saying his remarks contradicted what had been agreed upon by Lebanese groups during National Dialogue sessions. Separately, Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt endorsed a suggestion made last week by Speaker Berri and urged the formation of a National Commission for the Abolition of Political Sectarianism, “in line with the Constitution.” In an article published in the PSP’s Al-Anbaa magazine on Monday, Jumblatt stressed

that the commission was supposed to tackle “all of the concerns and fears” of some Lebanese parties.

Geo strategic front:

Palestinian group refuses to disarm outside Lebanon camps

January 18, 2010- Lebanonwire – The head of a Syrian-backed Palestinian militia in Lebanon has said Palestinians will never be disarmed inside or outside of refugee camps in Lebanon, newspapers reported. "We categorically reject the disarmament of Palestinians outside refugee camps in Lebanon," said Fatah al-Intifada chief Said Mussa, who is also known as "Abu Mussa." "This is solely a Palestinian decision and not in the hands of any other power," he told reporters in the southern port city of Sidon after a meeting with the mayor. The statement came less than a month after Prime Minister Saad Hariri's landmark visit to Syria, after which Hariri said he and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had discussed the arms of Palestinian groups outside camps in Lebanon. Abu Mussa also said he was "open for talks with the Lebanese government as long as they do not try to hinder our struggle. In 2006, feuding Lebanese leaders agreed on the disarmament of Palestinians outside camps at a national dialogue session. UN Security Council Resolution 1559, adopted in 2004, calls on Lebanon to assert sovereignty on the whole of its territory and disarm all militias, including armed Palestinian factions. By longstanding convention, however, the Lebanese army does not enter Lebanon's 12 Palestinian refugee camps, where groups like Fatah al-Intifada are based, leaving security inside in the hands of Palestinians. Along with armed Lebanese factions, Palestinian guerrilla groups played a major part in Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war. Palestinian factions and Lebanon's Shiite militant group Hezbollah were the only parties which did not give up their weapons after the war, saying they were needed to defend themselves against Israel. –AFP

US Mideast envoy Mitchell expected in Beirut on Tuesday

January 18, 2010- Lebanonwire - US special envoy for the Middle East George Mitchell is due to arrive in Beirut Tuesday for a two-day visit, the official Lebanese National News Agency (NNA) said. The US envoy is scheduled to meet high-ranking Lebanese officials upon his arrival in the country, kicking off a new tour of the Mideast region. Mitchell's visit coincided with a statement by Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah saying that the frequent visits by US officials to Lebanon 'harm the country.' Fadlallah told the Hezbollah-run An-Nour radio station on Monday that 'the recent visits made by US officials to Lebanon do not serve the country's interests.' He added that such visits also 'aim at showing that the US still plays an influential role in the country.' The US has listed Hezbollah among the terrorist organizations. The group is banned from using US financial centers and its members are banned from receiving US visas. According to the Lebanese news agency, Mitchell will head to the Palestinian territories, Israel and Syria after his visit to Beirut. –Xinhua

Lebanese protest Egypt's Gaza barrier

January 17, 2010- Lebanonwire -- Lebanese protesters accused Egypt's president Sunday of acting like an agent of Israel over his country's construction of an underground steel wall along the Gaza border. The Egyptian barrier could deprive Gaza's Hamas rulers of

their only lifeline by blocking hundreds of smuggling tunnels. About 200 people took part in the protest near Egypt's embassy. Crowds set fire to U.S. and Israeli flags. Some of the Israeli flags had Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's picture on them. The protesters also carried banners depicting Mubarak as an Israeli agent, as well as portraits of the president with a Star of David on his forehead. The Gaza barrier has angered many Arabs and Muslims. Egypt calls it a matter of national security. Hamas' exiled political leader, Khaled Mashaal, visited Beirut last week and urged Egypt to stop construction of the barrier, saying walls are built "between enemies, not brothers." Sunday's protesters - most of them activists from leftist groups - carried banners with Mubarak's image and the words: "At your service USA." Since Israel's withdrew settlers and soldiers from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Hamas is believed to have stepped up its weapons imports considerably and Israel has struck hard at the hundreds of tunnels beneath the Gaza-Egypt border to stop the flow of arms. The underground passages also pose a threat to Egypt, which is increasingly concerned about an Islamic militant regime on its doorstep that could spill into its territory and incite violence. -AP

Iranian dissident Masoud Ali Mohammadi 'killed by Hezbollah member'

