

Report# 112
BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD
Fertile Crescent
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From 20th -26th March 2010
Presentation: 31th March, 2010

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Summary

Egypt

political front One hundred independent and opposition MPs held a joint press conference in front of the People's Assembly calling for the discussion of a new law they drafted which lays the foundations for the elections. The draft Political Rights Law was discussed at the event that brought together politicians and political activists. The law lays the foundation of an election process that is full of integrity, freedom and democracy said MP Gamal Zahran.

Egypt's government is seeking to severely restrict the work of non-governmental organizations, including preventing them from monitoring elections, three dozen NGOs said Monday. Draft legislation to curtail local NGOs will be brought before parliament in the coming months, the groups said in a letter of protest. An official at the government ministry responsible for overseeing the work of NGOs confirmed there was new legislation but refused to discuss its contents because it has yet to be sent to parliament. The 36 groups that protested the draft say it is intended to prevent the monitoring of a parliamentary election to be held by the end of the year and a presidential election next year. In a separate step, 100 opposition lawmakers introduced a bill of their own aimed at allowing free and transparent elections, but this stands virtually no chance of clearing a parliament firmly under the control of President Hosni Mubarak's ruling party.

Geo strategic front Egypt's foreign ministry summoned Israel's charge d'affaires in protest at its "provocative measures" in occupied East Jerusalem, a day after hundreds of Palestinians clashed with Israeli police. Egypt delivered "a clear message to the effect that Israel must immediately stop all provocative and illegal measures that feed the cycle of conflict," the ministry said in a statement.

Economy Minister of Finance Youssef Boutros Ghali said Egypt's budget deficit for fiscal year 2009/10 will come in at 8.5 percent of GDP, predicting that the figure will fall to 7.9 percent for the coming financial year beginning in July. Ghali said the total budget deficit is expected to reach LE 109.2 billion, with revenues at LE 258.4 billion.

MSEs account for 40 percent of total employment. Earlier this month the World Bank announced a \$300 million loan to Egypt to finance micro and small enterprises (MSEs). The Enhancing Access to Finance for Micro and Small Enterprises Project is expected to boost job creation and economic growth in the poorest layers of Egyptian society. The

loan matures over 28.5 years with a grace period of seven years. “Micro and small businesses are a primary driver for job creation and economic growth in emerging economies,” said Shamshad Akhtar, World Bank vice president for the Middle East and North Africa. “In several countries of this region they contribute to economic diversification and play an important role in private sector development.

Egypt has banned international calls made through mobile Internet connections, one of Egypt's top three mobile phone operators said on Tuesday, which would include internet Skype calls.

Internet telephony firm Skype has questioned Egypt's move to ban international calls made through mobile internet connections and said markets should be left open for consumers to choose. National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority head Amr Badawy told it will ban international calls through mobile internet connections. Skype, which has more than 500 million users worldwide, said in an email statement that it was "seeking clarification" from the regulator about the reported ban. "In general, we believe it should be up to consumers, not regulatory authorities, to choose the winners and losers in the communications space. That is what happens in competitive markets," it said.

Social front The Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) demanded in a statement earlier this month, issued on the sidelines of the favorable Constitutional Court ruling that said women can be appointed to the country's top advisory court, the immediate issuing of a law to combat discrimination in the country in order to secure “equality, citizenship and efficiency for all Egyptians.” Their calls for a law against discrimination comes only weeks after the controversy over the State Council voted to bar women from standing on the top court. The Constitutional Court, which has a woman sitting on it, said that the vote to ban women was unconstitutional in over turning the earlier decision. The women's center also expressed “relief and satisfaction” with the Constitutional Court's ruling and considered it a “tool for establishing justice and law, which ensures women's equality

Transparency International reported that regulations and poor law enforcement are part of the problems in Egypt toward the fight against corruption, which the organization says is increasing. According to the Berlin-based organization, corruption fighting in Egypt is on the rise. It said that efforts by the government to combat corruption have been curtailed by poor regulations taken and a law enforcement community who continues to take bribes and allow those with money to get off from their crimes.

workers at the influential Muslim website IslamOnline.net said that they would launch an alternative website where they could demonstrate their ability to separate what they call “editorial policies from money”. Prolonged strike continues: Employees at the IslamOnline website protesting at their 6th of October City premises of the website, west of Cairo. They have been on strike for 11 days now.

Iraq

Political front

Elections

One hundred independent and opposition MPs held a joint press conference in front of the People's Assembly calling for the discussion of a new law they drafted which lays the foundations for the elections. The draft Political Rights Law was discussed at the event that brought together politicians and political activists. “The law lays the foundation of an election process that is full of integrity, freedom and democracy,” said MP Gamal

Zahran, spokesperson of the independent bloc at the PA. The MPs called on Parliament Speaker Ahmed Fathi Sorour to discuss the draft law at the PA so that it could be passed before the end of the final session of the current PA, which concludes this year.

With nearly 80 percent of the votes counted from Iraq's March 7 parliamentary elections, the main winners appear to be Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and challenger Iyad Allawi. But the two front-runners are neck and neck. The vote count so far shows Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah coalition narrowly ahead of Maliki's State of Law alliance by less than 9,000 votes.

Iran has congratulated Iraqis over an election that is likely to keep a bloc led by its Shi'ite ally, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, in power after a campaign in which Tehran's influence was a divisive issue. Maliki's main challenger, former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who headed a secular list mixing Shi'ite and Sunni Arabs, made a high-profile visit to Saudi Arabia during the campaign to improve ties with Iran's biggest Sunni rival in the Persian Gulf region. "All international supervision has confirmed the soundness of the Iraqi elections. This is a success and we congratulate Iraqis," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said at a weekly press briefing on English-language state television.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani has issued a statement urging a recount in some areas of votes from the country's March 7 parliamentary elections. The request suggested that ballots be counted anew "to ensure justice and absolute transparency." But Iraq's Independent High Election Commission rejected the idea, saying final results would be issued on March 26.

Geo strategic front

Lebanon's ambassador to Egypt will attend the Arab summit in Libya after President Michel Sleiman decided not to go amid a spat over the suspected disappearance there of a prominent Lebanese cleric, the government said. The cabinet "unanimously agreed that Khaled Ziyadeh, Lebanon's ambassador to Cairo and representative to the Arab League, will represent Lebanon at the Arab summit" on Saturday and Sunday, Information Minister Tarek Mitri told reporters.

Economy Iraq has agreed with Turkey to renew an accord to operate an oil pipeline from its northern oil fields near Kirkuk to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, a senior Iraqi oil official has said. "Iraq has approved to renew the Kirkuk-Ceyhan agreement after agreeing on some changes and amendments", Iraq's deputy oil minister, Ahmad al-Shamma, told Reuters. Shamma said the two sides had agreed on new transit fees and upgrades to the pipeline.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates have requested an extra \$37.5 billion from Congress to fund military and civilian operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. The Pentagon is seeking \$33 billion of the request, and most of the total amount would go toward funding operations

Social Iraqi women demonstrators protest lack of security and basic services [EPA]

Prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq, women working in the public and government sectors were entitled to receive a year's maternity leave under family laws enforced by the former Saddam Hussein leadership. In the seven years since the US-led invasion which ousted Saddam, however, maternity leave has been cut to six months. Since the Personal Status Law was enacted on July 14, 1958, when Iraqis overthrew the British-installed monarchy, Iraqi women have enjoyed many of the rights that Western women do.

Lebanon

Tawheed Movement head former minister Wi'am Wahhab reiterated Saturday calls for Lebanese President Michel Sleiman to resign. "The late Egyptian President Jamal Abdel-Nasser resigned, so why doesn't Sleiman?" asked Wahhab, who is a close ally of Syria. "Where is the problem if he wasn't able to fulfill his promises of eradicating corruption and guaranteeing transparent administrative appointments?" Wahhab's Saturday comments sparked a new wave of criticism from politicians of the parliamentary majority.

Lebanon and Jordan signed 16 agreements, protocols and memoranda of understanding in Beirut on Friday, Lebanese PM office announced. The agreements include cooperation between the Jordanian Institute for the Development of Economic Projects and the Lebanese Trade Information Center for the years 2010-2011, a technical program to activate the mutual recognition agreement on conformity certificates and quality marks, and administrative cooperation agreement on customs procedures. They also include cooperation on animal health and production, cooperation in the agricultural sector, and the executive program for tourism cooperation for the years 2010-2012

Barclays Capital projected economic growth in Lebanon at 6 percent in 2010, down from 8 percent in 2009, adding that initial indicators point toward sustained growth this year but at a slower pace than last year, as reported by Lebanon This Week, the economic publication of the Byblos Bank Group. It expected private consumption to slow down but to be offset by a pick-up in private and public investment, and by continued strength in services exports in line with gradual recovery in the GCC.

The UN's Electronic Participation Index for 2010 ranked Lebanon in 45th place among 179 countries worldwide and 6th among 19 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, as reported by Lebanon This Week, the economic publication of the Byblos Bank Group. Lebanon came in 28th place globally and in second place regionally in the previous 2008 survey. Also, Lebanon ranked 8th among 36 upper-middle income countries (UMICs) included in the 2010 survey and 5th in the previous survey. The index is an assessment of 21 public informative and participatory services and facilities in e-information, e-consultation and e-decision making across 6 general, economic and social sectors such as education, health, social welfare, finance and employment.

Tourism Minister said that the tourism activity in Lebanon would improve by 10 to 20 percent in 2010 and assured that there would not be an Israeli war on Lebanon. "During the past two months, the number of tourists increased by 22 percent which is a very good indicator and we expect this number to exceed 2 million in 2010," he said.

Detailed news

Egypt

Political front

100 MPS PUSH FOR POLITICAL RIGHTS DRAFT LAW

Daily News Egypt: March 24, 2010: One hundred independent and opposition MPs held a joint press conference on Monday in front of the People's Assembly calling for the discussion of a new law they drafted which lays the foundations for the elections. The draft Political Rights Law was discussed at the event that brought together politicians and political activists. "The law lays the foundation of an election process that is full of integrity, freedom and democracy," said MP Gamal Zahran, spokesperson of the independent bloc at the PA. The MPs called on Parliament Speaker Ahmed Fathi Sorour to discuss the draft law at the PA so that it could be passed before the end of the final session of the current PA, which concludes this year. "We hope it is passed before the parliamentary elections this year," said Zahran. In the 94-article draft law, the MPs are pushing for electronic voting using the national ID numbers, which will also give Egyptians abroad a chance to participate. The law also puts the judicial system in charge of the entire electoral process, starting with the lists of the voters' names up until the announcement of the results. It would also bar children of the head of state and other senior government officials from running for the presidency.

EGYPT'S GOVERNMENT TO RESTRICT NGO VOTE MONITORING

arch 23, 2010 : Egypt's government is seeking to severely restrict the work of non-governmental organizations, including preventing them from monitoring elections, three dozen NGOs said Monday. Draft legislation to curtail local NGOs will be brought before parliament in the coming months, the groups said in a letter of protest. An official at the government ministry responsible for overseeing the work of NGOs confirmed there was new legislation but refused to discuss its contents because it has yet to be sent to parliament. The 36 groups that protested the draft say it is intended to prevent the monitoring of a parliamentary election to be held by the end of the year and a presidential election next year. In a separate step, 100 opposition lawmakers introduced a bill of their own aimed at allowing free and transparent elections, but this stands virtually no chance of clearing a parliament firmly under the control of President Hosni Mubarak's ruling party. Opposition to Mubarak's nearly three decades of unchallenged leadership was stirred recently by the return to Egypt of Mohammed ElBaradei, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and former chief of the UN's nuclear monitoring agency, which is headquartered in Vienna. Since his return earlier this year, ElBaradei has spoken forcefully for

constitutional changes to make Egypt's elections freer and fairer. He is forming a coalition to press for the reforms, without which it is unlikely he could run against Mubarak. The government's legislation would penalize any NGO or advocacy group working without a government permit, the protest letter said. About 25,000 such groups would have to join a government-controlled federation that would vet their licenses and watch over their activities and funding. "This will hijack the organizations' free will and subjugate it to the will of the government," said Bahey El-Din Hassan of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies and a signatory of the statement. The opposition's draft legislation calls for electronic voter registration and election monitoring by the judiciary. Egypt currently has no independent election monitoring. It would also bar children of the head of state and other senior government officials from running for the presidency. Mubarak is believed to be grooming his younger son, Gamal, to succeed him. Mubarak, who is still in Berlin recuperating from surgery, has not said if he will run for re-election next year, but some leaders of the ruling National Democratic Party have suggested he will. The 2005 presidential election was the first to allow multiple candidates, but tough requirements limit who can run.

Geo strategic front

LEBANON'S CAIRO AMBASSADOR TO ATTEND LIBYA SUMMIT

March 25, 2010: Lebanon's ambassador to Egypt will attend the Arab summit in Libya after President Michel Sleiman decided not to go amid a spat over the suspected disappearance there of a prominent Lebanese cleric, the government said on Wednesday. The cabinet "unanimously agreed that Khaled Ziyadeh, Lebanon's ambassador to Cairo and representative to the Arab League, will represent Lebanon at the Arab summit" on Saturday and Sunday, Information Minister Tarek Mitri told reporters. Top officials in Lebanon have said they would boycott the meeting over a dispute with Tripoli on the disappearance of leading Shia cleric Mussa Sadr. Sadr – who is still regarded by Lebanon's Shias as a key spiritual guide – vanished on August 31, 1978, and the circumstances of his disappearance are still a mystery. He was last seen in Libya. An official told AFP earlier this month that Sleiman would not attend the summit in response to a request by parliament speaker Nabih Berri, a Shia who heads the Amal movement founded by Sadr. In 2008 Lebanon issued an arrest warrant for Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi over Sadr's disappearance while he was in Tripoli with two companions, who also went missing. Libya has denied involvement in Sadr's disappearance. It says the man left the country for Italy, but the Italian government has always denied he arrived there. However, in 2004 Italian authorities returned a passport found in Italy belonging to the imam. –AFP

ARAB LEADERS BID TO 'RESCUE' JERUSALEM AMID ISRAELI DEFIANCE

Agence France-Presse: March 25, 2010: Arab leaders gather for an annual summit in Libya at the weekend determined to "rescue" Jerusalem as Israel defies international calls for a settlement freeze in the Holy City. The summit will be the first to be hosted by Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi and is expected also to discuss Sudan where President Omar Al-Beshir, who is facing an arrest warrant for alleged war crimes, is seeking re-election. The Middle East peace process is likely to dominate the summit that opens on

Saturday in the Mediterranean coastal city of Sirte. Israel has infuriated Palestinian and other Arab leaders as well as the wider international community with plans to expand Jewish settlements in annexed Arab east Jerusalem. Its US ally warned the plans would derail its efforts to revive peace talks with the Palestinians amid a rise of violence in and around Jerusalem in recent days. In the run-up to the summit, the head of the 22-member Arab League Amr Moussa called for all talks with the Jewish state, direct or indirect, to be suspended. "Negotiations with Israel at this time are pointless," he said. His deputy Ahmed Ben Helli said on Tuesday that Arab foreign ministers would draft a resolution outlining measures "to rescue Jerusalem from being Judaized." The draft will be discussed at a preparatory ministers' meeting in Sirte on Thursday before being submitted to heads of state for approval. Arab diplomats said the aim is to set up a commission to record Israeli "violations" in east Jerusalem for subsequent referral to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Israel has refused to go back on its announcement of 1,600 new homes for settlers in east Jerusalem despite strong opposition from its US ally. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the timing of the announcement — during a visit by Vice President Joe Biden on March 9 aimed at promoting US-brokered indirect peace negotiations with the Palestinians — as "insulting." But after White House talks on Tuesday, Israel's hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remained defiant, insisting that it was Palestinian opposition to settlement construction not the building work itself that was the obstacle to resumed peace talks. "If the Americans support the unreasonable demands made by the Palestinians regarding a freeze on settlements in east Jerusalem and the West Bank, the peace process risks being blocked for a year," Netanyahu said. "Relations between Israel and the United States should not be hostage to differences between the two countries over the peace process with the Palestinians," he added. Further riling the Palestinians, Israeli media reported that municipal authorities had approved a plan to build a further 20 homes for Jewish settlers in east Jerusalem. The so-called Quartet of major players in the Middle East peace process — the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States — issued a statement last Friday calling on Israel to "freeze all settlement activity, including natural growth." But the Palestinians have come under mounting US pressure to enter indirect peace negotiations as soon as possible regardless of Israel's defiance on the settlement issue. Regional powerhouse Saudi Arabia said on Wednesday that Israel's "stubbornness" made the idea of renewed negotiations unrealistic and said it would be seeking clarifications from the Quartet. Netanyahu's remarks "cast doubts on the peace process as a whole and on the seriousness of ongoing international efforts to start negotiations," the state Saudi Press Agency quoted an official as saying. However past Arab summits have seen feuding between radical and pro-Western leaders block any effective united stand. Foreign ministers will have their work cut out at their preparatory meeting on Thursday to ensure the same does not happen this year.

