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## **Summary**

### **Egypt**

The Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya) called on citizens to pursue a policy of civil disobedience as a means of resistance. Kefaya also urged Egyptians to boycott all elections, starting with the Shoura Council election due to be held in June to elect members of the Upper House of Parliament. In a press conference held at the Kefaya

premises in Downtown Cairo, a number of Kefaya leaders announced a new strategy of resistance.

The new anti-human trafficking law is an important step but it is overdue, head of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) Hafez Abu Saeda told Daily News Egypt Tuesday. "At first the government totally denied this phenomenon existed in Egypt. Then it admitted it and [decided] to pass a law," he added.

Candidacy applications for the mid-term Shoura Council elections began and will continue till Sunday for elections that will take place in June. Eighty-eight seats are to be decided on June 1, with a second round of voting scheduled for June 8. Voting will take place in 67 electoral districts, 21 of which will have two seats. The Supreme Electoral Commission announced last week that monitoring of the Shoura Council elections would be open to Egyptian civil society groups.

The People's Assembly's constitutional and legislative affairs committee assigned one of its legal counselors to review the dispute over the Constitutional Party's leadership, after the party's deputy, Coptic lawyer, Mamdouh Ramzy, appointed himself as head. Mamdouh Qinawi, head and founder of the party, described Ramzy's appointment as a "slap on the wrist" by the regime after he announced his support for former IAEA Chief Mohamed ElBaradei. Ramzy filed a request to the constitutional and legislation affairs committee to approve his appointment as the party's head.

Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif said that the wave of demonstrations that has recently swept the Egyptian street is a new way for citizens to express their demands and has no political dimension, according to state online news portal egyptnews.net. In a meeting with editors of Egyptian papers on Tuesday, Nazif said that while the government attends to those calling for their constitutional rights, some protestors are making unconstitutional demands. Meanwhile, workers have continuously banded outside the Parliament, protesting low wages and poor working conditions. "I agree with one part of [Prime Minister] Nazif's statements, which is that most of the protests are calling for better wages and not political reform," political analyst Amr El-Choubaki of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies told Daily News Egypt.

#### **Water issue:**

Egypt needs to cut water waste and use new technology in agriculture and other fields to support its case for the lion share of the Nile's resources over other African states, a global water expert said. Egypt needs to cut water waste and use new technology in agriculture and other fields to support its case for the lion share of the Nile's resources over other African states, a global water expert said. Egypt, which gets almost all its water needs from the Nile but faces possible shortages as early as 2017, has angered upstream states by sticking to colonial-era pacts that guarantee it can use most of the Nile's flow. The row over the Nile detracts from the real problem of poor water management in Egypt and the other upstream states clamouring for a bigger share, Asit Biswas, director of the Third World Centre for Water Management, told

Egypt and Sudan have refused to sign the agreement on the sharing of the Nile waters. Although Uganda and the rest of the Nile Basin countries were ready to sign the protocol called the Co-operative Framework Agreement, Egypt and Sudan held on to their "historical rights" over the Nile as spelt out in two colonial agreements of 1929 and 1959. Speaking to The New Vision after three days of talks at Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt,

environment minister Maria Mutagamba said the seven member countries of the Nile Basin "also disagreed with Egypt and Sudan".

Following the recent failure to agree on water sharing, Egypt has warn upstream countries against signing the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA which excluded his country. "Nile water is a matter of national security to Egypt. We won't under any circumstances allow our water rights to be jeopardized," Mohamed Allam, Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation, told Egyptian Parliament this week.

### **Geo strategic front**

The annual report produced by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom includes harsh criticism of Egypt. How will the government respond, asks Mohamed Abdel-Baky A report produced by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and published on 29 April has severely criticised Egypt, saying that "serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, remain widespread."

This is not the first time that a report produced by the commission, a federal US government body, has led to disagreements between Cairo and Washington. The commission's annual reports have repeatedly placed Egypt on a "watch list", together with India, Indonesia, Turkey and Cuba over the past eight years, the same ranking being applied in this year's report. Commissioners sitting on the USCIRF are appointed by the US president in consultation with the leaders of both the main political parties sitting in the US Senate and House of Representatives.

Former IAEA director Mohamed El-Baradei's controversial visit to the United States has provoked a backlash at home, Gamal Essam El-Din reports Mohamed El-Baradei, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and leader of a political reform campaign in Egypt, concluded a two-week visit to the United States. Although originally planned for delivering lectures on the IAEA's role in containing nuclear arms, El-Baradei seized the opportunity to rally Americans for the case of political reform in Egypt. In El-Baradei's words: "the primary goal of my visit to America is discussing the issue of political and constitutional reform with Egyptian expatriates and addressing Americans about political reform and change in Egypt and the Arab world."

Egypt and the United States were Tuesday trying to work out a compromise at the United Nations to start talks on a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone, diplomats said. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had Monday told the conference on the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty being held here that the United States is "prepared to support practical measures" towards "the objective of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction." Egyptian ambassador Hisham Badr told the some 150 nations at the three-week-long NPT meeting that the review conference should support taking "concrete and practical steps" for "the establishment of a Middle Eastern zone free of nuclear weapons, as well as other weapons of mass destruction." Diplomats said the two sides are working behind the scenes to reconcile a hardline Egyptian position that a conference should be held to begin negotiating on such a zone with the US and Israeli stance that creating a zone depends on first finding peace in the Middle East. "

Egypt's Communications Ministry said it had launched the first Internet domain name using Arabic letters to try to boost e-services and the number of people online in the most populous Arab nation. "Introducing Arabic domain names is a milestone in Internet history," Communications Minister Tarek Kamel said in a statement. "This great step will

open up new horizons for e-services in Egypt. It will boost the number of online users in the country and will enable Internet services to penetrate new market segments by eliminating language barriers." The domain name .misr — the Arabic word for Egypt, which will be spelt in Arabic script — will be registered through Internet service suppliers TE Data, Vodafone Data and Link Registrar, the statement said. Analysts say Arabic content accounts for just 1 percent of total web content.

With a court order mandating the government to reset minimum wage to comply with the current cost of living and a rising wave of labor unrest, questions about the size of this potential increase in government expenditure and the resources and structural reforms required for it are yielding different answers. According to CAPMAS, 7.9 million were employed in the public sector in the beginning of 2009.

Egypt's economic prospects remain fairly lacklustre as it approaches the end of its financial year but it will outperform its neighbors and most gulf Arab nations, a Reuters poll showed on Wednesday. The survey of 14 economists predicted that gross domestic product (GDP) of the North African nation would have grown by 4.7 percent in the fiscal year that ends in 2 months time, ahead of other gulf nations, except region-leader Qatar. "Over the short-term, Egypt's impressive headline growth figures are masking a somewhat worrying decline in investment and private consumption," said Elizabeth Martins, head of Middle East and north Africa strategist at Business Monitor International. Forecasters expect economic growth for Egypt to accelerate to 5.3 percent in the fiscal year 2011/12, below last month's forecast by Economic Development Minister Osman Mohamed Osman for 6.5 percent.

#### **Social front:**

At the beginning of March, IslamOnline.net was one of the most successful websites in the Middle East. Now the editorial team are locked in a power struggle with their Islamist financial backers in Qatar. Alfred Hackensberger reports

The 120,000 daily visitors to IslamOnline.net must have wondered what had happened to their favourite website. Day after day, they found the same news and the same error message: "Please try again later." The entire 350-strong workforce has been on a sit-in in the office building to the west of Cairo since March 15. The owners of IOL, the Al Balagh Cultural Society, based in Qatar, had, apparently for financial reasons, decided to transfer to a smaller, but also slower server, and changed the passwords. It became a case of "access denied" for the Cairo editorial staff, who found themselves shut out from their own newspaper.

#### **Iraq**

##### **Political front**

Allawi warned that an alliance of Shia blocs could result in a return to sectarian bloodshed [Reuters] The political bloc of Nouri al-Maliki, the incumbent Iraqi prime minister, has joined forces with its main Shia rival, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), leaving the newly-formed coalition just four seats short of a parliamentary majority. Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a former PM, and Abdul Razzaq al-Kadhimi, an INA advisor, were flanked by officials from al-Maliki's State of Law bloc as they made the announcement at a news conference on Tuesday. "An agreement was reached to form a parliamentary bloc through the union of the two blocs, the State of Law Alliance and the Iraqi National Alliance," the officials said.

The recount of Baghdad votes, begun on Monday, is being monitored by EU and UN observers [AFP] Iraq's election commission has begun manually recounting around 2.5 million ballots cast in Baghdad during the country's parliamentary election almost two months ago. Officials said on Monday that the process could take between two to three weeks. "We will count 600 boxes today," Qassim al-Abbudi, an official with the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), said. Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's incumbent prime minister, demanded the recount and alleged fraud had occurred after provisional results handed a two-seat lead to the political bloc led by his rival, Iyad Allawi. Baghdad province accounts for about a fifth of parliament's 325 seats.

Iraq's two largest Shi'ite electoral blocs say they have formed an alliance that gives them a strong chance of setting up the next government. The coalition deal between Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition and the conservative Shi'ite Iraqi National Alliance leaves them just four seats short of a parliamentary majority -- close enough that the alliance possibly could control a majority after a vote recount for Baghdad is completed in two weeks. Abd al-Razaq al-Kazemi of the Iraqi National Alliance announced the deal late on May 4 at a press conference in which he was flanked by officials from the State of Law bloc and the movement of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose followers make up the strongest faction within the Iraqi National Alliance.

The agreement means a potential consensus between Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition and the Iraqi National Alliance. A leading official in one of Iraq's two largest Shi'ite electoral blocs says the two have agreed on a way to nominate the country's next prime minister, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Ammar Tuma told RFI today that the State of Law Coalition, led by outgoing Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and the Iraqi National Alliance, led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafaari, have agreed to nominate the next prime minister by consensus. The two blocs agreed to join forces in a political alliance on May 4. Tuma, who belongs to the Iraqi National Alliance, added that if the two blocs fail to come to a consensus on an acceptable nominee they would seek other alternatives, including a vote.

### **Economic front**

Iran has agreed to ship 1.5 million liters of fuel to breathe life into some Iraqi power plants made idle due to fuel shortages. The agreement was struck during a visit by a high level Iraqi delegation to Tehran, a statement by the Ministry of Electricity said. The agreement comes as power outages have worsened recently with major cities and provinces going without electricity for up to 20 hours a day. All promises of regularizing power supply have come to nothing. Billions of dollars have been poured into the sector, but supply has yet to level with what was available prior to the 2003-U.S. invasion.

### **Social front**

Iraqis' integrity is being violated every hour. This violation is being carried out through different political, security, internal and external means and has continued since the U.S.-led occupation of Baghdad in 2003. When suddenly an American newspaper reports about secret prisons in Iraq, the government displays itself as a deaf lamb. It keeps saying it has no knowledge of the existence of these prisons, although the horrific violations which take place in them are being perpetrated with its hands, its weapons and its authority. The government wants to morph each time, hiding its own crimes with a thick shroud, and move on to determine Iraqis' fate using the same means.

A top Iraqi official says thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq and refugees from neighboring countries have returned recently and others want to return, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq reports. Iraqi Immigration and Displacement Minister Abd al-Samad Rahman Sultan says that some 10,700 internally displaced families have returned to their homes in the past three months, and another 950 families have returned from Egypt. Sultan adds that some 630 Iraqi families in Jordan and 520 families in Syria have applied at Iraqi diplomatic missions in those countries seeking help in facilitating their return. Sultan says that the increasing rate of IDPs and refugees returning to their homes in Iraq is a sign that this "tragic page" in the country's recent history will soon be turned. Iraq's anticorruption czar says the government has launched a five-year strategic plan to combat endemic corruption in the country, Judge Abdel Rahim al-Ugaily, president of Iraq's Anticorruption Commission, told RFI that the plan is part of the UN convention against corruption, which Baghdad has signed. He said the measures are being undertaken in cooperation with the UN Development Program and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Al-Ugaily said the plan identifies 201 types of corruption in Iraq -- mainly in state bureaucracy -- and working teams have been set up to address each form according to a set timeframe with follow-up procedures to assess progress. He said the anticorruption commission is under no illusion that corruption will be eliminated by the plan, but expects improvements to be made. He noted that Iraq's rating in the Transparency International corruption index improved for the first time in 2009, though it's still a very low 176th in the world. Al-Ugaily said the commission is also appealing a recent Baghdad court verdict acquitting former Trade Minister Falah al-Sudani on corruption charges.

About one-third of Iraq's 1 million Christians are believed to have fled Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Iraqi Christians may seek a new family law so they don't have to follow the current code written largely for Muslims, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq reports. William Ward, the chairman of the Iraqi human rights organization Hammurabi, told RFE/RL that the Christian groups in Iraq are considering a campaign for separate legislation that would establish standards more in line with Christianity in such matters as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody.

### **Lebanon**

**Political front:** Rival politicians in Lebanon had set their differences aside and reached a consensus in many areas, the first round of the country's municipal elections, which began at the weekend, showed. Lebanese voters will continue to cast their ballots over three Sundays in May, during which some 963 local councils and nearly 2,800 mayors are due to be elected. Sunday's elections were described by many observers as "consensus elections" since in many areas political parties were able to reach an agreement together on a list of candidates.

Anonymous caller vows to avenge lynching of Egyptian near Beirut in phone call to Lebanon's embassy in Cairo. Lebanon's embassy in Cairo has asked Egypt for protection after receiving an anonymous pledge to avenge the lynching of an Egyptian by villagers near Beirut last week, a Lebanese official said Monday. "The Lebanese ambassador, Khaled Ziade, has asked Egyptian authorities to provide the embassy with protection," after receiving the threatening phone call on Sunday, a government source said. "He immediately hung up after making the threat," the source added.



Iran will “cut off Israel’s feet” if the Jewish state attacks Damascus, Iranian Vice President Mohammad Rida Rahimi vowed yesterday at the end of a two-day visit to key regional ally Syria. “We will stand alongside Syria against any (Israeli) threat,” Rahimi said at a news conference with Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri. “If those who have violated Palestinian land want to try anything we will cut off their feet,” he said in reference to the Jewish state. Rahimi described Syria as a “strong country that is ready to confront any threat” and pledged that Tehran “will back Syria with all its means and strength.” On Tuesday, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates accused Iran and Syria of arming Hezbollah with increasingly sophisticated rockets and missiles which he said undermined stability in the region. And on Thursday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Syrian President Bashar Al Assad against the risk of sparking a regional war if he supplies long-range Scud missiles to Hezbollah. “President Assad is making decisions that could mean war or peace for the region,” she warned. Earlier this month, Israeli President Shimon Peres claimed that Syria was supplying the militant Shia group Hezbollah with Scud missiles.

### **Israel and Palestine**

**Geo strategic front:** The Professional Associations Complex in Jordan is holding a campaign to ensure that the Jordanian markets do not carry any Israeli products. The campaign, For A Jordan Without Israeli Products, was launched as the Palestinians prepare to mark the 62nd anniversary of the Nakba. The Complex stated that the campaign is also meant to counter what it called “the ongoing Zionist threats to Jordan”. Head of the Professional Associations Complex, Dr. Ahmad Al Armouty, stated at a press conference that the campaign targets all Israeli products in Jordan and the distributors of these products. It also aims at providing information about the Israeli trade, cultural and tourist centers and agencies in order to boycott them too. Al Armouty, who also heads the Physicians Association in Jordan, stated that the Jordanian started boycotting Israeli products since the 1994 deal between Israel and Jordan was signed, and added that boycott campaigns should step-up their activities as Israeli is significantly escalating its attacks and violations in Jerusalem and its holy sites, and against the Palestinian people.

Israeli Legislator, Aryeh Eldad, member of the National Union fundamentalist party, asked the Israeli Knesset to discuss a proposal he submitted regarding establishing a Palestinian state in Jordan. Eldad initially filed his proposal in May of last year and the Knesset agreed to transfer the file to the Knesset’s The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

The Israeli Authorities deported Saturday a Palestinian resident of the West Bank to Jordan after the army claimed he was illegally staying in the country. Resident Morad Suleiman Zahda, 27, from Hebron in the southern part of the West Bank was expelled to Jordan. Zahda, a Palestinian native, entered the country using a visitors’ visa ten year ago. A deportation order was issued against him after he was kidnapped and detained by the army.

### **Peace talks**

Diplomatic sources in Washington reported that U.S. President, Barack Obama, gave Israel verbal and written guarantees that the United States will not allow the Palestinians

to conduct any unilateral steps during indirect talks, or in the case of failure of such talks. The sources did not mention any guarantees that would prohibit Israel from continuing its unilateral measures especially settlement activities and its illegal policies in occupied East Jerusalem.

Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, stated that proximity talks with Israel will discuss final status issues, including borders and security, and several related issues. Abbas told reporters following his meeting with King Abdullah of Jordan that the Palestinian leadership will hold a meeting Saturday to make a final decision on proximity talks, and that after meeting with the Palestinian Authority, he will tell U.S. Middle East peace envoy, George Mitchell, that Palestinian Authority is ready for talks and for discussing final status issues. He stated that the proximity talks will last for four months and that the Palestinian leadership would then hold a meeting with the Arab Follow-up Committee to discuss the developments, and hold consultations on future steps. Abbas said that the coordination with the Arab world is comprehensive and that the Palestinian Authority will not agree to anything that is rejected by the Arab countries. Commenting on the Palestinian-Jordanian coordination, Abbas said that such coordination is on its highest levels and that the Palestinian Authority is holding constant talks and discussions with Jordan. Abbas met king Abdullah of Jordan, and will be holding a meeting with Mitchell in the coming days. He said that the Palestinian Authority is holding talks with King Abdullah of Jordan, the Saudi king Abdullah Ben Abdul-Aziz, and the United Arabs Emirates.

The Palestinian Librations Organization Executive Committee will convene on Saturday to decide on resuming indirect talks with Israel mediated by Washington. The U.S envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell will arrive to Israel on Wednesday and meet Israel' PM Netanyahu, Mitchell is expected also to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Friday.

Lebanese President Michel Suleiman said Hezbollah cannot disarm before a defense strategy is reached that would also address future Israeli attacks. Lebanon's president says the government cannot ask Hezbollah to give up its weapons at a time of heightened tension with Israel.

## **Detailed news**

### **Egypt**

#### **Political front:**

#### **KEFAYA PROPOSES CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, ELECTION BOYCOTT**

: May 4, 2010: The Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya) called on citizens Tuesday to pursue a policy of civil disobedience as a means of resistance. Kefaya also urged Egyptians to boycott all elections, starting with the Shoura Council election due to be held in June to elect members of the Upper House of Parliament. In a press conference held at the Kefaya premises in Downtown Cairo, a number of Kefaya leaders announced a new strategy of resistance. "We advise our fellow [activists] to stop writing and releasing statements and to join our strikes and protests," Kefaya's General Coordinator Abdel-Halim Qandil said. "Let's go down to the streets together." Conference speakers

urged citizens to stop informing the interior ministry of future demonstrations and to practice their constitutional right to protest. Named “30-year-old Funeral,” the Kefaya press conference was held intentionally to coincide with President Hosni Mubarak’s 82nd birthday. “The date was deliberately selected. In such occasions, we are supposed to wish a person happy birthday,” Qandil said. “Unfortunately, Egyptians cannot do that because it is a day of sadness for the state of our homeland,” he added. The event was scantily attended on both the level of citizens and media. “The recent intensive presence of Kefaya on the street probably caused a state of saturation,” justified Kefaya assistant coordinator for media Abdel-Aziz Al-Husseini. Kefaya will hold a protest on June 1, concurrent with the first day of Shoura Council elections, under the slogan “No to Rigging Egypt.”

### **ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING LAW LONG OVERDUE, SAYS EOHR**

May 4, 2010 The new anti-human trafficking law is an important step but it is overdue, head of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (EOHR) Hafez Abu Saeda told Daily News Egypt Tuesday. “At first the government totally denied this phenomenon existed in Egypt. Then it admitted it and [decided] to pass a law,” he added. “I think the law is a preliminary step towards admitting that human trafficking crimes are committed on a wide scale and in different forms in Egypt.” Nevertheless, lawmakers argue that the law is not late. “We instantly responded to the draft law submitted by the Ministries of Family and Population and Foreign Affairs. Had they presented it a year ago, we would have discussed it at that time,” MP Magdy Allam told Daily News Egypt. Allam explained that the law was first approved by cabinet before it was presented to the People’s Assembly. “It took us no more than a month after the government pushed the law to parliament.” According to the new law that was passed on Sunday, victims of human trafficking are not to be questioned for any crimes they committed under duress. The government has also said that it is committed to protect the victims by offering them an enabling environment that would help them reintegrate into society. A fund will also be established to give financial assistance to these victims. On April 21, UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons Joy Ngozi Ezeilo praised the strong political commitment of the Egyptian government to tackle human trafficking. However, at a press conference wrapping up a 10-day visit to Egypt upon the invitation of the Egyptian government to evaluate the situation, she noted that there some challenges needed to be addressed in order to protect and respect the human rights of the victims of trafficking.

Ezeilo pointed out that that there were indications that trafficking for compulsory marriages, forced labor, transportation of human organs and body tissues may be much higher than the current estimates. The PA adopted the new law to combat human trafficking one day before the press conference. In June 2008, Egypt was severely criticized by the Trafficking in Persons Report published by the US State Department. According to the report, Egypt is a transit country for women trafficked from Uzbekistan, Moldova, the Ukraine, Russia, and other Eastern European countries to Israel for sexual exploitation. The country is also a source for children trafficked within the country for commercial sexual exploitation and domestic servitude, the report added. Some of Cairo’s estimated 1 million street children — both boys and girls — are exploited in prostitution. In addition, wealthy men from the Gulf reportedly travel to Egypt for

“temporary marriages” with Egyptian women, including, in some cases, girls who are under the legal age of 18, in unions often facilitated by the girl’s parents as well as marriage brokers. Some Egyptian cities have also been singled out as destinations for sex tourism. “Reports published by entities like the UN and the US State Department exposing such facts ... shocked Egyptian public opinion, which made the government eventually make a move,” Abu Saeda said.

### **APPLICATION PROCESS FOR SHOURA COUNCIL ELECTIONS BEGINS**

May 5, 2010 Candidacy applications for the mid-term Shoura Council elections began Wednesday and will continue till Sunday for elections that will take place in June. Eighty-eight seats are to be decided on June 1, with a second round of voting scheduled for June 8. Voting will take place in 67 electoral districts, 21 of which will have two seats. The Supreme Electoral Commission announced last week that monitoring of the Shoura Council elections would be open to Egyptian civil society groups. NGOs wishing to participate would have to coordinate with the National Council for Human Rights or submit a request directly to the committee. Candidates submit their applications to the 11-member Commission — made up mainly of judges — which decides whether to accept or refuse a candidate’s application. There is an appeals process if a candidate’s application is denied. Member of the Shoura Council’s legislative committee Independent MP Shawky El-Sayed told Daily News Egypt Wednesday, “It is everyone’s right to submit their papers within the next five days. It’s been reported that the National Democratic Party will field their candidates on the final day to prevent internal party strife, so for now it is open to the opposition and to independents, and those who claim to be independent.” The Shoura Council elections are not without their controversy. Muslim Brotherhood MP Hamdy Hassan told Daily News Egypt that as soon as the group announced the name of a candidate in Alexandria, his lawyers who were responsible for submitting his paperwork were promptly arrested. Brotherhood leader Gamal Heshmat was arrested in Beheira Monday evening along with another member Osama Suleiman in a move the group linked to the upcoming elections. “During elections it is always open season on the Muslim Brotherhood to prevent them from running,” Hassan said Tuesday. “Heshmat is a big symbol in Beheira and the arrest was to terrorize people out of participating in the elections.” Both Heshmat and Suleiman have been detained for 15 days but are yet to be charged. They have both begun a hunger strike to protest their arrest. El-Sayed, however, refuted the Brotherhood’s claims. “They cannot make such claims because the door is open for all to apply, as long as you are an Egyptian citizen with no criminal record.”

