

Report# 105

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Fertile Crescent

Aisha Rehman

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- Some 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed during the war.

Summary

Egypt

Political front:

Protestors called on the People's Assembly to take decisive action against sectarian acts of violence at a protest held outside parliament. "Egypt is for all Egyptians" the roughly 50 protestors chanted while holding up photographs of Abanop Kamal, one of six Coptic young men shot dead outside a church in Upper Egypt's Nagaa Hammadi on Coptic Christmas eve, Jan. 6. The National Committee Against Sectarian Violence, which organized the protest, was formed three days before the Nagaa Hammadi shootings. Since its formation the National Committee has been campaigning for legislative and social reform to end religious discrimination against Egypt's Christian minority.

Secretary General of the National Council for Human Rights in Egypt Mokhles Kotb stressed that the Council has no objection to the presence of international monitoring and supervision of both Parliamentary and Presidential elections in Egypt scheduled for later this year and 2011, respectively. But he said this monitoring must be done through United Nations organizations and regional organizations.

Geo strategic front:

Egyptian police shot dead a sub-Saharan African migrant and wounded another as they tried to enter Israel illegally, a security official said. A police patrol spotted the two trying to slip into Israel north of the Karm Abu Salem border crossing late. "Police opened fire

after they refused orders" to stop, the Egyptian official said. The identity of the dead migrant was not immediately known.

Hamas' exiled leader Khaled Meshaal said that a reconciliation deal with rival Palestinian faction Fatah was "within reach" and called on Egypt to host a meeting to seal an accord. Egypt has already twice postponed the planned signing of a reconciliation agreement in Cairo because of deep divisions between the Islamist movement Hamas and the secular Fatah. Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip from Fatah after deadly clashes in June 2007, a year after winning Palestinian legislative elections.

Social front:

Female students at Cairo University are defying religious and state efforts to ban the controversial niqab from schools and colleges, saying that wearing the controversial face veil is a religious obligation that also protects against sexual harassment. "I wear the niqab essentially to avoid harassment on the street and on public transport," said law student Marwa Mohammed, 19, her eyes visible only through the slits in the black veil that covers her entire face. But if conditions changed and she was not subjected to harassment would she take it off? She would not, because "the veil gives me respect, and people look at me differently." She implied that sexual harassment would exist as long as young men looking for work and housing remained frustrated in their efforts. "What will change?"

The battle between the Ministry of Higher Education and university students over the niqab has entered a new phase following last week's Supreme Administrative Court ruling that university administrations could not ban female students from wearing the niqab during exams. In a six-page judgement the court said that "banning the niqab, the full face veil, has no legal bases and contradicts the personal freedoms guaranteed by the constitution." Minister of Higher Education Hani Hilal said in a press conference that his ministry respects the court decision and will implement it.

Iraq

Political front:

Iraq's Shi'ite-led government said a decision by an appeals panel to suspend a ban on candidates with alleged ties to Saddam Hussein's outlawed Ba'ath Party until after an election was illegal. Political wrangling is heating up ahead of the March vote, seen as a crucial test for Iraq as it emerges from years of conflict unleashed by the 2003 U.S. invasion and tries to make peace between once-dominant Sunnis and the Shi'ite majority.

Economic front:

Iraq harvested less rice this year than any other year before. The slump agricultural officials blame on falling water levels from the Euphrates River which has for decades supplied the rice fields in southern Iraq. The Twin Rivers, the Euphrates and Tigris, are now a trickle of what they used to be, turning the land between them from a vast breadbasket into desert. A statement by the ministry of agriculture said only 102,000 tons have been shipped to state silos so far and the deadline for deliveries expires by the end of January. Last year, Iraqi farmers ferried more than 120,000 tons of rice to government silos. Iraq currently imports about 10 times as much rice as it produces – that is about 1 million tons a year. Official statistics reveal that

Lebanon

Political front:

Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea stressed the significance of a massive turnout to mark the fifth anniversary of the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri. "It is essential to exert every effort toward the success of the Feb. 14 anniversary and to stress that March 14 will carry on until it achieves the last goal of the Martyrs of the Cedar Revolution," Geagea said during a meeting of the LF in Maarab.

The Libyan government has announced that it hasn't been officially notified about a lower level of Lebanese representation at the Arab League summit in Libya next month. Government spokesman Mohammed Baayo told pan-Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat that Libya was keen on making the summit a success.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy's envoy to Syria Philippe Marini said that the situation in Lebanon has gone back to normal. "The situation in Lebanon was among the topics that we have discussed," Marini said following talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Lebanon of allowing Hizbullah to develop its military force by smuggling weapons "in violation" of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. "We are worried about developments in Lebanon and the great flow of weapons, rockets and missiles in blatant violation of Resolution 1701," Netanyahu told a press conference alongside his Italian counterpart, Silvio Berlusconi. "Hizbullah is in the Lebanese government and is developing a military force under the government," said Netanyahu. "These weapons are without doubt aimed at Israeli civilians," said Netanyahu. "It is the responsibility of the Lebanese government to prevent attacks against Israel and its citizens." Berlusconi said he would raise the Israeli concerns

Social front:

In an attempt to defuse mounting tension sparked followed accusations that Grand Mufti Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Qabbani was involved in financial mismanagement at Dar al-Fatwa, Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Lebanon's former PMs agreed to stop leaks to the

media on the country's highest Sunni religious authority. Hariri on Thursday brought ex-premiers Salim Hoss, Omar Karami, Najib Miqati and Fouad Saniora together in a meeting to address the row over Dar al-Fatwa.

Palestine

Peace process

The rival Fateh and Hamas movements managed to form a committee that would be in charge of discussing field issues that are preventing reconciliation. The committee was formed after Fateh official Nabil Shaath met with Ismail Haniyya of Hamas and several Hamas leaders in Gaza. The meeting is the first of its kind conducted by a Fateh official to the Gaza Strip since June of 2007.

The Hamas movement decided to halt the indirect prisoner-swap talks with Israel in the aftermath of the assassination of Mahmoud al-Madbouh who was killed at a hotel in Dubai two nearly weeks ago. Hamas claims Israeli agents were behind the assassination. Ayman Taha, a senior political leader of Hamas, stated that indirect talks were fully halted, and that they can not resume under the current circumstances.

Palestinian President, hinted on Monday that he might accept holding indirect peace talks with Israel, mediated by US Envoy, George Mitchell. He added that direct talks cannot resume before Israel freezes settlement activities for three months. His statements regarding the three months freeze are considered a backtrack on a previous demand that Israel should fully halt its settlement activities before peace talks are resumed.

Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated that there is a chance that the stalled peace process would be unconditionally resumed in the coming few weeks. Netanyahu said that the “International community now realizes that Israel wants to resume the peace process”, and that the “road is clear for resuming the talks”. The statements of Netanyahu came during his closing speech at the annual Herzilia conference. He said that “fate of the Jewish people is connected with the fate of the state of Israel”, and added that there is “a need to strengthen Israel’s security capabilities”.

Israel’s Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, met with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and senior Egyptian officials in Egypt. Barak also met with his Egyptian counterpart, Mohammad Tantawi and Egyptian intelligence minister, Omar Suleiman. Israeli Ynet News reported that the meeting focused on stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and efforts to release the captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. Israeli officials accompanying Barak reported the meetings to be positive and productive.

It has been one year since Israel launched its 22-day long attack codenamed Operation Cast Lead (OCL) on the Gaza Strip. Last week a British court issued an arrest warrant for

Israeli Kadima opposition leader Tzipi Livni for her role in orchestrating the assault. Livni, who was Israel's foreign minister at the time, was scheduled to visit the UK but ended up calling off her trip; the arrest warrant was cancelled as a result. However the issuing of the warrant in and of itself is an incredible feat. It is also a direct result of recommendations made in the Goldstone Report concerning how to bring justice to the Palestinian victims of OCL. Israel launched OCL in what it said was response to years of rocket and mortar fire emanating from armed Palestinian groups operating in the Strip, invoking self-defense under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter as justification for the attack.

Geo strategic front:

Israeli Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, warned, of the possibility of military confrontations with Syria due to the lack of progress during indirect talks with the country, and added that such an issue could develop into a comprehensive war. Speaking to senior military commanders, Barak stated that a conformation with Damascus would lead Israel to holding talks on the same issues indirectly discussed with Syria fifteen years ago.

Hamas has rejected accusations leveled against the movement that it had committed "war crimes" during the last year Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip. A UN Human Rights Council report that was compiled by a team led by the South African judge Richard Goldstone has accused both Israel and Hamas of war crimes during the three week war in the region.

Detailed news:

Egypt

Political front:

Mubarak: Upcoming elections will be characterized by integrity

For a long time Egypt has defended Arab issues and the Palestinian cause, said President Hosni Mubarak yesterday in an interview with Al-Shurta (The Police) magazine. The president went on to lament what he perceives as the ungratefulness of other Arabs. "Our sacrifices are met with campaigns of suspicion and attempts to cast aspersion, and [...] we are extremely angry about what happened lately in Arish and Rafah, the targeting of our soldiers, and attempts to bring chaos to our land under the name of solidarity convoys to Gaza," Mubarak said in the interview. "How would the region, the Arab world and the Middle East in general be if Egypt had not assumed its responsibilities?" Mubarak emphasized that Egypt will continue to support the Palestinian cause and the peace process, while giving priority to Egypt's national security. When asked about the role of

political parties, Mubarak said, "Parties are part of the Egyptian political system. If there are disagreements between parties about some programs or positions, this doesn't mean that some of those parties are more patriotic or loving toward Egypt than others." Mubarak also advised political parties to end their internal conflicts and offer solutions rather than just criticism. The president further called on political parties to integrate new members and young people, giving them the opportunity to take decisions that shape their futures. The Ministry of Interior will play an important role in the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, Mubarak said, adding that the ministry should contribute to bolstering constitutional and legislative reforms introduced in 2005. Mubarak also assured that the upcoming parliamentary elections will be characterized by integrity, and that the new formation of the People's Assembly formation will reflect the will of the voters. **Brotherhood changes tack?** Mohamed Badei, the newly-elected supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, uses his first week in office to issue a series of conflicting statements, reports Gamal Essam El-Din Considered by many a conservative academic who will avoid confrontation with the regime, Mohamed Badei, the 67-year-old newly-elected supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), used his first week in office to attack the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). In an interview with the BBC Arabic service Badei claimed the constitutional amendments passed in 2007 were tailored to allow the NDP to hijack elections and monopolise power. "The NDP has appointed itself both judge and plaintiff," he said. Badei urged President Hosni Mubarak to step down as chairman of the ruling NDP. "President Mubarak should be the father of all Egyptians and not just one party," said Badei. "He should entrust a neutral government with organising free parliamentary and presidential elections." "In this way, for the first time, Egyptians would be able to freely choose their leaders.' Badei also argued that the amended constitution has made it impossible for independent figures to run in the presidential elections. "It is not important who the candidates might be. What is important for now is that independent presidential hopefuls be allowed to run." Badei attacked the national press and denounced the vitriolic attacks they had launched against Mohamed El-Baradei, ex-head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), "simply for announcing that he might consider running in the next presidential elections". He also announced that, "the Brotherhood has no reason to refrain from contesting parliamentary elections in November." "I will say only that Brotherhood members will run on their own ticket and not within the framework of a deal with the government, as some allege." "A number of Brotherhood sisters have already decided to run in districts designated for female only candidates." The Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition group, was able to secure a fifth of the 454 seats up for grabs in the 2005 parliamentary elections, with candidates running ostensibly as independents. Many observers believe the group will lose a majority of its seats in November's election. In an address on Police Day on Sunday, Interior Minister Habib El-Adli warned that "the outlawed group [the Muslim Brotherhood] will never be allowed to tamper with

constitutional legitimacy". "Security forces will remain firm in the face of all the mouthpieces of this outlawed group which would like to cry foul about a lack of democracy and legitimacy." On an earlier occasion El-Adli said, "the outlawed group of the Muslim Brotherhood might have won a large number of seats in the 2005 elections but the situation is different now." On Sunday security forces arrested nine Brotherhood members as they prepared for the poll in the Aga district of the Nile-delta governorate of Daqahliya. The seat has remained vacant since 2005 owing to legal disputes. On Monday, in a conflicting signal, 104 Brotherhood members were freed after spending nine months in detention when they were accused of staging anti- government demonstrations during Israel's assault on Gaza last year. Some analysts believe that in spite of Adli's tough words the Interior Ministry is seeking rapprochement with the group. "The Interior Ministry was happy to see the Brotherhood elect a conservative figure like Badei as its leader and in return offered a reward in the form of releasing some of the group's members," speculates Ammar Ali Hassan, a researcher on Islamist movements. In an interview with the Qatar-based Arab satellite channel of Al-Jazeera , Badei surprised many by saying he had no objections to Gamal Mubarak, the 46-year-old son of President Mubarak, becoming the next president of Egypt. He did, however, qualify his statement by saying Gamal Mubarak "must come to power via free and fair elections and in competition with rival candidates". "Badei's words suggest the Brotherhood will cancel any objections to Gamal Mubarak succeeding his father in return for the security forces softening their campaign against the group and even allowing it to win some seats in the next parliament," says Hassan. The Brotherhood's lawyer, Abdel-Moneim Abdel-Maqsoud, insists the 104 members were released for legal reasons. "The Interior Ministry was forced to release them to comply with final judicial verdicts, not because of a deal between the new supreme guide and the government," he told reporters on Monday. "The allegation that I was elected supreme guide as part of a deal with the regime is entirely unfounded," Badei told the BBC. "We just want to extend a helping hand to the regime to help it solve the country's problems. Sadly, it always rejects our hand. We are ready to give advice to the regime but we are not ready to give up our rights and commitments in return for it softening its iron grip." "Suggestions that the Brotherhood currently suffers from serious divisions between hardline conservatives and a new generation of young reformists also lack foundation," Badei said. "People are fond of repeating the allegation to tarnish the image of the movement but the truth is all members of the Guidance Bureau, including myself, are reformists who call for greater political reform and democracy." Badei, who before becoming supreme guide was head of the group's indoctrination and ideological education unit, chose Mahmoud Hussein, a member of the newly-elected Guidance Bureau and a professor of civil engineering at Assiut University, as the movement's new secretary-general on 21 January. Hussein, 73, replaces Mahmoud Ezzat, the Brotherhood hawk thought to have engineered the coup against reformists in the 27 December Guidance Bureau elections. Hussein, who had

been in charge of the group's human resources development department, has been arrested three times. Like Badei he is considered a "Qotbist", a devotee of the extremist doctrines of the Brotherhood's theoretician Sayed Qotb. He is also a staunch supporter of Hamas. Ismail Haniyeh, the group's leader in Gaza, was among the first to phone and congratulate Badei on becoming supreme guide.

Protestors Urge Pa to Take Action against Sectarian Violence

Daily News Egypt : February 3, 2010: Protestors called on the People's Assembly to take decisive action against sectarian acts of violence Wednesday at a protest held outside parliament. "Egypt is for all Egyptians" the roughly 50 protestors chanted while holding up photographs of Abanop Kamal, one of six Coptic young men shot dead outside a church in Upper Egypt's Nagaa Hammadi on Coptic Christmas eve, Jan. 6. The National Committee Against Sectarian Violence, which organized the protest, was formed three days before the Nagaa Hammadi shootings. Since its formation the National Committee has been campaigning for legislative and social reform to end religious discrimination against Egypt's Christian minority. A delegation of activists and political figures left the protest to submit a letter from the National Committee to PA Speaker Fathi Sorour, and present these demands. University professor and activist Abdel-Gelil Mostafa formed part of this delegation. Before going in to meet Sorour, Mostafa commented that "the idea of co-existence was invented by Egypt." "A new spirit has emerged however because of a failure to apply the law properly. Islam itself preaches the principle of complete equality. Legislation must be enacted preventing all discrimination," Mostafa said. Commenting on the security response to acts of sectarian violence, Mostafa said that "the government has a duty to protect citizens." "The interior ministry must return to this principle rather than simply protecting the regime," Mostafa added. Copts and political activists have rejected claims by authorities that the Nagaa Hammadi shootings were criminal, rather than sectarian, in nature, alleging that the shootings were just part of a series of sectarian acts targeting Copts whose perpetrators have not been brought to justice. Activists say that a failure to hold to account perpetrators leads to their recurrence. They also maintain that Egypt's Christians routinely experience discrimination in areas such as the right of Christians to construct and maintain churches compared with the rules governing the construction of mosques. "Criminal proceedings against perpetrators of sectarian crimes are no longer enough," the letter reads. "What is needed now is to confront this problem at its roots...The problem is in essence political with legal, policing, cultural and media dimensions," it continues. The National Committee is calling for new legislation to ensure respect for the principle of citizenship enshrined in the Egyptian constitution. Two draft laws have already been submitted to parliament to that effect. The first calls for equality in legislation governing the building and maintenance of places of worship and was drawn up in 2005. The second draft law, submitted by the governmental National Council for Human Rights, is concerned with equal opportunity rights and anti-

discrimination measures. The National Committee is also calling for laws against incitement to religious hatred and “legislation necessary to protect respect for freedom of belief and bring to account individuals who prevent citizens from freely carrying out religious rituals.” Lawyer and Coptic activist Naguib Gobrael listed other Coptic demands. He said that Egypt’s Christians, who are estimated to make up between 6-10 percent of Egypt’s population, are calling for a representative number of Coptic members of parliament, greater visibility in the media and the amendment of school curricula, which some Copts say perpetuate misconceptions about Christians and the Christian faith. Daily News Egypt asked Gobrael whether he was hopeful that the meeting with Sorour would result in positive action being taken. “I think a re-thinking of the Coptic issue is inevitable given both the increasing tension recently, and the fact that Egypt will later this month be subject to international scrutiny before the United Nations,” Gobrael commented. The United Nations Human Rights Council will examine Egypt’s human rights record on Feb. 17 as part of the Universal Periodic Review process.