OBAMA-NETANYAHU TALKS LEAVE SETTLEMENT DISPUTE SIMMERING

Agence France-Presse March 24, 2010 Talks between US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to produce signs that they had ended a dispute which Netanyahu said could block the Middle East peace process for a year. Sticking to a hardline position before the White House talks late Tuesday, Netanyahu said peace efforts would be held up by what he called "unreasonable" demands for a freeze on

new settlers homes in east Jerusalem and the West Bank. While Netanyahu's office said the two rounds of talks between the key allies had unfolded in a "good atmosphere", the leaders unusually did not appear before the cameras. The White House stayed silent about the meetings. The US president initially hosted Netanyahu at the White House for 90 minutes. Netanyahu then huddled privately with his staff for more than an hour, after which he met a second time with the president in the Oval Office for a further 35 minutes, officials said. Netanyahu's office said in a statement that advisors to both men were holding follow-up discussions that would continue on Wednesday. But it gave no details, and White House officials refused to describe the tone or the substance of the talks — or to say if any agreements had been proposed or reached. Earlier, Netanyahu maintained a firm line on US demands for a freeze in settlement construction, warning that a halt to new settlements in east Jerusalem could wind up putting Israel-Palestinian talks on ice. "Relations between Israel and the United States should not be hostage to differences between the two countries over the peace process with the Palestinians," he was quoted as saying by Israeli media. Netanyahu was in Washington as the United States is seeking more UN sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program, with Israel concerned that efforts to that end are moving too slowly. His trip also coincided with Britain ordering the expulsion of an Israeli diplomat over the "intolerable" use of fake British passports in the killing of a Hamas operative in Dubai two months ago. In his speech to the powerful US-Israel lobby AIPAC in Washington, Netanyahu stressed that "Jerusalem is not a settlement" — spelling out an apparent message of no compromise towards Obama. The United States has warned that more Jewish settler homes in east Jerusalem would directly undermine both US credibility as a mediator and efforts to get "proximity" talks started between Israel and the Palestinians. Washington reacted angrily when — during a visit to Israel by Vice President Joe Biden — Netanyahu's government announced the construction of 1,600 settler homes in the eastern part of the city. Despite Netanyahu's subsequent apology over the timing of the announcement, the row has rumbled on for two weeks, with neither side backing down. Even as Tuesday's White House meeting went ahead, it emerged in Israel that local officials had given final approval for the building of 20 apartments for Jewish settlers at the site of a former Palestinian hotel in east Jerusalem. Netanyahu says he is simply following the policies of all Israeli governments since the 1967 war, when Israel seized and later annexed east Jerusalem in a move not recognized by any major world power. Israel claims all Jerusalem as its eternal capital, while the Palestinians want to make the predominantly Arab eastern sector the home of an independent Palestinian state. Deepening the sense of crisis, the Palestinians on Tuesday warned that Netanyahu's position threatens to destroy hopes for serious peace talks. "What Netanyahu said does not help American efforts and will not serve the efforts of the American administration to return the two sides to indirect negotiations," Palestinian Authority spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina said.

EGYPT RELEASES ISRAELI JOURNALIST, SAYS ISRAELI OFFICIAL

March 22, 2010 Egypt released Sunday an Israeli journalist arrested a week ago trying to cross the border illegally with an African migrant, an Israeli official said. "Israeli journalist Yotam Feldman was released following an intervention by Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai with Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman," said the Israeli official, who asked not to be named. Yotam Feldman arrived back in Israel early Monday. He told Israeli media that he was glad to have experienced the dangers that the

migrants endure. Feldman, a reporter for the Haaretz daily, had been sent by Israel's Channel 10 television to report on migrants trying to illegally cross into Israel, said the official. Feldman and a Ghanaian man were arrested on March 14 along a route used by smugglers who help African migrants into Israel, and he was questioned by Egyptian military prosecutors who had doubts about his story, an Egyptian security source said earlier in the week. The 250-kilometer border between the two countries has become a significant channel for illegal immigrants and drug smugglers, prompting Israel to ask Egypt to step up controls. Egypt has tightened control over the border, but has drawn criticism from human rights watchdogs for its readiness to use force to prevent illegal crossings. Its police have killed dozens of African migrants in the past few years as they tried to cross the border. The Israeli government earlier this month gave final approval for the construction of a barrier along the border in a bid to curb the entry of illegal immigrants. –Agencies.

EGYPT SUMMONS ISRAELI DIPLOMAT OVER JERUSALEM CLASHES

March 18, 2010- Egypt's foreign ministry summoned Israel's charge d'affaires on Wednesday in protest at its "provocative measures" in occupied East Jerusalem, a day after hundreds of Palestinians clashed with Israeli police. Egypt delivered "a clear message to the effect that Israel must immediately stop all provocative and illegal measures that feed the cycle of conflict," the ministry said in a statement. Sixteen Palestinians were hospitalized after Tuesday's violence in annexed East Jerusalem, where tensions have been high since Israel's announcement last week of plans to build 1,600 new homes for Jewish settlers. The reopening of a twice-destroyed Hurva synagogue in the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem's walled Old City on Monday further raised the tensions. –AFP

ARAB LEAGUE CHIEF PUSHES FOR CLOSER TIES WITH IRAN

March 24, 2010 : The Arab League chief wants the 22-nation bloc to engage Iran directly over concerns about its growing influence and its nuclear activities, in a step that could undermine US and Israeli efforts to isolate the country, diplomats said Tuesday. Senior US officials including Defense Secretary Robert Gates toured the region last month to urge Arab allies to back Western efforts to increase the heat on Iran over its nuclear program, including through tougher economic sanctions. Arab diplomats said Secretary-General Amr Moussa will present his proposal in a policy document to a two-day Arab League leaders summit in Sirte, Libya, that starts Saturday. The leaders are expected to discuss a range of regional issues, including stalled Middle East peace efforts and Iran. he engagement would take the form of a forum for regional cooperation and conflict resolution that would include non-Arab nations Iran and Turkey, two Arab League diplomats said. They agreed to discuss details of the proposal on condition of anonymity because of their sensitivity. One of the diplomats, who has seen Moussa's document, said the League's chief hopes the inclusion of Turkey — an increasingly influential Sunni Muslim nation — will provide a powerful counterbalance to Shia Iran. Moussa also wants the leaders to authorize him to initiate direct talks with Tehran on Arabs' concerns over what they view as Iranian meddling in regional affairs, including through its support of militant groups beyond its borders. A senior aide to Moussa, Hisham Youssef,

confirmed the secretary-general would present the ideas to the summit. It is not clear if Moussa has yet consulted with key Arab nations such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which have resisted closer ties with Iran in the past. They and other US-allied Arab nations — most of which are led by Sunni Muslims — have been deeply concerned over the rising power of mainly Shia and Persian Iran in the Middle East. They oppose its support of Iraqi Shia and militant groups like the Palestinian Hamas and the Lebanese Hezbollah and share Washington's concern that Iran's nuclear program is aimed at producing weapons. But the West's strategy in the standoff with Iran also troubles Arab leaders, who fear that its failure would lead to a military confrontation that could spill across their own borders. The US has tried to soothe those worries and has been bolstering defense systems in several Arab nations in the Gulf to combat the possible threat of missiles fired from Iran. A year of efforts by President Barack Obama to engage Iran have hit repeated roadblocks, leaving Washington with few options other than to seek international support for more sanctions. The United States and its Western allies are after a fourth round of UN sanctions to push Iran to stop enriching uranium, a technology that gives Iran a possible pathway to weapons making. Iran says its nuclear program is only for peaceful purposes such as power generation. Another factor behind the Arab push for their own Iran strategy is linked to their frustration over the failure of Washington to stand up to Israel over its insistence on building on occupied land the Palestinians want for a future state. Arab nations look increasingly less likely to align with the US strategy on Iran if they feel they are getting nothing in return on Mideast peace efforts. Skepticism is eroding Arab hopes that Obama will be able to help forge a deal between Israel and the Palestinians to end a conflict that has fueled anti-US sentiment in the region. In another sign of Arab disenchantment, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said Tuesday that his country will press the summit to focus on what is widely believed to be a secret nuclear weapons program in Israel and pressure it to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. "The priority of Arab countries should be to force Israel to join the NPT and place its nuclear facilities under the IAEA guarantees," Aboul Gheit said, referring to the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency.

Economic front

EGYPT'S BUDGET DEFICIT AT 8.5 PCT AS GHALI PUSHES FOR NEW PENSION LAW

March 25, 2010: Minister of Finance Youssef Boutros Ghali said Egypt's budget deficit for fiscal year 2009/10 will come in at 8.5 percent of GDP, predicting that the figure will fall to 7.9 percent for the coming financial year beginning in July. Speaking during a press conference at the Journalists' Syndicate, Ghali said the total budget deficit is expected to reach LE 109.2 billion, with revenues at LE 258.4 billion. In a faxed statement to Bloomberg, the Cabinet predicted revenues will increase to LE 280.5 billion for fiscal year 2010/2011. To achieve the increase in revenues and decrease in deficit, Ghali called for the passage of new pension legislation that would allow savings to increase from \$14 to \$18 billion. Combined with an expected \$10 billion in FDI, the total of \$28 billion would lead to the lowered deficit. "The Egyptian economy is in transition," he said, enumerating the challenges of the financial crisis. He explained that the economic advances, including successive years at 7 percent GDP growth, had raised the

quality of life for many Egyptians. However, the effects of the financial crisis had erased these benefits to the majority of citizens. With stimulus packages totaling LE 32 billion, the fear of recession in Egypt was largely mitigated; national GDP grew 4.7 percent last year and is projected to grow 5.8 percent for fiscal year 2010/11. Yet Ghali explained that to sustain growth, the country needs to invest LE 120 billion in infrastructure every year for the next three years, emphasizing that Egypt cannot borrow the money against the future of its children. He touched on the financial woes engulfing Greece, Spain and Portugal and Egypt's vulnerability to international economic fluctuations.

In the end, he turned the responsibility towards the Egyptian government, focusing again on the pension plan. He harangued a system that allows only LE 1,200 a month (about \$220) as its maximum payment for a lifetime of service.

EGYPT GROWTH SEEN AT 6.5 PCT IN 2011/12: MINISTRY

Reuters March 25, 2010: Egypt's economy is expected to grow by 5.8 percent in the current fiscal year and 6.5 percent in 2011/12 as it shakes off the global economic crisis, Economic Development Minister Osman Mohamed Osman said. The budget deficit is expected to be 8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2010/11, declining to 7.5 percent in 2011/12, his ministry said in a statement. Egypt's fiscal year runs from July to June. "The coming two years are very important to the Egyptian economy," Osman told a news conference. "The Egyptian economy is no longer concerned with the global economic crisis but is concerned with how to return back to its economic growth and how to benefit from the growth when its goals are accomplished," he said. Foreign direct investment (FDI) is seen at \$10 billion, up from an expected \$7.5 billion in 2010/11, the ministry said. The Economic Development Ministry said it expected government investment to reach LE 36.4 billion (\$6.6 billion) in 2010/11, down from a projected LE 49.2 billion for the current fiscal year. It said private investment was seen growing steadily, from an expected LE 114 billion this year, to a projected LE 163 billion in 2010/11 and increasing to LE 217 billion in 2011/12.

WORLD BANK ALLOCATED \$300 MLN TO FUND EGYPTIAN MSEs

Special to Daily News Egypt- March 24, 2010 MSEs account for 40 percent of total employment. Earlier this month the World Bank announced a \$300 million loan to Egypt to finance micro and small enterprises (MSEs). The Enhancing Access to Finance for Micro and Small Enterprises Project is expected to boost job creation and economic growth in the poorest layers of Egyptian society. The loan matures over 28.5 years with a grace period of seven years. "Micro and small businesses are a primary driver for job creation and economic growth in emerging economies," said Shamshad Akhtar, World Bank vice president for the Middle East and North Africa. "In several countries of this region they contribute to economic diversification and play an important role in private sector development. Through increasing access to finance for small business players, we aim at increasing productivity and employment as a development priority in our support to this region." The World Bank reports that MSEs account for 85 percent of non-agricultural private-sector employment and 40 percent of total employment. MSEs have also absorbed the majority of the informal sector. Because of their informal character, MSEs have largely been denied attention in the formation of Egypt's economic

development plans. “It should be made clear that informal activities have always been an integral part of Egyptian economic activity. However, awareness of its potential is only a recent phenomenon attributable to the diminishing role of government and state-owned enterprises, to the slow pace of the formal private sector enterprises in offering work opportunities, and to the recessionary atmosphere,” said Alia El-Mahdi, professor of economics and former vice dean of the faculty of economics and political science at Cairo University, in a report of the International Labor Organization. According to UNDP numbers, 70,000 enterprises are established yearly in Egypt. Small establishments operating with up to four people have registered the highest growth in recent years leading significantly in total employment numbers on companies with more than 50 workers. Sahar Nasr, team leader of the project, said the project was designed to encourage a successful institutional framework that could eventually be scaled up nationwide and replicated in other countries in the MENA region. “This will enable MSEs to access a much broader range of financial services and better quality services. As a result, MSEs will be able to manage risk more effectively, secure lower risk sources of finance, and reduce transaction costs and payment delays,” she added. Microenterprises are defined in Egypt as enterprises with a paid capital of less than LE 50,000; small enterprises are those with capital between LE 50,001 and LE 1 million. The average size of loans that they receive is about LE 1,600, while the penetration of formal borrowing is only 6 percent. According to the World Bank, there around 2.3 million formally registered MSEs, which together with the informal ones might reach a total of 5 million. El-Mahdi puts the number of informal enterprises at 82 percent of the total. The informal character and small unit size of the sector discourages banks from lending to MSEs. Speaking to Al-Ahram, Ghada Waly, assistant resident representative at the UNDP, said that the majority of banks refrain from extending financial services to the poor. “They believed they were a high-risk group, and owners of small enterprises in turn do not resort to the banks to fund their projects. They don’t have the collateral needed to repay their loans,” she said. According to the ILO, 77 percent of invested capital in MSEs is from informal sources, such as previous employment savings, inheritance, borrowing from relatives, remittances or gameia (cooperative saving) schemes. The global economic crisis not only limited the lending banking practices, but also affected negatively some of these informal sources of borrowing for the MSEs. The loan from the World Bank, therefore, is quite timely. The implementing agency of the funds will be the Social Fund for Development (SFD) which has provided significant support to MSE policy efforts in recent years. The loan money will be distributed in two different credit lines. The first one is allocated to microenterprises and disbursed between for different lending distributors: NGOs, microfinance institutions (MFIs), banks, and service agents at post office branches. Microenterprises will also be approached through Islamic microfinance and mobile phone banking. The second credit line will be dedicated to small enterprises. They will have the option of borrowing directly from banks or from NGOs distributing bank loans. The World Bank is encouraging the SFD to target underserved areas and clients as well as women and residents of the 1000 poorest villages in Egypt. Currently the Fund is working with seven banks and 390 NGOs, from which it will choose the World Bank loan distributors. As of June 2009, the SFD has provided finance to about 200,000 microenterprises and 100,000 small enterprises as of June 2009. The Fund was established as the responsible organ for MSEs development with Law 141 of 2004. The

stipulations of the law were aimed at encouraging the large informal sector of the country to legalize. To ease registration, the law stipulates that SFD offices or the branches of the General Authority for Investment and Free Zones in all governorates should issue MSE licenses within 30 days of submission of the required documents. According to the law, governorates are supposed to allocate 10 percent of industrial and construction communities to MSEs as well as information on investment opportunities. Waly warned that despite the advances in easing regulations, MSEs lack the human and material resources to cope with Egyptian bureaucratic procedures. This is one of the barriers that prevent them from entering the formal sector and benefiting from formal finances.