### **MUBARAK CHALLENGES THE OPPOSITION IN BELATED LABOR DAY SPEECH**

May 6, 2010: President Hosni Mubarak urged political reformists to announce their agendas to the public, asserting that there is no room for “mixing reform ideas with chaos.” “I am telling those who raise slogans that this is not enough to attract voters,” he said during a belated Labor Day speech Thursday at the Cairo International Conference Center, acknowledging that the recent wave of political movements is a “healthy phenomenon.” Commenting on his words, general coordinator of the Kefaya Movement for Change Abdel-Halim Qandil told Daily News Egypt, “Egyptians are taking to the

streets by force not by choice. The constitution is like a traffic law forcing you to go in one direction. "I'm asking the president to step down," he added. "Chaos will prevail if the government continues to carry on with its policies the way it is doing now." In recent years, Egypt has seen a wave of protests by political activists from across the spectrum calling for democratic reform and an end to emergency law. In his speech, Mubarak asked these groups to outline their policies with regards to attracting foreign investors, creating job opportunities, increasing wages, fighting terrorism and foreign relations. "This is naïve and laughable. My question for him is where does public money go?" said Qandil, adding that constitutional amendments have repeatedly crippled opposition blocs. Meanwhile, Mubarak said that the current government will continue to adhere to political reform and notions of democracy. "We will carry on with our policies of political reform taking gradual and calculated steps," he said, adding that the government will continue to support the role of parliament, value judicial independence and maintain a distance between religion and politics. "The upcoming elections will be free and fair, and the people are going to be the judge," said Mubarak, referring to parliamentary and presidential elections slated for 2010 and 2011, respectively. "We've heard this for the past 30 years. Now when we hear 'fair and free elections' we know that it will be like any other year," Qandil said. Throughout his speech, Mubarak was interrupted by sporadic applause and words of appreciation, with some attendees even reciting poetry. The 82-year-old arrived in Cairo this week from the Red Sea resort of Sharm El-Sheikh where he was convalescing after gallbladder surgery and a removing a growth on his small intestine in Hiedelberg, Germany last March. On the economic front, Mubarak, who is entering the last year of his fifth consecutive term, lauded the progress his government has achieved during the past five years. *"We have continued to raise wages year after year... Egypt has gained international recognition as one of the world's emerging economies. Our goal is to truly develop the workers and not to seek temporary solutions,"* Mubarak told the crowd.**He emphasized the fact that it is essential for economic prosperity to reach all strata of society.** On Thursday, Mubarak called on companies to protect the rights of their employees, and stressed that an evaluation of figures must mirror inflation rates and higher standards of living. **He pledged to raise wages, pensions and invite foreign investors who he promised "will create millions of jobs."**On a weekly basis, workers have bunched outside the Parliament in downtown Cairo, protesting low wages and poor working conditions. In a country where the money is circulating amply among the rich and the poor struggle to bring food to the table, Egypt's economic system has been repeatedly criticized for its inability to maintain a fair distribution of wealth.

### **SUPPORT FOR ELBARADEI CAUSES RIFTS IN CONSTITUTIONAL PARTY**

May 6, 2010 The People's Assembly's constitutional and legislative affairs committee assigned one of its legal counselors to review the dispute over the Constitutional Party's leadership, after the party's deputy, Coptic lawyer, Mamdouh Ramzy, appointed himself as head. Mamdouh Qinawi, head and founder of the party, described Ramzy's appointment as a "slap on the wrist" by the regime after he announced his support for former IAEA Chief Mohamed ElBaradei. Ramzy filed a request to the constitutional and legislation affairs committee to approve his appointment as the party's head. However, Qinawi told Daily News Egypt, "The request filed by Ramzy isn't worth looking at; it

lacks the basic legal standing. Ramzy is someone who represents only himself." The constitutional and legislative affairs committee had convened on Wednesday and issued a number of decisions related to the dispute and called for establishing a new party called "Reform and Development," headed by Mohamed Anwar Esmat El-Sadat. Qinawi said that Ramzy claimed he had convened a General Assembly, attended by 216 people, but failed to mention who these people were or whether they were even members of the party. He added that the party's statute specifies the process through which an Emergency General Assembly should be convened, either through an invitation from the head of the party or through signatures of 300 party members, none of which Ramzy had followed. Qinawi had invited ElBaradei to run in the next presidential elections through his party, to bypass the obstacles imposed by Article 76 of the constitution that hinders the nomination of independent candidates; but ElBaradei declined. "ElBaradei was hijacked by a group of no more than seven people. If it wasn't too early, I would disassociate myself from the National Coalition for Change, headed by ElBaradei." Ramzi announced a few months ago his intention to run in the coming presidential elections. He told Daily News Egypt that he didn't violate the party's statute and that the General Assembly was convened in his office on April 27, with the participation of 216 people. He added that he had notified the constitutional and legislative affairs committee of that the day following the General Assembly meeting. "Qinawi violated the party's traditions and pursued ElBaradei to invite him to run for president through the Constitutional Party despite the fact that one of the party's members [referring to himself] had already announced his intention to run." He also accused Qinawi of violating the Egyptian political parties' law by meeting with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a banned group.

### **RECENT PROTESTS ARE NOT POLITICAL, SAYS PRIME MINISTER**

May 5, 2010 Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif said that the wave of demonstrations that has recently swept the Egyptian street is a new way for citizens to express their demands and has no political dimension, according to state online news portal egyptnews.net. In a meeting with editors of Egyptian papers on Tuesday, Nazif said that while the government attends to those calling for their constitutional rights, some protestors are making unconstitutional demands. In recent years, Egypt has seen a wave of protests calling for higher wages, democratic reform and an end to emergency law. In the past month, four different protests by reform advocates were violently crushed by police forces. Meanwhile, workers have continuously banded outside the Parliament, protesting low wages and poor working conditions. "I agree with one part of [Prime Minister] Nazif's statements, which is that most of the protests are calling for better wages and not political reform," political analyst Amr El-Choubaki of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies told Daily News Egypt. "Protests by reform activists are limited, and their numbers have not been increasing for some time," he added, maintaining that social demonstrations have become "almost daily." Nazif said that this new wave helps create a medium where both viewpoints are being heard. However, he accused some independent papers and satellite channels of abusing this medium by exaggerating the faults. According to El-Choubaki, the increase in the frequency of expressions of social unrest stems from an inequality in the distribution of resources and a glum economic state. In the meeting, which was attended by Finance Minister Youssef Botrous Ghali and

Minister of Information Anas El Fiqi, Nazif said that poverty levels in Egypt are at 20 percent, pointing to India and China where poverty reaches 70 percent of the population.

Widely circulated economic studies put poverty levels in Egypt at higher percentages, ranging between 35-40. "Statistics have become a point of view. It's one thing when the reasons for high poverty levels are disputed, but meddling with figures mirrors the government's effort to conceal the real crisis," said El-Choubaki. He explained that the current challenge is for the government to act in response to people's demands. "If the government is unable to respond to the demands being called for, the protests will begin to have a political dimension," he warned. Meanwhile, Nazif said that President Hosni Mubarak continues to back efforts to support low-income citizens, and that the government will continue to implement such policies across different fields. He pointed to economic growth as a solution to Egypt's problems, saying that economic prosperity will reflect on citizens, through decreasing unemployment rates and a rise in the average standard of living. Nazif lauded the country's ability to overcome the economic crisis, adding that the rate of economic growth expected for this year is 5.3 and will climb to 5.6 next year. In the same statement, Nazif said the government has asked Daimler AG to reveal the name of the Egyptian official involved in the Mercedes bribery case, but that it hasn't yet received a reply. He added that the Egyptian government believes in the importance of transparency and that it will not tolerate corruption, maintaining that he will ensure that those accused of negligence are brought before the law.

### **Egypt's emerging political intrigue**

Egypt hasn't generated many international headlines in recent years. It's been some time since its government played much of a leadership role in the region, and Egypt didn't suffer as much damage from the global economic slowdown as most other emerging markets. Things have been pretty quiet. Underneath the surface, the transition toward a post-Hosni Mubarak era is starting to get interesting. President Mubarak's son Gamal has been steadily building a case to become Egypt's next president with both his father and the country's military leadership. Despite hesitation from both, authorities pushed through constitutional changes in 2007 that smoothed Gamal's path to power. For the past two years, he has worked to persuade the military brass--Egypt's real powerbrokers--that his ambitious economic reform plans will not undermine their financial interests or political influence. But over the past few months, two developments have created genuine uncertainty about what comes next. First, President Mubarak, now 82, has struggled with a serious illness, increasing the risk that he might be forced to relinquish power for health reasons or even die before the next election (in 2011) and before his son has closed the deal on succession. Second, Mohamed ElBaradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, has emerged as a surprise independent player in Egyptian politics. The past few weeks have added to the intrigue. President Mubarak, now home from hospital following gall bladder surgery in Germany, faces unprecedented pressure to send a clear signal about what he wants to happen next. The safe play would be to name a vice president from among his inner circle, someone like Security Chief Omar Suleiman or presidential chief of staff Zakaria Azmi. Either would represent continuity and reassure an increasingly anxious military. But the president appears reluctant to take such a definitive step. He could also bow to domestic and international pressure to amend

Egypt's constitution to allow for a more open electoral process and a genuinely contested presidential election. But ElBaradei's popularity, his unexpectedly high political profile since returning to Egypt from the IAEA, and the real possibility that he could win an open election make that decision unlikely. As a result, Hosni Mubarak, in power for nearly three decades, will likely brush aside questions about his health and signal that he intends to run for yet another term. That would leave Gamal in a tough spot. ElBaradei's rise has raised new fears within the military that Gamal is not the strongest choice. If the current president dies before the election, the military might well stage a soft coup (since legally, it's now difficult for anyone within the ruling party but Gamal to capture the party's presidential nomination). If the military decides this bold move would jeopardize relations with Washington, Gamal might be allowed to run and win. But he would find himself, at least initially, a president with far less power than his father has enjoyed. Then there's the longer-term uncertainty. No matter who succeeds Hosni Mubarak, ElBaradei has captured the imagination of a segment of Egypt's population hungry for change, a diverse range of supporters that includes a meaningful percentage of the public, a number of public intellectuals, and even a portion of the conservative elite. He's also shaken things up by taking a less confrontational approach than anyone now in government to the Muslim Brotherhood, a position that Egypt's military will not accept. ElBaradei probably won't run for president next year, but he and his supporters seem willing to play an interesting role in Egypt's political future as a catalyst for anti-establishment protest via civil disobedience. These protests won't immediately shake the foundations of Egypt's political establishment, but it's been a long time since the country had a relatively weak president and a potentially potent opposition. That will make life much less predictable within what has long been one of the world's most stable autocracies.

### **Water issue:**

#### **Egypt needs better water use - expert**

Reuters Monday, May 3, 2010 Egypt needs to cut water waste and use new technology in agriculture and other fields to support its case for the lion share of the Nile's resources over other African states, a global water expert said. Egypt needs to cut water waste and use new technology in agriculture and other fields to support its case for the lion share of the Nile's resources over other African states, a global water expert said. Egypt, which gets almost all its water needs from the Nile but faces possible shortages as early as 2017, has angered upstream states by sticking to colonial-era pacts that guarantee it can use most of the Nile's flow. The row over the Nile detracts from the real problem of poor water management in Egypt and the other upstream states clamouring for a bigger share, Asit Biswas, director of the Third World Centre for Water Management, told Reuters on Sunday. "Water is not a priority in most of the Basin countries," he said. "But for Egypt it is of critical importance. But the way it is looking to the future is regrettably very traditional." He said all parties could do more, adding that 30 percent of rainfall in African states on the Nile was not being used for agricultural or other productive reasons and Egypt squandered more than 40 percent of water used by households, often due to lack of awareness. "Egypt needs a radical overhaul of its water management plan in order to cope with its water scarcity," said Biswas, who has advised several United



Nations agencies, aid agencies and governments like in Egypt, India and Singapore on water issues. "People have been saying we face a water scarcity issue. I say this is a bunch of baloney, the fundamental problem is us. The solutions are there but we are not using them and the most convenient excuse is that we don't have enough water," he said. Agriculture firms are investing in sustainable farm research on new crops and better management, but Egypt and its Nile Basin peers have lagged in tapping this potential, Biswas said. Farmers should be given incentives to buy seeds for crops, like rice that use water with higher salt levels, or drought resistant wheat, he said, adding the extra costs for such seeds would be met by higher yields. Egypt has cut back rice production as part of its effort to reduce water intensive crops. "These possibilities are no longer in the realm of science fiction. It's not a question of if this research can be available, but a question of when," he said. Several US agricultural businesses, including DuPont and Monsanto Co, seek to double farm output by 2050 to meet rising world food demand, working on projects such as developing maize that need less fertiliser. Syngenta, the world's largest agrochemicals maker, has developed products like genetically modified (GM) seeds. Biswas said the Egyptian government, and other African states, should work more closely with such firms to meet demand for food, while also reducing water usage. Despite the need for more food, some African states like Zimbabwe and Zambia have banned GM food imports fearing they could be harmful to animals and humans.

### **Egypt: Nile Treaty Turns Sour for Govt (opinion)**

Chege Mbitiru 2 May 2010 opinion Nairobi — Egypt's officialdom appears stuck in a pharaonic mindset. This would explain the country's intransigence in negotiations on the management of water in the Nile river basin. Plausibly little genetic heritage of pharaonic era remains among Egyptians. However, claims to all the "River God" owns do. That's why Egypt sticks to "traditional right" of the largest share of Nile river water. Presumably, Egyptians still mummify the dead. Traditions die. The issue isn't just the mighty Nile that provides Egypt with 95 per cent of irrigation and drinking water. The issue is management of water in the Basin. The Basin covers an area of some 3,349,000 sq km. Ten countries, or parts of them, lie in it. These are Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. In the basin are streams that feed rivers and lakes that sustain the White Nile and the Blue Nile. At Omdurman, the two become the pharaonic "River God."

**Veto powers** The basin is home to about 300 million people. About a half live along the Nile Basin. Egypt says it can't survive without its 87 per cent share of the water. It bases its claim on tradition and a 1929 treaty with Britain. The treaty aimed at pacifying Egypt in order for Britain to advance its interests. Egypt also got veto powers over projects up river that it doesn't like. It hasn't liked any. The treaty is as obnoxious as any colonial machination. In any case, treaties are renegotiable depending on changed circumstances and facts. This is the case up river. Come 1959 and Egypt and Sudan pulled off a stinker. Egypt increased its share to 55.5 billion cubic metres and Sudan got 14.5 billion. Impudence! Here is a case of pre-emptive thievish strike. To side-step historic arguments, some intelligent people came up with the Nile Basin Initiative. It aimed at formulating a system of cooperation in as many aspects of development to manage the waters in the Basin for the benefits of all. The result is a proposed Cooperation Framework Agreement. At a meeting in Sharm El Sheik last month, hopes were high Egypt will play ball. It

balked and got poodle Sudan to go along. Cairo's proposed commission unrelated to any agreement makes little sense. What will the commission do? As if that wasn't enough, Egypt threw diplomatic tantrums. Water and irrigation minister, Mr Mohammed Nasreddin Allam, declared Egypt reserves the right to take whatever action necessary to defend, as it has done historically, its right to Nile river water. Up river peoples have a history and rights, too. Were Egypt to continue getting its share, which it wouldn't outside an agreement, the country will still run into a water shortage crisis. One of Egypt's best options, other than say desalination, is to get into a deal with up river nations that would make water resources in the Basin sustainable. Sabre-rattling is as out of place today as mummies in pharaonic tombs.

### **Africa: Egypt, Sudan Opposed to Nile Sharing Deal**

Gerald Tenywa<sup>14</sup> April 2010- Kampala — Egypt and Sudan have refused to sign the agreement on the sharing of the Nile waters. Although Uganda and the rest of the Nile Basin countries were ready to sign the protocol called the Co-operative Framework Agreement, Egypt and Sudan held on to their "historical rights" over the Nile as spelt out in two colonial agreements of 1929 and 1959. Speaking to The New Vision after three days of talks at Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt, environment minister Maria Mutagamba said the seven member countries of the Nile Basin "also disagreed with Egypt and Sudan". "We have agreed to disagree," Mutagamba said after the negotiations. "Seven countries have agreed, but two decided to continue disagreeing with us," she added. The other countries are the DR Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Burundi. She added that the colonial agreements, which guarantee downstream Egypt with the lion's share of the Nile waters, have been contested by the upper Nile states over the years and were blocking development of the water resources. Despite this, she argued, the Nile Cooperative Framework entails more than sharing water. "We have a lot at stake including trade and conservation of wetlands and forests, which act as reservoirs of the water in the River Nile," Mutagamba said. Mutagamba added: "We have decided to move on the next stage signing the agreement starting on May 14. This will remain open for signing for not more than one year. After that, the countries will engage in the ratification process." This is the second time the countries are disagreeing over the issue within one year. In May last year, the seven countries decided to honour the cooperative framework. They also proposed that the areas of disagreement would be resolved later. She cited politics and fear among politicians in Egypt for holding on to the archaic agreements.

### **Egypt Warns Nile Basin Countries**

Edwin Musoni<sup>24</sup> April 2010- Kigali — Following the recent failure to agree on water sharing, Egypt has warn upstream countries against signing the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA which excluded his country. "Nile water is a matter of national security to Egypt. We won't under any circumstances allow our water rights to be jeopardized," Mohamed Allam, Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation, told Egyptian Parliament this week. "If the Nile basin countries unilaterally signed the agreement it would be considered the announcement of the Nile Basin Initiative's death," Allam added. However, Rwandan Minister of Land and Environment Stanislas Kamanzi said that despite the good relations between Rwanda and Egypt, they wanted to see the agreement signed. "In our recent meeting in Sharm El Sheik, Egypt, we agreed to sign this

agreement come May 14 but with the exception of the two downstream countries (Egypt and Sudan) since they lacked consensus with the other countries," said Kamanzi. The controversy between the upstream and downstream countries of the Nile lies in the signing of the CFA that establishes a permanent commission of the Nile Basin and a clear formality of water sharing. The CFA 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.

An agreement between Egypt and Sudan in 1959 allowed Egypt 55.5 billion cubic metres of water each year and Sudan 18.5 billion cubic metres. 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. Meanwhile, Ethiopia has 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. 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.

### **North Africa: Can Nile Basin Talks Still Lay a Bridge Over Troubled Waters? (analysis)**

Patrick Gathara 3 May 2010 Analysis- Nairobi — The Nile River has been the source of life and of conflict in the Nile Basin for centuries. The basin's three million square kilometres cover about 10 per cent of the African continent, shared among 10 countries: Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Eritrea, Kenya and Democratic Republic of the Congo. Approximately 160 million people depend on the Nile River for their livelihoods. Within the next 25 years, the region's 300-million population is expected to double, adding to the demand for water, which is already exacerbated by the growth of the region's industries and agriculture. Though it is the longest river system in the world, the Nile carries much less water than other comparable systems, about 6.5 per cent of the Congo's volume and just over 3 per cent of the Amazon's. And this amount is declining. In fact, according to one study, the average annual flow of the Nile has declined continuously since the late 19th century.

For instance, from 1870 to 1899, the average annual flow at Aswan was 110 billion cubic metres, then it declined to 83 billion cubic metres from 1899 to 1954, and finally to 81.5 billion cubic metres from 1954 to 1988. However, international agreements on how to manage the Nile's waters have tended to focus on the needs of downstream countries and especially Egypt, which Herodotus called "the gift of the Nile." The most important were those reached in 1929 between Egypt and Britain (which was then the colonial power in Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda) -- in which Sudan was allotted 4 billion cubic metres of water, a twelfth of Egypt's allocation -- and in 1959 between Egypt and Sudan, which increased Egyptian water rights from 48 billion cubic metres to 55.5 billion cubic metres and Sudanese rights from 4 billion cubic metres to 18.5 billion cubic metres, giving the two counties absolute rights to use 94 per cent of the available Nile water, leaving just 6 per cent for all other riparian states. None of these agreements considered the needs, present and future, of the peoples in the upstream areas. Among projects in the EAC area exploiting the Nile waters is the Bujagali Hydroelectric Power Station, located on the Nile 16 kilometres north of Jinja, Uganda. Furthermore, Uganda is developing a

national 25-year master plan on irrigation to respond to the droughts that have regularly dented the country's food security. Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda have also joined together to exploit the Kagera River, which feeds into Lake Victoria. If the equatorial African states together were to eventually put 1.5 million hectares under irrigation -- and they could potentially do much more -- they would siphon off some 10 billion cubic metres of water, a not insignificant diminution of the flow of the White Nile. The results of next year's referendum in Southern Sudan will also be significant. If the South votes to secede, then it will add a new layer of complexity to the problem as 20 per cent of the Nile passes through its territory. The future of the Jonglei Canal project, meant to increase the flow of water from the White Nile through the Sudd swamp, would also be in doubt. The White Nile, which rises from its source in Burundi and passes through Lake Victoria, flows into Southern Sudan where it is dramatically slowed down by the massive natural swamp system. As a result, much of its water is lost to evaporation there. Work on the canal, financed jointly by the Egyptian and Sudanese governments, was abandoned in 1983 following an attack by the then SPLM rebels. In 1999, as part of an effort to head off open conflict, nine of the 10 riparian states established the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) as a joint programme to develop the river in a co-operative manner, share its economic benefits, and promote regional peace and security. A decade later, though, Egypt's intransigence has meant that the talks have gotten nowhere. A frustrated Kenya in 2003 announced that it did not recognise the 1929 agreement and Uganda warned that if negotiations on amending the agreement failed, it would be compelled to take a stand similar to that of Kenya. However, there does seem to be a growing recognition among the Egyptians that the development of the Nile Basin is not necessarily a zero-sum game. One expert on the Nile Basin, based at Cairo University, acknowledged that Egypt and Sudan had made a big mistake in 1959 when they ignored the upstream states. According to Simon Mason of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, in a study entitled *From Conflict to Co-operation in the Nile Basin*, any future framework for co-operation in the Nile Basin will consist of Egypt (and perhaps Northern Sudan), focusing on demand-side management and supporting development upstream; and Ethiopia (and other upstream countries) implementing supply-side management and committing to minimising the negative impacts downstream.

### **Geo strategic front**

#### **Mubarak meets Abbas on Mideast talks**

Wednesday, May 5, 2010 The meeting came two days after Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu travelled to Egypt for talks with Mubarak and as US Middle East envoy George Mitchell was in the region to re-launch the indirect peace negotiations.

Abbas and Mubarak discussed "preparing suitable conditions" for the indirect talks, the Egypt's official Middle East News Agency (MENA) reported. Mitchell, who arrived in the region on Monday, was expected to meet with Netanyahu later Wednesday and Abbas on Friday, with the indirect talks widely expected to start shortly afterwards. However, Abbas on Tuesday expressed doubts about the planned launch of talks after a West Bank mosque went up in flames, for which he blamed Jewish settlers. Abbas has refused to directly negotiate with Israel until it ends settlement construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, which Israel conquered and annexed in 1967 and Palestinians want as a

capital for a future state. He was set to begin indirect US-brokered talks with Israel in March, but the plan was scuttled after Israel announced it would build 1,600 new homes for settlers in east Jerusalem. Israel has offered to restrict settlement construction in the West Bank, but not in east Jerusalem. The Arab League on Saturday backed the indirect talks after the Palestinians said they received US guarantees. The PLO is expected to endorse the talks on Saturday. An Arab League official said Washington assured the Palestinians that Israel would not go through with its plan to build the new homes in east Jerusalem. Direct Palestinian-Israeli peace talks broke off in December 2008 when the Jewish state launched a devastating war in the Gaza Strip in response to rocket fire.

### **Egypt to question author for Coptic 'insult'**

Thursday, May 6, 2010 An Egyptian author whose book enraged the Coptic Church said on Wednesday he was wanted for questioning by the state security prosecution on suspicion of maligning the Christian faith. A church and a mosque are pictured at sunset in the southern Egyptian town of Nagaa Hammadi in January. Public prosecutor "Abdel Magid Mahmud has referred me to the state security prosecution in response to a complaint that reached him from the church and some Coptic activists," Yusef Zeidan told AFP. A judicial source said the complaint was expected to go to the state security prosecution, but it was uncertain whether it would reach trial. Zeidan's novel "Azzazil" angered the church with an unflattering portrayal of 5th century Coptic pope Cyril I as a tyrant who oppressed a minority Christian sect and was involved in the murder of the philosopher Hypatia. The book won the Arabic Booker prize in 2009. The author also recently told a newspaper Copts lived in a "dark age" before the 7th century Muslim conquest, saying the Copts were oppressed by Romans and other Christian sects. Coptic activist and lawyer Nagib Gibrail said he complained to the public prosecutor against Zeidan, a Muslim, not because of the novel, a popular seller in Egypt, but because of his remarks to the newspaper. "I am not against literature and the imagery a novelist might use in a creative work," he said. Gibrail also alleged that Zeidan scorned the Christian belief that Jesus Christ, as the son of God, came to earth as a man. Egyptian law outlaws insults against religion, and has banned works deemed by Muslims to be offensive. Egypt banned the film adaptation of the "Da Vinci Code" in 2006 after complaints from Christian lawmakers. Hani Nazeer, a blogger who linked a website that published a book responding to Zeidan's novel "Azzazil's Goat in Mecca" has been detained since 2008. The book was said to have insulted Islam. Copts make up about 10 percent of the country's 80-million population, and frequently complain of discrimination by the Muslim majority.