Nuclear Site Source Of Tension Within Ndp, Says Report

Daily News Egypt: February 1, 2010: According to local newspaper reports, a certain coterie of businessmen from the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) are still attempting to agitate for the relocation of Egypt’s first nuclear power plant from its chosen location in Dabba. Dabba is to be announced soon as the site for the nuclear plant because it satisfies all the conditions, but certain members of the policies committee in the NDP believe the site could become a tourist hotspot instead, Al-Masry Al-Youm reported Monday. Sources from the Egyptian Atomic Energy Authority (EAEA) were quoted by the paper as saying that President Hosni Mubarak was leaning towards picking Dabba as the site, but that a group of businessmen who belong to the ruling NDP were trying to prevent it. This is not the first time reports of this nature surface, and there has been an exchange of words in the media between scientists and businessmen over the suitability of the Dabba site. Last year Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif was quoted as saying, “Why are they insisting on the Dabba site? We can invest in this site for touristic purposes,” which kicked off a maelstrom over perceived designs to appropriate the site for business ventures. Last August, former members of the EAEA came out with warnings regarding the designs of businessmen that they deemed to be against the national interest of Egypt. One of these businessmen, Ibrahim Kamel, NDP policies committee member, had warned of the dangers of building a nuclear plant in the North of Egypt and the dangers it could pose to Cairo and other governorates. Egypt intends to build its first nuclear reactor at Dabba, 160 km west of Alexandria. The site will host a 1,000-megawatt nuclear power station and there are plans to eventually build four reactors in total at the site. Former deputy head of the Atomic Energy Authority Abdel-Fatah Hilal accused some businessmen of wanting to appropriate the site under the pretext of boosting tourism revenues. Furthermore, former head of the agency Mohamed

Abdel-Aziz said at the time, “Businessmen should stick to what they know and stay away from science.” Dabba is deemed an ideal locale for the plant because it is not susceptible to earthquakes and is near water, as well as having a small population in the immediate surrounding area. However, there are environmental concerns regarding the building of a nuclear site, and Egyptian environmentalists have called for seeking renewable sources of energy before resorting to a nuclear power plant.

Egypt Questions Suspects Of New Militant Group

By AP with additional reporting by Omnia Al Desoukie for Daily News Egypt: January 31, 2010: Some 25 Egyptians arrested in November are being questioned by prosecutors for allegedly planning terrorist attacks, a security official and a lawyer said Sunday. The security official said the suspects were arrested on charges of stockpiling weapons and explosives to be used in “attacks against targets inside Egypt.” The men were arrested in Mansoura, northeast of Cairo, two months ago and are believed to be members of a new Islamic militant group. The official and lawyer both spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the investigations. “They are accused of forming a new Islamic militant group based on ideas of Sayyid Qutb,” said the lawyer referring to an Egyptian ideologue executed in 1966 whose ideas provide much of the intellectual basis for today’s militant groups. The Egyptian independent daily Al-Masry Al-Youm reported Sunday that the group was planning to attack US ships in the Suez Canal and the tomb of revered Jewish holy man, Abu Hatzira in the Nile Delta. Quoting security officials, the paper also said the group was planning to ship weapons and explosives to Hamas for use in their rockets. The report added that some of the suspects have received training in the troubled Sudanese region of Darfur. Egypt security forces have recently reported the arrest of several new militant groups looking to carry out attacks against Egyptian and foreign targets, mainly US and Israeli interests. Commenting on news of the recent arrests, Diaa Rashwan, an expert on Islamist movements at Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, was weary of the reference to Sayyid Qutb. He did warn, however, against the media’s tendency to treat what he referred to as “security leaks,” emphasizing that such media reports must not be considered facts until there is a court case and those involves face legal charges. He added that since the 1997 terrorist attack in Luxor, the state has only initiated two cases against extremists for the Khan El-Khalili bombing in 2005 and the recent 2008 Al-Hussein bombing. Islamist lawyer Montasser El-Zayat, who represents some of the suspects, categorically denies that the detainees were planning any terrorist attacks. He accused state security of using violence to extract confessions and of holding the suspects illegally without allowing them access to either their families or even their lawyer. “They are political activists who hold religious views against the government and this is why they have been arrest,” he said. –AP with additional reporting by Omnia Al Desoukie for Daily News Egypt

Us Religious Commission Visit To Upper Egypt Cancelled

Daily News Egypt: January 29, 2010: The delegation of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom cancelled a proposed trip to Upper Egypt due to sensitivities in the wake of the Nagaa Hammadi Jan. 6 shootings. The foreign ministry sent a letter to the Shoura Council explaining that they had requested from the US Embassy to intervene regarding the visit, though the embassy explained that the delegation was not an official entity and they could not prevent the visit, the state-run Al-Gomhuria reported Friday. However, the report added that the embassy made several calls regarding the matter and managed to persuade the delegation to cancel the visit. The US embassy previously told Daily News Egypt that the delegation — an independent body whose members are appointed by the US Congress and President — was on a routine fact-finding mission and that its visit was not related to any specific event. The delegation did meet with head of Al-Azhar Mohamed Sayed Tantawy and Minister of Religious Endowments Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqzouq as well as rights activists involved in cases of freedom of expression. Pope Shenouda refused to meet with the delegation claiming that these were internal matters and should not involve foreign interference. The Nagaa Hammadi murders saw seven people killed in a shooting outside a church on the eve of Coptic Christmas, six Christians and one Muslim. Egypt has made terse statements regarding what it deemed was foreign interference in what it considers to be a purely local affair, and took exception to a European Parliament resolution on the incident. The European text called on “the Egyptian Government to ensure the personal safety and physical integrity of Coptic Christians and of members of other religious minorities in the country,” as well as guaranteeing that “Coptic Christians and members of other religious communities and of minorities enjoy the full range of human rights and fundamental freedoms — including the right to choose and change their religion freely — and to prevent any discrimination against them.” A statement from the foreign ministry last Friday read, “It is an internal Egyptian matter that no foreign party is allowed to consider.” And while the US delegation could not go to Upper Egypt, 1,500 religious scholars reportedly embarked on the journey to southern Egypt to discuss Muslim-Christian relations in the wake of the Nagaa Hammadi shootings.

Egypt: No qualms over monitoring elections

26 January 2010 in Egypt, News: Secretary General of the National Council for Human Rights in Egypt Mokhles Kotb stressed that the Council has no objection to the presence of international monitoring and supervision of both Parliamentary and Presidential elections in Egypt scheduled for later this year and 2011, respectively. But he said this monitoring must be done through United Nations organizations and regional organizations. Kotb added during a meeting on Sunday with Tamara Kaufman, United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, who had asked about the possibility of international supervision of the upcoming Egyptian elections and the events of Nag Hammadi – where 6 Copts and one Muslim were killed on Coptic Christmas Eve – and

requested an assessment of local monitoring of previous elections. The Egyptian official said, in response to queries from the American official, that the Council assessed the process of national control of the previous Parliamentary and presidential elections in Egypt and recommended the need to start choosing members qualified to do the work of the internal supervision services. This would coincide, he said, with the preparation of qualified instructors for the training of activists and researchers on the work of election observation, explaining that the Council “will organize a series of training sessions during this year in collaboration with UNDP, the United Nations and regional organizations for the preparation of high-level trainers for this purpose.” Regarding the events of Nag Hammadi, Kotb explained the stance of the council taken towards these events, saying he took the initiative to “immediately send two delegations of council members and researchers and technicians to stand close to the circumstances and understand the real causes of this incident.” He pointed to the fact that he had issued a statement of the council’s position and proposals, which “is currently being studied in detail concerning the incident and motives, and the climate, which showed a severe defect in spreading the culture of human rights and the culture of tolerance and acceptance of others, citizenship and participation among groups in society.” The Secretary General stressed that the situation in the region affects the situation of human rights, and “leads to widespread violence and radicalism,” emphasizing that reaching a solution would contribute to the achievement of security and stability and support for human rights. Local rights groups and activists have largely criticized the Egyptian government’s response to the incident, calling for a renewed effort to end sectarian strife in the country ahead of elections later this year.

Geo strategic front:

Egypt Police Kill Migrant near Israel Border

AFP: February 2, 2010: Egyptian police shot dead a sub-Saharan African migrant and wounded another as they tried to enter Israel illegally, a security official said. A police patrol spotted the two trying to slip into Israel north of the Karm Abu Salem border crossing late. "Police opened fire after they refused orders" to stop, the Egyptian official said. The identity of the dead migrant was not immediately known. The wounded migrant, who was taken to hospital in the northern border town of Rafah, was a 29-year-old from Cameroon. It was the second fatal shooting of a migrant reported this year along the porous border with Israel that has become a major transit route for migrants, asylum-seekers and drug smugglers. The Israeli government has asked Cairo to clamp down on the flow of asylum seekers, who say they are fleeing poverty and discrimination in Egypt, and earlier this month approved the construction of barriers along its 250-km border with Egypt. The policy of shooting migrants, 19 of whom were killed last year, has prompted harsh criticism of Egypt. None of the migrants killed was armed, although Bedouin smugglers who help them have opened fire on police. –AFP

Egypt Welcomes Hamas' Readiness for Unity With Fatah

AFP: February 2, 2010: Egypt on Tuesday welcomed statements by Hamas leaders that they were ready to seal a unity deal with the rival Fatah faction but said Cairo's blueprint for Palestinian reconciliation was not up for negotiations. "Successive statements from several Hamas leaders regarding their willingness to achieve Palestinian reconciliation are welcome," foreign ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki said. But he ruled out requests by Hamas to modify an Egyptian-drafted document to seal the reconciliation between the Islamist group and Fatah, the mainly secular party of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. "This matter would delay reconciliation indefinitely," Zaki said in a statement. "Opening the way for any changes in the document would mean...a regression," Zaki said, in apparent reference to repeated reservations by Hamas over the Egyptian proposals. Egypt's efforts to re-unite the two rival factions have so far failed and Cairo has postponed twice a planned signing of a reconciliation agreement because of the deep divisions between Hamas and Fatah. During the last attempt in October Hamas refused to sign the Egyptian-brokered document aimed at paving the way for legislative and presidential elections. Fatah signed the document. Zaki said reservations from Hamas or any other faction would be taken into account when implementing the agreement. His remarks came after Hamas' exiled leader Khaled Meshaal said on the weekend that his group was willing to reconcile with Fatah if invited to Cairo. "The reconciliation is within reach," Meshaal said at a mourning ceremony in Damascus on Sunday for Mahmud Al-Mabhuh, a top Hamas militant who was killed in Dubai on January 20. He urged Egypt "to receive us in Cairo ... and you will see that the Palestinians will be reconciled immediately. That is my message to Egypt." Hamas routed Fatah from the Gaza Strip in 2007 after deadly fighting, a year after winning Palestinian legislative elections. Tensions with Egypt soared after Hamas refused to sign the deal, and were exacerbated Egypt's construction of an underground barrier against smuggling tunnels on its border with Gaza. –AFP

Hamas says Palestinian reconciliation deal 'within reach'

AFP: February 1, 2010: Hamas' exiled leader Khaled Meshaal said on Sunday that a reconciliation deal with rival Palestinian faction Fatah was "within reach" and called on Egypt to host a meeting to seal an accord. He urged Egypt "to receive us in Cairo ... and you will see that the Palestinians will be reconciled immediately. That is my message to Egypt." "The reconciliation is within reach," Meshaal said at a mourning ceremony in Damascus for Mahmud Al-Mabhuh, a top Hamas insurgent who was killed in Dubai on Jan. 20. "We will be reconciled on the basis of what was agreed and we will sign," he said. "Invite us to Cairo with Fatah, and all the factions as well as independent leaders, and you will see a real reconciliation." Egypt has already twice postponed the planned signing of a reconciliation agreement in Cairo because of deep divisions between the Islamist movement Hamas and the secular Fatah. Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip

from Fatah after deadly clashes in June 2007, a year after winning Palestinian legislative elections. –AFP

Egypt Still Involved In Secret Detentions, Says Un Report

Daily News Egypt: January 28, 2010: Egypt is among a host of countries including the US that is still involved in secret detentions of terrorism suspects around the world, according to a UN report. The report, due to be submitted to the UN Human Rights Council in March, stated that these countries had been continuing the practice of secret detentions — which is illegal under the Geneva Conventions even during states of emergency and armed conflict — for the past nine years, Reuters reported. Alongside Egypt and the US, the report names Russia, China, Algeria, Sudan, Zimbabwe, India and Iran as the other countries still involved in secret detentions. Four UN investigators spent a year working on the report. “On a global scale, secret detention in connection with counter-terrorist policies remains a serious problem,” said the report,. “Secret detention as such may constitute torture or ill-treatment for the direct victims as well as their families.” The report surmised that the objective of secret detentions was to cover up torture and human rights abuses carried out against the terror suspects, and “continues to be used in the name of countering terrorism around the world.” The report also indicated that the US was still heavily involved in these practices, which included kidnapping suspects before locking them up in undisclosed locations. According to the UN report, “The secret detention policy took many forms. The CIA established its own secret detention facilities to interrogate so-called ‘High Value Detainees’. It asked partners with poor human rights records to secretly detain and interrogate persons on its behalf.” This process, known as extraordinary rendition, meant that terror suspects were held in countries such as Jordan, Pakistan, Syria and Egypt again. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report published in 2005 tackled specifically the role of Egypt in rendition of terror suspects and how those rendered suspects were tortured and generally mistreated, and in some cases made to disappear, as in the government would not even admit to having them in custody. “Torture, although it is strictly forbidden under Egyptian law and the international human rights treaties Egypt has signed, has been a widespread and persistent phenomenon in the country, particularly during interrogation of security suspects,” said the HRW report. Journalist and blogger Hossam El-Hamalawy who was involved in the drafting of the HRW report, told Daily News Egypt, “These renditions will continue while there is the political will and support for it by the Americans and what we are seeing from the Obama administration is that there is no difference in its counterterrorism measures from its predecessors.” “Aid to Arab dictatorships still continues, there is escalation in the war on Afghanistan and the same tough rhetoric is coming from Obama regarding terrorism,” he added, “[so it will continue] in the current atmosphere where even CIA operatives indicted for torture are given immunity.” The UN report said that “the CIA appears to generally have been involved in the capture and

transfer of prisoners, as well as in providing questions for those held in foreign prisons. Equally, little is known about the amount of detainees who have been held at the request of other states such as the United Kingdom and Canada.” El-Hamalawy said, “Regarding any operation between Arab security services, the CIA will at least be notified if it is not directly supervising the operation. So whether the Americans are directly involved or not, the renditions are happening.”

