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Summary

Egypt

Political front: There is no proper opposition inside the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, said Haitham Abu Khalil, one of the organization's leaders. Abu Khalil said Egypt's Brotherhood continually tries to marginalize and discredit what opposition does exist on the grounds that criticism should be expressed through the proper channels and not in public. Abu Khalil, who was giving a press statement said the Brotherhood was an association of Muslims, a human rather than a holy organization, and one that routinely makes mistakes. He described the idea that members of the Brotherhood are all of the same mindset as an "insult" to the organization.

The Egyptian Parliament approved a law on combating human trafficking during its session under the chairmanship of Fathi Sorour, the Speaker of Parliament. The Assembly also approved Article 23 of the Draft Law, which states that the "State guarantees the protection of the victim and is working to create conditions to help him and his health care, education and social rehabilitation and integration into society in a context of freedom and human dignity, as well as his return to his home quickly and safely if a foreigner or non-permanent residents in the country, in accordance with the rules and procedures issued by a decision of the Cabinet." The new Law also states that it must be "taken into account ensuring the following rights for the victim: the right to physical, psychological and moral health and integrity; the right to personal inviolability and identity; the right to be enlightened on administrative, legal and relevant judicial procedures and access to information related to them."

A source close to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Egypt's largest opposition movement, said the group was currently in the process of preparing its long-awaited program for political reform. The program, the source noted, was expected to be announced following a round of meetings now being held with different opposition parties. Speaking on condition of anonymity, the source went on to say that the manifesto would contain "points of agreement" between the MB and other opposition parties and movements, with the aim of confronting the ruling regime's intransigence vis-a-vis longstanding demands for political reform. "The brotherhood cannot achieve reform by itself," said MB Guidance Bureau member Essam el-Erian. "All political forces must set aside their differences and demand reform together." "

Moussa Mostafa Moussa, chairman of Al-Ghad party, applied to become the party's presidential candidate in the upcoming 2011 elections. Moussa's application will be discussed by Al-Ghad's supreme committee on April 26, when it is scheduled to vote on the party's presidential candidate. Moussa was not available for comment; however, in a phone call to Mehwar's nightly show "48 Hours," he said that the committee's vote will be displayed real-time on large screens to ensure transparency. Waleed Riyad, deputy chairman of Al-Ghad party, confirmed in a statement that since the doors for applications opened on April 13, the party has not received any applications for presidential candidacy apart from Moussa's.

Gamal Mubarak returned to politics, paying visits to Egyptian villages and supervising preparations for Shura Council elections, reports Gamal Essam El-Din For roughly six weeks, Gamal Mubarak, the 47-year-old son of President Mubarak and chairman of the ruling National Democratic Party's powerful Policies Committee, was absent from the Egyptian political scene. Gamal Mubarak decided to resume his political activities,

reinforcing his profile as a major political player. Between 12 April and last week, Gamal took part in several high-level party meetings and paid a visit to an Egyptian village in the Delta governorate of Daqahliya.

Geo strategic front

Ambassador Oren says Israel has "no intention of attacking" its neighbors. Even as Egypt is warning of a new escalation between Israel and Lebanon, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak reassured his Lebanese counterpart, Sa'ad Hariri, that Israel does not plan to attack his country. Israeli officials also denied plans to attack Lebanon, with Ambassador to the US Michael Oren telling CNN that Israel has "no intention of attacking Lebanon, Syria or anybody else in the Middle East." But tensions have been rising over allegations that Syria is supplying Scud missiles to Hizbullah operatives in Lebanon. Egypt sent a letter Tuesday to US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in an effort to "defuse tensions" between the two countries.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed hope that the stalled peace process between Israel and Palestine would resume next week. 'I was told that the Palestinian President intends on renewing talks, and I will be very glad if the venture comes to fruition next week,' Netanyahu said adding that Israel wants peace in its own interests.

Representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kifaya (Enough) coalition, along with a number of independent politicians filed a report to state prosecutor Abdel Meguid Mahmoud demanding the immediate arrest of Netanyahu when he arrives in Egypt on Monday for talks with President Hosni Mubarak. The Brotherhood and Kifaya are considered Egypt's largest opposition groups.

The United States Department of State said that Egypt has put forward new ideas on the international working group for combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden and for the security of the Suez Canal. It said that these ideas are being studied in Washington with the goal of implementing them. America In Arabic News Agency quoted a statement by American Deputy Assistant Secretary for Political and Military Affairs Thomas Countryman as saying that Egypt put forward some ideas, however, he did not explain the full details of the proposals. The government has been relying on foreign international law experts to revisit the water treaties that the country signed with Nile Basin states, Al-Masry Al-Youm has learned. The agreements under review include ones signed during the British occupation and others ratified after the July revolution of 1952.

Experts predict that Egypt will prepare a file on the historic agreements over Nile water to submit to international arbitration in the event that downstream states sign a separate deal excluding Egypt and Sudan. According to a classified report submitted to the government, the review by foreign experts has found that past agreements and treaties cannot be revoked and hence maintain international legitimacy. Experts argue that the Hague judged in 1989 that water deals are similar to frontier agreements, in the sense that they cannot be changed without a consensus between the concerned parties. Experts also suggested that President Mubarak commission the government to establish a new ministry that will coordinate cooperation with Nile Basin states, eliminating the problems that block investments in these countries, and work with other ministries to activate common joint projects in order to benefit from the river's resources. The government is currently preparing a comprehensive file of Nile Basin negotiations and the reasons for their failure, also tackling the future consequences of the crisis on a legal level.

The overwhelming majority of Nile Basin countries in east Africa, including Kenya, decided to sign a new treaty that governs the future usage of the Nile River, which the Egyptian government has rejected. According to local media, most Kenyans want Egypt to buy water from Kenya and other downstream states if Cairo seeks to continue benefiting from the Nile. Seven of the nine riparian countries will ink the new agreement on May 14, which will replace the old 1929 and 1959 pacts crafted by Egypt and colonial powers without the participation of most Nile nations.

Ethiopia said that it would go ahead with a new deal with six other countries on sharing the waters of the Nile and accused Egypt of “dragging its feet” on a more equitable treaty. The new agreement replaces a 1929 colonial-era treaty between Egypt and Britain, which gave Egypt veto power over upstream projects. The country also has access to most of the water from one of the world’s longest rivers.

United States aid to Egypt is expected to remain unchanged in 2011, with the same NGO funding restriction and a projected 2 percent allocated to democracy promotion, according to a recent report. US President Barack Obama’s budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2011 continues to give financial aid to Egypt at a constant level, but also continues a controversial 2009 decision to restrict financial aid to NGOs sanction Egyptian government-sanctioned NGOs, as well as creating a special “endowment” to be managed by the Egyptian president’s office. The suggested budget proposes \$1.56 billion in aid to Egypt, to be distributed through a wide variety of US governmental organizations — the same amount as requested for FY 2010.

Iraq

Political front; Post elections situation

The Iraqi prime minister harshly criticized calls by his rival for international involvement in setting up a new government following the close-fought parliamentary elections, saying such a role would harm Iraq's efforts to become a self-reliant country.

Nouri Al-Maliki also hinted at some sort of international plot to stage a coup through ballots — in the latest escalation of the war of words in Iraq's post-election impasse following the March 7 vote. Al-Maliki's Shiite coalition narrowly lost by two seats to former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's cross-sectarian Iraqiya Party, but neither garnered enough to rule alone, setting off protracted wrangling over the formation of the next government. In what others have said were attempts to hold on to power, Al-Maliki's bloc Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's efforts to retain power despite his failure in last month's elections threaten to undercut the democratic process that has been hailed as a key achievement of the U.S. invasion and occupation. He is also potentially gambling away the country's security with steps that, if successful, are certain to leave Iraq's minority Sunnis feeling cheated after they overwhelmingly backed his secular challenger, Ayad Allawi.

The front-runner in Iraq's recent parliamentary elections called for the formation of an impartial caretaker government to prevent the country from sliding into violence and counter what he says are efforts to change the vote results. Former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite whose cross-sectarian coalition narrowly won the most votes in the March 7 polling, said in an early morning interview with an Iraqi satellite channel that disqualifying candidates and holding recounts is a violation of the people's vote and an attempt to "steal the will of the Iraqi people." The call comes after an Iraqi court charged

with investigating election-related complaints disqualified one of his candidates, over alleged ties to the former regime.

Members of Al-Iraqiyah, the front-running political bloc in Iraq's parliamentary elections, are meeting in Baghdad to plan a response to a ruling that has thrown the outcome of the March 7 vote into question and driven the country into deeper political turmoil. The April 26 ruling by the three-member Justice and Accountability Panel in Baghdad disqualified 52 candidates because of their ties to Saddam Hussein's banned Ba'ath Party.

Iraq's former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi has said that his secular Al-Iraqiyah bloc has instructed lawyers to appeal a decision to invalidate the votes cast for 52 parliamentary candidates because of their ties to Saddam Hussein's banned Ba'ath Party. Allawi told a news conference in Ankara that Al-Iraqiyah is "very concerned about certain groups controlling the political process in Iraq."

Inmates were regularly tortured at a Baghdad prison illegally run by a military unit under the command of the Iraqi prime minister's office, a human rights group has said. Prisoners held at the Muthanna jail faced torture, beatings, and sexual abuse, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported. The group has called for a thorough investigation into the detention centre and has urged Iraq to prosecute those responsible for the abuse, which came to light when the prison was discovered and closed down this month by Iraq's Human Rights Ministry. Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister, has denied any connection with the facility, which housed mainly Sunni Arab prisoners from the volatile northern city of Mosul, a hotbed of armed groups such as al-Qaeda. **Bad timing for al-Maliki** The discovery of the prison comes at a sensitive time for al-Maliki as he tries to negotiate alliances with other parties, following an inconclusive election in March. HRW interviewed 42 of the 300 men who were detained on a military base at Baghdad's old Muthanna airfield after being arrested in Mosul and accused of terrorism.

Geo strategic front

Iraq's foreign minister chided the US and Britain for not taking an active role in resolving his country's bitter election dispute, and accused Washington of being more concerned with sending home US soldiers. In an interview published in the Arabic daily Asharq Al-Awsat, Hoshyar Zebari also warned of a political vacuum in the country still struggling to seat a government almost two months after the March 7 election as American troops leave prepare to leave. Zebari complained that the US and Britain have stood on the sidelines of the current dispute, and urged them to be more aggressive in pushing Iraq's rival political blocs toward a compromise. "Their role is absent in this election, and this has made matters more difficult," Zebari said in comments in the newspaper.

When President Obama approved a plan to withdraw combat forces from Iraq this summer, it was based on the assumption that a newly elected government would be in place by the time Americans headed home. Fourteen months later, that assumption is exploding but the plan remains the same. The delay and messy aftermath of the Iraqi election mean it may be months before the next government is formed, even as tens of thousands of American troops pack to leave.

Iraq called on Kuwait to halt legal action against Iraqi Airways following Kuwaiti attempts to seize one of the carrier's planes in London in the latest row between the neighboring countries. A lawyer for the Kuwaiti authorities obtained a British High Court order to prevent the director general of Iraqi Airways, who is currently in London, from traveling and seized his passport, Iraq's Transport Ministry said in a statement. Baghdad

and Kuwait have been locked in a long-running dispute over billions of dollars in reparations from Iraq, including about \$1.2 billion related to aircraft and parts that were seized during former dictator Saddam Hussein

Iraq says it has completed 25% of the plan to develop its Nasiriyah oil field. The field's development is carried out by the state-owned South Oil company. The field, which currently produces 10,000 barrels a day, is expected to increase output to 50,000 in 2011, according to the company's Director-General Dhia Jaafar. The company has drilled four oil wells and more will be drilled this year, Jaafar said.

France's cement maker, Lafarge, has invested \$600 million to upgrade production in two Iraqi cement companies. situated in the northern Kurdish city of Sulaimaniya. In two years, the companies are expected to hike their output to 5 million tons of cement a year.

Iraq has asked Iran to continue supplying it with electricity in the future, an official statement said. Electricity Minister Kareem Wahid held talks with the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad in the hope that Iran would agree to renew a contract regulating the purchase by Iraq of 350 megawatts from neighboring Iran, the statement added. Iranian electricity is essential for the Iraqi towns bordering Iran and particularly the provinces of Diyala and Basra. The contract is to expire soon. The statement by the Electricity Ministry did not say how much Iraq pays for electricity imports from Iran.

Iraq's Ministry of Oil says it expects output from oil fields in central Iraq to reach more than 400,000 barrels a day in four years. Central Iraq includes the Province of Baghdad which itself sits on a huge lake of crude and other adjacent provinces where fields with billions of barrels of proven reserves are located. Foreign firms have won contracts to develop some fields in the region while others will be developed by national oil companies. Iraq is now divided into four oil-producing regions with each administered by a separate national oil firm – one for the north, one for the south, one for the Province of Missan and the fourth for the center. Iraq had auctioned several fields in the center of the country which are now overseen by the its fourth state oil company. One of

Lebanon

Political front

Thousands of protestors have gathered in Beirut to demand a separation of politics and religion in Lebanon. The demonstrators marched on parliament on Sunday chanting "secularism" and waving placards calling for the recognition of civil marriage in the Mediterranean country. The idea of a secular political system has faced stiff opposition from ruling politicians who fear an erosion of power if the complex power sharing system between the different religious communities is abandoned. "What is missing is the political support.

About 3,000 people marched in Beirut to demand a secular system in place of the Muslim-Christian sectarianism that permeates politics, employment and family status matters in Lebanon. "Civil marriage, not civil war" was among the banners carried by the mostly young, educated protesters who gathered in response to a campaign on Internet social networking sites. It was Lebanon's first such demonstration in favor of secularism. Many wore white T-shirts with "What's your sect?" written on the front and "None of your business" on the back. Lebanon, whose five million people are split into 18 sects, developed a power-sharing system enshrined in a 1943 national covenant which gave Christians a majority in parliament.

Geo strategic front

Lebanon falls just behind Jordan when it comes to the presence of broad democratic practices, but suffers from relative weakness in democratic methods related to equality, social justice, and the sovereignty of law. This conclusion was reached in the second annual report issued by the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), which examined the state of reform all across the Arab world. The report was prepared by ARI and the Palestinian Center for Political and Survey Research.

Economic front: Business representatives from the controversial Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus met with a handful of Lebanese businessmen in a bid to expand their business ties in Lebanon and alleviate their state of isolation. The trade delegation held the investment conference at the Bristol Hotel in Beirut to persuade their Lebanese counterparts that despite the small size of their market, their service-based economy offers invaluable business opportunities. "Lebanon is a gateway to the Middle East, and its gross domestic product (GDP) per capital is high. So we are interested in establishing a stronger trade partnership with it," said Ali Cirali, who heads the Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce.

The Lebanese Pilots Syndicate announced a general 24-hours strike starting Thursday, thus halting 23 flights. The pilots decided the strike after their demands fell on the Middle East Airlines (MEA) deaf ears. The syndicate announced the strike during a news conference held at the Commodore Hotel Wednesday. Following the pilots' decision, MEA issued an announcement asking its clients to call their offices and call centers for them to be informed about the procedures made by the national carrier to facilitate their trips. MEA chairman Mohammad Hout, meanwhile, is expected to hold a news conference Thursday at 12 pm to inform the public about the latest updates on the pilots' issue. The syndicate's head, Mahmoud Houmani, said the relationship between pilots and MEA had deteriorated since 2001. "MEA imposed unfair working conditions on pilots which created problems between them," he said. He said that skilled Lebanese pilots had made big contributions to the MEA and "worked really hard to help the country's only national carrier face the many challenges it has faced in the past few years." Houmani said that pilots were a major contributor to the profits generated by the MEA last year. "Pilots deserve to get back

Detailed news

Egypt

Political front:

Egypt MB leader: Criticism from within is good

There is no proper opposition inside the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, said Haitham Abu Khalil, one of the organization's leaders. Abu Khalil said Egypt's Brotherhood continually tries to marginalize and discredit what opposition does exist on the grounds that criticism should be expressed through the proper channels and not in public. Abu Khalil, who was giving a press statement yesterday, said the Brotherhood was an association of Muslims, a human rather than a holy organization, and one that routinely makes mistakes. He described the idea that members of the Brotherhood are all of the same mindset as an "insult" to the organization. Abu Khalil drew a connection between

the lack of opposition inside the Brotherhood and the dwindling of its members' talents, saying that what talent does exist is not properly harnessed and is wasted on unproductive activities--one example being the organization's continuing dependence on the use of posters and tape cassettes. Abu Khalil said the Brotherhood needs to train its members to be more critical and to form opposition groups within the organization. "What would you think if you heard of an organization whose members are no longer accustomed to tolerating opposition inside that organization? How can it accept the existence of opposition outside the organization but not inside? Perhaps the matter is one of self-flattery and trying to believe that the Brotherhood is immune to criticism," said Abu Khalil. The Brotherhood leader refused to allow what he termed "the scarecrow of security" to justify a lack of transparency and tolerance of responsible criticism inside the organization. He also demanded that Mohamed Badie, Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, intervene to protect any opposition that does exist inside the organization against accusations of treachery and collaboration, saying that Badie should instead legitimize criticism from within which, if expressed publicly, could be a positive form of publicity for the movement.