### **Questions asked on a US report**

The annual report produced by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom includes harsh criticism of Egypt. How will the government respond, asks Mohamed Abdel-Baky A report produced by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and published on 29 April has severely criticised Egypt, saying that "serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, remain widespread."

This is not the first time that a report produced by the commission, a federal US government body, has led to disagreements between Cairo and Washington. The

commission's annual reports have repeatedly placed Egypt on a "watch list", together with India, Indonesia, Turkey and Cuba over the past eight years, the same ranking being applied in this year's report. Commissioners sitting on the USCIRF are appointed by the US president in consultation with the leaders of both the main political parties sitting in the US Senate and House of Representatives. Reaction to the report was swift to come from the Egyptian government. According to Ambassador Wael Abul-Magd, head of the Human Rights Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the report does not give a credible image of religious freedom in Egypt. "While we cannot deny that there are problems, as there are in many countries, the USCIRF report is not the right place to read about the state of religious freedom in Egypt," Abul-Magd told Al-Ahram Weekly. There were questions about the credibility and level of professionalism of the US commission, Abul-Magd said, reflected in the reports it has issued over the last few years. A USCIRF team carried out a research trip to Egypt in January this year, in order to assess religious freedom in meetings with Egyptian officials and civil society representatives. The visit took place shortly after six Coptic Christians and one Muslim were killed outside a church on Coptic Christmas Eve in the town of Nagaa Hammadi in Upper Egypt. The report harshly criticises the way the Egyptian government dealt with the incident and its handling of sectarian tensions. According to the report, there has been a "significant increase in violent attacks targeting Coptic Orthodox Christians and their property. In most cases, perpetrators have not been convicted. This increase in violence, and the failure to prosecute those responsible, fosters a growing climate of impunity, especially in Upper Egypt." However, Abul-Magd said the government had acted swiftly to deal with the Nagaa Hammadi incident, with police arresting the perpetrators of the attack within hours and the state prosecutor-general travelling to the scene to lead the investigation. Abul-Magd added that the government's swift actions had made the incident a model of how sectarian tensions should be handled. "The government's actions in this case should have indicated to the commission that we are very serious about improving the situation regarding religious freedom in the country, but it seems instead commission officials want to ignore the facts," Abul-Magd said. One source close to the commission in Washington, speaking on condition of anonymity, also told the Weekly that there were clear errors of professionalism in the report. According to the source, the tone of the report was determined by the results of the commission's visit to Egypt in January, which "was unsuccessful due to the Nagaa Hammadi incident." "We agree that the Egyptian government doesn't have a perfect record on human rights, but anybody who knows Egypt knows that religious freedom cannot be judged on the basis of one incident. Things are much more complicated than that," the source said. Leonard Leon, chairman of the commission, told the Weekly in an interview that the USCIRF report does not deny that progress has been made in protecting religious freedom in Egypt. USCIRF had found increased public space in Egypt to debate a wide range of religious freedom concerns, including sectarian violence, this having been "discouraged and prevented by Egyptian authorities" in previous years, Leon said. He added that USCIRF had welcomed a February 2010 ruling in the Qena governorate in Upper Egypt, where a court had convicted and sentenced five men to life in prison for the murder of two Christians in 2009. "However, there are many other court cases, particularly the Nagaa Hammadi case, where proceedings are pending or justice has not been served," Leon said. For his part, Abul-Magd also criticised the USCIRF report for what he described as the "systemic way

in which it mixes the facts", especially when the report claimed that Egypt's emergency laws were being used to support the violation of the freedoms of some religious groups. The report had not given any evidence of this, Abul-Magd said, which was unsurprising since the Egyptian government does not use the emergency laws against anyone because of his or her religious views. In an interview with the Weekly, Nabil Abdel-Fattah, an expert at the Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, said that one of the problems behind the report was the fact that the USCIRF and the US State Department annual report used different standards to evaluate religious freedom in Egypt. The language used in the reports is not acceptable to the Egyptian public or, often, to Egyptian intellectuals, Abdel-Fattah said, though this was not to say that there was not a problem regarding religious freedom in the country. Leon defended the commission's report by claiming that courts acting under the emergency laws had been used to detain and try individuals deemed by the state to have "unorthodox" or "deviant" Islamic or other religious beliefs or practices, such as Shia Muslims and dissident Sunni Muslims. In their recommendations, the report's authors proposed that the US administration establish a timetable for the implementation of political and human rights reforms in Egypt. If deadlines are not met, "the US government should reconsider the appropriate allocation of its assistance to the Egyptian government," they said. Over the past five years the US Congress and Bush administration did not attach conditions to the aid that Egypt receives from the US or reallocate it. However, the Obama administration has decreased the aid given to Egyptian civil society organisations, reducing it from \$56 million a year to \$25 million for 2010. According to Leon, the timetable of reforms referred to in the report involved removing religious affiliation from official identity documents and passing a law for the construction and repair of places of worship. The commission had discussed concerns over religious freedom in Egypt with a number of US government officials, Leon said, who had assured it that the concerns were taken seriously by the US state department. Assistant US Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Michael Posner had expressed concerns about what he called the atmosphere of "intolerance related to sectarian violence during his visit in January," Leon said, adding that Posner had also described human rights issues in Egypt as being a priority for the department in March. However, one Egyptian diplomat speaking to the Weekly said that human rights had barely been mentioned in recent meetings with American officials. "The Egypt-US relationship is much too sophisticated to be compromised because of concerns raised by human rights groups, but that does not mean that we will stop the reforms. On the contrary, we will continue them," the diplomat said.

### **El-Baradei in America**

Former IAEA director Mohamed El-Baradei's controversial visit to the United States has provoked a backlash at home, Gamal Essam El-Din reports. Mohamed El-Baradei, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and leader of a political reform campaign in Egypt, concluded a two-week visit to the United States. Although originally planned for delivering lectures on the IAEA's role in containing nuclear arms, El-Baradei seized the opportunity to rally Americans for the case of political reform in Egypt. In El-Baradei's words: "the primary goal of my visit to America is discussing the issue of political and constitutional reform with Egyptian expatriates and addressing Americans about political reform and change in Egypt and the Arab world."

On 26 April, El-Baradei addressed a two-hour meeting of some 200 Egyptian Americans in Harvard University on "the future of democracy in Egypt". El-Baradei painted a bleak picture of political and economic conditions in Egypt. El-Baradei, also founder of the National Association for Change (NAC), explained that his agenda for reform aims at turning Egypt into "a social democracy" like the Western European countries of Austria and Sweden. According to Mohamed Abul-Ghar, a Cairo University professor and the NAC's coordinator for foreign relations, El-Baradei's Harvard address focussed on explaining the NAC's seven objectives. "These," Abul-Ghar told Al-Ahram Weekly, include "amending the constitution, eliminating the state of emergency, abolishing military tribunals, releasing political prisoners, [ensuring the] separation of powers, improving Egypt's record on human rights and issuing a unified law for regulating places of worship." Abul-Ghar disclosed that El-Baradei had assured Egyptian-Americans -- mostly Copts -- that his agenda stresses that all Egyptians, regardless of religion or sex, are equal in rights." Responding to a question about his relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, El-Baradei stressed that "the Brothers" should be allowed to participate in political life as long as they "abide by democracy and democratic rules". El-Baradei renewed his attacks against the 23 July 1952 Revolution, arguing that Egypt should return to the democracy it lost in 1952. He stressed that he is against the principle of "reserving a quota of seats in parliament for workers and farmers". "The best guarantee for all classes to be represented in parliament is to establish a democratic system and conduct fair elections," El-Baradei argued. He also underlined again that he would run in presidential elections "only if elections are free and fair and the constitution is amended to allow independent politicians to run." According to El-Baradei, "the US administration has no excuse [for] condemning the record of human rights violations in the world and keeping a blind eye on what happens in Egypt." Before he went to the United States, El-Baradei was keen to make as many press interviews with American media as possible. He told the Harvard University meeting that he is proud that his reform campaign and foreign press interviews "forced The Washington Post to publish three editorials about the case of reform in Egypt in a very short time". Continuing this strategy, El-Baradei made an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour on 28 April. Amanpour's programme, "The Power of the Interview", also hosted Saadeddin Ibrahim, the Egyptian-American sociologist, and Ahmed Ezz, secretary of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) for organisational affairs. El-Baradei told CNN: "It is not my primary goal to run for the presidency, but it is to see my country, Egypt, a country where I grew up, making a genuine shift towards democracy." El-Baradei launched a scathing attack against President Mubarak, saying "we have a president who has been in power for 30 years and we have had martial law for almost 30 years and this speaks volumes for the lack of democracy in Egypt." He added: "It is only a handful of people who have the right to run for presidency and so democracy is no longer part of the Egyptian lifestyle for over 50 years." El-Baradei also asserted that, "everywhere I go, everywhere I travel, there's massive support for change in Egypt." He spoke of himself as "a real agent of change, but for the regime, I'm a virtual person... I can't even have a headquarters and I can't raise funds but we have volunteers everywhere in the country right now canvassing for change, explaining to the people how [change] will impact on their economic and social life." Sociologist Ibrahim, who spent three years in prison before being acquitted of the charge



of tarnishing Egypt's image, joined forces, arguing that, "El-Baradei is a charismatic candidate for the presidency in Egypt." "El-Baradei will have a good chance, and I think millions of Egyptians are willing to rally behind him," said Ibrahim, also calling upon "external powers to support him to ensure that presidential elections are marked with integrity and transparency, and in this case I think we will have a very good chance of changing Egypt." By contrast, the NDP's Ezz accused El-Baradei and Ibrahim of painting a false picture about Egypt, exaggerating the difficulty of competing in the upcoming elections. "My party, the NDP, has made it clear it welcomes El-Baradei to join the political fray," Ezz said, arguing: "our constitution anchors politics and political parties with clear political platforms." Ezz indicated that, "there are 24 parties in Egypt and any of these parties can field candidates in 2011." "Half of these parties, for example, have asked El-Baradei to be their official candidate of choice but he hesitates, preferring instead to run as an independent." *Ezz described El-Baradei as "the biggest obstacle before himself"*. El-Baradei's visit to America has provoked a strong backlash in Egypt. Speaking before parliament on Sunday, Ezz strongly attacked "those who want to implement a style of American democracy based on staging street demonstrations and flirting with religious movements." Jihad Auda, a Helwan University political science professor and NDP member, agrees: "El-Baradei made use of his US visit to court the Obama administration and seek its support for his political reform and change campaign in Egypt." El-Baradei, said Auda, believes that "the US administration's criticism of the 6 April demonstrations and its call for free elections has caused a rift with the regime of President Mubarak and that this is a good time for him to catch fish in murky water." Responding to Auda, the NAC's Abul-Ghar stressed that, "El-Baradei's US visit was planned three months ago and it is the right of the NAC's leader to rally support among Egyptian expatriates for change in Egypt." Abdallah El-Sinnawi, editor of Al-Arabi, mouthpiece of the Arab Nasserist Party, told the Weekly that, "it was very bad for El-Baradei to call upon the US administration not to keep silent about human rights violations in Egypt." "This is a call for American interference in internal [Egyptian] affairs," argued El-Sinnawi, adding that "as long as we criticised the visits of the son of President Mubarak, Gamal, to America to raise his profile among officials there, the same thing applies to El-Baradei." "We believe that those who would like to run for the presidency should raise their profile here in Egypt and garner credibility and popularity among the Egyptian people rather than paying frequent visits to America to court the ruling administration," El-Sinnawi argued, also considering El-Baradei as "a reactionary man who attacks farmers and workers or the sons of the 1952 Revolution." Nabil Louqa Bibawi, an NDP-appointed member of Shura Council and a Coptic businessman, agrees: "El-Baradei made use of his US visit to court the Obama administration. He is fond of US television cameras and press interviews to convey his love messages to the US administration." Bibawi said, "the Egyptian Coptic community in America doesn't represent Copts living in Egypt, who strongly reject what El-Baradei said about the Muslim Brotherhood and their right in founding a political party."

**Cairo's chants of dissent** Two demonstrations this week called on the government to increase wages and pursue genuine reform. But are the authorities listening, asks Amira Howeidya A man in the 2 May strike carries a placard with a breakdown of a worker's basic monthly expenses, which by far exceed existing average wages The heart of Cairo - its central nervous system, politically and administratively -- was the venue for loud

opposition against the ruling regime twice this week. In Hussein Hegazi Street, which hosts Egypt's cabinet, and Tahrir Square, a kilometre or two away, representatives of the country's expanding dissent movement demonstrated two days in a row against the government's economic and political policies, the three-decade old state of emergency, and the rule of President Hosni Mubarak..

The first demonstration, dubbed by its organisers as the "2 May strike" occupied Hussein Hegazi Street for three hours Sunday afternoon, where approximately 1,000 political activists and labour workers rallied against the regime. Opposition leaders who participated said the event was unique with political movements and workers united in action. The strike came in response to government apathy towards a court order of 30 April requiring the president, the prime minister and the National Wages Council to set a minimum "fair" wage. The official minimum wage per month of LE35 (\$6.25) hasn't changed since 1984. The court ruling was hailed as "historic" by labour unions and rights activists because it stipulated that the criteria for setting a national minimum wage should consider existing living costs and the balance between prices and wages. The ruling is especially important in light of the fact that 40 per cent of Egypt's population lives well below the international poverty line, according to recent statistics by the Egyptian Investment Authority (EIA).

An individual who lives on \$2 or less per day is considered poor by international standards. According to the EIA, the average income of a government employee in Egypt is LE394 (\$70) a month. The plaintiffs (labour activist and worker Nagui Rashad and the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights) who filed the minimum wage case demanded a minimum wage of LE1,008 (\$180). Since, labour unions and activists have been demanding a minimum wage of LE1,200 (\$214) and gave the government a one-month deadline to achieve it. When the demand was ignored, they responded with the 2 May strike.

"We want a minimum fair wage that lasts a month," and "Egypt, get up and rise," protesters chanted. The sloganeering, made to the beat of drums and frequent applause, was angry, passionate and scathing: "Oh you backward and cowardly government, tomorrow we shall have our arms," and "A minimum wage for those who live in cemeteries and a maximum wage for those living in palaces," in reference to the salaries of some state officials who reportedly make six figure incomes according to opposition MPs who raised the issue in parliament in February. Protestors also shouted, "Down, down with Hosni Mubarak" and were equally frustrated with Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif and Finance Minister Yousef Boutros Ghali, who "Sold and plundered Egypt," as per the chanting, and "rendered us bankrupt"..

Opposition figures from the Kifaya (Enough) movement, the left-wing Tagammu Party, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Nasserist would-be Karama (Dignity) Party, socialist activists, the 6 April Youth Movement, independent labour unions and the National Association for Change (NAC) -- formed by possible presidential candidate Mohamed El-Baradei -- participated in the demonstration. Hussein Hegazi Street, where the protest took place, was sealed off by batteries of anti-riot police. With the exception of a few moments of tension when some of the younger demonstrators attempted to break through police lines, it was generally peaceful.

The protest comes against a backdrop of unremitting strikes and sit-ins for better working conditions and better wages that swept Egypt since 2006. Their frequency accelerated to

a daily basis in 2009. According to the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights, there have been 2,026 workers' protests -- including strikes, sit-ins and demonstrations -- since December 2006. This would be a rate of at least one or more strikes daily. A shift in the pattern of these protests occurred in November 2007 when real estate tax collectors went on strike for 11 days, ending when their demands were met.

In February workers from the public sector Tanta Flax and Oils Company, privatised to a Saudi businessman, staged a strike on the sidewalk near the cabinet building in downtown Cairo for 15 days. This was followed by a series of strikes on the sidewalk near the People's Assembly by workers from several public sector institutions demanding their financial rights. While some of these strikes were called off, many continue until now in front of the parliament and have become a near permanent fixture, with sidewalks strewn with strikers' blankets, plastic bags, clothes and other amenities.

The sidewalk strikers include a large group of physically disabled people on wheel chairs who demand the right to housing, employment, special services, transportation and healthcare.

"The strikes on the sidewalk are a manifestation of the government's failure to address the problem, which is a crisis," Kifaya's general coordinator Abdel-Halim Qandil told Al-Ahram Weekly. Clearly the strike movement is a development the opposition wants to invest in. The presence of dozens of opposition figures at the 2 May strike was "deliberate", according to George Ishaq of the NAC. "The workers are the backbone of our tent in the next stage," he told the Weekly.

Strikers from the parliament sidewalk were also present in Sunday's demonstration that witnessed a very high media turnout. Mahrousa Salem, a 30-year-old physically disabled mother who has been on strike for the past 86 days at the parliament sidewalk told the Weekly, "since our demands for basic rights have been ignored by the MPs who see us every day, I needed to come here to make our voice heard. We're not beggars, we're humans and it's a shame that we've become a fixed item on the sidewalk of Egypt's parliament."

Following the demonstration, workers and labour activists held a meeting at the Press Syndicate where they decided to wait for President Mubarak's postponed Labour Day speech (due today, Thursday) to decide on their next step regarding demands for a realistic minimum wage.

The next day, on 3 May, some 100 political activists, politicians and opposition MPs gathered in Tahrir Square for a planned march to the People's Assembly 300 metres away. The march, originally called for by Muslim Brotherhood MPs and adopted by El-Baradei's NAC, aimed to draw public and media attention to their demands for political reform. But a warning issued by parliament speaker Fathi Sorour to all the MPs who were planning to join the March, to the effect of facing possible arrest and the lifting of their parliamentary immunity, cast a shadow on subsequent events.

On Monday morning, dozens of media representatives and some 80 activists gathered in Tahrir Square opposite the Omar Makram Mosque where the proposed march was due to commence at 11am. Soon they ended up in a police cordoned bloc in the public garden facing the mosque after the organisers of the march decided to cancel it. Muslim Brotherhood MP Hamdi Hassan justified this change of plan as an endeavour to avert an expected escalation with security forces adamant on preventing the march. A day before,

Interior Minister Habib El-Adli issued a statement saying the ministry had not given permission for the march, which is required under emergency law.

The march-turned-protest lasted for more than two hours under a blazing sun and seemed divided between its participants. On one side stood dozens of angry young protesters, mainly from the 6 April movement, chanting slogans against the state of emergency and demanding constitutional amendments to allow for genuine reform. On the other side stood the "elite" -- members of El-Baradei's NAC (university professors, doctors, writers, public figures and political analysts) and over 30 opposition MPs, watching the demonstration. While chanting protesters sung out, "Egypt is under occupation!" and "We shall march! We shall march against poverty and hunger!" and attempted, several times, to break through the police lines, the latter responding with batons and shields, the political heavyweights opted for making statements to the press. At one point a young protester broke away from the demonstration and shouted: "What are you here for? To be filmed?"

According to independent MP Hamdeen Sabahi, founder of the unlicensed pan-Arab Karama (Dignity) Party, who spoke to the Weekly : "These elitist figures are here to demonstrate their presence in the street."

Upon cancelling the march, its organisers announced they would send a delegation comprising of participating MPs and some public figures present in the demonstration with a statement of four points (demanding an end to emergency law, the release of Egypt's prisoners of conscience, parliamentary discussion on their draft law on political participation, and the amendment of articles 76, 77 and 88 of the constitution) to speaker Sorour. But Sorour refused to meet with the delegation because it comprised of public figures; he would only meet with MPs. The delegation, too, was cancelled.

The march that wasn't drew criticism from all sides, including those who put hope in it happening. Its organisers appeared to put very little effort -- if any -- into mobilising for the event, provoking questions as to the seriousness of the march. But according to Hassan, the protest scored a victory, because it "seized the right to demonstrate in public again" in face of a ban on street protests since 2006. On the other hand, the presence of many NAC members highlighted the conspicuous absence of its leader, El-Baradei, who is abroad for the third time since he announced the possibility of contesting the 2011 presidential elections. Hassan Nafaa, a founding NAC member and professor of political science in Cairo University, said El-Baradei had "planned commitments" that prevented him from being in Egypt, although "his presence would have definitely made an impact." He added, "political action should continue in his absence."

### **ISRAEL, EGYPT HOLD SUMMIT ON RENEWED MIDEAST PEACE EFFORT**

May 3, 2010 SHARM EL-SHEIKH: The leaders of Israel and Egypt met Monday to discuss the renewal of the Middle East peace process ahead of US-backed indirect negotiations between the Palestinians and the Jewish state. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's talks with regional broker President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt's Red Sea resort of Sharm El-Sheikh "focused on the renewal of the peace process," the premier's office said. The closed-door talks took place "in a positive and constructive atmosphere," the Israeli leader's office said in a statement issued after the almost 90-minute encounter. The leaders, who made no comments to reporters at the resort, "reviewed Egyptian and international efforts to prepare the ground for the indirect talks

... aimed at a two-state solution,” Egypt’s official news agency MENA said. Their talks were focused on the launch expected within days of indirect negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, a process suspended since Israeli offensive on Gaza in December 2008-January 2009. Netanyahu’s visit came amid a flurry of diplomatic activity two days after the Arab League voiced its support for the so-called “proximity talks.” The Israeli premier was accompanied in Sharm El-Sheikh by the chairman of the National Security Committee, Uzi Arad, and Industry and Trade Minister Benjamin Ben Eliezer. Netanyahu’s office said they met with Egypt’s intelligence chief Omar Suleiman and Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit. The indirect talks — the result of several months of US diplomacy — were set to start in March but scuttled after Israel announced it would build 1,600 new homes in an east Jerusalem settlement. The Arab League on Saturday gave its green light for the talks to go ahead after the Palestinians received US assurances that the construction would be shelved, an official of the pan-Arab organization said. An Israeli official said ahead of the summit that Netanyahu, who insists on unconditional direct talks with the Palestinians, was to ask Mubarak to pressure Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to “go forward.” Mubarak, a strong backer of Abbas, has supported the Palestinian demand for a complete settlement freeze in occupied Palestinian territories and east Jerusalem before direct talks can resume. Israel has offered a limited halt to settlement construction in the West Bank that did not include building in east Jerusalem, occupied and annexed in 1967. The Palestinians want the West Bank and Gaza for a future state, with east Jerusalem as its capital. The Netanyahu-Mubarak meeting comes ahead of another visit by US envoy George Mitchell to the region. He is expected to meet Abbas on Friday and the Abbas-led Palestine Liberation Organization is expected to endorse the indirect negotiations proposal the following day. The latest diplomatic developments raise hopes of a resumption of Middle East peace talks that were suspended in December 2008 when Israel launched an offensive on the Gaza Strip in response to rocket fire. According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, Netanyahu was to raise with Mubarak issues he considers crucial to Israel’s security in the event of a peace deal, such as a demilitarized Palestinian state and control of borders and airspace. The Arab League on Saturday stressed that the indirect talks would not immediately be followed by direct negotiations, holding fast to Abbas’ demand for a complete end to settlement building first. It was Netanyahu’s first visit to Egypt since December. The two countries maintain a cold diplomatic relationship although Egypt, which in 1979 became the first Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel, has often acted as broker in Israeli-Palestinian talks.

## **EGYPT, US EYE COMPROMISE ON NUCLEAR-FREE MIDEAST TALKS**

May 5, 2010 Egypt and the United States were Tuesday trying to work out a compromise at the United Nations to start talks on a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone, diplomats said. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had Monday told the conference on the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty being held here that the United States is "prepared to support practical measures" towards "the objective of a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction." Egyptian ambassador Hisham Badr on Tuesday told the some 150 nations at the three-week-long NPT meeting that the review conference should support taking "concrete and practical steps" for "the establishment of a Middle Eastern zone free

of nuclear weapons, as well as other weapons of mass destruction." Diplomats said the two sides are working behind the scenes to reconcile a hardline Egyptian position that a conference should be held to begin negotiating on such a zone with the US and Israeli stance that creating a zone depends on first finding peace in the Middle East. "We're not there yet but we are talking," an Arab diplomat told AFP. The deadlock over this issue threatens to block progress at the NPT meeting, which seeks progress on disarmament and non-proliferation. US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley told AFP that the "practical measures" mentioned by Clinton were "helping create conditions that allow us to advance this concept (of a nuclear weapons-free zone). Peace negotiations would be one of them." But Arab diplomats insist that creating such a zone should not be held hostage to the lack of peace in the Middle East. "A conference should look at whatever steps are necessary to move forward," said one diplomat. "But we expect it would be one which would launch negotiations on a zone and not just be a talk shop," he said. Egypt insists that Israel join the NPT. It is spearheading the nuclear-zone issue for the non-aligned movement. Badr, who represents Egypt at the UN in Geneva, was speaking Tuesday for the New Agenda Coalition of Brazil, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden and Egypt. Israel is believed to have some 200 atom bombs but does not confirm this. It says there must be peace in the Middle East before setting up a weapons-free zone. The NPT is built on a bargain that nuclear weapons states pledge to move towards disarmament while other states forswear the bomb in return for access to peaceful nuclear energy. NPT review conferences have been held every five years since the treaty was signed in 1970. The 1995 review conference called for a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction and extended the NPT indefinitely. The 2000 conference outlined steps to disarmament by nuclear-weapons states. But the NPT process stalled in 2005, when bickering over a Middle East weapons-free zone and over the Iranian nuclear crisis destroyed any chance of new agreements or fixes to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. US President Barack Obama has made moving forward on non-proliferation a top priority, and is seeking an accommodation with Egypt in order to avoid a stalemate at this year's NPT conference. Diplomats said the two sides were considering the idea of appointing a special envoy to look into setting up a conference. An Arab diplomat said, however, that "a conference would have to be endorsed before an envoy would be appointed." He said it would not be acceptable to paper over the dispute by having an envoy appointed, with no reasonable hope of having a conference. "We're not three-year olds. We know what's going on," the diplomat said. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabdkov told the NPT conference Tuesday his nation shares "the concerns of many states related to the implementation" of the 1995 resolution on setting up a zone free of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.