KYPE QUESTIONS EGYPT BAN ON MOBILE INTERNET CALLS

Reuters: March 23, 2010: Internet telephony firm Skype has questioned Egypt's move to ban international calls made through mobile internet connections and said markets should be left open for consumers to choose. National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority head Amr Badawy told Reuters earlier this month it will ban international calls through mobile internet connections. Skype, which has more than 500 million users worldwide, said in an email statement that it was "seeking clarification" from the regulator about the reported ban. "In general, we believe it should be up to consumers, not regulatory authorities, to choose the winners and losers in the communications space. That is what happens in competitive markets," it said. The ban applies to Egypt's three mobile operators — Mobinil, Etisalat Egypt and Vodafone Egypt — offering internet access for computers via USB and other mobile modems, as well as mobile handsets. It does not apply to fixed lines. Egyptian law requires international calls to pass through a network of state-controlled, fixed-line monopoly Telecom Egypt. Egypt's ban comes after the United Arab Emirates said earlier in the month it would not give Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) licenses to international companies such as Skype. In September, India's security agencies recommended a ban on international internet telephony until a system to trace the calls was put in place.

Social front

FROM PYRAMIDS TO PARIS, MILLIONS TO GO DARK FOR EARTH HOUR

Agence France-Presse March 26, 2010: World-famous landmarks including the Pyramids, the Eiffel Tower and Beijing's Forbidden City will go dark Saturday as millions turn out the lights for "Earth Hour", a rolling grassroots movement aimed at tackling climate change. Now in its fourth year, the campaign promises to be the biggest yet with thousands of cities and towns in 125 countries — 37 more than last year — pledging to take part in the aftermath of a failed climate summit last year. December's fractious Copenhagen summit has done nothing to dampen public hopes for meaningful action to avert catastrophic global warming, according to Earth Hour founder Andy Ridley. "There appears to be some fatigue to the politics around it ... But people are far more motivated this year than they were last year," he told AFP. Now run by the WWF, Earth Hour began in Sydney in 2007 when 2.2 million people switched off the lights in their homes, offices and businesses for 60 minutes to make a point about electricity consumption and carbon pollution. The campaign went global the following year, and this Saturday, more than 1,200 of the world's best-known landmarks will kill their lights

at 8:30 pm local time in what organizers describe as a “24-hour wave of hope and action”. A raft of multinational companies including Google, Coca-Cola, Hilton, McDonalds, Canon, HSBC and IKEA have endorsed Earth Hour 2010 and pledged to darken their offices worldwide in support. Sydney’s iconic Harbour Bridge and Opera House will help kick off the energy-saving marathon, with Egypt’s Pyramids and Sphinx, the Trevi Fountain and Tower of Pisa in Italy and all major landmarks in Paris to take part, led by a five-minute blackout of the Eiffel Tower. Some 30 US states and municipalities were to mark Earth Hour with darkness falling on sites including Mount Rushmore, the Empire State Building, the Golden Gate Bridge and Seattle’s Space Needle. The Forbidden City in rapidly developing China, which was blamed by many activists for Copenhagen’s failure, will go dark, along with the “Bird’s Nest” Olympic stadium. Elsewhere in Asia, where 3.3 million people have registered to take part, the world’s biggest observation wheel, the Singapore Flyer, will extinguish its main lights, while official buildings will be blacked out in Seoul. WWF Indonesia said around 200 buildings would take part in Jakarta. Scores of cities in India were expected to participate, including the massive urban centers of Delhi and Mumbai, while the country’s thriving Bollywood film studios were to shut down for the hour. Japan’s heritage-listed Hiroshima Peace Memorial, one of few buildings to survive America’s 1945 atomic bomb attack, will take part, while major companies including Sony, Sharp and Asahi were to switch off across Tokyo. And in Dubai, the world’s tallest skyscraper, the Burj Khalifa tower, will also dim its lights. Residents of Norway’s Longyearbyen, the world’s northernmost town, are set to brave an influx of curious polar bears normally deterred by lights after voting — for the first time — that participating was worth the risk.

“Earth Hour is meant to cross geographic, economic, country boundaries,” said Ridley, admitting that it was mostly a symbolic act.

“It’s one hour, one day, one year. We’re not saving the planet by turning the lights off for one hour.”

But he added: “What you are doing is adding your voice to a global call for action.”

UN RIGHTS BODY NARROWLY PASSES ISLAMOPHOBIA RESOLUTION

Agence France-Presse March 26, 2010The UN Human Rights Council on Thursday narrowly passed a resolution condemning Islamophobic behavior, including Switzerland’s minaret building ban, despite some states’ major reservations. The resolution, criticized by the US as “an instrument of division”, “strongly condemns... the ban on the construction of minarets of mosques and other recent discriminatory measures.”In a November referendum Swiss citizens voted to ban the constructio of new minarets, a move that drew criticisms worldwide. Such measures “are manifestations of Islamophobia that stand in sharp contradiction to international human rights obligations concerning freedoms of religions,” said the resolution. Such acts would “fuel discrimination, extremism and misperception leading to polarization and fragmentation with dangerous unintended and unforeseen consequences,” it charged. Some 20 countries voted in favor of the resolution entitled “combating defamation of religions”, 17 voted against and eight abstained. The resolution also “expresses deep concern ... that Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and terrorism.” It “regrets the laws or administrative measures specifically designed to control and monitor Muslim minorities, thereby stigmatizing them and legitimizing the discrimination they

experience.” Putting forward the resolution on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Pakistan’s ambassador Zamir Akram said that the specific references to Islam, the only religion mentioned in the text, “reflect the existing regrettable situation in some parts of the world where Muslims are being targeted.” Babacar Ba, who represents the OIC in Geneva, also told reporters that the resolution was a “way to reaffirm once again our condemnation of the decision to ban construction of minarets in Switzerland.” “This initiative breaches religious freedom and rights of Muslims to build their places of worship as they wish to,” he added. But while all countries agreed on the need to combat religious discrimination, debate on the resolution was intense as some were against the resolution on fears that it could be used to curb freedom of expression. Mexico for instance, said it was against the resolution as “part of its orientation touches upon political and social principles” which were against principles of the freedom of expression and the question of secularism. The European Union also pointed out that the concept of defamation should not fall under the remit of human rights because it conflicted with the right to freedom of expression, while the United States said free speech could be hindered by the resolution. Eileen Donahoe, US ambassador to the UN, also slammed the resolution as an “ineffective way to address” concerns about discrimination. “We cannot agree that prohibiting speech is the way to promote tolerance, because we continue to see the ‘defamation of religions’ concept used to justify censorship, criminalization, and in some cases violent assaults and deaths of political, racial, and religious minorities around the world,” she said.

Brotherhood MP cites 'abuses' by Interior Ministry

At a meeting of parliament's human rights committee on Monday, Muslim Brotherhood MP Ragab Emeish charged that the Interior Ministry was using hospital ambulances instead of police trucks to transport arrested brotherhood members to detention facilities in violation of the law. Assistant Interior Minister Hamed Rashed denied the allegation, however, saying: "We don't need to borrow ambulances for this purpose since we have our own trucks." Emeish also alleged that the ministry frequently interfered in issues pertaining to public employment. "The ministry must check up on all job applicants before government bodies can hire them," he said. "The education minister has even admitted that the Interior Ministry ordered the transfer of three teachers to different posts in Beheira and the dismissal of 16 students from Al-Azhar University in Damanhour." Rashed replied to the charges, saying: "We don't deal with citizens on the basis of their political or religious ideologies. We protect our citizens by carrying out the law."

Egyptian women’s group demands anti-discrimination law

22 March 2010 in Egypt, Women- CAIRO: The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights (ECWR) demanded in a statement earlier this month, issued on the sidelines of the favorable Constitutional Court ruling that said women can be appointed to the country’s top advisory court, the immediate issuing of a law to combat discrimination in the country in order to secure “equality, citizenship and efficiency for all Egyptians.” Their calls for a law against discrimination comes only weeks after the controversy over the State Council voted to bar women from standing on the top court. The Constitutional Court, which has a woman sitting on it, said that the vote to ban women was unconstitutional in over turning the earlier decision. The women’s center also expressed

“relief and satisfaction” with the Constitutional Court’s ruling and considered it a “tool for establishing justice and law, which ensures women’s equality and considered the ruling as “regaining the rights of women.” The statement pointed out that the decision of the Constitutional Court on the interpretation of the word “Egyptian” applies to both men and women, “is an affirmation of women’s rights as a citizen that does not require discussion or request for clarification, and that women should have all the rights and may not be discriminated against.” It also stressed the important role of the State Council in establishing the rules of justice and protecting the rights and freedoms of society.

For her part, Nehad Abul Komsan, the head of the ECWR, expressed her full confidence that the Council will apply the procedure for appointing graduates from the Faculty of Law of both sexes, and “in light of specific criteria for measuring and according to the efficiency and expertise and consistent with the principles of the Egyptian Constitution and international covenants.”

Egypt bans international Internet voice calls

Egypt has banned international calls made through mobile Internet connections, one of Egypt's top three mobile phone operators said on Tuesday, which would include internet Skype calls. "The National Telecom Regulatory Authority issued a decision to stop VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) and we stopped it on Saturday," Vodafone Egypt's external affairs director Khaled Hegazy told AFP. The ban applies to Egypt's three mobile operators, Vodafone, Mobinil and Etisalat. Egyptian law states that all international calls must pass through state-owned Egypt Telecom, which recorded lower than expected earnings in 2009. The ban has not been extended to international voice calls made over fixed-line Internet, such as through DSL. Skype and other providers offering VoIP services bypass standard telephone networks by channeling voice and video calls over the Internet, allowing users to make calls free of charge.

Egypt’s April 6 movement gets behind ElBaradei

20 March 2010 in Egypt, Featured, Over 100 signatures were collected Friday evening at the Hisham Mubarak Law Center (HMLC) in support of Mohamed ElBaradei and his proposed constitutional reforms. Smoke wafted from the end of a lit cigarette as a dozen young men spoke animatedly around a table littered with papers, overflowing ash trays, and half-empty tea cups around 8pm. Among those present were Ahmed Maher, Mohamed Adel and other activists and members of the 6 April Youth Movement. These activists are part of a larger group supporting ElBaradei’s National Association for Change and they are currently collecting signatures on a statement that affirms their support for ElBaradei’s changes. The statement calls for constitutional amendments, an end to the 29-year-old Emergency Law, international observers for elections and provisions for Egyptians abroad to vote, among other things. The movement wants to gather three million signatures. As of Friday night, they had around 3,000. Sunday, March 21, Egyptian Mother’s Day, will mark the beginning of a street campaign to collect more signatures from people on the streets. According to Mohamed Adel, a blogger and member of the 6 April movement, everyone except the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) is supporting the movement, and signatures have even been collected from military officers. The statement signed Friday night is the same shown to

Bikya Masr in the office of George Ishaq, the former leader of the opposition Kefaya movement, last week. Adel said the movement has received signatures by mail and via the Internet. In a few weeks time, he will travel to Dubai to collect signatures from Egyptians living abroad. "Dreams are coming soon in this land," Adel said. Asked if the movement had faced problems from security forces, Adel said as of now they have had no trouble. "They can't stop us," he added. Once the necessary number of signatures is collected, the papers will be sent to Parliament to demand constitutional changes. Should the target not be reached, Ishaq says he has another plan in mind. "But I can't tell you what it is," he said, smiling.

Egypt's government to restrict NGO vote monitoring

Monday, March 22, 2010 -- Egypt's government is seeking to severely restrict the work of non-governmental organizations, including preventing them from monitoring elections, three dozen NGOs said Monday. Draft legislation to curtail local NGOs will be brought before parliament in the coming months, the groups said in a letter of protest. An official at the government ministry responsible for overseeing the work of NGOs confirmed there was new legislation but refused to discuss its contents because it has yet to be sent to parliament. The 36 groups that protested the draft say it is intended to prevent the monitoring of a parliamentary election to be held by the end of the year and a presidential election next year. In a separate step, 100 opposition lawmakers introduced a bill of their own aimed at allowing free and transparent elections, but this stands virtually no chance of clearing a parliament firmly under the control of President Hosni Mubarak's ruling party. Opposition to Mubarak's nearly three decades of unchallenged leadership was stirred recently by the return to Egypt of Mohammed ElBaradei, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and former chief of the U.N.'s nuclear monitoring agency, which is headquartered in Vienna. Since his return earlier this year, ElBaradei has spoken forcefully for constitutional changes to make Egypt's elections freer and fairer. He is forming a coalition to press for the reforms, without which it is unlikely he could run against Mubarak. The government's legislation would penalize any NGO or advocacy group working without a government permit, the protest letter said. About 25,000 such groups would have to join a government-controlled federation that would vet their licenses and watch over their activities and funding. "This will hijack the organizations' free will and subjugate it to the will of the government," said Bahey el-Din Hassan of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies and a signatory of the statement. The opposition's draft legislation calls for electronic voter registration and election monitoring by the judiciary. Egypt currently has no independent election monitoring. It would also bar children of the head of state and other senior government officials from running for the presidency. Mubarak is believed to be grooming his younger son, Gamal, to succeed him. Mubarak has not said if he will run for re-election next year, but some leaders of the ruling National Democratic Party have suggested he will. The 2005 presidential election was the first to allow multiple candidates, but tough requirements limit who can run.

Corruption on the rise in Egypt

21 March 2010 in Egypt, Media: Transparency International reported on Sunday that regulations and poor law enforcement are part of the problems in Egypt toward the fight against corruption, which the organization says is increasing. According to the Berlin-based organization, corruption fighting in Egypt is on the rise. It said that efforts by the

government to combat corruption have been curtailed by poor regulations taken and a law enforcement community who continues to take bribes and allow those with money to get off from their crimes. “In Egypt, the essentials for good governance are in place, but in order to uproot corruption, existing rules and regulations need to be applied and legal provisions enforced,” said Omnia Hussein, program coordinator at Transparency International, in an emailed report published by Bloomberg News agency. The organization added that political interference in anti-corruption efforts and a lack of “whistle-blowing mechanisms and access to information, coupled with excessive limitations on civil society freedoms and the media” are responsible for the rising corruption in the country. The anti-corruption agency said that government appointments and close relationships between politicians and businesses in the country are “an issue of concern.” The report comes as no surprise to Egyptian analysts and observers, who have been demanding an increase in efforts to fight against corruption at the highest levels. They point to the arrests of leading editors for what their newspapers publish, government appointments of businessmen to Cabinet positions and the refusal to submit to the rule of law as examples of the corrupt state of affairs in Egypt. “We need a new Constitution and a new leadership if we are to have the country we want,” said former Kefaya opposition movement chief George Ishaq, who has been ardent in his push toward greater transparency. “If we can get reforms established and real and open elections this country will be changed quickly, but we have to stand up against this corrupt and arrogant government.” He specifically mentioned Ibrahim Eissa, editor of the daily al-Dustour newspaper, who has been under attack by the government in recent years, including receiving a number of jail sentences over his newspapers coverage of Egyptian politicians, including President Hosni Mubarak. Egypt to resume energy subsidies phase out Egypt in July will resume its gradual elimination of energy subsidies to industries that are not energy intensive, the daily Al Borsa quoted Egypt’s trade and industry minister as saying. The government suspended a plan to reduce the subsidies after the 2008 global economic crisis. “With the start of the new fiscal year, the government will resume the policy it laid down three years ago to eliminate energy subsidies to factories,” the paper quoted the minister, Rachid Mohamed Rachid, as saying. Egypt’s fiscal year starts July 1. Energy-intensive industries already receive energy at international prices, al-Borsa cited him as saying. “The second half of the current year will witness the first stage of price rises, then annual increases will be implemented to reach world prices,” Rachid said.