Egypt's Parliament approves law to combat human trafficking

CAIRO: The Egyptian Parliament approved on Tuesday a law on combating human trafficking during its session under the chairmanship of Fathi Sorour, the Speaker of Parliament. The Assembly also approved Article 23 of the Draft Law, which states that the "State guarantees the protection of the victim and is working to create conditions to help him and his health care, education and social rehabilitation and integration into society in a context of freedom and human dignity, as well as his return to his home quickly and safely if a foreigner or non-permanent residents in the country, in accordance with the rules and procedures issued by a decision of the Cabinet." The new article also states that any victim of human trafficking must be given the priority for protection and "taking into account the fundamental priority in all decisions and actions by whomever they are issued or exerted." The new Law also states that it must be "taken into account ensuring the following rights for the victim: the right to physical, psychological and moral health and integrity; the right to personal inviolability and identity; the right to be enlightened on administrative, legal and relevant judicial procedures and access to information related to them."

The Parliament also approved Article 28, which provides for the establishment of a fund to assist victims of trafficking and will grant a public juridical personality and shall be organized and renewal of its terms of reference-based and funded by a Presidential decree. The Fund would provide financial assistance to the victims who have suffered damages arising from any of the crimes stipulated in this law, "and among the resources, the fines in the crimes stipulated in this law, money, tools and means of transportation, which governs impoundment, and interpreted these proceeds directly to the Fund, and the Fund to accept donations, grants and donations from national and foreign sources," a statement from Parliament read. A United Nations official on Wednesday called on Egypt to intensify its campaign of combating efforts against trafficking in people, pointing to the lack of awareness about the issue in the country. Joy Ngozi Aizilu, the UN Rapporteur on human trafficking, who ended a 10-day visit to Egypt, met with officials from the Egyptian Government and representatives of civil society during her visit. She

said during a press conference in Cairo that one of the common forms of trafficking in human beings in Egypt underlined the “sexual exploitation of minors through temporary marriages,” adding that “this trend is growing.” She spoke about the exploitation of some needy families, especially in the summer season, when rich men come to Egypt from the Arab Gulf States to marry the daughters of poor family for several days, or weeks, in exchange for money. Aizilu said that “this type of marriage is sometimes just an excuse to provide sexual services to foreigners.” She added that child labor employment of servants, and even slavery, prostitution and organ trading is another issue of people-related trafficking in Egypt. “Internal trafficking, much more exists than the foreign trade,” she said, adding that the countries involved in foreign trade will, in principle, be mentioned in her initial report in June. She said that “in spite of the description of Egypt as a transit country, it can be a source and destination country” for victims of human trafficking. She pointed to the lack of public awareness about the seriousness of this problem and the absence of precise figures on human trafficking in the country, adding that Egypt is participating in a national study supported by various UN agencies, which will publish its findings in July. The rapporteur called on Egypt to improve the training of police and representatives of the judiciary on this issue and educate the media “to address the root causes of the phenomenon, particularly poverty, unemployment and discrimination against women.”

She did praise Egypt’s efforts in combating various types of smuggling, but called on the country to promote their legislative tools in this area as well.

MB to release political reform manifesto

A source close to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Egypt's largest opposition movement, said the group was currently in the process of preparing its long-awaited program for political reform. The program, the source noted, was expected to be announced following a round of meetings now being held with different opposition parties. Speaking on condition of anonymity, the source went on to say that the manifesto would contain "points of agreement" between the MB and other opposition parties and movements, with the aim of confronting the ruling regime's intransigence vis-a-vis longstanding demands for political reform. "The brotherhood cannot achieve reform by itself," said MB Guidance Bureau member Essam el-Erian. "All political forces must set aside their differences and demand reform together." "There are many good men in Egypt working for the good of the country," el-Erian added, pointing to the successful outcome of a recent meeting with the secular opposition Wafd Party. The MB's political reform program will be announced when it is agreed upon by all parties, the source added. Ex-IAEA chief ElBaradei: I may run for Egypt presidency ElBaradei, who recently stepped down as head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said he would seek to change the Egyptian constitution to allow international supervision of elections, an independent election commission and equal access to media.

It is the constitution, democracy activists say, that has allowed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to govern the country under emergency decree for nearly three decades, since the assassination of his predecessor Anwar Sadat. "This is not my primary goal," ElBaradei said in an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour on Wednesday, "to run for the presidency. My primary goal is to see my country, Egypt, a country where I grew up, making a genuine shift toward democracy." The 81-year-old Mubarak has not

announced whether he would stand again for the presidency in 2011, but a succession of health challenges, including recent gall bladder surgery in Germany, have led Egyptians to discuss an issue that had long been off limits in the tightly controlled Egyptian press. "We have a president who has been in power for 30 years," ElBaradei said. "We have martial law for almost 30 years. This speaks volumes for the lack of democracy in Egypt." ElBaradei, winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize along with the IAEA, said he was organizing a grassroots movement across Egypt's political spectrum, using Facebook to petition to change the constitution in a manner that would open Egypt's political system to real pluralism. "That current situation has to change, because the way it is crafted right now, it's only handful of people who have the right even to run for presidency. So democracy is no longer part of the Egyptian lifestyle for over 50 years. And it's an idea that its time has come."

ElBaradei does not have a political party, a factor that presents a substantive obstacle to his candidacy, but he vows to send a message of democratic change to the government.

"This is a peaceful, nonviolent movement, but it's a popular grassroots movement. And everywhere I go, everywhere I travel, there's massive support for change in Egypt."

"For the people, I'm a real agent for change. For the regime, I'm a virtual person," ElBaradei said. "I can't even have a headquarters. I can't raise funds. But we have a lot of volunteers. We have a lot of young volunteers everywhere in the country right now canvassing for change, explaining the people how change will impact on their economic and social life." But Ahmed Ezz, a businessman and leading parliamentary member of the ruling National Democratic Party, said that ElBaradei was exaggerating the difficulty of competing in the upcoming elections. "My party, the NDP, has made it clear it welcomes Dr. ElBaradei to join the political fray," Ezz said. "Our constitution anchors politics and political parties with clear political platforms. There are 24 parties in Egypt. Any of these parties can field candidates in 2011. Half of these parties, for example, have asked Dr. ElBaradei to be their candidate of choice. Dr. ElBaradei hesitates, preferring instead to run as an independent." But Egyptian-American academic Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who spent three years in prison before being acquitted of charges of defaming the Egyptian state, said that ElBaradei was a charismatic candidate facing an enormous logistical challenge to organize a grassroots campaign. "Mr. ElBaradei will have a good chance, and I think millions of Egyptians are willing to rally behind him," he said. "And if external powers could also demand that election, next election be free and fair and transparent, under international supervision, I think we have a very good chance of changing Egypt."

MUBARAK NOT CONSIDERING CABINET RESHUFFLE, SAYS NDP MEMBER

National Democratic Party (NDP) member Mohamed Khalil Kwaitah denied allegations that President Hosni Mubarak recognizes the unpopularity of the current government and might consider a cabinet reshuffle. On Wednesday, daily independent newspaper Al-Shorouk quoted an unnamed source in the ruling party as saying: "There is certainly a discussion on the need for a cabinet reshuffle to ease the recent criticism that is directed at the government, which consequently reflects on the ruling party." The source alleged that the idea of a cabinet change was backed by members in the party including those who adopt progressive ideas as well as old-school politicians. "Did they peak into the president's brain and know what he's thinking? Some news are not worth following up

on,” Kwaitah told Daily News Egypt. “If he [President Mubarak] thinks that the current government is incompetent he will change it... the president wants the best for the Egyptian people,” he added. Kwaitah denied that the notion of a cabinet reshuffle is popular among NDP members. “The problem is that the opposition always sees the cup half empty, not half full.” “Whichever government is in place will make sure to use the resources available in favor of the Egyptian people,” he added. Daily News Egypt was denied comments by Mohamed Kamal, NDP official spokesperson. According to Al-Shorouk’s report, the reshuffle will not only include service ministries. “It might include sacrificing some of the key players,” according to one source. In recent years, Egypt has seen a wave of protests calling for higher wages, democratic reform and an end to emergency laws. “Usually, a cabinet reshuffle is independent of speculations from the media or the public,” Emad Gad of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies told Daily News Egypt. Gad added that a cabinet change never occurred in response to the public’s demands. “The president actually benefits from criticism directed at his cabinet, because people eventually turn to him as the judge.” Al-Shorouk also suggested that there is debate over the possibility of Mubarak appointing a vice-president, a notion that has not been officially confirmed yet. “But this issue is only at the level of discussions. No one knows what’s on Mubarak’s mind,” an NDP source was quoted as saying. Since taking power in 1981, Mubarak, who is approaching the end of his fifth term, has never appointed a vice-president, triggering speculation about who would succeed him in power. “Mubarak always left the door of succession open, never confirmed it or denied it,” said Amr El-Choubaki of Al-Ahram center.

“If these claims are true, then the only significance is that it would mean the end of the succession scenario,” he told Daily News Egypt. Similarly, Gad said: “Egyptians have repeatedly asked Mubarak to appoint a vice president. This discussion is not new,” maintaining that such a move will rule out the succession scenario.

“If it happens, it will officially end the scenario of Gamal Mubarak,” said Gad.

AL-GHAD CHAIRMAN APPLIES FOR PARTY’S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

Moussa Mostafa Moussa, chairman of Al-Ghad party, applied to become the party’s presidential candidate in the upcoming 2011 elections. Moussa’s application will be discussed by Al-Ghad’s supreme committee on April 26, when it is scheduled to vote on the party’s presidential candidate. Moussa was not available for comment; however, in a phone call Thursday to Mehwar’s nightly show “48 Hours,” he said that the committee’s vote will be displayed real-time on large screens to ensure transparency. Waleed Riyad, deputy chairman of Al-Ghad party, confirmed in a statement that since the doors for applications opened on April 13, the party has not received any applications for presidential candidacy apart from Moussa’s. In what is known as the “Nour Front of Al-Ghad party,” at a press conference earlier this month, Ayman Nour, the party’s founder, announced that he will run for president in the 2011 elections, and will appoint two vice presidents including a Coptic woman. He even distributed a booklet detailing his electoral program and said that he will announce a shadow coalition government a few months before the elections which will be “a pleasant surprise to all Egyptians.”

Moussa said that they’ve filed a complaint to the Prosecutor General against the supreme committee of this faction of Al-Ghad. On Thursday, two party members were arrested in

Beheira for hanging posters including a photograph of the three possible presidential candidates for the coming elections: Mohamed ElBaradei, former head of the IAEA, Ayman Nour, founder of Al-Ghad party, and independent MP Hamdeen Sabbahi, representing the unlicensed leftist Al-Karama party. In related news, Egypt's former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Abdallah Alashaal, 65, said is seeking the backing of an opposition party to run for president to challenge what he calls the monopolization of power by President Hosni Mubarak, Reuters reported on Friday. "The Egyptian doesn't believe his vote is credible," Alashaal said. "This regime wants to stay any way and by any means, so we have to circulate power," he told Reuters, adding that he was speaking to several parties but was seeking the backing of the Arab Socialist Party in particular. "The main motive to run for the elections is to test the political regime in Egypt," Alashaal, who now lectures at universities, said. –Additional reporting by Reuters

PA TO DECIDE ON PUNISHMENT OF MP FOR PROPOSING TO SHOOT PROTESTERS

The People's Assembly's legislative committee denounced statements by MP Nashaat El-Qassas calling on security bodies to shoot demonstrators. The legislative committee issued a statement on Wednesday describing El-Qassas' statement as "a violation of the constitution" and "a total disregard for freedom and human rights." The People's Assembly is scheduled to vote on El-Qassas' punishment in next week's session, which can be as strict as expulsion from the assembly. Parliament speaker Fathi Sorour announced during a meeting with the legislative committee on Wednesday that the committee has reviewed the minutes of the joint session between the human rights and defense and national security committees, confirming El-Qassas' statements.

Earlier this month, El-Qassas proposed using violence against protesters, saying "If it were in my hands, I would interrogate the Minister of Interior for his kindness when dealing with those outlaws." "Shoot them and use the bullets on all the protestors that are breaking the law," El-Qassas said. "Based on the minutes," Sorour said, "it was proven that El-Qassas said that demonstrators must be executed ... why should we execute them? Are they dogs?" El-Qassas apologized in an official statement, saying that he "didn't mean to incite the police against demonstrators," explaining that he was only calling for "facing the outlaws."

While some NDP MPs called for the expulsion of El-Qassas, other opposition and Muslim Brotherhood MPs were concerned that it would be a violation of Article 96 of the constitution, restricting MPs' freedom of expression. Zakaria Azmi, chief of the presidential staff and leading member of the NDP, said "El-Qassas made a big mistake ... Even if the constitution does not constrict what MPs say inside the parliament, but we as representatives of the people vow to respect the constitution." Some MPs also called for the punishment of the two other MPs, Ragab Helal Hemeida, member of Al-Ghad Party, and NDP MP Ahmad Abo Aqrab, who seconded El-Qassas' sentiments. However, Sorour refused, saying that according to the minutes, their statements were vague and indirect.

A day after the session, some 50 demonstrators condemned the MPs' statements in a demonstration outside the PA, holding up placards reading, "shoot us" accompanied by an image of a target.

ELBARADEI, AHMED EZZ, SAAD ELDIN IBRAHIM FACE-OFF ON CNN

Christiane Amanpour delved into Egypt's political future in one of her last episodes days before she rounded off her career at CNN.

A video conference brought former IAEA chief and reform advocate Mohamed ElBaradei, and key figure at the National Democratic Party Ahmed Ezz to the studio, while human rights and democracy advocate Saad Eldin Ibrahim was at the studio.

"It is not uncommon for a country to declare emergency powers in times of national crisis, but what happens when the state of emergency lasts for almost 30 years, as it has in Egypt, with a population of nearly 80 million people and a professional class that often needs to look abroad for jobs and political freedom," said Amanpour in her introduction. She first spoke to ElBaradei, asking about his bid for the presidency, who denied that this was his primary goal, adding that above all he wishes to see Egypt make a genuine shift towards democracy. ElBaradei said that he seeks guarantees in every democracy in the world, which are a free and fair election, judicial supervision, international supervision, and to make sure that candidates have equal opportunity in the media. "I am organizing a grassroots movement to push the government," he said, "so that by the time of the presidential elections next year the government would understand that maintaining the status quo is a dead-end street." When Amanpour pointed out that he lacks the support of powerful institutions, such as the military or the intelligence, ElBaradei said that "all the indicators are saying that unless we change and change drastically and empower people, we are going nowhere. So I believe that even the military, the so-called institutions understand that status quo is not sustainable." "We have around 100,000 signatures [to support the reform campaign]. I think it would be a snowball effect. But there's a lot of fear remnant from, again, 50 years of repression," he said. Amanpour introduced Ahmed Ezz with a video from President Obama's speech in Cairo last June, in which he talks about the importance of democracy. Evading the question of why there is no clear succession in Egypt, Ezz said that he first wanted to comment on ElBaradei's remarks.