### **Economic front:**

#### **EGYPT'S ANNUAL INFLATION FALLS TO 11.3 PCT IN APRIL**

May 10, 2010 Egypt's annual headline inflation declined to 11.3 percent in April 2010, from 12.2 percent in March, as the annual change in food prices, clothing, furniture, transportation and hospitality costs dropped, according to data released by the government statistics agency CAPMAS. The monthly change in headline inflation rose, however, by 0.9 percent in April, from 0.8 percent the previous month, as the monthly

change in food prices and hospitality costs rose to 1.8 percent and 0.3 percent, respectively. The urban consumer price index for April rose to 146.4 versus 131.5 a year ago, the state statistics agency reported on its website. Reuters reported that four analysts cited forecasts for urban inflation — the most closely watched indicator of prices — that ranged from 11.3 to 12.9 percent. “We had expected annual headline inflation would decline in April to 11.7 percent, due to the base effect, with the monthly change rising to reflect the higher change in food prices in the lead-up to Coptic Easter and the start of the emergence of a shortage in meat, which reflected negatively on meat and other protein prices,” Cairo-based investment bank Beltone Financial said in a statement. “We expect the latter factor to have a more significant effect on May inflation.” Analysts at the firm expected headline inflation to continue declining through July, “after which it will rebound again due to expected seasonal and one-off changes expected in the second half of the year.” Beltone forecast annual average inflation to reach 13 percent in 2010. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) also forecasted a rise in average inflation for 2010 in the “Egypt May 2010 Country Report.” According to the EIU, the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE) has begun to move towards making inflation targeting its main policy goal; however, it will take some time before the monetary instruments are fully in place. The CBE has been loosening monetary policy since the beginning of 2009 on the back of a gradual deceleration in the rate of inflation, which bottomed out at 9 percent in August 2009, from a peak of 23 percent in August 2008. The CBE last cut key rates in September 2009, when the overnight deposit and lending rates were reduced by 25 basis points each, to 8.25 percent and 9.75 percent respectively. The discount rate was left unchanged at 8.5 percent. EIU forecasts a continued increase in inflation in 2010 but a decrease in 2011. “Given a subsequent pick up in inflation, we believe that the CBE has now reached the end of its loosening cycle. In light of the potential inflationary impact when the government resumes its program of reducing energy subsidies, we expect the CBE to starting raising interest rates again in late 2010.” The unit predicts inflation to average 12.3 percent in 2010 before gradually falling to 9.7 percent next year. The CBE’s Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) decided May 6 to keep the overnight deposit rate, overnight lending rate and the discount rate unchanged. According to a press statement on the CBE website, “the MPC assesses that inflationary pressures remain subdued and that the current level of policy interest rate is appropriate and supportive of the economic recovery while consistent with maintaining core inflation within the CBE’s comfort zone in the medium-term.” The statement added that the MPC will continue to closely monitor all economic developments and will not hesitate to adjust the key CBE rates to ensure price stability over the medium-term.

### **EGYPT LAUNCHES FIRST ARABIC DOMAIN NAME, SAYS MINISTRY**

May 6, 2010 CAIRO: Egypt's Communications Ministry said on Thursday it had launched the first Internet domain name using Arabic letters to try to boost e-services and the number of people online in the most populous Arab nation. "Introducing Arabic domain names is a milestone in Internet history," Communications Minister Tarek Kamel said in a statement. "This great step will open up new horizons for e-services in Egypt. It will boost the number of online users in the country and will enable Internet services to penetrate new market segments by eliminating language barriers." The domain name .miser — the Arabic word for Egypt, which will be spelt in Arabic script — will be

registered through Internet service suppliers TE Data, Vodafone Data and Link Registrar, the statement said. Analysts say Arabic content accounts for just 1 percent of total web content.

### **RAISING MINIMUM WAGE: THE RESOURCES AND THE CHALLENGES**

May 6, 2010 With a court order mandating the government to reset minimum wage to comply with the current cost of living and a rising wave of labor unrest, questions about the size of this potential increase in government expenditure and the resources and structural reforms required for it are yielding different answers. According to CAPMAS, 7.9 million were employed in the public sector in the beginning of 2009. The wages for government employees accounted for approximately 27 percent of government expenditure and the budget deficit amounted to LE 94,880 million in the draft budget for 2009/2010, according to the Analytical Statement of the State General Budget Draft For 2009/2010 on the Ministry of Finance website. The wages on the other hand, even with all incentives and bonuses included, are viewed as too low to meet basic living expenses and, according to many economic studies, have failed to keep up with rising inflation, subsequently causing mounting labor unrest. A revised minimum wage of LE 1,200 a month was proposed in a study by Ahmed El-Naggar, an economist at Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. El-Naggar based the wage increase on conservative estimates of the ability of government workers to acquire basic living space, nutrition, transportation and health services, a minimum of LE 300 for renting a flat in the Mubarak Youth Housing project and a minimum of LE 300 for food. But others don't see this proposed LE 1,200 as feasible. Doha Abdelhamid, professor of public policy evaluation in Carleton University in Canada and co-author of a study on the subject, said that the difference between the current minimum wage for government employees, which is around LE 300, and the proposed LE 1,200 is too big. "It seems that it is not really feasible since in order to make this change, the government will have to print money and this will inevitably cause inflation." At a public lecture, about the challenges and opportunities of civil service reform, organized Monday by the American University in Cairo (AUC), Safwat El-Nahas, president of the Central Agency for Organization and Administration, further explained why. "Countries around the world calculate minimum wage to be around the poverty line, which is around LE 160 a month in Egypt. The government of Egypt pays around LE 400 a month to the lowest level employees, 18-year-olds who have no experience and who do not support families," El-Nahas said.

A report published by the Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES), titled "Reforming the Pay System for Government Employees in Egypt," proposes that the minimum wage for government employees should be LE 733.2 per month compared to the officially announced minimum wage of LE 295.13.

Abdelhamid, who co-authored the study, said the calculation of this figure included more social aspects as well as average per capita GDP, like dependency of families on income earners and number of income earners in each family. "The proposed wage was calculated taking into account how much government employees would really need to provide for their families." However, Khaled Ali, the director of the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, the center that had filed the minimum wage case against the government, contests the announced figure the government pays to the lowest level employees per month, claiming that it is actually much lower than LE 400. He says that



the issue of funding the required wage increase can be solved by bridging the gap between the maximum and minimum wage. “The main issue here is dealing with the huge discrepancies between minimum and maximum wages within the government sector. Some workers, like the workers in the Ministry of Local Development who are currently protesting outside cabinet, get only around LE 90 a month, while the highest ranking officials get LE 1 million a month,” he said. *El-Naggar further points to the disparity in income distribution*. “Government officials make hundreds of thousands of pounds a month through additions to their basic government salaries, including allowances, bonuses, commissions, incentives and profit-sharing. Most of this money comes directly from the government.” El-Naggar’s study suggests that if the difference between minimum wages and the maximum allowed total wages (including additions) is reduced to 15 percent and a revised salary scale is adopted, the millions saved could be used to fund the minimum wage increase. *The ECES report echoes El-Naggar’s suggestion*. “Of course, we have used this proposed salary [LE 733.2 a month] to calculate a new wage scale for government employees with an acceptable difference between the highest paid government officials and the lowest paid workers, 14 fold. We found that in international experience, the difference should not be more than 10 fold,” explained Abdelhamid. According to the ECES report, the ratio of minimum to per capita GNP has decreased from nearly 60 percent in 1984 to 19.4 percent in 1991/92 and further to 13 percent in 2007. When the ratio of minimum wage to per capita GNP is compared to other countries, it appears amongst the lowest. While in Turkey the rate is 78 percent, France 51 percent, Spain 26 percent, in Egypt it is only 13 percent. The report concludes that the proposed salary structure will increase the total government fiscal cost of wages by nearly 256 percent, which would require substantial government funding. The report makes recommendations on how the government could find the necessary funding for this wage increase, which they advise should be implemented immediately. Mainly, it advises cutting back corruption in government authorities and better management of human resources. El-Nahas pointed to some government plans to reform the civil service by ending the practice of giving the customary “excellent” performance appraisal. With basic low salaries, such appraisals are required to give employees the bonuses that could make their monthly income more compatible with the cost of living. According to El-Nahas, another civil service reform is to stop hiring workers on temporary basis which has been cited as a major concern by labor groups, since this diminishes their social welfare benefits and bonuses. El-Nahas also talked about stopping temporary contracts from becoming permanent, even after the work for that short-term project has ended. “This creates an unnecessary burden on government resources and is one of the main issues we are working on.” The ECES report advised reducing military and police spending (specifically army and police perks) and channeling the cash to wages. “The government should reduce funding on luxury vehicles and other perks for higher government officials,” said Laila ElBaradei, public policy professor at AUC and co-author of the report. El-Nahas added that the government is planning to resort to freezing new appointments and not replacing employees who leave, as well as “reshuffling employees from over-staffed government offices to create new, more specialized agencies to deal with different issues.” The authors agreed that by adopting these reforms, the government would be able to finance the budget increase required to raise minimum wage.

### **CAIRO SEEKS TO UPGRADE OUTDATED BUS SYSTEM**

May 5, 2010 The Ministry of Transportation announced last week that the Cairo Transportation Authority (CTA) would be replacing a significant part of its bus fleet in the hopes of improving its level of service in the hopes of attracting more riders to generate increased revenue. In total 1,100 buses will be replaced in the next three years. The routes affected are largely those in Cairo proper, but a few as well that reach as far out as Sixth of October City. Currently, the transportation system in Cairo, although steadily improving, with the expansion of the metro, is still very much in dire need of upgrading to meet citizens' everyday needs and expectations, which is exactly what the Governorate of Cairo is seeking to accomplish with this improvement. "Beginning this month, 200 buses will be replaced, 300 by the end of this year, 300 more by the end of 2011, and another 300 by the end of 2012," explained Khaled Mostafa, spokesperson from the Cairo Governorate of Transport, explained, Although the existing bus routes will remain unchanged, what is significant about this project is, not only will public transportation users be able to enjoy riding in newer, safer buses, but the "bus drivers will be required to undergo training programs to improve the level of their performance on the job", Mostafa elaborated. Bus drivers are expected to attend a drivers education course where they will learn how to come to a full stop, what the appropriate time is to remain at a bus stop as well as how to provide users with sufficient time to enter and exit the bus in a safe manner, and how to respect the bus routes to name a few. Drivers will furthermore be provided with standard uniforms, which will all the more enhance the image and, hopefully, the level of professionalism of the CTA bus division. Administrative staff will also take such trainings. The hope is that by upgrading the bus system to one that is more in line with those found in other major metropolitan cities, more of the capital's citizens would use it for transportation. As the situation currently stands, it is not uncommon to hear complaints about the current bus system for its lack of professionalism and reliability. Ziad Amer, student at Cairo University, complained, "Everyday I take the metro rather than the bus, because, to be honest, the bus system is utterly unreliable: sometimes they don't even respect their routes and waiting times are totally unpredictable. And to be quite frank, I feel very unsafe on those buses." As the government would expect, Amer would change his opinion of the Cairo bus system as well as consider using it to go to the university. "If the bus system in Cairo were to become more reliable, safer and professional, then I would most definitely use it for my daily needs. I personally feel that many people living in Cairo feel this way too", he opined. If the CTA can convince more citizens of Cairo like Amer to use the bus system after this upgrade, then it can anticipate increased revenue through a rise in the number of riders. The government is also looking to open another venue for private sector investment through this project. According to the official website of the Cabinet, "Doors will be open for the private sector to participate in the mentioned project through introducing 1,500 new air-conditioned buses by the coming period, something which would encourage private cars' drivers to use these special buses instead of their own cars."

### **EGYPT'S ECONOMIC OUTLOOK REMAINS LACKLUSTRE**

April 29, 2010 Egypt's economic prospects remain fairly lacklustre as it approaches the end of its financial year but it will outperform its neighbors and most gulf Arab nations, a

Reuters poll showed on Wednesday. The survey of 14 economists predicted that gross domestic product (GDP) of the North African nation would have grown by 4.7 percent in the fiscal year that ends in 2 months time, ahead of other gulf nations, except region-leader Qatar. "Over the short-term, Egypt's impressive headline growth figures are masking a somewhat worrying decline in investment and private consumption," said Elizabeth Martins, head of Middle East and north Africa strategist at Business Monitor International. Forecasters expect economic growth for Egypt to accelerate to 5.3 percent in the fiscal year 2011/12, below last month's forecast by Economic Development Minister Osman Mohamed Osman for 6.5 percent. "They were averaging around 7 percent annual growth (but) have slowed down as result of the global recession ... the effects were mitigated by Egypt's own stimulus package," said David Butter, Middle East director at Economic Intelligence Unit. "The government has an ambition to put growth back on a very strong trajectory." Egypt has approved LE 34 billion of stimulus since the global economic crisis hit, targeted mainly at infrastructure spending to boost the economy. Butter also said there were still constraints due to high Egyptian inflation and weakness in the European Union economy, the country's primary export destination. Egypt's core annual inflation rose to 7.04 percent in the year to March from 6.9 percent in the year to February. The poll forecast inflation would average 11.8 percent in the current financial year, before easing to 10.0 next year, and then dropping to 9.4 percent in the 2011/2012 financial year. The Central Bank of Egypt held its benchmark overnight lending rate at 9.75 percent at its last meeting in March. The bank has held rates steady since cutting them in September. Economists expect the central bank to again hold the overnight lending rate at its meeting on May 6 and by the end of financial year 2012 to have cut to 8.75 percent. The Egyptian pound currently trading around LE 5.58 to the U.S. dollar, is predicted to be at LE 5.50 to the dollar by end-June then depreciate to LE 5.63 by end-June 2011 and sink further to LE 5.70 by the end of the financial year in 2012.

### **SHOURA COUNCIL APPROVES 2010/2011 DRAFT BUDGET**

May 4, 2010 The Shoura Council, Egypt's Upper House of Parliament, approved a draft of the national state budget for the fiscal year 2010/2011. "The state budget has to work on creating social justice for all, income equality and encourage investment," said MP Shawki El-Sayed, head of the legislative committee at the Shoura Council. "More money has to be allocated for education and human development; it also has to combat bureaucracy and corruption and if the state budget fails to achieve this then it has failed and will hinder the socioeconomic development plan," he explained. A draft of the state budget was approved by Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif before it was presented to the Shoura Council. At the time, a statement by Cabinet spokesman Magdy Radi said that the state budget has four main objectives: bringing down of the income tax; seeking new ways to attract investment, maintaining and rationalizing subsidies and minimizing the budget deficit. Rady said that the Egyptian economy could witness a decline of some resources mainly taxes, adding that the volume of taxes will be negatively affected by the implications of the global financial crisis. He also explained that the government aims to bring the deficit down to the least possible level and that it will work on attracting more investments and increasing exports. On the other hand, Shoura Council MP Mohamed El Ghamrawy believes that the budget needs to be reconfigured so that "petroleum subsidies

are decreased and more money is put into education and health sectors and combating poverty,” he said. According to news reports, a number of MPs were demanding that the amount of money allocated for export support in the budget be reduced. However, Finance Minister Youssef Boutros Ghali objected, saying that the amount of exports has doubled because of that budget, adding that the number of companies that export went up from 200 to 2,000. He explained that the budget supports production, boosting exports and creating employment opportunities.

### **WEAK SYSTEMS IN ARAB COUNTRIES HINDER ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS, SAYS TI**

May 9, 2010 Under-developed governance systems in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine hinder anti-corruption efforts, according to a recent Transparency International (TI) report. TI released Sunday an overview report entitled “The Good Governance Challenge: Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine,” highlighting major gaps in legal anti-corruption provisions as well as concerns over means of introducing effective practices to end the problem. “The idea of the project is based on conducting analytical studies and activities for the civil society to support national challenges in these countries,” TI Egypt Program Coordinator Omnia Nabil Hussein told Daily News Egypt. “Independent experts worked on the report, holding meetings and discussions with all concerned parties, including supervisory entities in the four countries,” Hussein added. The report, prepared over the period of about one year, depends on four previously published National Integrity System (NIS) studies. The studies assessed each country’s governance systems, including executive and legislative bodies, the judiciary, political parties, anti-corruption agencies, non-governmental organizations and the media. It found that overall, whether in government, the private sector or among citizens, there is a limited awareness of anti-corruption concepts such as transparency and accountability. Nepotism, bribery and patronage are so common to the extent that they are widely accepted facts of life. Recent assessments indicate that these countries rank as “very weak” in terms of their integrity systems, the report said. For example, the report added, in Egypt accountability remains a significant challenge across all branches of government as well as in other social sectors, including business, the media and civil society. The report further noted that Egypt, Palestine and Lebanon do not have anti-corruption agencies; and although Morocco does, it has no power to investigate or impose sanctions. However, the report pointed out that there is an increase in the adoption of national plans against corruption and legal frameworks including laws in Palestine to support the independence of the judiciary and draft legislation for information access in Lebanon. There is also a Central Institute for the Prevention of Corruption planned in Morocco and an already established Transparency and Integrity Committee in Egypt, the report said. “There are some positive trends like a more efficient role for the civil society... more organizations taking part in boosting transparency and combating corruption and institutional and legal reform attempts in the four countries,” Hussein concluded.

#### **Social front:**

#### **End of the Dialogue? IslamOnline Dispute**

At the beginning of March, IslamOnline.net was one of the most successful websites in the Middle East. Now the editorial team are locked in a power struggle with their Islamist financial backers in Qatar. Alfred Hackensberger reports

The 120,000 daily visitors to IslamOnline.net must have wondered what had happened to their favourite website. Day after day, they found the same news and the same error message: "Please try again later." The entire 350-strong workforce has been on a sit-in in the office building to the west of Cairo since March 15. The owners of IOL, the Al Balagh Cultural Society, based in Qatar, had, apparently for financial reasons, decided to transfer to a smaller, but also slower server, and changed the passwords. It became a case of "access denied" for the Cairo editorial staff, who found themselves shut out from their own newspaper. They would, some employees asserted, have been very happy to have gone on reporting, "particularly about the Israeli bomb attack on Gaza that was going on at that time." At the same time, of course, they would have kept us informed about their own cause. As it was, they had to switch to Twitter, YouTube, live streams and their own specially created blog, a tactic no less successful in terms of media coverage. The Arab media gave extensive coverage to the strike and the reasons behind it.

**Red roses and moral decline** The hardware lockout is symbolic of the conflict between the editorial staff in Cairo and the financiers in Qatar. There is a clash of ideologies involved. The editorial staff claim that they want to continue to present a pluralistic and moderate Islam, while in Qatar it is an ultra-conservative approach that is desired. The gulf is best illustrated by the initial incident that led to the quarrel. Interference with editorial autonomy: the power struggle between the owners and those who run IslamOnline was sparked off by an article about Valentine's Day, which is regarded as "immoral" by conservative Muslims | After Qatar carried out a reshuffle of the board of the Egyptian company in January, a series of quarrels broke out with the editorial staff over the content of articles. "It was the first time," said Bibi-Aisha Wadvalla, the South African-born head of Radio IOL, "that the board had interfered in editorial decisions."

In February, IOL editors wanted to use a text about St Valentines Day on February 14, which had appeared in a local Egyptian newspaper, recalls Abu Hattab, one of the editors. "The board, however, rejected this point blank." An action that may well not seem strange to traditionalist Muslims. The day dedicated to love in the West is immoral in their eyes. The sale of red roses for Valentine's Day is forbidden in Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's holiest places and, should you get your hands on one of the "immoral" plants in the first place, it is likely to be seized by the religious police.

**A timely excuse** When the IOL editors decided to stand their ground, the response from Qatar was to announce the termination of all contracts in Cairo on March 31. The employees were promised that they would receive a severance payment of six months salary, plus an additional payment based on length of service. The Valentine's Day protest, IOL editor Abu Hattab believes, was simply a timely excuse as far as Qatar was concerned. "They wanted to get rid of all of us and would have been glad to see all 300 of the staff leaving." He is sure of one thing, the Qatar move was intended to give the website over to a traditionalist religious agenda. In the meantime, something like normal service has been resumed at IslamOnline.net, with recent developments from the likes of Indonesia, Pakistan and Jerusalem being reported on. But there are certain topic areas where error messages are still encountered, this being particularly the case in what were previously the most popular sections of the online magazine. In "Ask the Scholar" or

"Cyber Counselor" no new questions have been published since late February. Normally, questions and answers are exchanged on a daily basis.

**Modern jihad, modern aspirations** Controversial TV cleric: the Al Balagh Cultural Society opted to remove its own chairman, Youssef al-Qaradawi, from office over the website dispute | Meanwhile, the editors received the backing of Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, host of the Al Jazeera TV programme "Sharia and Life". The Egyptian cleric was one of the founders of IOL in 1997. With financial support from Sheika Mozah, wife of the Emir of Qatar, the Al Balagh Cultural Society took over a university student computer project which would eventually grow into the website. "This project is neither nationalistic nor one aiming at a grouping," said the Islamic scholar at the time. "It is a project for the entire Islamic community. It is the jihad of our era." In other words, a contemporary advert for Islam. From this notion of the mission, however, there grew a relatively undogmatic website that was interested in exchange of opinions and not afraid of taking up taboo topics such as pornography or homosexuality, rather unusual within the conservative mainstream context.

**Showing who is boss** Youssef al-Qaradawi's support was not enough, however. He wanted to negotiate a solution with the IOL employees, but, shortly before his departure for Cairo, found himself unceremoniously removed from his position as chairman of the Al Balagh Cultural Society. It was a clear affront to the 84-year-old, who, despite his often controversial statements and fatwas, is one of the most influential of Islamic scholars, with over 80 books to his credit. It was Qatar's way of making absolutely clear who is boss. With little effect however. The IOL workers decided to continue their fight by going on with the sit-ins. Resistance to authority and civil disobedience are not the sort of thing that tend to happen much in most Arab countries – least of all in the Gulf, the region of emirs and kings.

**Resistance and legal protest** The initial offer of full severance pay for all was later withdrawn by Qatar, it was then later contractually agreed upon, but so far this has not been honoured. It is an emotional roller coaster for the 350 or so IOL employees who are fighting for their livelihoods. In Qatar, it seems, they believe that money is a more powerful argument than solidarity. "But this is not about money," IOL editor Sharia and Life claims. "It is about editorial independence and media ethics. We won't give in. They are trying to grab IOL from us, but we are putting up a fight!" Lawyer for the staff, Yasser Fathi, filed a complaint with the International Labour Organisation of the UNO last week. The managers from Qatar who administer IOL funds in Egypt had broken the law and violated the rights of the workers, he claimed. A report was submitted to the public prosecutor's office in Cairo and legal action instigated. The negotiated contract on severance pay had not been honoured. The administration owes 12 million Egyptian pounds (1.6 million euros) to the more than 270 IOL employees. The money is supposed to be paid out soon, but with the events of the past four weeks in mind, it would be foolhardy to think that the matter is done and dusted just yet.

## **Iraq Political front**

### **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." The 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. Al-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.

