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Summary

Egypt

Widespread allegations of vote rigging dog the newly-elected Shura Council, which meets next week to elect a chairman and two deputies, reports Gamal Essam El-Din

The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) swept the mid-term of Shura Council elections, ending with 80, or more than 95 per cent, of the 88 seats which were up for grabs. Opposition parties, which fielded 39 out of the total 446 candidates, won just five seats. The Tagammu's Salah Misbah won in the Nile-Delta governorate of Damietta; Al-Geel's Ahmed Al-Agouz and the Arab Nasserist's Mohsen Attia in the Old Cairo districts of Gammaliya and Azbakiya and Al-Ghad's Moussa Mustafa Moussa in Giza.

The original Nile pact gives Egypt the lion's share of the river's total flow of 84 billion cbm [Makary] Five East African countries have announced their refusal to go back on a deal they signed last month to share the waters of the Nile, despite fierce criticism from Egypt and Sudan. The stand was adopted as the latest meeting of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, ended with open disagreements on Sunday. After more than a decade of talks driven by anger over the perceived injustice of a previous Nile water treaty signed in 1929, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya signed the agreement in May without their northern neighbours.

An oil spill, which was detected at Egypt's Red Sea coast in Hurghada, could have come from a ship emptying its tanks in the Gulf of Suez, as the spill was limited, a report by the country's Ministry of Oil said Thursday. Oil is washed up along the public beach at the Red Sea resort of Hurghada, in southern Egypt, on June 23, 2010, which attacks hundreds of thousands of tourists all year round. Egypt's oil minister Sameh Fahmi has said the government is considering reducing "The oil leak was not continuous. This is an indication that it could not have spilled from an oil rig," the report said.

Egyptian authorities denied Iranian claims it has barred a Gaza-bound aid ship sent by the Iranian Red Crescent from entering the Suez Canal. Iranian claims it has barred a Gaza-bound aid ship sent by the Iranian Red Crescent from entering the Suez Canal. The official Middle East News Agency quoted an official at the Suez Canal Authority as denying reports on preventing the ship from using the waterway.

While Egypt pledges to improve its human rights record in Geneva, NGOs remain skeptical, reports Doaa El-Bey- In the face of growing calls to end the state of emergency the government adopted a defensive approach to its human rights record in front of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) which concluded its first Universal Periodic Review of Egypt in Geneva earlier this week. During the meeting, Egypt pledged to implement 140 recommendations from 165 presented by other state delegations. The remaining 25 recommendations are still under review. The government continues to insist that human rights violations are individual acts and that political reform is moving forward, whereas civil society organisations argue abuses are systematic and meaningful political reform non-existent. Egypt remains committed to ending the state of emergency, and will do so as soon as an anti-terrorism law is enacted. The delay in passing such a law is due to its complexity," he told the council.

A UN report on Egyptian youth launched concluded that nine interrelated constraints face Egyptian youth as they transition from childhood to adulthood. The nine constraints outlined in "Youth in Egypt: Building the Future," the 2010 Egypt Human Development Report (EHDR), include "waithood" which is the period in which youth wait for their lives to begin and during which they are financially unable. The report also outlines education as a major constraint, highlighting the fact that 27 percent of youth between 18

and 29 have not completed their basic education in addition to the fact that education in Egypt as a whole is of low quality.

During her appearance on the talk show “Manchet” with Gaber Al-Qarmouty, Islamic studies scholar, Souad Saleh stirred controversy after she said it is against the Islamic Sharia for a Christian to assume the presidential role in Egypt, seeing as it is a Muslim-majority country. In Saleh’s opinion, Christians should be given the opportunity to occupy prestigious positions such as ministers and university heads, but not the top job, as it goes against Sharia. Pope Shenouda, she said, would agree with her adherence to her religion. The scholar backed up her argument with a Quranic verse that described the relationship between Muslims and “infidels.”

The debate about appointing women judges is raging not only in Egypt, but also in a number of other Arab countries. Mistaken idea: It had taken so long for women to become judges in Egypt, because of the culture and the mistaken idea that women are not qualified for this sensitive job. The Cairo-based Arab Women's Association (AWA) discussed this issue at its third conference, with the participation of five Egyptian female judges and eight female judges from other Arab countries. “In 1998, at its first conference, the Association was the first body to draw attention to the fact that the Egyptian women were deprived of being judges, while eleven other Arab countries granted women this right,” Fatma Khafagi, a member, told the conference. It was after that first conference that the AWA decided to launch a campaign to support women wishing to become judges, she told the gathering hosted by the Arab League.

Iraq

The conflicting political statements issued by well-heeled public information impresarios in Iraq could drive the outside observer to despair. Here are most recent confusing examples. There is a widely circulated piece of information that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and the one who covets his job, Ayad Allawi, himself a former prime minister, are scheduled to meet any day to deal with mechanisms to move the political process forward. There is an alleged plan whereby the executive authority would be divided between Al-Maliki and Allawi, with one serving as prime minister and the other serving as president. Under this political plan, the Kurds will be persuaded to take the post of speaker of parliament. Contradictory statements immediately followed.

Turkish troops patrol in Sirnak Province, near the Iraqi border, on June 21. Turkish troops deployed along the Iraqi border today after a raid by separatist Kurdish militants left 12 Turkish soldiers dead on June 19. State media said elite troops rappelled down from helicopters and poured out of mechanized infantry units in the operation to surround Kurdish rebels. Meanwhile, security sources were quoted as saying helicopter gunships bombed suspected positions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerrilla group in the provinces of Hakkari and Sirnak.

The oil-rich city of Kirkuk has received more than \$65 million (approx. 80 billion dinars) as part of its share from oil exports. Under new Iraqi legislation, oil-producing provinces have the right to \$1 from each barrel their oil fields export. The sum was Kirkuk’s share for the past four months. The money should be used specifically for reconstruction and development purposes. The central government has directly transferred the money to a commission implementing reconstruction projects in the province. “We have formed a committee to identify the projects on which the money will be spent,” said Qassem Hamza, a senior provincial official.

Iraq's al-Qaeda group is said to be directing its deadly and bloody car and suicide bombings against Iraqi banks. In one week, attacks blamed on the group killed at least 35 people and injured scores as its suicide bombers are said to have targeted a state-owned bank and a private bank. The first attack targeting the Central Bank on June 13 brought most of Baghdad to a standstill. The government has blamed the daring attack in which at least 26 people were killed on Qaeda operatives despite allegations that Iraqi security personnel were involved. There was heavy gunfire and plumes of smoke rose over Baghdad skyline but none of the attackers was killed or captured.

Iraq's anticorruption chief says Lebanon has extradited a former Baghdad government official suspected of stealing millions of dollars from the government, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Judge Abdel Rahim al-Ugaily, chairman of the anticorruption commission, told RFI on June 22 that Zina Saud al-Timimi and her mother, brother, sister, and brother-in-law were flown back to Iraq on June 19 after being handed over to Iraqi anticorruption officials in Beirut. Ugaily added that some \$5 million believed to have been stolen by Timimi has been recovered. He said \$600,000 is still missing, but the commission has confiscated vehicles and property purchased by Timimi and her relatives equal to that amount. Ugaily said that in the first five months of 2010, his commission investigated corruption cases involving the theft, misappropriation, or embezzlement of some 117 billion Iraqi dinars (\$14.55 million) from the government.

Palestine Israel

Thousands of Palestinian refugees have staged a demonstration in the Lebanese capital, demanding the government in Beirut to grant them basic civil rights. Thousands of Palestinian refugees have staged a demonstration in the Lebanese capital, demanding the government in Beirut to grant them basic civil rights. Several Lebanese non-government organizations joined thousands of Palestinians who gathered outside the United Nations headquarters in Beirut on Sunday, a Press TV correspondent reported. The rally comes as Lebanese politicians are caught in a debate on whether to give the refugees social and economic rights such as the choice of jobs and the ownership of property.

Israel has threatened to use military force to take the full control of a newly-discovered gas field partly in Lebanese waters in the Mediterranean. Israel has threatened to use military force to take the full control of a newly-discovered gas field partly in Lebanese waters in the Mediterranean Sea. Israel's Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau made the remarks after Beirut announced that parts of the giant reserves actually belong to Lebanon and that it does not allow Tel Aviv to loot Lebanon's resources.

The World Bank Board of Executive Directors approved today a proposal to provide \$55 million in funding for projects in the West Bank and Gaza (WBG) to support Palestinian economic recovery and development. The funding will be channeled through the Trust Fund for the West Bank and Gaza and will support projects in water and sanitation, land administration, social services, NGO development and public sector capacity building. A central component is designed to shore up the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP.)

The Ofek 9 will join other Israeli spy satellites, such as this one launched in 2007 [EPA] Israel has launched its latest military spy satellite, reportedly increasing its capacity to intelligence-gather on enemies such as Iran. The Ofek 9 was blasted into orbit by an Israeli-made rocket on Tuesday, from the Palmachim air base south of Tel Aviv, joining

three other Israeli spy satellites in space. The defence ministry said the satellite had achieved its proper orbit, describing it as "a surveillance satellite with advanced technological capabilities". Officials said it has a high-resolution camera and would join its other satellites to give Israel considerable coverage of sensitive areas, adding the camera could pick out missiles and launchers on the ground.

Detailed news

Egypt

Political front

Shura election results contested

Widespread allegations of vote rigging dog the newly-elected Shura Council, which meets next week to elect a chairman and two deputies, reports Gamal Essam El-Din

The ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) swept the mid-term of Shura Council elections, ending with 80, or more than 95 per cent, of the 88 seats which were up for grabs. Opposition parties, which fielded 39 out of the total 446 candidates, won just five seats. The Tagammu's Salah Misbah won in the Nile-Delta governorate of Damietta; Al-Geel's Ahmed Al-Agouz and the Arab Nasserist's Mohsen Attia in the Old Cairo districts of Gammaliya and Azbakiya and Al-Ghad's Moussa Mustafa Moussa in Giza. On Monday Wifky Madani, an independent candidate who won a seat in the Upper-Egypt governorate of Sohag in the run-off round on 8 June, decided to join the liberal-oriented Wafd Party. It is the first time that five opposition parties have been represented by elected deputies on the 264-member Shura Council since it was created in 1980.

Three independents also won seats. In the next few days President Hosni Mubarak will issue a presidential decree appointing 44 members, a large number of which are expected to be existing appointees. They include Moufid Shehab, minister of state for legal and parliamentary affairs; Abdel-Rehim Nafei, the Shura Council's deputy chairman; Ragaa Al-Arabi, a former prosecutor-general and the current chairman of the Council's Legislative and Constitutional Affairs Committee and Khallaf Abdel-Gaber Khallaf, chairman of the Economic and Fiscal Affairs Committee. It is widely anticipated that Mamdouh El-Beltagui, a former minister of tourism, and Mohamed Zaki Abu Amer, a former minister for parliamentary affairs, will lose their seats.