January 17, 2010- Lebanonwire- Times Online- An Iranian university professor killed last week by a blast from a remote-controlled bomb strapped to a parked motorcycle may have been the victim of an Arab hitman, according to opposition groups. The murder of Masoud Ali Mohammadi, 50, a supporter of Mir Hossein Mousavi, the opposition leader, has been blamed by the Tehran regime on "mercenaries" financed by Israel and Washington because of his role as a nuclear physicist. However, opposition groups who monitor Hezbollah, the militant Lebanese movement, in Tehran, claim that a member of the group, known by his pseudonym "Abu Nasser", was photographed at the scene of the explosion in Tehran's affluent Gheytari suburb. A German-based opposition group released a photograph of a man of similar appearance who, it alleges, was one of the pro-regime demonstrators who stormed Mousavi's office in Tehran after disputed presidential elections last June. The opposition claims the Revolutionary Guard uses Hezbollah operatives for some bloodthirsty tasks because they have a reputation for ruthlessness, and are outsiders and can always be blamed as opposition sympathisers. Tehran has gone to great lengths to suggest that Mohammadi was killed because he was a nuclear scientist, implying that he was part of Iran's programme to develop nuclear weapons. However, Majid Mohammadi, a visiting scholar at the Institute for Global Studies at Stony Brook University, New York, and also a friend, said: "He was not a nuclear physicist. He was just a physicist. I believe the Iranian [official] media highlight this word 'nuclear' to imply he was killed by the Israelis or Americans." Iran maintains close links with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, which it supplies with weapons and funds. Scores of Hezbollah officials are based in Tehran and, according to the opposition, are frequently used by the regime to crack down on its opponents. It alleges that Abu Nasser had been spotted alongside revolutionary guards in recent anti-government demonstrations. Sources in Tehran suggest the murdered scientist was a strong supporter of the opposition and his assassination was a warning by the regime to its opponents. Last week President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said that the "method of bombing" indicated "Zionists did it and that they hate us and don't want to progress". In Israel there was no official comment. In recent years Mossad, the Israeli overseas intelligence service, has launched extensive

undercover operations inside Iran to attempt to derail its nuclear ambitions. Mysterious fates have befallen a number of Iranians involved in the nuclear programme. Two years ago a nuclear scientist was found dead at his home, apparently from carbon monoxide poisoning. Mishka Ben-David, a former Mossad agent, doubts that Israel was involved in last week's assassination: "Could you imagine how much risk it takes to carry out an attack of that kind in Tehran?" He does not believe the Iranian professor was worth the effort.

Lebanon's Jumblatt: Syria reconciliation nearly complete

January 17, 2010- Lebanonwire- Lebanon - Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt said at the weekend he was close to reconciling with former foe Syria and dismissed criticism of his latest political about-turn. The 60-year-old hereditary chieftain of Lebanon's Druze minority has come under fire since defecting in August from the March 14 ruling coalition he helped create in order to move closer to the Hezbollah-led opposition camp. The move came as Syria emerges from its international isolation and amid a rapprochement between Damascus and Riyadh, two key regional players. Jumblatt justified his U-turn, saying it was a necessary step to preserve the peace and avoid sectarian bloodshed. He said the sectarian unrest that brought Lebanon close to civil war in May 2008 had been a rude awakening. Lebanon's Druze community, a secretive offshoot of Shiite Islam, makes up about six percent of the country's four million population. Jumblatt, head of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), has earned both admiration and scorn through the years for his knack at manoeuvring through the topsy-turvy world of Lebanese politics and always emerging on the winning side. By mending fences with Hezbollah as well as Syria, whose relationship with the United States has been improving, observers say Jumblatt is staking out a position in between Lebanon's two main rival camps in order to ensure his own survival and that of his community. He admitted, however, that a major obstacle on his road to reconciliation with Damascus were some harsh words he used against the Syrian regime in 2007. At the time, Jumblatt launched a virulent attack on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, branding him "the dictator of Damascus... a savage... an Israeli product, a liar... and a criminal." He also called for the US to meddle in Syrian politics just as it had in Iraq, which was interpreted by Damascus as an invitation for US troops to invade the country. Asked whether he planned to apologise for his comments, Jumblatt remained enigmatic. He said he had asked Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to plead his case before the Syrians and was awaiting the opportune time for the final handshake with Assad. Jumblatt also criticised US policy in the Middle East saying it was all about words and no action. Jumblatt also confirmed that he was grooming his eldest son, Taymour, to take over the leadership of the PSP saying the 27-year-old had no other choice. He said once out of politics, he hoped to purchase a home in France's Normandy region or at a fjord in Norway and write his memoirs.

Hezbollah says Arab leaders bow to U.S. pressure

January 17, 2010-Lebanonwire — The leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah accused Arab leaders Saturday of caving in to U.S. pressure to bring the Palestinians back to peace talks with Israel. Sheik Hassan Nasrallah made the statement after meeting Friday with the political leader of the Palestinian militant group Hamas. Last week, the Obama

administration laid out a bold shift in its Mideast peace strategy, stepping up pressure on Israel and the Palestinians to resume stalled talks by moving immediately to negotiations on the toughest issues dividing them, like the borders of a Palestinian state and the status of Jerusalem. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said last week that dealing with those matters first would eliminate Palestinian concerns about continued construction of Jewish settlements in disputed areas. The Palestinians have refused to return to talks until such building stops. A Hezbollah statement said Nasrallah and Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal discussed "the ongoing political movement to resume negotiations under Israeli conditions." It added that this shows "the level of retreat and weakness in the official Arab position facing Israeli dangers and American pressure." President Barack Obama's special envoy, George Mitchell, is expected in the region this week to press for a resumption of peace talks.