African Union Seeks ICC Statute Amendment

AFP: February 3, 2010: The African Union sought an amendment to the Rome Statute to authorize the UN General Assembly to defer cases when the Security Council fails to decide on them. The bloc wants "an amendment to Article 16 of the Rome statute in order to allow the UN General Assembly to defer cases for one year in the case where the UN Security Council would have failed to take a decision within a specified timeframe," according to a document obtained by AFP. The AU summit that wrapped up Tuesday said it welcomed the proposal submitted by South Africa seeking changes to the statute establishing the International Criminal Court (ICC). Following the ICC's March 2009 arrest warrant on Sudanese President Omar El-Beshir for war crimes, the 53-member bloc called on the UN Security Council to defer the case, but it is yet to do so. The bloc "deeply regrets" that its request to the Security Council to defer proceedings against El-Beshir "has not been acted upon and in this regard reiterates its request to the UNSC." The ICC issued the arrest warrant for El-Beshir on five counts of crimes against humanity and two of war crimes committed in Sudan's war-torn western Darfur region — its first-ever warrant for a sitting head of state. The AU has argued that the execution of the warrant risks upsetting peace efforts in Darfur and south Sudan. –AFP

Dina Ezzat examines the debate over the two walls on Egypt's eastern borders

"The security measures that we apply on our eastern borders fall strictly under the jurisdiction of Egyptian sovereignty and we accept no argument on this matter," President Hosni Mubarak said this week. Speaking in a no-uncertain-terms tone, Mubarak could not have been clearer in dispelling any thoughts that Egypt would backtrack, or at least suspend, its plan to install underground steel plates across the 14km border with Gaza. As Mubarak said, in an address Sunday to celebrate Police Day, Egypt will "move on with the intensified security measures." This, he added, is not about appeasing the US or Israel, as has been suggested in some national, regional and international quarters, but to fortify Egyptian security. "Our top priority remains Egypt first and Egypt before anything else," the president stated, to the applause of a high-ranking police audience. The presidential statements came against the backdrop of unmasked criticism from Hamas on the new Egyptian security measures on the borders with Gaza that has been put under a humanitarian wrecking siege. On Monday, Mushir Al-Masri, a senior Hamas figure, claimed that such statements indicate an Egyptian-Israeli cooperation to put pressure on

Gaza, under the exclusive rule of Hamas since it ousted the Palestinian Authority in the summer of 2007. Egypt has already come under considerable criticism from international, regional and national human rights quarters for its refusal to ease restrictions on the operation of the Rafah crossing point that links Gaza to the eastern Egyptian territories. Late last week, a group of over 80 NGOs, including UN bodies, accused Egypt of being a party to imposing a siege on Gaza at a serious humanitarian and economic cost. Egyptian officials continue to shrug off these accusations publicly. In a series of statements Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul-Gheit, among other senior state officials, insisted that Egypt is providing sufficient aid to Gaza to prevent an existing humanitarian crisis from taking a downward curve. This, they argue, is being done despite the clear dissatisfaction of Egyptian authorities of Hamas policies that, Cairo suggests, prevents an end to the internal Palestinian power squabble over the past two years. "If we want to put more pressure on Hamas in Gaza we could but we are not doing it," said an Egyptian diplomat who asked that his name be withheld. According to the diplomat, Egypt has put up with much criticism from the US and Israel for having turned a blind eye to the smuggling through the tunnels built underground between Egyptian territories and Gaza for the last few years. However, he added, recently Egypt felt that these tunnels were used in an "aggressive and shameless way" to smuggle arms through Egyptian territories. "This is a red line," the diplomat stated. Egyptian officials argue that by installing these steel plates -- otherwise qualified by critics as the underground steel wall -- Egypt is getting both the US and Israel off its back. At the same time, they suggest, Egypt is making it clear to the international community that it is strictly the responsibility of Israel as the occupying power to provide for Gaza. Senior state officials privately argue that Israel is doing all it can "to throw Gaza in the face of Egypt. This has been a systematic policy for many years. For Israel it is a dream to get rid of Gaza, the highly populated part of the Palestinian territories and the one most inhabited by Islamist militants," commented a senior government member who asked not to be identified. According to this government member, "if Egypt bows to the platitudes issued in human rights and Arab nationalist quarters it would end up being solely responsible for Gaza." This, he insisted, is both an economic and security crisis. "If Egypt is responsible for Gaza and some militants decide to launch a militant attack on Israel -- no matter how insignificant -- it would be Egypt who has to answer to the international community concerning this attack." For Egypt the concept of pursuing tightened security measures is quite convenient, even when it comes to its borders with Israel. As such, diplomatic sources say, Egypt has allegedly given a nod of approval to Israel to proceed with upgrading the security measures on the Israeli side of the borders with Egypt. According to the same diplomats Egypt has objected to the construction of a cement and electrified wall on the borders with Egypt but has condoned the instalment of metal detectors and electronic gates across the borders. Late last week, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu inspected the borders to give the go-ahead to the new security measures.

Israel says it is pursuing these new measures to "protect the Jewish identity" of the state in the face of the infiltration of illegal immigrants from Egypt, mostly non-Jewish sub-Saharan Africans. Egyptian officials say they "don't mind" the rationale offered by Israel since "it is on the Israeli borders that the new equipment would be placed." Egyptian security officials say they take excessive care to combat the infiltration of illegal immigrants through the borders. Egyptian security forces have at times shot some of these immigrants and consequently came under heavy criticism from human rights quarters. For Egypt the new Israeli security measures should prevent "smuggling both ways". Egyptian security officials complain of human trafficking across the borders: "Women are smuggled from Israel into the Egyptian territories." Egyptian officials refuse to link the two walls. They insist it is coincidental that the two physical barriers are being put in place almost simultaneously.

Economic front:

Egypt's Efg-Hermes Eyeing Rbs Pakistan Unit: Central Bank

Reuters: February 4, 2010: Egypt's No. 1 bank EFG-Hermes has expressed interest in buying the operations of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) in Pakistan, a central bank official said on Thursday. Pakistan's MCB Bank had agreed in August to buy 99.37 percent of RBS Pakistan shares for about \$87 million. But the deal collapsed last month after MCB failed to get regulatory approval. "Yes, we have been approached by EFG-Hermes for permission to start due diligence of RBS Pakistan," said Syed Wasimuddin, chief spokesman of the State Bank of Pakistan. Last month, Pakistan's Faysal Bank also expressed an interest in buying RBS Pakistan. The central bank has yet to grant permission to both EFG-Hermes and Faysal Bank to start due diligence, Wasimuddin said. Industry sources familiar with the development said an EFG-Hermes team visited Pakistan recently to explore investment opportunities. "They looked pretty interested in this acquisition and probably would be a serious contender to buy RBS Pakistan," said one industry source. Last month, EFG-Hermes sold its 28 percent stake in Lebanon's Bank Audi for \$913.4 million. Its chief executive officer, Yasser El-Mallawany, told Reuters in a recent interview that the bank had \$1.2 billion-\$1.3 billion of spare capital after the stake sale that it would use for purchases and to venture into new banking businesses. The planned sale of RBS Pakistan is part of moves by part-nationalized RBS to sell assets globally as it tries to exit from up to 36 countries and focus on its mainly British core businesses. Before MCB Bank agreed to the now-lapsed deal, Egypt's Orascom Telecom Holdings and Rojhan Capital were also among those who had expressed interest in acquiring RBS Pakistan. By 0808 GMT, RBS Pakistan shares were up 0.53 percent, while the broader market was up 1.64 percent.

Social front:

Egypt Tourist Arrivals Down 2.3 Pct

Special to Daily News Egypt: January 31, 2010: While the holidays have ended in Europe and Russia snowy winters are still in mid swing. This is good news for Egypt as tourists flock to the country in search of warmer weather and luxurious beaches. Tourism accounts for about 11 percent of Egypt's gross domestic product and is a crucial source of foreign currency and jobs. It is one of the pillars of the Egyptian economy alongside Suez Canal revenues and remittances from workers abroad. However, it is also a cyclical industry and one of the first to feel the heat of the financial crisis. Egypt's tourist arrivals fell 2.3 percent in 2009 to reach 12.5 million, according to an Al-Ahram report released Thursday. The global slowdown kept more European travelers at home; and while vacationers from Gulf countries continued to flock to Egypt's beaches, many travelers remained fearful of the swine flu. Even once tourist rates return to pre-crisis levels; it will still take some time before revenues fully recover. As Beltone Financial put it, once tourists themselves have returned, their spending takes longer to rebound. "Figures imply that spending is recovering at a slower rate than that of tourism arrivals, as we had previously reported, as the appetite to spend on luxury items is still relatively subdued, compared to before the crisis," Beltone said. Egypt's competitive package of year round sun, proximity to European and Gulf markets, rich history and aquatic delights helped keep tourism rates constant during the crisis — the largest dip in tourism was a 13 percent drop last January — but another stabilizing factor has been the steady growth in residential tourism. "Last January tourism was down 13 percent," Omayma El-Husseini, ministry of tourism spokesperson explained, "Still by August it was down 9 percent. By September it was less than 5 percent. We've seen the numbers getting better and better." The Gouna resort in the Sinai and other tourist cities have sold second houses to European tourists who then return with their families for vacation. New purchases of second homes have dropped, but the revenues have been buoyed by the simultaneous drop in construction costs. While some nationalities were more likely to stay home, others showed up in increased abundance in line with recent yearly trends. Russian tourism to Egypt, for example, has been growing by leaps and bounds over the years. Arrivals from Russia were up by more than 2 million tourists, far ahead of Germany and Italy who maintained their arrival numbers at about 1 million tourists each. Egypt benefits from the double digit growth in Russian outbound tourism and remains the third most popular destination for Russian tourists heading abroad. The World Tourism Organization predicts that by 2020 Russia will be the 10th most important country worldwide for sending tourists abroad. Youmna El-Hamaky, member of the Shoura Council's economics committee, stressed the importance of increased marketing to improve tourism and attract the highest spending segments of the market. "We are not capturing the highest paying tourists. Tourists come but don't spend enough," she said. As countries come out of the financial crisis and their economies grow, Egypt's tourism sector should return to normal and bring back one of Egypt's "most important sources for

foreign currency," she added. Since tourist arrivals fell 5.4 percent over the first nine months of the year, the year end data comes as good news as it shows rapid market recovery in the fourth quarter.

Egypt's Veil Wearers See It as Barrier to Harassment

Agence France-Presse: February 2, 2010 : Female students at Cairo University are defying religious and state efforts to ban the controversial niqab from schools and colleges, saying that wearing the controversial face veil is a religious obligation that also protects against sexual harassment. "I wear the niqab essentially to avoid harassment on the street and on public transport," said law student Marwa Mohammed, 19, her eyes visible only through the slits in the black veil that covers her entire face. But if conditions changed and she was not subjected to harassment would she take it off? She would not, because "the veil gives me respect, and people look at me differently." She implied that sexual harassment would exist as long as young men looking for work and housing remained frustrated in their efforts. "What will change? The cost of living? Unemployment? Or the excessively high cost of housing?" Marwa asked, her kohl-stained eyes giving away a hidden smile. "As long as young people don't have the means to get married, harassment will continue," she added. The hijab, the Islamic head scarf that covers the hair and neck, is worn by most Muslim women in conservative Egypt, and religious authorities say that wearing it is an obligation of the faith. But the niqab, which has been gaining in popularity, has been driving a wedge between women such as Marwa and Egypt's highest religious authorities. In October, Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, Grand Imam of the prestigious Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's highest seat of learning, ignited a heated debate when he said the niqab was merely a tradition not linked to religion, and that women would be banned from wearing it in schools and universities. But on Wednesday, an Egyptian court caved in to opposition to the religious ruling and placed a stay on the ban. Now, religious authorities who oppose the niqab and women who favor it are polarized over the issue. The niqab-wearing students at Cairo University say they are adhering to a precept and repeat what seems to have become their mantra: "Of course the niqab is an obligation." It is an Islamic duty, "particularly in the times we live in, where sexual harassment is so common," explained 18-year-old Aya, who studies Arabic literature and has been wearing the niqab for three months. Sexual harassment is common in Egypt. According to a 2008 study by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, 83 percent of the country's women had experienced sexual harassment. There is growing concern by the government and Al-Azhar authorities over the niqab, which is associated in Egypt with the ultra-conservative Salafi school of thought that is practiced mostly in Saudi Arabia and parts of Yemen. Authorities say the niqab is also linked to security, allowing anyone to hide behind the veil. In schools, they say, anyone can pose as a student and sit for an exam in the place of another. Some university officials have even cited instances in which male students have tried to enter female dormitories by wearing

the niqab as a disguise. One female student at Cairo University charged that the authorities are trying to ban the niqab to paint Egypt's conservative society in a different light — one more acceptable to the West. "The government wants to ban the niqab to copy Americans and foreigners, to say that Egypt is a modern, developed country," said student Fatma Nasser.

Testing the veil

The battle between the Ministry of Higher Education and university students over the niqab has entered a new phase following last week's Supreme Administrative Court ruling that university administrations could not ban female students from wearing the niqab during exams. In a six-page judgement the court said that "banning the niqab, the full face veil, has no legal bases and contradicts the personal freedoms guaranteed by the constitution." Minister of Higher Education Hani Hilal said in a press conference that his ministry respects the court decision and will implement it. "Universities will allow the students who got a ruling in their favour to wear the niqab during exams. Students who did not get a ruling will be obliged to obey the university's examinations procedures. We want the students to reveal their faces during exams to make sure they do not cheat," Hilal said. The ruling came in response to a lawsuit filed earlier this month by 50 students. They had argued that allowing female guards to check their identities before entering the examination room was sufficient and that they should then be allowed to sit the examinations veiled. Although the Supreme Administrative Court ruling cannot be appealed the Faculty of Dar Al-Uloun, Cairo University, was last week still barring students wearing the niqab from examination halls. "They did not allow female students wearing the niqab to take the exams, claiming that the university had not yet received a copy of the court's verdict," Nizar Ghorab, the students' lawyer, told Al Ahram Weekly. More than 100 lawsuits, filed by 500 female students in Minya, Fayoum, Assiut, Menoufiya, Sharqiya, Tanta, Suez and Helwan governorates, are still pending before the courts. The issue first hit the headlines in October when Sheikh Mohamed Sayed Tantawi, the grand imam of Al Azhar, banned the niqab within Al Azhar University campus and affiliated classrooms and dormitories. Tantawi's move was followed by statements from Hilal saying the niqab could no longer be worn inside women's hostels for "security concerns".

Iraq

Political front:

Biden fails in Iraq

Shia determination to keep former Baathists out of Iraq's next elections has dealt a blow to Washington's desire for their rehabilitation, writes Salah Hemeid. US Vice-President Joe Biden travelled to Iraq this week for talks with Iraqi politicians in a bid to resolve a

simmering crisis over the disqualification of hundreds of candidates from the country's March elections on the grounds that they have links with Saddam Hussein's former ruling Baath Party. After two days of intensive discussions, Biden failed to convince leaders of the Shia-led government to push the Accountability and Justice Commission into rescinding its exclusion of suspected Baathists from the ballot, which Washington had hoped would stabilise the violence-torn nation and facilitate US troop withdrawals next year. The disqualification of 511 mostly Sunni candidates has outraged Iraqi Sunnis, who dominated Iraq for more than three decades under Baath Party rule and who see the disqualifications as an attempt to marginalise their community, casting doubt on the inclusiveness of the 7 March vote. The list consists of candidates accused of being members of Saddam's outlawed Baath Party's once-feared fedayeen (Men of Sacrifice) militia or his mukhabarat intelligence agency. Some of those now ordered purged are already in the government, including Defence Minister Abdel-Qader Al-Obeidi, or are key Iraqi lawmakers, such as Saleh Al-Mutlaq, head of the National Dialogue Front, and Dhafer Al-Ani, head of the National Accord Coalition. The controversy over these candidates' disqualification goes back to the earliest days of the US occupation of Iraq, when coalition authorities outlawed the Baath Party and established a commission to oversee what was known as de-Baathification, barring all but the party's junior members from public life. A new panel, the Accountability and Justice Commission, has since been formed to replace the De-Baathification Commission, but the Iraqi parliament has thus far refused to endorse the government's candidates for the new body. According to observers, Biden's failure to resolve the current crisis could have been predicted before he left Washington. Iraqi Shia officials had made it clear that they did not welcome US intervention, with government spokesman Ali Al-Dabbagh warning that attempts to influence the decision would be unacceptable. Protesters also waged anti-US demonstrations in several Iraqi cities having Shia populations, condemning what they called Biden's interference in Iraqi affairs. During his visit to Iraq, Biden met with Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, President Jalal Talabani, parliamentary speaker Iyad Al-Samaraai, senior government ministers and a cross section of other politicians. At his later press conference, he acknowledged the difficulties he had faced in trying to make Shia leaders change their minds. "I want to make clear I am not here to resolve that issue [of the banned candidates]," Biden said. "This is for Iraqis, not for me. I am confident that Iraq's leaders are seized with this issue and are working for a final, just solution. The United States condemns the crimes of the previous regime, and we fully support Iraq's constitutional ban on the return to power of Saddam's Baath Party." However, Biden did not try to hide Washington's irritation at what the US sees as the arbitrary way in which the list of disqualified candidates seems to have been drawn up, or its questioning of the legitimacy of the commission making decisions that could undermine the forthcoming elections. "The issue is not the goal of holding individuals accountable for their past actions, but the process of disqualification itself. Iraqi leaders understand that if the Iraq