Political observers believe the appointees will include a high proportion of Copts and women. The council currently includes 21 women, 20 of them appointees and just one elected member. The recent poll brought a second elected woman -- Hoda El-Tabalawi, NDP candidate in the Nile-Delta governorate of Kafr El-Sheikh. The council also includes 11 Coptic members, all appointed by Mubarak. The majority of them are businessmen. In addition, three Copts -- Eid Labib and Malek Yacoub Qaldas in Minya and Assiut, and Karam Bekhit in Alexandria -- won seats in the latest poll, all of them members of the NDP. Osama El-Ghazali Harb, Al-Ahram journalist and an appointed member of the Shura Council, announced earlier this week that he would be leaving the council. "Appointed members have no role to play beyond rubber-stamping laws and decrees," said Harb, who is also chairman of the liberal-oriented Democratic Front Party which boycotted the Shura elections. studied the 2007 Shura election, points out that "most Shura Council appointees in recent years belong to the NDP's Policies Committee led by President Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal." "This committee currently plays a leading

role in Egyptian politics and most of its members have become Shura Council appointees." The Shura Council will meet on 24 June to elect a chairman, two deputies and the heads of 10 committees. Safwat El-Sherif, NDP secretary-general and chairman of the council since 2004, is expected to be re-elected for the third time. His two deputies, Abdel-Rehim Nafei and Ahmed Al-Amawi, are also expected to continue in their posts. NDP members are also slated to occupy all the leading positions on the council's 10 committees. The NDP's clean sweep of the Shura polls was denounced by Muslim Brotherhood and independent MPs in the People's Assembly this week. Many took the ruling NDP and security forces to task for rigging the election. They also criticised the Higher Election Commission (HEC), alleging that its performance had been partisan. The Brotherhood, which currently holds 86 seats in the People's Assembly, fielded 15 candidates but failed to secure a single seat. In a meeting of the assembly's Defence and National Security Committee on 12 June, Brotherhood and NDP deputies clashed. Saad El-Hussein, a Brotherhood deputy for Mahala and a member of the group's Guidance Bureau, lashed out at NDP members, describing them as "liars and experts at rigging elections". ***Brotherhood deputies said HEC figures about the election had been falsified.*** "It is utterly incredible that HEC officials expect to be believed when they claim that more than seven million registered voters turned out in the first round and more than three and a half million turned out in the second," said El-Hussein. In his study of the 2007 election Elshobaki estimated turnout at around three per cent. NDP MPs responded to the accusations by launching a verbal attack against Brotherhood deputies. MP Mohamed Abdel-Fattah Omar, a former police officer, described Brotherhood MPs as "fanatics who should thank President Mubarak for allowing them to run as independents rather than attack the NDP". Abdel-Rahman Radi, another NDP MP, lamented that the security forces had dealt too leniently with Muslim Brotherhood supporters during the election campaigns, claiming "Brotherhood candidates were allowed by security forces to raise religious slogans in violation of the constitution and the HEC's instructions". Independent MP Talaat El-Sadat, a nephew of late president Anwar El-Sadat, said the NDP's sweep of the Shura polls was possible only because of the lack of full judicial supervision. "I think that Article 88 of the constitution should be re-amended to re-institute judicial supervision which will held put a stop to poll rigging," he said.

In a statement on 9 June the Wafd Party said it feared that "the rigging of the recent Shura poll would be repeated in the next parliamentary and presidential elections." Major-General Hamed Rashed, director of the Interior Ministry's Legal Affairs Department, denied that security forces had a hand in manipulating the polls. "The role the security forces played in the Shura election was confined to ensuring that candidates did not violate HEC instructions," said Rashed. A day after the 8 June second round poll the HEC announced that turnout had reached 14 per cent (3.9 million) of registered voters. The HEC has received 498 complaints against the results of the election, all of which, it says, will be investigated.

The view from abroad

Mohamed El-Baradei takes the NAC's message of reform to London, reports Gamal Essam El-Din Mohamed El-Baradei was in London this week, meeting with Egyptians living in the UK and other European countries. The visit was organised by members of

the National Assembly for Change (NAC) which was founded by El-Baradei and a group of political activists last February. George Ishaq, a leading member of the NAC, told Al - Ahram Weekly that El-Baradei's visit came as part of the NAC's efforts to disseminate its agenda for change and political reform among Egyptian expatriates. During a public meeting organised on Saturday, El-Baradei surprised the audience by announcing that he had "no wish to run in presidential elections scheduled next year". "The presidential election," he said, "will be a political farce." "Right now I am focussed on promoting the case for change. The Egyptian people are the only force capable of achieving reform." El-Baradei went on to describe himself as "a crusader for change and not a professional politician". "My greatest hope is to see my country in the same way I saw it when I was a young man," El-Baradei told the audience. "The pre-1952 period was one in which Egypt was a beacon of democracy." "Since 1952," he continued, "when the Egyptian people were stripped of any say in the internal affairs of their country, they have been told by others what they must do. When those in charge decided to move towards the East we became allies of the Soviet Union and adopted a centrally planned economy. Later, when they shifted loyalty to the West, we became allies of the United States and turned to a market economy." According to El-Baradei, "the deterioration of conditions in Egypt and the lack of democracy is the fault of policy rather than individuals." El-Baradei launched a scathing attack against the recent Shura Council elections, denouncing results in which "the Muslim Brotherhood, which has 88 seats in parliament, is supposed to have failed to win a single seat". El-Baradei concluded his London speech by urging all Egyptians to sign the NAC's manifesto of change. "Your signatures are very important. The more signatures we collect, the stronger we will be in standing up to the regime. No force can challenge the will of the people." El-Baradei's visit to London followed the appearance of rifts within the NAC. Hamdi Qandil and Hassan Nafaa, two leading members of the NAC, publicly criticised El-Baradei's prolonged absences from Egypt. Qandil surprised journalists by insisting that "El-Baradei has never been a leader of the NAC or even a member of it." "He wants to be free, not bound by any agenda of action or anything that gets in the way of his schedule," said Qandil. Ishaq told Al-Ahram Weekly that, "El-Baradei has a lot of international commitments to meet." "He wants to crusade for change, not to be restricted by the agenda of a single group. He was the major force behind the creation of NAC, and his relationship with the NAC remains strong. It is NAC, after all, that arranged his London visit," said Ishaq. Differences between El-Baradei and some NAC political activists have been exacerbated by El-Baradei's recent meetings with Muslim Brotherhood leaders and his visit, two weeks ago, to one of their main enclaves in Fayoum. Nasserist Hamdi Qandil is opposed to any kind of political partnership between El-Baradei and the Muslim Brotherhood. Nafaa said he hoped that "the Brotherhood's recent rapprochement with El-Baradei is not just a tactical step aimed at pressuring the regime". "El-Baradei believes, correctly, that the Muslim Brotherhood is a major political force and a moderate Islamic group. As long as it is committed to a civilian state it should be encouraged to participate in political life rather than being isolated," said Ishaq. "I have political differences with the Brotherhood but they cannot prevent me from defending the group's right to participate in political life," said El-Baradei. "Every force should be allowed to explain its ideas and ideology honestly and rationally. It is up to the people to judge between them." In an interview with the independent Al-Dostour, El-Baradei explained his priorities. "What I want to see is a

critical mass of Egyptians who believe in change, pressuring the regime to democratise. If it then refuses it will have to bear the consequences." "The required critical mass may not appear overnight but with the support of 250,000 Egyptians we could perhaps compel the regime to change 30 or 40 articles of the constitution." El-Baradei argued that, "anyone participating [under current regulations] in the farce of next year's presidential election will be betraying the will of the people". "If I stood in the 2011 presidential election what will happen is this: the regime will rig the vote, allowing me 35 per cent or so of the vote, simply because they imagine that would lend their own candidate some legitimacy." "We are still a year away from the presidential election. Should something happen to guarantee that the poll is conducted with a minimum level of integrity I could change my mind and run."

ElBaradei leads anti-torture rally

ElBaradei has said he is considering running in the 2011 presidential vote [Reuters] Mohamed ElBaradei, the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has led a protest against alleged abuses by the police in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. At least 4,000 people greeted ElBaradei, who has become a prominent pro-democracy campaigner, as he arrived to offer condolences to the family of Khaled Mohammed Saeed, an Egyptian youth who human rights groups say was beaten to death by police. The protest on Friday, which was ElBaradei's second public appearance this month and the first in which his family have joined him, was his biggest rally since he returned to Egypt after leaving the IAEA. Crowds chanted pro-democracy slogans and waved images of Saeed while ElBaradei, flanked by worshippers, emerged from a mosque after Muslim prayers. Youths and activists from political and online groups including the Facebook group "ElBaradei for presidency of 2011" joined the protest. Some chanted "Down Down [Egyptian president] Hosni Mubarak" and "Saeed you are a martyr" while rushing to meet ElBaradei.

Rallying point Egyptian authorities have said Saeed died after choking while on drugs, denying that torture or violence was the cause of his death. Breaking the barrier of fear is an incremental process that takes time. But with democracy we will have no fear" However, numerous witnesses have reportedly given Human Rights Watch (HRW) corroborating descriptions of Saeed being beaten to death, prompting the rights group on Thursday to call on Egypt to prosecute the culprits. Amr el-Shobky, a political analyst, said: "We know the price Egyptian citizens pay for giving testimony against the interior ministry or the police force. Yet despite that, those who saw what happened spoke of it." Saeed's death has become a rallying point for government opponents demanding an end to 30 years of emergency law, which they say allows police to abuse citizens with impunity. "This gathering of people from all walks of life and the anger they expressed against practices of torture is a message to the regime that Egyptians are against such inhumane practices," ElBaradei told Reuters. "Breaking the barrier of fear is an incremental process that takes time. But with democracy we will have no fear," ElBaradei said.

Pent up frustration Thousands of riot police spread across the city and surrounded the mosque, forming a tight cordon around the protesters, but only after ElBaradei was allowed to leave the area. Earlier protests in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, against police brutality have been forcibly broken up by police and dozens of protesters detained.

ElBaradei visited the neighbouring city of Fayoum in June in a signature drive campaign that drew some 3,500 supporters. The events in part reflect pent up frustration in Egypt after almost three decades of rule by Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, and with an emergency law that gives authorities wide powers to quash dissent. Mubarak has no designated successor and has not said if he will seek another term in the 2011 presidential election. If he does not, the most common view is that he will hand power to his politician son Gamal, 46. ElBaradei, a Nobel peace prize winner, has said he may run in the 2011 presidential vote if there were constitutional reforms, but the existing rules make it almost impossible for an independent to get on the ballot.

Mock trial for Egypt's PM, 2 ministers

A maverick teachers' union has said it will arrange a mock trial for Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif and ministers of education and health over the recent death of four invigilators. Egyptian Minister of education Ahmed zaki badr "The trial will begin after the end of thanwaya amma (secondary school certificate) exams," said Abdel Hafez Tayel, the director of the Right to Education, a non-governmental group. "The charges levelled against the three officials are putting the lives of teachers in danger and failure to provide favourable working conditions to them while engaged in exam supervision." The exams, traditionally associated with dread in Egypt, will end on Saturday. The four teachers died in the southern Egyptian cities of Assiut and Sohag during last week's heat wave.

Geo strategic front

Nile issue:

Suez drivers' strike causes chaos

Hundreds of drivers of Suez-bound mini buses launched a strike Saturday in Cairo to protest against the brutal attack by a Government official against one of their colleagues, stranding thousands of commuters. Hundreds of drivers of Suez-bound mini buses launched a strike Saturday in Cairo to protest against the brutal attack by a Government official against one of their colleagues, stranding thousands of commuters. In the absence of these privately-owned buses, which constitute the backbone of inter-provincial transport, thousands of commuters were stranded in Cairo and could not travel to Suez, eye witnesses said. The drivers are protesting against the beating of one of their colleagues by a Government official during a dispute over fare earlier in the day, the witnesses said. The striking drivers blocked entrances of el-Marg el-Gadida depot on the outskirts of Cairo, where hundreds of mini- buses stood idle during the day. No Government official was available for an immediate comment.

E African nations firm on Nile deal

The original Nile pact gives Egypt the lion's share of the river's total flow of 84 billion cbm [Makary] Five East African countries have announced their refusal to go back on a deal they signed last month to share the waters of the Nile, despite fierce criticism from Egypt and Sudan. The stand was adopted as the latest meeting of the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, ended with open disagreements on Sunday.

After more than a decade of talks driven by anger over the perceived injustice of a previous Nile water treaty signed in 1929, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Kenya signed the agreement in May without their northern neighbours. "The signed [agreement] can't be unsigned," Asfaw Dingamo, the Ethiopian minister for water resources, said, referring to the pact signed in May. "But we hope to reach a consensus and I hope to do it very soon." The five signatories have given the other Nile Basin countries - Egypt, Sudan, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo - one year to join the pact. The new deal would need at least six signatories to come into force. Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have not signed the deal yet and have so far been tight-lipped about whether they plan to or not.

Sudan's reaction esponding to the developments, Kamal Ali Mohamed, Sudan's water minister, said his country would now stop co-operating with the NBI because the agreement raised legal issues. "We are freezing activities regarding the NBI until these issues, these legal implications, are resolved," he said. Mohamed's statement drew expected criticism from Asfaw, who said the Sudanese had not revealed their intention to freeze co-operation during the two-day meeting. Separately, Mohamed Nasreddin Allam, Egypt's water resources and irrigation minister, told the Reuters news agency that a meeting to discuss the Nile agreement would be held in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, some time between September and November. "The deal can not be forced upon us. It will only be an obligation for those countries, not Egypt's," he said. "Ask the Egyptians to leave their culture and go and live in the desert because [you] need to take this water and to add it to other countries? No.