Israeli army crosses into Lebanon: state media

January 17, 2010- Lebanonwire-- An Israeli army unit on Sunday crossed the borders with Lebanon in the direction of the occupied part of al-Ghajar village, Lebanon's state-run National News Agency (NNA) reported. It added that "Israeli tank emplacements were spotted amid intense overflights by helicopter gunships and warplanes." On the Lebanese side, UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and Lebanese army personnel intensified patrolling activities. The Blue Line, which is the line for Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, now serves as the borderline of the two countries and runs through the middle of the al-Ghajar village. Lebanon accuses Israel of intruding its airspace on a daily basis, saying it is a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. The resolution put an end to the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanese Shiite armed group Hezbollah, and mandates peacekeepers to monitor the armistice along the border. – Xinhua

Sarkozy concerned with just peace for Lebanon - Hariri

Daily Star staff- Saturday, January 23, 2010: Prime Minister Saad Hariri stressed on Friday Lebanon's commitment to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701 while slamming Israeli violations following talks with French President Nicholas Sarkozy in Paris. The prime minister added that Sarkozy was "honest and clear with regard to taking sides with Lebanon." "However, the problem is Israel, which does not commit to Resolution 1701 and violates it in every step," Hariri added. "[Sarkozy] is concerned with a just peace for Lebanon, Syria, Palestinian and the Arab region," Hariri added as he voiced support for a Middle East peace conference to be held in France. Asked whether Paris provided him with any guarantee to enable Lebanon to face future challenges and threats, Hariri stressed his host's determination to push forward in setting up a peace conference. "They [French officials] know that keeping the situation in the region unchanged is unacceptable and several steps should be taken, steps that France would undertake to guarantee peace," the premier added. Tackling French support for Lebanon, Hariri said Sarkozy expressed his willingness to assist the Lebanese Army and Internal Security Forces at all levels, whether this involves transferring either light or heavy military equipment. On another note, Hariri said France would continue to play a pivotal role concerning Lebanese-Syrian bilateral ties, a role that facilitated the establishment of embassies in both countries last year. Earlier Friday, Hariri told an audience at the headquarters of the French Business Association that he looked for French-Lebanese

cooperation on economic and social levels rather than only diplomatic and political channels. Hariri added that he was determined to modernize infrastructure, telecommunication, energy, transportation and environment sectors, which are part of the Cabinet's top priority. The Lebanese premier also called on businessmen to invest in Lebanon while stressing that the cabinet would guarantee the private sector an encouraging environment to secure continuous growth. For her part, head of the French Business Association Laurence Barizo stressed the importance of trade between Lebanon and France as well as the importance of economic growth in preserving peace and promoting ties between both countries' people. Barizo also stressed the need for cooperation when it comes to the implementation of reforms in the telecommunication and energy sectors, while highlighting France's advances in water management and alternative energy sectors.

France to help boost number of green spaces, improve lighting in Beirut

Daily Star staff-Tuesday, January 19, 2010: The Municipality of Beirut and the French Development Agency (FDA) signed on Monday an agreement to increase green spaces in the Lebanese capital, improve its lighting and profit from unused public spaces. The French Ambassador to Lebanon Denis Pietton, the director of FDA in Beirut Donny Cassa and the director of the City and Local Governments Organization in Lebanon Bashir Odaymeh signed the agreement that granted Lebanon about 350,000 euros. Beirut Mayor Abdel-Monem al-Ariss said the money would be used "to prepare plans for a green belt and a bicycle path surrounding the city," and create "a safe trail for Lebanese of all ages." He added that a second project that the money would be used for consisted of increasing green zones in Beirut. Ariss said the plan to make the capital greener started several years ago and the municipality has taken several decisions to turn real estate into public parks. The mayor then presented a third project to benefit from about 3,000 unused spaces and convert them into public areas that "reflect the views of our youth and our love for developing the city." A fourth project the agreement would help accomplish was lighting public areas and profiting from solar energy to reduce petrol-produced energy. Pietton said FDA's role fell within the framework of aid presented to Lebanon during the Paris III donors' summit. He stressed that Beirut had many resources and that it could make use of them with the help of France, especially after a collaboration agreement was signed in December 2009 between Beirut, FDA, Ile de France and the Technical Office of Lebanese Cities. – The Daily Star

Iraq's Hakim arrives in Beirut for talks with Lebanese officials

Daily Star staff-Tuesday, January 19, 2010: The head of the Islamic Supreme Council (ISCI) for Iraq Sayyed Ammar al-Hakim arrived in Beirut on Monday. Hakim was welcomed by MP Ghazi Youssef, representing Prime Minister Saad Hariri, in addition to Iraqi Ambassador Omar al-Barazanji, MP Ali Mekdad and representatives from Hizbullah. During his stay in Beirut, Hakim is expected to hold a series of meetings with Lebanese officials. Hakim has a significant impact on cultural, social and political fields on local, Arabic, Islamic and international levels, where he was the special representative of his late uncle Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim who was represented in many political and religious gatherings locally and globally. Hakim was born in 1971 in Najaf, the son of Abdel Aziz Hakim, who preceded him as leader of ISCI, and the

grandson on Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, who lead the Iraqi Marja from 1961. In 2003 he established “Al-Hakim Foundation,” under the supervision of his uncle Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim. The Al-Hakim Foundation later received consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Headquartered in the Iraqi city of Najaf, it is now the largest institution of civil society in Iraq, with over 80 offices in all governorates of Iraq, and working in the field of humanitarian assistance, development, human rights and dialogue between religions. The Foundation also oversees several schools, colleges and cultural and scientific centers and holds numerous symposiums, conferences and social and cultural events, in addition to running a number of publications. – The Daily Star