US trains Egypt’s State Security

22 March 2010 in Egypt, Featured, News, United States

CAIRO: A confidential official United States government memo declassified on Monday, said that the US spends nearly five million Egyptian Pounds (\$900,000) a year to train the country’s security forces in an effort to combat terrorism. The same report praised the performance of the US embassy in Cairo and its management of Egyptian-American relations. However, the report complained of the congestion in the streets, pollution and noise for the staff of the Embassy in Cairo. The report revealed the presence of US armored vehicles belonging to the embassy are stationed in Egypt. The report, issued by the US Office of the Inspector General in November 2009, but not declassified until last Monday, said that the the relationship between the American diplomatic mission and the State Security in Egypt, including the police, “is a close, cooperative and effective

relationship.” The report, issued in 118 pages, added that the regional security officer at the Embassy “lead efforts to help the state security in Egypt to improve its newly established anti-terrorist unit.” The report, which carries the classification “sensitive, but not prohibited” after it had been declassified, revealed that the US government has allocated funds for training operations to combat terrorism in Egypt during 2008 and 2009. The report recommended “the need to encourage Washington and the Egyptians to expand control over the borders to the areas beyond the borders of Gaza, and the development of a broader strategy to combat the smuggling of weapons” into the Gaza Strip. The report revealed that the American embassy in Cairo has recently established a so-called working group to combat smuggling to “focus on issues of border security and smuggling of weapons.” The report recommended the disposal of the Embassy’s armored vehicles, which have “become dispensable due to the hot weather of Cairo.” The report said that the embassy currently has 140 vehicles, including 49 full and light armored vehicles, used by the embassy “because of security threats,” pointing to the damaged glass of vehicles, because it is directly subjected to the sun’s heat in a “desert climate such as Egypt’s”. Regarding the role of the embassy in Egyptian-American relations, the report said the embassy is “one of the largest US diplomatic missions abroad and the most complex and important,” pointing out that the budget for the embassy is around \$72 million annually. The report said that Ambassador Margaret Scoeby has “led a successful collective effort to break the impasse with the Egyptian government on the amount and use of the annual economic aid, as it provided continuous guidance for the overall aid strategy.” It added that the ambassador was able to “find a solution, satisfactory to all of the United States and Egypt, and that the Egyptian government accepted its aid money during the year, which was covered by the investigation.” The report also added that the diplomatic efforts of the ambassador and AID in Cairo, “helped pave the way for the travel of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to the United States in 2009, after his last visit in 2004, due to the tense relations with the Bush administration.” About living conditions in Cairo, the report described the city as “the capital of a huge traffic circle, with bad air and noise, and few places to park cars.” The report complained in another part, saying that Cairo “could be a difficult place to live, in the presence of issues such as pollution, traffic and high sexual harassment of women, all of which are the daily challenges to the population of Cairo.” The report said that “US personnel [of the embassy] and their family members living in different areas, very often face long journeys every day to work and school.” The report, however, showed a high level of satisfaction among the staff of the embassy from the level of education received by their children in Egypt. It said “there is a high level of satisfaction among the staff of the mission regarding the quality of education provided in schools in Cairo.” But for most, the shocking revelation that Washington trains and helps assist the country’s state security forces, which have been accused by international and local rights group of torture and gross human rights violations, is likely to hit home hardest for Egyptians.

Egypt ready for Earth Hour

MENA Friday, March 26, 2010 Egypt will plunge into darkness for an hour Saturday night, March 27, as it joins the rest of the world in this special event to save Mother Earth. Officials are making final arrangements at the Pyramids and Sphinx, Cairo Tower, Bibliotheca Alexandrina and the Mohamed Ali Citadel, as lights and other

electrical appliances will be turned off at exactly 8:30 p.m. until 9:30 p.m. for the third global Earth Hour activity. An estimated one billion people across 92 countries including Egypt, will be participating in this year's 'Earth Hour' movement hailed as the largest global earth awareness campaign in history, by preparing to turn off- or at least reduce - the use of non-essential lighting and electrical appliances on 27 March, from 8:30 PM to 9:30 PM, local time. Earth Hour uses the simple action of turning off lights and appliances for an hour to deliver a powerful message on the need for climate change solutions. Ninety-two other countries will also conduct the Earth Hour activity at 8:30 p.m. of March 27, to take their stand against climate change. Event organiser Earth Hour Philippines said that as of Thursday evening, 929 towns and 112 cities, consisting of at least 15 million Filipinos, pledged to switch off non-essential lights and appliances in support for the occasion.

New IslamOnline planned

Friday, March 26, 2010 workers at the influential Muslim website IslamOnline.net said on Thursday that they would launch an alternative website where they could demonstrate their ability to separate what they call “editorial policies from money”. Prolonged strike continues: Employees at the IslamOnline website protesting at their 6th of October City premises of the website, west of Cairo on Thursday. They have been on strike for 11 days now. The workers, who continued to stage a sit-in at the premises of the website in 6th of October City, about 40 kilometres outside Cairo, against interference by the Qatari company owning the website, said they were contacting several writers and funding organisations across the Muslim world that could have interest in offering finance for the new project. “The staff of the website will contribute the first amount of money necessary for launching the new website as a starter,” said Abdel-Hadi Abou Taleb, the Arabic desk editor at the website. “They all have a keen desire to continue to spread the message of IslamOnline.net,” he told The Egyptian Gazette Online in an interview. IslamOnline is by far the most read website on Islam. Between one and three million people visit the website every month, according to its staff. It offers information about intricate issues in the Islamic religion and also focuses on the news of Muslims worldwide. A few days ago, however, the staff of the website about 350 people, went up in arms against the Qatari company that funds them for what they described as the intervention of the company in the editorial policies of the website. They say the Qatari company wants to silence the moderate tone of the website and replace it with a radical one. “They want to deface the moderate nature of the work we do,” say website journalists in their e-mails to members of the media. On Tuesday, the Qatari government sacked Sheikh Youssef el-Qaradawi, an Egyptian-born founder of website and the board chairman of the funding company. This has left a bitter taste in the mouths of the staff of IslamOnline because the renowned Sheikh was their biggest supporter against the schemes of the Qatari company, according to some staff members.

The journalists of the website say their alternative project, which might take shape in a month or two, will have the same message, but not the same brand. “We’re already in contact with Muslim figures around the world,” said Ayman Qenawi, the English Desk editor at the website. “These people might be interested in sponsoring our new project. We ve several sponsors already,” he added.

Iraq
Political front
Elections
Iraq Vote Count Shows Maliki, Allawi Neck And Neck

March 17, 2010-- With nearly 80 percent of the votes counted from Iraq's March 7 parliamentary elections, the main winners appear to be Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and challenger Iyad Allawi. But the two front-runners are neck and neck. The vote count so far shows Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah coalition narrowly ahead of Maliki's State of Law alliance by less than 9,000 votes. The Iraqi National Alliance, a coalition of Shi'ite religious groups, looks set to come in third, followed by the Kurdistan Alliance, composed of the two main factions in the autonomous Kurdish region. With 20 percent of the vote remaining to be counted, the balance between the two front-runners still could easily tip either way. **Coalition Talk;** But what appears almost certain is that neither will be able to amass enough seats in parliament to rule alone. Already in Baghdad the talk is all about coalition building, and which party will partner with others. One senior candidate with the Al-Iraqiyah list, Intisar Allawi, a relative of Allawi, said on March 16 that the group held "very good and positive talks" with the Iraqi National Alliance and with the Kurdistan Alliance. At the same time, Prime Minister Maliki has invited all parties in Iraq to join negotiations with his State of Law alliance. With tensions high, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is cautioning that final vote tallies won't be known for some time yet. "We need another few days to announce the final results of the elections. We will hold a news conference to announce the results, following a meeting of IHEC's board of commissioners to ratify the final results," an IHEC official said on March 16. Complicating the announcement of final results are the charges of vote fraud lodged by many parties, including both front-runners. However, UN officials advising the IHEC have said they see no evidence of vote fraud widespread enough to undermine the outcome. **Redrawing Political Map** It is already clear that the balance of power in the new Iraqi parliament will be very different from what it is today. The parliament has been dominated over the past four years by an alliance of Shi'ite religious parties. Those parties swept the first Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2005, when Sunni Arabs largely boycotted the polls. Now, the Sunnis have come back to the ballot box, helping propel Allawi's secular bloc to prominence. By contrast, the Shi'ite religious parties have lost ground to both Allawi and Maliki, who also ran on a secular and nationalist message. The only group among the previously dominant Shi'ite religious parties that appears to have gained ground with this month's election is that of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr has always been a maverick in Iraqi politics -- at times a violent one. His group demands an immediate U.S. troop withdrawal and fought U.S. forces in 2004. It also was blamed for some of the country's worst sectarian violence before it was suppressed by the Iraqi military in 2008. In the north, the partial vote tally for the flashpoint province of Kirkuk shows little sign tensions there will be eased by the election results. Allawi's nationalist list holds only a slim lead there over its main challenger, the Kurdistan Alliance. The oil-rich province is claimed by three different Iraqi ethnic groups: Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans. **U.S. Withdrawal 'On Schedule'**U.S. officials are counting on the latest parliamentary elections to help smooth the way for Washington's planned troop withdrawal. The United States hopes by the end of August to halve the number of its

troops in Iraq to 50,000. Those remaining are to engage only in noncombat operations, such as training. U.S. commanders have called the largely peaceful voting on March 7 a sign the country could be on the road to stability. U.S. General David Petraeus told a U.S. Senate panel on March 16 he planned to stick to the withdrawal timetable, which envisages removing all U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. But he also noted that the situation in Iraq remained fragile. He said the U.S. military was still reviewing its plans for how best to manage its drawdown.

Iran Praises Iraq Election As Shi'ite Ally Leads

March 16, 2010 (Reuters) -- Iran has congratulated Iraqis over an election that is likely to keep a bloc led by its Shi'ite ally, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, in power after a campaign in which Tehran's influence was a divisive issue. Maliki's main challenger, former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who headed a secular list mixing Shi'ite and Sunni Arabs, made a high-profile visit to Saudi Arabia during the campaign to improve ties with Iran's biggest Sunni rival in the Persian Gulf region. "All international supervision has confirmed the soundness of the Iraqi elections. This is a success and we congratulate Iraqis," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said at a weekly press briefing on English-language state television. "We hope we'll be able to see the formation of the new government as soon as possible...the whole region will benefit from security in Iraq." Early results from the March 7 parliamentary vote show Maliki's State of Law bloc ahead in seven of 18 provinces, while strong Sunni Arab support has propelled Allawi's secularist Al-Iraqiyah list into second. A member of Iraq's Shi'ite Arab majority, Maliki has maintained close ties with non-Arab Shi'ite power Iran, Iraq's neighbor, which is locked in dispute with the United States over its nuclear energy program and influence in Arab countries. Analysts say leading Sunni Arab states such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia would be more comfortable with a government led by Allawi. Politicians have criticized the delay in publishing the election results. Allawi's list has put forward a long list of complaints about alleged fraud, including ballots found in garbage and more than 200,000 soldiers who were unable to vote because their names did not appear on official rosters. Maliki, who came to power in 2005, was unpopular in Arab capitals when sectarian fighting worsened in 2006, confirming the marginalization of Sunni Arabs who dominated Iraq under former leader Saddam Hussein. Sunnis see Maliki as a Shi'ite leader beholden to Tehran. The United States, which toppled Hussein in 2003, still has troops in Iraq who are preparing to withdraw before 2012 -- a process that could be key to U.S. President Barack Obama's political fortunes.

Iraq's Kurds Lose Political Dominance In Kirkuk

Last updated (GMT/UTC): 21.03.2010 Before the March 7 parliamentary elections in Iraq, there was no question of who dominated politics in mixed-population Kirkuk -- it was the two main political factions in the neighboring Kurdish autonomous region. But as the vote count from Kirkuk city and its surrounding Tamin Province neared its conclusion, it was clear that the political landscape was changing dramatically. The secular Al-Iraqiyah coalition and the Kurdistan Alliance appeared to be in a virtual tie, with the balance between them shifting by only wafer-thin differences as the vote tally rose. If the current balance stood, it would mean that the divided province's Turkoman

and Arab populations would have a much louder political voice than before. That, in turn, could complicate Kurdish hopes of one day incorporating oil-rich Kirkuk into their autonomous region. Turkoman politicians in Kirkuk make no secret of the fact that they competed in the parliamentary contest precisely with that goal in mind. **United Against Kurdish Ambitions;** Hicran Kazanci head of the foreign relations department of the Iraqi Turkoman Front, tells RFE/RL's Turkmen Service that Turkoman candidates enlisted in a variety of coalitions for the March 7 race. But he says they all agree on one thing: "Despite the fact the Turkomans went into the election with different coalitions, on major and essential subjects they are united," Kazanci says. "For example, about the future status of Kirkuk, all of them are united in opposition toward annexing Kirkuk into any federation. And they are united in making Turkoman one of Iraq's official languages."



A map Iraq's ethnic makeup

Turkoman and Arab politicians made up the vast bulk of Al-Iraqiyah's candidates in the local race, coming for the first time under a single political umbrella in the divided province. That is in sharp contrast to much of Kirkuk's recent history, where the three main population groups -- Kurdish, Turkoman, and Arab -- have all competed against each other. In the years immediately following the United States' toppling of Saddam Hussein, both Turkomans and Arabs boycotted attempts to form a provincial government. They expressed anger over what they said were Kurdish efforts to appropriate the province de facto after moving Kurdish peshmerga fighters into the area to support the U.S. invasion. The Turkomans and Arabs only agreed to take part in the running of the province after a power-sharing deal in 2008. Under that deal, the provincial governor is a Kurd while his two deputies are an Arab and a Turkoman. But Kirkuk's provincial parliament is still disputed after Arabs and Turkomans largely stayed away from the first election in 2005, handing the Kurds a majority. The Iraqi government excluded Tamin

Province from the January 2009 provincial elections due to fears of sparking sectarian unrest. Given this background, the fact that this month's elections for deputies to the national parliament went peacefully in Tamin Province is a major surprise. To ensure security, the Iraqi police fielded 56 mobile patrols in Kirkuk city on election day, while Kurdish peshmerga also spread out less obtrusively across the provincial capital. Simira Balay, a correspondent for RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq, said the Kurdish coalition was caught unaware by the election results, after it "had expected to dominate the election, but it seems the Kurdish vote split among a number of Kurdish parties, including Goran." She noted that the Kurdish bloc was "neck and neck with the Iraqiya list, which got most of the Turkoman and Arab vote." The Kurdish coalition comprises the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Goran, a recently created Kurdish opposition party, scored well in recent elections by running on an anticorruption platform. **Resolving Kirkuk Issue;** In the aftermath of the elections, Kurdish political leaders -- like their Turkoman counterparts -- are stressing unity in their position over Kirkuk. The Kurds see the city as the natural and historic capital of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. And they insist upon holding a referendum in the province to determine its future status. "The issue of Kirkuk is [already] in the Iraqi political arena to be solved in accordance with Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution," says Rizgar Ali, the Kurdish head of Kirkuk's provincial council. Major steps under Article 140 include resolving property disputes created by Hussein's policy of "Arabizing" Kirkuk, the holding of a census and conducting a referendum to decide the province's future status. To date, progress on all these steps has been painfully slow. Most property disputes remain unresolved and unrest in northern Iraq has prevented a census. The referendum, originally planned for no later than the end of 2007, has slipped accordingly. That limbo is unacceptable to the Kurds, who are sure to use their full representation in the Baghdad parliament, including deputies from the Kurdish region, to continue to press for swift implementation of Article 140. But it is likely that both the Turkomans and Arabs will use their new voice in the federal legislature to try to subject Article 140 to further negotiation. According to Rakan Said, the Arab deputy governor of Kirkuk, the election results "laid the ground for dialogue." He adds that now there are "two parties to the issue of Kirkuk: one is Al-Iraqiyah and the other is the Kurdish coalition. So the platform [for dialogue] has become clear and without interference." **New Political Landscape;** Al-Iraqiyah, headed by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, ran on a nonsectarian, nationalist platform. Its success on the national level as a joint front-runner with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition has appeared to realign Iraqi politics by relegating sectarian- and ethnic-based parties to the background. As the vote count **neared its end** and with **challenges to a final tally** continuing, the Shi'ite religious parties' Iraqi National Alliance were in third place and the Kurdistan Alliance in fourth. Still, Iraqi parliamentary politics is all about making coalitions and in the past the Kurds have proved adept at playing the role of kingmakers. Whether the Kurdish parties can continue to do so now, or are relegated to a less prominent role, will directly affect Kirkuk's eventual status. The Kurds want it to be part of Iraqi Kurdistan. And the newly empowered Kirkuk Turkoman-Arab bloc is just as determined to play the spoiler. Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans all claim the province around Kirkuk based on a long historical presence in the area. The Turkic-speaking Turkomans, who claim to be the second-largest group in northern Iraq after the Kurds, trace their presence to the time of the

Seljuk Empire, when migrating Turkic tribes conquered a vast expanse of territory stretching from modern Iran to Turkey.