"Egypt has no source of water other than that coming from upstream countries. The upstream countries have many sources and aren't managing our Nile properly. That's what we are asking for."

Vital water source Mena, the official Egyptian news agency, said on Monday that other states had said they "understood Egypt and Sudan's position ... and based on this an exceptional ministerial ... will be held to decide how to move forward in a matter that serves all Nile Basin states". Stretching more than 6,600km from Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean, the Nile is a vital water and energy source for the nine countries through which it flows. Egypt is almost totally dependent on the Nile and already threatened by climate change, is closely watching hydroelectric dam construction in East Africa. Under the original pact Egypt, which faces possible water shortages by 2017, is entitled to 55.5 billion cubic metres a year - the lion's share of the Nile's total flow of around 84 billion cubic metres. Around 85 per cent of the Nile's waters originate from Ethiopia and the Lake Basin is estimated to harbour more than half of Kenya's surface water resources.

Egypt, Sudan 'won't be forced' on Nile

Egypt and Sudan will not be forced into signing a new deal on the sharing of the Nile's waters, officials stressed Sunday at talks in Addis Ababa. A general view shows Egyptian sailboats, known as falukas, and a small ferryboat (back) used by locals to cross from one side of the River Nile. The water ministers of Egypt and Sudan, the largest consumers of the Nile's waters, were in the Ethiopian capital to discuss the increasingly contentious issue, which is pitting them against five other riparian countries. Ethiopia, Tanzania,

Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda inked a framework in March replacing a 1929 colonial-era treaty between Egypt and Britain which gave Cairo veto power over upstream projects.

"The deal can not be forced upon us. It will only be an obligation for those countries, not Egypt's," Mohamed Nasreddin Allam, Egypt's water resources minister, told AFP.

The new deal would need at least six signatories to come into force with indications that DR Congo and Burundi may soon follow suit, but Egypt and Sudan have so far refused to give up the previous arrangement which gave them the lion's share of the river's flow. Allam was speaking on the sidelines of a meeting of ministers from the Nile Basin Initiative which sat to review progress of the 11-year old scheme. "Egypt has no source of water other than that coming from upstream countries. The upstream countries have many sources and aren't managing our Nile properly. That's what we are asking for," he said. "The problem can be solved easily if we appreciate the conditions of each country," Allam added. "We will never sign the treaty unless all controversial issues are resolved. Legal implications will still exist even if six countries sign it," his Sudanese counterpart Kemal Ali Mohamed told AFP. "We are happy that these countries have agreed to meet in an extraordinary meeting," he said, referring to another meeting to be held later this year. The two-day meeting concluded on Sunday with Egypt handing over the body's chair to Ethiopia. At the heart of the dispute is a 1959 agreement between Egypt and Sudan that 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 hydro-power projects, not subjected to an Egyptian veto. Egypt, a mostly arid country that relies on the Nile for the majority of its water, argues up-stream countries could make better use of rainfall and have other sources of water.

Oil rigs did not cause Hurghada spill

An oil spill, which was detected at Egypt's Red Sea coast in Hurghada, could have come from a ship emptying its tanks in the Gulf of Suez, as the spill was limited, a report by the country's Ministry of Oil said Thursday. Oil is washed up along the public beach at the Red Sea resort of Hurghada, in southern Egypt, on June 23, 2010, which attacks hundreds of thousands of tourists all year round. Egypt's oil minister Sameh Fahmi has said the government is considering reducing drilling. "The oil leak was not continuous. This is an indication that it could not have spilled from an oil rig," the report said. "There is evidence that sediments on some islands have turned into a liquid state due to hot weather, and driven it to the shore," it said. The report added that oil rigs in the Gulf were set up 45 years ago, and similar leaks had been also detected on the Mediterranean Sea, where no oil rigs exist. "It is quite clear that the leak could never have come from an oil rig," it added. Egyptian media said Saturday that the leakage had caused a spill 20 kilometres long along the coast of the Red Sea city Hurghada, 504km east of Cairo.

On Tuesday, Egypt's Minister of Oil Sameh Fahmi said the Government was considering reducing drilling in the Gulf of Suez after crude washed ashore for several days. On Monday, the Prime Minister's spokesman Magdy Rady said a spillage from an oil rig was the "probable cause" of the leak, adding that an investigation was ongoing to determine the source of the pollution. Egypt produces about 700,000 barrels a day and the oil ministry says there are 188 rigs operating in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Suez, where the country's largest oil field, Belayim, is located.

Egypt lashes back at Hamas

The Egyptian Gazette Online and Reuters- Sunday, June 27, 2010- Egyptian Foreign Ministry has warned the Islamist movement of making 'irresponsible' statements after a senior official in the group, which rules the Gaza Strip, has criticised the Egyptian policy. Hossam Zaki, the spokesman for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. "The leaders of the movement living in Damascus (Syria) control everything, while those in Gaza have no influence," said Hossam Zaki, the spokesman for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. He was commenting on remarks by Mahmoud al-Zahar, a senior official in Hamas in Gaza, who criticised Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit. "The movement's leaders should stop provoking Egypt because the response will land Hamas in an embarrassing situation," added Zaki. Egypt has been unsuccessfully trying to mediate between Hamas and its rival faction Fatah.

Economic front

Financing a roof

New regulations may help realise the full potential of Egypt's real estate market, Sherine Nasr reports. Lucky were those who lived during the merry old times when apartments up for rent outnumbered potential tenants. Nine years after issuing the Mortgage Finance Law, low and middle income classes are still struggling to afford to buy a house.

But while the majority of Egyptians lack the means to provide for decent housing, the market has witnessed an unprecedented growth of construction during the past few years -- 71 per cent growth during 2009 compared to other sectors such as tourism.

In 2009, the construction sector contributed 11.4 per cent of GDP while during the second quarter of 2010 alone it has so far contributed 4.8 per cent of GDP according to statistics released by the Ministry of Economic Development. And while mortgage finance lending from banks and companies remains slow and below expectations, figures show that it has grown from LE200 million in 2005 to LE4.43 billion in March 2010. Mortgage financed units have also grown from 865 in 2005 to 18,351 in 2009. These figures could witness further growth by next year. "An ambitious plan to promote the mortgage finance sector is now in the making," said Mahmoud Mohieldin during the Euromoney Housing and Real Estate Finance Conference, held in Cairo Tuesday. Mohieldin added that a new mortgage finance bill has already been approved by cabinet and will be discussed in the People's Assembly during its coming session. "The new bill will introduce amendments to some provisions of the Mortgage Finance law. It will also provide a comprehensive vision to develop the sector, to raise the efficiency of the market and to encourage more companies to get involved in the activity," said Mohieldin. There is also good news for the limited income classes. According to Mustafa El-Hayawan, chairman of the Mortgage Finance Fund (MFF), the World Bank (WB) has provided \$300 million to finance the building of small units for low-income people. "The loan has a grace period of eight years and will be paid over a 28 year-period at an interest rate less than one per cent. It is dedicated to building 65,000 housing units over the next three years," said El-Hayawan, adding that LE642 million has already been received to build the assigned number of houses for this year. The MFF is mainly concerned with financing middle and limited income housing through providing loans to cover either downpayments or instalments, and sometimes both. Established in 2005, the fund only

became active lately. According to Mai Abdel-Hamid, deputy chairman of the MFF, finance to purchase housing units is available across the country, and grants to buy a house range from LE3,000 to LE25,000 for units priced between LE45,000 and LE95,000. "Priority is given to those who apply for the first time, and to singles with a maximum annual income of LE1,750 or families with LE2,500 income ceiling per year," said Abdel-Hamid who added that new protocols to finance more housing units have been signed with a number of governorates including Luxor, Minya, Giza and Beheira. Nevertheless, defining limited income has been controversial. "The fund has shut out individuals with a better income, yet they can hardly afford a house," argued Basel El-Hadidi, a real estate developer. According to Mohieldin, the new phase of developing mortgage finance in Egypt will witness a more active role by the Egyptian Financial Supervisory Authority (EFSA) to observe the activities of lending companies. "Companies will not be allowed to practise unless they get permission from EFSA. The authority will be given the right to stop all activity in case of malpractice. And merging will only be allowed for companies practising the same activity," said Ziad Bahaaeddin, chairman of EFSA, adding that the authority will coordinate efforts with the Central Bank of Egypt and the Egyptian Credit Bureau to create a database on companies in operation. The prospects for a growing real estate market remain impressive. According to Ayman Ismail, chairman and CEO of Dar Al-Mimar Group, construction and real estate have been growing by double-digit figures during the first quarter of 2010, driven by a high demand. "Investors have shifted interest from Dubai to Cairo where local demand is amongst the highest," said Ismail, adding that Egypt has the prospects of a real estate boom in the region. Encouraging factors include a large domestic market and the fact that 82 per cent of the population is under 40. Furthermore, there are 600,000 new marriages annually. Seven per cent of Egyptians are planning to buy an apartment within the next six months, and average price per square metre is amongst the lowest compared to other regions while prices of apartments have multiplied six-fold in the new cities. "There is \$16 trillion dedicated to investment in real estate globally. Our share is still minimal," Ismail said.

Egypt denies barring Iranian ship

Egyptian authorities Sunday denied Iranian claims it has barred a Gaza-bound aid ship sent by the Iranian Red Crescent from entering the Suez Canal. Iranian claims it has barred a Gaza-bound aid ship sent by the Iranian Red Crescent from entering the Suez Canal. The official Middle East News Agency quoted an official at the Suez Canal Authority as denying reports on preventing the ship from using the waterway. "The authority is committed to allowing all civil and military ships to cross the canal in line with the Constantinople Agreement signed in 1888," he added. "We have announced so early that we will allow Iranian ships to cross the canal," the Egyptian official said. The Iranian Red Crescent said Sunday the ship's departure had been postponed because of restrictions imposed by Israel and Egypt's barring of the ship from crossing the Suez Canal.

Egypt urges G 20 expansion

Egypt hopes the Group of 20 can be expanded in order to allow more countries attend its future meetings. "However, the international bloc is a good step towards boosting and reforming world economy," Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said Sunday.

"The G 20's current formation does not properly reflect the interests of some particular regions across the world," Abul Gheit said in press remarks yesterday. He added that the economic challenges facing the world needed better co-ordination and more organised effort. Heads of state from Algeria, Colombia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Jamaica, Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa were also invited to participate in the G-20 meeting, which was held on Friday and Saturday in Toronto, Canada. "We hoped discussions would have focused more on issues related to the developing nations, as the ties between these countries and the developed one should become stronger," Abul Gheit said. The G-8 summit wrapped up on Saturday with a call to do more towards achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals, reducing carbon emissions and ensuring energy security. The White House said in a statement: "The president believes that the credibility of the G-8 rests on the willingness of its members to honour their commitments, by reporting transparently on progress and identifying areas where additional effort is required."

Social front

A world of promise

While Egypt pledges to improve its human rights record in Geneva, NGOs remain skeptical, reports Doaa El-Bey- In the face of growing calls to end the state of emergency the government adopted a defensive approach to its human rights record in front of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) which concluded its first Universal Periodic Review of Egypt in Geneva earlier this week. ***During the meeting, Egypt pledged to implement 140 recommendations from 165 presented by other state delegations. The remaining 25 recommendations are still under review.*** Although Moataz El-Fegeiri, executive director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), regarded the Egyptian government's pledge as a positive sign, he noted that the necessary political will for change remains weak. "The government repeatedly comes up with excuses to justify its violation of human rights. It blames such violations on the prevailing culture, the global financial crisis, terrorism and a host of other excuses," he told Al-Ahram Weekly after returning from Geneva. ***The government continues to insist that human rights violations are individual acts and that political reform is moving forward, whereas civil society organisations argue abuses are systematic and meaningful political reform non-existent.***

The government delegation in Geneva, led by Minister of State for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Moufid Shehab, exerted every effort during the meeting to showcase improvements in the government's human rights record. Shehab justified last month's renewal of the state of emergency by stressing promises to apply it only in cases involving narcotics and terrorism. ***Egypt remains committed to ending the state of emergency, and will do so as soon as an anti-terrorism law is enacted. The delay in passing such a law is due to its complexity,*** he told the council.

Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Oman and some non-Arab allies, including Venezuela and Indonesia, praised the constructive manner in which Egypt had pursued human rights issues, particularly in fighting illiteracy, improving the situation of women and children, fighting trafficking in persons, and improving the plight of those with disabilities. The United Kingdom and the US were the only two speakers to express concerns about serious rights violations, including torture,

administrative detention, violations of freedom of expression and restrictions on religious and political liberties.