Economic front:

Rising property-sale indicators in Lebanon buck global trend

Daily Star staff- Tuesday, January 19, 2010: Figures released by the Directorate of Real Estate indicate that the number of property-sale transactions in Lebanon and the value of such transactions witnessed an increase in 2009, bucking the trend of dwindling real-estate activity across the MENA region and the world at large. The figures were released by Bank Audi’s Weekly Monitor Monday. But it added that during the next two quarters, indicators of the sector displayed signs of weakening, which could to a certain extent be the result of the high base recorded in the same period of 2008. Nevertheless, activity rebounded in the last quarter of the year, and especially during December 2009, thereby pulling up the number and value of property sales up above their record high levels registered in 2008,” Audi said. The figures indicate that the total value of property sales in Lebanon was at LL1.875.2 trillion in the 12th month of the year, jumping by 40.8 percent when compared to the value registered in the same month of the previous year and reaching its highest level in 2009. The number of property-sale transactions also hit a record high of 12,207 transactions, up by 27 percent year-on year. “This means that the average value per property sale surged 10.9 percent upward in December 2009 relative to December 2008 to reach LL153.6 million, by far its highest level in 2009,” Audi said.

The yearly performance in the property market was characterized by a rise in the overall value of property sales, as well as lower rise in the number of property-sale transactions. The number of property-sale transactions rose by 2.3 percent to reach 83,622 transactions, a yearly peak for Lebanon. It added that this underscores the attractiveness of the Lebanese property market to foreign investors, who are mostly Arabs, as despite the increase of property prices in Lebanon; such prices remain rather more competitive than property prices across the Arab world. The value of property sales reached a yearly peak of LL10.576.2 trillion in 2009, up 8.3 percent compared to 2008. Finally, the increase in the value of property-sale transactions within the context of a lower rise in the number of such transactions has resulted in a rise in the average property-sale value in 2009 of 5.8 percent to reach LL126.5 million. It is worth noting that Lebanon recorded over \$4.3 billion in real-estate transactions in 2008 and brokers noted that the bulk of the buyers were Lebanese expatriates in the oil-rich Gulf states. Prices of properties in Lebanon surged by more than 40 percent in the first seven months of 2009. This trend is expected to continue in the first few months of 2010 although some brokers warn that any economic shock in Dubai and other Gulf states could diminish the appetite of investors. – The Daily Star

Social front:

Lebanese delegation heads to Haiti with aid

Daily Star staff- Tuesday, January 19, 2010: The official Lebanese delegation carrying aid to the Lebanese diaspora in Haiti was to leave the Rafik Hariri International Airport Tuesday with tons of medical and other aid. The delegation is to follow up on the situation of the Lebanese in Haiti after the earthquake that hit the Caribbean country last week. It will carry 35 tons of non-monetary aid, including 29 tons of tents, three tons of powdered milk and three tons of various medications. The delegation includes the secretary general of the Higher Relief Commission Yahya Raad, the consultant of Prime Minister Saad Hariri Fadi Fawwaz, representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs consul Walid Haidar and representative of the Health Ministry Ali Khalifeh, as well as medical and media teams. The medical teams will transfer some of the injured to Beirut for further care. After the 7.0 earthquake hit Haiti last week causing considerable damage, Lebanon decided to send emergency assistance to the victims of Lebanese origins. The United Nations Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams said Monday that Lebanon's initiative was "warmly welcome." "Lebanon's support is critical at this moment for Haiti. It is an act of solidarity and underlines Lebanon's commitment as an active partner in the international community. I thank Prime Minister Hariri, the government and the people for this generous act," Williams said. A meeting was held at the Grand Serail on Monday to prepare for the Lebanese delegation's departure. Fawwaz contacted the Lebanese permanent delegation at the United Nations, Lebanon's Ambassador in Washington Antoine Chedid, Lebanon's Ambassador in Venezuela Charbel Wehbe and several international organizations to facilitate the landing of the airplane in Haiti. The participants of the meeting said many "logistic and technical problems faced the preparations," especially because transportation had become so difficult within the destroyed capital city. The delegation is expected back in Lebanon on Thursday, January 21. – The Daily Star

Lebanon says 2009 was best on record for tourism

January 19, 2010-Lebanonwire– The Tourism Ministry says about 1.9 million tourists came to Lebanon in 2009, the highest number of visitors to come to the mountainous Arab nation ever. The new figure exceeds those from the time before Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war, when Beirut was dubbed the "Paris of the Middle East." Figures released this week show that 1,851,081 tourists visited Lebanon in 2009, a 39 percent increase from the previous year. The 2009 number is the highest ever and broke the 1974 record of 1.4 million tourists, the ministry reported. Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud estimated the country's annual income from tourism at up to \$7 billion, or about 20 percent of gross domestic product. –AP