Allawi Edges Ahead Of PM Again In Iraq Election

March 20, 2010 (Reuters) -- Secularist Iyad Allawi edged ahead of Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki today in a neck-and-neck election race that has laid bare the ethnic and sectarian divisions threatening Iraq's fragile stability. The new results from Iraq's electoral commission, with about 93 percent of an early vote count complete, gave a lead of some 8,000 votes to Allawi, a Shi'ite former prime minister with wide support among minority Sunnis who fear consolidation of the dominance of Shi'ite religious parties in Iraq since 2003. The lead in the popular vote has changed hands several times and the eventual winner may be able to claim a symbolic victory, but no matter the final result both Maliki and Allawi will need to engage in long and potentially divisive talks to try to form a coalition capable of forming a government. As early results trickle in after the March 7 polls, the divided vote is a reminder of Iraq's precarious position on the seventh anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein and plunged Iraq into a bloody civil conflict. Tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have died since 2003, along with more than 4,000 foreign soldiers. Iraq may have held one of the most competitive elections in the region's history, but the course of its democracy is far from certain. It is far safer than it was at the peak of sectarian killing, but a tenacious insurgency keeps Iraq under siege just as U.S. troops halve their force by this summer.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki A close election may actually exacerbate those threats by making it harder to form a government coalition and accommodate the conflicting visions, and personal political ambitions, of groups as dissimilar as Maliki's mainly Shi'ite State of Law coalition and Allawi's cross-sectarian Iraqiya list. Maliki, who has won over many Iraqis with his nationalist rhetoric and steps to crush sectarian violence in Iraq, leads in seven provinces in central and southern Iraq, six of them mainly Shi'ite. The prime minister now has a narrow 6-percent lead over Allawi in Baghdad, the diverse capital city, but he has virtually no support in largely Sunni provinces where many are skeptical of his Shi'ite Islamist roots and condemn his support of a ban of hundreds of candidates, including prominent Sunnis. Allawi, who has tried to model himself as a nonsectarian outsider, swept western and northern areas home to large numbers of Sunni Arabs. The physician and fluent English speaker holds a narrow lead over a Kurdish bloc in Kirkuk, the disputed city that is Iraq's northern oil hub.

Jumble of Alliances; Both Maliki and Allawi supporters are predicting they will get more than 90 seats in Iraq's 325-member parliament. Full early results will be released in the next few days, and final results may take weeks. Each camp has suggested an alliance between the two men is unlikely, making it even more important where other contenders, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), a Shi'ite bloc closely allied to Iran, and an alliance of two leading Kurdish parties, will throw their weight. Even before full results are out, fissures are appearing in electoral blocs such as the INA, suggesting the calculus of coalition-building will be even more complex than expected. Sami al-Askari, a politician close to Maliki, predicted Allawi's alliance would soon splinter. "I don't think this coalition will last long," he said. Both State of Law and Iraqiya have complained of vote irregularities, and such an outcry could intensify if one bloc feels it was edged out of an

outright win. "Even if fraud was limited, we still feel cheated," said Jamal al-Bateekh, an Iraqiya candidate. One interesting outcome of this month's vote was the miserable showing some of Iraq's most important leaders, reflecting perhaps Iraqis' exasperation with poor services, rampant corruption, and indiscriminate violence. Compared to the 543,747 votes Maliki himself got, and 354,097 for Allawi, Interior Minister Jawad Bolani got just 2,992 votes. Defense Minister Abdel Qader Jassim did even worse, with a personal tally of only 687 votes. Qasim al-Aboudi, spokesman for Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, said officials had so far examined 1,150 complaints and rejected ballots from about 60 polling stations, out of 50,000 nationwide, for various reasons.

Iraq Prime Minister Calls For Response To Demand For Vote Recount

21.03.2010 Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has called on Iraq's high electoral commission to respond to demands from several political blocs for a recount of votes from the March 7 parliamentary elections. Maliki's call comes as his State of Law alliance is being edged out of first place by secularist Iyad Allawi, with most of the votes counted. He stopped short of demanding a recount himself. But a statement from his office said he wants the commission to respond immediately so as "to preserve the legitimacy of the electoral process." The statement further said that as the head of Iraq's armed forces, Maliki wants to protect political stability and prevent a return to violence. Latest results place former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's grouping ahead by about 8,000 votes, with about 93 percent of the vote count complete. But no matter the final result, both Maliki and Allawi's will need to engage in talks with other parties to try to form a coalition capable of forming a government.

Iraq's Election Watchdog Rejects Calls For Recount

21.03.2010 Iraqi President Jalal Talabani has issued a statement urging a recount in some areas of votes from the country's March 7 parliamentary elections. The request suggested that ballots be counted anew "to ensure justice and absolute transparency." But Iraq's Independent High Election Commission rejected the idea, saying final results would be issued on March 26. "In every country in the world, a mere suspicion [of a miscount] is not enough; a political entity will call for recounting votes whenever it has doubts and feels that there was a mistake at a polling station," the head of Iraq's Independent High Election Commission, Faraj al-Haidari, said on March 21. "It is impossible to recount the votes of a city or of Iraq as a whole for a mere suspicion. With a manual count, this means we redo the whole election. If you don't believe in the most sophisticated technology for vote counting, how can you believe in an official using a pen and paper to calculate figures?" The electoral commission has said that it is thoroughly investigating claims of fraud. In at least five cases it has discarded ballots cast at polling stations because of irregularities. Candidates have three days after the release of final results to launch formal challenges. Talabani's demand of the commission came one day after Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki urged the same commission to respond to demands from several political blocs for a recount. Maliki had called on the vote watchdog "to respond immediately to the demands of those blocs to preserve the political stability and prevent the security situation from deteriorating and avoid the return of violence," according to Reuters. The vote count, which is at 93 percent after weeks of counting, revealed a tight

race between Maliki's State of Law alliance and the Iraqiya list of former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. The latest results indicate that Allawi's party was slightly ahead of Maliki's group.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is a source of emulation across the Shi'ite world.

February 25, 2010 Recently, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's highest Shi'ite authority, urged voters to turn out for that country's March 7 parliamentary elections. He warned that that failure to do so would "allow some to achieve illegitimate goals." To be sure, Sistani is no politician, though he is not apolitical, either. He doesn't issue political or legal orders. He doesn't direct Iraq's policies on ethnic issues, oil exploitation, foreign relations, political parties, media, courts, or security. He just gives advice from his home in Al-Najaf. Still, many in Iraq's majority Shi'ite community follow him -- not because he is an official "supreme leader" like Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and not because the Iraqi government requires the people to either follow him or face punishment, as in Iran. They follow Sistani because Iraqi Shi'a respect him as a religious authority, an influential marja, or marja-i taqlid (source of emulation). Although it is difficult for even Sunni Muslims -- let alone non-Muslims -- to understand it, in the Shi'ite confession it is extremely important to have and follow a marja. Marjas provide advice and even make decisions when you are in doubt on religious, social, and even political questions. Marjas are recognized and respected ayatollahs, usually grand ayatollahs, who are qualified and accepted by the public to make decisions within the framework of Islamic rules and traditions. Imagine you are a Shi'ite Muslim facing a long intercontinental flight and you aren't sure how to arrange your prayers or ablutions. Or imagine there is a political event or dispute in your society, such as an election, and you are not sure how to act. You check the book of your marja, the risalah, and find the answers you need. Every marja has his own risalah. For things that cannot be found in those books, you turn to the nearest representative of your marja, write a letter or e-mail or, more recently, raise the question on the website of your marja and receive your answer. One of my late uncles, Ayatollah Abdollah Mojtahedi, used to tell me that a marja should have three qualities. First, he should be a deeply knowledgeable and experienced religious authority. Second, he should be "clean" from any personal or group interests in politics or business. And, third, he should be fair and moderate. And, my uncle added, the decision to follow a marja is entirely a free and personal one. Nobody can impose on you an obligation to follow a particular cleric or force to renounce your chosen marja. **From Emulation To Dictation;** My uncle died before Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and didn't live to see what happened in its wake to the centuries-old concept of the marja in Iran. While still in exile in Paris, the founder of the Islamic republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, promised to become "just a spiritual leader" following his triumphant return to Iran. He would, he said, go back to the seminary in Qom as a cleric and just advise the people without ruling the country. In short, he promised to adopt the role that Sistani has been playing in the seminary of Al-Najaf for decades. Before the revolution, Khomeini was more celebrated as a political fighter and challenger of the shah's regime than as a respected religious authority, a marja. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini initially said he would be a simple "spiritual leader." Upon returning to Tehran, however, Khomeini became a "supreme leader," an "imam," which was an innovation that none of us understood then. He formulated the constitution, appointed the cabinet, changed the

country's leadership at will, and started personally to pronounce the final word on everything from security issues and foreign policy to who should be punished or which political party or newspaper should be banned. His successor, Ali Khamenei, also a fighter against the shah rather than a religious authority, was hastily "promoted" to the title ayatollah in order to become supreme leader. His elevation was the culmination of the system that was created in 1979, in which only one faction among the victors of the revolution usurped all the powers of the executive, legislature, and judiciary and began brutally to eliminate all opponents. This new system was formulated with this statement: "Under the open sky, the only just position is that of the supreme leader." This simplistic ideology was pronounced by Ahmad Khatami, an ultraconservative member of the Assembly of Experts that elects or fires the supreme leader. Another member of the same body, Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, reportedly issued a fatwa before last June's presidential election, saying that it is permissible to "change" or manipulate election results to prevent the victory of the enemies of the supreme leadership. According to the official ideology, the supreme leader rules "on behalf and in absence of the Mahdi," the 12th Imam whom Shi'a believe went into hiding in the ninth century to return one day in order to restore global justice and peace. This concept, now the official policy of Iran, strictly bans any trace of opposition to the supreme leader and his will and allows the government to act ruthlessly against whomever they consider enemies of the system -- from leftists and democrats to former friends and dissident clerics and ayatollahs. Both Khatami and Yazdi are clerics, as are most other members of the Assembly of Experts, the Guardians Council (charged with the interpretation of laws and the vetting of candidates in elections), and many members of the parliament and the cabinet of ministers. But very few of them are respected, fair, moderate religious authorities -- a marja -- clean of political or business interests. Most of the influential and popular marjas, such as Grand Ayatollahs Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari and Hossein Ali Montazeri, were put under house arrest or forced into passivity. Under the new system, more than 200,000 mullahs became receivers of government salaries and benefits -- and were therefore largely silenced. This was an unprecedented development in Iranian history, during which Shi'ite clerics were always dependent solely on voluntary religious donations. **No Longer Followed;** The more the Islamic regime's leading clerics have distanced themselves from religion in order to cling to power, the more they have come to depend on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij militia, and the notorious "plainclothes militia" to maintain their positions by force. The five years of Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency have seen the further strengthening of the Revolutionary Guard and the gradual transition from religious authoritarianism to a military dictatorship with religious trappings. The other day I asked a relative in Tehran who our current marja is. I knew that our larger family once followed Grand Ayatollahs Muhsin al-Hakim (in the 1960s), Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari (1970s) and Abol-Qasim al-Khoei (1980s). But who have we followed since Khoei's death in 1982? "Mr. Sistani," my relative answered. He said he believed most Iranian Shi'a recognize Sistani as their marja. "I have his risalah at home. He has representatives in most Iranian cities that you can consult with, or you can send his hawza, his seminary, an e-mail and get an answer."

"There are two major differences between Mr. Sistani's views and those of Khamenei," another source from Isfahan told me. "Sistani believes that Shi'ite clerics should stay out

of active politics and remain as religious authorities," the source said. "He also thinks nobody can claim to be acting on behalf and in absence of the Hidden Imam. And you know well what the [supreme] leader believes."

Neither my relative in Tehran nor my source in Isfahan, both devout Shi'ite Muslims but still increasingly upset with the regime, have participated in the antigovernment demonstrations that have rocked the country since last June's election. I think the regime will be finished if people like them begin doing so.

With their aggressive policy of distancing themselves from the foundations of Shi'ite Islam and the intensifying oppression, Khamenei and his lieutenant, Ahmadinejad, are gradually ensuring the alienation of the majority of the Shi'ite faithful.

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Features

Election Campaigning In Iraq, A Local View

March 04, 2010: Iraq's politicians are using every possible tool -- from Facebook to election songs to old-fashioned campaigning -- to lure voters to the polls for Iraq's second parliamentary election on March 7. As campaigning winds up for Iraq's March 7 parliamentary election, the mood varies widely in different parts of the country. RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq correspondents in several cities describe how the upcoming election is viewed in their hometowns. Sundus al-Ta'i in Ramadi: Poor security and lack of services are the primary issues affecting the way people view the March 7 elections in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province. Anbar in general and Ramadi in particular -- with their Sunni majority and strong tribal affiliations -- have witnessed a deterioration in their security situation in recent months. Terrorist attacks using car bombs, explosive suicide vests, and a variety of other explosive devices have targeted civilians and security personnel. So, what we have seen here is an overriding sense of both fear and anticipation during the campaign period, as 306 candidates -- including 81 women -- representing 21 political entities compete for Anbar's 14 seats in the upcoming parliament.

But how many people will go the polls is a big question. As I mentioned, the dominant mood is disappointment with the security and public-services situation, and with the fact that the average citizen has not seen any positive changes within the local administration on any level, in the aftermath of the local council elections last year. Those local elections, which were Iraq's last nationwide polls, did not attract more than 40 percent of the eligible voters in Anbar. They produced no changes worth mentioning that would now encourage more people to take part in the upcoming elections.

The security situation continues to be an issue in Ramadi.

The campaigning here has mostly taken the form of intensive distribution of campaign posters depicting the candidates' picture and affiliation. The posters are visible in Ramadi's residential neighborhoods, its main streets, and near the various security checkpoints. The frontrunner in Ramadi is the Al-Iraqiyah list, which consists of 20

political entities and is riding the wave of nonsectarianism and nationalism. Al-Iraqiyah's leaders include former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and senior secular Sunni politician Salih al-Mutlaq, who was banned as a candidate from the election by the government's controversial de-Ba'athification commission. It is followed by the Iraqi National Coalition list, a mainly Shi'ite alliance including supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr and of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq comprising 38 political entities, while running third is the Iraqi Accordance Front, once the country's main Sunni alliance and now consisting of the Iraqi Islamic Party and some tribal leaders, which has four entities. At the same time, Anbar voters are dissatisfied with and opposed to the State of Law coalition and its 36 political entities. Pictures of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who leads the coalition, have been vandalized in many parts of the city. The hostility toward Maliki's coalition can be attributed to the local view that it has a somewhat extreme Shi'ite bias, and to claims that Maliki's government has deep connections with and cooperates with the Iranian government. But equally important is the perception that Maliki's government has not provided any benefits to Anbar Province, which was burdened with being an Al-Qaeda stronghold until the (since assassinated) Sheikh Abd al-Sattar Abu Rishah headed a tribal coalition in 2006 with the support of U.S. and Iraqi troops that rid the city of its armed gangs, bringing security back to the city. Nehad al-Bayati in Kirkuk: The elections in multiethnic, multisectarian Kirkuk are not so much about its residents choosing their representatives for the national Iraqi parliament as they are an extension of the political struggle between the various Arab, Kurdish, and Turkoman factions to determine the national identity of the oil-rich province. Here, candidates cannot count on any votes cast by voters not sharing their own origins, but there are some exceptions to the rule. Some of the smaller Arab and Turkoman lists are supported by the two main Kurdish parties -- the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Because of these exceptions, you can find some strange and remarkable campaign displays in the city center: the Kurdish flag alongside the banner of the Turkoman Front or pictures of Turkoman candidates alongside their Kurdish and Arab counterparts. There are even large pictures of competing candidates smiling at one another.