people and the international community see the process as fair and transparent, it will enhance the credibility of the election," Biden said. Before his visit, Biden, who has responsibility for overseeing US policy in Iraq, had reportedly exercised pressure on various Iraqi leaders to help him end the row. Shortly before Biden's arrival, President Talabani, who is of Kurdish origin, came out in support of allowing "non- Saddamist Baathists" to run for election. Talabani also expressed his concerns about the legitimacy of the commission and its rulings. However, Al-Maliki and other Shia leaders resisted pressure to ease the restrictions on the Baathists, suspecting American attempts to undermine their power and forcing Biden to moderate his demands. Iraqi officials said that Biden had suggested that the disqualifications be postponed until after the March elections, proposing that some barred candidates be allowed to sign a declaration denouncing the Baath Party in return for being allowed to take part. However, the Accountability and Justice Commission rejected the proposals, with disqualified Sunni politicians such as Al-Mutlaq rejecting the idea of signing a denunciation of the Baath Party as humiliating and arguing that the ban was sectarian and politically motivated. As a compromise, Shia leaders agreed to submit a new list of members of the Accountability and Justice Commission to the Iraqi parliament for its approval and to ask the newly constituted commission to reconfirm the disqualifications. The commission also said it had taken some 59 names off the blacklist because of "discrepancies" in their identification and personal details. Behind the current crisis over the disqualification of suspected former Baathists lie American concerns about feuds between Iraq's Shia, Sunni and Kurdish communities placing obstacles in the way towards political progress in the country, though the US has also repeatedly said it is fully behind the Iraqi constitutional ban on the return of Saddam's Baath Party to power. The US argues that some Baathists have become partners in the political process and accepted its terms and that therefore they should be reintegrated into political life. However, Iraq's Shias, who fear that the Baathists have not accepted the new political system in Iraq and plan to topple the Shia-controlled government, argue that the Baathists will be a "Trojan Horse" inside the parliament if elected and will work to overthrow the government. While Shia officials claim that the commission worked independently to disqualify candidates with suspected links to the Baath Party, some are saying privately that the decisions were also prompted by reports of conspiracy to remove them from power. Under the alleged conspiracy, Washington and some Arab countries hope that the Sunnis will be able to send enough candidates to the next parliament to forge a coalition with the two main Kurdish parties and secular Shias and form the next Iraqi government. According to Shia politicians, if that goal proves unattainable then Baath-backed members of the parliament will move to form a bloc that will work to paralyse the government in an attempt to bring about its downfall. They also fear a Baath-orchestrated military coup that would rely upon the thousands of former officers from Saddam's army who have now joined the new army and security forces. Shia leaders have accused Baathists of being behind the spate of

attacks in summer and autumn last year that targeted government buildings and killed hundreds of people. They also blamed them for three massive blasts that killed scores of people and injured tens of others in Baghdad on Monday. Although an Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorist group has claimed responsibility for the two massive attacks in August and October last year, the government has claimed that the Baathists and Al-Qaeda are working together. Hours after last Monday's attacks, the Iraqi government announced that one of Saddam's most-trusted henchmen, Ali Hassan Al-Majid, had been executed. Al-Majid, known as "Chemical Ali" for his part in poison-gas attacks against the Kurds in the 1980s and the brutal crackdown on the Shias in the south of the country, had been given four death sentences, and many believe that his swift execution was meant to be a message that the government intended to deal harshly with the Baathists. Shia insistence on barring suspected former Baathists from the nation's political life also seems to be a way of tightening their control of the country, even if it means further dividing Iraq's two Muslim communities. If the current crisis is not handled judiciously, there will be fears that the country's next elections will not be recognised as fair and democratic, again pitting Iraqi Shias and Sunnis against each other.

Will there be a coup d'état in Iraq?

Azzaman, February 3, 2010 "The staging of a coup d'état is still there in the minds of some politicians but the possibility of its success is no longer there in Iraq," a high senior government official has been reported as saying. To say military coups are not possible in Iraq is merely part of an offensive policy. A coup d'état and its specter is even there in the mind of the official himself. Let us discuss the issue calmly. To give it its due, I think we may need more than one article. When was the specter of military coups not part of Iraq's political landscape? The answer is clear. Coups have always been there in Iraq. It did not matter whether Iraq was ruled by a democratic government or a despot. That is what its history tells us since it emerged as a state in the 1920s up to the period under U.S. military occupation. And how should we view the U.S. occupation of Baghdad? It is none but a classical example of a military coup. In fact it is the worst example. In Iraq-style coups, Iraqi tanks would barge into the presidential palace. In U.S. -style coup, American tanks barged into the presidential palace. The only difference is that the former tanks were made in Russia and the latter ones in the U.S. How could any observer or official then say the possibility of staging a military coup in Iraq is an illusion? Those entertaining such ideas are simple-minded people who have not read Iraq's history carefully. Iraqi political mind is conspiracy-stricken by nature. There are no restraints to control such conspiratorial mind. The only thing that stops a coup from taking place is the presence of U.S. troops in the country. A coup against the government will be a coup against Washington. The U.S. will not let that happen. But who could ascertain that the U.S. itself might not support some form of a coup in Iraq. This is indeed what bothers those who see the staging of a coup quite a possibility. The place of military coups in

Iraqi political life, as I said earlier, needs more than one article. The reason is the fear that what now looks like a possibility will sooner or later turn into reality. Some observers dismissed even the suggestion that there could be a coup in Iraq. Others think that talking about coups in present day Iraq is like breaking a taboo. Military coups, they say, are the opposite of democracy. Theoretically, coups are impossible to occur in democracies. But concepts like democracy have little meaning if they are not tested and tried on the ground. The democracy which we crave for means political stability for the advanced countries practicing it. This type of democracy is not there in our country. Our democracy has been a restricted and conditional one. It has been confined to a limited circle of factions and personalities committed to a political program agreed to prior to the country's occupation. Therefore there has been a lot filtering and sieving to allow only those meeting the restrictions and conditions to pass and take part in governing the country. Our situation has some resemblance to what takes place in Iran where only those loyal to the supreme clerical ruler are allowed to proceed. The others are stopped half-way through. Some of the restrictions even bring to mind what was prevalent under the former regime which placed tough conditions for candidates nominating for its rubber-stamped National Assembly or parliament. The conditions imposed by the Debaathification Commission are in fact similar to those under the former regime. There is not much difference at all. It may look that we have diversity but this diversity is within one species and not a privilege available across the board of the society. The commission's main blunder is its failure to distinguish between members of the former Baath party and those diehards with unwavering loyalty to Saddam Hussein as a cult and family. Not every member of the Baath party was loyal to Saddam Hussein or his policies. There is a big difference between "Saddamists" and "Baathists". The commission is treating both the same way. This blunder has made every Baathist a Saddamist whether they like it or not. And who was not a member of the Baath party. Without registering in the Baath party, there was no possibility for getting a job. And the government was almost the sole employer. This political recipe has drastically failed on the ground and achieved nothing for the Iraqi people. The only success we have is the general elections, but even these cannot be held properly without U.S. protection and in the presence of its troops. Conditions like these become a fertile ground for military coups. When the political elites are immersed in corruption up to their ears, and the people are furious and angry, the majority would not mind a change even if it occurs via a coup.

Iraqi Government Says Lifting Ban On Candidates 'Illegal'

February 04, 2010 (Reuters) -- Iraq's Shi'ite-led government said today a decision by an appeals panel to suspend a ban on candidates with alleged ties to Saddam Hussein's outlawed Ba'ath Party until after an election was illegal. Political wrangling is heating up ahead of the March vote, seen as a crucial test for Iraq as it emerges from years of

conflict unleashed by the 2003 U.S. invasion and tries to make peace between once-dominant Sunnis and the Shi'ite majority. An appeals panel said candidates barred by the Justice and Accountability Commission, a body set up to ensure Saddam loyalists do not return to public life, could stand in the March 7 vote, but would still have a case to answer. "Postponing implementing the law of the Justice and Accountability Commission till after the election is illegal and not constitutional," government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said in a statement on his website. It was unclear if the government could contest the panel's decision -- much of the process of banning the candidates has involved creative interpretations of the law and the legality of the commission that drew up the list is also in question. The appellate panel's decision was also rejected by Shi'ite parties, which along with minority Kurds bore the brunt of Ba'ath Party oppression under the rule of Sunni dictator Saddam. Some suspected U.S. interference. The panel's decision mirrored a proposal by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden. Iraq's "de-Ba'athification" rules were originally drawn up by U.S. administrators after Saddam was driven from power in 2003. "[The] decision was submissive to outside influences," said lawmaker Karim al-Yaqubi of the mainly Shi'ite Iraqi National Alliance (INA). "Iraqis inside are not allowed to interfere in the judiciary so how is it that outsiders are interfering?" Members of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition dismissed the decision. Allies in the current government, Maliki and the INA will be rivals in the election. The candidate ban was seen by many Sunnis as a conspiracy by Shi'ite-led groups to keep them from a fair share of power even though the list has more Shi'ite names and a disproportionate number from smaller, cross-sectarian alliances. Sunni lawmaker Salih al-Mutlaq, who is on the list, said the decision was a "victory" for the Iraqi people. **'Learn A Lesson'** Sunnis largely boycotted the last national vote in 2005, and their resentment fuelled a bloody insurgency. Weary of the bloodshed, politicians have tried to be more cross-sectarian. Amid the simmering row over candidates, recent attacks on Shi'ite pilgrims on a religious trek are adding to sectarian tensions, which have eased since their peak in 2006-07. The stakes are high in the coming election. Whoever wins will rule Iraq as U.S. forces withdraw and will also preside over several multibillion-dollar oil contracts that could turn Iraq into one of the top three global oil producers. While political leaders in Baghdad issued denunciations, some Shi'ite pilgrims in the holy city of Karbala welcomed the temporary lifting of the ban, despite suffering a spate of attacks by suspected Sunni Islamist extremists. "The Ba'ath Party died when Saddam died," said Ali Adil, a 48-year-old civil servant. "We cannot implement Saddam's policy of excluding others. Politicians should learn a lesson from Saddam if they want to build Iraq in a correct way."

Geo strategic front:

Clare Short Says Blair Lied Over Iraq

February 02, 2010 (Reuters) -- Former minister Clare Short has accused Tony Blair of lying over the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and said she believed the government's chief lawyer at the time had misled the cabinet over its legality. Short, a long-time Blair critic who was then International Development Secretary, disputed evidence the former prime minister gave last week to an inquiry into the war, saying he had sidelined the cabinet and kept ministers in the dark. Discussions were limited and there had been a "block on communications," said Short, who voted in favor of the 2003 invasion but quit the government shortly afterwards because Blair had "conned" her about the United Nations having a lead role. On January 29, Blair made a robust defense of his decision to go to war, saying Saddam Hussein had posed a threat to the world and had to be disarmed or removed. He also told the inquiry there had been "substantive discussion" with senior ministers in the cabinet. But Short said she had been excluded from talks and that Blair had not wanted Iraq discussed in the cabinet because he was afraid of leaks to the media. "There was secretiveness and deception on top of that," she told the Chilcot inquiry which is examining Britain's role in the war and its aftermath. "Normal communications were being closed down." She accused Blair of being "frantic" to support the United States and said claims the French would have vetoed any second UN resolution authorizing military action had been untrue. "In my view that was a lie, a deliberate lie," she said. She added that current Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the then chancellor, had been marginalized and that Blair was obsessed with his legacy. Brown himself will give evidence later this month or at the start of March and commentators warn the inquiry could damage the Labour party, which is trailing in the polls, before an election due by June. **Goldsmith Misled Cabinet** Short accused former Attorney General Peter Goldsmith of not telling the cabinet of his doubts about the legality of war, nor that senior Foreign Office lawyers believed it would be illegal without a second UN resolution. Goldsmith has said he too initially doubted the war's legality and only concluded it would be lawful without such a resolution a week before the invasion, and just days before the cabinet were briefed. I think he misled the cabinet, he certainly misled me, but people let it through," Short said. She told the inquiry she believed Goldsmith had been pressured by Blair, something he denies, because of his sudden change of heart but had no direct evidence to back this up. Short told the inquiry she had seen intelligence which showed there was no imminent threat from Saddam, and she was damning of the planning for the aftermath of the invasion. "There was no reason why it had to be as quick as it was," she said. "It was all done on a wing and a prayer. "We could have gone more slowly and carefully and not had a totally destabilised and angry Iraq into which came Al-Qaeda which wasn't there before and that would have been safer for the world." Short quit the Labour Party parliamentary group in 2006 to become an independent, saying Blair had engaged in deceit over the Iraq War.

Economic front:

Iraq rice yields slump; rice imports surge

Azzaman, January 29, 2010 Iraq harvested less rice this year than any other year before. The slump agricultural officials blame on falling water levels from the Euphrates River which has for decades supplied the rice fields in southern Iraq. The Twin Rivers, the Euphrates and Tigris, are now a trickle of what they used to be, turning the land between them from a vast breadbasket into desert. A statement by the ministry of agriculture said only 102,000 tons have been shipped to state silos so far and the deadline for deliveries expires by the end of January. Last year, Iraqi farmers ferried more than 120,000 tons of rice to government silos. Iraq currently imports about 10 times as much rice as it produces – that is about 1 million tons a year. Official statistics reveal that the contribution of agriculture to national GDP has fallen to a meager three percent. Food imports now cost the country billions of dollars. Iraq had to pay more than \$600 million only for rice three years ago. Agricultural production is expected to meet less than one fourth of the country's needs this year. Wheat imports are estimated to hit 4 million tons this year.

Iraqi Officials Lament Failure To Refine More Oil

February 03, 2010 -- Iraqi officials say several factors have resulted in the country needing to import some 60 percent of its refined oil despite having huge reserves, RFE/RL's Radio Free Iraq reports. Ali Hassan Ballu, chairman of the parliament's Oil and Gas Committee, told RFE/RL on February 2 that a huge increase in demand from Iraqi consumers along with outdated refineries, a lack of investment, and insurgent attacks on oil resources have forced Iraq to import a majority of its oil by-products. More specifically, Ballu said Iraq has some refineries operating at just 50 percent capacity that can only turn crude into low-grade petroleum oil. He added that the government has also not invested in much-needed new catalytic-cracking facilities. Ballu said that taking stop-gap measures without any long-term planning has delayed the implementation of strategic projects in the energy sector. But Oil Minister Husayn al-Shahristani told RFE/RL that Iraq has initialed deals with foreign companies to build four new refineries in the Kirkuk, Karbala, Maysan, and Dhi Qar provinces as well as contracts to upgrade and expand the three main refineries operating now in Baghdad, Salah al-Din, and Basra. Shahristani said the Oil Ministry is planning for Iraq to not only be self-sufficient in oil by-products but to become an exporter of such products within a few years. Abdel Hadi al-Hassani, deputy chairman of the Oil and Gas Committee, told RFE/RL that in 2007 parliament passed a law designed to attract investment in oil and gas projects by offering incentives like a preferential price for the crude oil supplied to such refineries. Iraq is estimated to hold the world's third-largest proven oil reserves but shortages of diesel, kerosene, and gasoline are common.

Violence returns to Iraq's Samarra

Azzaman, February 1, 2010 Violence has surged in the city of Samarra north of Baghdad following two deadly suicide bombings which have killed four people and injured many others. A police source refusing to be named said the city the bombings' victims were mostly civilians. Samarra was once a major stronghold for anti-U.S. rebels and members of Iraq's Qaeda organization. The city is predominantly Sunni but home to some of the most sacred Shiite Muslim shrines. Shiite pilgrims from Iraq and abroad visit the city to pay homage to the shrines. The first suicide bomber targeted a restaurant frequented by security personnel and Sunni militiamen locally know as Quwat al-Sahwa or Awakening Forces. Two people were killed and 18 others wounded in the attack. The second bombing also targeted another restaurant. Two people were killed in the attack and many others wounded. The police source said security has been intensified in the city but conditions were returning to normal.

Senior Qaeda leader killed in Iraq's Mosul

Azzaman, January 31, 2010 senior Qaeda leader was killed in the restive city of Mosul. The Qaeda leader is alleged to have commanded several deadly operations against U.S. and Iraqi troops and coordinated the infiltration of foreign fighters into Iraq, according to a statement. The statement said the leader, Saad Uweed al-Shamari, was one of Iraq's Qaeda best experts. U.S. and Iraqi troops have mounted a joint campaign in northern Iraq to flush the Qaeda and groups resisting the presence of U.S. forces in the country. Iraqi armed groups have intensified their attacks recently in both the northern and central parts of the country. Mosul, the provincial capital of Nineveh, remains one of the most restive cities in Iraq. Qaeda and other armed groups have turned it into a major stronghold in the north. It is not certain whether the current military campaign will bring tranquility to Mosul. The gunmen have survived previous joint onslaughts by Iraqi and U.S. troops. The government, for ethnic and sectarian reasons, is reluctant to allow the formation of local militias such those in the Province of Anbar which helped contain Qaeda influence. Mosul, which is a mixed city, is predominantly Arab Sunni.

