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Fertile Crescent
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Political front

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Cairo set for Middle East talks

Mubarak will meet separately on Sunday with Netanyahu and Mitchell [AFP]
 The Egyptian and Palestinian presidents are scheduled to meet shortly in Cairo, the first in a series of meetings aimed at restarting stalled negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, will meet Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, later on Sunday afternoon. That meeting will be followed by talks in the evening with George Mitchell, the US envoy to the Middle East. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, is expected to tell Mubarak that he wants the Arab League to make a decision on whether to endorse direct negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians. Netanyahu wants Mubarak to push Abbas to restart direct talks with Israel. But expectations are low. Direct talks have been stalled for more than a year over a number of issues, particularly the continued growth of Israeli settlements in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank. **Resuming direct talks** In an interview with the Jordanian newspaper Al-Ghad on Saturday, Abbas laid out a number of conditions for negotiations with Israel. He said he would resume direct talks if Israel agreed to 1967 borders as the basis for a Palestinian state. He also requested an international force deployed along the border to protect the Palestinian state. "If they agree to that, we will consider that acceptable progress, and we will move to direct negotiations," Abbas told the newspaper. Abbas made no mention of requiring Israel to freeze settlement growth, which has long been a precondition for direct talks. The 10-month West Bank settlement freeze announced last year by Netanyahu will end in September. Yasser Abd Rabbo, a senior Palestinian official, told Al Jazeera he wants the United States to clarify its position on several issues, including borders, before resuming direct talks. **Gaza**

disengagement plan One issue likely to loom over Sunday afternoon's Netanyahu-Mubarak meeting is a proposal by Avigdor Lieberman, the Israeli foreign minister, to cut all ties with Gaza. Lieberman leaked the proposal to the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth, calling it a "second disengagement" from the Gaza Strip. Israel would seal its land border with Gaza, and lift its naval blockade of the territory. European countries would be asked to take the lead on reconstructing Gaza's economy, decimated by years of war and blockade. The plan is unpopular with the Egyptian government, because it would force Cairo to take greater responsibility for Gaza. Netanyahu has already sought to distance himself from the proposal, saying it had not received his approval. "Policies on this matter are set by the prime minister and the cabinet... that's how it has always been, and that's how it will remain," an aide told the Israeli newspaper Haaretz.

Arab Contractors' driver proven guilty by various reports

Dozens holding a coffin of one Arab Contractor staff after funeral prayers, Al Sayeda Nafisa...

Security sent two days ago Mahmoud Sweilam, a driver who works for Arab Contractors, to the Qata prison under tight security measures. Last week, the driver had opened fire on his colleagues, killing six and injuring several others.

Attorney General Abdel Meguid Mahmoud is expected to refer Sweilam to the Criminal Court today after the Public Prosecution received reports from the Forensic Authorities, the Criminal Laboratory and the Antiquities Committee, all of which have proven Sweilam guilty.

Diaa el-Garhi, Sweilam's lawyer, said he requested that the suspect be examined by mental health medics, adding that his defendant suffers from psychological problems which may have pushed him to commit the crime.

According to new information that Al-Masry Al-Youm has obtained, the suspect had planned for his crime and identified his victims beforehand.

The suspect was born in Bani Zaid village in the Upper Egyptian governorate of Assiut. He did not complete his primary education. He learned to drive while completing his military service. In 1980, he applied for a job with Arab Contractors.

He was hired by the company and received a good salary. He married his cousin and they had seven children. He has a clean criminal record. He was penalized only three times during 30 years of service at the company.

Mubarak-Netanyahu talks postponed again

By REUTERS Jul 13, 2010 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meeting in Egypt with President Hosni Mubarak has been postponed for a second time and will take place on Sunday, an Israeli official said on Tuesday.

Palestinian officials said a separate meeting Mubarak had been due to hold with President Mahmoud Abbas this week had also been pushed back to the weekend.

Abbas had been due in Egypt on Thursday, but the trip would be delayed until after he had met a US Middle East envoy due in Ramallah later this week, the Palestinians said.

Egypt, a US ally that made peace with Israel three decades ago, has traditionally played a central role in Middle East peace-making efforts.

The United States wants Netanyahu and Abbas to begin face-to-face peace talks aimed at creating a Palestinian state alongside Israel on land it has occupied since 1967.

The sides are currently engaged in indirect talks being mediated by Sen. George Mitchell, the US Middle East envoy.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said Abbas would travel to Egypt on Saturday after meeting Mitchell.

The Palestinian leadership, facing heavy domestic criticism over the failure of past negotiations, is wary of agreeing to more direct talks with Netanyahu, who says he is ready to negotiate with the Palestinians right away.

Abbas has said that before any move to direct talks, the indirect negotiations must make progress on the issues of the borders of the future Palestinian state and security arrangements.

Netanyahu originally announced he would meet Mubarak in Cairo on Tuesday to discuss efforts to restart direct peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The session was subsequently reset for Wednesday, and its location moved to Egypt's Red Sea resort of Sharm El-Sheikh, due to what Israel said were changes in Mubarak's schedule.

The official cited "logistical reasons" for the further delay, to July 18, without elaborating.

Egypt was the first of two Arab states to sign peace treaties with the Jewish state, and Mubarak has been active in helping to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians.

Gaza aid:

Egypt Decides To Deny Entry To Jordanian Aid Convoy

Monday July 19, 2010 - IMEMC & Agencies

The Egyptian Authorities prevented the "Ansar 1" Jordanian aid convoy from entering Egypt while on their way to deliver humanitarian supplies to the Gaza Strip.

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry issued an official decree preventing the convoy from entering the country by all means, the Qatar-based Al Jazeera reported.

Hussein Al Saoub, head of the “Al Jisr Al Araby”, the Arabic Bridge Company, phoned late on Sunday at night the head of the Jordanian convoy informing him that Egypt decided to prevent the convoy from entering Egypt.

There are 138 persons participating in the aid convoy. Al Sa’oub said that the Egyptian Authorities decided that each person on the convoy is a “Persona non grata”.

The aid was sent by a company owned by the governments in Iraq, Jordan and Egypt; the plan was to leave on Monday morning from Aqaba in Jordan to the Nweibi’ Egyptian city.

Despite the Egyptian decision, convoy organizers decided to head to Aqaba in order to try to sail to Egypt before heading to Gaza.

Head of the Jordanian “Artery Of Life” committee, Wa’el Al Saqqa, said that the “Al Jisr Al Araby” company is the only company in charge of shipments between Aqaba and Nweibi’ on the Red Sea.

The company granted the participants all needed travel tickets and documents but Egypt officially decided to prevent them from entering.

Libyan Gaza aid ship unloading in Egypt

AL-ARISH: A Libyan ship that failed to break Israel's Gaza blockade was being unloaded in the Egyptian port of Al-Arish on Friday, a day after docking there, an AFP correspondent at the scene said.

The director of the port of Al-Arish, Gamal Abdel Maqsoud, said the diverted ship will unload its cargo and transfer it to the Red Crescent for delivery to Gaza. The 2,000 tons of food and medical supplies will be transported overland into Gaza across the Egyptian border, after being inspected.

Meanwhile, the nine pro-Palestinian activists that traveled aboard the aid vessel, the Amalthea, said they would not accompany the shipment to Gaza, as their aim had been to arrive there by sea.

But representatives of Libya's Qaddafi Foundation, which chartered the ship, are due to arrive soon to travel with the aid to Gaza, Egypt's official Mena news agency quoted Libyan Masha Allah Hamed Abderrahman as saying.

A day earlier, Israeli navy ships stopped the aid vessel from reaching Hamas-ruled Gaza. Israel imposed the blockade after Hamas violently overran the territory in June 2007.

The standoff between Israel's navy and the crew of the Amalthea followed a botched Israeli raid on a similar Gaza-bound ship in May in which nine pro-Palestinian activists were killed.

The international criticism over that raid forced Israel to ease its land blockade of the territory, but it has maintained the naval embargo, insisting it is vital to keep weapons out of Hamas' hands.

Libyan aid ship sails for Gaza

The 92-metre Al-Amal aid ship is carrying around 2,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid for Gaza. A Libya-sponsored ship carrying 2,000 tonnes of aid has set sail from Greece for the blockaded Gaza Strip in spite of warnings from Israel not to approach the Palestinian territory. The captain of the Al-Amal vessel, a Cuban national, confirmed to Al Jazeera on Saturday shortly before leaving the Lavrio Port, in southeastern Greece, that he planned to head for Gaza. That would contradict a statement from the Israeli foreign ministry, which claims to have reached an agreement with Greece and Moldova to have the ship diverted to Egypt. However, the ship is the private property of a Moldovan owner, so it was not clear what impact the two European governments could have. Greek authorities inspected the vessel before it was allowed to set sail. Al Jazeera's Khalid Al-Deeb, accompanying the Al-Amal, said the ship expected to take 70-80 hours to reach Gaza. Youssef Sawani, a director of the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation that organised the aid ship, said that it was "loaded with about 2,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid in the form of foodstuff and medications". **'Expressing solidarity'** The charity is headed by the son of Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan leader, and is carrying "a number of supporters who are keen on expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people in the plight amidst the siege imposed on Gaza".

IN DEPTH "We are doing what we can, this is our responsibility. If everyone just hangs back and says the Israelis will not allow this nothing will happen and the people of Gaza will continue under starvation," Sawani said. Shahar Arieli, an Israeli foreign ministry spokesman, told Al Jazeera that Israel could not permit the vessel to reach Gaza because it may actually be transporting weapons for Palestinian fighters in the coastal territory. "If there is a desire to send products to the Palestinians, these can be delivered to Israel and [in] this way, we can make sure that there are no weapons," Arieli said. "Nobody knows what is on the ship. If there is humanitarian aid, this can be sent through Israeli border crossings to Gaza." But Abdal Raof Jaziri, travelling on the aid ship, said that they were all peaceful volunteers trying to help the Palestinians. "We have nothing in the ship except rice, oil, tomatoes, flour, that's all what we have. We don't have weapons, we don't have guns. We don't even have small knives or nothing because we come for peace to help," he said. **International pressure** The 92-metre ship, renamed Al-Amal which means "Hope" in Arabic, has a 12-man crew and will carry up to nine passengers, a representative of Piraeus-based agents Alpha Shipping said. The Israeli foreign ministry said earlier that Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister, "spoke several times in recent days with the foreign ministers of Greece and Moldova" to try and convince them to not let the aid ship sail. "Israel reserves the right under international law to prevent this ship from violating the existing naval blockade on the Gaza Strip"

Gabriela Shalev, Israel's ambassador to the UN

Gabriela Shalev, Israel's UN ambassador, also sent a letter to Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary general, asking that the international community intervene to prevent the ship approaching Gaza, the Haaretz newspaper reported. "Israel reserves the right under international law to prevent this ship from violating the existing naval blockade on the Gaza Strip," it said. Israeli armed forces attacked a flotilla of aid ships trying to break Israel's blockade of Gaza on May 31, killing nine activists on the Turkish Mavi Marmara.