The US representative expressed concern over the renewal of the state of emergency and over reports of fraud -- including voters being barred access to polling stations -- during the Shura Council elections. The UK called on Egypt to end the state of emergency and ensure that any replacement legislation complied with international human rights standards. ***Egyptian and non-Egyptian civil society organisations highlighted serious human rights violations committed by the government.*** Hossam Bahgat, executive director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, told the HRC that the repeated renewal of the state of emergency and reliance on its sweeping repressive measures sends a clear message that the government views itself, and its powerful security apparatus, as above the law. "The result has been a pervasive atmosphere of impunity for human rights violations, particularly with regard to the systematic and widespread practice of torture in places of detention," he said.

Representatives of other Egyptian NGOs highlighted the use of emergency laws to imprison bloggers and criticised the government for failing to respond to acts of sectarian violence against Christians in Egypt. They called on the government to lift the state of emergency, release detained bloggers and activists, and end discrimination against non-Muslims. "The state of emergency, the presence of military as well as civil courts, and systematic torture in prisons reflects an inability or unwillingness of the government to find solutions," said El-Fegeiri. ***Amnesty International criticised Egypt for failing to guarantee freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and the right to participate in public life and politics.*** Facing a barrage of criticism, Shehab acknowledged mistakes had been made and promised to address shortcomings. He concluded by pledging to set up an "institutional structure" to follow up the implementation of the 140 HRC recommendations accepted by the government. Created in 2006, the HRC, a 47-state inter-governmental body within the UN, is responsible for promoting and protecting human rights. *Egypt's human rights record was first reviewed by the HRC in February. The review produced several substantial recommendations, including ending the state of emergency and replacing it with anti-terrorism legislation that complies with international human rights law. It also recommended that Egypt introduce definitions of torture that meet international standards and revise NGO laws to ensure the effective and free functioning of independent NGOs.* "Improving Egypt's human rights record may be difficult but it is not impossible," says El-Fegeiri. What is required is political will at the highest levels, together with cooperation between all government institutions.

owards a resolution A unified personal status law may settle the conflict over divorce and remarriage between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the state, reports Reem Leila. Following Pope Shenouda III's objections to the Supreme Administrative Court's 29 May ruling allowing the remarriage of divorced Christians, the Ministry of Justice has established a committee to prepare a unified personal status law for all Christian denominations. On 12 June Minister of Justice Mamdouh Marei announced that the committee would be charged with drafting a unified personal status law acceptable to all Christians, not just members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Marei has set a one-month deadline for the draft to be presented to the People's Assembly (PA) for approval. Representatives of the catholic, orthodox and evangelical churches are represented on the

committee, headed by counselor Omar El-Sherif, Assistant Minister of Justice. Evangelical representative Ekram Lamei has already requested that the draft law allow civil marriage for Christians. "The church should also recognise children resulting from civil marriages. If it does not, Christians will be the first to regret the omission," says Lamei. According to its media spokesman, Bishop Morcoux of Shubra Al-Kheima, the Coptic Orthodox Church is opposed to the evangelical position. "They want to introduce regulations which are against Biblical teachings," says Morcoux. "The church will not tolerate any intervention in its religious affairs. Any priest who agrees to officiate over a second marriage ceremony of a Christian whose divorce was granted by the courts will be immediately excommunicated." Morcoux went on to quote Pope Shenouda III "The church can never accept any ruling or law that is against Biblical teaching. Marriage is a sacred bond and no man on earth can annul this bond except in the case of adultery." Dozens of Copts demonstrated in front of the PA on 13 June demanding the swift approval of the unified personal status law. Eleven groups representing Copts abroad, together with Coptic activists from the Egyptian Union for Human Rights Organisation (EUHR), took part in the demonstration. The protesters have sent a letter to People's Assembly Speaker Fathi Sorour, requesting that the draft be approved before the beginning of July. "We call on President Mubarak to speed up procedures so the draft can be approved at the earliest possible date," said Ibrahim Samuel, one of the demonstrators. Coptic MP Ibtisam Habib believes it unlikely that the draft will be approved in the current session, which is coming to an end, and will most probably be passed when the PA reconvenes in December. During the past week advertisements have appeared in national newspapers petitioning President Mubarak to intervene to speed up the passing of the law. After the consecutive incidents expressing Christians' anger it was not a real surprise that the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) accepted the injunction submitted by Pope Shenouda III on its verdict issued on 29 May which obligates him to provide marriage permits for divorced Copts who want to remarry. Lawyer Naguib Gabriel, head of EUHR, points out that the Pope's writ was accepted by the court only after the intervention of senior officials. "Officials," he says, "have hitherto been hesitant to discuss the draft unified personal status law for all Christian denominations proposed by a committee comprising eight jurists, two representing the Catholic Church, two representing the Evangelical Church, and four representing the Orthodox Church, in 1980. The time is now ripe to resume the legal procedures necessary for its approval." During the past 30 years, Gabriel argues, "officials have considered the whole issue from a purely political perspective, ignoring growing discontent in both the church and the Coptic community." It is now essential, he concludes, for a unified law, agreed on by all Christians, to be passed in order to avoid any future disputes.

Hundreds protest against torture in Alexandria

Amid heavy security presence, some 1,000 protestors and political figures took part in a protest against torture and police brutality in Alexandria on Friday. The protest began before Friday prayers had ended in the Sidi Gaber Mosque. Devotees began chanting while the Imam was still delivering the sermon. Once prayers had ended protestors assembled outside the mosque in an area entirely encircled by riot police. Demonstrators chanted against Interior Minister Habib El-Adly and condemned police brutality. Members of Kefaya Movement for Change, the Karama party, the April 6 Youth

Movement, the Ghad party and the National Association for Change took part in the protest. Some 15 minutes into the protest reform advocate and former head of the IAEA Mohamed ElBaradei left the protest, leading to minor scuffles between the police and protestors when other demonstrators tried to push their way through the security cordon. Before the prayers ElBaradei, accompanied by members of his family, visited the home of Khaled Saeid, who on June 6, died allegedly at the hands of two policemen who eyewitnesses say brutally beat him. On Wednesday there was a furious reaction from members of the public to news that a second autopsy performed on Saeid's exhumed body had upheld the findings of the first autopsy, claiming that he died from asphyxiation after swallowing a plastic wrap containing cannabis. During the protest lawyer Mohamed Abdel-Aziz told protestors that "12 witnesses have testified to seeing Saeid being assaulted by the policemen." A mother of two from El-Sharqeya governorate who attended Friday's protest told Daily News Egypt that she wanted to participate in earlier protests but had been prevented from doing so because of her daughters' exams. She said that she had felt "disgusted and provoked" by the results of the second autopsy report. The public prosecution office investigation into Saeid's death is ongoing. On Saturday the two policemen who Saeid's family allege beat him to death, will give evidence to the public prosecution office. –Additional reporting by Sarah Carr

UNDP report tackles problems facing Egypt's youth

A UN report on Egyptian youth launched Saturday concluded that nine interrelated constraints face Egyptian youth as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

The nine constraints outlined in "Youth in Egypt: Building the Future," the 2010 Egypt Human Development Report (EHDR), include "waithood" which is the period in which youth wait for their lives to begin and during which they are financially unable. *The report also outlines education as a major constraint, highlighting the fact that 27 percent of youth between 18 and 29 have not completed their basic education in addition to the fact that education in Egypt as a whole is of low quality.* Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif attended the report's launching ceremony on June 27 at the Conrad Hotel, where he outlined several government policies aimed at tackling unemployment and education problems as well as a lack of housing. We are all aware that the young confront many challenges and difficulties," he said. "We are on the right course for the development of youth." *Regarding socio-economic status,* the report says that around 20 percent of Egyptians are classified as poor, which eventually prevents them enrolling their daughters into school. There is also a labor market-education mismatch whereby there are a large number of students compared to a lack of qualified teachers. A *further constraint is poverty,* which, the report says is particularly correlated with the lack of a permanent job, which leads many poor youth to take up whatever employment they can find. The report explained that *youth unemployment is the dominant* form of unemployment in Egypt and the most serious kind of youth exclusion. At least 90 percent of those unemployed are less than 30 years old and many more are affected by underemployment. However, the report notes that unemployment has started to decline, explaining that the male jobless rate has fallen by a third from 32 percent in 1998 to 24 percent in 2009. As for the family formation constraint, the report says that given the low employment rate and lack of opportunities, more than one third of young people continue to live with their parents upon marriage. *The final constraint is that of housing.* The

report explains that the forecasted increase in construction costs will likely pose a great budgetary challenge to any low-income housing program in the coming years given that most subsidy programs are tied to specific income levels and unit price targets.

Youth in Egypt: Building the Future analyzes from a human development perspective the opportunities and constraints that face Egypt's sizeable youth today. ***The report is the eleventh in a series of Egypt Human Development Reports that is produced by an independent team headed by Professor Heba Handoussa, the report's lead author. It is also commissioned by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in collaboration with the Institute of National Planning affiliated to the Ministry of Economic Development.*** "Since its debut in 1994, this report has firmly established itself as a reliable analytical tool that positively impacts public discussion on critical national and sub-national human development issues; enriches policy options; paves the way for national investment and international development cooperation; and acts as a source of inspiration for action," said the launch statement by UNDP Egypt. This year's edition examines the role of Egyptian youth in the development process considering issues that includes education, health, gender, poverty, employment, housing, and participation in society. It also showcases success stories of youth-centered initiatives, programs and projects, calling for greater consultation and communication between young people, the government and civil society. "The report identifies and assesses the most pressing issues affecting youth in Egypt, with the aim of formulating a 'vision for youth' that is based on equity, opportunity, ownership and their participation in the development process," said Osman Mohamed Osman, Minister of State for Economic Development. In order to achieve a better future for the youth population, the report proposed nine areas that must be addressed to encourage the enhancement of generations. These areas include overcoming the education system's failure by achieving a better match between the outputs of educational institutions and the demands of the labor market, in addition to upgrading technical education and reviewing curricula to instill problem-solving skills, entrepreneurial and management capacity, and the value of self-employment. In addition, ***the report suggests breaking the cycle of poverty by*** targeting poor areas and providing them with job training and literacy, as well as creating more job opportunities and helping young people reach respectable government positions. The report also proposes promoting creative thinking and inventiveness among youth to create novel and original solutions to current problems, and reinstating a culture of tolerance and respect of the other through openness to global world views. It also underscores the importance of eliminating gender discrimination and adopting legislative and programmatic intervention to fight culturally rooted sources of discrimination. Other solutions included monitoring young people's wellbeing, enhancing youth participation for "responsive governance," supporting and regulating migration under a holistic and institutionalized approach and introducing elements that cater to both distributive justice and good investment fundamentals.

Young Arab Feminist Network hopes to build dialogue with older generations, non-feminists

When historians and political analysts first discussed a clash of civilizations, they were referring to a conflict that would arise due to cultural and religious differences in the post-Cold War years. In the world of feminism, however, such clash is born from a difference in age. In the Arab world, young feminists are finding it hard to carve a space

for themselves among an older, more experienced generation of female activists. Last week, 20 participants from across seven Arab countries came to Cairo for a four-day meeting to kick off the first Young Arab Feminist Network (YAFN), an initiative fueled by a determination to seek gender equality, and a desire “be taken seriously,” according to one Egyptian founder, Engy Ghozlan. Ghozlan, who worked with several women’s organizations, recalls a recurrent conversation that, to her, describes the clash between old and young feminists in Egypt. “This is what they tell us: ‘Where have you been in 1987 when I was doing this and that?’” “Well I wasn’t here,” she quickly replies, “but now I’m here and I have something to say.” It seems that there is a lack of communication between two not-so-old civilizations, the traditional, experienced feminists and the younger, tech-savvy of the league. Three years ago, young Arab feminists came together in Morocco at a meeting hosted by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development. It was there that participants realized the need to create a support network for young female activists across the Arab world.