Bomb Kills 20 In Iraqi Shi'ite City Of Karbala

February 03, 2010 (Reuters) -- A bomb planted on a cart pulled by a motorcycle killed at least 20 people and wounded 110 others as Shi'ite pilgrims poured into the Iraqi holy city of Karbala today for a major religious rite, police said. Shi'ite gatherings are frequent targets for Sunni Islamist militants such as Al-Qaeda, trying to stoke sectarian carnage, while recent months have also seen major coordinated attacks by suicide bombers on Baghdad ahead of a March election. The toll from today's bombing could rise, police said. Police said three people were killed and 21 wounded late on February 2 when a

bomb attached to a military vehicle exploded in Karbala, 80 kilometers southwest of Baghdad. On February 1, a bomb targeting Shi'ite pilgrims killed more than 40 people on the outskirts of Baghdad as they set off on the annual trek to Karbala for the Arbain festival. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has improved security across Iraq a central theme of his campaign for the March 7 parliamentary election and he has called on the security forces to ensure pilgrims heading to Kerbala are protected. Millions of Shi'ites from Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, and other nations have defied the threat of bombings since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion toppled the Sunni-led government of Saddam Hussein to visit Iraq's Shi'ite holy sites. Arbain marks 40 days of mourning for Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, who died in a seventh-century battle at Karbala. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, beating their heads and chests in ritual mourning, visit the city for the rite.

Suicide Bomber Kills 41 Shi'ite Pilgrims In Iraq

February 01, 2010 (Reuters) -- A female suicide bomber has killed at least 41 people and wounded 106 others in an attack on Shi'ite pilgrims in the Iraqi capital, an Interior Ministry source said. The attack took place as thousands of Shi'ite Muslims flooded the streets at the start of an arduous trek to the southern city of Karbala, 80 kilometers southwest of Baghdad, for the religious rite of Arbain. "At 11:45 [local time] on Monday, a female suicide bomber wearing an explosives belt blew herself up among the crowd of pilgrims going to Karbala," the office of Baghdad security spokesman Major General Qasim al-Musawi said. Thousands if not millions of Shi'ites, from Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, and other nations, have defied the threat of suicide bombings since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion toppled the Sunni-led government of Saddam Hussein to visit Iraq's Shi'ite holy sites. Arbain marks 40 days of mourning for Hussein, the Prophet Mohammad's grandson, who died in a seventh century battle at Kerbala. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, beating their heads and chests in ritual mourning, pour into the city for the rite. Many walk from hundreds of kilometres away. Tens of thousands of troops and police have been deployed to protect pilgrims as they walk and also around the revered Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala. But suspected Sunni Islamist extremists, who view Shi'ite Muslims as apostates, still manage to get through. Arbain was once suppressed like other Shi'ite gatherings under Saddam.

Lebanon

Political front:

Geagea: March 14 will Carry On until Cedar Revolution Goals are Achieved

Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea stressed Friday on the significance of a massive turnout to mark the fifth anniversary of the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri. "It is essential to exert every effort toward the success of the Feb. 14 anniversary and to stress that March 14 will carry on until it achieves the last goal of the Martyrs of the Cedar

Revolution," Geagea said during a meeting of the LF in Maarab. "March 14 is not made of particular individuals or parties. It is the vision of Lebanon and a set of goals," Geagea stressed. Lebanon in Race against Time before Arrival of New Storm, One Body Recovered off Khaldeh Rescue teams continued hunt Tuesday for bodies of the victims of an Ethiopian plane that crashed into the Mediterranean sea killing 90 people as Beirut was hanging onto hope that a submarine would arrive soon to help in recovering the jet and the black boxes before another storm invades Lebanon. The Boeing 737 that crashed last week south of Beirut is thought to be at least 1,500 meters beneath the sea. On Tuesday, the body of a male was recovered from the Ethiopian plane crash site off the coast of Khalde. Families of the victims flocked Rafik Hariri state Hospital around midday to try to identify the body. Health Minister Mohammed Jawad Khalife said that identification of the victim would only be through DNA analysis, adding that a golden necklace found on the body did not bear any inscription or photo. French experts are expected to arrive in Beirut at 4:10 pm Tuesday to join crews searching for victims and the black boxes. A Lebanese army officer said a vessel carrying a submarine was on its way to help. The plane crashed into the Mediterranean sea on Jan. 25 just minutes after takeoff from Beirut in a fierce thunderstorm with all 90 people on board feared dead. Rescue teams have recovered 14 bodies as well as a few body parts and pieces of the plane. Chances, however, of finding survivors has dwindled. The aircraft's main body and the two black boxes have not been found. U.S. Navy ship the USS Ramage has picked up signals from the flight recorders at a depth of 1,300 meters. While the army official said he does not know when the vessels will arrive, Transportation and Public Works Minister Ghazi Aridi said the submarine has left and should be in Lebanese waters in the "next few days." The government has formally asked the U.S.-based Odyssey Marine Explorations to send a submarine to help in recovering the plane and the black boxes. The civilian ship, Ocean Alert, has also been searching Lebanese waters for the plane's body and the flight recorders. On Monday, an Iraqi man who died in the plane crash was buried in Beirut's Rawdet al-Shahidain cemetery. Akram Jassem Mohammed, 55, was buried next to his son and daughter who died in a car accident in Beirut last year, an Iraqi diplomat said. Officials are especially keen on knowing why the plane veered off course after takeoff, but have ruled out sabotage Ethiopian Airlines spokesperson Wogayehu Tefere said the pilot was experienced and had been with the company for 20 years. Hariri Gathers Ex-PMs on Dispute over Dar al-Fatwa. Prime Minister Saad Hariri brought Lebanon's former premiers together in a meeting on Thursday to address the row over Dar al-Fatwa. The meeting between Hariri and ex-PMs Salim Hoss, Omar Karami, Najib Miqati and Fouad Saniora is underway at the Grand Serail. The daily Al-Liwaa said Hariri has invited the four former prime ministers to discuss the work of the committees tasked by the higher Islamic Council to look into all the projects and issues relating to Dar al-Fatwa and affiliated institutions. The probe into the disaster includes French and U.S. experts, among them a technical advisor from Boeing.

Moussa: Fragile Mideast Situation Could Reflect on Lebanon

Arab League chief Amr Moussa said political and security conditions in Lebanon are much better but the fragile situation in the Middle East could reflect negatively on the country. "There is now a president, a government and parliament. The situation in this country is much better than it was two years ago even if there are still sources of concern," Moussa told An Nahar daily on the sidelines of the Global Zero conference on the elimination of nuclear weapons in Paris. The Arab League secretary-general denied he had any information about a possible Israeli aggression on Lebanon. "What's important is for the Lebanese president and prime minister to make contacts and take measures to take precautions" against any attack, Moussa said. "This doesn't mean they have confirmed news about an Israeli strike." He also warned that any aggression on Iran would burn the entire region.

March 14 Calls on the Lebanese to Defy Attempts at Undermining 'Independence Uprising' Achievements

March 14 general-secretariat on Wednesday called on "all the Lebanese to turn their presence in Martyrs Square on February 14 this year -- as in the last four years -- into a day of determination to reject the attempts aiming at undermining their Independence Uprising achievements." March 14 general-secretariat urged "holding onto the values and objectives embodied by our martyrs." In a statement issued after its weekly meeting, March 14 general-secretariat expressed its contentment "over the atmospheres which prevailed in Bristol's meeting last Sunday." The statement added that the mere convention of the meeting, the wide political participation, and the closing statement "represented the tangible evidence" that March 14 forces are "committed to strive for realizing the dreams of Independence Uprising's people." March 14 forces vowed to remain loyal for "the path of the martyrs of this uprising, topped by (slain) premier Rafik Hariri." They also vowed to reject all of the attempts aiming at invalidating the victorious results they had achieved in the last parliamentary elections. The gathered said that "recurrent attempts to bypass the Taef Accord and the Lebanese Constitution with factious explanations" will not affect their determination to achieve the "transition to statehood."

Cabinet Postpones Debate on Electoral Law Reforms Until Next Week

Cabinet has voiced a united stance against repeated Israeli threats against Lebanon amid assurances by Prime Minister Saad Hariri that he will hold contacts with the international community to face up to these challenges. Information Minister Tareq Mitri said Hariri stressed the unity of the Lebanese position in the face of Israeli threats. Hariri will launch a series of contacts with "brotherly and friendly countries" in this respect, Mitri said. Wednesday's Cabinet meeting failed to discuss reforms to the municipal electoral law.

There was no official explanation as to why Cabinet postponed debate on amendments to the municipal electoral law until next Wednesday. The daily An-Nahar on Thursday said the decision to postpone Cabinet meeting one week was to make way for contacts and consultations in an effort to reach an "exit agreement." Mitri, however, stressed that the government was committed to holding elections on time after "technical amendments" were introduced to the electoral law. He said Cabinet was preparing a draft law for the approval of Parliament. Turning to the issue of the ill-fated Ethiopian Airliner jet, Mitri said Hariri promised that search will continue for victims of the plane crash once weather conditions improve.

Hariri Won't Back Down on Decision to Lower Voting Age to 18

Prime Minister Saad Hariri not only rejects the division of Beirut into three electoral constituencies, but has also reiterated his commitment to lowering the voting age to 18. The daily As-Safir on Thursday said Hariri seemed "unenthusiastic" about a proposal by Energy and Water Minister Jebran Bassil which urges the government to retract a decision to lower voting age to 18. It cited two reasons why Hariri won't back down on that decision. First, he does not want to contradict the ministerial statement which calls for action regarding lowering the voting age. Second, al-Mustaqbal Movement is a staunch advocate of this proposal.

Hariri tribunal chief begins first Lebanon visit

February 1, 2010 Lebanonwire - The president of a UN tribunal set up to investigate the murder of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri on Monday met President Michel Sleiman and other officials on his first visit to Lebanon. Tribunal chief Antonio Cassese briefed Sleiman "on the progress the tribunal has made and the steps planned for the next phase of the investigation," a statement released by Sleiman's office said. Cassese and his deputy, Ralph Riachy, also met Foreign Minister Ali Shami and Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar and were scheduled to meet parliament speaker Nabih Berri during their week-long visit. In order to preserve the tribunal's impartiality, Cassese and Riachy will not meet Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the son of the slain premier, or Defence Minister Elias Murr "because of the personal link they have with cases that may fall under the tribunal's jurisdiction," Cassese's office said in a statement prior to his visit. Murr was also a minister in Rafiq Hariri's cabinet. The tribunal was set up by a UN Security Council resolution in 2007 to try suspects in the assassination of Hariri, killed in a massive bomb blast on the Beirut seafront in February 2005. The bombing was widely blamed on Syria although Damascus has denied any involvement. A UN commission of inquiry said it had found evidence to implicate Syrian and Lebanese intelligence services but there are currently no suspects in custody. –AFP

Aoun: I Back Abolishing Sectarianism, I Didn't Associate Lowering Voting Age with Nationality Law

Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun on Tuesday stressed his support for the rise of a civil state in Lebanon and for abolishing all kinds of sectarianism "without getting into classifications." After the weekly meeting of the Change and Reform parliamentary bloc, Aoun stressed that he did not associate the issue of lowering voting age in Lebanon to 18 years with passing the law on reclaiming Lebanese nationality for immigrants of Lebanese origin, blaming some MPs for the confusion. "Lowering the voting age to 18 years needs some kind of political edification in schools," added Aoun. Aoun considered that the sectarian regime in Lebanon was created with intrinsic reasons and called for eliminating those reasons in order to eliminate the sectarian regime. "I have backed Hizbullah's arms because the arms of the resistance have reasons (to exist), if we want to remove those arms, then let's remove the reasons," reminisced Aoun. The FPM leader revealed that special programs are being mulled "to prepare the society for transition from one stage to another," criticizing "battles on history as we lose the present and the future." As to the amendments of the municipal electoral law, Aoun stressed that dividing Beirut into many constituencies is essential. "We might need more than three constituencies." On the other hand, Aoun stressed he does not have a problem with the implementation of proportional representation in all constituencies.

Geo strategic front:

Feltman: Hezbollah arms flow could prompt war with Israel

Lebanonwire- The U.S. is concerned that the continued flow of arms to the Hezbollah militant organization could prompt a war between Israel and Lebanon, State Department official Jeff Feltman said in remarks published Sunday by the London-based Al-Hayat daily. Feltman, who serves as Assistant Secretary of U.S. State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, told the daily that the U.S. had no evidence of any Israeli plan to attack its northern neighbor. Nevertheless, Feltman said he was growing increasingly worried by reports describing the quantity and types of weapons being smuggled to the terrorist organization in clear violation of United Nations Resolution 1701, which put an end to the 2006 war. The UN resolution clearly demanded a weapons-free south Lebanon, said Feltman, but the world had yet to see that put into play. With regard to the possibility of a future peace deal between Lebanon and Israel, Feltman said that he believed Lebanon preferred to see a Palestinian-Israeli agreement reached first. When asked about negotiations between Syria and Israel, Feltman said U.S. special Mideast envoy George Mitchell had passed on to Jerusalem a message from Damascus on the matter, but that progress was slow. Feltman also said that the U.S. wanted to see the Palestinian Authority resume negotiations with Israel in order to resolve the issue of West

Bank settlements. Once borders were determined, said Feltman, the issue of settlements would be easier to solve.

Israel hands over Lebanese shepherd arrested in Shebaa

February 1, 2010 Lebanonwire – Israel handed over to UN peacekeepers a young Lebanese shepherd who was arrested in the occupied Shebaa Farms in southern Lebanon at the weekend, a Lebanese army spokesman said. "At 2:00 am (0000 GMT), the Israeli army handed over Rabih Mohammed Zahra at the Naqura crossing" near the base of the UN peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon (UNIFIL), the spokesman told AFP on condition of anonymity. Zahra, a 17-year-old shepherd, had bruises on his face and neck, he added. Zahra had been tending a flock of sheep on Sunday in the Bastara Farm area near the border when he was arrested by Israeli soldiers. The Shebaa Farms, a mountainous sliver of land rich in water resources measuring 25 square kilometres (10 square miles), is located at the junction of southeast Lebanon, southwest Syria and northern Israel. The area has been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Middle East war and caught in a tug-of-war over ownership ever since. The demarcation of the border around the Bastara Farm is not clearly defined by barbed wire or any other markings, according to an AFP correspondent. Israel has previously detained Lebanese civilians in the disputed border region and regularly conducts overflights into southern Lebanon, a stronghold of Shiite militant group Hezbollah. The overflights are a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended a 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The resolution also calls for the dismantling and disarming of all militias operating in Lebanon. –AFP

Libya Expects Suleiman to Participate in Arab Summit Despite Shiite Ire

The Libyan government has announced that it hasn't been officially notified about a lower level of Lebanese representation at the Arab League summit in Libya next month. Government spokesman Mohammed Baayo told pan-Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat that Libya was keen on making the summit a success. He added that Tripoli supported any positive Arab effort to achieve unity. "Until now, we haven't received any information if President Michel Suleiman will participate in the summit or not," Baayo told Asharq al-Awsat. Speaker Nabih Berri on Wednesday said that only Suleiman can decide on Lebanon's participation in the Arab summit, but stressed that he "personally" favors that Lebanon lowers its level of participation. His stance came as a result of the burning issue of imam Moussa al-Sadr's disappearance. In 1978, the Lebanese Shiite religious leader flew to Tripoli for a week of talks with Libyan officials. He was never seen or heard from again. Libyan diplomatic sources told Asharq al-Awsat that they expected Suleiman to participate in the summit "despite a campaign launched by Shiite parties in Lebanon against Libya." "Libya is keen on improving its ties with Lebanon despite some Shiite stances that oppose such relations," the sources said. Akhbar al-Yom news agency also

quoted a source close to Baabda as saying that if Lebanon decided to participate in the summit, Foreign Minister Ali al-Shami would boycott the conference because he is a Shiite and is close to Berri's Amal movement. The source said that a delegation headed by the prime minister would travel to Libya if Suleiman decided not to participate in the summit.

Lebanon Files Another Complaint to U.N. over Alleged Israeli Torture of Lebanese Shepherd

The Lebanese foreign ministry filed another complaint to the U.N. Security Council claiming Israeli forces tortured Lebanese shepherd Rabih Mohammed Zahra after kidnapping him near Kfarshouba hills on Sunday. Lebanon already filed a complaint after the kidnapping, accusing Israel of violating U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. The Lebanese army on Sunday said the incident is "an act of aggression against Lebanese sovereignty and an attack on a citizen's liberty." Zahra, 17, was handed over to UNIFIL on Monday in the border town of Naqoura.