Amid increasing international condemnation after the raid, Israel has begun easing the blockade on the Gaza Strip by allowing in some previously banned items, but still maintains a naval blockade, prevents the export of goods or people over land, and controls the territory's airspace. Construction materials to repair extensive infrastructure damage suffered during Israel's war in Gaza in December 2008-January 2009 are also heavily restricted.

Gaza aid ship 'diverts' to Egypt

Organisers say the ship is carrying 2,000 tonnes of food and medicine for Gaza [AFP]

The Libyan aid ship bound for the Gaza Strip has apparently changed course for Egypt following a warning from the Israeli navy.

The vessel, Al-Amal, now appears bound for the Egyptian port of El-Arish, on the Sinai peninsula. The Israeli navy warned the vessel on Tuesday to change course, and said it had "begun preparations for stopping the ship".

Egyptian officials have given the ship permission to dock at El-Arish.

The ship is carrying 12 crew members and at least nine passengers, including six Libyans and one each from Algeria, Morocco and Nigeria. Organisers say the ship is transporting 2,000 tonnes of food and medicine for people in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli navy denied reports that it issued any ultimatum to the ship. Organisers on board said the navy warned it would take over the ship if it did not change course.

Egyptian offer

Ahmed Aboul Gheit, the Egyptian foreign minister, said earlier on Tuesday that Egyptian authorities would unload the aid and distribute it into Gaza if the ship docks at El-Arish.

The ship set sail from Greece on Saturday. The Israeli government has warned that allowing the ship to breach the Gaza blockade would have "very serious consequences" for Israeli security.

"Israel will not let the boat reach Gaza," Yossi Peled, a minister in the Israeli cabinet, said on Sunday.

PJ Crowley, the US state department spokesman, urged the Al-Amal to "act responsibly".

"We have urged the Libyan government to avoid any unnecessary confrontation," he said.

"We... have urged all those wishing to deliver goods to do so through established channels, so their cargo can be inspected by the government of Israel and transferred by land crossings into Gaza."

An attempt by a flotilla of aid vessels to breach the blockade in May led to the deaths of nine pro-Palestinian activists after Israeli commandos boarded the lead ship.

Following an international outcry over the raid, Israel recently eased restrictions on the Gaza Strip, allowing some previously-banned items into the territory. But construction materials remain heavily restricted, Gazans have very limited freedom of movement, and Israel still enforces a naval blockade of the territory.

Economic front

Egypt to build four nuclear power plants

Friday, July 16, 2010 Egypt has decided to build four nuclear power plants by 2025, Egypt's Minister of Electricity and Energy Hassan Younes said. "The bodies in

charge of carrying out the Egyptian nuclear program are currently studying the after-2025 stages as the issue of setting up four nuclear plants before this date has already been decided and there is no way to retreat from establishing any of the four plants," the country's El-Shorouk daily newspaper quoted the minister as saying on Friday.

"We are currently defining the number of plants that we will need after 2025, as we adopt a strategy based on the diversification of energy resources including the nuclear, traditional and renewable energy," he added. Meanwhile, the Egyptian minister ruled out Cairo could be pressurized over its nuclear energy program or face any problems regarding nuclear fuel supplies. He affirmed that his country maintains good relations with international partners and deals with the issue with much transparency. In June, International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Yukiya Amano said in Cairo the agency was ready to cooperate with Egypt to build nuclear power stations. The UN nuclear watchdog chief indicated the agency had proposed to send a mission to Egypt to help with the country's projects. In October 2007, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced a plan to build several nuclear power stations to meet the country's increasing demand of electricity.

Egypt June Inflation Little Changed, Ends Slowdown (Update2)

Egyptian inflation was little changed in June after easing for four months in a row, supporting the central bank's decision to hold interest rates at a four-year low.

Urban inflation, the main rate monitored by the central bank, was 10.7 percent compared with 10.5 percent in May, according to the website of the Cairo-based Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics. The median forecast of six economists surveyed by Bloomberg was 10.6 percent. Prices rose 0.5 percent month-on-month.

"I certainly see no justification for the central bank to act on interest rates before the fourth quarter of 2010," Simon Williams, chief Middle East economist at HSBC Holding Plc in Dubai. "If anything the rate rise should come later not earlier than that point," he said by telephone. He had forecast inflation at 10.7 percent.

The central bank said last month that while inflation was "elevated" because of high fruit and vegetable prices, it remained subdued enough to keep interest rates unchanged. The central bank cut interest rates six times in 2009 to support economic growth in the most populous Arab country.

The economy expanded 5.8 percent in the first three months of 2010 compared with 5 percent in the previous quarter. Egypt's benchmark EGX30 stock index has fallen 2.9 percent this year.

Some investment banks, including Cairo-based Pharos Holding, said that they expect a rise in food costs because of a June price increase by Juhayna Food Industries, the country's biggest seller of packaged milk. Dairy products account for 6 percent of the consumer price index, Pharos said in a report this week, forecasting inflation at 11.5 percent.

Food prices rose at an annual rate of 18.5 percent in June, unchanged compared to May, according to the statistics agency. Food and drinks account for more than 45 percent of the consumer price index in urban parts of Egypt.

-With assistance from Abdel Latif Wahba in Cairo. Editors: Digby Lidstone, Louis Meixler, Inal Ersan.

Social front Sacramental squabbles

The Supreme Constitutional Court overturned an earlier ruling allowing the remarriage of divorced Christians even though the unified personal status law remains unresolved, Reem Leila reports

[Click to view caption](#)

On 7 July the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) overturned an earlier verdict issued by the Supreme Administrative Court (SAC) obliging the Coptic Orthodox Church to provide Christian divorcees with marriage permits. The ruling, issued in May, angered many Christians, beginning with Pope Shenouda III, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, who has appealed to the SCC.

Hundreds of Christians demonstrated in Cairo, with angry protesters claiming that the ruling went against Biblical teachings. They also accused the government of interfering in religious affairs.

Court officials believe the issue between state and church should be settled by a unified personal status law for all Christian denominations. According to the Coptic Orthodox creed, divorce is forbidden except in cases of adultery, and when converting to another religion or other denomination of Christianity. Bishop Morcouc of Shubra Al-Kheima Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church's media spokesman stated that church officials and Christians consider the SCC ruling "a great victory". "This ruling proves that Egypt has a fair judicial system which does not interfere in religious matters," Morcouc said. Church leaders who trust and respect the judiciary system and believe it is just "were not about to abide by any ruling which is against Christians' religious freedom which is guaranteed by the Egyptian constitution," argued Morcouc, who added that marriage is a religious matter and is one of the Orthodox Church's seven sacraments. "Nothing on earth will force us to abide by anything that contradicts Biblical teachings."

Following the controversy over the SAC ruling, Minister of Justice Mamdouh Marei formed a committee to draft the Christians unified personal status law. Pope Shenouda III, along with officials from the Ministry of Justice, said the committee included representatives of all four of Egypt's churches with their various denominations. "The unified Personal Status Law which was submitted to the Ministry of Justice meets the approval of all of Egypt's different denominations," Pope Shenouda had previously said.

The Roman Orthodox Church, one of four legally recognised denominations of Christianity in Egypt, rejected the new status law. Bishop Nicolas Antonio, official spokesman for the Roman Orthodox Church, said on behalf of Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria and All Africa Theodors II, the Justice Ministry is currently drafting the law in collaboration with the Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical and Catholic churches. The Roman Orthodox Church did not approve the law as was claimed. "Representatives of the church were neither invited to the preparatory sessions of the law nor to the committee formed by the ministry," Nicolas said.

It has been reported that Pope Shenouda III was angered by the Roman Orthodox Church following disagreement between both churches at the Middle East Council of Churches. The dispute resulted in the pullout of the Coptic Orthodox Church from the council and its request for a formal apology before returning to the council.

Antonio refused to comment on the reports and told Al-Ahram Weekly that an official letter has been sent to Marei, People's Assembly Speaker Fathi Sorour, head of the Shura Council Safwat El-Sherif and head of the committee concerned with the law Omar El-Sherif declaring their rejection of the law because they were excluded from the committee and any prior preparations of the law. "Should the People's Assembly approve the Christians' unified personal status law without taking our opinion, the law will not be binding on the Roman Orthodox Church. So far we did not receive any reply from any of these officials," Antonio said.

According to the Roman Orthodox Church, there are eight reasons a Roman Orthodox Christian can be granted divorce. Antonio said the Roman Orthodox Church signed the 1998 draft prepared by Pope Shenouda III and not the amended version.

"The pope submitted an amended version to the Ministry of Justice and the Roman Orthodox Church was not informed of the changes," stated Antonio. The Roman Orthodox Church has its own personal status law and will submit it to the Ministry of Justice.

"There are 16,000 followers of our church in Egypt. None of them, not even the Roman Orthodox Church itself should abide by the draft law prepared by Pope Shenouda III. How can we follow a law which does not represent our teachings?" asked Antonio.

Roman Orthodox Church law is enforced upon 22 bishoprics in Africa, 26 archbishoprics all over the world and millions of followers. "We cannot apply the law prepared by the Coptic pope on all those just because Pope Shenouda III of Egypt wants this," argued Antonio.

Disputes between Pope Shenouda III and other popes representing different denominations are escalating. Morcous stated that the Coptic Orthodox Church has criticised the group's draft law presented to the Justice Ministry, accusing the group of violating the Bible's teachings. This group "does not represent Christians", stated Morcous.

Antonio replied that the Roman Orthodox Church follows the law dating back to 1937 which previously regulated matters of marriage and divorce for each denomination separately. "Egypt's courts have been ruling via our own laws since then. This is the only law which is binding to us."

Roman Orthodox Church rejects unified Personal Status Law

The Roman Orthodox Church, which represents one of the four officially-recognized sects of Christians in Egypt, said it rejects the new unified Personal Status Law for non-Muslims, which the Ministry of Justice is currently preparing in cooperation with the Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical and Catholic Churches.

A source from the Roman Orthodox Church said it was excluded from the committee responsible for the preparation of the unified law because the Coptic Church and Pope Shenouda wanted to take revenge on the Roman Orthodox Church following the crisis of the Middle East Council of Churches and the withdrawal of the Coptic Church from the council.

At a meeting of the Middle East Council of Churches in May in Jordan, a disagreement erupted between representatives of the two churches. The dispute led the Coptic Church to pullout of the council, saying it would only return upon a formal apology from the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem.

The same source said the Roman Orthodox Church will hold an international press conference to announce its rejection of the bill.

Nicolas Antonios, the Roman Orthodox bishop, said the Roman Orthodox Church has sent letters to the Minister of Justice, the head of the committee preparing the law, the Speakers of the People's Assembly and the Shura Council and the Minister of Interior saying that it will not conform to the new law since it has not participated in its formulation. He added that the Roman Orthodox Church has not received a reply so far.

Antonios added that according to the Roman Orthodox Church, there are eight reasons that warrant a divorce, and therefore adultery cannot be the only grounds for a divorce as the Coptic Church believes.

Antonios rejected to comment on whether Pope Shenouda, the Coptic patriarch, is behind their exclusion from the committee preparing the law. He added however that he is not clear on who is running the committee entrusted with the preparation of the law.