"My party, the NDP, has made it clear that it welcomes Dr. ElBaradei to join the political fray," he said. "I wish Dr. ElBaradei will do that, because in that situation, he will have to make his position clear on many issues. I have heard Dr. ElBaradei say that he is allying with a huge coalition of Egyptians, when, in fact, he is allying himself with a fringe coalition, either of the extreme left, nurturing old, tired, tested and failed policies of the '60s, or with an extreme right-wing Muslim brothers, who are nurturing democracy a la Ahmadinejad," he said. "The only obstacle to ElBaradei's candidacy is ElBaradei himself," he said. As a pretext to the on-going emergency law, Ezz said: "In this heightened level of security awareness in the world, every country is grappling with how better to protect its citizens, including Egypt, and it has always been controversial. You have your Patriot Act. Our emergency law is our Patriot Act." "That has only and exclusively been used to either combat terror or to avert the threat of terror. In no way has it been used to suppress either political or social or economic life," he added, saying that the emergency law can only be lifted when the Middle East is at peace with itself.

The show ended with an interview with Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who spent three years in prison on charges of defaming the Egyptian state, but was later acquitted and is now living in the United States teaching at Drew University. Ibrahim said that ElBaradei has a chance at the presidency as "everything is possible nowadays" pointing out that no one believed that the Soviet Union could collapse. However, the problem with ElBaradei is that he is a challenger, according to Ibrahim. "We heard from an apologist for the

regime, Mr. Ahmed Ezz ... it will take nearly a miracle to change [the regime] but miracles do happen in the Middle East. After all, that is a region where all the miracles took place," he said. Ibrahim predicted that Mubarak will most likely be running in the 2011 elections as his son [Gamal] does not seem to have created the kind of appeal that would be necessary for a sustainable and serious campaign." He concluded that ElBaradei will have a good chance and that millions of Egyptians are willing to rally behind him. "If external powers could also demand that the next election be free and fair and transparent, under international supervision, I think we have a very good chance of changing Egypt," he said.

Back among the people

Gamal Mubarak returned to politics, paying visits to Egyptian villages and supervising preparations for Shura Council elections, reports Gamal Essam El-Din

For roughly six weeks, Gamal Mubarak, the 47-year-old son of President Mubarak and chairman of the ruling National Democratic Party's powerful Policies Committee, was absent from the Egyptian political scene. Gamal had been in Germany in March alongside his father who underwent surgery to remove his gall bladder. He was also celebrating the birth of his first child, Farida, in the first week of April. While President Mubarak was convalescing in the Red Sea resort of Sharm El-Sheikh, Gamal Mubarak decided to resume his political activities, reinforcing his profile as a major political player. Between 12 April and last week, Gamal took part in several high-level party meetings and paid a visit to an Egyptian village in the Delta governorate of Daqahliya.

On 12 April, Gamal participated in the NDP's six-member steering committee to review the party's future political agenda and prepare for the elections of the Shura Council next summer. On 21 April, Gamal supervised the NDP's electoral colleges designed to select the party's Cairo candidates in the mid-term elections of the Shura Council, scheduled for the beginning of June. Gamal highly praised the role of the electoral colleges in democratising the NDP's internal structures and broadening the scope of participation in the process of decision-making. On 22 April Gamal made his first public appearance outside Cairo, choosing to visit the village of Damas in the governorate of Daqahliya, northwest of Cairo. In his words: "Damas is a highly productive village and represents an excellent example of self-dependent local development."

Gamal said his visits outside Cairo included not only poor villages but also productive ones which top the agenda of the NDP's agricultural development. He stressed that civil society organisations should play a greater role in local development, urging that "the government alone should no longer bear the burden of funding self-productive rural projects." According to Gamal, three important laws aimed at raising the socio-economic living standard of citizens will soon be discussed by parliament. "These include opening the door for private participation in public infrastructure projects; upgrading pensions and the insurance system; and instituting a new social insurance pension for poor classes," Gamal said. In political terms, Gamal Mubarak strongly condemned calls by the NDP's MP Nashaat El-Qassas for security forces to open fire on pro-democracy demonstrators. "This call is totally rejected and can never be justified and it was strongly condemned by the NDP's secretariat-general in its most recent meeting," the president's son said.

A meeting held by the People Assembly's Legislative Affairs Committee yesterday also condemned El-Qassas, recommending that he be referred to parliament's Ethics

Committee. The committee said that in a parliamentary meeting on 18 April El-Qassas said of security forces: "They should not use water hoses to disperse outlaw demonstrators but rather shoot at them directly."

Some observers agree that the temporary absence of Gamal Mubarak from the political scene had partly enhanced the profile of Mohamed El-Baradei, the former director of the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as a potential successor to the 82-year-old President Hosni Mubarak. Observers also believe that since he returned to Egypt to lead a ferocious anti-NDP campaign for political reform, El-Baradei has managed to draw attention to his campaign. Like Gamal, observers remarked, El-Baradei decided to visit Egyptian villages and mix with ordinary Egyptians during Friday prayers in well known mosques. He even took his political reform message to America last week. On Tuesday, El-Baradei met a number of Egyptian academics and reformists in Harvard University and posted an Internet message on his Twitter website urging Egyptians to "break the wall of fear the way Germans broke the Berlin Wall in 1990". But even if El-Baradei manages to join the presidential elections of 2011, he stands no chance of victory, given the overwhelming authority of the NDP, which controls politics across Egypt. The vast majority of NDP members are young citizens who firmly support Gamal Mubarak as a successor to his father, not to mention that Gamal is also very popular among businessmen who highly appreciate his economic reformist initiatives. President Mubarak and Gamal have repeatedly denied that they eye a father-son succession scenario. Speculation has been rife in recent weeks that President Mubarak had at last decided to name a vice-president. President Mubarak has not appointed a vice-president since he came to power in 1981. Rumours were and remain rampant that he has chosen Omar Suleiman, chief of the Egyptian General Intelligence Services, to be his deputy. Other rumours, however, suggest that Suleiman will be appointed a member of the NDP's political bureau rather than as Mubarak's long-awaited deputy. "Suleiman will simply replace Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb El-Naggar, who was appointed grand imam of Al-Azhar last month, as a member of the NDP's political bureau," said a political analyst who asked not to be identified, adding that the appointment "will open the door for Suleiman to be a member of the NDP's 45-member higher council and hence become eligible to run in future presidential elections". The number of candidates willing to run in presidential elections has grown in recent weeks. Abdallah El-Ashaal, a former deputy minister of foreign affairs, announced that he will be fielded by the opposition Arab Misr (Egypt) Socialist Party (AMSP) as its official candidate in 2011. Since he resigned from the Foreign Ministry, El-Ashaal has been a harsh critic of the regime of President Mubarak. Wahid El-Oksori, AMSP chairman, strongly denied that El-Ashaal will be fielded by his party. "El-Ashaal is not an AMSP member and we are not interested in importing candidates from outside the party," El-Ashaal said. Ayman Nour, leader of the Ghad (Tomorrow) Party, and Hamdeen Sabahi, leader of the Karama Party, have announced they, too, intend to run in the presidential elections despite several insurmountable legal obstacles. Amr Elshobaki, an Al-Ahram analyst, argues that Nour can never stand in elections because "the years he spent in jail [between 2005 and 2009] make him ineligible to run." "On the other hand," added Elshobaki, "since Karama is not an officially recognised party, the only chance for Sabahi to run is to be fielded as an independent but this is quite impossible." Elshobaki, however, said he believed that the increase in the number of hopeful presidential aspirants helps reinvigorate political life.

"This, though, reflects how difficult it is for the opposition to agree on one candidate and how easier this makes it for an NDP candidate to win any presidential election," Elshobaki argues. NDP officials have so far refused to name their party's candidate for the presidential elections of 2011. They attribute the early announcement of some to run in presidential elections to their party's reformist initiatives, especially the amendment of Article 76 of the constitution in 2005.

Scramble for the Shura

The ruling NDP and other political parties have begun preparing for mid-term elections of the Consultative Council scheduled for June. Gamal Essam El-Din reports Preparations for the mid-term elections of the Shura or Consultative Council, scheduled for the beginning of June, have shifted into third gear. Intissar Nessim, chairman of Cairo's Court of Appeals and president of the Higher Election Commission (HEC), announced on 24 April that the elections will be staged in 67 districts to elect 88 deputies from all governorates, with the exception of Ismailia and the Al-Wadi Al-Gadid. Nessim said the 67 districts include 21 designed to elect 42 deputies, or two in each district, while the remaining 46 were designed "to elect just one deputy in each district." According to Nessim, HEC decided that the financial ceiling imposed on campaigning be boosted from LE100,000 to LE200,000. "In the run-off round," Nessim indicated, "we decided that the ceiling be upped from LE50,000 to LE100,000." He indicated that administrative committees will be tasked with guaranteeing that candidates abide by the funding rules. Nessim also explained that general judicial committees will be formed to take charge of monitoring the polls. "These committees will be headed by chairmen of First Instance Courts in all governorates," said Nessim, adding that "female members of judicial authorities such as administrative prosecution and state cases will participate in monitoring the elections for the first time."

Nessim emphasised that Egyptian civil society organisations will be allowed to take part in monitoring all stages of the Shura elections, including voting in polling stations and vote-counting in main polling committees.

"These organisations will be required to coordinate with the National Council for Human Rights [NCHR] to be officially licensed to participate in monitoring," said Nessim. He, however, indicated that civil society monitors will not be allowed to direct questions to voters inside polling stations or hold interviews with monitoring judges.

In response, Hafez Abu Seada, secretary-general of the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR), said an EOHR team is being mobilised to monitor the Shura elections. "A random sample of 30 districts where competition is expected to be fierce between candidates of the ruling National Democratic Party [NDP] and opposition and independent candidates was selected to be monitored by the EOHR," Abu Seada said, emphasising that "the role of the EOHR and other civil society organisations in supervising elections will be marked with complete impartiality." Meanwhile, President Hosni Mubarak ordered on Monday that the door of registration for the Shura elections be opened between 5 and 10 May. "The elections will be held at the beginning of June while the first meeting of the new Shura Council will be convened on 24 June," Mubarak's order said. Minister of State for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs and NDP's Assistant Secretary-General Moufid Shehab said the NDP's preparations for the elections

had begun in earnest in the last few days, that the NDP's electoral colleges -- committees in which the party's candidates are selected in secret polls -- were held between 21 and 25 April. "Statistics show that as many as 305 NDP members competed strongly to receive their party's official nomination," Shehab said. Shehab argued that electoral colleges were devised by the ruling party as part of efforts exerted to democratise the process of decision-making in the NDP. "These colleges aim to encourage NDP members to choose the candidates they see most qualified to run in elections instead of giving NDP leaders the upper hand in selecting the party's candidates," said Shehab.

A number of prominent NDP members competed in the party's electoral colleges. Mohamed Abdallah, chairman of the NDP's Foreign Relations Committee and former president of Alexandria University, won the party's candidacy in Alexandria's district of Al-Montazah. Hisham Talaat Mustafa, the business tycoon currently facing trial on murder charges, was the NDP's former representative of Al-Montazah in the Shura Council. Minister of Waqf (religious endowments) Hamdi Zaqzouq won the NDP's official nomination uncontested in the district of Talkha, in the Nile-Delta governorate of Daqahliya. Shehab said out of a total of 305 nominees, the NDP's electoral colleges should have selected 88 official candidates in the mid-term elections. Shehab said once its list of official candidates is adopted, the NDP will embark on an election platform "which will explain the NDP's ideology and vision for the next stage of Egypt's history and political life," adding that "the NDP's political and economic achievements in the past three years will be also reviewed by the programme." Most opposition parties announced that they will run in the Shura elections. More than 60 candidates are expected to be fielded by as many as 14 parties. The liberal-oriented Wafd Party said a mere 10 candidates will run in the polls. "The party will spend LE300,000 on supporting the election campaigns of these candidates," said Essam Shiha, a member of Al-Wafd's Higher Council. Rifaat El-Said, chairman of the leftist Tagammu Party, said the party will field 11 candidates in the governorates of Alexandria, Helwan and Qena.

Ahmed Hassan, secretary-general of the Arab Nasserist Party, argued that "since the cost of running the Shura elections is too expensive for the party members to afford, we found it enough that just one candidate be fielded in the Upper Egypt governorate of Qena."

Most opposition parties believe that running in the Shura elections is futile. "This is a council which does not have any legislative or supervisory powers and whose elections are very costly for under-funded parties to afford," said Hassan. Osama El-Ghazali Harb, chairman of the Democratic Front Party, announced on 18 April that its party would boycott the Shura elections. El-Ghazali, himself an appointed Shura Council member, announced that his party had strong doubts that the Shura elections will be marked by integrity and transparency. "Because these elections lack any kind of guarantees of integrity and fair competition, we decided not to participate because the whole matter will turn out to be a big farce," El-Ghazali argued.

Geo strategic front

Egypt warns of Israel-Lebanon escalation

Ambassador Oren says Israel has "no intention of attacking" its neighbors.

Even as Egypt is warning of a new escalation between Israel and Lebanon, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak reassured his Lebanese counterpart, Sa'ad Hariri, on Tuesday

that Israel does not plan to attack his country. Israeli officials also denied plans to attack Lebanon, with Ambassador to the US Michael Oren telling CNN that Israel has “no intention of attacking Lebanon, Syria or anybody else in the Middle East.” But tensions have been rising over allegations that Syria is supplying Scud missiles to Hizbullah operatives in Lebanon. Egypt sent a letter Tuesday to US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in an effort to “defuse tensions” between the two countries. In the past week, Egypt has taken an aggressive stance against Israel, with Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit calling Israel an “enemy” state, and saying that the Scud transfers are a “big lie.” An editorial in Al-Ahram, the daily newspaper of the Egyptian government, called on Arab countries to isolate Israel. After Egypt subsequently denied calling Israel the enemy, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Danny Ayalon said, “As far as Israel is concerned, the matter is now closed.” Reports of the alleged Scud transfer surfaced in Kuwait’s Al-Rai newspaper earlier this month. Israel subsequently issued a stern warning that it would consider attacking both Syrian and Lebanese targets in response to a Scud attack on its territory. During a visit to Brazil, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman said Tuesday that his country would defend itself if it came under attack. And Hariri, on his way out of a meeting with Mubarak at Sharm e-Sheikh, said he was reassured that Egypt would support Lebanon if a war were to break out. He further denied Scud missiles had been delivered to Hizbullah in Lebanon. Also on Tuesday, Oren said, “The fact of the matter is the Syrians have been providing missiles to Hizbullah in Lebanon.” Asked whether another conflict was imminent, Oren said the Obama administration has made it clear to Syria that arming Hizbullah is “unacceptable behavior.” He pointed out that the Syrian ambassador has been summoned to the White House on four occasions related to the weapons charges. “We are convinced that the Obama administration understands this danger” and made “its concerns clear to the Syrian government,” he said. Asked about the Iranian nuclear threat, Oren said Israel was fully committed to the sanctions program being pursued by the United States. “Israel, like any country in the world, has a right to defend itself,” he said. “We are committed to these sanctions, seeing how they work, getting them up and running... Nobody is talking about coexisting with a nuclear Iran.”

Sudan's Beshir in Egypt on first trip since re-election

Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir travelled to neighbouring Egypt on Tuesday on his first trip abroad since his re-election was declared on Monday. His Egyptian counterpart, Hosni Mubarak, “congratulated the Sudanese president on his winning a new presidential term in the elections,” state news agency MENA reported. Beshir’s victory by 68 percent margin was announced by Sudan’s election commission on Monday, following five days of polling earlier this month. Mubarak hosted Beshir in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, where the 81-year-old president is convalescing after surgery in Germany last month. Mubarak said he was keen to achieve stability in his country’s southern neighbour, where the semi-autonomous south is due to vote in an independence referendum next year, the agency said. The two also discussed developments in the war-torn western Darfur region, where the United Nations says 300,000 people have died since ethnic rebels took up arms against the government in 2003. Khartoum puts the toll at 10,000. The Sudanese government has been in Qatari-hosted peace talks with the most active rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement. The negotiations were suspended for the elections, but are due to resume next month. After the International Criminal

Court issued a warrant in March 2009 for Beshir's arrest for alleged war crimes in Darfur, Mubarak expressed support for the Sudanese president. Egypt was the second country Beshir visited after the warrant was issued.

Netanyahu to meet Egyptian president

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed hope that the stalled peace process between Israel and Palestine would resume next week. 'I was told that the Palestinian President intends on renewing talks, and I will be very glad if the venture comes to fruition next week,' Netanyahu said adding that Israel wants peace in its own interests. Netanyahu will meet Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak next Monday to discuss ways to resume talks with the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Xinhua reported. 'Monday I will travel to Egypt to meet with President Mubarak, who is doing a lot to renew peace. We are committed to a real peace process,' said Netanyahu at a meeting of his Likud party Tuesday. In an interview with an Israeli TV channel Monday night, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said he is optimistic that the Arab League will approve Palestinian-Israeli indirect talks when it meets May 1. US Middle East special envoy George Mitchell announced in March that both Israel and the Palestinian Authority agreed to enter US-brokered proximity talks, which could end the hiatus in the Mideast peace process since Israel launched a massive military campaign against the Gaza Strip in December 2009. The indirect peace negotiations have been on hold after Israeli government approved a housing program in East Jerusalem following Mitchell's announcement.