French Presidential Envoy: Lebanon Situation Back to Normal

French President Nicolas Sarkozy's envoy to Syria Philippe Marini said Tuesday that the situation in Lebanon has gone back to normal. "The situation in Lebanon was among the topics that we have discussed," Marini said following talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad. "We can say that the situation in Lebanon has gone back to normal," said Marini, who is a senate member and head of the French-Syrian parliamentary friendship group. The French envoy told reporters in Damascus that he had conveyed to Assad a message from Sarkozy on bilateral relations.

Jumblatt: I will not apologize to Syria publicly

February 1, 2010- Lebanonwire, Asharq Al-Awsat - Head of the Democratic Gathering Walid Jumblat told Asharq Al-Awsat that he will not apologize publicly to Syria if this is a precondition as reported in the Lebanese media. Jumblat stated that he has fulfilled his duties for reconciliation with the Syrian leadership and said that he believes that three-quarters of the road to Damascus has opened up. A public opinion poll conducted by Asharq Al-Awsat amongst circles popular with Jumblat showed that there was some nervousness regarding what is considered continuous "compromises" offered by Jumblat to Syria. A source close to Jumblat told Asharq Al-Awsat that even if Jumblat apologizes publicly to Syria "it will not result in a meeting between Jumblat and Assad, as some are saying, but rather [it will result] in preliminary meetings and [taking] preliminary steps is inevitable." The source added: "Jumblat's visit to Damascus will not happen soon. The Syrians are not in a hurry. Moreover, they left the issue to Hezbollah to deal with. It is as if for them the [right] time is yet to come." Jumblat was absent from the March 14 Coalition gathering on Sunday held at the Bristol Hotel in Beirut. At the meeting attended

by Prime Minister Saad al Hariri, the March 14 forces called on people to gather in Freedom Square in downtown Beirut to “ensure continuance on the path of independence, determination in crossing over to an institutional state...sovereignty of all its land.” The statement emphasized that national unity in Lebanon “cannot be achieved through impositions by a single group amongst us or by outside actors.” The statement was read by March 14 General Secretariat Coordinator Fares Soaid. The source close to Jumblat confirmed that the Democratic Gathering will take part in the 14 February commemoration [for Rafik Hariri] but the level of representation is yet to be decided. Walid Jumblat announced that he will not give a speech on this occasion.

Netanyahu Accuses Lebanese Government of Allowing Hizbullah to Develop Military Capabilities

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday accused Lebanon of allowing Hizbullah to develop its military force by smuggling weapons "in violation" of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. "We are worried about developments in Lebanon and the great flow of weapons, rockets and missiles in blatant violation of Resolution 1701," Netanyahu told a press conference alongside his Italian counterpart, Silvio Berlusconi. "Hizbullah is in the Lebanese government and is developing a military force under the government," said Netanyahu. "These weapons are without doubt aimed at Israeli civilians," said Netanyahu. "It is the responsibility of the Lebanese government to prevent attacks against Israel and its citizens." Berlusconi said he would raise the Israeli concerns when he meets Lebanese PM Saad Hariri in Beirut this month. Israel and Hizbullah fought a devastating war in 2006, which killed more than 1,200 Lebanese, most of them civilians, and more than 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers. Resolution 1701, which led to an end to the 34-day conflict, set mechanisms to stop arms smuggling into Lebanon.(Naharnet-AFP)

Jumblat Snaps Back at Lieberman: We Are with Syrian People, Leadership Above All Else

Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblat on Friday snapped back at Israel's firebrand ultra-nationalist Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman over his recent threats to Syria and its leadership on Thursday. In 1982, during the siege of Beirut, and amid the peak of nationwide defeat of the Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians, I told (late Syrian President) Hafez Assad: We are with you and with Syria, and we will resist. And today, amid the Israeli madness and rabid threats, I tell the Syrian people and leadership: We are with you above all else," Jumblat said in a statement issued by the PSP.

Economic front:

Social front:

Agreement to Stop News Leaks on Dar al-Fatwa

In an attempt to defuse mounting tension sparked followed accusations that Grand Mufti Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Qabbani was involved in financial mismanagement at Dar al-Fatwa, Prime Minister Saad Hariri and Lebanon's former PMs agreed to stop leaks to the media on the country's highest Sunni religious authority. Hariri on Thursday brought ex-premiers Salim Hoss, Omar Karami, Najib Miqati and Fouad Saniora together in a meeting to address the row over Dar al-Fatwa. Hariri has reportedly invited the Sunni leaders to discuss the work of the committees tasked by the higher Islamic Council to look into all the projects and issues relating to Dar al-Fatwa and affiliated institutions. The Sunni leaders stressed in a statement following the meeting the importance of the committee's ongoing efforts to carry out reforms at Dar al-Fatwa. The statement, issued by Hariri's press office, said intensive efforts were underway to "follow-up on the plan that was initiated two months ago for carrying out reforms on financial, administrative, architectural, legal and religious levels, including the issues being dealt with by the media." It said a "comprehensive report" would come out soon and should reveal all the facts to the public, adding that measures will be taken to safeguard the best interests of Muslims.

Maronite Bishops Acknowledges Improvement in Security Situation

The Council of Maronite Bishops on Wednesday acknowledged improvement in the security situation in Lebanon and expressed hope that peace will prevail over violence. "The security situation in Lebanon has improved," the Bishops said in a statement. "We hope peace will prevail so that the Lebanese could be assured about their conditions," the statement added. The Bishops offered condolences to the victims of the Ethiopian plane crash.

Palestine

Peace process

Fateh and Hamas Form Field Committee

Friday February 05, 2010 - IMEMC & Agencies- The rival Fateh and Hamas movements managed to form a committee that would be in charge of discussing field issues that are preventing reconciliation. The committee was formed after Fateh official Nabil Shaath met with Ismail Haniyya of Hamas and several Hamas leaders in Gaza. The meeting is the first of its kind conducted by a Fateh official to the Gaza Strip since June of 2007. Hamas legislator, Salah Bardaweel, stated that the meeting was constructive and positive, and that it came to revive political talks between the two movements. He added that the talks focused on reconciliation, the Egyptian document for national unity and the efforts to restore trust between the two movements. Bardaweel further stated that the two

sides agreed on the necessity of achieving reconciliation under Egyptian guarantees. Ismail Radwan of Hamas stated that the coming days will witness real measures on the ground. Shaath started his political talks with a meeting with Ismail Haniyya at his home in Al Shaty's refugee camp in Gaza City. He said that this meeting is very important as it was held at the residence of Haniyya, an issue that was perceived as a "warm attitude between Fateh and Hamas leaders". Shaath also met with Saleh Zeidan, member of the Political Bureau of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and several DFLP political leaders. The talks were focused on the efforts to restore the Palestinian unity and achieving national reconciliation. He further held a meeting of independent legislator, Jamal El Khodary, head of the Popular Committee Against the Siege, and held talks with him on a number of issues such as electricity crises, the ongoing siege and national unity. On Tuesday evening, Shaath met with several Hamas leaders and legislators, and a number of Fateh leaders.

Sha'ath Meets Hamas Leaders In Gaza

Thursday February 04, 2010 - IMEMC & Agencies- Dr. Nabil Sha'ath, member of the Central Committee of the Fatah party, met evening with delegates of the rival Hamas movement, and also met with Fatah leaders and leaders of other factions. The visit is considered a positive step towards ending the ongoing rift between Fatah and Hamas, and achieving national unity. Sha'ath met with Hamas political leaders Khalil al-Hayya, Ayman Taha, legislator Ashraf Jom'a, and Dr. Salah Abu Khatla, in charge of National Relations in the Fatah party. He received a warm welcome and held talks on the current issues and the negative impacts of internal divisions. He met with leaders of different factions at the headquarters of independent national figures. Yasser al-Wadya, representative of the independent figures described the meeting as comprehensive as it includes representatives of all factions in Gaza, and added that the talks included a discussion of the Egyptian document for Palestinian national unity and a number of issues regarding the Gaza Strip.

Hamas Halts Indirect Prisoner-swap Talks With Israel

Wednesday February 03, 2010 - IMEMC & Agencies- The Hamas movement decided to halt the indirect prisoner-swap talks with Israel in the aftermath of the assassination of Mahmoud al-Madbouh who was killed at a hotel in Dubai two nearly weeks ago. Hamas claims Israeli agents were behind the assassination. Ayman Taha, a senior political leader of Hamas, stated that indirect talks were fully halted, and that they can not resume under the current circumstances. Taha added that the movement will make a final decision on the issue soon. Al-Mabdouh was killed in his hotel room on January 20th. Israel holds him responsible for the abduction and the killing of two soldiers, and of smuggling weapons into the Gaza Strip. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated Tuesday that Hamas is the obstacle to a prisoner-swap deal that could see the release of prisoner of

war soldier, Gilad Shalit, in return to freeing hundreds of Palestinian detainees. His statements came during a joint press conference with his Italian counterpart, Silvio Berlusconi, in Jerusalem. Netanyahu said that “a deal is possible if Hamas wanted one”, and that the movement has the choice. He added that Israel wants a deal but at the same time “wants to make sure terrorists are not released”, according to Netanyahu. Mahmoud Zahar, of Hamas, told the BBC that he holds Netanyahu personally responsible for the failure of prisoner-swap talks. Zahar stated during the “Hard Talk” program that the talks became complicated after Netanyahu’s involvement in them, and added that Israel wants to banish dozens of detainees instead of sending them back home under the claim that they participated in deadly attacks against Israeli targets. On Tuesday, the family of Gilad Shalit lashed out at Hamas and stated that Hamas leaders and the Hamas-run security forces in Gaza are violating the rights of the Palestinian people. The family of Shalit said that Hamas is holding Shalit hostage without granting him his basic rights, and has kept thousands of Palestinians in intolerable situation for four years. The parents of Shalit blamed Hamas for the Israeli siege imposed on Gaza, and said that Hamas is “forcing the people to live in hunger and poverty”. They also stated that Hamas leaders are “stubborn” and that they “should put the interests of their own people above their political interests”. Israel blames al-Madbouh for the killing of two Israeli soldiers. In 1988, fighters of the al-Qassam Brigades kidnapped corporal Avi Saports and killed him later on after Israeli refused to hold talks on a swap deal. On May 3, 1989, the fighters kidnapped corporal Elan Sadoun and killed him. The brigades said its fighters killed him due to difficulties in bargaining on him and in keeping his hideout discrete. After the Palestinian Authority was established and entered the Gaza Strip, Palestinian security forces arrested a number of fighters and according to the al-Qassam Brigades, tortured the fighters until they confessed to killing the two soldiers and led the interrogators to the burial site. The bodies of the two soldiers were located seven years after they were kidnapped and killed.

Hamas: “Abbas No Longer Represents The Palestinians”

Tuesday February 02, 2010 - IMEMC News- Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, issued a statement challenging the legitimacy of president Mahmoud Abbas, stating that Abbas’ term in office is over, and that he does not represent the Palestinian people and their aspirations anymore. Hamas said that Abbas’ statements regarding accepting the resumption of peace talks with Israel in return to only a three-month freeze of Israeli settlement activities, expresses his “defeated spirit and his personal opinion”, and added that this opinion does not even represent his own movement, Fatah. Hamas further warned of returning to the same “cycle of arbitrary negotiations that only serve the American and Zionist interests in providing a cover-up to Israel’s illegal settlement activities and the attacks against Jerusalem”. “Abbas and his Oslo team are willing to abandon the legitimate Palestinian rights”, the movement stated, “They are willing to succumb to US and Israeli pressures.” The statement came after Abbas told The Guardian

newspaper in the UK, that he is willing to accept the resumption of peace talks with Israel should Israel freeze its settlement activities for three months. Abbas confirmed during his Guardian interview that he will not accept any return to, what he described as, “violent resistance”, and proposed direct talks with Israel after a three-month settlement freeze. Following a meeting with British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, Abbas said that he does not know why the American government retracted its demand for a full settlement freeze, and added that he intends to consult with Arab leaders before responding to a proposal by US Middle East Envoy, George Mitchell, regarding holding indirect talks with Israel. He further stated that should the Israeli response be positive, and “should they accept to the two-state solution based on full withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, and ending the occupation within a set timeframe, then a progress could be made”. Ahmad Bahar, deputy of the head of the Palestinian Legislative Council, said that Abbas is breaking his own promises and vows. Bahar, a senior political leader of Hamas, added that Abbas is willing to recognize a Jewish State and that this issue is considered “executing the Palestinian rights and sacrifices, especially the Right of Return of the Palestinian refugees”.

President Abbas Meets With Chancellor of Germany

Monday February 01, 2010- IMEMC News & Agencies- The Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, met the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, in the German capital city of Berlin. The two leaders discussed the latest updates on the peace process and the German-Palestinian relations. The Palestinian-Israeli peace process has been on stalemate since 2009 as Israeli refuses to halt settlement activity in the West Bank. A condition set forth by the Palestinian Authority and the U. S administration so peace talks could be resumed. Abbas embarked on the tour that took him to Arab and European courtiers earlier last month in an attempt to accumulate pressure on Israeli to reinvigorate the stalled peace talks. Dr. Sa'eb Erekat, head of the Negotiation Department of the PLO, and Nabeel Abu Rudinyah, Abbas' spokesperson, also attended the meeting in Berlin today.

Abbas Hints Indirect Talks With Israel After 3 Months Settlement Freeze

Monday February 01, 2010- IMEMC & Agencies- Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, hinted on Monday that he might accept holding indirect peace talks with Israel, mediated by US Envoy, George Mitchell. He added that direct talks cannot resume before Israel freezes settlement activities for three months. His statements regarding the three months freeze are considered a backtrack on a previous demand that Israel should fully halt its settlement activities before peace talks are resumed. He made his statement during an interview with British newspaper, The Guardian . He said that he was close to signing an agreement with former Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, and added that Olmert presented “better offers than those offered to late president, Yasser Arafat”. The Palestinian President added that the offers of Olmert included borders, Jerusalem, and a

limited return of the refugees. “But the government of Benjamin Netanyahu did not recognize the understandings reached with Olmert as basis for renewed peace talks”, Abbas stated. In an interview with Israeli paper, Haaretz, conducted before the end of last year, Abbas said that the talks with Olmert were never completed, with the Arabs48 news website reporting that they were mainly focused on borders. He also said that no understandings were made on the refugees, Jerusalem or water. Abbas confirmed during his Guardian interview that he will not accept any return to what he described as “violent resistance”, and proposed direct talks with Israel after a three-month settlement freeze. Following a meeting with British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, Abbas said that he does not know why the American government retracted its demand for a full settlement freeze, and added that he intends to consult with Arab leaders before responding to a proposal by US Middle East Envoy, George Mitchell, regarding holding indirect talks with Israel. He further stated that should the Israeli response be positive, and “should they accept to the two-state solution based on full withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, and ending the occupation within a set timeframe, then a progress could be made”. Abbas added that Israel should implement what it agreed to under the Road Map peace plan. “If they are not willing to freeze settlement activities, then they are not interested in achieving a peaceful solution”, the Palestinian president concluded.

Netanyahu Expects Peace Talks To Resume Within Coming Weeks

Thursday February 04, 2010 - IMEMC & Agencies- Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, stated Wednesday that there is a chance that the stalled peace process would be unconditionally resumed in the coming few weeks. Netanyahu said that the “International community now realizes that Israel wants to resume the peace process”, and that the “road is clear for resuming the talks”. The statements of Netanyahu came during his closing speech at the annual Herzilia conference. He said that “fate of the Jewish people is connected with the fate of the state of Israel”, and added that there is “a need to strengthen Israel’s security capabilities”. Netanyahu further stated that “a weak Israel reduces the chances of peace”. The Israeli Prime Minister anticipated that Israel’s security needs will increase in the coming two decades, and added that fulfilling the security needs also boosts Israel’s security. He said that Israel can increase its economic development by 5% annually, and expressed rejection to increasing taxes. Netanyahu also announced that a new plan would be presented to the government soon, and that it includes a comprehensive transportation system in Israel, and what he described as “revolutionary reformations in development and construction”.