Prehistoric whale skeletons found in Egypt

Many skeletons of prehistoric whales have been discovered in a valley in Egypt, and officials Saturday said it might be an entirely unknown species.

A complete skull, two jaws, 20 vertebrae and some ribs were found in a valley north of Lake Qarun in Egypt's Fayoum region, Xinhua reported citing the ministry of environment. The vertebrae and some teeth belongs to a bigger whale, believed to be a previously unknown species.

The discovery has enriched the historic record of presence of whales in Egypt, the officials said.

Lake Qarun was a freshwater one in the prehistoric era but today is a saltwater lake. Ancient Egyptians used to live around the lake, fishing and hunting animals.

Iraq

Political front

U.S. Hands Over Former Iraq Deputy PM Tariq Aziz

July 14, 2010 Iraq's deputy justice minister says U.S. authorities have handed over Iraq's former Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, along with 55 other members of Saddam Hussein's former regime. Busho Ibrahim said the handover took place over the last three days. U.S. officials confirmed the transfer, but gave no details. AFP quoted Badie Aref, a lawyer for Aziz, as saying his client's life was "in danger now." Aziz was appointed deputy prime minister in 1991 under Hussein. He was jailed for 15 years for murder in 2009, and last year was given a seven-year sentence for his role in expelling Kurds from Iraq's north.

Tariq Aziz shifted to Iraqi custody

Aziz was convicted by an Iraqi court in 2009 and sentenced to 22 years in prison [AFP] The Iraqi government says US forces have handed over 55 former members of Saddam Hussein's government, including Tariq Aziz, his former foreign minister. Busho Ibrahim, Iraq's deputy justice minister, said on Wednesday that the detainees also include Saddam's former oil and culture ministers. The US military in Baghdad confirmed that some detainees were handed over, but refused to name them. Badie Aref, Aziz's Amman-based lawyer, confirmed that his client was handed over to Iraqi authorities. "The American side handed over Aziz and other detainees to the Iraqi side on Tuesday night," Aref said. "Aziz called me and said he was being held in the Kadhimiya prison in Baghdad."

Recognisable figure Aref also warned that his client's life was in danger, saying that Iraqi authorities might execute him. Several other high-ranking Baathists, including Saddam and Ali Hassan al-Majid, known as Chemical Ali, have been executed by the Iraqi government in recent years.

In depth Aziz surrendered himself shortly after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. He was brought to trial five years later, and in 2009, he was sentenced to 22 years in prison for two separate crimes. He received a 15-year sentence for the summary executions of dozens of people in 1992, and a seven-year sentence for helping to displace thousands of Kurds from northern Iraq. The 74-year-old Aziz was one of the most recognisable faces of Saddam Hussein's administration. A longtime member of the Baath Party, he served terms as both Iraq's foreign minister and deputy prime minister. Aziz took part in the Geneva peace conference in 1991, which aimed to head off the first Gulf War by finding a diplomatic solution to Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. And in the days before the second US invasion of Iraq, in 2003, Aziz held a high-profile meeting with the late Pope John Paul II.

Camp Cropper handover The handover was announced one day before Iraqi authorities take control of Camp Cropper, the last US-run detention facility in Iraq. Ibrahim said several more detainees would be turned over in the next 24 hours. But the US military says it will keep control of roughly 200 prisoners even after the handover. US authorities will continue to oversee some operations at the prison until the end of the year.

US hands over last prison in Iraq Rawyeh Rageh reports on a turnover that could mark the final chapter of US involvement in Iraq prisons. The United States has handed over the last American-run prison to Iraqi authorities, a milestone in Iraq's push to reclaim sovereignty seven years after the US-led invasion. Camp Cropper, near the airport of Baghdad, the Iraqi capital, is where the US held deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, prior to his execution. Iraq's assumption of authority over the last prison controlled by US forces on Thursday marks an end to controversies which erupted after photos of US troops abusing Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison surfaced in 2004. However, some worry that sectarian tensions, a political deadlock four months after a close election and improper training could lead to future prison abuses, including torture, by Iraqi forces. But the US general in charge of detention facilities in Iraq says Iraqi forces are ready to take over the responsibility. "There is overwhelming evidence they are equipped, prepared and poised to take over," Major General Jerry Cannon said. In a ceremony, Cannon handed over a giant key of the prison to Dara Nouredin, Iraq's minister of justice. **'Model prison'** "We will make sure this prison is a model for all prisons," Nouredin said. The US continues to hold 200 other detainees, including eight members of Saddam Hussein's ousted government, in a separate part of the prison dubbed Compound 5. The high-security detention centre houses an estimated 1,500 detainees, excluding the 200 still held by the US. With the exception of these 200 inmates, there are no more prisoners in US custody in Iraq, Cannon said. A day before Camp Cropper's handover, Iraqi officials said the US had turned over 55 former officials in Saddam Hussein's government since last year, including Tariq Aziz, the former foreign minister. These former officials will "be treated fairly, transparently and truthfully" under Iraqi laws, Ali al-Dabbagh, a government spokesman said. Aziz's son voiced concerns over how his father would be treated by Iraqi authorities.

Geo strategic front

Iraqi Court Seeks Arrest Of Iranian Exiles

July 11, 2010 An Iraqi court has ordered the arrest of 39 members of the People's Mujahideen Organization of Iran (PMOI), a guerrilla movement opposed to the Iranian government, accusing them of crimes against humanity. Judge Mohammed Abdul-Sahib, a spokesman of the Iraqi High Tribunal, said an arrest warrant has been issued for the 39 members, who are charged with siding with former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in a 1991 uprising. Iraq, along with the United States and Iran, considers the PMOI a terrorist organization. Baghdad last year said it wanted the 3,500 PMOI exiles living in a camp north of Baghdad to leave the country. Iraqi forces took over responsibility for the camp from U.S. troops on January 1, 2009.

Economic front

Iraq allows private entrepreneurs to build power plants

Azzaman, July 17, 2010 Iraq has agreed for private entrepreneurs to have a stake in its state-owned electricity sector, a senior Electricity Ministry official said. The official, Adel Waheed, said the government has authorized the Electricity Ministry to seek private sector's help to build eight new power plants with a capacity of 3200 megawatts.

The designs for the new plants were ready and the ministry was keen to have them built and run by the private sector, Waheed said. Waheed, an adviser to the Electricity Minister Hussein al-Shahristani, said the ministry wanted to see private investors playing a vital role in the power sector. Iraq's national grid is government-owned and it is the first time the state agrees for the private sector to have a stake. It is not clear whether private entrepreneurs will be interested to invest in an ailing sector and amid a lot of uncertainty in a country torn by war and internal strife. But Waheed said private sector's contribution was the only means to close the huge gap between power output and demand in Iraq. He said Iraq needed 5,000 more megawatts of power to balance demand and output. The new plants will be tendered by September and the contractors will be under obligation to have them completed in 24 months, he said.

Kurds and Baghdad in row over oil smuggling

Azzaman, July 14, 2010 Iraqi oil officials and their Kurdish counterparts have exchanged accusations of smuggling large volumes of crude oil and by-products to neighboring Iran. There are two oil ministers in Iraq. Heading the Oil Ministry in Baghdad is Husain al-Shahristani. The semi-independent Kurdish region has its own government with Ashti Horami heading the Ministry of Natural Resources, i.e. oil. There are big differences between the two ministries and governments on how to deal with Iraq's almost sole source of hard cash – oil. The ministry in Baghdad says oil exploring, excavating, refining and exporting activities fall within its jurisdiction. The Kurdish regional government disputes that and has developed several oil fields by signing contracts with foreign firms. Baghdad says the Kurds export the crude they produce in their fields to Iran, the shipments which it sees as illegal. Horami, the Kurdish regional minister in charge of oil, denies the accusation of exporting crude oil, but admits ferrying unspecified quantities of by-products. The Kurdish official charged that the government in Baghdad was involved in the smuggling of up to 100,000 barrels of crude oil a day to Iran from its southern fields in Basra. Accusations that the Kurds are involved in oil smuggling operations first surfaced in the Kurdish region. A senior Kurdish opposition official of the Kurdish Change Party said the ruling Kurdish factions of Massoud Barzani, head of the Kurdish region and Jalal Talabani, the Iraqi president, were involved in the smuggling. The official Azad Jalak said the revenues end up in the coffers of Barzani and Talabani's factions and military wings. Horami, the Kurdish minister, said the money goes to regional government coffers.

Social front

Fire Kills At Least 29 In Northern Iraqi City

Firemen work to extinguish the fire at the Soma Hotel. Health officials say a fire at a hotel in the northern Iraqi city of Sulaimaniya killed 29 people, including foreigners, and injured at least 22. The fire, at the Soma Hotel in the central area of the city, reportedly raged out of control for several hours. A local security official, Qader Hama-Jan, said the fire was "not a terrorist act." He said the likely cause of the fire had been an electrical fault. Authorities said the dead included people from Cambodia, Bangladesh, Canada, Australia, Ecuador, South Africa, Britain, Lebanon, Venezuela, Sri Lanka, and one person who was believed to be a foreigner but did not have identification.

Iraqi Muslim cleric arrested for keeping Saddam's name on mosque

Azzaman, July 13, 2010 A Muslim cleric in charge of the grand mosque in Tikrit has been arrested, Iraqi police said. In a statement to the newspaper, the police said Sheikh Jumaa Duhaimi was seized because he refused to erase the name of Saddam Hussein from the mosque. The grand mosque, in the heart of Tikrit, was built by Saddam as part of a plan to have one grand mosque in each Iraqi city bearing his name. Tikrit, some 181 km north of Baghdad, is Saddam Hussein's birthplace. The former Iraqi leader was executed and buried in the same city. The authorities had renamed the mosque but Duhaimi inscribed Saddam's name on it, saying the holy place should keep its original name. "Duhaimi was arrested and will stand before a judge "for writing 'this is Saddam Mosque' on the wall of the mosque," " the statement said. Members of Duhaimi's family confirmed his arrest but they said they had no idea on his whereabouts. Many in Tikrit and elsewhere yearn for the days of Saddam Hussein who, despite his ruthlessness and reign of terror, is now viewed as 'the lesser of two evils' when compared with the post-U.S. invasion era in Iraq. "Duhaimi refused to change the name of the mosque despite several requests by the authorities. He thought the people of Tikrit needed something to remember Saddam Hussein," one member of his family, refusing to be named, said. Demand for Duhaimi's immediate release is high in the city. The cleric is seen by many as one of the city's most renowned scholars.