Palestine

Political front

Fatah al-Islam 'plotting attack' against judges

Daily Star staff- Friday, January 22, 2010: Judicial authorities have been warned of a possible attack by the Fatah al-Islam militant group against one of the judges trying its

members, sources revealed. The authorities received a security report saying the group aimed to stage an attack against one of the judges involved in trying members of Fatah al-Islam, according to the sources. A source said the report was based on evidence and information gathered by security forces from calls made by a number of "suspect elements." The information revealed that the militant group was plotting an attack on one of the judges currently assigned to try Fatah al-Islam members. The source also hinted that the attack would probably be launched from the Palestinian refugee camp of Ain al-Hilweh in south Lebanon. The report also asked military and security authorities to reinforce surveillance around Ain al-Hilweh, to observe the moves of suspected individuals and to check the identities of everyone going in and out of the camp. It also demanded that security be tightened at justice palaces and courts throughout the country, and that judges who are investigating cases involving Fatah al-Islam members be escorted by security personnel. Fatah al-Islam first emerged in 2006 after it split from the Palestinian group Fatah al-Intifada. It comprised a few hundred fighters and was based in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in north Lebanon. Fierce battles between Fatah al-Islam and the Lebanese Army broke out at Nahr al-Bared in 2007, killing 400 people, including 168 soldiers, and displacing some 30,000 refugees from the camp. Fatah al-Islam has also been linked to deadly bombings targeting UN peacekeepers in the south and civilian buses. Members of the group have been arrested in recent years and sentenced to imprisonment, hard labor or death. The Beirut Criminal Court and the Military Tribunal have on several occasions tried members of the group on various charges, including conducting or organizing terrorist acts. – The Daily Star

Geo strategic front

Palestinians Want U.S. to Negotiate in its Place

21/01/2010 – Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has proposed that the Obama administration negotiate the final borders of a Palestinian state with Israel, a Palestinian official said Wednesday, as a U.S. envoy headed to the region for another attempt to restart Mideast peace talks. Such a proxy arrangement could provide a way around the current deadlock over reviving Israeli-Palestinian talks, which broke off more than a year ago. Abbas says he won't return to the table without a complete Israeli settlement freeze, something Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has refused to do. Netanyahu has imposed a 10-month slowdown on West Bank construction, but opposes any freeze on east Jerusalem. The Palestinians seek east Jerusalem as their capital, while Israel considers all of Jerusalem its eternal capital. An Israeli official dismissed the idea of an undeclared freeze. "It is not going to happen. This is against everything the prime minister stands for and believes in," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because it was not a formal offer. However, Abbas aide Nabil Abu Rdeneh said talks cannot resume without a freeze. "This is a test for the U.S. administration and a test of Israel's seriousness about returning to the negotiations," he said. Also Wednesday, several major international aid agencies said the blockade of the Gaza Strip has undermined the territory's health care system by limiting the entry of medical equipment and the travel of doctors and patients outside for training and treatment. The agencies, including the World Health Organization and U.N. agencies, called on Israel and Egypt to open their border crossings with Gaza, home to 1.5 million Palestinians. Max Gaylard,

U.N. humanitarian coordinator for the Palestinian territories, said Gaza's health situation is "entirely man-made" and could be fixed only through greater access. Israel and Egypt first restricted access to Gaza in 2006, after the capture of an Israeli soldier by Hamas-allied militants. They tightened the blockade a year later, after Hamas seized control of the territory. This has prevented the repair of medical facilities damaged or destroyed in Israel's military offensive against Hamas a year ago.

Abbas: USA Needs to Resolve Decades of Conflict

18/01/2010 - Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas urged Washington on Sunday to declare an "endgame" to resolve the decades-old Middle East conflict if Israel does not agree to halt settlement growth. Abbas, in a statement carried by the official Wafa wire service, said Arab states and the Palestinians would present a unified position to the United States offering two options. Abbas has resisted months of US pressure to relaunch peace talks suspended during last year's Gaza war, saying Israel must first freeze all settlement activity in the occupied West Bank, including annexed Arab east Jerusalem. In November, Israel's hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu enacted a 10-month moratorium on new building starts in the West Bank but excluded east Jerusalem, public buildings and projects already under way. The United States hailed the move as "unprecedented" but the Palestinians have rejected it as insufficient. Israel's hardline Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, however, said on Sunday that his country would make no more gestures towards the Palestinians.

Exhausted gestures

"As far as we are concerned, we have exhausted our arsenal of gestures. There will be no more gestures. Right now, it is time for gestures from the Palestinians," he told a press conference. Last week, Abbas appeared to give some ground by demanding a halt to settlement growth for a "fixed period," but in Sunday's statement he remained adamant about a complete halt. US Middle East envoy George Mitchell is expected to return to the region this week to try again to convince both sides to restart negotiations. Israel's Maariv newspaper reported earlier this month that Washington was pushing a plan to restart peace talks that foresees reaching a final deal in two years and agreeing on permanent borders in nine months.