Hamas: Netanyahu to Blame for Prisoner Swap Deadlock

A leading member of the Hamas political bureau, Mahmoud al-Zahar, says negotiations between the movement and Israel over a prisoner swap involving Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and hundreds of long-serving Palestinian prisoners have broken down. In an

interview with BBC's Hardtalk program on Tuesday, the prominent leader of the Islamic Resistance Movement held Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accountable for the failure of talks on the exchange deal. Zahar pointed out that Netanyahu is adamantly opposed to the release of 'heavyweight' Palestinian prisoners Marwan Barghouti and Ahmed Sa'adat. The status of Sa'adat and Barghouti is one of the most sensitive issues in the discussions on the Hamas-Israel prisoner swap deal. "As regarding negotiations, as of now the process has failed. The main cause, well known to everybody, well known to the mediator, that after the interference of the political element, after the appearance of Netanyahu personally, there was a big regression and retraction. For this reason negotiations have now stopped," Zahar said. "We are looking to set free our people and also to give a chance for the family of the Israeli soldier to live as a human being also. We demanded a considerable number of prisoners, but the Israeli side, after hundreds of rounds of talks, reached backward too much," he noted. Should a prisoner swap take place, Israel would release 980 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Shalit — who has been in Hamas custody for over three years. According to the head of the census department at the Palestinian Ministry of Detainees, Abdul-Nasser Farawna, Israel currently holds 7,300 Palestinians in prison. Among the detainees, are 33 women, 300 children, 17 legislators and two former ministers.

Politics

Ehud Barak Meets With Egyptian Officials

Thursday January 28, 2010 - IMEMC News & Agencies- Israel's Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, met with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and senior Egyptian officials this past Wednesday in Egypt. Barak also met with his Egyptian counterpart, Mohammad Tantawi and Egyptian intelligence minister, Omar Suleiman. Israeli Ynet News reported that the meeting focused on stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and efforts to release the captured Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. Israeli officials accompanying Barak reported the meetings to be positive and productive. Barak directed Egyptian officials to pressure Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, into resuming peace talks. The Palestinian Authority firmly states that negotiations will not resume until Israeli settlement construction ceases.

Operation Cast Lead: a Critical Study of the Goldstone Report

Wednesday January 27, 2010 – MIFTAH- It has been one year since Israel launched its 22-day long attack codenamed Operation Cast Lead (OCL) on the Gaza Strip. Last week a British court issued an arrest warrant for Israeli Kadima opposition leader Tzipi Livni for her role in orchestrating the assault. Livni, who was Israel's foreign minister at the time, was scheduled to visit the UK but ended up calling off her trip; the arrest warrant was cancelled as a result. However the issuing of the warrant in and of itself is an

incredible feat. It is also a direct result of recommendations made in the Goldstone Report concerning how to bring justice to the Palestinian victims of OCL. Israel launched OCL in what it said was response to years of rocket and mortar fire emanating from armed Palestinian groups operating in the Strip, invoking self-defense under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter as justification for the attack. Article 51 of the charter reads “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations...” Israel maintains that the operation was indeed necessary for self-defense, and stated that the aim of the operation was to end rocket attacks into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip, to dismantle the ability of Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups to launch rockets and mortars into southern Israel, and to restore Israel’s deterrent capability. Yet on the first day of the operation and within the first few minutes of OCL alone, Israeli forces killed 99 members of the Palestinian police force in Gaza. The attack occurred in midday when the streets were full of people, including many school children, which spiked the death toll of the first day to over 200. In the days that followed, the death toll increased significantly, drawing the condemnation of Palestinians, human rights groups and the international community who decried the operation as having a disproportionate and what seemed an intentional impact on civilians. The number of Palestinians killed during the operation varies, but most human rights groups put the number around 1,400 and say that an overwhelming number of those killed were civilians, including approximately 300 children. Additionally, there was extensive and severe damage to civilian objects and infrastructure; the overall impact of OCL on the civilian population of Gaza caused widespread international outcry and protests, which led to the establishment of the UN Fact Finding Mission to Gaza, and ultimately resulted in the Goldstone Report.

The United Nations Fact Finding Mission to Gaza

The United Nations Fact Finding Mission to Gaza was established on 3 April 2009 by the President of the United Nations Human Rights Council with the purpose of investigating “all violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law that might have been committed at any time in the context of the military operations that were conducted in Gaza during the period from 27 December 2008 and 18 January 2009, whether before, during or after.” The fact-finding mission emerged as a result of UN resolution S-9/1 adopted on 12 January 2009 by the United Nations Human Rights Council at the conclusion of its 9th special session, and was drafted by Cuba, Egypt and Pakistan. Resolution S-9/1 initially sought the investigation only of Israeli violations during OCL, drawing criticism that the resolution was biased against Israel. However, prior to the drafting of the resolution, eight Israeli NGOs wrote to Israeli Attorney General Mr. Meni Mazuz requesting an independent international investigation into the allegations of grave Israeli violations of the laws of war during the Gaza operation. The eight NGOs additionally expressed their concern at the inability of the Military Advocate

General's office to initiate a fair and neutral investigation. Thus there was also a very strong push from within Israel itself for a fair and independent international investigation into the allegations that the laws of war were seriously violated during OCL. South African Justice Richard Goldstone, former judge of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, was selected by the President of the Human Rights Council to head the commission. Justice Goldstone, a Jew and self-proclaimed Zionist who sits on the board of Governors of Hebrew University, is a man of impressive stature with an impeccable reputation for fairness and justice. He headed the former prosecution for the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, and agreed to head the fact-finding mission to Gaza only after asking that all violations of international law be investigated, not just allegations against Israel. According to the mandate, "the mission determined it was required to consider any actions by all parties that might have constituted violations of international human rights law or international humanitarian law." This allowed the mission to investigate and document Palestinian violations as well, making it more difficult to claim that the findings of the report were biased. However, aside from drafting a report that would be deemed fair and balanced, the mission also held the opinion that denying accountability on both sides only serves to reinforce impunity, which has a negative impact on the credibility of the UN, the international community and the peace process itself. Thus the overall aim of the Goldstone Report seemed to be concerned with ending the cycle of violence by halting impunity from violations of international law through holding those violators accountable. The report asserts that accountability would deter the eruption of such extreme violence in the future. In addition to investigating violations of international law during the military operations, the mandate also required it to review related actions in the entire Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel, thereby providing a larger framework through which to understand the context from which the violence of Operation Cast Lead emerged." The mission considered both Israeli and Palestinian actions from 1967 through January 2009, placing particular emphasis on the Israeli imposed blockade of the Gaza Strip, and placing OCL within the context of the ongoing blockade of the Strip and overall Israeli policies toward the occupied Palestinian territory. In this sense the report is exhaustive, thorough and meticulously documents Israeli occupation practices that violate international law and the human rights of Palestinians, drawing a direct correlation between these practices and OCL. The report gives considerable attention to Israeli policies of house demolitions, evictions, construction of the wall and settlements, settler violence against Palestinians, the separation of the West Bank from east Jerusalem and Gaza, Israeli detention policies, and the denial of due process to Palestinian prisoners. The mission also examined discriminatory policies within Israel against its Palestinian citizens and attempts to stifle dissent within Israel. In this regard, the report is extraordinary in its scope and deeply profound in its findings.

Simply put, the conclusions of the report cannot and should not be ignored in the pursuit of peace and justice for Palestine and Israel.

The Mission's Framework and Methodology- The task of the mission was very specific and according to the report itself “interpreted the mandate as requiring it to place the civilian population of the region at the center of its concerns regarding the violations of international law.” The mission conducted its investigation of the impact of the operation on civilians within the framework of general international law, the United Nations Charter, international humanitarian law, international human rights law and international criminal law. Because the mandate of the mission very specifically required it to investigate the impact on civilians according to international humanitarian law (IHL) and the laws of war, it was not intended or permitted to investigate deeper questions of aggression and how Operation Cast Lead was initiated. The framework of the report assumed that Israel had the right to self-defense according to Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. Thus the investigation did not specifically explore whether or not OCL was a war of last resort or if all other diplomatic options had been exhausted in dealing with the rocket fire from Gaza. The Goldstone Report does document very thoroughly all terms and breaches of the six-month Egyptian-brokered truce between Israel and Hamas, which was intended to halt the rocket and mortar fire and ease the Israeli blockade of the Strip. The report also acknowledges that the Israeli blockade of the Strip was not eased during the truce, and notes that the Israeli incursion into the Strip on 4 November 2008 in which six Hamas operatives were killed played a significant role in the breakdown of the truce. However, it does not provide any recommendations or draw any conclusions regarding the success of the truce in reducing rocket and mortar fire from the Strip. Instead, the mission focused on examining to what extent Israel took feasible precaution in protecting the civilian population of Gaza, to what extent Palestinian armed groups took feasible precaution in protecting the civilian population of Gaza, and to what extent Palestinian armed groups placed the civilian population of southern Israel in danger.

Israel's Reactions- In response to allegations that OCL had a disproportionate impact and effect on Palestinian civilians, Israel responded that Hamas launched attacks from within civilian areas and near civilian objects including schools, hospitals, ambulances and mosques, thereby using the population of Gaza as a human shield. Because of this, Israel claimed that Hamas had forced the Israeli military into a type of urban warfare that could not distinguish between military and civilian objects and that civilian casualties were an unfortunate but justified result of this type of warfare. Israel's government officials continue to insist that OCL was not directed at the civilian population of Gaza, but at those responsible for firing rockets and mortars at civilian centers in southern Israel. For example, in response to the recent arrest warrant issued against her, Livni's office said she was “proud of all her decisions regarding Operation Cast Lead.” This should not be surprising considering that OCL enjoyed an overwhelming majority of

Israeli approval; 90% of the Israeli public supported the operation in Gaza and continue to insist that it was a just war. In fact during the operation some Israelis, many of them from the southern Israeli town of Sderot which has been one of the primary areas impacted by the rocket and mortar attacks, gathered with journalists on a string of sandy hilltops near the Gaza border to watch the bombardment of the coastal enclave. Spectators brought binoculars, lawn chairs, sack lunches and snapped photos of each other with plumes of smoke rising from the besieged Strip in the background. Most expressed gratitude that the Israeli government was finally taking action against the rocket and mortar attacks from Gaza, rejecting accusations that the force used was disproportionate and placing the blame for the assault squarely onto the shoulders of the people of Gaza. Moreover, last March in the wake of the operation Israeli Major General Yoav Galant reiterated this sentiment about OCL when he said "A feeling of pride washes over me because we have a moral army that adheres to international law." This statement seems to reflect the general Israeli popular opinion concerning OCL, and explains why there was such anger and outrage over the Goldstone Report within Israel, which dismissed the report as unfair, biased and an attempt to undermine Israel's right to defend itself. It also seems to indicate a severe lack of awareness and understanding amongst the Israeli public concerning the origins of the violence and the reality of Israel's policies in the Palestinian territories. It is no surprise then that Israel rejected the report's findings and that most Israelis have not bothered to read the report, the contents of which are unsettling and deeply disturbing to them, particularly for a population that can easily choose to live in denial about Israeli policies in the Palestinian territories. The conclusions reached by the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict determined that the overall aims of OCL were not based upon self-defense from the rocket attacks but were "directed at the people of Gaza as a whole, in furtherance of an overall and continuing policy aimed at punishing the Gaza population." Thus the conclusions of the report directly contradict and challenge the dominant Israeli narrative that Israel operated according to and with respect for international law. Moreover, the report punches a dramatic hole in the assertion that the Israeli army is the most moral army in the world. It is very difficult for many Israelis to grapple with the assertion that their government and military intentionally target Palestinian civilians. In the collective Israeli consciousness in which Israelis are morally superior, it is imagined that only Palestinians target civilians.

International Law Under international law, both Israeli military forces and armed Palestinian groups are entitled to engage in military action against the other, and both are entitled to engage in military action for purposes of self-defense. However, any such attacks must be undertaken and designed to achieve military objectives and target military objects. In order for an object to be considered a military object, two criteria must be fulfilled; the object has to contribute effectively to the military action of the enemy, and its destruction, capture or neutralization must offer a definite military

advantage for the other side. The principle of distinction under customary IHL prohibits direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects. In the event that attacks from civilian objects occur, the principle of proportionality must be considered, in which disproportionate harm to civilians that produces no clear military advantage become prohibited. The principle of distinction also holds true even in the event that one party to a conflict does not have the means or the military capability to attack the enemy's military targets. This has always been a dilemma for the Palestinians who have never had the military means or military strength to fight Israel equally; as the occupying power Israel has always maintained military and strategic dominance over the Palestinian people. Thus the conflict has always been an asymmetrical one – these are not two equal powers fighting each other on equal ground with equal means. Israel is the world's 4th strongest military power and has access to the most sophisticated and deadly weaponry. Palestinians, on the other hand remain a stateless and occupied people who have access to very limited military weaponry and capability. Yet the Goldstone Report undoubtedly recognizes the legitimate right of the Palestinian people to struggle for their inherent right to self-determination. However, the mission and the report reject claims made by a minority of individuals within armed Palestinian groups that the deliberate targeting of Israeli civilians with the rocket and mortar attacks is justified. The report rejects that reprisals in response to the killing of Palestinian civilians by Israeli military are legitimate. According to the Goldstone Report, under international law “resistance movements against colonialism and occupation are regarded as international armed conflicts” in which “any action of resistance pursuant to the right of self-determination should be exercised with full respect of other human rights and IHL.” One can argue the logistics of how an occupied people without the necessary military means to strike at purely military targets ought to resist their occupation, particularly when negotiations and the international community have repeatedly failed them. Nonetheless, the Goldstone Report is clear in its condemnation of the rocket and mortar attacks and Palestinian violence directed at Israeli civilians: this type of violence is intended to spread terror amongst the civilian population, constituting war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity, and under no circumstances can it be tolerated. Yet the report also acknowledges the high number of Palestinian casualties in Gaza during the time period the rocket and mortar attacks have occurred. Death tolls from two particular incidents are worth noting. From the Israeli “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005 until November 2006, Israeli forces killed 525 Palestinians in Gaza. Then in February of 2008 during operation “Hot Winter,” Israeli forces killed 202 Palestinians in Gaza. The report thus asserts that the cycle of violence makes it difficult for Israelis to believe that Palestinians intend to let them live in peace and security in their state, and for Palestinians to believe that Israelis intend to let them live in peace and security in a state of their own. This distrust serves to feed the vicious cycle.

The Mission's Findings- Despite Israel's claims that the report singled it out alone, the mission found that both Israel and armed Palestinian groups committed war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity. As the occupying power Israel receives the majority of the attention throughout the report, although all Palestinian abuses are well documented in the report including inter-Palestinian violence between Hamas and Fatah, abuses against the Palestinian people by both the PA and Hamas, Palestinian attacks directed at Israeli civilians and the protections and rights thus denied to captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit as a prisoner of war. In relation to Israel and OCL, the mission examined very specific incidents and cases in which international humanitarian law was explicitly violated, particularly in relation to the principles of distinction and proportionality. This included the deliberate and intentional disabling of what little remained of Gaza's civilian infrastructure including the destruction of wells, agricultural land, Gaza's only operating flour mill, chicken farms and a cement factory in addition to the destruction and razing of civilian homes. The mission found that these actions were not in response to a direct threat to Israeli military forces and that no military advantage was gained from their destruction; the mission concluded these attacks were deliberate and intended to produce increased suffering of the civilian population of Gaza. The mission also took particular interest in the attack on the UNRWA compound, which seems to offer exceptional representation of Israel's overall aims and policies during OCL. The UNRWA compound was sheltering some 700 Palestinian civilians when it came under Israeli attack with seven white phosphorous shells and three high explosive missiles on 3 January 2009. What troubled the mission most about the nature of the attack is that the UNRWA compound had a large fuel depot, with 120,000 liters of fuel stored underground and 49,000 liters of fuel stored in tankers above ground, which could have resulted in an immense catastrophe had the fuel ignited. The compound also stored substantial quantities of food, medical supplies and blankets, which according to former UNRWA Director-General Karen AbuZayd were the supplies for all the humanitarian agencies in the Gaza Strip. Fires resulting from Israeli shelling destroyed much of the aid. UN officials at the compound were in constant communication with Israeli authorities that had coordinates of all UN facilities, including the UNRWA compound. Moreover, Israeli military officials were aware of the most vulnerable parts of the compound, in particular the fuel depot. On the day of the attack on the compound, numerous phone calls were made to inform the Israelis of the attack on the compound and the immediate danger due to the fuel depot. However, the attacks continued unabated for more than three hours despite the exceedingly high level of communication between UN officials in the compound and the Israeli military. In response to the attack on the UNRWA compound, the Israelis initially asserted that they had been attacked from the compound. Later they backtracked and said that the white phosphorous shells had been fired to produce a smoke screen to provide cover from Hamas fighters who were in the area, and that all remnants of munitions that landed in the compound were unintended. The mission rejected this

claim because the munitions landed directly inside the compound in extremely vulnerable parts of it. The mission also concluded that due to the precision of Israeli military technology it is unlikely that mistakes of this nature were made, and also unlikely that the same mistake could have been made ten times over a three-hour time period. Moreover, all witnesses interviewed whom the mission deemed to be credible reported that there was no fire coming from within or near the compound while it was being shelled. The mission found that even if Israeli claims were taken at face value despite their contradictions the attack on the UNRWA compound failed to strike a balance between risk to civilian life and military advantage gained. In this sense, the mission was more than willing to give the benefit of the doubt to Israeli military commanders in what would otherwise appear to be a deliberate attack on a well-known and easily identifiable civilian object with an extremely high risk for civilian casualties. Moreover, the fact that fires destroyed much of the humanitarian aid being stored in the compound would seem to indicate that this may have been the intention of the shelling of the compound, fitting into the overall policy of inflicting greater suffering upon the civilian population of Gaza. Additionally the mission found many instances in which Palestinian civilians, whose status as civilians was known to Israeli military forces, were intentionally targeted and killed. The mission also found that Israeli forces used Palestinians as human shields, forcing them to enter buildings ahead of Israeli soldiers to check for combatants or booby traps. Furthermore, the mission concluded from facts gathered that Israel committed the following grave breaches of the 4th Geneva Convention: “willful killing, torture or inhuman treatment, willfully causing great suffering or serious injury to body or health, and extensive destruction of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly.” The Mission also indicated that the use of human shields constitutes a war crime. Additionally, the mission concluded that Israel’s efforts to warn Palestinians of imminent attacks through phone calls, dropping of leaflets and the use of lighter explosives as warning indicators were insufficient and did not relieve Israeli forces from taking all additional precautions in protecting the civilian population of Gaza. The mission reached this conclusion because warnings were often unclear, or directed civilians to city centers that had previously come under heavy attack. The report also draws necessary attention to the deadly predicament the population of Gaza found itself in; they were extremely limited in their ability to flee to safety. Gaza is one of the world’s most densely populated areas, of which all borders were sealed and closed. Thus they did not have the option to become refugees – there was literally no place for them to go.