Ethnic and sectarian violence hits Iraq's oil-rich Kirkuk

A wave of violence is sweeping Iraq's Kirkuk, targeting Arabs and ethnic Turks in the oil-rich city. Scenes of corpses dumped on the streets and open spaces in residential neighborhoods have returned to the city, prompting Arab and Turkmen leaders to call for the formation of vigilante groups for protection. The violence seems to be organized as its victims are none but Arabs and Turkmen. "We demand the formation of a joint Arab and Turkmen force ... to protect the Arab and Turkmen ethnic groups whose members are continuously the target of abduction, killing and assassination," said Mohammed al-Jibouri, head of the Arab group in the city. Jibouri indirectly blamed the Kurds for the latest upsurge in anti-Arab and anti-Turkmen violence, urging the government to let Arab and Turkmen armed militias serving in provincial cities and villages to enter Kirkuk. "We are aware of who is in charge of the security file" in the city of Kirkuk, said Jibouri in reference to the Kurds. "We cannot trust the security organs (in the city). Terrorism against us continues and there is no one to be held accountable," he said. Jibouri asked the government and the Interior Ministry to launch an independent investigation to bring those behind the violence to account. "Today we plead with the state and the Ministry of Interior to set a neutral commission to investigate the security events," he added. Kurdish militias and their multifarious security organs are practically in control of Kirkuk. There are more than 100 non-official headquarters manned by Kurdish security agents and armed militias belonging to the two major Kurdish political factions of Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, according to Jibouri. Barzani, who is head of the Kurdish regional government, leads the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Talabani, who is the Iraqi president, heads the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Both factions have armed wings with tens of thousands of militias locally known as peshmerga. Jibouri said it was time the government deployed units from the Iraqi Army in the city.

He said as U.S. troops were preparing to leave, the presence of Iraqi armed forces in Kirkuk was essential. The Kurds have blocked attempts by the government to deploy Iraqi troops in the city. "We demand the presence of Iraqi troops in Kirkuk since we have reached this dangerous situation and before the departure of U.S. troops," Jibouri said. "We need to protect our people since there is no let-up in operations of murder and kidnapping and there is no one to blame."

"Our leaders, our sons, our police officers, our civil servants all have become victims as a result of the conditions we are in and there is no one to heed our complaints," he said.

'Syria

Syria Bans Face-Covering Veils in Universities

A Palestinian woman wearing a Niqab and a headband that reads in Arabic "There is no God but God and Mohammed is his Prophet," takes part in a demonstration in Damascus on October 9, 2009. (Credit: Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty Images) Fearing an ever-secular Syria might turn to radical Islam, authorities has quietly banned the niqab, a face-covering veil worn by some Muslim women, in public universities — a move welcomed by most Syrians. The government, which has always kept a tight lid on Islamic movements, has also possibly forced 1,200 women teachers wearing burqa (the head-to-toe Muslim veil) out of their jobs, or reassigned them to government offices where they would not come into contact with students. "Minister of Higher Education Ghyath Barakat has given his directives that women wearing niqab would not be allowed to enter the Syrian universities," one informed source told CBS News. "The Minister has totally rejected this phenomena which contradicts with the academic values and traditional morals and ethics of the Syrian society," the source said, on condition his name would not be used. "We will not leave our daughters a prey for extremist thoughts. The Syrians have always shown through history their awareness, understanding and the ability for confronting those bad habits," the source quoted Barakat, the Syrian Minister, as telling his top assistants. The ban, which was not made public in state-run media, does not affect the hijab, or headscarf, which is favored by the vast majority of veiled Syrian women.

The pan-Arab Ba'ath party, which has ruled Syria since 1963, crushed an extremist movement in the 1980s after it launched a string of deadly attacks across the country.

Only about 20% of Syrian women wore hijab in the 1980s; in the 1960s, the headscarf was even rarer.

Today the percentage of students wearing it is much higher, a phenomenon common in much of the Islamic world.

It is not expected that the orders have a chance of becoming law in Syria, though the country is now experiencing a dramatic religious resurgence, according to many analysts.

A new Islamic revivalism is evident among the hitherto moderates, a change clearly fueled by anger over pictures of the occupation of Iraq and violence in the Palestinian territories, beamed into peoples' homes every day.

Islam is a faith of many faces, from the Wahhabis to the Sufis, from Shiites to Sunnis. There are also secular Muslims, of whom there are many in Syria.

The majority of Syrians, of all different age groups, expressed support for getting niqabs and burqas not only out of schools and universities but out of all public places as well.

"Hijabs and niqabs have been a symbol of oppression and religious extremism over the past hundreds of years. They have been a tool used by fundamentalist men to repress women," said Ahmed, a 32-year-old engineer.

"It's unpleasant when you have to conduct a conversation with a woman [when] you can't see her face. You don't know whether she is smiling or sad, happy or angry . . . It is kind of scary, really," he adds.

When similar bans were introduced in Europe, they were widely criticized in the Middle East as discriminatory against Muslim immigrants. But many women's rights organizations in the region — and in Syria specifically — are staffed by secular activists who also share some of the government's fears of radicalization.

"I would like to thank the government for such a brave action. This ban should be applied in all public places. Sometimes, in certain neighborhoods, I feel as if I am walking in Tora Bora, not Damascus," comments Shadi Karim, a travel agent in his mid-40s.

One passer-by in the fancy Abu Roumaneh street said the burqa to him was like a "walking black ghost," while another simply said it had nothing to do with real Islam.

But Mohammed Saad was among those few who said he was against the government's ban, although he pointed out that his sisters do not wear either hijab or the burqa.

"I come from a secular family where you cannot see hijab in our gatherings but, I think, the ban is wrong as it touches personal freedom and certain way of expression," he said while entering the 5-star Four Seasons Hotel, hand-in-hand with his blond wife.

Lebanon's PM Hariri in Syria, focus on economy

Sun Jul 18, 2010 (Reuters) - Syria and Lebanon signed economic agreements on Sunday, signalling improving ties, but did not resolve a border demarcation issue the Lebanese government views as central to its sovereignty.

The deals, signed by Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri with his counterpart in the Syrian capital, were the first since the 2005 assassination in Beirut of his father Rafik al-Hariri.

The elder Hariri was a member of parliament and a former premier whose killing heralded international pressure that forced Syria to end its 29-year military presence in Lebanon.

"We want the ties between Syria and Lebanon to form a model for an Arab common market," Hariri said at a news conference with Syrian Prime Minister Naji al-Otri.

The agreements included investment protection, pharmaceutical products, shipping, tourism and taxation.

Hariri, who also met President Bashar al-Assad, said a committee set up by the two countries to demarcate the border "has to begin its work and finish it as soon as possible."

Otri said cooperation between Syria and its smaller neighbour had to extend to security. Damascus had hinted it was concerned about infiltration by Islamist militants from Lebanon after a 2008 bombing targeted a security compound in Damascus.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem said border demarcation must not cause what he termed social suffering by Syrian families living on Lebanese land and vice-versa.

"The border demarcation issue is not stuck. The two countries have formed committees and are in agreement," he said.

Syria agreed with Lebanon in 2008 to set the border, two years after a United Nations resolution recommended Syria work on the issue. Damascus has since said its technical teams were busy finishing border demarcation with Jordan and that a small Lebanese region occupied by Israel and bordering Syria complicated any demarcation.

Lebanon and Syria are a product of a deal between France and Britain that established the two countries along ethnic and religious lines in 1920, but the border was not set.

A U.N. investigation into Hariri's killing implicated Lebanese and Syrian security officials. Syria denied any involvement and the younger Hariri has visited Syria several times since he became prime minister last year.

An international tribunal into the killing has yet to indict any suspects. Moualem said if Syrian involvement was proven, the government would try the suspect in Syria for treason.

Trade between Lebanon and Syria fell to \$459 million (300 million pounds) in 2009 from \$495 million the previous year. The volumes comprise a quarter of the trade between Syria and neighbouring Turkey.

Syria, however, is Lebanon's only open land transport route, and Lebanese banks have spearheaded the entry of foreign banks into the Syrian market after the state gave up its monopoly.

Lebanon

Political front

Fatfat from Diman: Nasrallah Should Ask Jumblat About May 5 Intentions

MP Ahmed Fatfat said Saturday that the international tribunal is not aimed at taking revenge from anyone, adding doubting its decisions would create tension and target national unity.

Fatfat made his remark following talks with Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir in Diman.

The Mustaqbal bloc lawmaker said Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's statement that the May 5 decisions were Israeli-made is rejected.

On May 5, 2008, the government decided to remove airport security chief Brig. Gen. Wafiq Shuqeir over his alleged links to Hizbullah and labeled illegal and unconstitutional a private telecommunications network set up by Hizbullah on Lebanese territory. The decision sparked clashes between Hizbullah gunmen and al-Mustaqbal supporters.

"The May 5 decisions were patriotic and if Sayyed Nasrallah wants to know their intentions, then he should ask MP Walid Jumblat because he was behind everything," Fatfat said.

He also slammed Nasrallah for saying Israel had complete control over Lebanon's telecom sector.

"If Nasrallah has any information about an Israeli spy who sought to change telecom (details) and data to impact the international tribunal, then let us hand him over" to the court, Fatfat said.

The MP also rejected Nasrallah's statement that the pending indictment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is an Israeli project.

"If we have any proof, then let us submit it for accountability ... But if we don't have any excuse, then we are shoving the country into strife," Fatfat said.

Aoun Reportedly Advised Nasrallah to Change Rules of the Game Over Tribunal Indictment, Strife, Israel Attack

Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun has reportedly informed Syrian President Bashar Assad and Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah that the international tribunal's pending indictment would be followed by an Israeli attack on Lebanon.

As Safir daily said that Western diplomatic sources have given the information to Aoun, who in his turn, told Assad and Nasrallah that the alleged indictment of "uncontrolled" Hizbullah members would be accompanied by a Lebanese-Lebanese and Lebanese-Palestinian tension.

The FPM leader expressed fears that upon issuance of the indictment, Israel would launch a large-scale war on Lebanon, during which the resistance would be hit by "Israeli fire" from one side and "internal strife fire" on the other.

Aoun also warned that given this situation, some Christian parties would seek to impose a new status quo in their regions while fundamentalist groups in Palestinian camps would act the same way.

As Safir said that the FPM leader asked his allies, particularly Hizbullah, to ready themselves to confront such strife and review the current structure of the national unity cabinet, which according to Aoun would be incapable of facing such threats.

"They want to kill you once more," Aoun reportedly told Nasrallah. "There is still a Lebanese team betting on a new Israeli war, that's why ... I advise you to change the rules of the game."

As Safir said that Nasrallah, in his turn, informed Speaker Nabih Berri and Marada movement leader Suleiman Franjeh about Aoun's scenario.

Jumblat Calls for Executing Israeli Spies: Thank God I Left March 14

One has to acknowledge his mistakes and not hide behind a finger, we were taken by the mottos of freedom and independence while the reality was different. I'm not ashamed to perform self-criticism and some have to understand that, Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblat announced Friday.

In a live interview on Hizbullah's mouthpiece al-Manar television, Jumblat said: "Spying is a dangerous thing and all spies must be executed. Enough with some civil society calls on the need to abolish the death penalty for the sake of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership because the country's security is more important than that partnership."

Answering a question on the division among the Lebanese on the consequences of the July 2006 War, Jumblat noted that Lebanese division regarding wars with Israel is "historical, since in 1982 there had been division and also in 1978." Jumblat thanked God for leaving the March 14 camp, calling on his one-time allies to benefit from Hizbullah's resistance against Israel – "from those who volunteer to defend Lebanon for nothing in return."