### **Maliki allies with rival Shia party**

Allawi warned that an alliance of Shia blocs could result in a return to sectarian bloodshed [Reuters] The political bloc of Nouri al-Maliki, the incumbent Iraqi prime minister, has joined forces with its main Shia rival, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), leaving the newly-formed coalition just four seats short of a parliamentary majority. Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a former PM, and Abdul Razzaq al-Kadhimi, an INA advisor, were flanked by officials from al-Maliki's State of Law bloc as they made the announcement at a news conference on Tuesday. "An agreement was reached to form a parliamentary bloc

through the union of the two blocs, the State of Law Alliance and the Iraqi National Alliance," the officials said. However, few details of the merger have been revealed, and the parties have not announced a candidate for prime minister. Previous talks of a State of Law-INA alliance failed because Moqtada al-Sadr, a prominent Shia leader, refused any deal that would secure a second term for Maliki. Sadr's movement controls 39 of INA's 70 seats.

**Sadr's influence** The INA is dominated by the Sadrist movement, a staunchly nationalist party, and the the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, a Shia party with close ties to Iran. Officials from both blocs met yesterday at the home of Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the former prime minister who came out top in the Sadrist movement's informal referendum to choose the next prime minister. Iraqi newspapers have speculated about several other possible candidates for the post, including Jafar al-Sadr, a cousin of Moqtada al-Sadr. "The alliance brings them a step closer to forming a government, but there are still many unresolved issues, and some observers are saying these groups jumped the gun," said Al Jazeera's Mike Hanna, reporting from Baghdad. The Sadrist movement was behind Maliki's nomination for the premiership in 2006, but Maliki angered the party by sending government troops, backed by US forces, to crush Sadr's Mehdi Army militia in 2008. Maliki's State of Law Alliance won 89 seats in the March 7 election, and the INA won 70 seats. That would give a merged bloc 159 seats, just shy of the required 163-seat majority to control the Iraqi parliament. The Kurdish Alliance, comprised of the autonomous Kurdish region's two long-dominant political parties, holds 43 seats; it has previously promised to join a coalition with the main Shia blocs. The Iraqiyya list, led by former premier Iyad Allawi, took the most seats in the election - 91 - but could be squeezed out of the government by a State of Law-INA merger. Dhafir al-Ani, a senior member of the Iraqiyya bloc, told Al Jazeera: "It [the merger] is a blow to the will of the majority of Iraqi people, who voted for Iraqiyya. The new Shia merger, which is backed by Iran, would pull Iraq back to sectarianism." Allawi has warned Maliki against excluding his party from government and last month suggested such a move could result in a return to the sectarian bloodshed that killed tens of thousands of people in 2006 and 2007.

**Constitutional dispute** Tuesday's announcement could escalate the debate over the Iraqi constitution's declaration that "the biggest parliamentary bloc is entitled to form the government". That provision was initially interpreted to mean that the coalition with the most seats after the election would have the first opportunity to form a government. But Iraq's supreme court ruled on March 28 that the "biggest parliamentary bloc" could be one formed after the polls. Iraqiyya insists that the court's decision is illegitimate and politically motivated. State of Law and Iraqiyya could both see their representation change slightly in coming days: Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission is recounting votes in Baghdad, which accounts for 70 seats in the 325-seat parliament.

But the recount is unlikely to mean significant changes; indeed, Maliki said last week that the recount will not change the balance of power in parliament.

### **Baghdad manual vote recount begins**

The recount of Baghdad votes, begun on Monday, is being monitored by EU and UN observers [AFP] Iraq's election commission has begun manually recounting around 2.5 million ballots cast in Baghdad during the country's parliamentary election almost two



months ago. Officials said on Monday that the process could take between two to three weeks. "We will count 600 boxes today," Qassim al-Abbudi, an official with the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), said. Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's incumbent prime minister, demanded the recount and alleged fraud had occurred after provisional results handed a two-seat lead to the political bloc led by his rival, Iyad Allawi. Baghdad province accounts for about a fifth of parliament's 325 seats. Al-Maliki had challenged results in four other provinces as well, but had those requests denied. The recount was being carried out inside the green zone under the supervision of observers from the UN and the European Union. Iraq's March 7 parliamentary poll produced no clear winner, with Allawi's Iraqiya coalition winning the highest number of seats, 91, and al-Maliki's State of Law bloc coming a close second, with 89 seats. A political bloc needs 163 seats in parliament in order to form a government. However, coalition-building talks between the major blocs and smaller parties in order to achieve that number appear to have stalled.

### **Bridge reflects Iraq's unity hopes**

Nouri Nouri al-Maliki, the Iraqi prime minister has been warning against what he calls an attempted coup through ballot boxes. He is happy with a recount ordered by the country's electoral commission, a process due to begin on Monday and last two weeks. However, many fear that the intervening political vacuum could provoke more sectarian and religious division. In the latest attack, eight people were killed and 20 others wounded on Thursday when a car bomb exploded near an alcohol store in Baghdad, according to an interior ministry official. A symbol of Iraq's sectarian divide is the Imam's bridge in Baghdad, which links the Sunni Muslim neighbourhood of Adhamiya to the Shia Muslim district of Kadhimiya. Five years ago the bridge was closed after 1,000 people were killed in a stampede during a Shia Muslim procession. The crowd had panicked after rumours of a suicide bomber. The bridge was reopened in December 2008 and Iraqis hope it will remain open to symbolise the peaceful coexistence they are trying to build.

### **Iraq's Leading Shi'ite Blocs Agree To Form Parliamentary Coalition**

Iraq's two largest Shi'ite electoral blocs say they have formed an alliance that gives them a strong chance of setting up the next government. The coalition deal between Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition and the conservative Shi'ite Iraqi National Alliance leaves them just four seats short of a parliamentary majority -- close enough that the alliance possibly could control a majority after a vote recount for Baghdad is completed in two weeks. Abd al-Razaq al-Kazemi of the Iraqi National Alliance announced the deal late on May 4 at a press conference in which he was flanked by officials from the State of Law bloc and the movement of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose followers make up the strongest faction within the Iraqi National Alliance. But State of Law official Haidar al-Ibadi, who also is a member of Maliki's Al-Dawah Party, said the two blocs have not yet resolved who they would nominate to lead the government as prime minister. That is a serious hurdle that could prevent future cooperation between the would-be coalition partners.

**'Serve The People'** Baghdad resident Abu Maher today welcomed news of the coalition deal as a way to break a political deadlock that has prevented any group from forming a new government. "Congratulation on this initiative, God willing, the government will be formed as soon as possible," Maher said. "Regardless of the name of the next prime

minister, we want him to serve the people." Another Baghdad resident, Mohsen al-Taie, told Reuters that the new coalition should not discount the views of other blocs that finished strongly in the election. "If the new coalition takes into consideration the interests of Iraq and seeks to agree with other political blocs that won in the election, I think the new coalition will be able to meet the interests of the country," Taie said. According to official results of the March 7 vote, State of Law won 89 seats in the new parliament and the Iraqi National Alliance won 70 seats. Their combined 159 seats leave them just four away from the simple majority required to govern. Meanwhile, Maliki has taken steps to challenge those official results, which showed his coalition just two seats behind the Al-Iraqiyah coalition of former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. On May 3, electoral workers began a recount demanded by Maliki of 2.5 million ballots that were cast in Baghdad. That recount alone could alter the official results in Maliki's favor, giving the new coalition a parliamentary majority

**Legitimate Response** Farj al-Haidari, the chairman of Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, defended the manual recount of all 2.5 million Baghdad votes as a legitimate response to Maliki's legal challenge. "The Electoral Commission has put its measures in place according to the decision of the review panel," he said. "It was the decision of the review panel that stressed the necessity of conducting the recount in the polling stations in which votes were discarded. And not only in the disputed stations, but in those across all of Baghdad." The United Nations' special representative to Iraq, Ad Melkert, told journalists on May 3 that the recount appears to have been set up in a "very professional way" and was designed to reassure Iraqi voters that their ballots would be respected. "It's also important that those who have issued complaints now find a way, through the recount, to see whether these complaints are justified," he said. Meanwhile, a judicial committee tasked with vetting candidates who had ties to Saddam Hussein's regime also has tried to bar many politicians on Allawi's electoral list. Those moves could further shift revised official results in Maliki's favor. Such an outcome threatens to rekindle sectarian violence at a sensitive time in Iraq as U.S. troops prepare to withdraw from the country. The bloc of Allawi, a Shi'a who gained widespread Sunni backing by campaigning for an end to sectarian politics, led the election by winning 91 seats in parliament. Many Sunnis celebrated that unexpected victory as confirmation that they still have a role to play in the governance of Iraq.

**Sow Instability** Analysts say the formation of a government that excludes them would deepen Sunni disillusionment and sow further instability. Sunni insurgent groups have shown that they remain capable of staging large-scale attacks in the heart of Baghdad, despite government successes like the recent killing of Al-Qaeda in Iraq's two top leaders. A spokeswoman for Al-Iraqiyah, Maysun al-Damluji, warned that the coalition deal indicates a return to sectarianism in Iraq. She said the alliance is designed to undermine Al-Iraqiyah. Alluding to neighboring Shi'ite power Iran, Damluji also alleged that the new Shi'ite coalition would carry out the will of a "neighboring country." If the Baghdad recount and the disqualification of candidates on Allawi's list does not give the new Shi'ite coalition enough seats to control a majority, they would have to consider deals with Kurdish politicians, who have been seen as a key to forming any Iraqi government. Kurdish politicians have said they would demand tough concessions in exchange for lending their support to any coalition. In particular, they want concessions

on the fate of oil-rich Kirkuk -- a city in northern Iraq that is claimed by both Arabs and Kurds -- and on oil rights for the Kurdish autonomous region in the north.

### **Iraqi Shi'ite Blocs Discuss How To Select Prime Minister**

May 06, 2010- The agreement means a potential consensus between Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition and the Iraqi National Alliance. A leading official in one of Iraq's two largest Shi'ite electoral blocs says the two have agreed on a way to nominate the country's next prime minister, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Ammar Tuma told RFI today that the State of Law Coalition, led by outgoing Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and the Iraqi National Alliance, led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jafaari, have agreed to nominate the next prime minister by consensus. The two blocs agreed to join forces in a political alliance on May 4. Tuma, who belongs to the Iraqi National Alliance, added that if the two blocs fail to come to a consensus on an acceptable nominee they would seek other alternatives, including a vote. But Tuma said "the winner in such a case would have to receive something like 75 or 80 percent of the votes to ensure the closest thing possible to selection by consensus." Hachim al-Hasani, a Sunni and a leading member of the State of Law Coalition, told RFI that the two blocs had agreed on common principles and a platform rather than a specific mechanism to nominate the next prime minister. He said "we are still waiting for such a mechanism before we can agree on a nominee for prime minister." Analyst Ibrahim al-Sumaidaei told RFI that the biggest obstacle threatening the newly announced alliance is the State of Law Coalition's insistence on nominating Maliki for another term. The Iraqi National Alliance has strongly opposed his nomination, especially the party's wing that is close to radical Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sumaidaei said Iraq's political landscape will become clearer when a recount of votes from Iraq's March 7 election is completed. Iraq's Independent Electoral Commission started the manual recount on May 3, and said it could take about three weeks.

### **Geo strategic front**

#### **The secret behind Iran's power (Analysis)**

Azzaman, May 6, 2010 - Why is Iran seen as a fundamental power in the region stretching from Afghanistan to Lebanon and in between Iraq, its golden state?

There are some who think that Iran's military maneuvers and revelations of new weapons, boats, frigates and missiles that can reach Israel and Europe are the source of this power. People who entertain such opinions, I am sorry to say, are naïve. The U.S. and Europe have no fears of the display of Iranian armaments. Strategy analysts and experts say Iranian weapons might be ineffective. The point is whether the weapons are operational and can be used. The analysts believe if the U.S. attacks Iran, the first thing its forces will do is to render Iranian weapons systems ineffective. Iran's Western enemies will take the initiative and do not allow Iran to unleash its missiles and other weapons on their targets. But still Iran is a powerful country. Iran's strong muscles are not due to its weaponry. Iran's strength emanates from its diplomacy and the role it plays almost in all important files in the region. Arab states have almost no role to play here. Therefore, it is so hard for Iran's nemesis, the U.S., to embark on any negotiating or

movements in the region without taking Tehran into account. Tehran has proxies and agents throughout the region. They are the source of Iran's power and not its weapons.

**Iraqiya damns 'sectarian alliance'** The Iraqiya coalition, which won the most seats in Iraq's March 7 parliamentary poll, has alleged an alliance between Iraq's two main Shia blocs is an "Iranian orchestrated" sectarian move. "Iranian finger prints are obvious in the way the alliance was formed and announced," Haidar al-Mulla, a spokesman for Iraqiya, told Al Jazeera. The Sunni-backed list led by Iyad Allawi, a former prime minister, also accused Nouri al-Maliki, the incumbent prime minister, and his allies of clinging to power at the expense of Iraqi people. "We will never be part of a sectarian government. Iraqi people refused sectarianism when the majority of them gave their votes to our list, which includes all Iraqi factions, religions, ethnicities and sects," al-Mulla said. Khalid al-Asadi, co-founder of al-Maliki's State of Law list, denied the allegation. "Actually, those who describe our alliance [with the Iraqi National Alliance] as sectarian are sectarian themselves," he told Al Jazeera. "We consider this accusation a kind of sectarian incitement. We are patriots who promote a civil state in Iraq." The deal, which was struck late on Tuesday between the country's two biggest Shia Muslim alliances, allows them to sideline the secular Iraqiya coalition, which won the most seats in the election but failed to build a parliamentary majority.

**Leadership talks** Discussions about who will become prime minister are now under way between the Shia parties, al-Asadi told Al Jazeera. However, it is widely believed that the agreement came to light only after assurances were given by the State of Law that al-Maliki would not continue in his post. "Mr al-Maliki has left the decision to the leadership of the alliance. There are certain internal methods to choose the PM candidate at the end of the day, and everyone should respect them," al-Asadi said. There was no immediate reaction from the United States, which in the past week urged Iraq's politicians to set aside their differences and speed up the process of forming a coalition capable of running the country. The new Shia alliance remains four seats short of the 163 needed to form a parliamentary majority but is still likely to take office. According to full preliminary results from the election, State of Law won 89 seats in the 325-member Council of Representatives while the INA, led by Shia religious groups, won 70 seats. The Kurdish Alliance, made up of Iraq's autonomous northern region's two long-dominant blocs and holding 43 seats, has previously said it would join the coalition once the two main parties sorted out their differences. The final number of seats gained by each party could yet change, however, as electoral authorities are conducting a recount of votes in the key Baghdad constituency, which accounts for 70 parliamentary berths. In addition, nine election-winning candidates are awaiting a ruling on whether or not they will be allowed to take office. One winning candidate, from Iraqiya, has already been disqualified.

## **Economic front**

### **Iran exports 1.5 million liters of fuel a day to Iraq**

Azzaman, May 5, 2010- Iran has agreed to ship 1.5 million liters of fuel to breathe life into some Iraqi power plants made idle due to fuel shortages. The agreement was struck during a visit by a high level Iraqi delegation to Tehran, a statement by the Ministry of

Electricity said. The agreement comes as power outages have worsened recently with major cities and provinces going without electricity for up to 20 hours a day. All promises of regularizing power supply have come to nothing. Billions of dollars have been poured into the sector, but supply has yet to level with what was available prior to the 2003-U.S. invasion. How much the Iranians are going to reap from their fuel shipments to Iraq is not known but Tehran expects the value of its Iraq-bound exports to hit \$8 billion this year. The ministry blames fuel shortages, maintenance and lack of security for the outages. The statement said power output could reach 8 500 megawatts. It is far beyond the pre-war level, but the ministry is known to have rarely met its own predictions.

## **Social front**

### **Iraq needs public and not secret prisons**

Azzaman, May 2, 2010 Iraqis' integrity is being violated every hour. This violation is being carried out through different political, security, internal and external means and has continued since the U.S.-led occupation of Baghdad in 2003. When suddenly an American newspaper reports about secret prisons in Iraq, the government displays itself as a deaf lamb. It keeps saying it has no knowledge of the existence of these prisons, although the horrific violations which take place in them are being perpetrated with its hands, its weapons and its authority. The government wants to morph each time, hiding its own crimes with a thick shroud, and move on to determine Iraqis' fate using the same means. This disgraced government, which paid lip service to secret prison reports when they first came to light in a local newspaper, finds itself in a difficult situation now. It only cares about its disgrace because the source of revelation about its disgrace is U.S.-based. It wants to steer the ship in a different direction, and talk about the presence in Iraq of fair, just and independent judiciary which it now asks to handle the case of the inmates who languished in its secret prisons. Whenever horrendous crimes like these are committed and crises with destructive powers are in the offing, members of the government seek help from "independent judiciary" to defend themselves. But we have never heard of any government official being brought before a court of justice for subjecting innocent Iraqis to all forms of torture in secret prisons. Such horrific practices were not even committed by the former regime some of whose officials have already been convicted to death and hanged and others are on trial; all for violations some which took place more than 20 years ago. The 'state of democracy', Iraq of today, has no mechanism, authority or even the desire to investigate crimes against humanity being perpetrated under the nose of those in charge.

### **Saddam Hussein's palace in Basra to be turned into museum**

Azzaman, May 7, 2010- The British Museum is to turn one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in the southern city of Basra into a museum, according to Iraqi Antiquities Department. Abdulzahra al-Talaqani, the department's spokesman, said a British Museum delegation is visiting Basra for talks on the project. He said the delegation met the Governor of Basra Province Shaltah Aboud who thanked the British scientists for the offer the terms of which Talaqani declined to reveal. The current provincial museum in the city was looted shortly after the 2003-U.S. invasion and the building in the heart of the city is said

to be no longer suitable for a museum. The head of Basra's antiquities office confirmed the visit by the British delegation and the British Museum's pledge to turn a Saddam Hussein's palace into a museum "Shlatah discussed with the British Museum delegation the plans and mechanisms to establish a museum in Basra. The British Museum has promised to implement the project in one of the palaces," said Qais Rasheed, antiquities head in Basra. He said the delegation would hire an international firm to "prepare the palace and make it suitable for the display of antiquities." Saddam Hussein had built numerous palaces in Basra. It is not clear which one the British Museum would opt for and how big it is. But Rasheed said the palace was big enough to be turned into both a museum and a public library specialized in antiquities and heritage books and publications.

### **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.

### **Iraqi Lawmaker Says Secret Prison Reports 'Exaggerated'**

One of the reportedly "secret" prisons opened its doors for journalists  
May 04, 2010 Iraq -- A parliamentarian with Iraq's governing coalition has described media reports of secret prisons in Iraq as "exaggerated." Adnan al-Shahmani, the chairman of parliament's Federal Relations Committee, said on May 3 that Iraq does not allow the existence of secret prisons, according to Iraqi media reports. He said Iraq's prisons are under the authority of official bodies such as the Defense Ministry, Interior Ministry, and Counterterrorism Directorate. "I think the existence of these prisons has

been exaggerated in an unhealthy way," Al-Shahmani said. Following widespread reports in Iraq and internationally about alleged secret prisons, the Defense Ministry allowed journalists on May 2 to visit one prison caught up in the controversy. Radio Free Iraq visited a jail on the grounds of the Al-Muthanna airport outside Baghdad, speaking to detainees. "I was detained even though I had committed no crime," one of the detainees said. "The Defense Ministry forces have pinned the charge of mass murder on me, but I didn't kill anyone. Also, when I was arrested the division commander threatened me, saying he would violate the sanctity of my family." Sadeq Abbas, the commander of the prison, said representatives of international organizations and local human rights groups have visited the prison, showing official documents to prove these visits. Abbas acknowledged that although the prisoners who journalists spoke with were detained without specific charges, the ministry has "conclusive evidence" of the crimes they committed.

### **Iraqi Official Says Refugees, IDPs Returning To Homes**

May 05, 2010 -- A top Iraqi official says thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Iraq and refugees from neighboring countries have returned recently and others want to return, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq reports. Iraqi Immigration and Displacement Minister Abd al-Samad Rahman Sultan says that some 10,700 internally displaced families have returned to their homes in the past three months, and another 950 families have returned from Egypt. Sultan adds that some 630 Iraqi families in Jordan and 520 families in Syria have applied at Iraqi diplomatic missions in those countries seeking help in facilitating their return. Sultan says that the increasing rate of IDPs and refugees returning to their homes in Iraq is a sign that this "tragic page" in the country's recent history will soon be turned. But Abd al-Khaliq Zangana, the chairman of the outgoing parliament's Deportees, Immigrants, and Expatriates Committee, says that "the ministry's euphoric tone is premature as we [still] have some 280,000 internally displaced families." Zangana says the returnees have sustained large losses of property, valuables, and personal belongings and the government should find some way to compensate them. He admits that some government decisions and decrees have been issued that provide assistance to returnees, but people who come back complain that the respective government departments are slow in providing aid. Abd al-Wahid Hassan, a recent returnee to Iraq, says that although his house was looted and seriously damaged, neither the government nor nongovernmental organizations have offered him assistance. The U.S. Congressional Research Service estimated last year that there might be as many as 2 million Iraqi refugees living in Jordan, Syria, and other neighboring countries, and approximately 2.7 million IDPs.

### **Iraq Launches Anticorruption Plan**

#### **Iraq Engl Map**

May 06, 2010- Iraq's anticorruption czar says the government has launched a five-year strategic plan to combat endemic corruption in the country, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Judge Abdel Rahim al-Ugaily, president of Iraq's Anticorruption Commission, told RFI that the plan is part of the UN convention against corruption, which Baghdad has signed. He said the measures are being undertaken in cooperation with the UN Development Program and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Al-Ugaily said the plan identifies 201 types of corruption in Iraq -- mainly in state bureaucracy --

and working teams have been set up to address each form according to a set timeframe with follow-up procedures to assess progress. He said the anticorruption commission is under no illusion that corruption will be eliminated by the plan, but expects improvements to be made. He noted that Iraq's rating in the Transparency International corruption index improved for the first time in 2009, though it's still a very low 176th in the world. Al-Ugaily said the commission is also appealing a recent Baghdad court verdict acquitting former Trade Minister Falah al-Sudani on corruption charges. The 2010-2014 anticorruption plan is overseen by a joint council comprising the Anticorruption Commission, the Financial Audit Office, and the Inspector-General's Office. Khalid Khidair, director of the council, told RFI that the five-year plan began by training some 250 officials and NGO activists who will teach more than 100,000 Iraqis to staff a public awareness campaign against corruption. He added that the trainers will lecture at workshops attended by government officials and nongovernmental organizations that will teach about the legal and administrative aspects of reporting corrupt practices. Khidair said this is the first time Iraq has seen such an anticorruption action with broad public involvement.

### **Iraqi Christians May Seek Legislation To Regulate Family Matters**

May 01, 2010- About one-third of Iraq's 1 million Christians are believed to have fled Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Iraqi Christians may seek a new family law so they don't have to follow the current code written largely for Muslims, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq reports. William Ward, the chairman of the Iraqi human rights organization Hammurabi, told RFE/RL that the Christian groups in Iraq are considering a campaign for separate legislation that would establish standards more in line with Christianity in such matters as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. But Ward said a separate family code for Christians could create more problems than it solves, by setting a precedent that other religious communities -- including denominations within the Christian community itself -- could use to seek special laws to settle their family matters. Ward suggested that a more practical solution would be to amend the existing law to allow for the teachings and values of other religions. But Iraqi legal expert Tariq Harb told RFE/RL that the constitution already states that Iraqis are free to settle their family affairs according to their religious faith or personal beliefs. He said that means Christians are exempted from the existing family code, much of which is based on Islamic Shari'a law. Harb added that the family code has been in existence since 1959. Before the first Gulf War in 1991 there were some 1 million Christians in Iraq. About one-third are believed to have fled Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003. There are currently 14 official Christian denominations registered by Iraq's Religious Affairs Department.

### **Muslim Students Stage Sit-In To Support Christians At Iraqi University**

The wreckage of a car at the site of a car bomb Al-Hamdaniya in March Lecturers and Muslim students at northern Iraq's Mosul University staged a sit-in today to protest deadly attacks against Christian students, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. A student activist who requested anonymity told RFI that the action is in support of Christian students who have been the victims of bomb attacks and murder. He said the sit-in will end only when measures are taken to ensure the safety of Christians, in



particular, and the student body as a whole. A roadside bomb and a car bomb exploded near buses transporting students from the predominantly Christian town of Al-Hamdaniya to Mosul University on May 2. One civilian was killed and 100 others, mostly students, were wounded. Christian students stopped attending classes at Mosul University after that attack in fear for their safety. The Muslim students staging today's sit-in have said they will return to class only when their Christian counterparts do. Student Sami Karim told RFI that the protesters are especially indignant that their fellow students have become targets simply because they are Christian. Ethel Nujaiji, the governor of Nineveh Province in which Mosul is located, said that his government "sympathizes with the students and their sit-in." Referring to the security situation for Christian students, Nujaiji said security forces are "partly responsible as they have failed to properly discharge their duties." He added that there must be a thorough investigation of the recent attacks against Christians to reassure the population that such acts will not be tolerated. Before the first Gulf War in 1991 there were some 1 million Christians in Iraq. About one-third are believed to have fled Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003.