Campaign posters in Kirkuk, where sectarian tensions are high

In general, Turkoman candidates have been divided up among the major Arab lists, as they do not have any lists of their own. Meanwhile, the Arabs of Kirkuk are apparently supporting the Al-Iraqiyah list led by Iyad Allawi and embracing some Kirkuki Arab tribal and political figures. The strongest Kurdish entity is the Kurdish Coalition list, made up of the KDP and PUK. Its main competitor is the opposition "Goran" (Change) party, which has had its candidates' pictures and slogans torn down in most of the Kurdish areas. Goran accuses the Kurdish Coalition of being responsible for this vandalism. There are 449 candidates competing for Kirkuk's 12 parliamentary seats, and unofficial figures indicate that about half of the eligible voters are Kurds. The Arab and Turkoman factions accuse the Kurds of "importing" thousands of Kurdish families in order to "Kurdify" Kirkuk. The Kurds claim that the incoming Kurdish families are originally from Kirkuk, and were expelled by Saddam Hussein's regime as part of his "Arabization" campaign in Kirkuk that began in the 1960s. The security situation is stable and under the control of the Iraqi police forces. There are about 56 mobile police patrols operating within Kirkuk city, in addition to the "Asayesh" (Kurdish security) forces from both of the main Kurdish parties, which are unobtrusively spread out all over Kirkuk.

U.S. forces have also stepped up their patrols within Kirkuk ahead of the elections. Abd al-Hamid Zibari in Irbil: I live in the Zanko al-Jami'a district near Salah Al-Din University to the southeast of Irbil's city center. It is populated by an absolute majority of Kurds, most of whom hold higher university degrees and are mainly doctors, engineers, and university professors. The area is heavily targeted by campaign ads and posters supporting the ballot lists of the Kurdish Coalition (KDP and PUK); the Goran party; and the Kurdistan Islamic Union. In this district there are no campaign ads supporting the Iraqi Arab parties. The people here are not concerned with the sectarian issue. They are mainly concerned with the issues related to Kurdish rights and nationalism, and with the Kurdistan identity of the disputed regions, such as Kirkuk Province. Optimism or pessimism with regard to the upcoming Iraqi elections are not an issue here; people believe that the Kurdish factions -- in spite of their internal differences within the Kurdish autonomous region -- will unite in the face of the Iraqi Arab factions with regard to the national rights of the Kurdish people. Most of my neighbors believe that Kurdistan's future lies in independence, if the sectarian and ethnic conflict among the Iraqi Arab factions continues, and if the areas having a Kurdish majority are prevented from joining the autonomous region. The widespread belief here is that the Iraqi elections will enhance the Kurdish role, which is why everyone wants to take part in the voting. Aysar al-Yasiri in Al-Najaf: My neighborhood, Al-Muhandisin, lies in the northern part of Al-Najaf. Most of my neighbors are middle-class employees or self-employed, and are exclusively Shi'a. The area does not have its own candidate, and the other Najafi candidates -- most of whom are also Shi'a -- rarely come here to meet the people. There may be some candidates in other parts of the city who do move around, but the adopted procedure is that candidates convene public assemblies, inviting their clan and their friends and relatives to listen to their campaign programs. Former PM Iyad Allawi hopes to make a comeback with his Al-Iraqiyah list. here are only a few posters on display in my neighborhood; most of the candidates' posters have been posted in the central parts of the city. They are not limited to one particular sect or party. Most of the posters support either Maliki's State of Law coalition; the Iraqi National Coalition of Shi'ite religious parties; or Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah list. There is a sense of optimism among my neighbors with regard to the upcoming elections, although some are refusing to participate. Many feel that the present government has provided them with the wherewithal to make a living and they don't want to see the reemergence of sectarian tensions in the country. Generally, people are very pleased with regard to the preelection weeding out the Ba'ath influence; they feel that this is essential to their stability, as they are afraid of the Ba'ath Party's return. There are some candidates who are calling for the Ba'ath's elimination, and are banking on this demand in their campaigns. The U.S. presence in the city is no longer as noticeable as it was in the past, now that U.S. forces have withdrawn from the towns and cities. However, these forces are still deployed outside the city and are still responding when called by the local government. Layla Ahmad in Al-Sadr City, Baghdad: The countdown to balloting day has created much excitement has here in Talibiya district, an extension of eastern Baghdad's mostly Shi'ite Al-Sadr City. The mosques in Talibiya have stirred up the fervor of some residents through their Friday sermons, calling for a broad participation in the election and exhorting people not to waste their opportunity to vote. A recent survey of the district that included interviews with a large number of its residents showed that most of the families intend to take part in

the election without hesitation. So, we expect the polling centers in the district will see a big turnout, as they did in last January's municipal elections. The biggest campaigning activity in the district has been by Prime Minister Maliki's State of Law coalition and the Iraqi National Coalition of Shi'ite religious parties. Also campaigning are the Unity of Iraq alliance of Shi'ite Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani and Ahmad abu Rishah, a Sunni tribal leader; the Kurdish Coalition; and a number of entities that are participating in elections for the first time. Posters depicting the candidates have been pasted onto buildings, and on the facades of some houses and businesses, as well as on lampposts, shops, and public parks. The candidates living in the district have been particularly active with distributing their posters, their slogans, and their campaign programs, and have sought to meet personally with the voters.

With Iraqi Votes Tallied, Deal-Making Begins

The party of Iyad Allawi, right, edged out current Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's bloc, but the process of forming a government is just beginning.

March 26, 2010 The official results from Iraq's parliamentary elections show former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's Iraqiya bloc won two more seats than current Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law bloc. The announcement brings an end to weeks of vote-counting in the high-stakes race. Iraqiya won 91 seats in the 325-member Council of Representatives, while the State of Law bloc won 89 seats. The Iraqi National Alliance, a coalition of mainly Shi'ite groups, won 70 seats, and Kurdistania, made up of the autonomous Kurdish region's two dominant blocs, won 43 seats. Another 17 seats were won by independent candidates and candidates from smaller parties. The last 15 seats will be given to members of religious and ethnic minority groups, according to quotas. One quarter of the seats should be filled by women, according to the Iraqi constitution. In Washington, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said the White House congratulates Baghdad and the Iraqi people on "a successful election." "International observers and more than 200,000 domestic observers expressed their confidence in the overall integrity of the election and found that there's no evidence of widespread or serious fraud," Crowley said. "This marks a significant milestone in the ongoing democratic development of Iraq." The State Department called on all candidates and parties "to accept the results, respect the will of the Iraqi people, and work together cooperatively to form a new government in a timely manner." The statement continues: "It will be important for all sides to refrain from inflammatory rhetoric and intimidation. It also is important that the Iraqi government continue to provide security and other essential services for its citizens during this period leading to the formation of a government." As Iraqis waited for the election results today, fresh violence struck the town of Kholes in Diyala Province north of Baghdad, with two explosions killing some 40 people. Reports say women and children were among the wounded. **Wrangling Begins** The release of the election results marks the formal start of what may be an even more difficult process: forming a governing coalition. By failing to produce a decisive winner, the national parliamentary election leaves the field open for not one, but two, major parties to try to seize the initiative in coalition building. And, by producing at least two potential "kingmaker" groups in the background, the election has opened the way for even some of the losers in the election to exert huge influence in the deal-making. The

result is almost certain to be a months-long period of negotiations over forming a new government -- a process that could severely test the country's recently won stability. Nabil Ahmed, a correspondent for RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq, says there are no parties immediately strong enough to form a ruling coalition on their own. Even though former Allawi's Iraqiya took the most votes, his list and the other frontrunner, Maliki's State of Law bloc, emerged essentially neck-and-neck. Ahmed says that means tough fights ahead. "The winning lists are strong enough to try to make alliances with smaller parties," he says. "But they also are strong enough to try to break each other apart by wooing away wavering loyalists. So there will be many battles and efforts to create new alliances in the days ahead." **Religious Parties Lose Ground** He notes that this is a much more complicated situation than the last parliamentary election in 2005, when Shi'ite religious parties swept the poll and later allied with the Kurdish bloc to dominate the new parliament. Even so, it took a full six months of tough negotiating to create a coalition stable enough to rule. This time, the front runners are not Shi'ite religious parties, but secularists or nationalists. Allawi is a Shi'ite secularist. Maliki heads a Shi'ite religious party but has used his years in power to rebrand as a nationalist. A dream team, from Washington's point of view, might be a coalition uniting Allawi and Maliki. That would marginalize the Shi'ite religious parties, which are actively supported by Iran. But Ahmed says this is highly unlikely. "There is quite a lot of personal animosity and that will play its part, too, in any deal-making," he says. "One of the strongest feuds is between Allawi and Maliki. Neither wants to share power with the other, so they are both almost certain to try to outmaneuver each other by reaching out to the third- and fourth-place finishers instead." **Coalition-Building** The prospect of such maneuvering puts both the third- and the fourth-place finishers in potential kingmaker roles. The third-place finisher is the Shi'ite religious parties' Iraqi National Alliance and, strongest among them, the loyalists of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. But the Sadrists themselves have deep-seated animosities toward both Allawi and Maliki, dating back to the efforts by both men to crack down on the Sadrists "Mahdi Army." Sadr opposes the U.S. military presence in the country and demands its immediate withdrawal. Since the election, both Allawi and Maliki have said they are open to alliances with Sadr. But it is not clear at what price. The Sadrists have suggested they could make a deal with Maliki's State of Law Coalition but that they would propose their own candidate for prime minister in Maliki's place.

Both Allawi and Maliki have also held talks with the fourth-place finisher, Kurdistania. The alliance, composed of the two ruling factions in the Kurdish autonomous region -- the KDP and PUK -- is eager to retain its former king-making status despite losing some of their seats in the national parliament to the Kurdish opposition party, Goran. Ahmed says that because of the highly fragmented political landscape, almost any ruling coalition will -- of necessity -- be more inclusive than the governing coalition in Iraq today. "Maliki's government sought to include some key Sunni politicians despite the largely Sunni boycott of the parliamentary elections in 2005," Ahmed says. "But today it is no longer a question of goodwill or national interest to reach out across the political spectrum. It will be the only way to put together a bloc large enough to form a government." All this makes the coming days a historic moment filled in equal measure with risk and promise. The risk is that Iraq will fall into an extended political vacuum that also produces a security vacuum -- exactly what happened after the 2005 election. When

the new Iraqi government was finally sworn in six months later in 2006, it faced a significantly worse security situation than before. The country tumbled into a spiral of sectarian violence that was in large part due to the distancing of one group -- the Sunni Arabs -- from the political process. But the promise is that this time Iraq might break with that violent past. It could happen if forming a ruling coalition requires incorporating and working with parties across the political spectrum. It would be a major departure from Iraq's history of dictators, coups, and one-party rule, and a large step toward becoming a stable parliamentary democracy.

Geo strategic front

In U.S., Thousands Rally To Pull Troops From Iraq, Afghanistan

March 21, 2010- Thousands of protesters have marched in Washington on the seventh anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, demanding an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. At least eight people, including activist Cindy Sheehan, whose son Casey died while fighting in Iraq in 2004, were arrested after laying coffins at a fence outside the White House. The protest drew a smaller crowd than the tens of thousands who marched in 2006 and 2007. There were other similar protests in other cities, including Los Angeles.

Economic front

Iraq Agrees To Renew Oil Link Accord With Turkey

March 17, 2010 (Reuters) -- Iraq has agreed with Turkey to renew an accord to operate an oil pipeline from its northern oil fields near Kirkuk to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, a senior Iraqi oil official has said. "Iraq has approved to renew the Kirkuk-Ceyhan agreement after agreeing on some changes and amendments", Iraq's deputy oil minister, Ahmad al-Shamma, told Reuters. Shamma said the two sides had agreed on new transit fees and upgrades to the pipeline. "There is an Iraqi delegation in Turkey now, headed by a deputy oil minister, to finalize the deal." The agreement is expected to be signed during a trip by Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz to Baghdad, scheduled for March 22, said a Turkish Energy Ministry official who declined to be named. An agreement between Baghdad and Ankara that governs the operation of the 970-kilometer pipeline, which transports about a quarter of all Iraqi oil exports, expires this month.

Turkish officials said talks with Baghdad on extending the accord began last year. The deal will include a guarantee from Baghdad on the flow of oil in the pipeline, the Turkish Energy Ministry official said. Flows are sometimes halted due to maintenance problems or sabotage by Iraqi insurgents and poor security left the link mostly idle between 2003 and 2007 after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The double-pipe link has a capacity of 1.6 million barrels per day (bpd) but normally carries about 500,000 bpd. The Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline first opened in 1977.

Clinton, Gates Seek \$37.5 Billion More

March 26, 2010-- U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates have requested an extra \$37.5 billion from Congress to fund military and civilian operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq. The Pentagon is seeking \$33 billion of the request, and most of the total amount would go toward funding operations in Afghanistan. Clinton said the supplement, which goes beyond the White House's original funding request, would help the United States achieve its goals in all of what she called "frontline states." "Our request addresses urgent demands that will advance our efforts to bring stability to Afghanistan and Pakistan and ensure a smooth transition to a civilian-led effort in Iraq," she said. In Afghanistan, Clinton said, the funds would be used to facilitate civilian integration in security forces as well, along with support for agriculture and infrastructure projects, local governance, and women's initiatives. She also said that the money would be used for increased oversight of multibillion-dollar reconstruction projects in Afghanistan and Iraq. Gates said some of the funds would be used for increased training of Afghan forces, which would help the United States stay on target to begin withdrawing from the country in July 2011. He urged lawmakers to approve the request by early spring.

Social front

Iraq: Women's rights in danger

Iraqi women demonstrators protest lack of security and basic services [EPA]

Prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq, women working in the public and government sectors were entitled to receive a year's maternity leave under family laws enforced by the former Saddam Hussein leadership. In the seven years since the US-led invasion which ousted Saddam, however, maternity leave has been cut to six months. Since the Personal Status Law was enacted on July 14, 1958, when Iraqis overthrew the British-installed monarchy, Iraqi women have enjoyed many of the rights that Western women do. But the statutes governing the status of women since 1958 have been replaced with Article 2 of the new Iraqi Constitution, which states that "Islam is the official religion of the state and is a basic source of legislation." Sub-head A says "No law can be passed that contradicts the undisputed rules of Islam." Under this Article the interpretation of women's rights is left to religious leaders.

Islamic governance

Yanar Mohammed, a women's rights campaigner in Iraq, believes that the US has "let go of women's rights" in the war-ravaged country. "Political Islamic groups have taken southern Iraq, are fully in power there, and are using the financial support of Iran to recruit troops and allies," she says. "The financial and political support from Iran is why the Iraqis in the south accept this, not because the Iraqi people want Islamic law." According to the post-2003 Iraqi constitution, parliament should be comprised of no less than 25 per cent female candidates. As a result, the amended electoral law of December 2009 stipulated that parliament should comprise 82 female representatives. Each party and coalition list must ensure that 25 per cent of its nominated candidates are women. However, the women's quota has not been filled since 2005 and as a result, the elections commission said "special measures" must be implemented to ensure the quota is met. Women's rights groups in Iraq and abroad have complained that the Iraqi parliament has not provided information on what the measures involve or how it would go about

implementing them. According to Maha Sabria, a professor of political science at Al-Nahrain University in Baghdad, women members of parliament "stand up to defend their party in the parliament, not for women's rights".

Lack of infrastructure Sabria also makes a direct link between the deteriorated status of women in the country to the lack of infrastructure, political and economic stability, and security. She believes that women bear a "double burden" as they have lost many of their freedoms due to, and under, the US occupation. "The violation of women's rights [is] part of the violation of the rights of all Iraqis," she says. "More men are now under the weight of detention, so now women bear the entire burden of the family and are obliged to provide full support to the families and children. At the same time, women do not have freedom of movement because of the deteriorated security conditions and because of abductions of women and children by criminal gangs." Women, she says, are also now under pressure to marry at a younger age in the hope that a husband (including his family and tribal affiliations) will bring added security. Sabria says that the abduction of women "did not exist prior to the occupation. We find that women lost their right to learn and their right to a free and normal life, so Iraqi women are struggling with oppression and denial of all their rights, more than ever before." "**Tribal, backward laws**"

The Constitution mandates that 25 per cent of seats in Parliament be allocated to women. Since 2003, many Iraqis sought refuge in the tried and tested security offered by tribal affiliations and allegiances. As contemporary Iraqi society fell apart in the face of lawlessness, abductions, revenge killings and overall lack of security, the tribal system offered both refuge and order. Some Iraqis believe that the decline in the modern and secular standard of living since 2003 propelled the social dynamic back by several decades. "The real ruler in Iraq now is the rule of old traditions and tribal, backward laws," Sabria says. "The biggest problem is that more women in Iraq are unaware of their rights because of the backwardness and ignorance prevailing in Iraqi society today."