Hamas denies report on readiness to accept Israel's right to exist

21-01-2010 , Hamas on Thursday denied a report in an Israeli newspaper that the Resistance Movement is ready to accept Israel's right to exist. The JPost added that Dr. Aziz Dwaik, Hamas' senior representative in the West Bank and speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, stated also that Hamas is ready to nullify its charter calling for the destruction of Israel. According to the report, Dwaik made the comments during a meeting Wednesday with British tycoon David Abrahams in Hebron. Dwaik told Hamas website on Thursday that the report was "inaccurate". According to him, Hamas will never recognize the occupation on Palestinian lands. Dr. Dwaik stated he told Abrahams that the PLO abolished its charter following the agreements with Israel but the Palestinian people didn't benefit from this move. On his part, Salah Al-Bardawil, a senior Hamas leader in Gaza Strip, also dismissed the Israeli report on Dwaik's comments. "The quotes are not true. Hamas' stand regarding the Zionist entity's recognition is clear", stressed Al-Bardawil.

UAE Source: Israel Attendance of Conference Does Not Mean Start of Diplomatic Ties

18/01/2010- Asharq Al-Awsat- UAE official denied to Asharq Al-Awsat that an Israeli Minister attending a conference on renewable energy held in Abu Dhabi yesterday means the beginning of diplomatic ties between the UAE and Israel. The source confirmed that the only reason that the Israeli Minister is attending the conference is due to the UAE's obligation as host to the International Renewable Energy Agency [IRENA] headquarters. The third session of the IRENA Preparatory Commission began in Abu Dhabi yesterday, and all attention was on the attendance of Israeli Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau, who is the first Israeli Minister to visit the UAE. The Emirati source who spoke to Asharq Al-Awsat on the condition of anonymity confirmed that the Israeli Minister's attendance of the conference does not under any circumstances mean that there is "any relationship...or indication of bilateral ties between the United Arab Emirates and any of those [countries] attending the conference" in reference to Israel. The UAE currently has no diplomatic ties with Israel. According to the Emirati source, the IRENA organization has 139-member states "and the host country has no right to exclude any of these countries [from attending conferences]." The UAE official also told Asharq Al-Awsat that his country, as host of the IRENA headquarters "has nothing to do with who attends IRENA conferences, and all members of the organization should be able to attend." He clarified that this is one of the pre-requisites for any country wishing to host the headquarters of an international organization. The UAE is one of three Gulf States – along with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – that has no direct diplomatic contact with Israel whatsoever. Despite this, the Israeli Infrastructure Minister was present in Abu Dhabi yesterday, and this is not the first time that an Israeli official has visited the UAE. In October 2009, Israeli officials attended IRENA preparatory meetings, whilst Israeli official also attended IMF meetings held in Dubai in 2003. In early 2009, Israeli tennis player Shahar Peer was refused a visa to Dubai to compete in the Sony Ericsson World Tennis Association [WTA] tour in Dubai. This led the WTA to say that it would reconsider Dubai's membership to the WTA tour, especially as the Israeli tennis player has already previously competed in a tournament held in Qatar. Peer was the first Israeli tennis player to compete in tennis tournaments held in the Arab Gulf. The Dubai tour director said that the competition regulations do not allow the host country to prevent players from competing in tournaments. Speaking during the opening session of the IRENA third preparatory session in Abu Dhabi, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Dr. Anwar Mohammed Gargash said that "the UAE remains committed to using its unique geographical, political, and economic position not only to encourage the dynamic involvement of the developing world in the quest for renewable energy, but to also effectively contribute to the ongoing North – South dialogue on a wide range of developmental issues." Gargash added "The UAE firmly believes that IRENA will evolve into one of the most important international organizations of the 21st century and we are truly proud to be part of that journey." The UAE Minister for Foreign Affairs went on to say that "it is remarkable to think that in less than 12 months, we have IRENA membership increase from 75 to 139" after the Czech Republic joined the list of member-states less than a fortnight ago. He also stressed that IRENA could have a positive effect on reality through teamwork and the ongoing contribution of member-states. He ended his address by saying that IRENA's

work so far "reflects the whole-hearted global endorsement of IRENA's core aspiration to be the driving force behind a rapid transition towards the widespread and sustainable use of renewable energy around the world."

Fatah: Abbas won't attend Kuwait talks until Hamas signs document

17/01/2010- Ma'an/Agencies - Members of Fatah's Central Committee told Ma'an on Sunday that President Mahmoud Abbas will not meet with senior-most Hamas leader Khaled Mash'al until Hamas signs the Egyptian reconciliation document. Their statements follow news that the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Muhammad As-Sabah said that a reconciliation meeting will be held within the next ten days between Abbas and Mash'al, Kuwaiti media reported. Efforts to end Fatah-Hamas rivalry have been stonewalled, as Hamas demands that its amendments be taken into consideration. Meanwhile, Fatah officials say that the reconciliation document is finalized and have accused Hamas of attempting to stay general elections by delaying the ratification of the agreement. As-Sabbah further said that the peace process is at a precarious stage as Israel is governed by a "gauche and insane" prime minister, and expressed concern for the internal Palestinian division, the basis of Arab disagreement at present. Fatah and the reconciliation document At the beginning of January Azzam Al-Ahmad, speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council's Fatah bloc, accused Hamas leader Mash'al of lying when he said a reconciliation agreement was in the final stages. "If Mash'al is telling the truth, let him go to Cairo and tell the Egyptians that Hamas agrees to their reconciliation plan," Al-Ahmad said. "Hamas' deception and wordplay pushed Egypt and the Arab League secretary-general to declare that it was Hamas who impeded national reconciliation," he added, noting that "Egypt revealed recently that Hamas thwarted Palestinian reconciliation." Mash'al, Hamas' most senior leader, said on Sunday the Islamic movement was close to achieving a deal with its Fatah rivals. "We achieved great strides toward achieving reconciliation," he told reporters Riyadh, according to Reuters. "We are in the final stages now." Haniyeh calls for new Palestinian strategy On Friday de facto Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh called on the creation of a new Palestinian and Arab strategy based on an evaluation of previous talks and establishing ties with Turkey and Iran, he said during a Friday sermon in Gaza City.