## **Lebanon**

### **Political front**

#### **Lebanon leaders set rancor aside for local elections**

Rival politicians in Lebanon had set their differences aside and reached a consensus in many areas, the first round of the country's municipal elections, which began at the weekend, showed. Lebanese voters will continue to cast their ballots over three Sundays in May, during which some 963 local councils and nearly 2,800 mayors are due to be elected. Sunday's elections were described by many observers as "consensus elections" since in many areas political parties were able to reach an agreement together on a list of candidates. Lebanon's 4-million-strong population is divided between Christians, Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims, with around a third each, as well as a number of other smaller religious groups. The political system decrees that the Lebanese president be a Christian Maronite, the house speaker a Shiite Muslim and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim. The lists put to the vote on Sunday were therefore a good reflection of Lebanon's spirit of consensus, since they included representatives of all the major religious communities and parties. Relations were also seen to have improved between the western-backed majority headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri and the Syrian and Iranian backed Hezbollah opposition. "Mainly we saw consensual lists among the rival political parties in most towns and villages," political analyst George Alam said. "I think the political leaders either from the majority or the opposition wanted to show the Lebanese that there is a kind of unity over some political issues in the country and the Lebanese national unity government is here to work for the people's need," Alam said. After securing 71 of parliament's 128 seats in June elections last year, it was not until November 9 that Hariri managed to form a national unity government following months of tough negotiations with his Hezbollah-led rivals. The line-up includes 15 ministers from Hariri's parliamentary bloc, 10 from the opposition alliance and five nominated by Lebanese President Michel Suleiman. The candidates on the lists for the municipal elections were intended to stay in line with the Lebanese system and respect the delicate Christian-Muslim power-sharing agenda that ended the 1975-1990 civil war. The mayors

and councillors which are elected by voters every six years have no legislative powers, but deal with day-to-day affairs such as education. President Michel Suleiman on Monday praised the interior and defense ministries for guaranteeing safe polls. But despite the so-called consensual lists, in some areas such as the Jbeil region, north of Beirut, a consensus could not be reached and a heated race took place between followers of Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun and others loyal to Christian leader Samir Geagea, who is backed by the majority. According to initial results issued on Monday, the list of the western-backed majority was victorious in Jbeil. But in the Baabda region, northeast of Beirut, the list backed by Aoun, managed to squeak to victory over others backed by the majority. Around 466,000 of 790,000 voters in the Mount Lebanon district cast their ballots on Sunday, according to Interior Minister Ziad Baroud. The final results were to be announced on Tuesday. –DPA

### **Minister: 59 percent vote in first stage of Lebanon polls**

Nearly 60 percent of the electorate voted in Lebanon's municipal elections, a month-long weekly process that kicked off Sunday in the Mount Lebanon area overlooking the capital, a minister said. With clan and family bonds the main focus rather than political loyalties, a registered electorate of 3.33 million is being called to the polls every Sunday apart from on May 16. In Mount Lebanon, almost 800,000 Lebanese were electing municipal councils and mukhtars, or mayors. Polling stations opened at 7 am (04H00 GMT) and closed 12 hours later. Fifty-nine percent of eligible voters took part in the election, whose results will be revealed starting at midday Monday, Interior Minister Ziad Baroud told reporters. Out of a total of 313 municipalities, 56 councils are not being contested as consensus lists have been agreed amid a political calm in Lebanon since a national unity government was formed last November. But battle lines have been drawn up in large towns such as Jbail, a Christian area north of the capital, where supporters of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's coalition face candidates of Michel Aoun, a parliamentary minority leader. More than 7,500 candidates, including 466 women, are contesting 3,507 seats, after a proposal by Interior Minister Ziad Baroud to bring in a quota system for women failed to win approval in parliament. Some 20,000 security personnel have been mobilised for the polling, Lebanon's first local elections since 2004. –AFP

### **Geo strategic front**

#### **Obama: Syria still backing terrorists and seeking WMD**

As engagement falters, White House extends Syria's national emergency status for another year. U.S. President Barack Obama said on Monday he would extend a national state of emergency over Syria for another year, citing the Arab state's continuing support for terrorists and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. Obama's decision means that despite Washington's recent attempts to ease tensions with Damascus, United States economic sanctions against Syria, introduced in May 2004, will remain in force. "While the Syrian government has made some progress in suppressing networks of foreign fighters bound for Iraq, its actions and policies, including continuing support for terrorist organizations and pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States," Obama said in a statement. In recent months the U.S. has met with frustration in its attempts to woo the government of President Bashar Assad

away from its close ally Iran toward better ties with the West. Earlier in 2010 the White House announced that the U.S. would return an ambassador, veteran diplomat Robert Ford, to Syria after a five-year pause in American diplomatic representation there. But the Obama administration's strategy of engagement has so far produced disappointing results, with Assad this year hosting Iran's virulently anti-American President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a high-profile Damascus summit, alongside leaders of the militant groups Hamas and Hizbollah - both on the State Department's list of terror organizations. In April tensions soared further following Israeli claims that Syria had supplied Hizbollah militants in Lebanon with advanced Scud missiles capable of inflicting heavy damage on Israel's major cities – an accusation Damascus denies. "The President took these actions to deal with the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States constituted by the actions of the Government of Syria in supporting terrorism, [...] pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, and undermining U.S. and international efforts with respect to the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq," the White House said. In 2007 Israeli warplanes bombed a site in Syria that the U.S. later claimed was a nuclear reactor intended to supply fuel for a clandestine bomb program. The president added that the U.S. would be willing to reconsider emergency laws on Syria, which Sunday's measure extended until May 2011, if Damascus showed willingness to change its policies.

#### **Lebanon embassy in Cairo asks for protection**

Anonymous caller vows to avenge lynching of Egyptian near Beirut in phone call to Lebanon's embassy in Cairo. Lebanon's embassy in Cairo has asked Egypt for protection after receiving an anonymous pledge to avenge the lynching of an Egyptian by villagers near Beirut last week, a Lebanese official said Monday. "The Lebanese ambassador, Khaled Ziade, has asked Egyptian authorities to provide the embassy with protection," after receiving the threatening phone call on Sunday, a government source said. "He immediately hung up after making the threat," the source added. The caller vowed to avenge the death of Mohammed Muslem, an Egyptian suspected of murdering an elderly couple and their two young granddaughters in Ketermaya, 25 kilometres (15 miles) southeast of Beirut, who was lynched by an angry mob on Thursday. Muslem, 38, was being driven by a police escort to re-enact his crime when several hundred residents of Ketermaya dragged him out of the police car and beat and stabbed him to death before hanging his body on a pole with a butcher's hook. Gruesome images of the lynching were broadcast by local television stations, prompting a wave of condemnation, including from Lebanon's President Michel Sleiman and Interior Minister Ziad Baroud who have called for an inquiry. –AFP

#### **Lebanon: Lynch of Egyptian strains diplomatic ties**

Lynching underscores xenophobia and weak law enforcement in Lebanon.

The lynching by a Lebanese mob of an Egyptian man who allegedly went on a murder spree has strained relations between Cairo and Beirut, but is not expected to lead to a rupture in relations. The Egyptian Embassy in Beirut condemned the lynching over the weekend and some Egyptian politicians called on the government to take immediate diplomatic actions against Lebanon. "I don't think this is going to hurt relations between Egypt and Lebanon," Akl Kairouz, a political scientist from the Notre Dame University

of Beirut told The Media Line. “I don’t the Egyptians are naïve enough to let one man create a problem.” The man was identified as Egyptian national Mohammed Salim Al-Musallim who was living in the Lebanese town of Ketermaya in the western Chouf district. Internal security forces arrested Al-Musallim, 38, last Wednesday on suspicion that he murdered an elderly couple and their two grandchildren, aged seven and nine. He was also suspected of raping a 15-year old girl in the same village and was fleeing a criminal record in Egypt. A blood-stained knife was reportedly found at the suspect’s house and he confessed to the crime after an interrogation at the police station.

Just a few hours after the alleged murders, police brought him back to the crime scene to re-enact the deed. Outraged residents of the village snatched him away from his police guards. The mob of hundreds beat him to death while shouting “revenge!” and then stripped him to his underwear, dragged his dead body through the streets and hanged the bloody corpse from an electricity pole by a butcher’s hook, Lebanese security officials and witnesses said.. Security forces stood by and did not stop the assault, some claiming they were outnumbered by the mob and were incapable of responding. Parts of the lynch were captured on a cell-phone camera and uploaded onto YouTube, where they have been flagged by YouTube as being inappropriate for some users due to extreme graphic and disturbing content. The lynching highlights Beirut’s incapacity to lay down the law and proliferation of the deed in the media has pitted those who justified the lynching against others who were appalled by it. “This was a case of a man who was in state custody and was being investigated, high-level judges were involved in the investigation and yet he was executed before the eyes of the state,” Nadim Khoury, Beirut director of Human Rights Watch told The Media Line. “This is the law of the jungle impinging on law of the land.” “Whoever killed the man is guilty of murder and the penal code is very clear on that. What’s not clear is if they will have the political courage to do it,” he said. “The only choice the state has is to follow the rule of law by prosecuting all those involved in the horrible murder. Unfortunately there are political voices trying to say ‘we’re all guilty so put us all in’ jail and that can’t be justified. It’s a real challenge. Up to [Sunday] morning no one was detained, even though the Justice Ministry said they identified 10 names and referred them to the prosecutor’s office.” Khoury testified to the existence of impunity in Lebanon, but said this was not a reason to justify the crime. “It wasn’t like this was a crime that went unresolved for a long time,” he said. He also indicated a shortcoming on behalf the security forces who were supposedly there to protect the suspect while the crime was being enacted. “There was a public relations aspect of the investigation that was impinging on the suspect’s right to a fair trial. The forces may have been overpowered, but at one point they stood idly by, while the mob pushed his body,” he said. Mustafa Bakri, an independent Egyptian MP, announced he considered the crime harmful to relations between the Egyptian and Lebanese people and urged the foreign minister Ahmad Abu Al-Gheit to consider immediate action. Condemning the lynching, the Egyptian Embassy in Beirut urged Lebanon to clarify why Al-Musallim was taken to re-enact the crime less than a day after it was committed. “I don’t think this is going to hurt relations between Egypt and Lebanon,” Akl Kairouz, a political scientist from the Notre Dame University of Beirut told The Media Line. “I don’t the Egyptians are naïve enough to let one man create a problem, especially since it can be remedied by the government. “The media has made an issue out of it,” said

Kairouz, of Notre Dame University. “There’s a general mood among the people in the street which is causing the media to make an issue of it, but I think it will wither away. The Egyptian government knows it can’t be important enough to sever diplomatic relations and enter a situation of enmity.” “It was lynch of Sunnis against a Sunni and not Shi’ites against a Sunni,” Kairouz added. “If the villagers were Shi’ite, it would have created a greater crisis.” Still, he said, Egypt can sue Lebanon under international law since its security force did not respond properly to protect the Egyptian national. “It’s not a question of good relationships,” Khoury said. “Lebanon should be prosecuting those responsible for the sake of its own interests, and not because of diplomatic pressure.” The fact that the target was Egyptian and not a local played a “huge role” in why he was killed so savagely, Khoury maintained. “It was xenophobia mixed with anger and his being Egyptian and an outsider to the village was a determining factor,” he told The Media Line. The dangling body attracted the onlookers, some of whom are clearly seen in footage taking pictures. More than 800 talkbacks were posted on an article about the lynching on the pan-Arab Al-Arabiyya website. Most of them condemned the attack while a few justified it. “May your hands be blessed,” one commentator wrote. “This is the penalty for any criminal.” “What happened was totally inhuman and belongs to the law of the jungle. They have become criminals who are no better than he was,” wrote another.

### **Iran warns Israel against attacking Syria**

Iran will “cut off Israel’s feet” if the Jewish state attacks Damascus, Iranian Vice President Mohammad Rida Rahimi vowed yesterday at the end of a two-day visit to key regional ally Syria. “We will stand alongside Syria against any (Israeli) threat,” Rahimi said at a news conference with Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri. “If those who have violated Palestinian land want to try anything we will cut off their feet,” he said in reference to the Jewish state. Rahimi described Syria as a “strong country that is ready to confront any threat” and pledged that Tehran “will back Syria with all its means and strength.” On Tuesday, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates accused Iran and Syria of arming Hezbollah with increasingly sophisticated rockets and missiles which he said undermined stability in the region. And on Thursday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned Syrian President Bashar Al Assad against the risk of sparking a regional war if he supplies long-range Scud missiles to Hezbollah. “President Assad is making decisions that could mean war or peace for the region,” she warned. Earlier this month, Israeli President Shimon Peres claimed that Syria was supplying the militant Shia group Hezbollah with Scud missiles. Syria has denied the charges. Hezbollah, which is backed by Syria and Iran, fought a month-long war with Israel in 2006 during which it fired more than 4,000 rockets on the Jewish state. Israel estimates that Hezbollah has since stockpiled more than 40,000 rockets, some of which could reach major Israeli population centers, and has warned it stood ready for any attack by the Lebanese group.

Despite a 1949 armistice agreement, Israel remains technically at war with Syria, which was among those that battled the nascent Jewish state in the 1948 Israeli-Arab war. –AFP

### **Hezbollah slams UN 'interference' in Lebanon**

Hezbollah on Friday slammed "interference" in Lebanese affairs by UN envoy Terje Roed-Larsen and warned that its arsenal was off-limits after the diplomat accused militias of creating tension in Lebanon. Hezbollah condemns this attempt to create dissent and sedition among the Lebanese under the guise of advice and guidance," the Shiite militant party said in a statement. "Roed-Larsen's continuous attempts to interfere in Lebanese affairs and incite the Lebanese to fight one another are unacceptable for an international official working for peace in the region," it said. On Thursday the UN envoy had warned of the need to address the presence in Lebanon of heavily armed militias, which he said was a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, adopted in 2004. The resolution calls for "the disbanding and disarmament" of all militias in the country. "As long as these unresolved issues are there, for instance the existence of heavily armed militias in Lebanon... there will always be tension," Roed-Larsen said after briefing the Security Council on a report on the implementation of Resolution 1559. But the Syria- and Iran-backed Hezbollah warned that its arms were "only to be discussed among the Lebanese as part of a comprehensive national defence strategy, and neither Roed-Larsen nor any other officials, international or not, can interfere." His briefing came shortly after Israel accused Syria of supplying Hezbollah with Scud missiles. Damascus has denied the charge. The United States has also accused both Syria and Iran of supplying their Lebanese ally with sophisticated weaponry including missiles, but has stopped short of naming the Scuds. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Thursday warned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad about the risks of sparking a regional war if he supplied long-range Scud missiles to his Lebanese ally. Hezbollah is the only Lebanese group that did not disarm after Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war, arguing that its weapons were necessary to fight Israel. -AFP

### **Lebanon minister apologises to Egypt over lynching**

Lebanon's justice minister apologized on Tuesday for the mob lynching last week of an Egyptian wanted for a quadruple homicide, his office said. "I would like to personally apologise to the government and people of Egypt for the reaction in the village of Ketermaya, which would not have happened had it not been for the gruesome crime that preceded it," Ibrahim Najjar said in a statement. Mohammed Muslem, 38, was the prime suspect in the deadly stabbing Wednesday of an elderly couple and their two granddaughters, aged seven and nine, in the quiet village of Ketermaya, just southeast of Beirut. Muslem was being driven by a police to re-enact his crime on Thursday when several hundred residents, who had gathered in the village square for the funeral procession, stopped the police car. They dragged Muslem out, beat and stabbed him to death and hung his body on a pole with a butcher's hook as police watched helplessly. A security official told AFP Muslem was already suspected in Ketermaya of the rape of a 13-year-old girl about two months ago. Gruesome images of the lynching were broadcast by local television stations, prompting a wave of condemnation, including from Lebanese President Michel Sleiman and Interior Minister Ziad Baroud.

Police chief Ashraf Rifi said he has taken disciplinary measures against the officers escorting Muslem for failing to take the necessary precautions, given the anger of the villagers less than 24 hours after the murders. No one has been arrested for the lynching.

Lebanon's embassy in Cairo asked for protection after receiving an anonymous call pledging to avenge Muslem's murder. –AFP

### **UN: No Scuds in Lebanon**

Israel accuses Syria of sending regular shipments of weapons to Hezbollah [EPA]  
The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) has said that Southern Lebanon is a Scud free territory. Responding to Israeli accusations that Syria was smuggling Scud missiles and other weapons to Hezbollah, a Unifil official said on Wednesday that his force had found no evidence of any such armaments in southern Lebanon. "We have no evidence of any Scud missiles in Unifil's area of operations" in southern Lebanon, the daily An-Nahar newspaper quoted Major General Alberto Asarta Cuevas as saying. "These missiles are large and difficult to hide," he said. Israel accuses Syria of routine weapon smuggling to Lebanon's Hezbollah. Brigadier General Yossi Baidatz, the head of Israel's military intelligence research department, told a parliamentary committee on Tuesday that Hezbollah's arsenal included thousands of rockets of all ranges and types, some solid-fuelled. Baidatz did not specifically name the long-range Scud missiles which Shimon Peres, the Israeli president, had accused Hezbollah of stockpiling, but appeared to allude to Peres' warnings. "The shipments of long-range missiles which have been reported recently are only the tip of the iceberg," he told the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee. "Syria has a significant role in the growing strength of Hezbollah's rocket arsenal. Weapons are sent to Hezbollah from Syria on a regular basis under the direction of the Syrian and Iranian regimes," he said.

**'Legal arsenal'** Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Hezbollah, refused on Saturday to confirm or deny the Scud allegations, saying his group has a "legal" right to own any weapons it wishes. "We do not confirm or deny if we have received weapons or not, so we do not comment and we will not comment," Nasrallah said. Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran and Syria, is the only group that did not disarm after Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war, arguing its weapons are necessary to fight Israel, which it later faced off in a devastating conflict in 2006. On Monday, President Barack Obama renewed US sanctions on Syria for a year, accusing Damascus of supporting "terrorist" groups and pursuing missile programmes and weapons of mass destruction. Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, warned Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president, last week about the risks of sparking a regional war if he supplied long-range Scud missiles to Hezbollah.

## **Israel and Palestine**

### **Geo strategic front**

#### **Jordan Union To Fight For Boycott**

The Professional Associations Complex in Jordan is holding a campaign to ensure that the Jordanian markets do not carry any Israeli products. The campaign, For A Jordan Without Israeli Products, was launched as the Palestinians prepare to mark the 62nd anniversary of the Nakba. The Complex stated that the campaign is also meant to counter what it called "the ongoing Zionist threats to Jordan". Head of the Professional Associations Complex, Dr. Ahmad Al Armouty, stated at a press conference that the campaign targets all Israeli products in Jordan and the distributors of these products. It also aims at providing information about the Israeli trade, cultural and tourist centers and

agencies in order to boycott them too. Al Armouty, who also heads the Physicians Association in Jordan, stated that the Jordanian started boycotting Israeli products since the 1994 deal between Israel and Jordan was signed, and added that boycott campaigns should step-up their activities as Israeli is significantly escalating its attacks and violations in Jerusalem and its holy sites, and against the Palestinian people. Badi Rafay'a, head of the Committee Against Normalization, stated that a list of Israeli Trademarks and those who import Israeli products would be distributed in every part of Jordan, and added that the Committee will organize an event Saturday in which it will burn Israeli products in front of the Central Market, south of the capital Amman.

Rafay'a told Al Jazeera that the campaign is preparing a list that includes the names of persons and companies that refuse to boycott Israel, and that those mentioned in the list will be boycotted. It also intends to prepare an "honor list" that would include the names of Jordan individuals and companies that refuse to deal with Israel and its products. Furthermore, campaign organizers intend to distribute a Fatwa signed by fifty Islamic scholars and Sheikhs in Jordan in which they state that dealing with Israel, buying or selling its products is a sin. It also intends to build a website to provide further information about boycott, and intends to hold several seminars and talks on the issue.

### **Israeli Legislator Submits A Proposal For A Palestinian State in Jordan**

Israeli Legislator, Aryeh Eldad, member of the National Union fundamentalist party, asked the Israeli Knesset to discuss a proposal he submitted regarding establishing a Palestinian state in Jordan. Eldad initially filed his proposal in May of last year and the Knesset agreed to transfer the file to the Knesset's The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. He demanded that the security committee should discuss the issue but head of the Parliamentarian Committee, Tsahi Hanegbi of the Kadima Party, refused to respond to Eldad's request. Israeli paper, Yedioth Aharonoth, reported Sunday that Hanegbi presented his "solution" to the conflict by a two-state solution that suggests establishing a Palestinian State in Jordan and a Jewish state in all parts of the West Bank and Israel. The paper added that Hanegbi informed Knesset head, Rovin Livlin of the Likud Party, that he would allow this issue to be presented next year. But according to the Israeli Law, Eldad has the right to appeal the decision of Hanegbi and can even file an appeal to the High Court of Justice. The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee at the Knesset is one of the most important and influential committee at the Knesset.

### **Palestinian Resident Expelled To Jordan**

The Israeli Authorities deported Saturday a Palestinian resident of the West Bank to Jordan after the army claimed he was illegally staying in the country. Resident Morad Suleiman Zahda, 27, from Hebron in the southern part of the West Bank was expelled to Jordan. Zahda, a Palestinian native, entered the country using a visitors' visa ten year ago. A deportation order was issued against him after he was kidnapped and detained by the army. The deportation falls under a new Israeli "law" regarding dozens of thousands of Palestinians as "illegal immigrants" and granting the army, occupying Palestine, the power to expel them. The Israeli legislations which came into effect in April grants the army the power to deport thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip and to Arab countries. Under the new law, which is illegal in nature and violates the



International Law, any person who entered the West Bank and stayed without a permit from Israel would be regarded as conducting a criminal act and could be sentenced to seven years in prison.

## **Peace talks**

### **Obama Will Not Allow Unilateral Palestinian Steps**

Diplomatic sources in Washington reported that U.S. President, Barack Obama, gave Israel verbal and written guarantees that the United States will not allow the Palestinians to conduct any unilateral steps during indirect talks, or in the case of failure of such talks. The sources did not mention any guarantees that would prohibit Israel from continuing its unilateral measures especially settlement activities and its illegal policies in occupied East Jerusalem. The guarantees were reportedly delivered to Israel during the visit of U.S. Middle East Envoy, George Mitchell, who is touring the region in an attempt to launch indirect Palestinian-Israeli talks. In a statement to Al Manar newspaper, the sources said that the United States will not allow the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas to conduct any unilateral measures, and added that declaring a Palestinian state can only happen through a Palestinian-Israel agreement and as an outcome of direct talks between the two sides. According to Al Manar, the United States supports Israel's demand of a Palestinian recognition of the country as a Jewish State under any agreement, and that a Palestinian State will not be declared before this recognition is made official and public, and before declaring an end to the Middle East conflict. There was no mention of the internationally guaranteed Palestinian demands of the Right of Return, East Jerusalem as the capital of the future state, the refugees' Right of Return, borders or any of the core issues.

### **Abbas: "Indirect Talks Will Discuss Final Status Issues"**

Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, stated that proximity talks with Israel will discuss final status issues, including borders and security, and several related issues. Abbas told reporters following his meeting with King Abdullah of Jordan that the Palestinian leadership will hold a meeting Saturday to make a final decision on proximity talks, and that after meeting with the Palestinian Authority, he will tell U.S. Middle East peace envoy, George Mitchell, that Palestinian Authority is ready for talks and for discussing final status issues. He stated that the proximity talks will last for four months and that the Palestinian leadership would then hold a meeting with the Arab Follow-up Committee to discuss the developments, and hold consultations on future steps. Abbas said that the coordination with the Arab world is comprehensive and that the Palestinian Authority will not agree to anything that is rejected by the Arab countries. Commenting on the Palestinian-Jordanian coordination, Abbas said that such coordination is on its highest levels and that the Palestinian Authority is holding constant talks and discussions with Jordan. Abbas met king Abdullah of Jordan, and will be holding a meeting with Mitchell in the coming days. He said that the Palestinian Authority is holding talks with King Abdullah of Jordan, the Saudi king Abdullah Ben Abdul-Aziz, and the United Arabs Emirates.