Opposition calls for arresting Netanyahu

Representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kifaya (Enough) coalition, along with a number of independent politicians filed a report to state prosecutor Abdel Meguid Mahmoud demanding the immediate arrest of Netanyahu when he arrives in Egypt on Monday for talks with President Hosni Mubarak. The Brotherhood and Kifaya are considered Egypt's largest opposition groups. In 2005 parliamentary elections, the Brotherhood won 20 per cent of the popular vote. "Our demand is based on a number of international reports about the Israeli offensive on Gaza, including the Goldstone report," said opposition journalist Abdel-Halim Qandil, the current head of the Kifaya coalition.

The fact-finding mission of Justice Richard Goldstone last year charged that war crimes may have taken place during the 2008-2009 three-week-long Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip, which left some 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis dead. At the time, Netanyahu was not prime minister. "We also filed a separate legal memorandum reviewing evidence of Netanyahu's war crimes in Gaza based on international laws," Qandil added. Meeting at the Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Sheikh, Netanyahu and Mubarak are expected to discuss Palestinian-Israeli "proximity" talks, which Washington said will resume next week. On Saturday, the Arab League gave its blessing to the indirect talks. Egypt has been a key player in the negotiations, which were suspended in late 2008. The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed al-Beltagi said that the report is a "a political message to emphasize that receiving Netanyahu in Sharm al-Sheikh is rejected by the people." The independent-daily al-Masry al-Youm on Saturday quoted Egypt's ambassador to Israel, Yasser Reda, as saying that "the Egyptian opposition isn't opposed to the peace treaty or Israel." "Those people don't want war. Most of the world wants

peace," he said at a Tel Aviv University after expressing his hopes of seeing a football match played between the Egyptian and Israeli national teams in the near future. Despite being the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, the question of normalizing relations remains a hot topic of debate in Egypt, where many reject the idea of direct relations with Israel.

US: Egypt could secure Gulf of Aden

The United States Department of State said that Egypt has put forward new ideas on the international working group for combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden and for the security of the Suez Canal. It said that these ideas are being studied in Washington with the goal of implementing them. America In Arabic News Agency quoted a statement by American Deputy Assistant Secretary for Political and Military Affairs Thomas Countryman as saying that Egypt put forward some ideas, however, he did not explain the full details of the proposals. Countrymen said that "Egypt is the fourth President of the International Working Group, but the ideas need to be taken forward for implementation and application, and in a better way while providing the necessary funding for it." The State Department said that more than 20 countries now participate in the international naval force, which works to secure the navigation in the Gulf of Aden. According to State there is, on any given day, an average of 17 military naval ships patrolling the Gulf of Aden, "which is partly related to passing through the Suez Canal in Egypt." The canal is one of Egypt's largest sources for foreign capital and Cairo believes that securing the canal zone and the gulf would go a long way in getting ships to return to shipping via the canal. The State Department said in its statement that the international force "is working steadily" and securing some 30,000 cargo ships crossing from this corridor each year, many of which passes through the Suez Canal in Egypt. The statement quoted Countrymen as saying that the "warships of the United States and the European Union and NATO and a number of other countries, including Russia, China, South Korea, Japan are working together under a united international leadership." He said that 24 countries formed in January 2009 a "contact group" on piracy off the coast of Somalia "under the umbrella of the United Nations." The group now comprises 47 countries and 10 international organizations. Countrymen said that progress in the fight against piracy happens "consistently and steadily but not dramatically," adding that the number of successful attacks waged by the pirates in the region has declined. The US had earlier said that Egypt, the United States, the United Kingdom and Denmark are leading the four teams to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden off the Somali Coast. This comes as piracy in the gulf continues to run without much hindrance, although international forces have been stationed in the area in an effort to curtail the hijacking of vessels that travel through the waters upon leaving the Suez Canal.

International law experts review Egypt's position on water agreements

The government has been relying on foreign international law experts to revisit the water treaties that the country signed with Nile Basin states, Al-Masry Al-Youm has learned. The agreements under review include ones signed during the British occupation and others ratified after the July revolution of 1952.

Experts predict that Egypt will prepare a file on the historic agreements over Nile water to submit to international arbitration in the event that downstream states sign a separate deal excluding Egypt and Sudan.

According to a classified report submitted to the government, the review by foreign experts has found that past agreements and treaties cannot be revoked and hence maintain international legitimacy. Experts argue that the Hague judged in 1989 that water deals are similar to frontier agreements, in the sense that they cannot be changed without a consensus between the concerned parties. Experts also suggested that President Mubarak commission the government to establish a new ministry that will coordinate cooperation with Nile Basin states, eliminating the problems that block investments in these countries, and work with other ministries to activate common joint projects in order to benefit from the river's resources. The government is currently preparing a comprehensive file of Nile Basin negotiations and the reasons for their failure, also tackling the future consequences of the crisis on a legal level. A commission of Egyptian experts in water issues is also planned to be set up, and the government intends to request that experts from the British government provide documents to strengthen Egypt's position, since London has maintained copies of all treaties signed during its occupation of Egypt.

The government is also readying itself with responses to Ethiopian allegations that no deals were signed between the two countries to regulate the construction of dams and Nile resources. Egypt will use as evidence a letter of intent issued by the presidents of both countries in 1993, which was approved by the UN. The letter includes a pledge by Ethiopia not to implement any project that will impact the water flow to Egypt, and also grants the latter the right to obtain its share periodically. Former Irrigation Minister Mahmoud Abu Zeid told Al-Masry Al-Youm that the letter is counted among the conventions that enjoy international legitimacy. A government entity is now reviewing the results of the rounds of negotiations between Egypt and Nile Basin countries and the reasons for the failure of the talks held in Sharm el-Sheikh last week. All findings will be submitted to Mubarak so that he may make an appropriate decision. Senior government sources said that the president stressed the importance of boosting cooperation with Nile Basin countries, making this a foreign policy priority. On the other hand, former president for Monufiya University, Meghawri Shehata Diab, a water expert, said it was wrong to convene a meeting of Nile Basin leaders at this stage, which, he believes, will end in failure. He emphasized the importance of self-restraint on the Egyptian side.

Diab also said there is no international law regulating cross-border rivers. He warned that, in the scenario that downstream states sign a separate deal excluding Egypt and Sudan, Egypt should be ready to turn to international arbitration.

Kenya wants Egypt to pay for using Nile water

The overwhelming majority of Nile Basin countries in east Africa, including Kenya, decided to sign a new treaty that governs the future usage of the Nile River, which the Egyptian government has rejected. According to local media, most Kenyans want Egypt to buy water from Kenya and other downstream states if Cairo seeks to continue benefiting from the Nile. Seven of the nine riparian countries will ink the new agreement on May 14, which will replace the old 1929 and 1959 pacts crafted by Egypt and colonial powers without the participation of most Nile nations. Kenyans who noted the current row between Egypt and the seven nations suggested that the seven downstream nations

buy oil from Egypt and Sudan. Since the seven east African countries are paying for Oil, they said Egypt and Sudan should start paying for water as both Oil and water are natural resources of the respective nations.

Other Kenyans said Egypt, a mainly desert country, would need to purchase food and hydro energy from Kenya, Ethiopia and other countries which are the sources of the Nile. According to Kenyan analysts, fair trade and agreements between Egypt and other Nile basin nations would drastically reduce the likelihood of conflict in the region.

ETHIOPIA ACCUSES EGYPT OF DELAYING NILE TREATY

Ethiopia said Tuesday that it would go ahead with a new deal with six other countries on sharing the waters of the Nile and accused Egypt of “dragging its feet” on a more equitable treaty. The new agreement replaces a 1929 colonial-era treaty between Egypt and Britain, which gave Egypt veto power over upstream projects. The country also has access to most of the water from one of the world’s longest rivers.

“Ethiopia and six other countries in east and central Africa will sign on May 14 a framework agreement on the equitable utilization of the Nile river,” Ethiopian government spokesman Shimelis Kemal told reporters. “It’s a deal based on international customary law, but Egypt is dragging its feet. All seven countries have rejected the previous agreement between Egypt and colonial Britain,” he said. Egyptian Water Resources Minister Mohammed Allam on Monday warned Nile basin countries against inking the deal which excluded his country. Burundi, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda agreed to the new deal on April 13, only to be shunned by both Egypt and Sudan — the river’s two largest consumers. At the heart of the dispute is the 1929 agreement between Egypt and Britain, acting on behalf of its African colonies along the 5,584-kilometer river, which gave Egypt veto power over upstream projects.

An agreement between Egypt and Sudan in 1959 allowed Egypt 55.5 billion cubic metres of water each year — 87 percent of the Nile’s flow — and Sudan 18.5 billion cubic meters. Some of the Nile Basin countries say past treaties are unfair and they want an equitable water-sharing agreement that would allow for more irrigation and power projects. Egypt, a mostly arid country that relies on the Nile for the majority of its water, argues up-stream countries could make better use of rainfall and have other sources of water.

AMNESTY CALLS FOR RETRIAL OF HEZBOLLAH CASE IN EGYPT

Amnesty International on Thursday called for a retrial of 26 defendants convicted in Cairo of working for Lebanon's Hezbollah to launch attacks in Egypt, criticizing the use of an emergency court. "These men should be retried by an ordinary court which gives them a chance of getting a fair trial," said the London-based rights watchdog.

"Bypassing justice by referring sensitive cases to emergency courts undermines the criminal justice system and encourages human rights abuses," Amnesty said.

In a trial which reflected Egypt's tense ties with the Lebanese Shia group, the men — Lebanese, Palestinians, Egyptians and a Sudanese national — received jail terms of between six months and life imprisonment.

Four of the men were tried in absentia, three of whom were given the longest jail terms.

The 26 were convicted of plotting attacks against ships in the Suez Canal and on tourist sites, among other charges.

"Their conviction was based on 'confessions' which the defendants say were obtained under torture," Amnesty said in a statement.

Egypt's emergency law, in place since the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981, allows for indefinite detention and the courts set up under the law deny the right of appeal. The defendants "were denied an adequate defence and tried by a special court whose decisions cannot be appealed before a higher tribunal. Convictions after unfair trials can only entrench injustice," Amnesty said. – AFP

OBAMA PROPOSES ALLOCATING 2 PCT OF EGYPT AID TO DEMOCRACY

United States aid to Egypt is expected to remain unchanged in 2011, with the same NGO funding restriction and a projected 2 percent allocated to democracy promotion, according to a recent report.

US President Barack Obama's budget proposal for Fiscal Year 2011 continues to give financial aid to Egypt at a constant level, but also continues a controversial 2009 decision to restrict financial aid to NGOs sanction Egyptian government-sanctioned NGOs, as well as creating a special "endowment" to be managed by the Egyptian president's office. The suggested budget proposes \$1.56 billion in aid to Egypt, to be distributed through a wide variety of US governmental organizations — the same amount as requested for FY 2010.

Of that \$1.56 billion, \$1.3 billion (84 percent of the total) is allocated for military assistance, as part of the US government's Foreign Military Financing initiative. That number has remained constant since 1987, and is currently required by a 10-year agreement between the US and the Egyptian government, signed in 2008.

The remaining \$250 million (16 percent of the total request) is allocated for civilian aid.

Of that \$250 million, \$25 million (2 percent of the total request) is specifically earmarked for promoting democratic growth, as part of the government's Governing Justly and Democratically (GJD) fund. Originally, the Obama Administration only requested \$20 million for the GJD, but a recent earmark by the US Congress required "not less than \$25 million shall be made available for democracy, human rights, and governance programs." The Obama Administration subsequently raised the GJD request to \$25 million. The \$250 million in aid comes with restrictions some find troublesome.

The proposed budget continues a controversial decision by the Obama administration to require the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to only distribute its funds to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) officially registered with the Egyptian government. "Many Egyptian civil society groups, however, choose not to register as an NGO for fear of heavy-handed government interference," said Stephen McInerney, Director of Advocacy for the Project on Middle Eastern Democracy in Washington, DC. "Many other organizations do try to register with the Egyptian government, but do not receive approval." Writing in a report critiquing President Obama's budget, he continued, "making funds available only to those groups that do receive Egyptian government approval for their NGO registration essentially gives the Egyptian regime veto power over the recipients of its civil society direct grants."

He added, "Many observers ... view this change in policy as contradicting the language of the annual appropriations act." That congressional act states that "with respect to the provision of assistance for democracy, human rights, and governance activities, the

organizations implementing such assistance and the specific nature of that assistance shall not be subject to the prior approval by the government of any foreign countries.”

In other words, the act explicitly does not require US Government funds to only go through locally-sanctioned NGOs. “This policy decision ... certainly does appear to violate the spirit and intent of [this act’s] language,” McInerney said.

The Obama Administration has defended this action by noting only USAID is required to abide by this restriction, and that the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) at the US State Department, as well as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), created under President George W. Bush, are still free to invest in NGOs not approved by the Egyptian government. However, these organizations have been allocated approximately \$3 million, whereas USAID routinely contributed approximately \$10 million to unregistered groups before the restrictions first appeared, in FY 2009. This amounts to a continuing 74 percent cut for non-registered NGOs, according to McInerney. The other element of the proposed budget some find controversial consists of \$50 million allocated to a “bilateral endowment” between the US and Egyptian governments. “The idea is that the US government would deposit funds into the endowment for a period of years, after which the Egyptian government would be able to draw on the fund without the uncertainty of congressional appropriations,” McInerney said. ***The proposal has been criticized by some observers.*** “[This] amounts to a trust fund for Hosni Mubarak’s regime,” said Gregg Carlstrom, a writer at the Middle East affairs blog The Majlis. “Mubarak can use the money in the endowment — and the dividends earned on investment — however he wants; the money is already appropriated, so Congress cannot impose any conditions.” The endowment fund originated in a 2007 proposal by New Hampshire Senator Judd Gregg, a Republican member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, to create a “United States-Egypt Friendship Endowment,” with an original budget of \$500 million. He amended the FY 2010 omnibus bill to allow for this \$50 million endowment, according to Foreign Policy. Ratification of a US president’s budget is no easy process. It is first subjected to intense scrutiny and debate in the US House of Representatives, and then, if approved, the US Senate repeats the process. Due to the wide range of areas the budget covers, the process can take many months.

Iraq

Political front

Post elections situation

Iraq PM slams calls for foreign role in election

The Iraqi prime minister on Friday harshly criticized calls by his rival for international involvement in setting up a new government following the close-fought parliamentary elections, saying such a role would harm Iraq's efforts to become a self-reliant country.

Nouri Al-Maliki also hinted at some sort of international plot to stage a coup through ballots — in the latest escalation of the war of words in Iraq's post-election impasse following the March 7 vote. Al-Maliki's Shiite coalition narrowly lost by two seats to former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's cross-sectarian Iraqiya Party, but neither garnered enough to rule alone, setting off protracted wrangling over the formation of the next

government. In what others have said were attempts to hold on to power, Al-Maliki's bloc has since requested recounts in several provinces. Meanwhile, a commission responsible for vetting candidates for ties to old regime has recommended disqualifying several Iraqiya winners. The moves prompted Allawi to warn of an effort to "steal" the election and has called for an international supervised caretaker government to oversee the process of determining the election results and forming a new government. Even Al-Maliki's foreign minister has suggested that the UN could become more involved in the process. "Matters are getting worse day after day," Hoshyar Zebari told the Al-Sharqiya channel Wednesday night. "The UN might at least bring together the winning lists to sit with them and discuss matters." But Al-Maliki argued on Friday that any further involvement of international organizations would only delay Iraq's efforts to end a United Nations mandate and become fully sovereign. "Look at the delegations that are roaming several countries and demanding an intervention in a national issue in which nobody should interfere," he said in reference to Allawi, who had just completed trips to Jordan, Egypt and Turkey. "I ask them and the Iraqi people about the meaning of these delegations going out and crying for help. What happened to them so that they scream to the world," he said in a speech in the holy city of Karbala. Al-Maliki warned that further foreign interference could turn Iraq into a "battlefield for regional and international powers." He defended his calls for a recount as a way of assuaging voters' anger that their ballots had disappeared or had not been properly counted, and suggested that efforts to stop the recount were part of an international plot to remove him from power. "This gives us an impression that there is a regional and international project that wants to mount a coup through ballots, otherwise why this big fuss and weeping in the world over the recount issue?" he said. Despite numerous calls for recounts by a number of parties, only Al-Maliki's request for a recount in Baghdad province was approved. With 68 seats up for grabs, Baghdad is the largest electoral district and a recount could reverse Allawi's slim lead. The recount is expected to start Monday and could take weeks. The anonymous three-judge panel's approval of the recount and the disqualification of one of Allawi's candidates' has also spurred accusations that the judiciary is biased. Iraq's disaffected Sunni minority overwhelmingly backed Allawi's list and it is feared that a reversal of his victory could prompt many to lose faith in the political process and possibly take up arms against the government once more. Police in the western city of Fallujah, once a center of the Sunni-backed insurgency, said two men died Friday when a bomb they were planting by the roadside went off. A third bomber was captured by security forces after the blast while a fourth escaped.