The goals YAFN is a network of young feminists and activists who are encouraging a new discourse of feminism, one that transcends differences between specific viewpoints within the larger spectrum of the ideology. In addition, the movement wishes to challenge the bureaucratic nature they claim have been character of most women’s rights organizations in the Arab world. “One of our main values is that we accept diversity and that we accept that we are not all equal on our feminist theories. We all have different approaches and that does not make any of us less than the other,” said Ghozlan in the garden of the Swiss Club in Cairo last Sunday. “We have people who are staunch secularists and we have people who are Islamic feminists,” Marwa Sharaf El-Din, women’s rights activist and co-founder of YAFN, added. Meanwhile, the founders wish to change the “stagnant and bureaucratic” nature of women’s organizations today. “We are sick and tired of hierarchies,” said Sharaf El-Din, referring to a recurrent scenario where heads of organizations are unwilling to step down and create space for fresh blood. “We want to see change; we want to see positive change, and we will make it. It’s just easier when you make it together than when you make it alone,” said Sharaf El-Din. “Sometimes it was a little bit hard to express our own thoughts and the project we want to carry out in our respective organizations,” she added, which birthed the idea of forming “a safe space for young women to express such thoughts.” Stemming from their conviction that fluidity of knowledge and support to one another is key to succeeding, YAFN members wish to focus on a culture of “critical feminist engagement” where self-evaluation becomes an integral component. “We are thinking that there could be more of an online existence, for example,” added Ghozlan, maintaining that the movement is not against traditional feminist initiatives but sees room for new developments and new blood.

The kick off Between April 29 and May 2, YAFN members were drafting a strategic plan for the network, outlining its values and discussing plans for the coming year.

“We decided we want to do a big meeting for young feminists, for older feminists, for people who are interested in the topic to exchange knowledge, to exchange experiences, to learn from each other, to show solidarity with each other. And you don’t have to be a feminist to come,” said Sharaf El-Din. With only one main activity on next year’s agenda, YAFN wishes to encourage offshoot projects that come up as they year unfolds.

With such strategy in mind, YAFN is leaving room for each member to come up and implement a project in their respective communities, projects that will be nurtured by the support of other members in the network. After a four-day meeting, participants were pleased with the outcome. "I can't believe it actually happened and that it happened the way it did; the openness, the criticism, the determination. This is something we have all been yearning for," said Sharaf El-Din about the last four days.

Similarly, Ghozlan said: "It was very enlightening. There was a lot of commitment and people felt that they really need this." "It was the most comfortable and open space that I feel I have been in such a long time," said Nadia Da'er, Yemeni-Indian member of YAFN who took part in the meeting. "I hope that this network expands its reach to other women who might not call themselves feminists or might not have these spaces available to them," added Da'er.

Pope calls for 'stable peace' in Middle East

Pope Benedict XVI called for peace in the Middle East and reiterated concerns about the plight of the region's Christians in a meeting with members of Eastern churches Friday, Vatican Radio reported. "We all wish the Holy Land, Iraq and the Middle East, the gift of a stable peace and a solid coexistence," he said. "These are born of respect for human rights, families, communities and peoples, and the overcoming of religious, cultural or social discrimination," added the Pope during a discussion held in multiple languages with the Reunion of Aid Agencies for the Oriental Churches. "I encourage brothers and sisters in the East to share the priceless gift of Baptism to persevere in faith, and despite the many sacrifices to remain where they were born," said the Pope, alluding to the difficulties facing minority Christians in the region. "I would like to pay special tribute to Christians who suffer violence because of the Gospel, and I commend them to the Lord. I am still counting on the Leaders of Nations to concretely guarantee, everywhere and without distinction, the public and common profession of the religious belief of each individual," said the Pope, without referring to a specific country. In a working paper distributed during a trip to Cyprus in early June ahead of a Synod of Middle Eastern bishops set for October in the Vatican, the Pope said the disappearance of Christians "would impoverish the pluralism that has always characterized the Middle East".

Copts protest Pope Shenouda's rejection of remarriage verdict

Dozens of Copts protested Thursday outside the Ministry of Justice headquarters in downtown Cairo against Pope Shenouda III's refusal to allow Copts to remarry. The protesters called for ending the controversy raised recently after Pope Shenouda, head of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church, rejected a court ruling that obliged the Church to issue second marriage licenses to divorced Copts. A number of Muslim activists took part in the protest in solidarity with the Copts. One protester held a banner on which he wrote: "I'm Muslim and I support the Christians' right to divorce." "This is a community issue that concerns all Egyptians not just Copts," Fouad Fawaz, a Muslim sociology researcher, told Daily News Egypt. "It is the right of any woman [regardless of her religion] to decide who to marry and whether to go on or have a divorce," Iman Selim, a Muslim psychiatrist, noted. The joint Muslim-Coptic protest called on the Justice Ministry to authorize marriages through the registration office rather than the Church. "What harm will come to the Church if a Christian gets married or gets a divorce," Amira Gamal, a

Coptic writer, told Daily News Egypt. “It is a cultural dilemma that considers divorce a sin before being a legal crisis,” she added. “This [cultural concept] has been used to mobilize the Copts against divorce ... though the Orthodox Church allows the divorce of Egyptians who hold US passports.” According to Gamal, Copts can get divorce in the US within 60 days, while in Egypt a similar case would take years in court. The protesters called for applying the 1938 regulation when the Coptic Ecclesiastical Council adopted an ordinance that outlined nine reasons to be considered for divorce. In 1955, however, Family Status Law 462 was adopted and applied to all Egyptians. Accordingly, the various community courts were abolished and were replaced by civil courts (personal status courts). Gamal believes that social problems are likely to recur due to the fact that many Copts found no way to secure a divorce other than by converting to Islam. “But I’m against the idea of changing one’s religion to be divorced,” she argued. “You can say that the advocates of divorce are against the norms of the Church and Pope Shenouda. But still they don’t want to change their religion,” she added. Protesters, however, refused to offer information on their marital status. Last week, Pope Shenouda assigned the Church’s legal committee to file a lawsuit at the Supreme Constitutional Court to settle the legal debate surrounding an Administrative Court ruling compelling the church to allow divorced Orthodox Copts to remarry. Pope Shenouda had previously announced that the church would not implement the court order, which he considered a violation of the teachings of the holy Bible and an intervention in religious freedom. The orthodox Coptic Church allows divorce only in cases of adultery. The Church does not grant a remarriage license to individuals found guilty. “There is no verse in the Bible that supports the [Church’s claim],” Gamal argued. “On the contrary, Jesus Christ himself said ‘he that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone at her’ [in response to an adultery case]” she added.

Religious scholar opposes Christian leadership

During her appearance on the talk show “Manchet” with Gaber Al-Qarmouty, Islamic studies scholar, Souad Saleh stirred controversy after she said it is against the Islamic Sharia for a Christian to assume the presidential role in Egypt, seeing as it is a Muslim-majority country. In Saleh’s opinion, Christians should be given the opportunity to occupy prestigious positions such as ministers and university heads, but not the top job, as it goes against Sharia. Pope Shenouda, she said, would agree with her adherence to her religion. The scholar backed up her argument with a Quranic verse that described the relationship between Muslims and “infidels.” “Leadership should be by a Muslim on an ‘infidel’ and not vice versa,” she said on the show, “that is why God allowed Muslim men to marry non-Muslim women and not vice versa.” Her statements were met with critical comments from some callers on Manchet’s June 20 episode. In a phone call, Egyptian businessman Naguib Sawiris said all Egyptians are equal under the law.

“No believer could be called an infidel, because we all believe in the same God, no matter what the different interpretations [of the Quran] are.” Another caller, Salah Soliman, a prominent leading figure in the secular political party, Al-Wafd, agreed with Sawiris, saying that national unity between Christians and Muslims is one of the party’s main principles. “We are tied by our citizenship and our duties to the nation,” Soliman said, as he protested Saleh’s views, saying that presidency is a political matter, devoid of

religion. As a professor of comparative jurisprudence at Al-Azhar University and a member of the International Union for Muslim Scholars, Saleh's recent decision to join Al-Wafd created controversy. Many critics called Saleh a propagandist saying she would have been better off joining the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), according to Al-Qarmoty. But Saleh said the MB is marred with internal conflicts, unlike Al-Wafd, who are proving to be both peaceful and democratic, as was demonstrated by their latest internal elections. Apart from being a member, Saleh is expected to hold a senior position on the religious affairs committee in the party, and also participate in the women's committee, a duty she looks forward to, she said during her praise of the increasingly popular party. But while her views on women's rights in political participation may appear in line with the party's agenda, she said her outlook is mainly based on Quran's supportive view. She argued that her opinions were purely from a religious, and not a political, perspective and that she was discussing matters as a scholar and not as a party or committee member. "I would never change my religion or any of my religious principles in the name of any human principle," Saleh said.

Bahais demand inclusion in unified personal status law

Egypt's Bahais are demanding they be included in the unified personal status law for non-Muslims or the formation of a new legislation that includes them altogether. Bahais, whose numbers range between 2,000 to 3,000 in Egypt, can't document their marriages because the state doesn't recognize them. The Supreme Administrative Court last year ruled in the Bahais' favor, allowing them to issue National ID cards, with a dash in the religion affiliation field. The interior ministry's civil status department agreed to implement the verdict on unmarried Bahais based on the fact that their marriages aren't officially recognized or documented. The Bahais have voiced their demands for a unified personal status law for non-Muslims again, following the recent stand-off between the church and the state. The unified status law for Christians has been recently raised by the church, after the Administrative Court issued a verdict compelling Pope Shenouda III, head of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church, to allow divorced Copts to remarry. Bahai activists filed requests to a number of state institutions including the Cabinet and the Ministry of Justice, demanding the drafting of a new legislation that could settle the issue. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) is negotiating a settlement to solve the Bahais' problems with a number of government officials, before resorting to court. Bahai activist Basma Moussa told Daily News Egypt that the Bahais' main problem is that the state doesn't recognize their marriage. Moussa added that the civil status department issued a National ID card for her son, but refused to issue it for her. "None of the Bahais can file a lawsuit because they can't give power of attorney to any lawyer without a National ID Card," Moussa said She added that they had filed the first lawsuit using their old National ID cards which they can no longer use. Hossam Bahgat, director of the EIPR, told Daily News Egypt, "In case the negotiations the organization [EIPR] is conducting with a number of governmental officials fails, we'll have no choice but to go through a new legal battle."

'Repression in Egypt an obstacle to youth'

The UN has issued a report criticising the lack of political freedom in Egypt for preventing youth participation in society. The UN has issued a report criticising the lack

of political freedom in Egypt for preventing youth participation in society. This year's Egypt Human Development Report comes as the country has been swept by a wave of protests that have turned violent over allegations police beat to death a young man. The report launched Sunday lists several areas that need to be addressed to better involve the country's 20 million Egyptians between the ages of 18 to 29 " nearly a quarter of Egypt's population. Those include improving education, housing opportunities, political participation and employment. The report says corruption, nepotism, electoral fraud and the long-running state of emergency are discouraging political engagement.

Egypt's engineers start sit-in

Members of the troubled Engineering Association started Saturday an open-ended sit-in inside the premises of the independent union in central Cairo in protest against what they say is the Government's procrastination about enforcing a court ruling to end the sequestration of the union. started Saturday an open-ended sit-in inside the premises of the independent union in central Cairo. Starting their sit-in amid tight security, the strikers, members of the maverick group "Engineers against Sequestration" raised banners reading: "Sit-in is our way to liberate the Association". They urged in a statement that the Government complies with the court ruling and set a date for holding elections under judicial supervision.

Women face hurdles to become judges

The debate about appointing women judges is raging not only in Egypt, but also in a number of other Arab countries. Mistaken idea: It had taken so long for women to become judges in Egypt, because of the culture and the mistaken idea that women are not qualified for this sensitive job. The Cairo-based Arab Women's Association (AWA) discussed this issue at its third conference, with the participation of five Egyptian female judges and eight female judges from other Arab countries. "In 1998, at its first conference, the Associations was the first body to draw attention to the fact that the Egyptian women were deprived of being judges, while eleven other Arab countries granted women this right," Fatma Khafagi, a member, told the conference. It was after that first conference that the AWA decided to launch a campaign to support women wishing to become judges, she told the gathering hosted by the Arab League. The second conference, entitled "Arab Women: Years in the Field of Judgement", witnessed the participation of five female judges from Egypt. During the conference, the Egyptian delegation, headed by Suzanne Abdel-Rahman, a senior Court of Appeal judge, said that the criteria in Egypt for selecting women were tough. "My female colleagues and I had to pass a difficult law exam, consisting of 40 questions, as well as oral exams in the presence of the Minister of Justice," she said, adding that it wasn't until 2007 that women judges were allowed to sit on the benches of courts other than the Family Court.