Fleeing Iraq Compounding the severity of the situation is the fact that many women also fled their homes because their husbands were arbitrarily arrested by occupation forces or government security personnel. A household without a male figure became far more vulnerable since 2003. Women sought refuge with relatives and failing to do so fled to Syria or Jordan. According to United Nations estimates, more than four million Iraqis have been displaced in the past seven years, including approximately 2.8 million registered as internally displaced persons. Many live as refugees mainly in neighbouring countries, according to a report by Elizabeth Ferris, co-director of the Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement. The report, titled, *Going Home? Prospects and Pitfalls For Large-Scale Return Of Iraqis*, says most displaced Iraqi women are reluctant to return home because of continuing uncertainties.

Obstacles to repatriation For its part, the Washington-based Refugees International (RI) says in another report - *Iraqi Refugees: Women's Rights and Security Critical to Return* - that "Iraqi women will resist returning home, even if conditions improve in Iraq, if there is no focus on securing their rights as women and assuring their personal security and their families' well-being". The RI report covered internally displaced women in Iraq's semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region and female refugees in Syria. "Not one woman interviewed by RI indicated her intention to return," the report says. "This tent is more comfortable than a palace in Baghdad; my family is safe here," a displaced woman in northern Iraq told RI. The situation continues to be challenging for women within Iraq.

Yanar Mohammed believes the constitution neither protects women nor ensures their basic rights. She blames the US for abdicating its responsibility to help develop a pluralistic democracy in Iraq. "I am an employee, and everyday go to my work place, and the biggest challenge for me and all the suffering Iraqis is the roads are closed and you feel you are a person without rights, without respect," a 35-year-old government employee, who asked to be referred to as Iman, said. "To what extent has this improved my security," she asked. "We have better salaries now, but how can women live with no security? How can we enjoy our rights if there is no safe place to go, for rest and recreation and living?" Dahr Jamail is an independent American journalist who reported from Iraq for eight months in 2003-2004. He is the author of *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq*.

Lebanon Political front

UN Hariri tribunal begins 3-D filming at crime scene

March 23, 2010 Lebanonwire UN team investigating the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri on Tuesday began filming the site of the 2005 Beirut murder in 3-D, a military official said. "The investigation team will be using high-tech equipment to film the area where the bombing occurred," the official told AFP without elaborating. A UN tribunal based in The Hague was set up by a Security Council resolution in 2007 to try suspects in the murder of Hariri, killed in a massive bomb blast on the Beirut seafront in February 2005. Tribunal spokeswoman Radhia Achouri also declined to give details on the filming on Tuesday. "We do not give any details about any programme our team is carrying out," she told AFP. "There have been many visits and many specific projects, and investigators might carry out a project any day, any week." An AFP photographer at the scene said members of the UN team wearing identity cards around their necks were filming and photographing the assassination site outside the once-popular Saint Georges Hotel. The murder was widely blamed on Syria although Damascus has repeatedly denied any involvement. Before the tribunal was formed, a UN commission of inquiry said it had found evidence to implicate Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services, but there are currently no suspects in custody.-AFP

Questioning Hezbollah members by tribunal could "instigate trouble"

March 22, 2010 Lebanonwire A UN-backed tribunal set up to probe the killing of former Premier Rafik Hariri could "instigate trouble" after summoning Hezbollah members, a former minister said Saturday. Wi'am Wahhab, leader of the Druze opposition Tawheed Movement and a close Syria ally, claimed investigators from the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) had in the last few days questioned several Hezbollah members over the 2005 assassination of Hariri. "Problems could occur in the country because the investigating panel will create strife," Wahab told Al-Jadeed TV, calling on Premier Saad Hariri to "avoid the trap set up by the tribunal." Wahhab's allegations were neither confirmed nor denied by the STL media spokesperson Radhia Achouri, who has repeatedly told The Daily Star her office does not comment on media reports. Achouri also said she would not remark on an An-Nahar report claiming that 11 STL investigators had recently arrived in Beirut to continue questioning witnesses. But she told Naharnet

last Wednesday the STL “always had” investigators in Beirut. Meanwhile, Hezbollah MP Nawwaf Moussawi told Al-Jadeed his party “does not comment on everything that has to do with the tribunal,” though he added Hezbollah would “comment in due course.” Media reports in the past have frequently tried to implicate Hezbollah in Hariri’s killing. A number of reports published by the German magazine Der Spiegel in the last year have claimed that special forces from Hezbollah planned and executed Hariri’s murder and that it was involved in cocaine smuggling across Europe. French daily Le Monde also published reports claiming Hezbollah had taken photographs of the STL headquarters in The Hague and that Der Spiegel’s claim the group had orchestrated the killing were “trustworthy.” MP Robert Ghanem said Sunday that even if the STL had questioned Hezbollah officials, it did not necessarily mean they were responsible for Hariri’s death. “We are careful about Lebanon’s interests ... so we should not accuse anyone of treason since the case is about justice and uncovering the truth,” he told the Voice of Lebanon radio station. The former prime minister was assassinated on February 14, 2005, along with 22 other people in a truck bombing as his convoy passed through Beirut’s seafront. The STL was established by a UN Security Council resolution in 2007 to prosecute suspects in his assassination. Unlike most other tribunals, it applies Lebanese law to acts of terrorism, gives a greater active role to its judges, allows for trials in absentia, and employs a pre-trial judge with considerable authority. In the STL’s first annual report, released earlier this month, tribunal President Antonio Cassesse said he believed the court would move to prosecution within 12 months. In April 2009, four Lebanese generals, held since 2005 without charge in connection with Hariri’s killing, were released from prison. The STL currently has no suspects in custody and has yet to issue any indictments. Despite this, over 280 interviews have taken place since March 2009 and “significant progress” has been made in building a case against Hariri’s killers, Cassesse said in the report. -with the Daily Star

Wahhab reiterates call for Lebanese president to resign

March 22, 2010 Lebanonwire Tawheed Movement head former minister Wi’am Wahhab reiterated Saturday calls for Lebanese President Michel Sleiman to resign. “The late Egyptian President Jamal Abdel-Nasser resigned, so why doesn’t Sleiman?” asked Wahhab, who is a close ally of Syria. “Where is the problem if he wasn’t able to fulfill his promises of eradicating corruption and guaranteeing transparent administrative appointments?” Wahhab’s Saturday comments sparked a new wave of criticism from politicians of the parliamentary majority. In an interview with Al-Jadeed TV, Wahhab criticized Lebanon’s politicians, who “devoted two hours of the Cabinet session to respond to what I said, instead of addressing major problems from which the country is suffering.” “I can’t understand the reason for this intellectual terrorism against me,” Wahhab added, ruling out any Syrian influence in his recent position towards the Lebanese president. “I stated my personal opinion and I don’t represent the voice of Syria, Hizbullah, [Christian opposition leader Michel] Aoun or even the opposition, but simply the Lebanese citizen’s voice,” he said. Those defending Sleiman were “hypocrites,” he said. “Be sure that I like and respect Sleiman much more than you. If you really like the president, then you should work on restoring his prerogatives,” Wahhab said, branding the dialogue committee a “conspiracy project.” “I wanted to be calm today, but after the response by the president, and describing what I said as ‘silly

work,' I would like to tell him that he signed a decree granting two members of the Al-Hashem family the right to sell water from the Nahr al-Ruweiss well in the Byblos area," he said. Wahhab also asked Sleiman if it was legal to appoint his relative Farid Sleiman to a post at the Casino du Liban, noting that the president should be involved in more pressing tasks. After calling on the president to resign for not fulfilling his promises, Wahhab voiced his readiness to visit the presidential palace in Baabda "to make all my remarks to the president." He said he wouldn't ask for an appointment at the presidential palace but he would have no problem in going there if a mediator arranged a visit. Wahhab challenged Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea to employ a statistics company to find out which of the two was more popular. "I am sure I will win by 60 percent, otherwise I will step down from political life," he said. In response to Wahhab's remarks, Geagea noted that campaigns targeting the president and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) were intended to force Sleiman to resign and to undermine security and democracy in Lebanon. "They don't seek the resignation of the president but the presidency," Geagea told visitors at his home in Maarab. "They don't target the ISF but internal security, and they're not attacking the US but Lebanon. They want the resignation of the presidency, freedom, democratic systems, diversity, stability, and they want us to go back to enslavement. The time of enslavement is over," Geagea said. MP Antoine Saad also slammed Wahhab's campaign against Sleiman, saying that it was aimed at undermining internal consensus. "The presidency has national, political and Christian immunity and we don't accept targeting it by any side," he said. "President Sleiman was elected based on Lebanese consensus and not through forced renewal like what happened with former President [Emile] Lahoud," Saad added, referring to the former president who altered the Constitution to prolong his term in office. Phalange MP Elie Marouni similarly condemned the campaign against Sleiman, especially as "Lebanon is facing the problem of whether to participate in the upcoming Arab summit and as the president tours in different countries to bolster Lebanon's position outside." After meeting with Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir, LF MP George Adwan said the campaign against Sleiman targeted the independence of Lebanon and efforts made by Sleiman and Premier Saad Hariri to enhance Lebanon's position as an independent state. Asked about Sfeir's position regarding the campaign against Sleiman, Adwan said the patriarch believed empowering the president and the presidency was a critical factor in the establishment of a strong and independent Lebanon. Meanwhile, head of the Lebanese Democratic Party (LDP) MP Talal Arslan underlined the need to discuss Lebanon's political system and its serious flaws at the dialogue table. "Without reforming the political regime to tackle upcoming challenges, we can't talk about major achievements of the dialogue," Arslan said while receiving delegations from various areas in Mount Lebanon. "The state we entrust to apply a defense strategy embracing the army, resistance and people should rely on an advanced political system adopting the resistance and its experience in defending Lebanon in an unprecedented way, and should be supported by a political system capable of accommodating this wide diversity in the Lebanese political life," he said. -with the Daily Star

Geo strategic font

Lebanon mulls official invitation to Libya summit

March 23, 2010 Lebanonwire– Lebanon has received an official invitation to an Arab summit to be staged in Libya this weekend but is yet to confirm its attendance amid calls for a boycott, a foreign ministry official said Monday. "A Libyan envoy extended an invitation to Lebanon's ambassador to Cairo Khaled Ziyadeh in the presence of Arab League chief Amr Mussa," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity. Ziyadeh may represent his country at the March 27-28 summit, as top officials in Lebanon have said they would boycott the meeting over a dispute with Tripoli on the 1978 disappearance of leading Shiite cleric Musa Sadr. Sadr -- who is still regarded by Lebanon's Shiite community as a key spiritual guide -- vanished on August 31, 1978, and the circumstances of his disappearance are still a mystery. He was last seen in Libya. A government official told AFP earlier this month that President Michel Sleiman would not attend the summit in response to a request by parliament speaker Nabih Berri, a Shiite who heads the Amal movement founded by Sadr. Beirut last week rejected an invitation to the summit which was received by the Lebanese embassy in Damascus. The embassy was "not authorised to receive and respond to the invitation for administrative reasons," according to a statement released by the foreign ministry. In 2008 Lebanon issued an arrest warrant for Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi over Sadr's disappearance while he was in Tripoli with two companions, who also went missing. Libya has denied involvement in Sadr's disappearance, saying he left the country for Italy. But the Italian government has always denied he arrived there. In 2004, however, Italian authorities returned a passport found in Italy belonging to the imam. –AFP

Lebanon yet to accept second invitation to Libya summit

March 22, 2010Lebanonwire Asharq Al-Awsat- Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi has dispatched his Deputy Foreign Minister Amran Abu Kara'a to Cairo in order to deliver a new invitation to Lebanese President Michel Suleiman to attend the Arab League Summit in Libya, Asharq Al-Awsat has learnt. This invitation was delivered to the Lebanese Arab League representative in the presence of Arab League Secretary-General Amr Musa. The Arab League Summit is scheduled to take place in the Libyan city of Sirte on Saturday and Sunday 27 – 28 March. Well informed Arab and Libyan sources told Asharq Al-Awsat that Abu Kara'a yesterday paid an unannounced visit to Cairo which lasted for a number of hours during which he met with Amr Musa and delivered the Lebanese invitation before returning to Tripoli. Amr Musa confirmed the veracity of this information telling Asharq Al-Awsat "I did indeed meet with a Libyan government official and I invited Lebanon's representative to the Arab League [to attend] and he officially received this invitation in my presence at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo." He added "Therefore the protocol aspect of this has been resolved and the invitation has been sent and received, and we wait – God willing – for Lebanese participation at the summit in view of the importance of every state participating [in the summit], especially at this critical stage." Amr Musa refused to comment on the role that he played with regards to persuading Libya to issue a second invitation to Lebanon to attend the Arab League summit after the first invitation was rejected "for administrative reasons." Musa told Asharq Al-Awsat "I did my duty; it is in everybody's interests to ensure an excellent Arab presence at the summit." Lebanon has yet to respond to this second invitation from Libya. Asharq Al-Awsat yesterday attempted to contact Khalid Ziadeh, Lebanese Ambassador to Egypt who is also the Lebanese representative to the Arab League, however calls were not returned at the time of going to press. During a

meeting with International Criminal Court [ICC] Registrar Silvana Arbia in Cairo on Saturday, Arab League Secretary-General Amr Musa commenting on Lebanon's participation at the Libyan summit said "Lebanon will participate in the summit, and this is what we expect, and we will succeed in our efforts to achieve this." Arab sources informed Asharq Al-Awsat that Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi responded to the mediation efforts and advice of Arab League Secretary-General Amr Musa with regards to sending a second invitation to Lebanon in a way that they would consider acceptable in order to ensure Lebanese participation at the summit at the highest level. The sources also said that Amr Musa had sent a message to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, and Libyan Foreign Minister Musa Kusa, calling for Libya to reconsider the way that Lebanon was invited to attend the summit. The Arab sources, who spoke to Asharq Al-Awsat on the condition of anonymity, also revealed that Amr Musa – who visited Beirut last week – stressed that the absence or exclusion of Lebanon from the summit is not in anybody's interests, and that it is important to give Lebanon the opportunity to attend the summit in a dignified and acceptable manner, in the same manner as other members of the Arab League. A senior Libyan official told Asharq Al-Awsat that Colonel Gaddafi is keen that all members of the Arab League attend the Arab League summit in Sirte. The Libyan official said that Colonel Gaddafi did not have any problem whatsoever with the State of Lebanon, with the exception to the tendency of some Shiite leaders launching media campaigns criticizing Libya against the backdrop of the controversial disappearance of Lebanese Shiite Cleric Musa al-Sadr from Libya in 1978. The source added "The Colonel does not have a problem with the Maronite [Christians] or the Sunnis in Lebanon, but rather with some Shiite leaders, and I believe he does not want to give them any excuse not to attend the summit. If the way the invitation was extended last time was not acceptable, we have rectified the situation." The Libyan official told Asharq Al-Awsat that he expected Lebanon to attend the Arab Summit at the highest level, and that he expected "either Lebanese President Michel Suleiman to participate [in the summit] or Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri." The official added "this is the level [of attendance] that we expect and hope for." He also revealed that senior Lebanese officials had indicated that Lebanon would reverse their decision to boycott the summit if Libya extended another invitation to Beirut in a manner it deemed acceptable. The Shiite community in Lebanon holds Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi responsible for the disappearance of Shiite cleric Musa Sadr, who was last seen in Libya on 31 August 1978.

Cabinet delegates Arab League envoy to attend Libya summit

Daily Star correspondent Thursday, March 25, 2010: The Cabinet decided Wednesday to delegate Lebanese representative to the Arab League Khaled Ziyade to deliver Lebanon's address to the Arab Summit in Tripoli on March 27-28. The government's decision to send a low-level representative is perceived as a compromise between parliamentary majority parties that support of Lebanon's participation and Shiite parties, Hizbullah and Amal Movement, which demand a boycott of the summit peaker Nabih Berri warned earlier this month that Lebanese participation would "jeopardize the current political status quo," a reference to potential tensions among parties of the national unity Cabinet. However, Prime Minister Saad Hariri's Future Movement party said it supports a Lebanese presence, arguing that any disintegration in regional politics would have enormous repercussions at home. The Lebanese widely blame Libyan leader Moammar

Gadhafi for ordering the abduction of Lebanese Imam Musa Sadr, together with his two companions, during a trip to Libya in August 1978. Tripoli has denied the allegations and claimed that Sadr, also the spiritual and political leader of the Movement of the Deprived (Amal) in Lebanon, which is currently headed by Berri, had already left for Italy before his disappearance. Following the Cabinet meeting headed by Hariri at the Grand Serail in Beirut, Information Minister Tarek Mitri told reporters the summit would embrace on its agenda an article expressing unity with Lebanon against Israeli threats. "The article is being prepared in Lebanon and was earlier discussed during the Arab foreign ministers meeting in Cairo earlier this month; however the government did not agree on any other issue to be raised by Ziyade," Mitri added. On another note, Mitri said the government had delegated the Higher Relief Council to donate LL40 million to each of the families of the Ethiopian Airlines crash victims. "The government decided to offer LL40 million in aid to families of victims which is not to be considered as a legally binding compensation," he added. Flight ET409 plunged into the sea minutes after taking off from Beirut's Rafik Hariri International Airport amid a violent thunderstorm in the early hours of January 25. The plane was bound for the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa and had 83 passengers and seven crew members on board. No survivors were found. Furthermore, the Cabinet delegated Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud and Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud to resolve violations of public peace following complaints by Gemmayzeh residents against pubs and restaurants in the area.