Haniyeh specified three bases upon which a new Palestinian strategy should be founded on, including admitting the failure of prior negotiations, entering in national dialogue to establish a political program and the signing of the Egyptian-sponsored reconciliation document, taking into account Hamas' amendments. The de facto prime minister further claimed that members of the Palestinian leadership were making use of the current impasse to oust Hamas with a tampered election.

Social front:

UN 'Deeply Concerned' About Health System in Gaza

21/01/2010 - The United Nations on Wednesday said it was "deeply concerned" about the deterioration of the health care system in the Gaza Strip due to Israeli closures of the Hamas-ruled territory. A year after Israel's devastating offensive in Gaza the borders of the impoverished territory remain mostly sealed, preventing hundreds of patients each month from leaving to receive timely advanced care, officials said. "We are deeply

concerned about the current health system in Gaza and in particular its capacity and ability to deliver proper standards of health care to the people of Gaza," UN Humanitarian Coordinator Max Gaylard said. "This adverse situation is not like Haiti. Haiti has been destroyed by an earthquake," he told reporters at Gaza's main Al-Shifa hospital. "The circumstances here are entirely man-made and can be fixed accordingly." Israel tightened sanctions on Gaza in June 2007 after the Islamist Hamas movement seized power, sealing the territory of 1.5 million people off from all but vital humanitarian aid and strictly limiting travel into and out of Gaza. The Israeli military would not immediately comment on the UN allegations but has said in the past that it is allowing humanitarian needs to be met while putting pressure on Hamas, which won 2006 legislative elections but is blacklisted as a terrorist group by the West. The World Health Organisation (WHO) says the embargo has led to shortages of certain drugs, delayed or prevented the entry of vital equipment and spare parts, and kept doctors and nurses from pursuing advanced training. The lack of certain kinds of advanced care meanwhile forces hundreds of Gazans to seek passage to Israel each month for treatment there or in third countries, but many are denied or receive no response. In December there were 1,103 applications for advanced care with 21 percent of applicants declined, and 27 patients died while waiting for Israeli permits in 2009, according to the WHO. One such patient was Fidaa Hijji, an 18-year-old woman diagnosed with Hodgkins disease who applied for a permit to be treated in Israel on three occasions last autumn but did not receive any response. She died on November 11, two days after her last missed appointment at an Israeli hospital.

Israel Withholding NGO Employees' Work Permits

21/01/2010- The Interior Ministry has stopped granting work permits to foreign nationals working in most international nongovernmental organizations operating in the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. In an apparent overhaul of regulations that have been in place since 1967, the ministry is now granting the NGO employees tourist visas only, which bar them from working. Organizations affected by the apparent policy change include Oxfam, Save the Children, Doctors Without Borders, Terre des Hommes, Handicap International and the Religious Society of Friends (a Quaker organization). Until recently, the workers would register with the international relations department at the Social Affairs Ministry, which would recommend the Interior Ministry to issue them B1 work permits. Although the foreign nationals are still required to approach the Social Affairs Ministry to receive recommendations to obtain a tourist visa, the Interior Ministry is aiming to make the Ministry of Defense responsible for those international NGOs and also requiring them to register with the coordinator of government activities in the territories (COGAT), which is subordinate to the Ministry of Defense. Foreign nationals working for NGOs had understood they would receive a stamp or handwritten note alongside their tourist visa, permitting them to work "in the Palestinian Authority." Israel is refusing work visas to most foreign nationals who state that they wish to work within the Palestinian territories, such as foreign lecturers for Palestinian universities and businessmen. Israel does not recognize Palestinian Authority rule in East Jerusalem or in Area C, which comprises some 60 percent of the West Bank. The NGO workers say they've come to believe that the new policy is intended to force them to close their Jerusalem offices and relocate to West Bank cities. This move would prevent them from

working among the Palestinian population of East Jerusalem, defined by the international community as occupied territory. The organizations fear the new policy will impede their ability to work in Area C, whether because Israel doesn't see it as part of the Palestinian Authority or because they will eventually be subjected to the restrictions of movement imposed on the Palestinians. Such restrictions include the prohibition to enter East Jerusalem and Gaza via Israel, except with specific and rarely obtained permits; and prohibition to enter areas west of the separation fence, except for village residents who hold special residency permits and Israeli citizens. One NGO worker told Haaretz that the policy was reminiscent of the travel constraints imposed by Burmese authorities on humanitarian organizations, albeit presented in a subtler manner. NGO workers told Haaretz that they had been informed by the COGAT official that a policy change was forthcoming, as early as July 2009. When a number of them approached the Interior Ministry in August to renew their visas, they found that their applications had been submitted to a "special committee." They were not told who constituted this committee, and had to make do with a "receipt" confirming that they had submitted the request. The workers said the tourist visas they received differed from each other in duration and travel limitations, and surmised from this that the policy has not been entirely fleshed out.