Judge Ranya Sanaa el-Mulk of the North Cairo Court said that it's not easy for women to become judges in Egypt, especially in the Administrative Prosecution and State Council. She said that it had taken so long for women to become judges in Egypt, because of the culture and the mistaken idea that women are not qualified to work as judges. However, Dar el-Iftaa (the highest Egyptian Islamic institution responsible for passing religious edicts) says that having women judges doesn't contradict Islamic Law.

Judge Sara Adli noted that the Ministry of Justice gave female judges the opportunity of travelling to many countries, such as the US and Italy, in order to learn from their

counterparts there. Tunisia, considered to be the Arab leader when it comes to gender equality, appointed its first female Court of Appeal judge two years ago, while 27 per cent of Tunisia's judges are now women. Judge Gamila el-Gezeiri noted that 547 of Tunisia's 1,843 judges were women, working in different fields. Zalfa Al-Hassan, a Lebanese judge, has said that 60 per cent of her country's judges are women, adding that women judges can often relate better to other women than men can, especially in discussing sensitive personal issues. She has stressed that women judges are more effective than men in the family courts and personal status cases. They are also good at dealing with delinquents. The first Arab country to appoint women judges was Morocco, in 1961, and they have held the most senior judicial posts in this Northwest African nation. In Morocco, 612 or 22 per cent of the country's 3,157 judges are women.

Iraq

Political front

Political Stalemate in Iraq Continues Unabated

Commentary by MEMRI staff- The conflicting political statements issued by well-heeled public information impresarios in Iraq could drive the outside observer to despair. Here are most recent confusing examples. There is a widely circulated piece of information that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and the one who covets his job, Ayad Allawi, himself a former prime minister, are scheduled to meet any day to deal with mechanisms to move the political process forward. There is an alleged plan whereby the executive authority would be divided between Al-Maliki and Allawi, with one serving as prime minister and the other serving as president. Under this political plan, the Kurds will be persuaded to take the post of speaker of parliament. Contradictory statements immediately followed. Dr. Hani 'Ashur, a spokesman for Allawi issued a communiqué that the meeting will be preliminary and will not deal with the allocation of the sovereign posts. He added pointedly that Al-Iraqiya is maintaining a dialogue with the Sadrists and with the Supreme Islamic Council, both members of an alliance with Al-Maliki. Ali Al-Musawi, information spokesman for Al-Maliki, volunteered the information that there were signs that Allawi would be prepared to concede the post of prime minister to Al-Maliki. Ammar Al-Hakim, the nominal head of the Iraqi National Alliance, said he was fed up with the stalemate and was prepared to break up the alliance with Al-Maliki to expedite the formation of a new government. Ammar Al-Hakim went recently to Damascus to meet with the Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad, who undoubtedly urged him to get rid of Al-Maliki in favor of a candidate acceptable to the Sunni regimes in the region. At no time can either Iran or the U.S. be excluded from the political maneuvering in Baghdad. In a major article in today's Al-Hayat, Mushriq Abbas, reporting from Baghdad, writes of "an open confrontation" between Iran and the U.S. over the post of prime minister. A candidate acceptable to one country will be rejected by the other. Hence, he concludes there is "no government on the horizon." In the meantime, the current government in Iraq is facing a severe shortage of electric power, which is feeding demonstrations in the streets of the major southern cities that could easily turn into violent confrontations with security forces. "Merchants of electricity" are making fortune selling electricity from privately owned generators at exorbitant prices which poor

families cannot afford. In addition to the electricity crisis, there is looming a water crisis, as a result of a short supply of potable water. As a result, the residents of Baghdad, a city which used to be flooded in the spring, must now depend on bottled water from the desalination plants in the Gulf countries. There are already instances of violence in Iraq over the share of water and land between the various tribes, and hence a genuine concern that the violence could become widespread.

Sources: Al-Zaman, Iraq, June 26, 2010; Baghdadtimes.net, June 26, 2010; Communiqué No, 333 issued by Dr. Hani Ashur, <http://nahrain.com/d/news/10/06/100627ba.htm>; Al-Mada, Iraq, June 27, 2010; Al-Rafidayn, June 27, 2010; Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, London, June 27, 2010; Al-Hayat, London, June 28, 2010; Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, June 28, 2010

Does Iraq Have Secret Deals With Its Neighbors On Kurdish Rebels?

Turkish troops patrol in Hakkari province, near the Iraqi border, on June 19. The last major ground incursion into northern Iraq by Turkish troops in their fight against Kurdish militants was in February 2008. But now, with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) staging a comeback in Turkey, having recently launched a series of deadly attacks in Istanbul and in the country's southeast, the prospects of a fresh offensive against Kurdish bases in northern Iraq by Turkey's military is growing. Turkey's military chief, General Ilker Basbug, said on June 22 that he would not rule out the possibility of a new major cross-border offensive against Kurdish militants in northern Iraq. Basbug's comments come as pressure mounts on Ankara to rein in violence that has been escalating, once again, in the mainly Kurdish southeast of Turkey and along the border with Iraq. Already, elite Turkish commando units have rappelled from helicopters to mountain positions along the Iraqi border while infantry in armored personnel carriers have been blocking escape routes used by Kurdish militants. Also on the Turkish side of the border, government troops have been closing in on bands of militants who have fortified themselves on the slopes of two mountains -- Kupeli and Cirav -- in Simak Province. The PKK said earlier this month that it was scrapping its year-old unilateral cease-fire and resuming attacks against Turkish forces because of military operations against them. On June 22, suspected Kurdish rebels detonated a remote-controlled bomb in Istanbul that killed four people on a bus carrying military troops and their families. That follows an attack during the weekend by Kurdish guerrillas that killed 11 Turkish soldiers -- one of the deadliest confrontations for Turkish forces for years in their three-decade war against the PKK.

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's remarks during a memorial ceremony on June 20 for the slain Turkish soldiers was vitriolic and suggested more military operations are planned. "They will dry in their own swamp and they will drown in their own blood," Erdogan said. "We have never fallen into intimidation and we will never fall. We have never given up hope and we never will. We have never surrendered to the spiral of violence and we never will in the future." Turkish warplanes often have bombed Kurdish rebel hideouts in northern Iraq without any forceful response from Baghdad or the government of the Iraqi Kurdish region.

Turning A Blind Eye? The prospects of another Turkish ground offensive into northern Iraq highlight what appears to be complicit silence on the part of Iraqi leaders about military incursions that simply would not be tolerated farther south. Meanwhile, recent

military operations by Iranian forces against Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq suggests Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government officials may have a similar tacit agreement with Tehran about dealing with Kurdish militants. Iran's Shi'ite government has had its own confrontations with Iranian minority Sunni Muslim Kurds in western Iran. To be sure, each country in the region has its own goals regarding the Kurdish question. Turkish officials tell RFE/RL privately that Ankara wants a government in Iraq that is "all inclusive" while Iranians are focused on supporting just a Shi'ite government in Iraq. Nevertheless, what emerges is a scenario suggesting that Baghdad and Kurdish Iraqi officials may be willing to turn a blind eye to national sovereignty concerns as long as incursions by its neighbors are targeting a common foe. "This all goes back a long way. Back in the 1980s, when Saddam Hussein ruled in Baghdad, there were also understandings and hot-pursuit agreements by which Turkey was able to deal with its insurgency problem by attacking bases of the Kurdish insurgents in Iraq," said Hugh Pope, director of the Turkish Project of the nongovernmental International Crisis Group. "Sometimes it does it in collaboration with Iran, historically. Sometimes it has accused Iran of helping them. Currently, it seems to be in a more cooperative mood with Iran on this particular Kurdish urgent issue." Baghdad and Iraq's Kurdish regional officials refuse to comment on the existence of such agreements with Turkey or Iran. But the current president of the Iraqi Kurdish region, Masud Barzani, visited Ankara on June 2 to discuss what authorities described as "security issues." In Ankara, Barzani met with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, President Abdullah Gul, and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu.

Presumed Limits Agreements to allow "hot pursuit" incursions would be secret deals rather than overt treaties that are debated publicly by elected lawmakers, Pope said. "Any agreements on these questions [involving Kurdish militants] are usually secret and between the intelligence and militaries of the countries involved," Pope said. "There was a period of explicit Syria-Iranian-Turkish collaboration on what to do about the Kurdish question. I haven't seen that explicitly followed up in recent years. So I think anything that is going on is done very secretly between the armed forces and intelligence agencies of the countries involved." Pope said such secret agreements usually are limited in scope and time. "These alliances come and go, but the one thing I think you will find is constant in the approach of regional states to the Kurdish question is that they will tend to prefer to act to suppress insurgent movements," he said. "There are times, of course, where some states have backed Kurdish insurgents against each other. But I think that is not the case at the moment." The PKK was founded in the late 1970s as a separatist organization fighting for Kurdish independence in southeastern Turkey. More than 40,000 people have been killed in that struggle -- an overwhelming majority of them Kurds. The group is listed as a terrorist organization by the United States, the United Nations, NATO and the European Union. That provides a legal loophole under international law for so-called "hot pursuit" agreements in which countries allow cross-border police or military operations in order to chase down fleeing criminals, militants, or terrorists.

Iraqi politicians want to 'undermine' each other instead of serving their country

In a recent interview, a senior Iraqi politician noted that a large parliamentary bloc has been formed. "The formation of the new bloc constitutionally cuts the road in the face of

other blocs.” So, functioning as burglars who block roads and interrupt the smooth flow of passengers and traffic has become part of Iraqi political culture and the ruling factions. Is not this the same culture of thugs and burglars of the former regime who ruled the country prior to 2003. The only difference is that today’s politicians add the word ‘constitutional’ to their new era. ‘Constitution’ for Iraqi politicians is like a mantra, a word devoid of meaning. They think when they cite this word, they appeal to the civilized and democratic world. Everybody knows that these politicians and factions have no respect for the constitution which was drafted while Iraq was swirling in blood and still is. And because the country works and functions ‘unconstitutionally’, a U.S. official is dispatched to Baghdad to work out a settlement for a government that should have been formed several months ago. All parties are in need of U.S. support, though some seek aid and backing from other areas. Will Washington give up its silence and abandon the ‘neutral stand’ it has adopted in the past three months regarding who is to form the new government? Why would anyone be embarrassed or even ashamed of U.S. interference? Is it not logical for the U.S. to put Iraqi house in order before leaving? Or shall we wait until the U.S. withdraws its troops and then only believe that it does not meddle in Iraqi affairs? No sane person would give credence to such logic. Washington’s interests in Iraq will not end by the departure of its troops. The Americans started the war and paid dearly for it. The war and its aftermath disgraced the U.S., its weapons, its reputation, its standing and its intelligence. This is not to mention the war casualties. Who would believe that all these sacrifices the U.S. made for nothing? Who would believe that the U.S. would agree to and present Iraq as a gift to militias and factions with regional loyalties? If this happens, the table would most probably be turned on U.S. head in a few years’ time. But the assignment of the U.S. envoy currently visiting Iraq is extremely difficult. The administration of President Barak Obama has left the impression that it is up to the disparate and rival Iraqi factions to put the Iraqi house in order. This by itself is yet another tragedy for Iraq. The factions which Obama wants to rule Iraq have turned into burglars whose aim is to undermine each other and serve their own interests and those of their regional masters. This is how things are in today’s Iraq....Iraq faces 'more power shortages' Al Jazeera's Omar al-Saleh reports on how Baghdad is coping with blackouts and sweltering temperatures Iraq's prime minister has said that his country faces at least two more years of widespread power shortages like the ones that sparked protests across southern Iraq. Nouri al-Maliki said at a news conference on Tuesday that new power plants will eventually add 9,000 megawatts to Iraq's meagre power supplies. But he said construction will take several years. "The power stations being built by Siemens and GE will take two years to complete, at least," al-Maliki said, referring to the companies building the new power plants. "The electricity problem cannot be over in one or two days." Siemens and GE signed multi-billion-dollar agreements in 2008 to build the plants. But the Iraqi government has struggled to pay the first instalment of those contracts. It recently finished selling \$2bn worth of bonds which will be used to pay for the power plants. Al-Maliki also promised to increase the power supply to southern Iraq, where at least one person was killed last week during three days of violent protests.