"Some still long for the neutrality theory and they adopt the theory that says that the Resistance's arms give Israel an alibi," Jumblat added.

"I took part in the lunch at the U.S. Embassy with (former U.S. Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice (in 2006), and I believe that was a shameful scene: Lebanon was being destroyed and we were waiting for the U.S. envoy."

Jumblat noted that the decision to wage an all-out aggression against Lebanon in 2006 "was not taken only by Israel, because Israel can't do anything without the permission of the U.S."

"The Americans were trying to employ some Lebanese for the sake of their plan to push Lebanon away from its natural environment, and maybe the 2006 aggression had aimed at making Lebanon abandon the Taef Accord, but that aim failed."

Asked whether he sees a war looming on the horizon, Jumblat said: "I don't believe there would be a war in the near future because the U.S. administration has the midterm elections soon, and if (U.S. President Barack) Obama was defeated, hawks would rise to power. The timing of war is related to Iraq and Afghanistan."

Jumblat revealed that "Mount Lebanon will become a strategic depth for the Resistance in any new war, as all areas must be."

"I tell some hesitators that Israel has not and will not be merciful on anyone in its war." On the other hand, Jumblat said that some of UNIFIL's behaviors and photographing of some places, "and maybe provocations and maneuvers without coordinating with the army, led to the reaction of the southerners."

"Lebanese theoreticians are the ones who want to change (UNIFIL's) rules of engagement and I don't believe that the West wants to reach the foolishness of changing the rules of engagement because they would be subjecting themselves and Lebanon to dangers."

As to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and the possible repercussions of its indictment on Lebanon, Jumblat said: "When (Israeli Army Chief of Staff Gabi) Ashkenazi said that September would be unstable due to the indictment of the STL, I remembered the Der Spiegel remarks, and we must foil any Israeli infiltration of the Lebanese interior."

Zahra: Governmental Change Not Possible, We are Ready to Discuss What May Fulfill Palestinian Refugee Needs

MP Antoine Zahra stated Friday that the Lebanese Forces is ready to discuss all that may fulfill the Palestinian refugee needs, adding that there are no disagreements between the LF and the Phalange Party over this matter.

He also refuted claims of that there are documents of a Lebanese-Palestinian agreement to naturalize the refugees, stressing that the Lebanese stand is adamant in rejecting naturalization.

The MP also praised all who helped uncover Lebanese spies working for Israel in the telecommunications sector, saying that the government and parliament's hard work has led to these achievements.

The current political situation does not allow for governmental changes despite the political disputes, Zahra noted.

Jumblat: Let Us Set Political Disputes Aside and Focus on Development

Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblat hoped that political disputes in Lebanon could be put aside in favor of focusing on development.

He said during a meeting with the heads of municipalities in the Iqlim al-Kharroub region: "The municipality heads were elected in a consensual and competitive atmosphere, but we should now focus on development."

He also stressed the importance of the 2010 state budget being approved in order to speed up services in the country.

Jumblatt, Aoun seek common ground on key issues

Wednesday, July 14, 2010: Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt met with Free Patriotic Movement leader MP Michel Aoun during a dinner hosted by Change and Reform MP Naji Gharios on Monday, the state-run National News Agency (NNA) reported on Tuesday. Gharios told the Central News Agency on Tuesday that Aoun discussed all the issues currently debated on the Lebanese political scene "from all perspectives." "Discussions were comfortable and away from tensions," he added. The MP said the two politicians were trying to find a common understanding on problematic issues. Gharios said Jumblatt and Aoun went over the political situation in the country on "a regular basis either through direct phone calls or through mediators." – The Daily Star

Geo strategic front

France Defends Controversial Security Pact with Lebanon

France on Thursday defended a controversial security accord with Lebanon as Hizbullah demanded a clear definition of the word "terrorism" in the text.

"This is a classic agreement like those France's interior minister has already signed with our foreign partners," said foreign ministry spokesman Bernard Valero.

"The text includes technical terms, for example, for the fight against organized crime as well as cooperation in ... homeland security, crisis management ... and decentralized administration," Valero said in a statement distributed by the French embassy.

The pact stipulates the two countries should "boost cooperation" in fighting terrorism, money laundering and drugs.

Valero's statement made no mention of the word "terrorism."

Lebanon and France signed the agreement in Paris on January 21. The accord must be ratified by Lebanese parliament and the French senate to take effect.

Hizbullah has demanded "a text that either clearly defines 'terrorism' as per Lebanese and Arab laws or the omission of the clause that deals with counter-terrorism entirely," Hizbullah MP Hasan Fadlallah told Agence France Presse.

"France's definition of terrorism includes Palestinian resistance movements, and that clashes with Lebanese law, which is in line with the Arab League's definition," he added.

"Without resolving this matter, the accord will not be passed in parliament."

The 22-member Arab League does not regard "armed struggle against foreign occupation," such as the Palestinian Hamas or Lebanese Hizbullah, as terrorist movements.(AFP)

U.S. Study: Growing Concern of Renewed Israel-Hizbullah War

There is growing concern of renewed war between Israel and Hizbullah due to an Israeli strike to degrade the Shiite group's military capabilities and alleged rearmament, a U.S. study has said.

"An Israel-Hizbullah conflict could also be precipitated by Hizbullah attacking Israel, either for internal political reasons or at the behest of Iran," said a Contingency Planning Memorandum by Daniel C. Kurtzer at the Center for Preventive Action.

The center is part of the Council on Foreign Relations.

"The more likely unfolding of an Israeli-Hizbullah war would hold almost no positive consequences for the United States," the author of the 8-page report said.

Kurtzer made several recommendations for the U.S. to make efforts to avert a third Lebanon war. They include taking measures to reassure Israel, deter Hizbullah, and pressure Syria from providing Hizbullah access to destabilizing weapons.

Concurrently, the U.S. should heighten its preparedness to respond quickly in the event of war between Israel and Hizbullah including, potentially, a wider diplomatic initiative for regional peace, the author said.

Report: Paris Expects More Southern Skirmishes Not Welcomed by Syria

Paris expects more skirmishes between residents of the south and U.N. peacekeepers despite a Security Council statement to allow the forces to move freely, an informed security source told pan-Arab daily al-Hayat.

"Tension in the south would increase because all factors are there: They are the international tribunal, continued smuggling of arms to Hizbullah and deteriorating Lebanese political life," the source said in remarks published Friday.

Last week, a statement by council members "strongly deplored the recent incidents involving UNIFIL peacekeepers which took place in southern Lebanon on June 29, July 3 and July 4."

The Security Council members said they "call on all parties to ensure that the freedom of movement of UNIFIL remains respected in conformity with its mandate and its rules of engagement."

"The members of the Security Council also call on all parties to abide scrupulously by their obligation to respect the safety of UNIFIL and other United Nations personnel," the statement added.

France believes that Syria's alleged arming of Hizbullah does not contradict with the presence of international forces in southern Lebanon although the weapons of the Shiite

group are inexistent in the area south of the Litani river where UNIFIL is deployed, the source said.

He ruled out that Damascus was at ease to the skirmishes in the south and said Syria does not favor the anti-France campaign there because it sees UNIFIL as beneficial in case of a new Israeli attack on Lebanon

British Government Reviewing Relations with Hizbullah

British Minister of State for the Middle East Alistair Burt warned that "bad things may happen" if the Middle East peace process did not move forward.

In remarks published Friday by pan-Arab Asharq al-Awsat newspaper, Burt said the new British government was reviewing its relationship with Hizbullah "but it is being careful with its moves."

"There is a sense of anxiety and frustration among people in the region, and pessimism that if things did not move forward or improve, it will get worse," Burt argued.

"This summer is going to be a difficult one," he warned.

"This is a strong feeling in Syria and in Lebanon, and I think that our responsibility is to do everything we can to try to take steps to dispel this feeling," Burt added.

Turning to Syria, he said Damascus "surely is playing a much more positive role in Iraq. It is truly involved in the political process to help form a new government there."

"But, of course, we remain very much concerned about Hizbullah. We are concerned about reports on weapons stockpiles."

Checchia: Italy Committed to Peace in Lebanon Through UNIFIL

Italian Ambassador Gabriel Checchia stressed Friday his country's continued commitment and support for peace in Lebanon and the region.

Following talks with Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir in Diman, Checchia said that such commitment comes through Italy's "political contacts" and participation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon.

The ambassador said Christians play a very important role in Lebanon.

Fatfat: Agreement with France Cannot be Modified

MP Ahmed Fatfat said Friday that a security agreement between Lebanon and France cannot be modified.

He told the Voice of Lebanon radio station, however, that there is an exit to the controversial issue.

"There is a way out of the standoff over the France-Lebanon security deal if they (Opposition) want to be positive," Fatfat said.

"The only way out is to emphasize that Lebanon has its own interpretation," Fatfat argued.

He said that the accord points to the legal interpretations based on Lebanese laws and regulations.

Paris Urges Lebanese Parliament to be Responsible

France has called on the Lebanese parliament to be responsible and urged all parties to distinguish between the controversial security agreement and the French contingent in the south.

"There is no link between the security agreement and the French contingent working as part of UNIFIL which is an international force similar to the Spanish or Italian forces," French Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bernard Valero said Friday.

Valero did not comment on the dispute between Lebanese MPs over the adoption of the security agreement. March 14 lawmakers and pro-Hizbullah and Amal MPs have been bickering over the definition of terrorism in the agreement which needs parliamentary approval.

The agreement was signed between the Lebanese and French interior ministers on January 21.

The spokesman said, however, that the "Lebanese side should take responsibility" and parliament would either approve the agreement or reject it.

Asharq al-Awsat newspaper said Saturday that Paris believes the agreement is similar to deals it has signed with other countries. It is amazed by the uproar over the issue in Lebanon, the daily added.

Pan-Arab program teaches community spirit

Mount Lebanon: "All the Arab countries are now in a similar level of civil society development and they are all pretty near the beginning," said Issa Nesheiwat, volunteer coordinator with Madarasati, a Jordanian civil society initiative operating under the patronage of Queen Rania.

"This culture [of volunteering] is not in our values," said Nesheiwat. "High levels of poverty have traditionally taught us to look after ourselves first, but now we have started thinking in a different way and are slowly realizing – 'if I can do this with my neighbor, we may be able to do it better together and to benefit the whole community.'"

Nesheiwat is one of the 34 volunteers from nine different Arab countries who have arrived in Lebanon this week to participate in Learning to Care, an intensive week-long course on how to encourage volunteerism and how to implement youth training projects.

The groups, made up of teams of four, comprised mainly of NGO workers and Education Ministry representatives who were selected for their philanthropic work in Saudi Arabia,

Kuwait, Yemen, Mauritania, Jordan, Syria, Tunisia and Lebanon, where they have worked on projects, such as educating underprivileged children.

They have been brought together to share their experiences, and learn about various challenges facing fellow Arab volunteers, but, crucially, they will also be the first group of volunteers to benefit from the full training program adapted from “Learning to Care” a book by Patricia Nabti, director of Lebanese NGO, Association of Volunteer Services (AVS).