Latest in a series of steps

A number of NGO workers who spoke with Haaretz voiced deep apprehensions about having to submit to the authority of the Defense Ministry. The groups are committed to the Red Cross code of ethics, and therefore see being subjugated to the ministry directly in charge of the occupation as problematic and contradictory to the very essence of their work. Between 140 and 150 NGOs operate among the Palestinian population. Haaretz could not obtain the exact number of foreign nationals they employ. The new limitations do not apply to the 12 organizations that have been active in the West Bank prior to 1967. Those groups, which include the Red Cross and several Christian organizations, were registered with the Jordanian authorities. The new move by the Interior Ministry is the latest in a series of steps taken in the last few years to constrain the movement of foreign nationals in the West Bank and Gaza, including Palestinians with family and property in the occupied territories. Most of those who have been effected are nationals of countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations, especially Western states. Israel does not apply any similar constraints on citizens of the same countries traveling within Israel and West Bank settlements. The Interior Ministry said in a statement that the only relevant authority empowered to approve the stay of foreign citizens in the Palestinian Authority is the coordinator of government activities in the territories. "The Interior Ministry is entrusted with granting visas and work permits within the State of Israel. Those staying within both the boundaries of Israel and the Palestinian Authority are required to secure their permits accordingly," the ministry said. "Recently, a question was raised on the issue of visas granted to those staying in the Palestinian Authority and in Israel, as it transpired that they spend most of their time in the PA despite having been provided with Israeli work permits," the statement continued. "The matter is under intense discussions, with the active participation of the relevant military authorities, with a view to finding the right and appropriate solution as soon as possible."

Palestinian Families Evacuated From Haiti

21/01/2010- Twelve members of three Palestinian families in Haiti were evacuated from the earthquake stricken country with the assistance of the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The family members were taken to Jordan by a Jordanian aircraft, where they were received by members of staff from the Palestinian Embassy.

The evacuation was carried out in conjunction with the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Royal Bureau and the Palestinian Embassy in Jordan. Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyadh Al-Maliki called on the Palestinian ambassador to Cuba Akram Samhan to travel to Haiti with a delegation of Palestinian and Cuban doctors to follow up on the current situation of the Palestinian community in Haiti.

PNA: Mitchell to Push for Settlement Halt in East Jerusalem

20/01/2010- Agencies – The Palestinian National Authority is urging Israel to approve a complete standstill on settlement construction in occupied East Jerusalem. US Middle East envoy George Mitchell who will arrive on Wednesday following talks in Syria and Lebanon, is set to raise the issue during talks with Netanyahu. The PNA has repeatedly rejected all calls to resume negotiations while settlement expansion remains unhindered in East Jerusalem, while Netanyahu has deemed the 10-month halt in the West Bank a gesture, mandating a return to talks. Nevertheless, the international community, including the Obama administration, has condemned Israeli practices in East Jerusalem, including settlement expansion, house evictions and demolitions. On the other hand Israeli media reported that the halt would be for a period of between three to six months and will not be approved by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, according to the Israeli daily The Jerusalem Post. "This is not going to happen; it goes against everything Netanyahu says and believes in," a source in the prime minister's office told the daily.

Economic front:

EU official to PNA: Financial support won't continue forever

20/01/2010- A European Union official said Tuesday that the EU will continue to sustain financially Palestinian efforts to build their independent state, but cautioned that this support would not continue without clear progress in the peace process with Israel. EU representative to the Palestinian Authority Christian Burger made the comment after signing an agreement with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in Ramallah to provide the PNA with more than 158 million euros (\$220 million) in financial aid. He said that the EU will continue to support Palestinian state- building efforts if there are clear signs that this money will lead to that goal "Support can only be sustained if there is a clear indication that a Palestinian state will be established in a foreseeable future," Burger said. He said the EU financial support is aimed at helping the Palestinians build the institutions necessary to create their independent state, and stressed that this aid will even increase if the state is created to help it develop. However, he said, the EU will have to answer to its taxpayers regarding where their money is going, if the goal of establishing the state is not reached. Fayyad thanked the EU for its financial support, agreeing with Burger that the money should help the Palestinians achieve their final goal, which is to end the Israeli occupation started in 1967 and establish the independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with East Jerusalem as its capital. He said the 158.5 million euros he received from the EU were part of the 500 million euro annual EU aid to the Palestinians allocated for 2010. Even though this money will go for

budget support to cover salaries and to pay running costs, it also has a goal of helping the Palestinians build their state institutions, said Fayyad, who in August launched a programme to build a fully fledged Palestinian state within two years.