Protesters criticized Basra witnessed the largest demonstration: hundreds of people threw stones and empty bottles at the provincial government building. He criticised the protesters as "rioters"."There is a difference between demonstration and unrest. In Basra, it was unrest," al-Maliki said. Thousands of people turned out for a peaceful protest in

Karbala on Tuesday, and a smaller group demonstrated in the western city of Ramadi. Al-Maliki also said he would consider a resignation offer from Kareem Waheed, Iraq's electricity minister. Waheed offered to step down on Monday. But al-Maliki denied reports that he had demanded Waheed's resignation, and said the minister remains the best-qualified person to improve Iraq's electricity production. "I don't know anyone in Iraq who is more capable than he is at the technical level," al-Maliki said.

Geo strategic front

Turkey Sends Troops To Iraq Border

Turkish troops patrol in Sirnak Province, near the Iraqi border, on June 21. Turkish troops deployed along the Iraqi border today after a raid by separatist Kurdish militants left 12 Turkish soldiers dead on June 19. State media said elite troops rappelled down from helicopters and poured out of mechanized infantry units in the operation to surround Kurdish rebels. Meanwhile, security sources were quoted as saying helicopter gunships bombed suspected positions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerrilla group in the provinces of Hakkari and Sirnak.

Kurdish rebels have bases in northern Iraq.

In Ankara, President Abdullah Gul chaired an emergency security meeting, attended by Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and military leaders. Also today, U.S. Ambassador James Jeffrey said the United States would "urgently" consider any requests from Ankara asking for help fighting the PKK, which Washington considers a terrorist group. Kurdish rebels have been fighting for autonomy in Turkey's Kurdish-dominated southeast since 1984. Iraq's Cabinet Debates Electricity Minister's Resignation Amid Mass

Iraq Sends First Ambassador To Egypt In 20 Years

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has accepted the credentials of 20 new ambassadors to the country, among them Iraqi ambassador to Egypt Nizar Essa Al-Khairallah. Al-Khairallah is the first Iraqi ambassador to the country in 20 years.

Economic front

Iraq's Kirkuk gets \$65 million as part of share in oil royalties

The oil-rich city of Kirkuk has received more than \$65 million (approx. 80 billion dinars) as part of its share from oil exports. Under new Iraqi legislation, oil-producing provinces have the right to \$1 from each barrel their oil fields export. The sum was Kirkuk's share for the past four months. The money should be used specifically for reconstruction and development purposes. The central government has directly transferred the money to a commission implementing reconstruction projects in the province. "We have formed a committee to identify the projects on which the money will be spent," said Qassem Hamza, a senior provincial official. It is the first time oil-producing provinces are given their share of royalties under the new regulations. Hamza said the sum represented Kirkuk's share for the first four months of this year. An Iraqi economist, refusing to be named, said the allocations were bound to reinvigorate the province's economy "if spent wisely." More money is in the pipeline for Kirkuk. Last

month, its prolific fields exported 13.347 million barrels. On average, Hamza said he expected about \$15 million a month, barring negative price fluctuations on international markets. The southern Province of Basra is by far the largest exporter in the country but the least developed. Basra is expected to reap \$50 million on average every month. The Finance Ministry is yet to issue Basra's share for the first four months of this year. Last month, Basra oil fields exported more than 45 million barrels a day, according to statistics issued by the Oil Ministry.

Iraqis told to wait for two more years for power supplies to improve

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki dumped Iraqis' hope of better electricity supplies by saying that they will have to wait at least two more years before they see any tangible improvements. Power shortages have worsened recently amid scorching heat and rising temperatures. Supplies from the national grid are erratic and may last less than three hours a day. Violent demonstrations, in which two people were killed and scores injured, swept across southern Iraq and have so far covered five provinces. More demonstrations are expected in central Iraq, but they will probably change nothing. Electricity Minister Kareem Wahid has submitted his resignation, meeting a major demand from the demonstrators. Since 2006, the government says, it has poured \$17 billion into the electricity sector. But Wahid says most of the money has been allocated for major contracts, some of which need years to be completed. To meet domestic requirements for power, Iraq should be able to produce at least 14,000 megawatts. Wahid says the grid's capacity is about 8,000 megawatts. Although the figures given by Wahid indicate that the grid can churn out more than half Iraq's needs, many cities barely have two hours of continuous supply every day.

'Al-Qaeda' wages war against Iraqi banks

Iraq's al-Qaeda group is said to be directing its deadly and bloody car and suicide bombings against Iraqi banks. In one week, attacks blamed on the group killed at least 35 people and injured scores as its suicide bombers are said to have targeted a state-owned bank and a private bank. The first attack targeting the Central Bank on June 13 brought most of Baghdad to a standstill. The government has blamed the daring attack in which at least 26 people were killed on Qaeda operatives despite allegations that Iraqi security personnel were involved. There was heavy gunfire and plumes of smoke rose over Baghdad skyline but none of the attackers was killed or captured. Iraqi security forces had cordoned the area and stormed the bank. A twin suicide bombing on June 21 targeted Iraq's commercial bank. At least nine people were killed and many others wounded. It is not clear why the latest attacks have banks as their major targets and why would Qaeda shift attention to the country's financial institutions. Iraqi troops and bodyguards assigned to protect senior politicians have previously been implicated in such attacks in which millions of dollars were stolen.

Lebanon Extradites Iraqi Suspected Of Corruption

Iraq's anticorruption chief says Lebanon has extradited a former Baghdad government official suspected of stealing millions of dollars from the government, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Judge Abdel Rahim al-Ugaily, chairman of the anticorruption commission, told RFI on June 22 that Zina Saud al-Timimi and her mother, brother,

sister, and brother-in-law were flown back to Iraq on June 19 after being handed over to Iraqi anticorruption officials in Beirut. Ugaily added that some \$5 million believed to have been stolen by Timimi has been recovered. He said \$600,000 is still missing, but the commission has confiscated vehicles and property purchased by Timimi and her relatives equal to that amount. Ugaily said that in the first five months of 2010, his commission investigated corruption cases involving the theft, misappropriation, or embezzlement of some 117 billion Iraqi dinars (\$14.55 million) from the government. He said that among the forms of fraud and corruption, forgery accounts for 40 percent of the total number of cases, embezzlement about 25 percent, and bribes and kickbacks some 5 percent.

Ugaily said people are often reluctant to report corrupt civil servants and officials for fear of retaliation by the tribe to which the corrupt functionary belongs. As a result, the anticorruption commission finds itself compelled to resort to sting operations. He pointed out that the anticorruption commission is also having difficulty bringing to account fugitives who have dual citizenship, because the government of their adopted country refuses to hand them over. Political analyst Hadi Jellou told RFI that political factions are partly to blame and often make the anticorruption commission's work harder by turning their ministries into fiefdoms.

Social front

Iraq Trying To Retain Its Minority Communities

Mass at a church in Irbil, Iraq. Nearly half the Christian community has fled the country since 2003- An Iraqi minister says Baghdad wants to discourage emigration by its minority groups and has urged other countries not to accept asylum seekers from these communities, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq (RFI) reports. Emigration and Displacement Minister Abdel Samad Sultan told RFI on June 23 that his ministry has asked the European Union, the United States, and Australia to refuse applications for asylum by members of Iraqi minorities in order to preserve the country's ethnic and religious diversity. Sultan said Iraq should remain a country distinctly marked by a mosaic of peacefully coexisting communities and not lose this characteristic. Hasan Shabaan, chairman of the Iraqi Human Rights Organization, told RFI that the Iraqi government's request for other countries to deny asylum to members of minority groups "runs counter to the Iraqi Constitution and universal human rights." He added that the constitution guarantees the individual's right to live anywhere he or she chooses. Sultan said that Iraq has also appealed to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the international community as a whole to help minority groups stay in the country while the government intensifies its efforts to provide better protection for them and discourage them from emigrating. He said that while extending considerable support for returnees to rebuild their lives at home, the Iraqi government is opposed to their forcible deportation, which he said is conducted by some European countries. He said such treatment is "inhuman and in contravention of international norms." Father Shlaimon Wardooni of the Virgin Mary Church in Baghdad told RFI that "it is difficult to ask members of Iraq's minority groups to stay in the absence of stability, security, jobs, and the rule of law." The cleric said "we know that our people and all Iraqis who flee the country encounter hardships in the host countries, but many of them argue that there is at least peace and stability." Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities in Iraq have often been the target of

bomb attacks and other violence by Islamic insurgent groups. The UNHCR estimates that since 2003, some 250,000 to 500,000 Christians -- about half the total number in Iraq -- have left the country. Iraq Remains Under U.N. Chapter 7 [Sanctions]; U.S. Reminds Iraqis Not To Violate Security Council's Sanctions on Iran U.S diplomatic sources have reminded Iraqi leaders that their country remains under U.N. Chapter 7 (sanctions) and that the new government should adopt new policies in dealing with Iran, in particular banning financial transactions with Iranian banks in the light of the new Security Council sanctions on Iran. U.S. and European diplomats have stressed to Iraqi leaders that they are concerned about Iran's attempt to fill the vacuum that would be created following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. The U.S. in particular has urged pro-U.S. Iraq leaders to move ahead in forming a new government to frustrate Iranian attempts for a pro-Iranian government in Iraq.

Palestine Israel

Political front

Hamas dismisses the Israeli reasoning as untrue.

Gilad Erdan, Israel's environment minister, admitted that the blockade did not achieve the desired effect of weakening Hamas. "The blockade caused damage to us: it did not enable us to weaken the Hamas power or to speed up the release of Gilad Shalit," he told Israel army radio. "One should not cling to principles that bring no profit and for which one has to pay." Critics say the new rules could still make it difficult to import building materials to rebuild the territory, which was heavily damaged during Israel's 22-day assault which started in late December 2008. Christopher Gunness of UNRWA, the United Nations relief agency that looks after Palestinian refugees, said: "We need to have the blockade fully lifted." "The Israeli strategy is to make the international community talk about a bag of cement here, a project there. We need full unfettered access through all the crossings," he told the Reuters news agency. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, also repeated his calls for the total removal of the blockade. He said that letting some materials in was not the way to end the suffering of Palestinians in the enclave.

Geo strategic front

Palestinians demand rights in Lebanon

Thousands of Palestinian refugees have staged a demonstration in the Lebanese capital, demanding the government in Beirut to grant them basic civil rights. Several Lebanese non-government organizations joined thousands of Palestinians who gathered outside the United Nations headquarters in Beirut on Sunday, a Press TV correspondent reported. The rally comes as Lebanese politicians are caught in a debate on whether to give the refugees social and economic rights such as the choice of jobs and the ownership of property. "There is no doubt that the problem of Palestinian refugees here in Lebanon is not a humanitarian one, but it's a political one," said human rights activist Amina Gibreel. "The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have been asking for human rights over the past 62 years," she added. The UN

Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees lists almost 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, while Lebanese and Palestinian officials claim the actual number may be as low as 250,000, arguing that the UN agency's list includes those who had moved to other countries. The majority of the UNRWA-listed Palestinians live in hard conditions in refugee camps across the country as under Lebanese law the Palestinian refugees cannot own properties. Not allowed to hold most white collar positions, the refugees are trapped in low-paid employment. They are also denied social security and are not given medical care in state-run hospitals. Certain groups criticize Lebanon for considering Palestinian refugees as second-class citizens, describing the country -- known to many as the most democratic nation in the Middle East -- as the most hostile to Palestinians after Israel. Lebanon's Druze leader Walid Jumblatt recently handed a proposal to the country's parliament which will grant the Palestinians civil rights. The proposal stirred up a lot of controversy as many fear that a possible integration of the Palestinians could disturb the confessional balance in Lebanon.