Iraq's future

Iraqi security forces seem to have enjoyed an outstanding 24-hour period in which they appear to have killed three top commanders of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Unfortunately, it cannot be hoped that these slayings will break the back of the insurgency. Many "masterminds" have been killed in the past. Nevertheless the loss of not one, but three key leaders so swiftly will undoubtedly have thrown the Al-Qaeda men into confusion. It looks their established command structures have been disrupted and their communications broken by US and Iraqi intelligence. This could in turn usher in further Iraqi successes against them. The government of Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki has certainly gone out of its way to

drive home the point that this coup has happened on its watch. In so doing Al-Maliki will be seeking to strengthen his bargaining position in his push to block his rival Iyad Allawi from forming the next coalition. He has already obtained a recount of general election votes in Baghdad. There is, however, a core consideration that seems too often neglected as Iraq's political leaders jockey for power. The only way that a decisive victory over the insurgents and terrorists will ever be won, will be by the emergence of a unified and strong coalition government that represents the plurality of the people and that has a semblance of legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqi people. Al-Qaeda has always feared the electoral process and on three separate occasions has vowed and has failed to stop Iraqis from going to the polling booths. Despite the terrible threats from the men of violence, the ordinary man and woman in the street have done their duty within the electoral process. Sadly, the people they elected have all too often failed to live up to their part of the bargain. There is no doubt that bargaining must take place. It is part and parcel of the formation of any coalition government anywhere. However, it cannot be emphasized too much that in a country still under occupation and riven by violence the whole political and social fabric is at greater risk while there is no settled outcome. Politics is always about power, the power to change the direction and fortunes of a country, hopefully for the better. It should never be about power for its own sake, for the trappings and the influence that go with high office. Iraqi political leaders, not only have the interests of their own constituencies to promote, they also have the interests of Iraq. Most of them no doubt believe their particular vision is the best guarantee of improvement, which is why they will struggle for the power they need to implement it. However, in the end the future of Iraq and its people rests less on who governs it than it does on the fact that it is governed fairly on behalf of all interests. As the Americans finally get out, Iraqis need to be united in their refund independence. A stable and fair government is what the men of violence fear most.

Iraqi government formation still months away

After a historic election in early March, Iraq is still months from forming a new government as political leaders jockey for position in a race that appears to have little to do with voters. The initial results from the March 7 vote for only the second parliament since Saddam Hussein was toppled put Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's Shiite Muslim coalition narrowly behind that of his secular Shiite challenger Ayad Allawi. While political leaders made a flurry of what officials called unseemly visits to neighboring Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which all are thought to have played backstage roles in the elections, an Iraqi appeals panel upheld a challenge by Prime Minister Maliki and ordered a recount of more than 20 percent of the votes. "You still get the sense that Maliki is hoping some sort of miracle is going to put him in the lead in terms of number of seats in parliament and as long as he clings to that hope the whole process will get delayed," said Reidar Visser, an Iraq expert at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. With the U.N. having said it hadn't seen any evidence of widespread fraud, the recount was widely seen as a bow to political pressure. The painstaking manual count of more than 2 million votes cast in and around Baghdad and an investigation of other complaints is expected to delay certifying the tally by several weeks. Positions in the 325-seat parliament were split among four main political blocs, meaning that at least three of them probably would have to band together to form a comfortable majority. Six

weeks after the vote, however, serious talks still haven't begun. I don't detect serious movement yet on the real decisions regarding government formation," said Ambassador Gary Grappo, the political counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. "I could envision a scenario where it might go relatively quickly and you could have something by early June, but it could drag through the summer." U.S. and Iraqi officials said the political parties are willing enough to bargain that a coalition government could take almost any kind of form but will have a hard time overcoming their objections to the leaders themselves. Maliki emerged during his four years in power as an autocrat who alienated almost all of his coalition members and former political allies. Allawi, a former prime minister with U.S. ties, has been painted by religious Shiite parties as pro-Baathist. Many officials said it could be difficult for either of them to build enough support to head a government, which could lead to a lesser-known compromise candidate becoming prime minister. "You don't find the kind of debate you might find in a more advanced democracy when you're talking about fiscal policies, great social policies or health care _ things of that nature," said Grappo. "They're wondering which party may get which ministry and specifically which party or coalition may be placed there." "There is a lot of bad blood between the personalities, and there are a lot of different personalities involved," said a senior Kurdish official who asked to remain anonymous so he could speak more candidly. "The optimistic scenario is that this will drag on until May or June _ some people are giving it until August or September." "As far as we are concerned, we don't have any red lines against anybody," he said, referring to how the Kurdish bloc expected to be a powerbroker in the coalition building. Kurdish leaders made it clear before the election that the Kurds, who've won at least 56 seats, would support whoever was prepared to offer them the most on Kirkuk and other disputed areas. With voters widely rejecting politicians who focused on religion rather than basic services, analysts said the debate has more to do with party politics than with the Iraqi people. "Really the resistance to Allawi is most pronounced at the level of the leaders and not the general population," said Vasser. "We should not forget that Allawi was able to attract hundreds and thousands of votes south of Baghdad as well _ he actually has some support in most Shiite areas." Vasser, the editor of the Iraq website Historiae.org, thinks that both Maliki's and Allawi's supporters want many of the same things, including a strong central government controlling the oil sector. While everyone calls for a government with more Sunni participation than the last one had, there are fears that a coalition that's too broad-based could be paralyzing. "The only thing we can say with certainty is if we get this big government with all four alliances, it will hardly be able to agree on anything," Vasser says. "Then you will have a big parliamentary majority but they won't be able to use it for anything because they won't be able to agree." Fractures within the Shiite parties are further complicating government formation. Before the election, Maliki broke from his original coalition in a dispute over how much power he should have. Talks to unify the three main Shiite parties again have failed, seemingly over the same issue, analysts said. One of the main Shiite blocs, the Sadr movement, has been at odds with Maliki since he sent troops against their military wing in the southern city of Basra and the Baghdad Shiite neighborhood Sadr City two years ago. Including the Sadrists in a coalition also would complicate relations with the United States. Fighters loyal to Shiite cleric Muqtada al Sadr have fought U.S. forces in the streets, and the organization refuses to meet with or deal with U.S. officials. Some fear that a failure to build an effective and inclusive

coalition government this time could tear the country apart. "I believe this period is the most dangerous period here in Iraq," said Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari. "I don't want to sound alarmist, but unless we get it right, unless we fix the government formation, if one group feels they have been denied their victory, that they are marginalized...they will abandon the process and that will lead to the literal division of the country."

Iraqi PM's moves to hold office threaten stability

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's efforts to retain power despite his failure in last month's elections threaten to undercut the democratic process that has been hailed as a key achievement of the U.S. invasion and occupation. He is also potentially gambling away the country's security with steps that, if successful, are certain to leave Iraq's minority Sunnis feeling cheated after they overwhelmingly backed his secular challenger, Ayad Allawi. The resulting anger could fuel new sectarian bloodshed and reinvigorate an insurgency against the country's Shiite-dominated leadership. Illustrating the risk, suicide attackers detonated two car bombs Wednesday evening in a Shiite enclave of Baghdad, killing seven people. Allawi, a former prime minister, is fighting back, demanding an internationally supervised caretaker government and warning he might withdraw from the political process altogether, potentially prompting the barely contained Sunni-Shiite tensions to explode just as U.S. troops prepare to go home. Al-Maliki came out of the March 7 parliamentary election with a two-seat deficit to Allawi, a decision that was met with dancing in the streets by Allawi's backers, many of whom are Sunni Arabs who resent al-Maliki's perceived sectarian policies. Al-Maliki has vigorously fought the outcome, using the powers of his office and a judiciary of questionable independence to try to change the results. He successfully pushed for a recount of the Baghdad votes—which has not yet been carried out—and benefited from a vetting panel targeting former members of Saddam Hussein's ruling party that has set its sights on several of Allawi's candidates. Either tactic could tilt the election outcome in al-Maliki's favor. "Certainly what is going on is a theft of the Iraqi will and democracy, jeopardizing the safety of the country," Allawi told Iraq's al-Sharqiya channel in an interview early Wednesday. Allawi called on international organizations like the U.N., the Arab League, the EU and the Organization of Islamic Conference to help establish an impartial interim government, and a spokesman said his Iraqiya coalition would consider quitting the political process altogether or demand a repeat election if its demands are not met. He has also been touring neighboring countries in an attempt to drum up support for his candidacy and is set to hold talks with the Cairo-based Arab League Wednesday. With no end in sight to al-Maliki's efforts, U.S. officials appear worried and impatient. Speaking to reporters this week, U.S. Ambassador Christopher Hill did not mention al-Maliki specifically, but his frustration was palpable. "It seems it is time to get this show on the road here," he said. "It was always going to take a long time to form a government in Iraq, a fractious country in which every political decision deteriorates into a showdown, but what is surprising to many is the degree to which al-Maliki has battled results even before the negotiating for the new government has started. "Almost every day, we see new procedures and possible decisions that could change the results and have a grave impact on the political process," said Baghdad-based political analyst Kadhum al-Muqdad.

Even if the recount is in al-Maliki's favor and a number of Allawi's candidates are booted from the race, it still won't give the prime minister's coalition the majority needed to form

a government outright. But that may not be his aim. Baghdad-based political observer Hadi Jalo said al-Maliki is trying to strengthen his negotiating position before serious talks to form a coalition government. Al-Maliki has said his legal appeals are simply designed to make the process fair and that he will abide by all court decisions. In some ways, al-Maliki is simply a sore loser, some Iraqi politicians say privately. But the cost of his political machinations could be extremely high. Sunnis were outraged after the news last week of a secret prison run by Iraqi forces that mostly held Sunnis. In a report released Wednesday, the New York-based Human Rights Watch said Iraqi men held for months at the prison were systematically tortured, including some beaten so badly they lost teeth and urinated blood for days. Others were raped, given electric shocks to their genitals and deprived of air, the report said. The Iraqi government quickly shut down the prison after the torture was revealed by the Los Angeles Times and either released or transferred its 431 detainees. The government has denied al-Maliki had any knowledge of the facility and vowed to investigate the abuses. But many Sunnis see the prison as proof the Shiite-dominated government is persecuting them and has changed little since the days when Shiite death squads roamed the city. Adding to frustrations, the lack of information about the court handing down rulings favoring al-Maliki has raised questions about its independence. Its three anonymous judges approved al-Maliki's call for a Baghdad recount and upheld a decision to bar 52 candidates from the election-including one from Allawi's list who won a seat. But the decisions were not publicly released and word leaked out piecemeal. The man who oversaw the elections and is tasked with carrying out the recount, Faraj al-Haidari, railed against the court this week in an interview with The Associated Press, calling their decisions entirely political.

Former PM urges interim government in Iraq

The front-runner in Iraq's recent parliamentary elections on Wednesday called for the formation of an impartial caretaker government to prevent the country from sliding into violence and counter what he says are efforts to change the vote results. Former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite whose cross-sectarian coalition narrowly won the most votes in the March 7 polling, said in an early morning interview with an Iraqi satellite channel that disqualifying candidates and holding recounts is a violation of the people's vote and an attempt to "steal the will of the Iraqi people." The call comes after an Iraqi court charged with investigating election-related complaints disqualified one of his candidates, over alleged ties to the former regime. The court's ruling came at the urging of a commission charged with investigating politicians' connections with Saddam Hussein's regime. The commission is also asking that several other candidates lose their seats. The court is expected to rule on those in the coming days. Disqualifying Allawi's candidates would favor incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's bloc, which came in second-placed in the elections. "Certainly what is going on is a theft of the Iraqi will and democracy, jeopardizing the safety of the country," Allawi told Iraq's al-Sharqiya channel. "We will call for the forming of a new interim government." "Regretfully, the issue has reached a level where we can't keep silent," he said, citing efforts to disqualify his candidates and recount ballots. He also expressed concern over who was guarding the ballot boxes. The narrow victory of Allawi's Iraqiya coalition, which was heavily backed by Iraq's Sunni minority, in the elections was immediately assailed by al-Maliki, whose Shiite-dominated coalition garnered just two seats less. Al-Maliki has won a recount in

Baghdad, which has yet to take place, and has also been aided by a commission established by parliament that probes candidates for ties to Saddam's former ruling Baath Party. Hundreds of candidates were barred from running prior to the election by the Accountability and Justice Commission, and now dozens of those who actually ran are being investigated. "The Accountability commission is illegal and illegitimate and works randomly without any cause or accusation," Allawi said in the interview. "It works with no constitutional cover." Late Tuesday, his party held an urgent meeting to discuss the situation and decided to send a letter to the head of the judiciary asking him to "step in to protect the Iraqi judiciary system from the political pressures," said a statement. The fact that many of the Accountability Commission recommendations have been approved and that the only recount granted so far was requested by al-Maliki has opened up the country's judiciary to accusations of bias and partiality to the prime minister's government. Allawi warned that further delays in forming a new government only give "terrorists" the opportunity to kill more people in the country. The party's statement also said this was Iraqiya's "final warning" and there would be no further calls or appeals. It was unclear, however, what actions the party would take next. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Tuesday warned that any challenges to the election results should be conducted in an atmosphere of transparency to preserve people's faith in the system. "For challenges to be credible and legitimate they must also be transparent and must accord with the laws and mechanisms established for the conduct of the elections," she said in a statement. "Transparency and due process are essential to protecting the integrity of the process and preserving the confidence of the Iraqi people in their democratic system.

Iraq politicians struck from poll

Veteran Iraqi politician Ahmed Chalabi led the judicial panel which investigated links the candidates [Getty] Iraqi electoral authorities have said that 52 candidates who stood in parliamentary elections in March should have been barred from taking part. Two candidates who won parliamentary seats were among those struck from the ballot on Monday for alleged ties to the Baath party of Saddam Hussein, the former president. "Their participation in the election is considered cancelled," Ali Mahmud, a spokesman for a three-member judicial panel organised by the Independent High Electoral Commission, said. "The appeal panel has rejected appeals from the 52 candidates, which the justice and accountability panel discovered." One of the disqualified candidates is a member of the secular Iraqiya coalition, led by former prime minister Iyad Allawi, that came out two seats ahead of the bloc led by Nouri al-Maliki, the incumbent prime minister, in the March 7 parliamentary polls. **Saddam ties** Officials have said that they do not believe that the outcome of the polls will be dramatically affected. Iraq's electoral law states that a disqualified elected politician may be replaced by a colleague from the same party. "I don't think this would affect the number of seats for the bloc," Saad al-Rawi, one of nine commissioners at the Independent High Electoral Commission, said. "Iraqiya got millions of votes, 5,000 or 10,000 votes [less] would not affect it." However, Allawi criticised the panel's decision and vowed to fight the ruling. "We have instructed lawyers to appeal against the panel's decision," he said. "I am sure we will be successful. "Frankly, we are very worried... the political process is now in the hands of a group of people from the Iraqi judiciary. They pass or reverse decisions to their liking."The panel,

chaired by Ahmed Chalabi, a former deputy prime minister, was established in response to a request by a candidate vetting committee to check ties to the government of Saddam Hussein. **Political dominance** Al Jazeera's Mike Hanna, in the capital Baghdad, said that those disqualified will not be able to take up public office. "They now have a month's grace in which to appeal against the commission's decision. "But to be very clear about it the impact on the formation of a government with this announcement is likely to be minimal. "None of the blocs were able to get an alliance big enough to have dominance in parliament before this. "The fact that one or two of the seats is lost in this particular process will have no relevance whatsoever on those ongoing attempts to form a majority in parliament." he panel is due to make another ruling on Tuesday over six to nine winning candidates, which politicians and electoral officials have said could be more crucial to the poll outcome. I-Maliki's bloc stands to benefit most from any significant changes. The Iraqiya coalition won 91 parliamentary seats in the elections, compared to the 89 seats won by al-Maliki bloc, but a recount expected to begin in Baghdad next week could alter the result.