### **Israeli-Palestinian Indirect Talks Pending PLO Approval**

The Palestinian Liberation Organization Executive Committee will convene on Saturday to decide on resuming indirect talks with Israel mediated by Washington. The U.S. envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell will arrive in Israel on Wednesday and meet Israel's PM Netanyahu, Mitchell is expected also to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Friday. Hanna Ameerah, PLO Executive Committee member said that based on Abbas Mitchell meeting the PLO will make its decision. "Washington said that it will stand against any provocative action, but did not clarify what those actions are, is it settlements construction, Israeli daily attacks, or the destruction of Palestinian homes?. We have questions that Mitchell should answer on Friday and based on that will make our decision." Ameerah told the Palestine News Network on Wednesday. PM Netanyahu said that issues of security arrangements and water followed by the issue of borders will be first discussed in the renewed talks. Jerusalem and the Right of Return of the Palestinian refugees, two main Palestinian demands for peace, would not be touched until the final stages of talks. "The negotiations will be pointless, there is no clear agenda or time table, the Israelis want to start talks on issues like security and water, issues Palestinians do not consider negotiating; therefore nothing will come out of those talks." Ameerah told PNN. Palestinians have repeatedly showed willingness to resume peace talks with Israel, but conditioned this resumption with Israel freeze of settlement activities in the West Bank, a demand that Israel have continuously rejected. Senior Israeli officials told the Israeli online Haaretz on Tuesday that they were dissatisfied by the fact that the Palestinians had not yet agreed to start the indirect talks. "Whether Israelis are dissatisfied or not that doesn't mean we have to speed our decision making process, we go back to the Arab League Committee and then we take it to the PLO Executive Committee that how it works, this talks are very critical." Ameerah, of the PLO Executive Committee commented. Last week the U.S. Administration said it will consider convening an international conference if Palestinian-Israeli peace talks fail in few months. Palestinian President Abbas announced that the indirect talks will last for 4 months only.

#### **US: "Jerusalem Issue To Be Discussed At Final Stage Of Negotiations"**

As indirect Palestinian-Israeli talks are to start Wednesday, advisor to U.S. President, Barack Obama, stated that the issue of Jerusalem would be discussed during the final stages of negotiations. David Excelrod said that Obama agreed to this issue and told a group of Jewish reporters on Tuesday at night that he agreed to postpone Jerusalem talks until the final stages of talks. Excelrod added that other issues would be discussed at initial stages mainly security arrangements, water and borders as the U.S. administration fears that the issue of Jerusalem could jeopardize the talks before their start. Israeli Yedioth Aharonoth reported that the American stance is coherent with Israel's demands especially since Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated that the first issue to be discussed with the Palestinians is security arrangements then the issue of water followed by the issue of borders. The two main complicated issues, Jerusalem and the Right of Return of the Palestinian refugees, would not be touched until the final stages of talks. Several Israeli officials and senior political analysts stated that the "crisis" between the United States and Israel had completely vanished.

#### **Indirect Talks Starts Wednesday With A Netanyahu-Mitchell Meeting**

United States special Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, will be holding a meeting on Wednesday with Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, in Jerusalem to mark the start of indirect talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. On Friday, Mitchell will be heading to the central West Bank city of Ramallah to hold a meeting with Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas. He will be leaving the region next Sunday. Israeli sources reported that Israel will focus on "security issues" instead of other core issues such as settlements, borders and Jerusalem. On Tuesday evening, Israeli Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, phoned the Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, to follow-up on talks held Monday between Netanyahu and Mubarak at the Egyptian resort of Sharm Al Sheikh. President Mahmoud Abbas will be heading to Cairo on Wednesday to hold a meeting with Mubarak. Abbas is currently in Riyadh visiting the Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz. Abbas held talks with the Saudi Intelligence Chief, Prince Miqrin Bin Abdul-Aziz before he met the Saudi king. A diplomatic Palestinian source told the French Press Agency that the visit is part of the Arab diplomatic coordination before the beginning of indirect talks.

### **Abbas: Mideast proximity peace talks to address final-status issues**

Israel should refrain from unilateral moves in West Bank, East Jerusalem that could disrupt upcoming talks, top Palestinian negotiator says.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Monday said indirect peace talks scheduled to begin this week with Israel will address final-status issues, including borders, Palestinian refugees and Jerusalem, Army Radio reported. "There is a historic opportunity before Israel, if it withdraws from all Palestinian and Arab lands," said Abbas adding that in exchange, under the Arab peace initiative, Israel would be officially recognized by Arab states. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu intends to open the indirect talks with the Palestinian Authority this week with a discussion of the security arrangements in the West Bank and of water resources. A senior official told Haaretz that Netanyahu had recently asked the defense establishment and the National Security Council to elaborate on the so-called eight-points brief, which lists Israel's security demands in terms of a permanent status agreement, as framed by Ehud Olmert's government. Also Monday, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told Army Radio that Israel should avoid taking any unilateral steps in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, adding that he felt Israel had no reason to sabotage upcoming talks. Speaking ahead of the soon-to-be-resumed proximity talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Erekat said the PA would not "tolerate new settlement construction, people being driven out of their homes, and any unilateral steps taken by Israel." "We have four months for the proximity talks, and there's no need for Israel to disrupt those talks with unilateral steps," Erekat added. Asked whether a decision by Jerusalem's municipal planning committee to erect a new East Jerusalem neighborhood would lead to a Palestinian withdrawal from the negotiations table, Erekat said: "Why would Israel build now? We want to continue talks, not stop them." Erekat also refuted recent reports stating there had been a falling out between Abbas and PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, saying that those reports were "rumors and illusions that Israel is spreading. Their relationship is very good." Meanwhile Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor said in an interview with Army Radio that upcoming proximity talks were unlikely to succeed, adding that it was "clear to everyone that the real talks are direct, and as soon as we get to them the sooner

we can get to the crux of the matter." "Proximity talks are a peculiar thing. For 16 years almost every government has talked to the Palestinians and suddenly they ask for this," Meridor said, adding he felt indirect talks were "a Palestinian attempt to push the Americans in." Meridor also said it was "a mistake to think Israel didn't want to push things forward," adding that both sides "were losing from the present situation and need to advance to an agreement." "These talks don't just represent an Israeli interest, even though we have a clear interest, but a Palestinian as well," Meridor said. Earlier Monday, Army Radio reported that official documents showed Jerusalem's municipal planning committee would not be discussing any significant construction plans for Jewish housing in East Jerusalem in its upcoming meetings. Jerusalem officials claimed the lack of discussion regarding East Jerusalem building was an attempt to appease U.S. President Barack Obama's administration in the wake of recent tensions between the allies. Officials have also said that Israel had also tacitly agreed to halt all East Jerusalem demolitions, with one official saying that it has been "months since houses were demolished in the east of city."

### **Israel: Palestinians stalling kickoff of proximity peace talks**

Senior officials in Jerusalem on Tuesday said they were dissatisfied that the Palestinians had not yet announced their agreement to begin proximity talks. According to a senior government official in Jerusalem, the Palestinians were delaying the announcement for no real reason. A source in the U.S. administration said that at this point it appears that the Palestinian announcement will come only on Saturday, after the meeting of the PLO Executive Committee.

A senior official in Jerusalem said that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his team had made all necessary preparations to jump-start the peace process, and they are ready to open the proximity talks at a meeting scheduled for today with special U.S. Middle East envoy George Mitchell.

"We hope we will be able to start the proximity talks soon, and that the Palestinians will not use delay and avoidance tactics," the government source said.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu has warned for a whole year against wasting time, and has repeatedly called on the Palestinian Authority leadership to renew the peace process without delay," the official said.

Mitchell is scheduled to arrive at Netanyahu's office at 5 P.M., accompanied by his deputy David Hale, as well as Dan Shapiro, senior director for the Middle East and North Africa at the American National Security Council.

Netanyahu will be there with his advisers Yitzhak Molcho and Ron Dermer.

Although the PA's official announcement of the opening of talks may come only on Saturday, Mitchell is expected to meet with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Friday morning. At noon Friday, Mitchell is to meet with Netanyahu, Defense Minister Ehud Barak and opposition leader Tzipi Livni.

Officials in Netanyahu's office, Mitchell's team and Abbas' close associates seemed keen to lower expectations for the first round of talks, saying they were merely initial contacts.

Speaking on Tuesday at the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the chief of research at the Intelligence Corps, Brig. Gen. Yosef Baidatz, said Abbas doesn't believe Netanyahu and doesn't think he could be partner to an agreement that would meet Palestinian needs.

"Abbas is preparing the ground for the talks to fail," said Baidatz. "He believes the failure will expose Israel's true face. He is pessimistic about the outcome and believes the ball is in Israel's court."

Baidatz noted Abbas was interested in an agreement, but had little room to maneuver on the core issues of the conflict. "We don't discern any real attempt by Abbas to get flexible on the essential issues," Baidatz said. "He will bring the same positions he used in talks with the previous government."

On Wednesday morning, the cabinet will be presented with a "Palestinian Incitement Index," prepared by a team chaired by Strategic Affairs Ministry deputy director Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kupperwasser. The cabinet will plan its diplomatic activity in an international outreach campaign in response to the index.

A senior government official told Haaretz that incitement would be discussed with Mitchell during the proximity talks. Israel will demand the Palestinians work to prevent media incitement against Israel, and "educate for peace."

### **Jailed PFLP leader: Only a one-state solution is possible**

Ahmad Saadat, currently serving 30 years in Israeli prison, believes peace talks will deepen Palestinian rift.

A jailed Palestinian leader has warned against more peace talks with Israel, saying a resumption of negotiations will not achieve Palestinian goals and deepen divisions among Palestinians.

Ahmed Saadat, secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), said the Middle East conflict could only be resolved through the creation of a state shared by Palestinians and Jews - a position at odds with the "two-state solution" long sought by world powers.

In written answers to questions from Reuters, Saadat condemned Palestinian participation in indirect negotiations that are expected to begin soon under the stewardship of the United States. The questions were delivered by his lawyer.

"Negotiations will be nothing but a cover for the continuation of an Israeli policy built on the continuation of occupation," said Saadat, who is serving 30 years in an Israeli jail for his role in the Palestinian Intifada that erupted in 2000.

Israel had accused him of ordering the 2001 assassination of Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Zeevi, though later decided there was not enough evidence to charge him with that killing.

He heads a group that remains, nominally at least, the second largest faction in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), an umbrella group led by President Mahmoud Abbas and dominated by his Fatah movement.

Though the PFLP's influence is today limited compared to that of Fatah and the Islamist group Hamas, which is not part of the PLO, Saadat is one of the most high profile Palestinians in an Israeli jail.

Hamas wants him released as part of an exchange for Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured by Palestinians in cross-border raid from the Gaza Strip in 2006. Saadat said Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had obstructed a deal. "There is no room for Hamas to retreat from the names put forward in the negotiations," he said.

Israel, Saadat said, was not interested in peace talks leading to a solution acceptable to the Palestinians. The talks proposed by the United States to revive the two-decade old peace process aimed to hide "American impotence" and U.S. President Barack Obama's failure to make good on promises of a new beginning with the Muslim world, he said.

The PLO executive committee is expected to approve the indirect negotiations on Saturday. The Arab League has already given its nod, approving four months of such talks.

Justifying Arab support for more talks, Abbas says he has received U.S. assurances Israel will not carry out any "provocative measures".

Saadat said the Palestinian leadership had given way on its demands, which had included a full halt to settlement building on Israeli-occupied land that the Palestinians seek for a state. More talks, Saadat said, would make it harder to achieve reconciliation between Abbas and opponents of his strategy, which is aimed at negotiating the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

The rejection of Abbas's strategy by Hamas and other factions is at the heart of a national rift that many Palestinians believe has set back their cause. Saadat said: "The continuation of negotiations, direct or indirect, will have consequences on the efforts to repair the Palestinian rift and achieve reconciliation." Saadat said the only way to end the Middle East conflict was through the creation of a single state. The idea of a single, bi-national country between the Mediterranean Sea and the River Jordan on land controlled by Israel is rejected by Israel as it would endanger its Jewish majority. "The solution is the one-state solution and not the two-state solution," Saadat said. "There are no other horizons for any other settlement."

### **Netanyahu meets Mitchell for second time in two days**

U.S. Mideast envoy meets with the Prime Minister ahead of expected resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

U.S. Middle East envoy George Mitchell met Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday for the second time in two days, ahead of the expected start of indirect Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

The United States hopes Israel and the Palestinians will resume peace negotiations in an indirect format in the coming days, a U.S. spokesman said on Wednesday, after the first, three-hour meeting between Netanyahu and Mitchell.

Neither side commented on the details of Thursday's meeting.

An Israeli source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the start of indirect proximity talks had not been announced as expected on Wednesday because Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had yet to formally agree to join them.

Mitchell will meet Abbas on Friday and Saturday, U.S. officials said.

The Arab League endorsed Abbas' participation in the talks last Saturday, and he is awaiting formal approval from the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee this Saturday, said his spokesman, Nabil Abu Rdainah.

"If the executive approves these indirect negotiations, all the final-status issues will be on the table for discussion," Rdainah said. "Absolutely no issue will be excluded and Jerusalem will be the top priority."

Israeli leaders have said the Palestinians can raise core issues in the indirect talks but only direct negotiations can resolve them. The indirect format for talks would involve Mitchell shuttling between the two negotiating teams.

Washington opted for this method after failing to narrow differences over Israeli settlement activity enough to resume face-to-face talks, which the sides have not held in 18 months.

#### **U.S.: Israel pledged not to build in Ramat Shlomo for two years**

U.S. State Dept. says first round of proximity talks ends with positive steps from both sides.

The U.S. State Department announced on Sunday that the first round of indirect peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has been completed, saying that both Israel and the Palestinians had taken steps to create an atmosphere conducive to successful talks.

State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said in a statement that U.S. special envoy George Mitchell has left the Middle East after concluding talks characterized as "serious and wide-ranging."

Crowley said Israel had pledged not to build in the Ramat Shlomo neighborhood of East Jerusalem for two years and that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas vowed that he would work against incitement of any sort.

Mitchell told the parties that progress is important so they can move to direct negotiations resulting in a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The State Department statement also said that both Israel and the Palestinians would be held "accountable" for actions that "undermine trust" during the course of the proximity talks.

Mitchell will return to the region next week to continue the talks.

Sources close to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to the American announcement later Sunday, confirming that the housing project intended for the Ramat Shlomo neighborhood would not be built in the coming two years. The sources added that even when the Ramat Shlomo crisis first erupted, when the housing project was announced just as U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was visiting Israel, Israel told the U.S. administration that the project was only in very initial stages and construction would not begin for at least two years.

"Prime Minister Netanyahu even announced this publicly after Biden's visit," the sources said. "Furthermore, the prime minister emphasized from the beginning that the planning

and construction in Jerusalem will continue as always, just as it was during every one of Israel's last 43 administrations, and there has never been any Israeli pledge on this matter."

The sources also said that the Israel promised the U.S. administration to discuss all the core issues during the course of the proximity talks, and to take confidence building steps as gestures toward the Palestinians. On the other hand, sources said, the U.S. has promised Israel that the core issues, especially the most sensitive ones like the fate of Jerusalem, would be resolved only after proximity talks progress to direct talks.

Earlier on Sunday, the PA responded to U.S. and Israeli calls for eventual direct peace negotiations by reiterating that it would engage only in proximity talks until Israel halted all settlement construction.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat clarified the PA's stance as he officially announced the start of indirect peace negotiations mediated by Mitchell. The Palestinian Liberation Organization's executive committee approved the four-month process on Saturday.

"I can officially declare today that the proximity talks have begun," Erekat said, after a meeting between Mitchell and Abbas.

Netanyahu, meanwhile, told his cabinet on Sunday that Israel expected the upcoming indirect negotiations to lead to direct talks, declaring: "It is impossible to make peace at a distance."

But Erekat told Voice of Palestine radio in response: "If he [Netanyahu] announces a complete halt to settlement building, there will be direct talks."

In his remarks to the cabinet on talks with the Palestinians, Netanyahu said no-one should expect that "we will arrive at decisions and agreements on matters that are critical ... without sitting together in the same room."

Senior U.S. officials have told their Palestinian counterparts that Washington also believes direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians must begin as soon as possible.

The Obama administration has informed Abbas that it will not unveil mediation proposals or a Middle East peace plan before the start of direct, substantive talks between the two sides on final-status issues, a high-level Israeli official said.

## **Security issues:**

### **Arab states: Israel's nuclear program is destabilizing Mideast**

World must strive harder toward a nuclear-free Mideast, Jordan FM says at second day of UN nuclear conference.

Arab countries sought to turn attention Tuesday to Israel as delegates from 189 countries debated how to stem the spread of nuclear weapons.

On the second day of the month-long meeting at the United Nations, Arab countries were reiterating calls for a nuclear-free Middle East with criticism of Israel's unacknowledged nuclear arsenal and failure to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

The first day of the conference was dominated by rhetorical crossfire between the United States and Iran, as Washington pushed for the UN Security Council to approve new sanctions against Iran.

On Tuesday, Jordan's Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh expressed frustration at the lack of progress on implementing a nuclear-free Middle East, a goal that was declared in a resolution of a previous meeting of NPT signatories



He said that Israel's failure to sign the NPT and allow international monitoring of its nuclear program renders the NPT a source of instability in the Middle East.

Egypt has proposed that this 2010 NPT conference back a plan calling for the start of negotiations next year on such a Mideast zone. The proposal may become a major debating point in the month-long session.

The United States has cautiously supported the idea while saying that implementing the idea must wait for progress in the Middle East peace process.

The position reflected a middle ground as the Obama administration sought to satisfy Arab countries while keeping the spotlight of the conference on Iran's nuclear program.

Meanwhile, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad continued his campaign to stall the U.S. push for new sanctions. He scheduled a news conference Tuesday afternoon. On Monday, addressing the conference, he rejected the U.S. allegations about Iran's nuclear program, saying Washington has offered not a single credible proof that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons. Iran says it only wants the technology for producing nuclear power.

The debate about Iran dominated the first day of the month-long conference on how to improve the NPT. The treaty is formally reviewed every five years at a meeting of treaty members - all the world's nations except India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea, all of which either have confirmed or are believed to have nuclear weapons.

The review conference is meant to produce a final document pointing toward ways to better achieve the NPT's goals of checking the spread of nuclear weapons, while working toward reducing and eventually eliminating them.

Because it requires a consensus of all parties, including Iran, any final document would be highly unlikely to censure the Tehran government, which would block consensus.

U.S. officials have said they will be looking to isolate Iran at the conference and to produce an unofficial document calling for stricter enforcement of the NPT that could be signed by the overwhelming majority of signatory countries.

As delegates assess the state of the NPT in UN conference halls, American and European diplomats will be working elsewhere to reach agreement with the sometimes reluctant China and Russia on a fourth round of UN Security Council economic sanctions against Iran.

### **Syria gave advanced M-600 missiles to Hezbollah, defense officials claim**

Army intelligence worried by Lebanese militants' growing rocket arsenal - but says Syria has a genuine desire to strike a peace deal with Israel.

Syria has delivered advanced M600 rockets to Hezbollah militants in Lebanon within the past year, Israeli defense officials said on Wednesday.

The M600, a Syrian copy of the Iranian Fateh-110, has a range of 300km and carries a half-ton warhead. If fired from southern Lebanon it would be capable of hitting Tel Aviv.

Latest claims of arms transfers to Lebanon follow recent accusations by President Shimon Peres that Syria Hezbollah gave long-range Scud missiles, capable of inflicting heavy damage on Israel's cities.

Other government figures, including Defense Minister Ehud Barak, have since avoided repeating the claims and it is unclear whether Damascus could have delivered the 44-foot liquid-fueled missiles, handling which requires complex logistics, undetected.

Yet doubts over the Scuds have not masked growing fear in the Israeli defense establishment over Hezbollah's rapidly expanding arsenal. On Tuesday the army's head of intelligence research, Brigadier General Yossi Baidatz, told the Knesset that the Scud transfer was the "tip of the iceberg".

"Even today Hezbollah has missiles of all ranges types, including solid-fueled rockets that have a longer range are extremely accurate," Baidatz told the Knesset's foreign affairs and security committee.

Baidatz warned that arms transfers were not sporadic but reflected long-term policy in Tehran and Damascus

"Syria and Iran carry out weapons transfers on a constant and structured basis in way that can't be described as simple smuggling – the transfers are official and well-organized," he said.

He added: "Hezbollah's long-range rockets allow them to position launchers deep within Lebanese territory and cover ranges far greater than we aware of in the past.

The militant group was far stronger today than in 2006, when it fought a war with Israel, Baidatz said.

"Hezbollah in 2010 is very different to Hezbollah in 2006 in terms of military capability, which has advanced a great deal," he said. "Hezbollah is now regarded by the Syrians as a component of their defense establishment."

But despite strong backing for Hezbollah, Syria remained keen to strike a peace deal with Israel, Baidatz said.

"A political settlement with Israel is high on Syria's list of priorities and intelligence shows a will to reach an agreement – but on their terms, meaning a return of the Golan Heights and American involvement" he said.

Baidatz said that Syria's President Assad was willing to embrace sweeping changes – but did not trust the administration of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"Military intelligence believes Syria could radically alter its role – but Assad feels that political progress with the current Israel government is impossible and has therefore avoided confidence-building measures."

### **Abbas laying the groundwork for failure of proximity talks, intelligence boss claims**

Abbas' goal is to show that Israel does not want peace, Brigadier General Yossi Baidatz told a Knesset committee.

Military Intelligence research division chief Brigadier General Yossi Baidatz on Tuesday presented a bleak forecast for the opening of a negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

"[PA President Mahmoud] Abbas' goal is to expose Israel's true face and show that we do not want peace," Baidatz told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, adding that "Abbas is interested in an agreement with Israel, but his leeway on the core issues is limited."

"We do not detect any real attempt on Abbas' part to show flexibility on the core issues, and he will start the talk with the same positions he presented to the previous [Israeli] government," he continued, concluding that "Abbas is laying the groundwork for the failure of the talks."

Proximity talks between Israel and the PA will start no later than mid-May, according to officials involved in efforts to renew the peace process.

Abbas has received an official invitation to the talks from U.S. President Barack Obama. In the message to Abbas, Obama acknowledged that he was unable to extract a commitment from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to freeze construction in East Jerusalem, but the American president expressed confidence that Israel would refrain from "significant" actions in the eastern part of the city during negotiations.

By "significant," Obama appears to mean projects like the 1,600 housing units in the Ramat Shlomo neighborhood of East Jerusalem that were announced during Vice President Joe Biden's visit last month.

In his message to Abbas, Obama wrote that proximity talks with Israel would encompass all the conflict's core issues including Jerusalem, as was agreed in the Annapolis Joint Declaration in November 2007. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said that the Palestinians requested such a meeting and were told by Obama's envoy that the U.S. leader would see Abbas in the near future.

European officials who have met in recent days with senior officials at the White House and State Department in late April got the impression that the Obama administration did not expect that the proximity talks would produce any agreement.

The efforts to push the peace process forward are meant to allow the United States to claim some success in its Mideast policy as the region marks one year since Obama's historic address in Cairo.

Officials in Washington say that the talks with the Palestinians will force Netanyahu to reveal his positions beyond those outlined in his speech at Bar-Ilan University last June.

The Americans say that if Netanyahu takes an uncompromising stance in the negotiations, like the one he displays in public, the Labor Party might quit the coalition and pave the way for a new government.

Netanyahu's statement that he is willing to recognize a Palestinian state with provisional borders has only strengthened suspicions among PA leaders that the Israeli PM wants an interim agreement, not a final-status deal.

### **Israel official defends nuclear ambiguity as 'strategic advantage'**

UN nuclear chief has asked international community to help with resolution demanding Israel accede to NPT.

An Israeli official on Thursday defended the country's "opaque" policy regarding its nuclear program a "strategic advantage", responding to mounting international pressure calling for it to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The official noted that the treaty obligating nations to stop the spread of nuclear weapons was unable to stop countries like Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons programs.

Israel has said it would not sign the NPT until a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace deal is in place. But U.S. Undersecretary of State Ellen Tauscher said that the U.S. has been working for months with Egypt on the issue.

Another Western diplomatic source, speaking on condition of anonymity about other nations' contacts, said the Americans also have been in discussion with Israel. Israel refused to comment on these remarks.

Efforts to make the Middle East a nuclear-free zone have received new attention at the recent United Nations conference in New York, where the 189 signatories to the NPT are reviewing the treaty.

The head of the United Nations atomic watchdog has asked for international input on how to persuade Israel to join the NPT, in a move that is sure to add to pressure on Israel to disclose its unacknowledged nuclear arsenal.