Civil Society Representatives Discuss European Neighbourhood Policy

(Wafa)- For the first time, the Palestinian Authority and the Office of the European Union Representative held a Joint Consultation with the representatives of the Palestinian civil society on the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Representatives of the Palestinian civil society, as integral contributors in this process, were invited in Ramallah to present and discuss their thoughts on the EUP-A ENP Action Plan and the recently published 2009 ENP Progress Report. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ibrahim Khraishi and EU Representative Christian Berger addressed the participants at the opening of the event. Dr. Khraishi, said in his opening remarks 'the EUP-Palestine Relations are based on a common political vision, embodied in the last Council conclusions of December 2009 reiterating the urgent need to ensure fulfilment of our national inalienable rights including our right to statehood and independence. We believe that our civil society is an integral part of the Palestinian national struggle, the quest for statehood and in our relations with our main partner, the EU'. From his side, the EU Representative, Mr Christian Berger said 'the European Neighbourhood Policy is a crucial instrument to support the Palestinian Authority's Plan to establish an independent and viable Palestinian State, and involving the civil society in this process will increase its relevance and its impact'. During the opening plenary session, EU officials explained the ENP reporting process and Action Plan. PA officials then gave their considerations on the process and an overview of the achievements so far. Following the opening session, the participants were divided into 4 working groups to discuss different topics: human rights, including gender issues, governance, and rule of law; economy, employment, and trade; environment, energy, transport, and research & development; and social sectors (education, health, youth issues) In each of the working groups, discussions between the Palestinian civil society representatives and officials from the PA and the EU were active and substantive. Civil society representatives made interesting proposals as to how they could be further involved in the ENP process in the future. Civil society organisations also proposed their own priorities for the new Action Plan, due to come into force in 2011. PA and EU officials stated their commitment to take their comments into account when they will jointly draft the new Action Plan. In the afternoon plenary session, chosen representatives of civil society organisations reported on the discussions held in the 4

working groups. These reports enabled participants to have a global view of the issues that were covered in all working groups. These recommendations will be discussed in the EUP-A Joint Committee on June 30. PA and EU officials concluded that the consultation was a great success, and look forward to holding the same event next year. Over 100 representatives of civil society organisations participated in the event, demonstrating again the vibrancy of Palestinian civil society.

UN: East Jerusalem Housing Plan Illegal

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon criticized Israeli municipal authorities on Wednesday for pressing ahead with a plan to raze Palestinian homes in occupied east Jerusalem, calling it unhelpful and illegal. "The Secretary-General is deeply concerned about the decision by the Jerusalem municipality to advance planning for house demolitions and further settlement activity in the area of Silwan," Ban's press office said in a statement.

"The planned moves are contrary to international law, and to the wishes of Palestinian residents." Israeli municipal authorities moved ahead on Monday with plans to demolish 20 Palestinian homes in east Jerusalem, risking more US-Israeli friction over a building project seen by Palestinians as settlement expansion. Ban's statement appeared to confirm that the occupied Jerusalem city planning board's decision would lead to renewed diplomatic pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Earlier this week, Netanyahu bowed to world calls to ease a Gaza blockade after Israel's deadly raid on an aid flotilla. "The secretary-general reminds the Israeli government of its responsibility to ensure provocative steps are not taken which would heighten tensions in the city," Ban's statement said. "The current moves are unhelpful, coming at a time when the goal must be to build trust to support political negotiations."

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"We know that the attacks on Israel are threatening its existence, since we constantly hear people saying 'go back to Poland or Morocco'. They are essentially telling us to dismantle the Zionist enterprise," he claimed. Netanyahu went on to criticize the United Nations and other international institutions for "targeting Israel alone" for condemnation. "They want to strip us of the natural right to defend ourselves. When we defend ourselves against rocket attack, we are accused of war crimes. We cannot board sea vessels when our soldiers are being attacked and fired upon, because that is a war crime."

Netanyahu claimed that Israel has taken steps to push forward a resolution with the Palestinians though they have not reciprocated the gesture. "The Palestinian side promoted the Goldstone report, organized boycotts, and tried to prevent our entrance into the OECD. The Palestinian Authority has no intentions of engaging in direct talks with us," Netanyahu went on to say. "I call on PA President Mahmoud Abbas, yet again, to enter direct talks with us, because there is no other way to solve the conflict between us without direct dialogue. How could we possibly live side by side if they can't even enter the same room as us?"

UN concerned over Silwan demolitions

The UN has expressed "deep concern" over Israel's "illegal" plan to demolish Palestinian homes in East al-Quds (Jerusalem) to make room for an archaeological park. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon "is deeply concerned about the decision by the Jerusalem municipality to advance planning for house demolitions and further settlement activity in the area of Silwan in East Jerusalem," his spokesman Martin Nesirky said in a statement on Wednesday. "The planned moves are contrary to international law, and to the wishes of Palestinian residents," AFP quoted the statement as saying. Ban further warned Tel Aviv against "provocative steps" that would heighten tensions in the annexed city. "The current moves are unhelpful, coming at a time when the goal must be to build trust to support political negotiations," the statement added. Earlier on Monday, Israeli municipal authorities in al-Quds approved a plan to raze 22 houses in the Palestinian neighborhood of al-Bustan, arguing that they were built without Israeli permits. The issue of Israeli construction permit comes despite the international community's refusal to recognize Israel's annexation of East al-Quds, which its army occupied in the six-day war of 1967.

Sarkozy: Force will not free Shalit

French President Nicolas Sarkozy says Israel's use of force against Palestinians would not help secure the release of captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. In a letter to the Shalit family on Friday, President Sarkozy wrote that Israel's three-year blockade of the Gaza Strip had not greased the wheels for Shalit's release, Israeli daily Haaretz reported. The now 23-year-old Shalit was captured by Palestinians in a cross-border operation in June 2006. "It is wrong to believe that creating a state of deprivation for the [Palestinian] population will bring his release," the French president explained. In a prisoner swap deal in 2009, Tel Aviv had agreed to release 450 Palestinian prisoners demanded by the Palestinian resistance movement of Hamas. However, Israeli officials later reneged on the deal. Hamas insists that Shalit will not be freed unless Israel lives up to the original deal. Around 7,000 Palestinians, including women and children, are held in Israeli detention facilities, reportedly suffering from harsh and life-threatening conditions. Human rights groups have complained several times that the conditions in which the Palestinian inmates are kept are in contravention of the Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners.

Economic front

'Israel to take over Lebanon gas by force'

Israel has threatened to use military force to take the full control of a newly-discovered gas field partly in Lebanese waters in the Mediterranean. Israel has threatened to use military force to take the full control of a newly-discovered gas field partly in Lebanese waters in the Mediterranean Sea. Israel's Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau made the remarks after Beirut announced that parts of the giant reserves actually belong to Lebanon and that it does not allow Tel Aviv to loot Lebanon's resources. "Israel is racing to make the case a fait accompli and was quick to present itself as an oil emirate, ignoring

the fact that, according to the maps, the deposit extends into Lebanese waters," Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Berri said, adding that "Lebanon must take immediate action to defend its financial, political, economic and sovereign rights". Lebanon has also called on gas drilling companies to respect its territorial integrity and warned them against working close to its economic zone. Israel, however, insists the entire gas field lies on its territory. The newly discovered field is estimated to contain 15 trillion cubic feet of gas -- worth some USD 40 billion -- and might enable Israel to export gas to other countries in the future.

World Bank Proposes \$55M for Projects in West Bank, Gaza

WASHINGTON, June 24, 2010 (WAFA)- The World Bank Board of Executive Directors approved today a proposal to provide \$55 million in funding for projects in the West Bank and Gaza (WBG) to support Palestinian economic recovery and development. The funding will be channeled through the Trust Fund for the West Bank and Gaza and will support projects in water and sanitation, land administration, social services, NGO development and public sector capacity building. A central component is designed to shore up the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan (PRDP.) In addition, the Board voted to expand the WBG portfolio and to launch both the Teacher Education Improvement Project and the Capacity Building for Palestinian Economic and Regulatory Institutions Project. "The Bank is committed to continue its backing for local reformers, as they build systems capable of providing sustained delivery of high quality services to the Palestinian people," said Mariam Sherman, Country Director for West Bank and Gaza. "The two new projects are part of an effort to expand our support for Palestinian institution building and human capital development, both in the public sector and in civil society." The Teacher Education Improvement Project of US\$5 million will provide support to teacher training institutions in improving teacher education programs and to line units of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE) on general project management and implementation, including procurement and financial management. "It is critical to introduce policy changes geared towards capitalizing on the achievements of the rapid expansion of the education system, with an increased focus on quality," said Ernesto Cuadra, Lead Education Specialist. The Capacity Building for Palestinian Economic and Regulatory Institutions Project of US\$3.7 million will support the Palestinian Authority's (PA) effort to strengthen economic management and regulatory capacity through the development of key public institutions: The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the Palestinian Monetary Authority (PMA), and the Palestinian Pensions Authority (PPA). "This project sets an important precedent for the efficient delivery of aid that is fully coordinated with Government priorities and systems, to avoid creating multiple uncoordinated technical assistance projects," said Douglas Pearce, Senior Private Sector Development Specialist.

Crossing ready for more Gaza goods

Israel's critics and humanitarian groups say the easing of the blockade is not enough. Measures are in place for the increase in road shipments to the Gaza Strip following Israel's decision to change the conditions of its blockade of the Palestinian enclave. The Palestinian Maan News Agency quoted a Palestinian border crossing official as saying that 130 lorry loads of goods would be permitted into Gaza on Tuesday. Israel has said it

will allow the import of "civilian" goods, but will continue to restrict items they say could be used to build weapons, including cement and steel rods. Previously, only products mentioned on lists drawn up by Israel were allowed into the territory. Al Jazeera's Nicole Johnston, reporting from the Kerem Shalom crossing, said there was a lot of uncertainty about what kind of products Israel was planning to allow into the besieged Strip. "We think Israel won't allow the people of Gaza to export anything and we also know Israel won't allow import of raw materials. Our correspondent said people had greeted the news of items expected in the next few days with "quite a bit of excitement." "Israel will be allowing spare parts for cars into Gaza. That hasn't been allowed in for a few years although it has been smuggled through tunnels," she said. It will also allow oil for engines, tyres, spare parts for agriculture, furniture, make-up and perfume." Officials at a freight terminal at the Israeli side of the crossing said they were ready to handle up to 120 lorryloads a day of food and trade goods for Gaza as soon as Palestinian co-ordinators organise the extra capacity on their side. "The list of items that will not be allowed into the Gaza Strip is still being concluded and will be published later," an official said. At Kerem Shalom everything will be offloaded in big corrals made of two-storey high concrete slabs. After the Israeli lorries leave, the gates will close, and Palestinian drivers coming in from the Gaza side will reload the shipments. Ahmed Yousef, the Hamas deputy foreign minister in Gaza, has dismissed Israel's new conditions as a public relations stunt and said it would not greatly improve conditions in Gaza. "This is just another way for Israel to deceive the world," he told Al Jazeera on Monday. The blockade of Gaza, implemented three years ago, has been criticised as collective punishment of 1.5 million Palestinians. Israel came under strong pressure to ease the blockade after its May 31 raid on a Gaza-bound aid flotilla ships killed nine activists, sparking an international outcry. *The naval blockade will remain even under the new rules.* **'Strengthened position'** Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has said the new order "strengthens our position towards our friends in the world." "It pulls the rug out from under Hamas's main propaganda tool and its patrons in Iran, who pretend there's a humanitarian crisis in Gaza," he said on Monday. Israel has said the siege is a necessary measure to prevent smuggling of weapons to Hamas, which rules the strip. Al Jazeera's Nicole Johnston reports from Gaza as the first lorries are on their way

Social front

Israel launches spy satellite

The Ofek 9 will join other Israeli spy satellites, such as this one launched in 2007 [EPA] Israel has launched its latest military spy satellite, reportedly increasing its capacity to intelligence-gather on enemies such as Iran. The Ofek 9 was blasted into orbit by an Israeli-made rocket on Tuesday, from the Palmachim air base south of Tel Aviv, joining three other Israeli spy satellites in space. The defence ministry said the satellite had achieved its proper orbit, describing it as "a surveillance satellite with advanced technological capabilities". Officials said it has a high-resolution camera and would join its other satellites to give Israel considerable coverage of sensitive areas, adding the camera could pick out missiles and launchers on the ground. Along with the West, Israel believes Iran's uranium enrichment activities are aimed at producing nuclear weapons, an allegation Tehran denies. Israel is also thought to be targeting Syria with its satellites. In

2007, alleged Israeli warplanes struck a site in Syria thought to be a nuclear facility under construction, although Israel has not commented on the incident. Besides its spy satellites, Israel also has a number of communications satellites in orbit. Israel is widely believed to be the Middle East's only nuclear power. An attempt to launch an Ofek-6 in 2004 failed with the satellite crashing into the Mediterranean Sea after a technical malfunction with the launcher.