Former Baath party chief wants 'united front' in Iraq

The two branches of the former Iraqi Baath party are said to be working to form a 'united front' inside Iraq. The splinter branch lead by Mohammed Younis, a former senior Baathist with Syria as his base, is reported to be willing to join forces with the more powerful Iraq-based Baath party. The Iraqi branch of the Baath party is headed by Izzat al-Douri, a deputy of former leader Saddam Hussein. The U.S. has set a multi-million dollar price on Douri's head. However, Douri has so far managed to evade massive and persistent hunt-outs by U.S. and Iraqi troops. Douri is reported to be leading a powerful military arm of the Baath party in Iraq. With the star of Iraqi al-Qaeda waning following the death of its key leaders, Douri's Baath party has emerged as a powerful military resistance group to both the U.S. and Iraqi government. Douri also leads several groups bent to resist U.S. occupation of Iraq. An official source in Mohammed Younis's branch said the splinter group was willing to form a coalition under Douri, who is the supreme leader of former Baath party in Iraq. The move has come as a surprise as Younis has been warming up to both the U.S. and Baghdad and was willing to cooperate. The Baathists oppose the current political process. Faced with the so-called deBaathification, under which they are not allowed to hold public posts, their ultimate aim seems to be the restoration of their former power. The splinter group under Younis is said to be without popular base inside Iraq. It also lacks military presence in the country. Sources say Douri will be reluctant to bring Younis under his umbrella. He might fear the move is "a tactic" to infiltrate his ranks.

Iraqi Bloc Plans Response To Candidates' Disqualification

Members of Al-Iraqiyah, the front-running political bloc in Iraq's parliamentary elections, are meeting in Baghdad to plan a response to a ruling that has thrown the outcome of the March 7 vote into question and driven the country into deeper political turmoil. The April 26 ruling by the three-member Justice and Accountability Panel in Baghdad disqualified 52 candidates because of their ties to Saddam Hussein's banned Ba'ath Party.

At least one of those disqualified was a winning candidate from former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah bloc, which says it's being targeted by officials and religious

parties who do not want Allawi to take power. The ruling has cast doubt on the slim lead of Allawi's alliance, which won strong backing from Iraq's Sunnis. Iraqi political leaders, meanwhile, are waiting for the judicial panel to issue another ruling as early as today on whether to disqualify up to nine other winning candidates alleged to have ties with the Ba'ath Party. Seven are reported to be from Al-Iraqiyah. **Changing The Balance** Earlier this month, the same panel had ordered a recount of votes in Baghdad that could further influence the composition of parliament. According to the initial official results, Allawi's cross-sectarian Al-Iraqiyah bloc won 91 of the 325 seats in parliament -- just two seats ahead of Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law bloc. Although Allawi is a Shi'a, his bloc includes Sunni as well as Shi'ite politicians and received substantial support from Iraq's Sunni community. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's bloc hopes to take advantage of the rulings. ut Maliki's Shi'ite bloc challenged the official results -- winning decisions for both the recount and the disqualification of Sunni candidates with ties to the Ba'ath Party. Allawi said on April 26 that Al-Iraqiyah's lawyers have been instructed to appeal the decision to invalidate all votes cast for the 52 candidates. Allawi said he was confident that the legal appeal would be successful. "Unfortunately, there have been some activities aiming to divert the political process and they tried to twist the process within the constitution," Allawi said. "But there are legal, political, and legitimate ways [to deal with such activities]." **Politicized Process?** But Allawi appeared less confident that the procedures being followed were fair -- saying Al-Iraqiyah is worried that the political process is "now in the hands of a group of people from the Iraqi judiciary." Allawi said legal challenges also would be addressed directly to the United Nations, because of what he called the politicization of legal rulings within Iraq. "We are going to call on the United Nations to bear its responsibility, because Iraq is still under the mandate of Chapter 7 of the Security Council," Allawi said, "and we need the United Nations to intervene to salvage the political process, because it has been politicized and the counting and recounting has been politicized." The Baghdad panel's rulings come before the start next week of a recount of votes in the capital. Changes to the initial results stemming from the recount and disqualifications could enrage Sunnis who saw Al-Iraqiyah's success as a vindication of their claim to greater political clout. Sunni resentment about their fall from power after the ousting of Saddam Hussein in 2003 helped fuel bloody sectarian violence and a fierce insurgency after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. **Political Gridlock** Since the initial results of the election were announced by Iraq's election commission, no bloc has been able to put together a parliamentary coalition that would control the 163-seat majority needed to form Iraq's next government. The Iraqi National Alliance, a coalition of mainly Shi'ite groups, won 70 seats, and the Kurdistan Alliance, made up of the autonomous Kurdish region's two dominant blocs, won 43 seats. Another 17 seats were won by independents and candidates from smaller parties.

The last 15 seats were to be awarded to members of religious and ethnic minorities, according to quotas. Under the Iraqi Constitution, one-quarter of parliament's seats should be filled by women. But the exact distribution of parliamentary seats is now unclear as a result of the disqualifications and the recount in Baghdad. Amid the stalemate over attempts to build a governing coalition, politically motivated violence has been on the rise across Iraq during April -- raising concerns of rights groups around the world. The U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, Christopher Hill, also has expressed concern

about delays that, almost seven weeks after the election, have left Iraq no closer to forming a government.

Allawi's Al-Iraqiyah To Appeal Decision To Disqualify Candidates

Iraq's former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi has said that his secular Al-Iraqiyah bloc has instructed lawyers to appeal a decision to invalidate the votes cast for 52 parliamentary candidates because of their ties to Saddam Hussein's banned Ba'ath Party. Allawi told a news conference in Ankara that Al-Iraqiyah is "very concerned about certain groups controlling the political process in Iraq." The decision earlier today by an Iraqi judicial panel throws into question the results of March's parliamentary elections. The justice and accountability panel said the ruling would affect two winning candidates. The panel also said it would issue a ruling on April 27 on nine other election winners who could lose their seats. The Sunni-backed Al-Iraqiyah alliance won 91 seats in the 325-seat parliament. Shi'ite Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition came in second with 89 seats. A recount of votes in Baghdad also has been ordered by the judicial panel, which could further influence the composition of parliament.

Iraq ministry enters 'secret jail'

Amnesty International has urged Maliki to take action after allegations of abuse at the prison [EPA] The Iraqi ministry of human rights has said two of its inspection teams have entered a facility, described as a "secret prison" by a Los Angeles Times newspaper report. Kamil Amin, a spokesman for the ministry, told Al Jazeera on Tuesday that serious legal violations had been committed at the jail in the capital, Baghdad. "Our teams have received complaints that the prisoners are not getting enough legal consultation and suffer from very slow procedures that take much longer than they should," Amin said. However, he refused to answer questions about whether there was any evidence of torture on the inmates at the facility at the former al-Muthanna air base in west Baghdad. The Los Angeles Times reported Iraqi officials as saying that more than 100 prisoners had been tortured with electric shocks, suffocated with plastic bags or beaten. **'Human rights abuses'**

UK-based human rights group Amnesty International urged Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister, to investigate the allegations of abuses against the predominantly Sunni detainees. "We found judges and representatives of the public prosecutor installed inside the prison, which means the prison is not a secret one" Kamil Amin, spokesman for Iraq's human rights ministry "The existence of secret jails indicates that military units in Iraq are allowed to commit human rights abuses unchecked," Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa deputy director, said in a statement on Monday. Maliki, who is looking to build a parliamentary majority following elections last month, has denied any knowledge of the prison, but Amnesty said that this did not absolve the government of responsibility. "Prime Minister Maliki's claim that he was unaware of abuses cannot exonerate the authorities from their responsibilities and their duty to ensure the safety of detainees," Sahraoui said. "Maliki's government has repeatedly pledged to investigate incidents of torture and other serious human rights abuses by the Iraqi security forces, but no outcome of such investigations has ever been made public." **Prison 'not secret'**

Amin rejected the description of the facility, by the Los Angeles Times and Amnesty, as a "secret prison". "We found judges and representatives of the public prosecutor installed inside the prison, which means the prison is not a secret one," he said. Amin said his ministry had collected enough evidence to prove that the prisoners, who were detained during an operation in October targeting alleged Sunni fighters in Nineveh province, were transferred from Nineveh to Baghdad legally. But Atheel al-Nujaifi, the governor of Nineveh, contested Amin's claims. "The prisoners were transferred without court or investigation judge orders," he said. Al-Nujaifi accused the security forces of targeting civilians in his province. The whereabouts of the detainees came to light in March after relatives of the missing men raised their concerns with Iraq's human rights minister

'Iraq secret jail inmates tortured'

HRW said Most of the 300 prisoners it interviewed displayed fresh scars and injuries [AL Jazeera] Inmates were regularly tortured at a Baghdad prison illegally run by a military unit under the command of the Iraqi prime minister's office, a human rights group has said. Prisoners held at at the Muthanna jail faced torture, beatings, and sexual abuse, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported on Wednesday. The group has called for a thorough investigation into the detention centre and has urged Iraq to prosecute those responsible for the abuse, which came to light when the prison was discovered and closed down this month by Iraq's Human Rights Ministry. Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister, has denied any connection with the facility, which housed mainly Sunni Arab prisoners from the volatile northern city of Mosul, a hotbed of armed groups such as al-Qaeda. **Bad timing for al-Maliki** The discovery of the prison comes at a sensitive time for al-Maliki as he tries to negotiate alliances with other parties, following an inconclusive election in March. HRW interviewed 42 of the 300 men who were detained on a military base at Baghdad's old Muthanna airfield after being arrested in Mosul and accused of terrorism. "The men's stories were credible and consistent. Most of the 300 displayed fresh scars and injuries they said were a result of routine and systematic torture they had experienced at the hands of interrogators at Muthanna," HRW said. The detainees said they were handcuffed, blindfolded and hung upside down, and that interrogators kicked, whipped and beat them. Interrogators also placed dirty plastic bags over their heads to close off air supply. When the detainees passed out, they were awoken with electric shocks to the genitals or other parts of the body, HRW said. **Detainees' stories** One detainee, a former Iraqi army general who had been living in London but returned to Mosul after his son was detained, said his jailors refused to give him medicine for his diabetes and high blood pressure and beat him severely. "They applied electricity to my penis and sodomized me with a stick," the man, who is in a wheelchair, told Human Rights Watch. "I was forced to sign a confession that they wouldn't let me read." Another detainee, who was 21, said interrogators threatened to rape his mother and sisters if he did not confess. During one torture session, guards made another detainee rape him. Another detainee said he was sodomised with a pistol. The Human Rights Ministry says three Iraqi army officers have been arrested for questioning. The prison was illegal because it was not under the jurisdiction of the Justice Ministry and the Human Rights Ministry was not informed of its existence. "What happened at Muthanna is an example of the horrendous abuse Iraqi leaders say they want to leave behind," said Joe Stork,

deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "Everyone responsible, from the top on down, needs to be held accountable."

Geo strategic front

US, UK must push to resolve impasse: Iraqi FM

Iraq's foreign minister chided the US and Britain for not taking an active role in resolving his country's bitter election dispute, and accused Washington of being more concerned with sending home US soldiers. In an interview published Saturday in the Arabic daily Asharq Al-Awsat, Hoshyar Zebari also warned of a political vacuum in the country still struggling to seat a government almost two months after the March 7 election as American troops leave prepare to leave. Zebari complained that the US and Britain have stood on the sidelines of the current dispute, and urged them to be more aggressive in pushing Iraq's rival political blocs toward a compromise. "Their role is absent in this election, and this has made matters more difficult," Zebari said in comments in the newspaper. He noted that after Iraq's 2005 elections, both nations played a key role in cajoling Iraqi politicians into forming a government. The foreign minister's stance appeared to put him at odds with Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, who has slammed a proposal put forward by his chief rival that sought international intervention in setting up a new government. Al-Maliki said such a role would undermine Iraq's efforts to become fully independent. The prime minister's Shiite coalition narrowly lost by two seats to former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's cross-sectarian Iraqiya, but neither garnered enough to rule alone, setting off protracted wrangling over the formation of the next government. Zebari also suggested Washington should reconsider its Aug. 31 deadline for withdrawing all US military combat troops from Iraq if a new government is still not formed by midsummer. "The American opinion so far is to let Iraqis solve their problems by themselves," Zebari said. "Their message to us is: 'Solve your problems quickly so that we can withdraw quickly.'" In a second interview Saturday, with Iraq's Al-Sharqiya TV, Zebari said neighboring countries were waiting for US troops to leave so they could step in and fill Iraq's political vacuum. "This is one of the most dangerous things Iraq would face," Zebari said. He did not name any specific countries, but many officials have voiced concern in recent weeks that Iran is seeking greater influence in Iraq. Shortly after taking office last year, President Barack Obama set the August deadline for sending home all but 50,000 US troops from Iraq. The White House can still push back that date, although US officials have insisted so far that the timeline stands. The top US military commander in Iraq, Gen. Ray Odierno, said last year that he planned to hold troop levels steady until two months after the elections, primarily to give a new Iraqi government time to settle. But that timeframe expires next week, and Baghdad has made little headway on forming a new government. The US Embassy in Baghdad did not immediately respond Saturday to requests for comment. A senior US official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the issue openly, disputed Zebari's view. He said US officials meet regularly with Iraq's rival political blocs and have been pushing for weeks for a compromise. Compounding the political tension is widespread fear that Al-Qaeda and other militants will take advantage of the impasse to launch attacks. New data from Iraq's health, interior and defense ministries shows that more civilians killed in attacks in April than any other month so far in 2010. The casualty figures, which were obtained and compiled by The Associated Press, show that 274 Iraqi civilians died in attacks last

month, and another 731 were wounded. That's up from 216 killed and 419 wounded in March. However, far more Iraqi security forces were killed in March - 151 killed - compared to 54 in April.

The US is the lead country on Iraq issues in general, and the UK is the lead on Iraq/Kuwait issues.

When President Obama approved a plan to withdraw combat forces from Iraq this summer, it was based on the assumption that a newly elected government would be in place by the time Americans headed home. Fourteen months later, that assumption is exploding but the plan remains the same. The delay and messy aftermath of the Iraqi election mean it may be months before the next government is formed, even as tens of thousands of American troops pack to leave. Yet Mr. Obama has not had a meeting on Iraq with his full national security team in months, and the White House insists that it has no plans to revisit the withdrawal timetable. The situation presents a test for Mr. Obama's vow to end the war, perhaps the most defining promise he made when he ran for president. While Mr. Obama has proved flexible about other campaign promises and deadlines, his plan to pull out combat forces by August and the remaining 50,000 trainers and advisers by December 2011 has been the most inviolate of policies. He adopted on the recommendation of military and civilian advisers in February 2009 that a large American military presence was needed long enough to provide stability during the post-election transition. Instead, the president is now relying on the conclusion that Iraqis are stepping up to the challenges of governing and security that for too long depended on Americans. "We see no indications now that our planning needs to be adjusted," said Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security adviser to Mr. Obama. "We did anticipate an extended period of government formation," and recent Iraqi-led missions that have killed leaders of Al Qaeda in Iraq show "their growing capacity to provide for security, which of course is critical to ending our combat mission at the end of August." While Mr. Obama has not convened a full-scale meeting on Iraq lately, Mr. Rhodes noted that Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., who manages Iraq policy, does hold such meetings regularly and keeps Mr. Obama informed. "It's something that he's obviously regularly engaged in," Mr. Rhodes said of the president. For Mr. Obama, shifting the deadline would prove complicated for both logistical and political reasons. As he pulls troops out of Iraq, he has been sending more to Afghanistan, putting pressure on the armed forces. And with his liberal base angry at the Afghan troop buildup, any delay of the Iraq drawdown could provoke more consternation on the left. But the resistance to revisiting the deadline has drawn concern from former American officials, including some who participated in formulating the Obama policy last year. The original plan anticipated Iraqi elections in December and the formation of a new government at least 60 days afterward. Instead, the elections did not take place until March and produced a near tie between the parties of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki and former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. And now the two are fighting through the courts and recounts. Ryan C. Crocker, the former American ambassador to Iraq who was appointed by President George W. Bush and later made recommendations to Mr. Obama regarding the drawdown, said the administration should consider extending the August deadline. "I am a little bit nervous," Mr. Crocker, now dean of the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, said in a recent interview. "The elections were later than expected and there

were very close results between Maliki and Allawi, which suggest it's going to be a very long process. We may not even have a new government until we're at the August deadline. I'd like the U.S. to retain the original flexibility."