Palestinian Violations The mission found that Palestinian armed groups were present in urban areas during hostilities and did launch rockets from urban areas. The mission concluded that some armed Palestinians might not have distinguished themselves from civilians at all times. However the mission found no evidence to suggest that civilians were directed to areas where attacks were being launched, nor that they were forced to stay in areas where attacks were underway. In this sense, the mission largely rejects the

Israeli assertion that Palestinian armed groups used the civilian population of Gaza as a human shield in order to deter Israeli attacks. Moreover, the mission noted that the government of Israel has produced absolutely no evidence to support its claims that Palestinian combatants “mingle routinely with civilians in order to cover their movements.” Further, the mission could not conclude that mosques were used for military purposes, nor did they find any evidence that attacks were launched from hospitals or that ambulances were used for military purposes. Moreover, the mission concluded that UN facilities were not used to stage attacks or military activities, though it could not discount the possibility that Palestinian armed groups may have been active in the vicinity of UN facilities. If Palestinian armed groups engaged in military activity in the vicinity of civilian or protected buildings, the mission concluded that this would unnecessarily place the civilian population of Gaza in danger. However the conduct of military action in urban areas does not by itself violate international law.

Rocket Attacks In relation to the Palestinian rocket and mortar attacks the mission noted their psychological impact on the civilian population of southern Israel. The attacks have killed 19 Israeli civilians within Israel between June 2004 and January 2009. The mission noted that the attacks interfere with their right to education, the ability of Israelis to lead a normal social life, and have caused destruction to property. The mission found that the rocket and mortar fire constitutes indiscriminate attacks on the civilian population of southern Israel, and that such attacks are deliberate and intended to spread terror, which constitutes a violation of international law in the form of war crimes and possibly even crimes against humanity. The mission also found that public declarations by Hamas and other armed Palestinian groups of the intention to target civilians as reprisals to Israeli violence against Palestinians is contrary to international humanitarian law. However, the mission also noted with concern that many Bedouin communities in southern Israel within rocket and mortar range, which remain unrecognized by Israel do not have warning systems, nor are any of their structures reinforced to protect them from rocket attacks. Furthermore, Palestinian towns in southern Israel that lie within rocket range are not afforded reinforcements for any of their structures; only the predominantly Jewish towns are. This finding brings attention to discriminatory policies and practices within Israel against its non-Jewish citizens. Additionally, the mission concluded that Gilad Shalit meets prisoner of war status and should be afforded all rights due to him under the 3rd Geneva Convention including protection, humane treatment, external communication, and visitation by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) without delay. However the mission noted that the continued blockade of Gaza until Shalit’s release would constitute collective punishment against the civilian population of Gaza.

The Israeli Blockade of Gaza The mission examined OCL as part and parcel of the Israeli siege of the Gaza Strip. Israel began blocking aid to Gaza in 2006, following the

success of Hamas in the Palestinian parliamentary elections with the intention of convincing the population of Gaza to withdraw their support from Hamas. When Hamas seized power of Gaza in 2007 Israel put much greater restrictions on the flow of goods including fuel, electricity and food into the Strip. Additionally, Israel declared Gaza a hostile entity and insists it is no longer the occupying power of Gaza due to its withdrawal of settlers and military forces from Gaza in 2005; on this basis Israel asserts it is no longer responsible for Gaza's welfare. The impacts of the blockade have been severe, and the mission placed much emphasis on examining the effects of the blockade. The mission found that "by December 2008 the destructive impact of the blockade on the local economy had doubled unemployment levels. While in 2007 79% of households lived below the official poverty line (US\$ 4 per capita/day) and some 70% below the deep poverty line (US\$ 3 per capita/day), these figures were expected to increase by the end of 2008" and this was before OCL, which greatly exacerbated the already dire circumstances. Further, the mission determined that "the blockade and the military hostilities have created a situation in which most people are destitute. Women and children have been particularly affected. The current situation has been described as a crisis of human dignity." Finally, the mission concluded that "the expected impact" and what it believes was the primary purpose of the blockade "was to bring about a situation in which the civilian population would find life so intolerable that they would leave (if it were possible) or turn Hamas out of office, as well as to collectively punish the civilian population." The mission saw OCL as a continuation of the policy of punishing the population of Gaza as a whole, intended to increase their level of suffering. The deliberate targeting of the food and sanitation infrastructure, along with the targeting of the UNRWA compound, which destroyed much of Gaza's humanitarian aid, makes this assertion difficult to refute.

Conclusions of the Report Given the advanced Israeli military technology and ability for precision, the mission concluded that "the incidents and patterns of events considered in the report are the result of deliberate planning and policy decisions." Tactics used in Gaza were consistent with practices in the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 and reflect what is known as the Dahiya Doctrine. The Dahiya Doctrine transforms civilians and civilian objects into military targets, and proscribes the infliction of disproportionate force and damage to civilian property and infrastructure, and thereby great suffering to civilian populations to achieve political aims. The mission found little doubt that disproportionate destruction and violence against Palestinian civilians during OCL were part of deliberate Israeli planning and policy. The mission further concluded that the blockade on Gaza, which was severely worsened by Operation Cast Lead, constitutes collective punishment in violation of international humanitarian law. In further relation to the blockade, the mission found that the denial to Palestinians of their right to sustenance, employment, housing, water, freedom of movement, and the limitation of their access to a court of law could amount to persecution, which is a crime against humanity. The

mission also found that “Israel is still duty bound under the 4th Geneva Convention... to ensure the supply of foodstuff, medical and hospital items and others to meet the humanitarian needs of the population of the Gaza Strip without qualification.” This last finding is particularly important because Israel is trying to escape responsibility for the welfare of the population of Gaza by denying it is still the occupying power there. Finally, the mission reached a very significant and profound conclusion regarding the source of violence and the way to redress it. According to the Goldstone Report:

“As the Mission focused on investigating and analyzing the specific matters within its mandate, Israel’s continuing occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank emerged as the fundamental factor underlying violations of international humanitarian and human rights law against the protected population and undermining prospects for development and peace. Israel’s failure to acknowledge and exercise its responsibilities as the Occupying Power further exacerbated the effects of occupation on the Palestinian people, and continue to do so. Furthermore, the harsh and unlawful practices of occupation, far from quelling resistance, breed it, including its violent manifestations. The Mission is of the view that ending occupation is a prerequisite for the return of a dignified life for Palestinians, as well as development and a peaceful solution to the conflict.”

Recommendations of the Report According to international law, when serious violations of human rights occur, investigations must be conducted, and if appropriate, prosecution of allegations of serious violations must ensue. The Goldstone Report was endorsed by the Human Rights Council on 16 October 2009 and will now go on to the Security Council for further consideration. The Security Council can then refer the report to the International Criminal Court (ICC) should Israel and Hamas fail to conduct proper investigations into the allegations of war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity, which would allow for the trying of those directly involved in the planning and implementing of OCL. However, the report will more than likely not move beyond the Security Council because the US is likely to veto further consideration of it. If that happens, there are two additional options. The UN Secretary General can refer the matter to the UN General Assembly, which under Resolution 377 can take action if the Security Council fails to act in matters that produce a threat to peace, a breach of peace or an act of aggression. This would potentially allow the General Assembly to refer the matter to the ICC if it does not move beyond the Security Council. However, the most likely possibility is that those guilty of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity will be arrested and tried under universal jurisdiction. Universal jurisdiction allows national courts to try cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity, even when those crimes are not committed in the nation trying the case, and even when those guilty of the crimes are not nationals of the nation trying the case. The recent arrest warrant issued for Tzipi Livni in the UK was an exercise of this power. However, it remains to be seen if the Goldstone Report will have enough influence to result in a prosecution. Attempts were

made to try former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Belgium for his roles in the attack on the West Bank village of Qibya in 1953, and the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, including the infamous massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. The attempts to arrest and try him failed, and given the immense political pressure Israel will exert to avoid the arrest and trial of any of its military commanders or political leaders, it is uncertain if the Goldstone Report will be able to deliver this kind of justice. Case in point, UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband said in the wake of Livni's arrest warrant that changes to the UK's legal system might be necessary to prevent this kind of situation from arising again. In addition to the recommendation of referral to the ICC should Israel and Hamas fail to conduct proper investigations, civilian victims of war crimes and grave violations of international law are entitled to reparations for damages or losses incurred during hostilities. The mission reached the conclusion that there is very limited room, if any for Palestinians to seek reparations from Israel. Thus the mission recommended the establishment of an international mechanism to provide compensation for Palestinian victims of OCL.

Conclusion The Goldstone Report took note that Palestinians and human rights organizations have grown weary in the face of numerous reports and initiatives that have failed to produce any meaningful or tangible results in the pursuit of peace and justice. The report further notes the enabling impact this has on the formation and implementation of Israeli policies in the Palestinian territories that violate IHL. Thus we have arrived at a critical juncture for the future of Palestine and Israel; Justice Goldstone has said in interviews that he does not believe there is a genuine peace process. Yet there is an obvious and urgent need for one that incorporates respect for and adherence to international humanitarian law. The trial and prosecution of war criminals would be a major victory in the pursuit of justice for victims of OCL. However, it will prove futile if it does not deter future inflictions of gross violence from occurring. Perhaps then the most profound revelations of the Goldstone Report do not pertain to the allegations and assertions that war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity were committed during OCL. Perhaps the more important revelations of the report, and the ones we should concern ourselves with are the ones that attempt to uncover the root causes of the violence; the occupation and the denial of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people. Finally, the report also cautions against the use of the kind of grotesque military violence witnessed during OCL, drawing much needed attention to the long-term consequences of it. Both Palestinian and Israeli victims are likely to develop feelings of hatred in response to attacks on civilians. However, the level of violence inflicted on the people of Gaza was severe, deep and far-reaching; the impacts will be felt for generations to come. The mission found that 30% of children screened in UNRWA schools in Gaza have mental health problems, while 10% lost family, friends, their homes and all of their belongings. Additionally, the World Health Organization has estimated that 30,000 children in Gaza will need prolonged psychological support, and warned of

the potential for many of these children to grow up with aggressive attitudes and hatred. The question that needs to be asked, and ultimately addressed, is what kind of future will the use of this kind of violence create? OCL demonstrated an escalation in the level of violence, and seems to indicate that the level of violence will only grow more severe. For this, the Goldstone Report condemns Israel for “failing to protect its own citizens by refusing to acknowledge the futility of resorting to violent means and military power.” Thus there is much to be gained and learned from the results of the fact-finding mission to Gaza. Israel should not bury its head in the sand in the face of the report’s findings, nor should the international community continue its failure to act. Justice just might be the first step on the road to peace. In order for that to happen, the era of impunity needs to be replaced by an era of accountability. This is the ultimate message of the Goldstone Report, and one that will hopefully be received. Britain Eakin is a Writer for the Media and Information Department at the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH). She can be contacted at mid@miftah.org.

Geo strategic front:

Barak Warns Of Confrontations With Syria

Tuesday February 02, 2010 - IMEMC & Agencies- Israeli Defense Minister, Ehud Barak, warned, Monday, of the possibility of military confrontations with Syria due to the lack of progress during indirect talks with the country, and added that such an issue could develop into a comprehensive war. Speaking to senior military commanders, Barak stated that a conformation with Damascus would lead Israel to holding talks on the same issues indirectly discussed with Syria fifteen years ago. He also said that a peace settlement with Syria is not "the dream" of Damascus, but the best option and decision Syria should make. Barak added that if Syria believes it can defeat or deceive Israel, it would then prefer to choose this path instead of engaging in peace talks. As for Iran, Barak stated that Iran is “a central threat to Israel and the world”, and that all options are open in dealing with the country. He added that the United States intends to conduct international efforts in the coming months in an attempt to impose further sanctions on Iran and its regime. Furthermore, Barak stated that the United States would try to convince China and other countries that imposing sanctions on Iran has minimum effects on changing the Iranian policies and its “Nuclear aspirations”.

Hamis Rejects Goldstone Report Accusations

Hamis has rejected accusations leveled against the movement that it had committed "war crimes" during the last year Israeli offensive against the Gaza Strip. A UN Human Rights Council report that was compiled by a team led by the South African judge Richard Goldstone has accused both Israel and Hamis of war crimes during the three week war in the region. Hamis, which launched rocket attacks to retaliate Israeli air raids and ground

incursion into the strip, said a committee it appointed to follow up on the report found no intention to harm civilians. The UN report claimed that rocket attacks against southern Israel deliberately targeted civilians and could constitute a crime against humanity. "Palestinian armed groups have repeatedly confirmed that they are abiding by international humanitarian law, through broadcasting in different media that they intended to hit military targets and to avoid targeting civilians," the Hamas said, attributing civilian casualties to "incorrect (or imprecise) fire." The request for independent investigations was made by the UN General Assembly last November. The UN gave both sides until Feb. 5 to respond to the report. The report also accused Israel of grave crimes against humanity among which the use of phosphorous munitions against Palestinians in Gaza.

Syria Warns Israel against Military Offensive

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem has cautioned Israel against any act of adventurism and launching a war against his country, saying such a move would only endanger the regime's stability. "Israelis, do not test the power of Syria since you know the war will move into your cities," Muallem told a media conference with his visiting Spanish counterpart Miguel Angel Moratinos in Damascus. "Return to reason, follow the path of peace ... and implement the requirements of peace fairly and comprehensively," he added. "If a war breaks out in the region... it will be widespread even if it is waged against [only] southern Lebanon or Syria," Muallem warned. Under the auspices of Turkey, Israel and Syria have held four rounds of indirect talks aimed at a comprehensive peace agreement. Negotiations, however, reached a stalemate in September 2009. Syria withdrew from the talks in protest at Israel's December 2008-January 2009 military offensive against the Gaza Strip. At least 1,400 Palestinians were killed and 5,400 others were injured during the three-week long offensive.

Social front:

Some 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed during the war.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad says Israel is not serious about achieving peace since all facts point out that Tel Aviv is pushing the region towards war. "Israel is not serious in achieving peace and that everything shows it is working towards a war," SANA news agency quoted Assad as saying in a meeting with visiting Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos in Damascus. Moratinos, for his part, pointed out that resolution of crises in the Middle East is a priority to the European Union. He also expressed appreciation over Syria's positive role in establishing security and stability in the region. Syria maintains that Israel's withdrawal from Golan Heights is the prerequisite for peace between Damascus and Tel Aviv. Israel captured the Golan Heights following the 1967 Six-Day War and annexed the Syrian territory in 1981. Further raising Damascus' ire,

Israeli warplanes destroyed Syria's al-Kibar site in 2007 blaming the country of harboring a nuclear reactor there — a claim rejected by Syria. Under the auspices of Turkey, Israel and Syria last May launched peace talks aimed at reaching a comprehensive peace agreement, but the negotiations reached a deadlock in September 2009. Syria then withdrew from the talks in protest at Israel's all-out military strike against the Gaza Strip — in December 2008 and January 2009 — where at least 1,400 Palestinians lost their lives to the three-week carnage.