In a letter made available Wednesday, Yukiya Amano asked foreign ministers of the International Atomic Energy Agency's 151 member states to share views on how to implement a resolution demanding that Israel accede to the NPT and throw its nuclear facilities open to IAEA oversight.

Islamic nations used the second day of the nonproliferation meeting Tuesday to call for a nuclear-free Middle East, while criticizing Israel for not divulging its nuclear capabilities and refusing to sign the nonproliferation treaty.

A string of Israeli officials, including a spokesman for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the minister of atomic energy, the deputy minister of foreign affairs, the minister of strategic threats and the minister of communication, all refused to comment on the recent developments.

Egypt has proposed that this 2010 Nonproliferation Treaty conference back a plan calling for the start of negotiations next year on a Mideast free of nuclear arms. The proposal may become a major debating point in the month-long session.

The U.S. has cautiously supported the idea while saying that implementing it must wait for progress in the Middle East peace process. Israel also says a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement must come first.

Amano's April 7 letter comes seven months after IAEA member states at their annual conference narrowly passed a resolution directly criticizing Israel and its atomic program, with 49 of the 110 nations present backing the document, 45 against and 16 abstaining.

The result was a setback not only for Israel but also for Washington and other backers of the Jewish state, which had lobbied for 18 years of past practice - debate on the issue without a vote. It also reflected building tensions between Israel and its backers and Islamic nations, supported by developing countries.

The resolution expresses concern about the Israeli nuclear capabilities, and links it to concern about the threat posed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons for the security and stability of the Middle East.

The U.S. and its allies consider Iran the region's greatest proliferation threat, fearing that Tehran is trying to achieve the capacity to make nuclear weapons despite its assertion that it is only building a civilian program to generate power.

But Islamic nations insist that Israel is the true danger in the Middle East, saying they fear its nuclear weapons capacity. Israel has never said it has such arms, but is universally believed to possess them.

The Muslim countries enjoy support from developing nations. These are critical of the U.S. and other nuclear weapons nations for refusing to disarm, and suspects that developed nations are trying to corner the market on peaceful nuclear technology to their disadvantage - themes likely to surface not only at the now ongoing Nonproliferation Treaty conference, but at the next IAEA general conference in September.

With divisions deep on Israel, Amano's letter asking IAEA member states for input on the issue foreshadowed intense feuding at that September conference.

"It would be helpful to me if Your Excellency could inform me of any views that your government might have with respect to meeting the objectives of the resolution," according to his half-page letter.

A senior diplomat from one of the IAEA member countries confirmed that his government had received the letter. He and an official from another IAEA delegation said that to their knowledge the agency was still awaiting responses. Both asked for anonymity because their information was confidential.

### **Netanyahu looks to toughen conditions for Palestinian prisoners**

The idea is to make conditions for Palestinian prisoners similar to those of abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

Tags: Israel news Palestinians Middle East peace Gilad Shalit Benjamin Netanyahu

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is considering introducing a bill that would impose sanctions on Palestinian security prisoners held in Israel, in an effort to pressure Hamas to approve a prisoner-exchange deal.

The Ministerial Committee for Legislation, meanwhile, is expected to discuss on Sunday a private member's bill on that issue, which was pulled from the legislative agenda several months ago on Netanyahu's request. The idea is to make the conditions for the Palestinian prisoners similar to those of abducted Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

In the introduction to his bill, MK Danny Danon (Likud) wrote that the legislation sought to "fix the absurd situation in which terror organizations abduct Israeli citizens as bargaining chips, totally depriving them of visits, while members of the same terror organizations who are imprisoned in Israel are permitted to receive visitors."

The MKs behind the bill pulled it on the request of the Prime Minister's Bureau, who said they wanted to give the German mediator in the exchange talks with Hamas a chance to complete his mission.

The swap proposal was submitted to Israel and Hamas in December. Israel agreed to the terms but Hamas has not responded.

Last week, with the start of the new Knesset session, Cabinet Secretary Zvi Hauser told the MKs that they could reintroduce their bill, but asked them to wait for about two weeks for the government to develop a position on the issue and consider introducing its own bill.

Shalit has not received visits from the International Committee of the Red Cross or from his family since his capture nearly four years ago. Danon's bill would end all visits to Palestinian security prisoners, with the exception of their attorneys and one visit every three months from the ICRC.

### **OECD entrance is 'seal of approval,' Netanyahu says**

31 members of the OECD unanimously voted in favor of accepting Israel as a member of the group.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hailed Monday Israel's entrance into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development saying it was a "seal of approval" which would attract many financial investors.

"Joining [the OECD] is like receiving a university degree," Netanyahu said. "Just as it is significant to have a degree from the Technion, for example, when entering the job market, entering [the OECD] will open doors and provide access to many fields. It's a seal of approval."

Earlier Monday, the 31 members of the OECD unanimously voted in favor of accepting Israel as a member of the group, a senior Jerusalem source said.

In a special press conference, Netanyahu discussed the importance of the admittance into the Paris-based international economic group and noted several economic realities in Israel which the government would focus on improving.

"There is still too much centralization in the private business sector," Netanyahu said of Israel's economy, adding that "we intend to act adamantly to diminish this centralization." Netanyahu added that Israel was in the worst place in the world regarding bureaucracy, and said that "we are in a category of our own when it comes to bureaucratic complications."

"Our goal is to climb to the 15 leading economies in the world for their gross national product," Netanyahu said.

Israeli officials have said acceptance would be an important stamp of approval for the country's economy, boosting its credit rating and strengthening ties with foreign investors.

Three OECD members - Switzerland, Ireland and Norway – had previously expressed reservations about Israel's membership. They have focused on the settlements, which Israel does not treat as a separate economic entity. All new members require the approval of all 31 members.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman welcomed Israel's acceptance into the prestigious economic organization, and said that it was "a stamp of approval for the country's economy and its achievements in technology."

"The resolution was unanimous, despite attempts by anti-Israel entities to prevent the acceptance of Israel into the OECD," Lieberman said in a statement, adding that "the fact that the attempts failed is proof of Israel's solid standing with the international community, and that it is recognized for its achievements, despite the fierce incitement against it in every conceivable arena: political, security or economic."

Foreign Ministry officials earlier said that Palestinians had intensified their efforts to keep Israel out of the organization in recent days, saying that Israel infringes on Palestinians' human rights and violates OECD values.

Israel says Palestinian Prime Minister Salem Fayyad called many of the leaders of OECD countries over the past day to argue against Israel's acceptance. One of the Palestinian arguments is that Israel provided false financial data by not separating out the data related to the settlements.

Israel had launched a campaign of its own to bolster support for its membership. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to several other world leaders on the

### **Two Israeli Arabs arrested on suspicion of spying, contact with Hezbollah**

Gag order lifted on news that Omar Said, a member of the Balad movement, and Amir Makhoul, director general of an Arab charity, were detained by the Shin Bet security service.

The military censor on Monday lifted a gag order on news that two Israeli Arab political activists were arrested last week on charges of spying and contact with a foreign agent from Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

Omar Said, a member of the Balad movement, and Ameer Makhoul, director general of the charity Ittijah (Union of Arab Community-Based Associations) were detained by the Shin Bet security service and police anti-terror squads.

Makhoul was arrested in the early hours of Thursday morning, Said on April 24.

Reports of the arrests circulated widely on unofficial websites and blogs but government censors had banned the Israeli press from reporting them until the gag order was lifted late Sunday night.

Sayid was detained and his house was also searched, police said. The activist, who also practices alternative medicine, has been questioned by police on several occasions over trips abroad in the past few years.

At around 3:00 A.M. on Thursday, armed security forces raided Makoul's home in Haifa. Makhoul's brother Assam, a former MK for Hadash, said the family had no details of the investigation but they suspected authorities had singled out the activist because of his campaigns against the government's "racist and discriminatory polices" against Israeli Arabs.

The veteran activist is well-known among Arab charities and NGOs and is a regular participant in conference on discrimination in Israel and abroad and has been a virulent critic of government policy.

Unofficial sources say Makhoul was in contact with a number of foreign activists, some with links to groups classified by the government as terror organizations.

Hussein Abu Hasin, a lawyer who has handled several cases of spying charges, told Haaretz that espionage laws in Israel were so wide-ranging that an internet chat or telephone conversation with anyone in an 'enemy state' could lead to prosecution.

"The use of these laws has become draconian," Hasin said.

The arrests have sparked outrage among Israeli Arab organizations and rights groups, who claim that activists disappear from their homes in the middle of the night. They also accuse the courts of being at the beck and call of security services, who often bar suspects from visits with lawyers or from obtaining legal counsel.

Late last week, Israeli Arab rights groups, including Adallah, a center that promotes rights for Arabs in Israel, petitioned a Petah Tikva court to lift the gag order in the case. Adallah also plans to petition the High Court over the general matter of gag orders, in an effort to challenge the policy by which the orders are issued.

A mass rally is planned for Monday night in Haifa to protest the arrests of Said and Makhoul.

### **Israel detains Turkey national over illegal Gaza aid work**

Izzet Shahin, arrested in the West Bank by Israeli security forces two weeks ago, had been organizing a Gaza aid shipment.

The Israel Defense Forces and the Shin Bet arrested a Turkish national suspected of being a member of an outlawed Islamic group, a released gag order revealed on Monday.

Izzet Shahin, a volunteer for the Turkish NGO Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), was arrested in the West Bank by Israeli security forces two weeks ago and had been transferred to a Shin Bet investigation.

IHH, who had been organizing a Gaza aid boat planned to depart at the end of the month, was outlawed in Israel a few years ago.

According to the IHH website, the organization had been organizing a "major initiative...to deliver aid via the sea to the Gaza Strip, which has been under an embargo for over three years."

"Hundreds of concerned people will set out on 10 ships in May to take over 5,000 tons of relief aid and materials to Gaza," the website statement said,

In an unrelated affair earlier Monday, the military censor lifted a gag order on news that two Israeli Arab political activists were arrested last week on charges of spying and contact with a foreign agent from Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

Omar Said, a member of the Balad movement, and Amir Makhoul, director general of the charity Ittijah (Union of Arab Community-Based Associations) were detained by the Shin Bet security service and police anti-terror squads.

### **Medvedev arrives in Syria, may discuss Israel ties**

During the visit, the first formal trip by a Russian leader to Damascus, Assad is expected to ask Russia for new long-range missiles.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev arrived in Damascus on Monday, in the first official visit by a Russian or Soviet leader to Syria.

The visit is seen, among other things, as intended to increase Russia's influence in the Middle East, and is perhaps a foray by Moscow toward further involvement in possible future peace talks between Israel and its neighbor to the north.



Medvedev arrived in Damascus accompanied by his wife as well as a constituent of Russian businessmen.

The Russian President is scheduled to meet his Syrian counterpart Bashar Assad, with the two expected to discuss peace talks with Israel, as well as other issues such as Israel's nuclear program and planned arms deals between Moscow and Damascus.

According to some reports President Shimon Peres, whose Moscow visit runs parallel to Medvedev's trip, had passed a message to the Syrian president, indicating that Israel would not attack this summer.

Syria has also been rumored to be interested in acquiring advanced Russian-made Iskander surface-to-surface missiles, although sources had said Moscow was likely to refuse such a transaction. The timing of Medvedev's visit may run counter to U.S. policy, as President Barack Obama said Friday he had intended to renew sanctions against Syria because it posed a continuing threat to U.S. interests.

Obama, in a letter to Congress notifying it of his decision, accused Damascus of "supporting terrorism, pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs, and undermining U.S. and international efforts with respect to the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq." The United States, moreover, is delaying the displacement of a new American envoy to Syria. Medvedev's Syria visit also comes while Israeli President Shimon Peres was visiting Moscow, and in the face of recent Israeli allegations of a Syria-Hezbollah arms deal which included, among others, long-range Scud missiles.

It is also possible that Russia is also trying to signal to the Arab world of its intention to move closer to the more extreme side of the Arab world, which includes Iran Syria, Hezbollah, and Hama

On Saturday, the PLO Executive Committee announced that it had given the green light to Abbas to begin indirect negotiations with Israel. Abbas also met with Mitchell to discuss the manner in which the so-called proximity talks would be conducted.

The United States welcomed the PLO's decision as an important step in the peace process. "It is an important and welcome step," Crowley said.

Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat said Saturday after a meeting in Ramallah between Abbas and Mitchell that the discussions would be held over the four months allotted to address final-status issues such as borders and security arrangements. "The issues of Jerusalem and the settlements are part of the 1967 borders, so they will be discussed and negotiated," Erekat said.

Erekat said that during their meeting, Abbas gave Mitchell a letter outlining the Palestinian Authority's position on proximity talks and the issues it wants to discuss. Abbas would head the Palestinian negotiating team himself, Erekat said, adding that the Palestinians view the talks as aimed at "The end of the occupation and creation of a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel along the 1967 borders."

The talks appear to represent a U.S.-brokered compromise that meets both the Palestinian demand to address the issue of borders, and Israel's condition to discuss security arrangements. Both Palestinian and Israeli negotiators recognize that the two issues are intimately linked, and that any proposal or statement on either matter is likely to significantly influence any resolution on the other.

***Israel welcomes PLO decision.*** Prime Minister Netanyahu welcomed the decision to resume peace talks, urging that they be held unconditionally and lead swiftly to direct negotiations between the two sides.

A statement from Netanyahu spokesman Nir Hefetz said the prime minister "welcomes the resumption of peace talks."

Quoting Netanyahu, Hefetz added that "Israel's position was and remains that the talks ought to be conducted without preconditions and should quickly lead to direct negotiations."

Defense Minister Ehud Barak said that the U.S. administration expects Israel to do its part in facilitating U.S. efforts to advance the stalled peace process. "An essential condition for improving relations with the U.S. is taking steps that prove Israel is seriously committed to making decisions on the Palestinian issue once they reach the negotiating table," Barak said at a conference at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot.

"That will be judged by deeds, not by how much we smile at the White House. A comprehensive peace plan is needed, one that Israel stands behind. I'm not sure that that is possible with the current government," Barak said.

"Without an agreement, we will be subject to international isolation, and we will suffer a fate similar to that of Belfast or Bosnia, or a gradual transition from a paradigm of two states for two peoples to one of one state for two peoples, and some people will try to label us as similar to South Africa. That's why we must act," Barak said. If both sides are willing to make brave decisions, he said, "it will be possible to get to direct negotiations and a breakthrough toward an agreement."

In talks last week with Netanyahu and Barak, Mitchell asked that Israel make confidence-building measures over the next few weeks, both to build up PA institutions and encourage the Palestinians to shift more quickly to direct talks.

A senior official in Jerusalem said Israel would take such steps in the coming weeks, probably including the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, the removal of additional checkpoints and the transfer of certain West Bank areas to PA security control. Yasser Abed Rabbo, a member of the PLO Executive Committee and veteran peace negotiator, said the Palestinians had received assurances from the U.S. concerning "settlement activities and the necessity to halt them." He said the Obama administration had also promised to be tough in the event of "any provocations," and guaranteed that all core issues would be put on the table.

The PLO decision came despite warnings from the rival Palestinian group Hamas, which said Friday that the move would only legitimize Israel's occupation, Palestinian media reported.

"Absurd proximity talks" would only "give the Israeli occupation an umbrella to commit more crimes against the Palestinians," Hamas reportedly said. "Hamas calls on the PLO to stop selling illusions to the Palestinian people and announce the failure of their gambling on absurd talks."

### **Israel fights to keep Palestinians from sabotaging its admittance into OECD**

PA Foreign Minister sent letter to OECD countries calling to delay the vote because 'Israel infringes on Palestinians' human rights, violates OECD values.'

Israel is waging a last-ditch diplomatic fight in an effort to keep the Palestinian Authority from undermining the country's bid for membership in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Despite the Palestinian campaign, the Foreign Ministry expects the OECD Council to accept Israel as a member during its meeting at 5 P.M. on Monday.

Ministry officials said that over the last few days, the Palestinians have intensified their efforts to keep Israel out of the organization.

All new members require the approval of all 31 members.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki has sent a letter to all the foreign ministers of the OECD countries calling for the vote to be delayed because Israel infringes on Palestinians' human rights and therefore violates OECD values, he said.

Israel says Palestinian Prime Minister Salem Fayyad called many of the leaders of OECD countries over the past day to argue against Israel's acceptance. One of the Palestinian arguments is that Israel provided false financial data by not separating out the data related to the settlements.

"Fayyad's efforts to thwart Israel's participation in the organization are extremely grave, and even more so during a time when Israel wants to begin proximity talks in order to reach an agreement and a reconciliation between the nations," said Industry, Trade and Labor Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who has been involved in efforts to get Israel accepted. For its part, Israel has launched a campaign of its own to bolster support for its membership. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to several other world leaders on the phone and requested their support and assistance.

Israeli officials say acceptance would be an important stamp of approval for the country's economy, boosting its credit rating and strengthening ties with foreign investors.

Three OECD members - Switzerland, Ireland and Norway - have expressed reservations about Israel's membership. They have focused on the settlements, which Israel does not treat as a separate economic entity.

The unanimity rule means that Israel would not be allowed to join the OECD for now if any of those countries were to vote against it. That, in turn, has meant a lot of anxiety in Jerusalem, notwithstanding the reassurances. Under the pressure of potential rejection, the Foreign Ministry ordered its personnel to keep a low profile and refrain from speaking to the media.

"There is a concern that if we speak to the press, it's liable to cause damage to the election results," a ministry official said.

### **The Associated Press contributed to this report.**

Peace Now: Construction for largest East Jerusalem settlement has begun

Plan calls for the construction of 104 housing units on land where the former police headquarters was housed.

The Israeli anti-settlement group Peace Now said Sunday that renovation work has recently begun for the construction of 14 housing units in an old Israel Police station in East Jerusalem, where plans are in the works for the largest Jewish neighborhood in that part of the city.

Some 50 Jewish families currently live in six buildings in Ras al-Amud, where an American Jewish millionaire has purchased land for Jewish settlement.

The plan calls for the construction of 104 housing units on the land where the former headquarters of the Judea and Samaria police was housed before it was moved to a new building in Area E-1.

The plan for the building of the new settlement, Ma'aleh David, was filed for approval last summer by the relevant municipal committee at the Jerusalem municipality.

But Peace Now said renovations within the former station did not require municipal building permits - official approval that could torpedo the new peace negotiations.

Once the police evacuated the area it returned to the control of the Committee of the Bokharan Community, which has held ownership over the property and the structures there since before 1948.

The municipality has treaded carefully in its approval of new construction plans since tensions rose between Israel and the U.S. after new construction in East Jerusalem was announced during U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's visit in March.

The new settlement is planned to be connected to an existing Jewish neighborhood, Ma'aleh Zeitim, and together will be occupied by some 200 families, forming the largest Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem.

According to the plan, the former police structure will be razed and replaced by seven structures ranging between four and five stories in height.

The plan involves high-end housing and the complex will include a swimming pool, mini "country club," community library and parking spaces. A synagogue, kindergartens and a mikveh (Jewish ritual purification bath) are also planned for construction there.

A foot bridge will connect the new settlement with existing ones on the other side of the road. The settlement of Ma'aleh Zeitim across the street currently houses 51 families and in its second phase of development, which is currently being completed, another 66 housing units are being built.

When the two neighborhoods are completed and linked, a Jewish settlement of more than 1,000 people will be situated in the heart of Ras al-Amud, a neighborhood comprising 14,000 Palestinians.

### **Lebanon says it won't ask Hezbollah to disarm**

Lebanese President Michel Suleiman said Hezbollah cannot disarm before a defense strategy is reached that would also address future Israeli attacks.

Lebanon's president says the government cannot ask Hezbollah to give up its weapons at a time of heightened tension with Israel.

President Michel Suleiman said Saturday that Lebanon cannot and must not tell Hezbollah to disarm before reaching a deal on a defense strategy that would also address any future Israeli attacks. A United Nations deal to end the 2006 war between Israel and the Shiite militants required Hezbollah to disarm, but Lebanon's politicians have been unable to agree on a national defense strategy that would integrate the group's weapons into the regular armed forces.

A recent Israeli claim that Hezbollah's arsenal includes Scud missiles transferred from Syria has provoked another exchange of warnings between Israel and Lebanon.

### **Abbas: Obama won't allow provocations from either Palestinians or Israel**

Abbas aide: Obama committed to two-state solution; Netanyahu lauds Arab League vote to renew talks

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, on the verge of indirect negotiations with Israel, said Sunday that U.S. President Barack Obama had given a commitment that he would not allow "any provocative measures by either side."

Abbas told the Palestinian newspaper al-Ayyam in an interview published Sunday that the U.S. leader had invited him to Washington later this month "in an attempt to push the peace process forward".

Abbas gave no specific date for the visit. An aide to the Palestinian president said earlier Sunday that Obama had assured the Palestinian Authority that his administration is committed to a two-state solution and that a future Palestinian state will be independent and have territorial continuity.

Abbas' meeting with Obama next month will be the first since hosted for a trilateral meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in September at the United Nations.

PA secretary general Tayeb Abdel Rahim said Obama had relayed that message in a letter delivered by U.S. Mideast envoy George Mitchell while he visited the region last week in a bid to restart peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

Rahim also said the U.S. vowed to assign blame publicly to any party that takes provocative actions or jeopardizes prospects for peace.

Obama also reportedly has promised Abbas a prolonged Israeli settlement freeze in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Army Radio reported earlier on Sunday quoting London-based Arab-language newspaper Al-Hayat.

According to the report, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told the Arab League ministers Saturday night that Obama made his promise off the record in order to avoid conflict with right-wing factions in Israel.

Palestinian sources also claim that Israel has committed to continuing the moratorium on settlement construction in the West Bank beyond the original ten months Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared last December. An Israeli official said Mitchell was expected back in the region on Monday to further negotiations ahead of the proximity talks. The Arab League on Saturday endorsed a proposal for the Palestinians to hold U.S.-mediated indirect negotiations with Israel. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) will meet later this week and is also expected to approve the indirect talks.

Abbas said the talks would get under way once both bodies had given their nod. On Saturday night, Netanyahu praised the Arab League's endorsement of renewed peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, scheduled to start mid-May. Responding to the League's decision, Netanyahu said in a statement: "Israel is willing to renew negotiations with the Palestinians at any time and at any place."

### **Israel To Impose Further Sanctions On Detainees**

Israeli paper, Maariv, reported that Israeli Internal Security Minister, Yitzhak Aharonovitch, retracted his opposition to imposing further sanctions and restrictions on the detainees in an attempt to push Hamas movement to change its stances on prisoner-swap. On Wednesday, Aharonovitch held a special session on the issue and stated that he fears such sanctions would lead to "riots" in prisons and detention camps.

Maariv said that imposing sanctions would push Hamas to conclude a swap-deal under Israel's terms. Likud member of Knesset, Danni Ayalon, presented a draft law stating that "detainees who are members of terrorist groups, holding an Israeli soldier captive without

visitations, should not be allowed visitations". He believes that denying the detainees from their basic rights will be the most effective measure to pressure Hamas. The new measures would include limiting lawyer visitations to the minimum allowed, denying visitation rights and in some cases limiting them, confiscating TV and radio sets, preventing the entry of newspapers and magazines and preventing them from receiving any education. The Israeli government would be discussing the draft this coming Sunday, but Maariv said that Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, would attempt to delay the vote for a week or two while Ayalon insists that the law be discussed as soon as possible. Israel already imposed several sanctions on the detainees, such as preventing them from their visitation rights, forcing them to wear prison suits, preventing them from watching several Arabic satellite TVs such as Al Jazeera, and several other restrictions. In a direct violation to the International Law, Palestinian detainees are tortured during interrogation, held for extended periods without charges or trial, and denied their right to medical treatment. The latest casualty among the detainees was Raed Abu Hammad who died on April 16 after he was hit by Israeli interrogators on the center of his spine and the back on his neck. Nearly 200 Palestinian detainees died of torture and abuse, more than 50 died of medical negligence. Hundreds of detainees died after their release due to illnesses and effects of torture and gunshot wounds suffered prior or during the course of their arrest. On April 17, the Palestinian Prisoners Day, the PPS reported that Israel arrested more than 70.000 Palestinians since 2000, 800 of them were women and 8000 were children. Qaddoura Fares, head of the Palestinian Prisoners Society (PPS), stated that the current number of detainees imprisoned by Israel is 7000, held in 25 prisons, interrogation centers and detention camps. Fares added that Israel is holding captive 16 legislators and ministers, 36 female detainees including 4 mothers, and 340 children. 5700 detainees are from the West Bank, 780 are from the Gaza Strip, 450 from Jerusalem and 47 detainees from the Arab world.