The book is a carefully compiled manual which talks through every step of volunteering, describing in practical detail how to recruit volunteers, identify projects and how to carry them out in a sustainable fashion.

“You can’t just wake up one day and decide that you are going to volunteer,” said Safaa el-Makkaoui, a trainer associated with AVS who is helping conduct this week’s course. “You need to start from the ground up – and talk about issues such as what kindness is and what different roles people can and should play.

“You also have to know what kind of volunteer project to choose from and there are many different types; from pure volunteering to incentive-based to mandatory, and for a project to succeed it is key to know what will work for your circumstances,” she added.

By bringing together people from different countries – who have experience in different fields but share a similar culture – it is hoped that course participants will build upon on existing knowledge and incorporate new ideas, which will not only help to bolster their ongoing domestic work, but will provide the Learning to Care teaching method with fresh practical suggestions.

The initiative is at heart a pan-Arab program and AVS, with its strategic partners the Arab Thought Foundation and Association for Volunteering Efforts, hope eventually to reach out to, and recruit from, all 22 Arab countries.

“The program doesn’t end here,” said Makkaoui. “We are expecting that all the participants will go back to their home countries and they will implement what they have learnt and help to recruit more people, implement the projects we have worked on and spread the word.”

Arab League chief voices doubts over peace process

BEIRUT: Arab League chief Amr Moussa voiced doubts Thursday over the progress of indirect negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and talked down the possibility of direct talks between the two sides.

On an official visit to Damascus to meet with Syrian President Bashar Assad and other top level officials, Moussa said: “I am very pessimistic over the future of this process.”

After meeting with Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, Moussa stated that indirect talks so far “did not achieve anything,” and that for this reason direct negotiations between the two are not a real possibility.

Moussa’s visit to Damascus focused on a host of issues related to the region including the peace process, the extraordinary Arab summit, Palestinian reconciliation and overhauling the Arab League.

According to state news outlet the Syrian Arab News Agency, Assad and Moussa stressed the importance of producing a draft Arab resolution on Israel’s nuclear capabilities to be put forth at the 54th Session of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna on September 20.

“In the light of the international meeting regarding reviewing the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), there are decisions on the importance of Israel’s joining the treaty for the Middle East to be a nuclear-free zone,” Moussa said.

SANA reported that both Assad and Moussa stressed support for Turkey in the face of what they deemed as increased pressure after speaking out over Israel’s attack on a flotilla of aid heading to Gaza, which killed 9 Turks and one American of Turkish descent.

Moussa also met with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and called on Palestinians to immediately end their internal divisions. – With Reuters

UK envoy regrets offense caused by Fadlallah praise

BEIRUT: Britain’s ambassador to Lebanon has said she regretted “any offense” caused by a blog post in which she praised late Shiite cleric Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah.

“I am sorry that an attempt to acknowledge the spiritual significance ... and the views that he held in the latter part of his life has served only to further entrench divisions in this complex part of the world,” Frances Guy wrote on her official Foreign Office blog.

“I regret any offense caused,” Guy said in the entry, dated July 9 and entitled “The Problem with Diplomatic Blogging.”

London said Friday it had taken down Guy’s original blog posting in which she hailed Fadlallah as “a true man of religion,” saying her views clashed with official policy.

“When you visited him you could be sure of a real debate, a respectful argument and you knew you would leave his presence feeling a better person,” Guy wrote after Fadlallah’s death last Sunday.

A Foreign Office spokesman said that the ambassador had expressed a personal view that did not fully reflect government policy.

While we welcomed his progressive views on women's rights and interfaith dialogue, we also had profound disagreements – especially over his statements advocating attacks on Israel,” the Foreign Office spokesman said.

Fadlallah, blacklisted by the US as a terrorist, was a top authority in Shiite Islam and many followers revered him for his moderate social views, openness and pragmatism.

But he was also a fiery critic of the United States and Israel and was an advocate of suicide attacks as a means of fighting the Israel's illegal occupation of Arab land.

Fadlallah's death has also spelled trouble for a senior editor with American television giant CNN.

Lebanese-born Octavia Nasr left her job last week after sending out a tweet praising him as “one of Hizbullah's giants I respect a lot.” –**AFP**

Syrian opposition activist says Lebanese authorities ordered him to leave

A Syrian opposition activist granted refugee status by the United Nations said Tuesday that Lebanese authorities had ordered him to leave.

“I went to the General Security bureau today to reclaim my passport, only to find that the words ‘to travel by July 20, 2010’ were stamped on it,” former Syrian MP Maamun Homsy told AFP on Tuesday.

Homsy, 55, was arrested in Syria in 2001 and jailed for five years after a short-lived “Damascus spring” of liberalization when President Bashar Assad ascended to power 10 years ago.

Homsy was convicted for working “to change the Constitution through illegal means.”

He was released in January 2006 and has since lived in Lebanon with his wife and two youngest sons.

On May 26, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) granted him refugee status.

But today, he says, he has no choice but to return to Syria where he “will certainly be jailed” for his political beliefs.

UNHCR deputy representative to Lebanon Jean Paul Cavalieri confirmed to AFP that Homsy was accorded refugee status but said he “could not comment to third parties about individual cases.”

“Our job is to protect refugees in Lebanon and find durable solutions for them outside of Lebanon in cooperation with Lebanese authorities,” Cavalieri said.

Lebanese General Security officials were not immediately available for comment.

While Homsy said the UNHCR offered him the chance to move to Sweden, he could not find it in him to “uproot my children to a town more than 700 kilometers from the capital of a country they do not know and the language of which they do not speak.”

When asked why Lebanon would not renew his residency, Homsy said: “I see no reason other than Lebanon’s newfound openness to Syria.”

Syrian troops entered Lebanon during the 1975-90 Lebanese Civil War and Damascus exercised political and military control over its smaller neighbor for 29 years.

But the 2005 assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, widely blamed on Syria, sparked a wave of mass protests and Syria subsequently withdrew its troops under international pressure.

Syria has consistently denied any involvement in the murder and in a string of subsequent assassinations targeting anti-Syrian journalists and politicians.

Relations between the two neighboring countries have warmed in recent years, and Syria and Lebanon decided to establish formal diplomatic relations in October 2008.

But Homsy, for his part, says he and others like him may well end up paying the price.

“If Lebanon decides to shift to a new political stance, perhaps it would be wise to amend its Constitution and laws which today make it the only oasis of freedom and democracy in the Arab world,” Homsy said.

“I have principles and if I go back to Syria there is a price to pay for the principles I hold.”

Economic front

Ex-Swiss envoy praises Lebanese 'resilience'

BEIRUT: Driven by his diplomatic experience as the Swiss Ambassador to Lebanon, Dr. Francois Barras profiled the different dimensions of ambassadorship at a panel entitled: “To Be an Ambassador to Lebanon: Challenges and Opportunities,” organized by the Issam Fares Center for Lebanon last week.

On the Lebanese character, the veteran diplomat praised the “resilience of the Lebanese people,” their “quick-mindedness,” their “spontaneity” and “flexibility.” However, Barras criticized the weakness of state institutions and the lack of a clear and well-defined relation between the citizen and state.

Barras advised the Lebanese state to proceed with prudence in international ties and with determination in protecting its interests. His mission in Lebanon contributed to his learning about “crisis management,” especially during the 2006 summer war with Israel, and deepened his belief in the value of the “human dimension” of diplomacy. Such lessons were learnt as the country was facing difficulties such as instability, paralysis, and insecurity, according to Barras.

Barras outlined commonalities between Lebanon and Switzerland, and considered the sharing of experiences between the two an asset. Barras enhanced the importance of identifying available resources in Lebanon to proceed with a diplomatic mission.

He mentioned key points which enabled him to initiate many programs as part of a bilateral public diplomacy. He told the audience that Switzerland does not have a political agenda for Lebanon. Rather its focus was on cultural, social, and economic objectives. His talk was followed by an intervention from former US Ambassador to Lebanon Vincent Battle, who was among the audience, who considered a lack of a political agenda amounted to a “luxury.”

Meanwhile, audience members enquired about his perception of other embassies’ intervention in Lebanese politics, particularly by the US. He said Lebanon was highly praised and recognized for its hospitality, but that Lebanese are at times too hospitable. – The Daily Star

World Bank: Red tape still hurts businesses in Lebanon

Monday, July 12, 2010

The World Bank said Lebanon is still plagued with red tape and long bureaucratic procedures in government circles that negatively affect the business climate in the country.

The World Bank made these remarks a report on the of indicators for 140 economies that track all procedures, the time, and the cost required for a business to obtain an electricity connection for a newly constructed building, including an extension or expansion of the existing infrastructure. The report was carried by Byblos Bank Lebanon This Week publication.

It said the Getting Electricity Indicators reflect the efficiency and cost of the services provided to commercial customers by distribution utilities, the complexity of procedures, and the resources expended by businesses to obtain a connection. It added that the new indicators provide insights into the regulatory aspects surrounding electricity connections and might serve as a proxy for some aspects of the quality of the electricity system.

The indicators show that a company in Lebanon requires five procedures to be connected to electricity, higher than the MENA region’s average of 4.8 procedures and the Arab average of 4.6 procedures, but lower than the upper middle income countries (UMICs) average of 5.6 procedures. Lebanon ranked in 49th place globally and in 7th place among 14 countries in the Arab world on the number of procedures required to provide an electricity connection to a company.

It also ranked in 6th place among 28 UMICs included in the survey. On a global basis, Lebanon tied with 47 other states, ranked ahead of 44 economies and came behind 48 countries. It also tied with 10 UMICs, ranked ahead of 12 economies and behind 5 nations.

Regionally, Lebanon tied with Oman, Morocco, Jordan, Bahrain and Syria, came ahead of Palestine and Egypt, and ranked behind Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, UAE, Yemen and Djibouti in this category.

Further, the World Bank figures show that it takes 75 days for a company in Lebanon to obtain a new electricity connection, higher than the Arab average of 71.9 days, but lower than the MENA region's average of 78.9 days and the UMICs average of 110.7 days.

Lebanon ranked in 63rd place worldwide on the average time to obtain an electricity connection, while it came in 12th place in the Arab world and 11th among UMICs. Globally, Lebanon tied with Ethiopia, ranked ahead of Singapore and behind Argentina and El Salvador. It also came ahead of Serbia and behind Argentina among UMICs, and ranked ahead of Qatar and behind Bahrain in the Arab world.

Further, the World Bank indicators show that the cost required for a business to obtain an electricity connection in Lebanon is equivalent to 29.9 percent of income per capita in the country, lower than the MENA average of 1,355 percent of income per capita, as well as the UMICs average of 534.3 percent of income per capita and the Arab average of 1,473 percent of income per capita. Lebanon ranked in 17th place globally on the cost of obtaining an electricity connection, while it came in third place in the Arab world and in third place among UMICs.