Mideast officials stress need for unified transport laws

By The Daily Star Wednesday, March 24, 2010 Transport officials on Monday affirmed the importance of unifying transport legislation among Arab countries and removing obstacles to the movement of goods and people in this region. Officials were speaking at the 11th Session of the ESCWA Transport Committee, held under the auspices of Lebanese Minister of Transportation, Ghazi Aridi. Head of the ESCWA Economic Development and Globalization Division (EDGD) Nabil Safwat delivered the opening statement, focusing on the achievements in the areas of transport and trade and their importance to the work of the commission. "Thanks to the fruitful and laborious collaboration of ESCWA, member countries and concerned organizations, this sector witnessed progress in its infrastructure, systems and procedures," he said.

However, he added that more work needs to be done to achieve progress on road, railway and maritime transport. "Also, legislation requires additional efforts to be harmonized in its entirety." The director general of the land and maritime transport at the ministry, Abdel-Hafiz Qaissi considered in his statement "achievements of the ESCWA Transport Committee have drawn out a road map toward the fulfillment of socio-economic integration among member countries." However, he added that obstacles to movement of persons and goods among Arab countries must be removed. alestine representative Mahmoud Khaled noted the achievements of the committee's 10th session, which focused on harmonizing transport legislation, and Sudan's request to join ESCWA's three transport agreements. He emphasized Palestine's ratification of the agreements. –The Daily Star.

Economic front

Lebanon, Jordan sign economic agreements

Lebanon and Jordan signed 16 agreements, protocols and memoranda of understanding in Beirut on Friday, Lebanese PM office announced. Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri met with visiting Jordanian Prime Minister Samir Rifai Friday at the Grand Serail in down town Beirut. Hariri and his Jordanian counterpart headed the meeting of the Lebanese-Jordanian committee and signed 16 agreements between the two countries. The agreements include cooperation between the Jordanian Institute for the Development of Economic Projects and the Lebanese Trade Information Center for the years 2010-2011, a technical program to activate the mutual recognition agreement on conformity certificates and quality marks, and administrative cooperation agreement on customs procedures. They also include cooperation on animal health and production, cooperation in the agricultural sector, and the executive program for tourism cooperation for the years 2010-2012. Earlier, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman met with Rifai at the presidential palace near Baabda where they discussed "the excellent relations between the two countries and the situation in the region" said a statement released by Suleiman's office. Suleiman expressed his gratitude to Jordan's King, and invited him to visit Lebanon. He also hailed the bilateral relations, and encouraged the signing of cooperation agreements between them. For his part, Rifai conveyed Jordan's King Abdullah II greetings and wishes that bilateral relations would witness further cooperation and development in the interests of both countries. Rifai is on a two-day visit to Beirut accompanied by a high level ministerial delegation. –Agencies

Lebanon's neglected liquid treasure just trickles away

By Agence France Presse (AFP) Monday, March 22, 2010 : Rose Hatem's home overlooks the Mediterranean and is just a short distance from one of Lebanon's longest rivers. But twice a week the 60-year-old has to buy water for her daily needs. "I have been buying water since I moved here 14 years ago," Hatem told AFP in the picturesque village of Amsheet, north of the Lebanese capital Beirut. "In the summer, when demand is high, I'm often left without a drop."ers is a story repeated across Lebanon, one of the rare countries in the Middle East considered relatively rich in water. But many people still have to buy it because of a lack of a proper supply network and effective conservation. Experts warn that unless Lebanon takes proper measures to protect its precious water resources, little will be left for future generations as the population, which currently stands at 4 million, increases. Fadi Comair, who heads hydraulic and electrical resources at the Energy and Water Ministry, said that unless the problem is addressed – and quickly – Lebanon could even run dry within four years.

"There is no miracle solution," he said. "We need to build dams, artificial lakes, a new network and work hand in hand with the private sector." "If you take into account population increase and climate change, we have enough water to last us another four years, until 2015," Comair said. It is a warning that hits home hard where it hurts the most. "As we celebrate World Water Day on Monday we must reflect on the fact that Lebanon should be exporting this resource rather than sitting by and watching it slowly diminish," said Antoine Issa, head of the local council in Amsheet. The tiny country bordering Syria and Israel has no fewer than 40 major streams, 2,000 springs and numerous waterfalls that form each year with the melting snow. But the 1975-90 Civil War and years of political unrest have relegated the water issue to the backburner. Water rights are also a constant source of dispute between Lebanon and Israel, where the resource is even more scarce. Comair said Lebanon annually has an average 2.1 billion

cubic meters of renewable hydraulic resources. “We use about a billion of that as drinking water or for irrigation and industrial purposes,” Comair said. “The rest – meaning more than half – is dumped in the Mediterranean.” The fact that much of the country’s sewage is channelled into the sea rather than being recycled compounds Lebanon’s water problem, he said. “Not only are we polluting the Mediterranean but this water is very valuable economically and could be used for irrigation or other purposes,” Comair said. “Instead we end up using fresh water for irrigation, and that’s catastrophic.” Experts also say that many rivers, including Nahr al-Kabeer and Orontes shared by Lebanon and Syria, and the Wazzani and Hasbani shared with Israel, are not exploited, partly because of their location. “Water is a sensitive political issue and it’s true that any attempt by the state to exploit its rivers in the south would meet with a reaction from Israel,” said Nadim Farajalla, professor of hydrology and water at the American University of Beirut. “But if we don’t do anything then there will come a point where the international community will tell us that we have lost our rights to exploit this water,” he added. “We lack a global vision [regarding] water and badly manage this resource.” A sad example of waste is the northern Akkar region, one of the country’s poorest, where a mere 54 percent of homes are connected to the public water grid despite the area being rich in underground water. “Even those connected don’t always have water because the infrastructure is so outdated and there are huge leaks,” said Aisha Mushref, who works with Mada, a non-governmental organization that carried out a study on the issue titled “Forgotten Akkar.” “People in this region still have to go and fetch water from the river.”

Lebanese economy expected to grow slower than 2009 at 6 percent

growth, credit outlooks depend on budget outcome, reform implementation
By The Daily Star Monday, March 22, 2010



Barclays Capital projected economic growth in Lebanon at 6 percent in 2010, down from 8 percent in 2009, adding that initial indicators point toward sustained growth this year but at a slower pace than last year, as reported by Lebanon This Week, the economic publication of the Byblos Bank Group. It expected private consumption to slow down but to be offset by a pick-up in private and public investment, and by continued strength in services exports in line with gradual recovery in the GCC. It also expected a slower pace of capital inflows despite a slight increase in remittances, as this rise is likely to be offset by a widening trade balance due to growth in

domestic demand, higher oil prices and a stabilization of tourism activity. As such, it projected the current account deficit at around 8.6 percent of GDP for this year. It noted that the favorable macroeconomic trends should continue to be supported by a robust performance in the banking sector. It said the aggregate loans-to-deposits ratio stood at 68 percent at the end of 2009, a low level compared with other regional banking systems, and highlighting the potential of local banks in meeting an expected pick-up in private sector credit demand in case of sustained political stability. It added that the pace of deposit growth is likely to slow down from about 23 percent to around 15 percent, as conditions in external capital markets stabilize and Lebanon's interest rate differentials with the rest of the world decline. It noted that the central bank would still have to absorb much of these inflows to avoid inflationary pressures. Barclays Capital indicated that the key missing factor in this outlook is the 2010 budget, as it has been belayed for more than a month. It stated that discussions about the draft 2010 budget have not yielded an agreement on the package of revenues proposed by the Finance Minister and could result in a reconfiguration of the revenue package by shifting the burden onto direct taxation. It expected the fiscal deficit to widen to 11 percent of GDP in 2010 from 9 percent of GDP last year, and for the primary surplus to contract to 0.5 percent of GDP this year from 3.3 percent of GDP in 2009. Accordingly, it estimated the debt level to remain unchanged at 154 percent of GDP. It added that the main objective of the Finance Ministry was to find the fiscal space necessary to accommodate higher capital expenditures in view of alleviating the infrastructure bottlenecks to growth, in the energy, telecommunications and transport sectors, without raising indebtedness. It added that higher oil prices and a lack of visibility on the nature and timing of measures to reduce Electricité du Liban (EdL) losses, including the much-needed electricity tariff reforms, will also keep EdL's losses weighing on public finances for a while. Barclays Capital considered that Lebanon's credit outlook depends primarily on credible policy actions from the new government aimed at furthering fiscal consolidation and sustaining higher growth rates as a means of putting debt on a sustainable path. It said the 2010 budget is a first key milestone and litmus test for the government's ambitions. The government faces crucial tests which will challenge its ability to forge ahead with the reforms necessary to improve the country's creditworthiness. Ample liquidity, both in the banking system and in the Treasury accounts renders refinancing risks a non-issue for 2010 and 2011, despite significant maturities. While this excess liquidity should translate into downward pressure on local rates, much will depend on the credibility of the reform path the government is likely to embrace, notably for restructuring the energy and telecoms sectors in preparation for their privatizations in early 2011. – **The Daily Star**

Lebanon ranks 45th globally, 6th in MENA region in e-participation

By The Daily Star Tuesday, March 23, 2010

The UN's Electronic Participation Index for 2010 ranked Lebanon in 45th place among 179 countries worldwide and 6th among 19 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, as reported by Lebanon This Week, the economic publication of the Byblos Bank Group. Lebanon came in 28th place globally and in second place regionally in the previous 2008 survey. Also, Lebanon ranked 8th among 36 upper-middle income countries (UMICs) included in the 2010 survey and 5th in the previous survey. The index is an assessment of 21 public informative and participatory services and facilities in e-

information, e-consultation and e-decision making across 6 general, economic and social sectors such as education, health, social welfare, finance and employment. The E-participation Index measures the quality, relevance and usefulness of the information that the government presents on its websites. It analyzes how the state interacts with the people and encourages their input online, as well as how well it promotes e-government services. It also assesses the degree of the government's willingness to encourage the public to be active in promoting participatory decision-making in public policy matters. Globally, Lebanon tied with Latvia, and Portugal, ranked ahead of Greece, Ukraine and Uruguay, and came behind Brazil, Egypt and Jordan. It tied with Latvia, ranked ahead of Uruguay and behind Hungary among UMICs. Lebanon's numerical score was 0.2714 points, constituting a decrease of 33.6 percent from 0.4091 in the 2008 survey and an increase of 144.3 percent from 2005.

It came above the global average of 0.2047 points, the MENA average of 0.1932 points and the UMIC's average of 0.1964 points. Regionally, the scores of 8 countries improved and those of 11 countries deteriorated, while the rankings of 9 countries increased and those of 10 countries dropped from the previous survey. Globally, Lebanon posted the 68th steepest drop in ranking from the previous survey, falling from 28th place in 2008 to 45th place in 2010. In parallel, it posted the 39th biggest increase in rankings from the 2005 survey where it came in 69th place. Regionally, Lebanon posted the 4th steepest drop in ranking from the previous survey, falling from second in 2008 to 6th in 2010. It also posted the 8th steepest drop in rankings from the 2005 survey, falling from the 4th position. South Korea is the world's leader in e-participation, while 13 countries that include Algeria, Syria, Gambia, Senegal and Paraguay came in last place. – The Daily Star

Social front

Sison and Mneimneh discuss education issues

The Daily Star Thursday, March 25, 2010

United States Ambassador to Lebanon Michele Sison reiterated on Wednesday her country's "strong support for Lebanon's efforts to provide quality educational opportunities to all of its citizens throughout the country." Sison met on Wednesday with Education Minister Hassan Mneimneh at the latter's office in Beirut. "Ambassador Sison and Minister Mneimneh discussed the Minister's overall strategic vision for the Ministry and US' continuing support for the government of Lebanon's educational initiatives," a statement by the US Embassy said. Ambassador Sison commended the work of the Education Ministry, calling the education sector a key element in guaranteeing Lebanon's future prosperity and economic growth. Sison and Mneimneh also discussed plans for a new, robust Basic Education Program managed through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). "This US program will support the Education Ministry's efforts to improve the quality of public education, encourage students to remain in school, and decrease dropout rates and strengthen the skills of educators across Lebanon," the embassy statement said. Sison and Mneimneh also discussed ongoing embassy programs in support of Lebanon's education sector. USAID's \$11 million Lebanon Education Assistance for Development (LEAD) program provides assistance to public schools to improve their learning environments through physical repair works, provision of

equipment and educational extra-curricular activities. To date, 283 public schools located in all across Lebanon have received assistance under the program. In addition, the US Embassy's Access English Language Scholarship program is now in its seventh year in Lebanon, providing over 700 Lebanese public high school students with afterschool English-language and personal development courses. On Wednesday, Sison gave an overview of the US Embassy's educational exchange opportunities for Lebanese students to Minister Mneimneh, including the Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program for high school students, the Near East/South Asia (NESA) program for undergraduates, and the Fulbright program for graduate students and university faculty." – The Daily Star

Abboud sees Lebanon tourism increasing by up to 20 percent

By The Daily Star Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud said on Friday that the tourism activity in Lebanon would improve by 10 to 20 percent in 2010 and assured that there would not be an Israeli war on Lebanon. "During the past two months, the number of tourists increased by 22 percent which is a very good indicator and we expect this number to exceed 2 million in 2010," he said. "I don't think that there will be an Israeli war on Lebanon and nothing will keep us away from working with great efforts to boost our tourism sector," the minister added. His remarks came during a press conference held at the Tourism Ministry in Beirut in the presence of the ministry's director general, Nada Sardouk. The conference aimed at presenting Abboud's tourism reform plan after it has been approved by the Cabinet in its last meeting. Abboud started by presenting the main problems facing the tourism sector in Lebanon. He said that the role and power of the Tourism Ministry are very limited and that the budget allocated to the sector is very small. "It does not even cover the needs of this sector," he said. He criticized the 20 to 30 percent lack in employees in the public institutions in the country. "The lack of tourist police in the ministry reached 92 percent which is a very big percentage compared to the lack available in other public institutions," he said. Abboud cited a long list of problems but then gave an overview of his work plan, which he divided into four categories. The first category includes an increase in tourist police until it reaches 200 and the activation of the ministry's hotline. "The role of the tourist police should not only be limited to repression but also to guide tourists and take care of their well being," he said. He emphasized as well the importance of changing the prices and quality of tourism services in addition to finding solutions to the institutions that are working without licenses. The second category, he said, includes the establishment of the Promotion Lebanon Board which aims at improving the image of Lebanon in other countries. "Countries always work hard on promoting their identities because of the challenge imposed on them by globalization and the high international competition," he said. "Promoting our identity will also attract a lot of investments to the country." Abboud added that the establishment of this board must be accomplished in cooperation with the private sector headed by the minister of tourism. "It should be funded by the public and private sector," he said.

He also underlined the importance of participating in international and local exhibitions and the improvement of the ministry's website, where a tourist can do all the reservations online. As for the third category, he said that it includes the work on enhancing medical, cultural, and religious tourism which he considers to be very productive. "It is also very important to develop festivals by giving them a cultural aspect depending on the area in

which they are organized,” he said. Abboud added that there should be cooperation with the international and Lebanese travel agencies and tour operators. “We will encourage them to organize tours to areas outside of Beirut which will help in increasing hotels’ activities in these areas,” he said. The fourth category, according to Abboud, is to increase the cooperation with the private sector, which he said plays a great role in developing the tourism industry in Lebanon. –The Daily Star