Meghan L. O'Sullivan, a former deputy national security adviser to Mr. Bush who oversaw Iraq policy, also said August might be too soon. "I'm for a shift away from the current rigid deadline to something more flexible, more reflective of the fluid and tense situation in Iraq, where the last thing the Iraqis really need is for the United States to be focused more on exit than anything else at a moment of high political uncertainty," she said. Two former officials who worked on Iraq policy in the Obama administration said that after it became clear how late the elections would be, Gen. Ray Odierno, the commander in Iraq, wanted to keep 3,000 to 5,000 combat troops in northern Iraq after the Aug. 31 deadline. But the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the delicacy of the matter, said it was clear that the White House did not want any combat units to remain. Maj. Gen. Stephen R. Lanza, a spokesman for General Odierno, said no formal request to the White House was ever made. "Nor," he added, "has the president ever denied him the tools needed to complete our mission." General Odierno, as well as his commander, Gen. David H. Petraeus, and the ambassador, Christopher J. Hill, have all said in recent days that they are satisfied with the current timetable. "I feel very comfortable with our plan," General Odierno said on "Fox News Sunday" last week, "and unless something unforeseen and disastrous happens, I fully expect us to be at 50,000 by the first of September." General Petraeus, in an interview, said the remaining force "is still a substantial number" that should be capable of handling the situation. "The whole process of drawing down and getting to the change in the mission is on track," he said, "and what we're seeing in the wake of elections has included efforts by Al Qaeda in Iraq once again to ignite sectarian violence, but we have not seen any success in that regard." Some military analysts who have favored higher troop levels in Iraq in the past agreed that the current timetable still made sense. Michael E. O'Hanlon, a scholar at the Brookings Institution, said staying longer would mean only that Americans could be enmeshed in deciding between Mr. Maliki and Mr. Allawi. "I don't see why we should be picking sides in a top-down civil war," he said. Peter Baker reported from Washington, and Rod Nordland from Baghdad. Thom Shanker and Elisabeth Bumiller contributed reporting from Washington.

Iraq asks Kuwait to drop legal action against airline

Iraq called on Kuwait yesterday to halt legal action against Iraqi Airways following Kuwaiti attempts to seize one of the carrier's planes in London in the latest row between the neighboring countries. A lawyer for the Kuwaiti authorities obtained a British High Court order to prevent the director general of Iraqi Airways, who is currently in London, from traveling and seized his passport, Iraq's Transport Ministry said in a statement. Baghdad and Kuwait have been locked in a long-running dispute over billions of dollars in reparations from Iraq, including about \$1.2 billion related to aircraft and parts that were seized during former dictator Saddam Hussein's 1990-91 invasion to Kuwait.

The dispute is between Kuwait Airways Corp and Iraqi Airways, both of which are state owned. Iraqi Airways made its first commercial flight on Sunday after 20 years, flying into London. Once the plane landed at Gatwick airport in London, a lawyer for the Kuwaiti authorities tried to seize the plane, but failed because it was leased from a

Swedish firm, the ministry said in the statement. "The ministry is surprised at these provocative acts by the Kuwaiti authorities... whenever Iraqis are trying to open a new window to the world," the Transport Ministry said. "We urge our Arab brothers to pressure the Kuwaitis to stop such behavior, which does not help both sides to forget the past and open a new page in bilateral relations." Christopher Gooding of the law firm Fasken Martineau, which is representing Kuwait Airways in the dispute, said in a statement the Kuwaiti airline had obtained a High Court order on April 27 against Iraqi Airways. That order included freezing the assets of Iraqi Airways worldwide "subject to frequent judicial review." The ruling also required the director general of Iraqi Airways to provide a statement on the airline's assets and remain within the jurisdiction of the High Court, plus have his passport seized to make sure he did. "(Iraqi Airways) response to the order has been to do nothing. Absolutely nothing, which is in line with its approach since 2005 and fully supports the contention of (Kuwait Airways) that drastic action by the court was justified," Gooding said in the statement. A British Foreign Office spokesman said this was a "commercial matter for the two airlines concerned." The spokesman said a further hearing on the Kuwait Airways injunction would be held on April 30.

Economic front:

Value of Iran's exports to Iraq likely to exceed \$8 billion

The value of Iranian exports to Iraq is expected to exceed \$8 billion this year, Iranian embassy's commercial attaché in Baghdad said. Ali al-Haydari said Tehran's trade and commercial links with Baghdad boomed shortly after the overthrow of the former regime by the U.S. in 2003. The exchange of trade was a trickle under former leader Saddam Hussein but it soared to nearly \$6 billion last year. Iran has exported more than 40,000 cars to Iraq so far this year, Haydari said. Iran's exports to Iraqi markets, other than vehicles, include construction materials, petrochemicals, industrial equipment, medical appliances and fuel oil necessary for the operation of Iraqi power plants. Meantime, the countries are currently holding talks on how to develop their joint oil fields straddling their international frontier. "The sides have a roadmap to follow. The talks would eventually lead to a mechanism under which they would develop these fields," said Abdulkarim al-Aibi, an Oil Ministry undersecretary.

An Iraqi delegation is due in Tehran shortly for a new deal on a possible hike in amount of power Iraq imports from Iran, Aibi said.

Iraq completes 25% of Nasiriyah oil field development plan

Iraq says it has completed 25% of the plan to develop its Nasiriyah oil field.

The field's development is carried out by the state-owned South Oil company. The field, which currently produces 10,000 barrels a day, is expected to increase output to 50,000 in 2011, according to the company's Director-General Dhia Jaafar. The company has drilled four oil wells and more will be drilled this year, Jaafar said. Iraq's National Drilling Company is involved in the field's development as well as other state-owned enterprises, he said. Iraqi state-owned firms decided to develop the field on their own when talks with a Japanese-led consortium failed to reach an agreement. Japanese firms Nippon Oil Corporation, Inpex Corporation and JGC Corporation, were involved in negotiating an engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) deal with Iraq.

The field has reserves of about 4.4 billion barrels of crude. The Japanese planned to produce 100,000 barrels a day by the end of 2011.

French cement maker invests \$600 million in Iraq

France's cement maker, Lafarge, has invested \$600 million to upgrade production in two Iraqi cement companies. situated in the northern Kurdish city of Sulaimaniya. In two years, the companies are expected to hike their output to 5 million tons of cement a year. Iraqi Reconstruction and Housing Minister Bayan Dazaai has held talks with a delegation from the French cement giant this week. The sides have signed a memorandum of understanding under which Lafarge will sell its Iraq-based cement output to the ministry. "We are the country's largest cement consumer," a statement by the ministry said. It said the ministry is now implementing large construction and housing projects across the country.

Iraq wants to renew electricity contract with Iran

Iraq has asked Iran to continue supplying it with electricity in the future, an official statement said. Electricity Minister Kareem Wahid held talks with the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad in the hope that Iran would agree to renew a contract regulating the purchase by Iraq of 350 megawatts from neighboring Iran, the statement added. Iranian electricity is essential for the Iraqi towns bordering Iran and particularly the provinces of Diyala and Basra. The contract is to expire soon. The statement by the Electricity Ministry did not say how much Iraq pays for electricity imports from Iran. The statement said Wahid also discussed with the Iranian envoy progress regarding the implementation of other bilateral agreements. These include the construction by Iran of electrical appliance manufacturing firms in Iraq as well as the building of new power plants in the south. Iran has emerged as Iraq's leading trade partner. Value of bilateral trade is now estimated at \$5 billion a year.

Iraq to produce more than 400,000 oil barrels daily from central fields

Iraq's Ministry of Oil says it expects output from oil fields in central Iraq to reach more than 400,000 barrels a day in four years. Central Iraq includes the Province of Baghdad which itself sits on a huge lake of crude and other adjacent provinces where fields with billions of barrels of proven reserves are located. Foreign firms have won contracts to develop some fields in the region while others will be developed by national oil companies. Iraq is now divided into four oil-producing regions with each administered by a separate national oil firm – one for the north, one for the south, one for the Province of Missan and the fourth for the center. Iraq had auctioned several fields in the center of the country which are now overseen by the its fourth state oil company. One of them is al-Badra border field which is expected to produce 200,000 barrels a day. The other is al-Ahdab which a Chinese firm is currently developing. The field should produce up to 200,000 barrels a day in four years. The Sharq (Easter) Baghdad field is being developed by national firms with a projected output of 40,000 barrels.

Social front

Christians targeted in Mosul blasts

The students were travelling from Hamdaniya, a mainly Christian town [Reuters]

A shopkeeper has been killed in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, as two bombs went off near buses carrying Christian students. More than 100 people, including students and other civilians, were injured in the blasts on Sunday morning. Abdul-Rahim al-Shammari, the head of the provincial council's security committee, said a roadside bomb exploded first, followed by a car bomb moments later. The buses were transporting university students from the mainly Christian town of Hamdaniya, 40km east of Mosul. "All of them were Christian students. They go in buses like that to Mosul's university after the troubled times when Christians were targeted in the past," Nissan Karoumi, the mayor of Hamdaniya, said. Dr Muhsin Shamzi, who works at a hospital in Irbil, said at least 17 critically injured patients were taken to the hospital. **Protection urged** About 750,000 of Iraq's 30 million population are Christians. The US-based National Council of Churches last week sent a letter to Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, calling on her to urge Iraqi officials to do more to protect Iraq's Christian community. The organisation said they were particularly worried now as Iraq struggles to seat a government after the March 7 parliamentary elections. "Our concern is now particularly acute because it is possible that tensions will increase as various political forces continue to vie for power following the recent elections," the letter said. "We fear that a growing climate of mistrust and animosity will further threaten the fragile Christian community." In November, the US-based Human Rights Watch warned that minorities including Christians were the collateral victims of a conflict between Arabs and Kurds over control of disputed oil-rich provinces in northern Iraq. While sectarian violence has dropped dramatically across Iraq since its peak between 2005 and 2007, attacks remain common, especially in Baghdad and Mosul.

Lebanon

Political front

Lebanese rally calls for secularism

Thousands of protestors have gathered in Beirut to demand a separation of politics and religion in Lebanon. The demonstrators marched on parliament on Sunday chanting "secularism" and waving placards calling for the recognition of civil marriage in the Mediterranean country. The idea of a secular political system has faced stiff opposition from ruling politicians who fear an erosion of power if the complex power sharing system between the different religious communities is abandoned. "What is missing is the political support. In the last election in 2009, all the main political parties paid lip service to the sectarian system," Elias Muhanna, a Boston-based political analyst and blogger, told Al Jazeera. Seats in the Lebanese parliament are divided equally between Muslims and Maronite Christians and key cabinet posts are reserved for members of the major communities. The country's president must be Christian, the prime minister Sunni and the speaker of parliament Shia. **Quota system** Lebanon is home to 18 religious sects, and is deeply divided between Christians and Muslims. "We cannot live in a country where they divide the chairs of ministers according to their confessions, not their merits" Its sectarian system was solidified in a 1943 national accord in a bid to avoid religious conflict, but the country was torn apart by a brutal 15 year civil war that started in 1975. The agreement that ended the conflict called for the abolition of sectarianism, but the system has endured. Under the complicated rules, public sector jobs are subject to religious quotas

that change year-on-year in a bid to maintain the delicate balance. Civil marriage is not recognised under the system, and Lebanese seeking to marry outside their sect are forced to choose between a church or a mosque, or else travel to nearby countries like Cyprus to obtain a civil marriage. The rally was organised by the grassroots movement *Laique Pride* using social networking sites. Said Shaito, one of the organisers, told Al Jazeera that they want equality for all Lebanese citizens. "We are for citizenship, which is being Lebanese, not Muslim or Christian," he said. "We want people to talk about it, to create a public debate in Lebanon."

Civil marriage not civil war, say secular Lebanese

BEIRUT - About 3,000 people marched in Beirut on Sunday to demand a secular system in place of the Muslim-Christian sectarianism that permeates politics, employment and family status matters in Lebanon. "Civil marriage, not civil war" was among the banners carried by the mostly young, educated protesters who gathered in response to a campaign on Internet social networking sites. It was Lebanon's first such demonstration in favor of secularism. Many wore white T-shirts with "What's your sect?" written on the front and "None of your business" on the back. Lebanon, whose five million people are split into 18 sects, developed a power-sharing system enshrined in a 1943 national covenant which gave Christians a majority in parliament and said the president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of parliament a Shi'ite Muslim. The Taef accord that ended Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war gave Muslims parity in parliament and also called for the abolition of sectarianism, but the system persists, with religion-based quotas observed in the bureaucracy, army and education. "We cannot live in a country where Lebanese university teachers cannot be hired full-time unless they fit the quota of the year," said Kinda Hassan, one of the march organizers. "We cannot live in a country where they divide the chairs of the ministers according to their confessions, not their merits." Hassan, 26, operations manager for a local record label, said the constitution defined Lebanon as a democratic republic that respects freedom of belief and grants equal rights to its citizens. "So we are demanding the application of this point."

VESTED INTERESTS Politicians have so far blocked attempts to reform Lebanon's electoral system, for example by introducing proportional representation to dilute the power of sectarian-based factions. Demands for civil marriage have run into stern resistance from Muslim and Christian religious establishments -- Lebanese who marry someone from another religion must now either convert or get married abroad, with Cyprus the closest option. "In marriage, jobs, social life, sectarianism affects just about every person in Lebanon," said Aman Makouk, 62, a retired school teacher who decided to join the march on impulse when she saw the crowd gather on Beirut's seafront Corniche. "Even for the government, why should the president be a Maronite? It can be a Muslim, a Druze, anyone," she said. "Instead of getting rid of it, people are getting more and more enclosed in this mentality, which we don't really need at all." Lebanon's system does give all communities a share of power, which is no small achievement for such a divided country in a violent and explosive region, argued Paul Salem, Middle East director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "However, the system should also allow more competition, progress and evolution," he said, advocating electoral reform, decentralization and an end to sectarian quotas in parliament. Salem said

such reforms would be hard to push through against opposition from Lebanon's "ruling oligarchy" who represent groups vying for power under religious labels. "In any country where you have four or five dominant politicians, they are not going to happily share their power or change the system in a way that would weaken them." Fear was another obstacle to change, Salem said. "A fearful person is comfortable with what they know. And all communities in Lebanon are fearful. Everybody's afraid, everybody's a victim, so it's hard to convince them to move on." Police prevented the march from reaching parliament, just another frustration for those demanding change. "We're really sick of sects controlling our lives. We want a secular country. We want civil marriage," said a 19-year-old student named Sara, slogans painted on both cheeks. –Reuters

Lebanese army chief sure no scuds in country

Lebanon's army chief said he is convinced there are no scud missiles in the country, dismissing allegations that Syria has transferred the long-range rockets to the Lebanese Shi'ite Islamist group Hezbollah. n-Nahar newspaper quoted army commander Jean Kahwaji on Saturday as denying it would be possible to bring Scuds across the Lebanese border undetected. The allegations, which appeared on April 10 in a Kuwaiti newspaper, initially caused consternation in Washington and drew denials from the Lebanese and Syrian governments. Kahwaji said Scuds were not like the easily mobile Katyusha rockets, Hezbollah's weapon of choice when the Syrian- and Iranian- backed group fought a war with Israel in 2006. "The process of transporting them is not a game, it's a very big operation. I'm convinced there are no scuds in Lebanon and talk about the issue is political," said Kahwaji. Israeli President Shimon Peres has endorsed the allegations. But on Friday Defence Minister Ehud Barak stopped short of saying whether Hezbollah actually possessed Scuds, saying only he assumed that it had sought them. Moving Scuds into Lebanon might draw preemptive Israeli strikes. U.S. officials said on Thursday they had no indications any had been shipped into the country, although Washington suspected that some kind of transfer may have occurred in Syria. "Scud rockets are not like Katyushas that are carried on the shoulder and transferred from one area to another. The rockets are 30 metres long, are carried on large vehicles, and need 40 minutes to prepare for launch," Kahwaji said. Hezbollah fired thousands of the mostly short-range Katyushas on Israel in 2006 and the Jewish state is worried that the guerrillas have replenished their arsenal to lash out on Iran's behalf should its nuclear sites come under attack. The commander of the U.N. peacekeeping force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was also quoted as saying he had not seen any Scuds in the southern region bordering Israel. "I have not seen and our forces haven't seen either Scud rockets or others ... I am certain that in UNIFIL's area of operations, there are no rockets," Major-General Alberto Asarta Cuevas told as-Safir newspaper. U.S. officials are confident that any Scuds crossing the Lebanese-Syrian border would be detected, especially since they cannot be readily broken down into small parts for transport. Hezbollah has not commented specifically on the allegations, but Syria and Lebanon dismissed them as disinformation to give Israel a pretext to launch a war against them. Kahwaji said Israel could launch a war at any moment but added that "the indications until this hour point to no war in the foreseeable future. There are no reasons that require a war and the south is completely quiet".

gyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit who was visiting Beirut, also dismissed the allegations. "Whoever knows about these rockets, knows that these (allegations) are all laughable lies," he told reporters. –Reuters

Geo strategic front

Lebanon tops Arab world in terms of democratic improvement

Lebanon falls just behind Jordan when it comes to the presence of broad democratic practices, but suffers from relative weakness in democratic methods related to equality, social justice, and the sovereignty of law. This conclusion was reached in the second annual report issued by the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), which examined the state of reform all across the Arab world. The report was prepared by ARI and the Palestinian Center for Political and Survey Research.