On a global basis, Lebanon ranked ahead of Singapore and behind France. It also came ahead of Malaysia and behind Argentina among UMICs, and ranked ahead of Bahrain and behind the UAE in the Arab world. The World Bank noted that the cost of both the electricity connection and the electricity supply is very important for businesses because electricity-related expenditures absorb a significant share of their revenues. It estimated that companies spend on average the equivalent of 4 percent of their annual sales on electricity alone, compared to 6.4 percent of their yearly sales on all other infrastructure services such as fuel, telecommunications services and water. – The Daily Star

IMF urges regulatory overhaul, better banking supervision in Middle East

Senior International Monetary Fund (IMF) officials recommended Monday urgent regulatory reforms and better banking supervision in the Middle East countries to weather any future global financial crisis.

José Viñals, financial counselor and director at the IMF, in particular gave his recommendation for an agenda of reform while speaking at a news conference held at the Le Royal Hotel.

“The purpose of reform is in preventing crisis,” said Viñals, “It has been three years since the start of the global financial crisis and we are now in a debate as to how and why it came about.”

“Tremendous work has been completed [as a result] of this crisis,” he said, “To design an ambitious agenda of reform [that aims] to prevent future crisis.”

“It is especially important for emerging markets to ensure the reform strikes the right balance between safety and efficiency,” he said. “So as to avoid stifling financial market development.”

In particular, Viñals highlighted six items that he felt should figure in a functioning framework for regulatory reform.

“[Firstly] we need a review of pro-cyclicality,” he said in reference to the financial trend of a boom and bust cycle. “We need regulations that would cause financial institutions to introduce financial buffers in the good times.”

“At the moment there is too big a boom when economies do well and too big a bust when they fail,” said Viñals. “Financial institutions should also strengthen their capital so that they are able to withstand severe shocks without requiring financial bail-outs from the government or the taxpayer.”

“We should strengthen supervisor [capabilities] ... and crisis resolution frameworks ... which should be based around on-the-ground supervision,” he added. “You have to have enforceable rules that can be implemented as well.”

“We [also] recommend that sources of funding should [remain] stable and that steps should be taken to reduce risks of damaging institutions that are ‘Too important to fail,’” he said. “[That is to say] that funding for banks should be safe but resilient and risks are not made that will lead to economic damage in important institution.”

Also speaking at the conference was Adnan Mazerei who spoke on new revelations experienced by international financial systems in the face of the recent crisis and the subsequent requirements that have emerged for a regulatory framework.

“The recent crisis has brought to light some old shortcomings in the region’s financial sectors and [regulators],” said Mazerei, “[such as] excessive dependence by banks on name lending and inadequate supervisory powers to take remedial action.”

Lebanon’s banking system has been focused on more traditional banking,” he said, “but it now needs hard-nosed regulation and resolution mechanisms to provide a sound first line of defense.”

When asked about the issue of supervision in Lebanon, Mazerei refused to name banks that he felt specifically required watching however he did emphasize the requirement for a “cross-border ... supervisory system,” adding that measures were being taken to see that “this process is occurring.”

When asked by The Daily Star whether the IMF was in fact telling banks how to run their own institutions in line with ideas lauded upon by the Obama administration – such as the pre-supposed requisite that regulation was essential, Maerei replied: “Lebanon has a history of banking and they know their business,” he said, “But the world has changed and the banks in this region need to change with them.”

“[I think] that we need to be more vigilant and knowledgeable,” he added. “We have a lack of good supervision [in the region] and we need more [regulatory] supervision ... especially in other countries, not specifically just in Lebanon.”

For his part, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh said “neither the IMF nor we have the intention to revise our banking supervision system, adding that the Central Bank will continue its prudent and conservative policies which avoided Lebanon the financial crisis.

Property sales up 105 percent in first five months of 2010

Sales of properties in Lebanon over the first five months of 2010 rose by 105.4 percent to LL5.785 trillion (\$3.8 billion) compared to the same period of 2009, according to data which was released by the Directorate of Real Estate, in a report published by Bank Audi’s Weekly Monitor on Monday.

Audi said that real estate sales in early 2010 had benefitted from increased remittances from Lebanese non-residents, population growth, and vigorous tourism.

According to data the first five months of 2010 saw continued growth in the number of property sales transactions, along with an increase in the value of such transactions.

The number of property sales transactions were at a record high for recent years, increasing 39.5 percent in the first five months of 2010 to reach 37,663 transactions.

In addition, there was a 10.7 percent increase in the number of sales transactions to foreigners, which is lower than the 16.8 percent surge witnessed in the same period of last year, but proof of a continued interest from foreigners in buying Lebanese property.

As to the value of the property sales, it reached a record high of LL5.758.6 trillion in the first five months of 2010, up by 105.4 percent compared to the same period of last year, indicating a significant upsurge in property prices in Lebanon, within the context of rising demand for realty.

The significant increase in the value of property sales transactions, relative to a lower rise in the number of such transactions has resulted in a rise of 47.2 percent in the average value per property sale, which reached LL152.9 million in the first five months of this year.

Real estate is still the primary target for investors and average Lebanese citizen alike as experts assure that the prices of properties will surely not fall any time soon, despite the global recession.

Experts stress that the demand for small and medium size apartments in Beirut and other regions is still picking up, noting that Lebanese banks, with the blessing of the Central Bank, are offering low interest rate housing loans over a period of 20 to 30 years.

There is also consensus that Lebanon will not witness a real estate bubble, as has occurred in Dubai, because the price of property remains lower than many of the other countries in the region. – The Daily Star

Nahhas: Telecommunications Sector in Intensive Care Over Spies Case

Telecommunications Minister Charbel Nahhas said the telecom sector was now "in the intensive care" unit, adding that investigation into the spy case was underway on two tracks.

Nahhas told UAE's al-Bayan daily in remarks published Saturday that the first part of the probe was focusing on the possibility that spies have sent information to Israel while the second track included possible infiltration of Alfa mobile network's computer system. Lebanon has arrested three suspects over the past month in an expanding probe into the alleged network of Israeli spies employed in the country's telecom sector.

Two of them, technician Charbel Qazzi and Tareq al-Rabaa, were likely accomplices at the company Alfa, one of Lebanon's two mobile service providers.

Ad-Diyar daily on Saturday said security forces are investigating about the possible involvement of two other suspects from the same firm in the spy ring. One of them is from the Khreish family and hails from the southern village of Ain Ibl, the newspaper reported.

Social front

Palestinian refugees issue

Lebanese closer to consensus on Palestinian refugees' rights

Lebanese domestic debate over the extent of rights to be granted to Palestinian refugees seems to have settled on a basket of social and work rights that exclude property ownership, as Christian parties reached a compromise over the issue with the country's major political groups.

Based on the proposal pitched by the March 14 alliance, the Lebanese state is to provide refugees with a work and residency permit exempted from fees allowing refugees the right to employment as well as the right to a passport in line with Lebanese laws.

However, the Palestinian refugees' right to free professions still remains governed by the separate legislations of various syndicates.

On the social security front, the proposal would mean the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) would continue to provide Palestinian refugees with medical

and maternity care while the National Social Security Fund would cover the end of service indemnity and also family compensation.

The draft law, based on the March 14 proposal, is expected to be submitted Tuesday to Parliament's office for discussion by the Justice and Administration parliamentary committee prior to the general assembly meeting on Thursday.

Meanwhile, discussions by Future Movement bloc leader, former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora with Phalange Party leader Amin Gemayel and Speaker Nabih Berri to reach a final understanding on the details of the proposal were still ongoing on Monday.

After talks with Gemayel at the Phalange Party's headquarters Siniora said "Gemayel expressed a big readiness to cooperate and thus we discussed the best way to do it."

Siniora added that Thursday's session would be followed by other sessions to address concerns of all political parties.

Gemayel expressed fear of international pressure to resolve the issue in Lebanon in order to pave the way for peace in the region, a reference to Israeli rejection of granting the refugees the right of return as part of any Mideast peace resolution.

"There is pressing need to meet the humanitarian needs of Palestinians but the Phalange Party demands that all necessary steps to prevent the naturalization of refugees be taken which requires a Lebanese-international dialogue to guarantee that a resolution to the Palestinian cause does not come at Lebanon's expense," Gemayel said.

Christian parties including the LF, the Free Patriotic Movement and the Phalange Party have rejected an emergency draft law by MP Walid Jumblatt's Democratic Gathering bloc to grant Palestinian refugees civil rights equally to the Lebanese.

On Wednesday, Jumblatt said he would withdraw his bloc's draft law if the one to be submitted by March 14 parties approves the Palestinian refugees' right to property ownership.

Jumblatt also refused to link Palestinian refugees' civil rights and the disarmament of Palestinian groups.

Lebanese rival leaders agreed during talks by the national dialogue committee in 2006 to disarm Palestinian factions outside refugee camps and organize weapons possessions inside them.

The Maronite Church, which voiced support to improve the Palestinian living conditions, said the Palestinians should assume their responsibilities toward the Lebanese state in

return for rights, a reference to the state's right to spread its authority over all territories including camps.

Around 50,000 Palestinian refugees are registered in the Interior Ministry's records and are allotted an annual budget of \$70 million by UNRWA, head of the Justice and Administration parliamentary committee, Robert Ghanem, said Monday.

Ghanem made his statements following a meeting of the committee's members along with director of UNRWA in Lebanon, Salvatore Lambardo. The meeting was attended by Labor Minister Butros Harb and Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar.

"There was a match between the numbers and statistics by the Lebanese refugees' directorate, the General Security and UNRWA," Ghanem said. – With AFP

Parliament postpones voting on Palestinian rights issue

The Parliament postponed voting on a draft law to improve the civil rights of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon until August 17.

The issue was discussed between MPs from different parliamentary blocs during a session that was held on Thursday, before Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri postponed the voting until next month to help in securing a broad consensus over the issue.

The debate started in June when head of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) MP Walid Jumblatt proposed a law granting Palestinian refugees the right to property ownership, social-security benefits and employment in various professions.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are now barred from all but menial jobs.

Parliamentary blocs failed to reach a deal over the proposal, with the majority of Christian MPs opposing the amendment for fear it would constitute a prelude to naturalizing Palestinians in Lebanon, a step that would upset Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance.

On the other hand, the bulk of Muslim MPs endorsed passing the draft law.

Speaker Nabih Berri ended the debate of June's parliamentary session by referring the proposal to the Administration and Justice parliamentary committee for examination.

On Wednesday, the committee gave its final say, with its head West Bekaa MP Robert Ghanem urging the Parliament's General Assembly to grant his committee two more months for additional examination of the proposal.

Speaking to reporters following a meeting for the committee in the Parliament, Ghanem said the additional period was necessary for a comprehensive study of the Palestinian issue.

Ghanem said his committee had sent a letter to the UN urging it to cover UNRWA's budget deficit, along with a request that the budget be increased to prevent a deficit of this kind causing troubles in Lebanon.

During Thursday's session, Ghanem reiterated his request to Berri and Parliament for a two-month period.

He said that the matter should be dealt with comprehensively while raising concerns over UNRWA's deficit.

According to Ghanem, the budget of UNRWA in Lebanon was only \$70 million.

MP Akram Shehayeb, a PSP official, called for setting up a final date for voting on the issue.

Meanwhile, Sidon MP Bahia Hariri underlined the "inhumane conditions" under which Palestinians in Lebanon were living, stressing that "decent living is important and red lines should not be crossed regarding this matter."