ARI is a network of independent Arab research and policy institutes, with partners from the United States and Europe. Founded in 2005, the network seeks to apply Arab research capacities to the cause of advancing knowledge and developing a program for democratic reform in the Arab World that is realistic and home-grown. The initiative also aims to produce policy recommendations that can help promote reform in the region. Entitled "The State of Reform in the Arab World 2009-2010 – The Arab Democracy Index," the report is composed of four parts: methodology, results, analysis, summary and recommendations. The index adopted 40 indicators measuring four major components of democratic conversion: the presence of strong public institutions and accountability, respect for rights and freedoms, the sovereignty of law, and equality and social justice. The indicators measured the methods of democratic transition, such as legislation, as well as practices such as elections. The indicators were drawn from a variety of political, economic and social fields, reflecting all stages of democratic politics. In addition to Lebanon, the study examined nine other Arab countries: Jordan, Algeria, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Kuwait, Egypt, Morocco and Yemen. Lebanon topped the nine other states in terms of improvement in the general index compared to ARI's previous report, reaching the number one ranking in terms of respect for rights and freedoms, and the second-best ranking for democratic practices. The report attributed the improvement to recent political stability, as Lebanon jumped to the number four position overall, after the previous report ranked it sixth out of eight states surveyed. In the general index, Jordan topped the list while Saudi Arabia was at the bottom. However, Lebanon yielded poor results in indicators related to violating the Constitution, mistreating detainees, arbitrary detention, personal security, shares of the national budget allocated to health and education, its non-civilian justice system, and number of children abandoning school.

Lebanon scored above the regional average in terms of both democratic practices and methods, compared to previous reports where the practices were below average. But flaws were apparent in the democratic methods related to equality, social justice and sovereignty of law in Lebanon. Based on this, **the report forwarded 11 recommendations, including the following:**

1 Reforming the electoral law by freeing it from sectarian considerations and introducing proportional representation, lowering the voting age, imposing a female quota at least in candidacy and granting an electoral supervisory committee full administrative and financial independence.

- 1 Amending the Municipalities Law, to allow voters directly elect mayors and deputy mayors, and assuring the administrative and financial independence of municipalities.
- 1 Approving a law to protect individuals and groups that uncover corruption.
- 1 Freeing publications from prior censorship and exempting newspapers and magazines from obtaining publications licenses.
- 1 Stressing the independence of judiciary and protecting judges from various types of applied pressure.
- 1 Granting Lebanese women the right to pass on their nationalities to their families.
- 1 Adopting an economic plan that encourages industrial, crafts and agricultural sectors.
- 1 Combating the drop-out rate in schools and boosting government spending on education.

In the analysis section, Bassma Kodmani, the executive director of ARI, touched on the relationship between democracy and political and security stability. She noted that the report's results indicated a clear retreat in democratic transitions in Palestine and Yemen, the two states that witnessed severe deterioration in security conditions

Sufian Obeidat, a lawyer and researcher, highlighted the sharp contrast between the abundance of democratic methods in the Arab east and the modest level of democratic practices. According to the report, the increase in democratic methods was a misleading statistic, which gave an impression of progress, modernization and compliance with the will of the people. For Abdullah Sahef, who heads the Social Sciences Research and Studies Center in Morocco, the capability of Arab regimes to resist reforms has increased, as they have introduced such changes into legal texts but declined to apply them. Sarah Anne Rennick of ARI highlighted that while campaigns to secure access to government sources of information have been gaining momentum, the results have yet to bear fruit, despite action in Yemen and Lebanon on the issue.

Economic front

North Cypriot businessmen hope to boost trade ties with Lebanon

BEIRUT: Business representatives from the controversial Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus met with a handful of Lebanese businessmen Thursday in a bid to expand their business ties in Lebanon and alleviate their state of isolation. The trade delegation held the investment conference at the Bristol Hotel in Beirut to persuade their Lebanese counterparts that despite the small size of their market, their service-based economy offers invaluable business opportunities. "Lebanon is a gateway to the Middle East, and its gross domestic product (GDP) per capital is high. So we are interested in establishing a stronger trade partnership with it," said Ali Cirali, who heads the Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce. Situated about 100 kilometers from Lebanon's coast and offering pristine beaches that make it an idyllic tourist destination, the country should count among Lebanon's natural trading partners. "We are so close in miles and so similar in minds," said Taner Yolcu, a delegation member with the Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce. Northern Cyprus' complicated political situation has instead made it a difficult trading partner. Since the ethnically Turkish population of Northern Cyprus unilaterally declared its independence from the Greek-Cyprus Republic in 1983, the enclave – which is only recognized by Turkey – has been politically ostracized from the

international community. Efforts to reverse Northern Cyprus' independence have included a trade ban by the European Union that has ravaged its economy. The trade volume between Lebanon and Northern Cyprus – estimated at a miniscule \$2.8 million in 2009 – is near insignificant as it currently stands. But the trade delegation expressed its hopes that Northern Cyprus' geographic and cultural proximity as well as its recently fast-growing economy – standing at a whopping 9.5 percent average growth between 2003 and 2008 – could transform the country into a more regular trading partner of the Lebanese business community. While there is no trade ban between Lebanon and Turkey, the international community's pressure to shun Northern Cyprus and minimize ties with the breakaway region has translated into obstacles Northern Cypriot businessmen must face every day when engaging in international trade. In Lebanon, chief among those hurdles is the absence of a regular transportation network – by sea or by air – to ship goods or transport tourists, which several businessmen at the meeting lamented. In the current circumstances, commercial ships making the trip between Lebanon and Northern Cyprus usually make a stop-over at Mersin port, in Turkey, before reaching their final destination in order to avoid a direct connection. Planes, meanwhile, will often stop in Istanbul, Turkey, before heading for Lebanon. The impracticality of this arrangement has been a thorn in Northern Cyprus' side, damaging the enclave's efforts to expand its promising tourism industry. "It should take half-an-hour to fly from Northern Cyprus to Beirut, but instead it takes up to six hours," said Mustafa Defterali, a Northern Cypriot businessman at the meeting. The situation may change, however, following an initiative by several businessmen at the conference who said that they have requested a permission with the Lebanese government to establish a direct shipping line between Northern Cyprus and Lebanon. But Cirali acknowledged that it was still unclear whether the project would be approved by the Lebanese government given intense pressure by the Greek-Cyprus Republic to deny permission to the venture's proponents. "It's a political decision ... If your government starts a direct transportation line, it will damage its relations with the Greek Cypriot government," he said. The conference was organized by the Cyprus Turkish Investment Development Agency as part of a wider effort to reach out to markets in the Middle East.

Social front

Lebanon's news agency says its website was hacked by Israelis

Lebanon's state-run news agency on Tuesday accused an Israeli organization of having hacked into its website to post a message calling for information about a missing Israeli air force pilot. National News Agency (NNA) director Laure Suleiman said the agency's Arabic, English and French websites 'were hacked several times by the Israeli Born to Freedom Foundation.' The hackers left a message that read: 'Earn a reward of 10 million dollars in exchange for information about Israeli airman Ron Arad and other missing Israelis' was posted on the websites on Monday afternoon. 'Due to the hacking, the agency was forced to stop transmitting on Monday, but resumed operations on Tuesday,' Suleiman said. Such messages appeared on several occasions on mobile telephones in Lebanon during the July 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon's militant Hezbollah

group. Arad, an Israeli air force navigator, went missing in Lebanon when his plane was downed over southern Lebanon in 1986. –DPA

Pilots Association insists strike legal

The Lebanese Pilots Association said Friday that its 24-hour strike earlier this week was legal and pilots were not demanding an increase in salaries, but rather earlier benefits that had been taken away from them. The association issued a statement in which it said Middle East Airlines (MEA) pilots were paid less than pilots in most airline companies, where sometimes the salaries of old employees exceeded that of the chairman. “We aren’t asking for a raise. We’re only asking for our earlier rights,” the statement said, denying claims by MEA chairman Mohammad Hout that the strike was illegal because it violated a previous contract that prevented pilots from making any further demands. – The Daily Star

New human rights website looks to promote awareness, interaction

Civil society activists in Lebanon have long dreamed of a space in which they could all come together to debate, exchange information, and plan activities in the field of human rights. This was partially achieved in 2006 with the launch of Lebanon Support, a local website that posts job listings and reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, the website remains little known about outside the communities involved. Now a new website dedicated solely to human rights is hoping to promote awareness and interaction among students, researchers and activists. The Human Rights in Lebanon website (www.humanrights-lb.org or [.com](http://www.humanrights-lb.com)) will provide a democratic “multimedia virtual space for human rights,” said Layal Samaha of KAFA, which is running the website along with the Italian NGO COSV, Permanent Peace Movement and the Lebanese Center for Human Rights. At the website’s launch on Thursday at the Lebanese University in Hadath, the organizations requested Lebanese and international NGOs contribute to the website by posting reports, fact sheets, audio-visual material and activities on topics pertaining to human rights. The website, which is available in English and Arabic, is an “innovative tool” for human rights workers in Lebanon, said Stefano Moschini, COSV Lebanon coordinator. The website “aims at building a network of NGOs” coordinating and cooperating in the field and on “promoting a culture of human rights in Lebanon,” he said. It will also reduce duplicated activities and projects, and help students to access vital information. The website should boost cooperation among civil society actors and become an indispensable tool in promoting human rights in Lebanon, said Michael Miller, counselor at the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon, which funded the project. “Under the European Neighborhood Policy, the EU has already developed a thorough bilateral political dialogue with Lebanon,” he said, adding that a third meeting in this regard will take place on Monday. “Lebanon’s civil society is rather strong and dynamic, with many organizations active across a wide range of issues of interest to the European Union, including – for example – torture, empowerment of women, and the rights of refugees or migrant workers,” said Miller. “But there is still a need to support and strengthen interaction ... in order to promote better respect of human rights by the state and judicial authorities.” A human rights film festival, scheduled for February 2011, is being organized as part of the project, Moschini said. In addition, the four core organizations involved will produce reports on such human rights issues as freedom of

association, racism, arbitrary detention, torture and violence against women. The launch of the website came as a collective of human rights activists held a conference to mark the beginning of the “24/7 Campaign,” calling on employers to provide better working conditions for migrant domestic workers, starting with their legal obligation to grant a weekly day off outside the home. The campaign, which has been advertised on the Human Rights in Lebanon website, includes 24 hours of continuous activities in the run up to Labor Day on 1 May.

Abboud: More work needed to promote tourism sector in Lebanon

Promoting Lebanon in foreign countries remains weak and still requires much work, said Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud on Monday. “Advertising is the best way to promote one’s country. Foreign countries usually compete by creating a tourism image to attract tourists,” he said. Abboud added that the ministry used to focus on Arab countries while promoting Lebanon because Arab tourists make 40 percent of the total tourism activity in the country and 70 percent of the total expenditures in this sector. “This year, we will focus on the European market and we will target countries such as Spain, Germany, Russia and Britain,” he said. His remarks came during a news conference at the Tourism Ministry in Beirut to announce that the ministry received the silver award for its movie ad titled, “It’s hard to leave Lebanon,” during the Golden City Gate Awards ceremony held in Berlin in March 2010. The movie, which was implemented by Impact BBDO, competed with 110 advertising movies from 32 countries. “The movie played in front of an international audience of experts in the tourism sector and contributed in giving a great image of Lebanon and its tourism sector,” he said. Abboud said the movie was successful in conveying the great feeling every Lebanese citizen feels toward this small country. “Lebanon is a small country but it contains a variety of cultures, civilizations and religions,” he added. “It gives tourists a chance to get exposed to all kinds of experiences despite the tough moments it went through during the past few years,” he added. He said Lebanon does not have a proper infrastructure but it still attracts a great number of tourists every year. “Tourism revenues reached \$7 billion in 2009 and the sector is expected to growth at a 20 percent rate in 2010,” he said. Abboud encouraged the promotion of tourism in all of the Lebanese areas and not just in Beirut. “A lot of Lebanese areas are still behind when it comes to tourism and it is our duty to work on encouraging different kinds of tourism activities for us to be able to reach all these areas,” he said. He said that the Tourism Ministry made a deal with Middle East Airlines to give good offers to tourists who plan to visit areas outside Beirut. Abboud added that the number of Turkish tourists increased since the two countries signed an agreement to lift the visas requirements. “We ask security organizations to treat tourists in a very good way because tourism contributes to our GDP at a rate of 25 percent,” he said. He added that there will be great control over restaurants and those who cheat will have to pay a LL3 million fine. Since the day of his appointment as a tourism minister, Abboud promised to implement serious reforms in the sector. The reforms will begin with the very basics of the sector with requests that restaurants and hotels display their menus outside of their premises. “This is considered to be at the very basic because tourists would like to see what is being offered by restaurants in addition to their prices range before entering,” he previously told The Daily Star in an exclusive interview. – The Daily Star

Lebanese pilots plan strike over 'unfair terms'

The Lebanese Pilots Syndicate announced Wednesday a general 24-hours strike starting Thursday, thus halting 23 flights. The pilots decided the strike after their demands fell on the Middle East Airlines (MEA) deaf ears. The syndicate announced the strike during a news conference held at the Commodore Hotel Wednesday. Following the pilots' decision, MEA issued an announcement asking its clients to call their offices and call centers for them to be informed about the procedures made by the national carrier to facilitate their trips. MEA chairman Mohammad Hout, meanwhile, is expected to hold a news conference Thursday at 12 pm to inform the public about the latest updates on the pilots' issue. The syndicate's head, Mahmoud Houmani, said the relationship between pilots and MEA had deteriorated since 2001. "MEA imposed unfair working conditions on pilots which created problems between them," he said. He said that skilled Lebanese pilots had made big contributions to the MEA and "worked really hard to help the country's only national carrier face the many challenges it has faced in the past few years." Houmani said that pilots were a major contributor to the profits generated by the MEA last year. "Pilots deserve to get back some of their rights since they have offered numerous sacrifices with no additional returns at all," he said. MEA recorded its best year in 2009 when the company made over \$100 million in net profit, thanks to a drop in world oil prices, and growing security and political stability in Lebanon, Hout said in 2009. But Hout said in an interview to the Associated Press earlier this month MEA's net profits were projected to drop 40 percent this year, from \$100 billion in fiscal 2009, largely due to what he claimed was unfair competition from other carriers benefiting from Lebanon's open-air policy. Houmani said that the pilot profession requires regular health tests to be done every six months to make sure that pilots are well prepared to do their duties. "These are not the only requirements and pilots have a lot of responsibilities," he said. "Airlines all over the world are aware of these responsibilities and requirements and that's why they provide their pilots with the best working conditions," he added. – The Daily Star