She criticized political bickering over the Palestinian issue, warning that the current situation in the Palestinian camps constituted the suitable circumstances for extremism to thrive.

Premier Saad Hariri called for postponing the voting on the matter for "two months or two months and a half," hoping that approving such a draft law would not constitute "a political gain for one party, it is a gain for all Lebanese and Palestinians."

Hariri urged for a calm discussion on what he called a sensitive matter.

Change and Reform parliamentary bloc MPs Ghassan Mkheiber and Ibrahim Kanaan called for urging the United Nations to assume its responsibilities regarding Palestinian refugees and work on covering UNRWA's budget deficit.

The discussion was ended when Parliament speaker Berri postponed voting on the matter till a parliamentary session that will be held on August 17.

"We will continue to follow up on the issue, and the law will not pass unless if it enjoys consensus among Lebanese parties," said Berri.

Apart from the Palestinian matter, the Parliament approved a law allowing the promotion of officers in the Customs Department.

Just near the Parliament that was witnessing hot debates over the Palestinian issue, a sit-in was held near the UN headquarters in Downtown Beirut to press for passing the proposed draft laws.

Envoys from several Lebanese parties and Palestinian factions, along with Lebanese and Palestinian civil society activists took part in the protest.

Hasbaya MP Qassem Hashem, also a Baath Party official, said the time had come for improving humanitarian rights of Palestinians in Lebanon.

“There is a need for distinguishing between the importance of passing a draft law to improve rights of Palestinians and between rejecting the naturalization [of Palestinians] which Palestinians and Lebanese reject unanimously,” said Hashem.

Later on, the protestors headed to the Parliament where they handed out a letter to Berri in which they called for focusing on the humanitarian aspect of Palestinian rights away from sectarian and political polarization.

Tourism police to get extra resources to cope with high season

Thursday, July 15, 2010

BEIRUT: Head of Internal Security Forces (ISF) Major General Ashraf Rifi gave orders to provide tourism police with extra vehicles and personnel to cope with the country’s promising tourism season, on Wednesday.

In his order, Rifi said the move also came in line with decisions made by the Internal Security Central Council, chaired by Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud, on Tuesday.

Lebanon will play host to more than two million tourists and visitors this summer, generating more than \$8 billion in revenues for the country, according to Tourism Minister Fadi Abboud.

However, concerns have been raised over the small number of tourism police ready to help visitors and ensure that they are not taken advantage of during their stay.

“In principle, there should be 300 tourist police, but at this moment in time we have 23,” Abboud said.

Several months ago, government officials devoted a Cabinet session to upgrading tourism policies to prepare for the summer season, and Abboud’s ministry is now seeking to increase the tourist police to a total of 300 personnel, although no progress appears to have been made on this front, and no training of current or future personnel is taking place. – The Daily Star

Palestine

Security front

U.S. military support for Israel, worth 3.2 billion dollars in 2011

Tel Aviv - Despite the economic crisis faced by the United States and the shortage in its budget, it does not affect U.S. military support continuing to Israel and to maintain its

technological supremacy in the Middle East, where you will receive Israel Gifts military and security during 2011, worth 3.2 billion dollars.

According to the published site daily "Ha'aretz" speaking in Hebrew, the Deputy Secretary of State Andrew Shapiro, the end of last week, the intention of the U.S. administration to provide the Israel of the military and security aid, after the administration's request of Alkonkgrs U.S. approval of this amount, and it was Shapiro speaking at the Saban Center the Brookings Institution in Washington.

He said the site, said Israel had received from the American administration this year, 3,775 billion dollars, while total aid-military U.S. last year's 2.775 billion dollars, so that was not affected by this aid the economic crisis faced by the United States and has maintained the agreement between Israel and the U.S. administration in 2005 Judge Itzid Israel military assistance of up to 30 billion dollars over ten years.

The website also said the military aid for next year include 200 million dollars to develop the missile system "Iron Dome" that Israel will publish them on the southern border to face the risk of short-range missiles that are launched from Gaza toward Israel, while the administration will turn the U.S. military support to Israel 3 billion worth of dollars.

He was Deputy Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs, Andrew Shapiro, Friday, that Washington intended to provide Israel with security assistance package to military described as the largest in history

Agreed to strengthen bilateral relations

President keep his Bulgarian counterpart on the content of negotiations to rounding Palestinian summit - Egypt Sunday to meet with Mubarak ahead - Netanyahu President Mahmoud Abbas said that his meeting yesterday with his Bulgarian counterpart Georgi Parvanov laid the foundations to strengthen and develop relations in all fields between the two countries.

The President spoke at a dinner in his honor by Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov. The President said: "We hope to work on the implementation of what has been agreed to strengthen and develop relations for the benefit of our people," and praised the long history shared between Bulgaria and Palestine, in addition to geography and culture as well as "economic interests among us that are keen on cementing."

He said: "We need peace and stability, and solving problems through dialogue, and enough to our region has suffered from wars."

The President praised the strong relations between Palestine, Bulgaria, and thanked the Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov at a joint press conference, the invitation to visit Sofia.

He commended the position of Bulgaria in the European Union, also praised the relations and exchanges that are between Bulgaria and Palestine, and cooperation agreements signed between the two sides.

He said: that he had discussed with Bulgarian President the possibility of the formation of a Palestinian ministerial joint Bulgaria to strengthen relations between the two sides.

Negotiations to rounding

The president said he briefed his Bulgarian counterpart on the content of negotiations under the aegis of approximately U.S. envoy to the peace process George Michel, to gain access to an independent Palestinian state with sovereignty.

The president, Mahmoud Abbas, yesterday, with the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boiko Borissov. The President also placed a wreath of flowers at the monument to the Unknown Soldier.

The president arrived earlier to Sofia, where he was received by senior officials of the Bulgarians, and the Ambassador of Palestine to the Sofia Ahmed slaughtered, and the Arab ambassadors accredited to Bulgaria.

It was also an official reception to President Abbas in the presidential residence in Sofia, where the two presidents reviewed a guard of honor, and then played national anthems of Palestinian and Bulgarian.

Abbas to visit Cairo on Saturday

In Cairo, said a source close to the Egyptian presidency, the president's visit to Cairo, Mahmoud Abbas had been postponed.

The source said that Abbas, who was scheduled to arrive Wednesday to meet with President Hosni Mubarak tomorrow, will start his visit to Egypt on Saturday. The source added that Mubarak will meet with Abbas on Sunday morning, then meet later with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu postponed a visit to Cairo to Sunday

The Egyptian official source said that Netanyahu's visit to Egypt once again been postponed to a later date has not been determined yet.

He told the press center of the Egyptian Ministry of Information «AFP» that «has been postponed visit of Israeli Prime Minister to a later date».

A source close to the Egyptian presidency said the visit was postponed to Sunday, without explanation.

Netanyahu's visit to Cairo, scheduled for yesterday, but he said the day before being postponed to the day before the postponed again.

The Israeli government official who requested anonymity said that Netanyahu's visit, which will be his fifth to Egypt since he took over as prime minister in April, in April 2009, "was postponed for logistical reasons to Sunday". "

A government source said Sunday that Israeli Netanyahu talks in Egypt, will discuss "the possibility of payment of direct talks with the Palestinians forward." .

Abul Gheit: progress must be made before moving on to "direct"

However, the Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit stressed that the vision of his country on the issue of the transition to direct negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides based on the importance of achieving adequate progress allows for the Palestinian leadership to take decision in this regard.

And Aboul Gheit's remarks came in response to questions from editors and diplomats at the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, the night before last, about reports that Israeli Prime Minister will seek during his visit to Egypt to convince Cairo to start direct negotiations.

Aboul Gheit said: You should progress can be designated an advanced stage in negotiations, and then begin direct negotiations.

The Foreign Minister indicated that this is the Palestinian position, which we must stick to it, as a supporter of the Palestinians.

And that there was a link between the Palestinian reconciliation file and the file deal to release kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, denied that the Egyptian foreign minister, pointing out that each file has nothing to do with the other

Arab League to form a preparatory committee for the International Conference on Jerusalem

Arab League Council decided on the level of permanent delegates in a meeting yesterday, chaired by the representative of Somalia and the participation of the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, the formation of a preparatory committee for the International Conference on Jerusalem, which will be hosted by Qatar.

The Deputy Secretary-General of the Arab League Ambassador Ahmed Ben Helli, in a press conference following the conclusion of the meeting: The Committee is comprised of: Qatar Chairman - as the host country - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Arab League General Secretariat Arabic.

He added that it was expected that the conference will be held at the end of this year or early next year.

He said: You will be a meeting of the committee next week and the meetings of the Council of the Arab League to prepare for this conference, and the preparation of the agenda and axes, and invited him.

On the implementation of the decision Sirte summit to lift the financial support of Jerusalem from 150 million to 500 million dollars, "said Ben Costume: There are contacts between the Secretary-General and officials of Arab countries on financial support for Jerusalem is the part of development has reached to the attention of the Arab League that there are countries that will meet its obligations Although the university did not report in an official capacity so.

And added: The Secretary-General briefed the delegates on his movements and contacts, particularly with regard to Arab-Israeli conflict, and his visit to Gaza, and how is now implementing what was agreed upon during the visit to lift the siege and to provide the people of Gaza to their needs

Knesset recognizes the rights to withdraw parliamentary nostalgia Zoubi

Jerusalem - Agencies: General Authority approved the Knesset yesterday evening, by 34 votes to 16, the recommendation of the Committee of the Knesset to withdraw rights of parliamentary deputy Zoubi nostalgia in the wake of their participation in the fleet of freedom.

The decision of the General Authority of the Knesset a final decision after having discussed the Knesset committee recommendation and approved in the past and which draw from the MP Zoubi three rights normally accorded to members of the Knesset, namely: the denial of certain rights to travel abroad, and to withdraw the passport of parliamentary and depriving them of funding submissions a lawsuit in the event exposure to trial.

Zoubi told MP after the vote on the withdrawal of parliamentary rights, saying: "The decision sets a dangerous precedent in the state and its institutions to deal with the Arab citizens and their leadership legitimacy, which falls under the political persecution of the Arab leadership is provided for the withdrawal of legitimacy on it."

Zoubi said: "I did not expect the opposite, because the state imposed a criminal blockade a million and a half Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and depriving them of their basic rights, not surprisingly, of looting rights, a parliamentary deputy in Parliament representing their constituents and represent the voice of right and justice."

It continued: "This decision strengthens our determination to continue our struggle against the blockade against the occupation and against racism, and will not deter us from continuing to represent our political stand behind him in the Knesset and beyond."

Zoubi and ended by saying that the international campaign of solidarity with them, which began after the return of the fleet of freedom will continue, and block the NDA will exhaust all means available to them locally and globally hysterical campaign to rein in the National Assembly and the Arab leaders at home

Maliki: the negotiations would be a waste of time in the absence of the presence of third-party intervention

Minister of Foreign. Riyad al-Maliki said on Monday that direct talks between the Palestinians and Israelis would be meaningless without the participation of which the international community.

The al-Maliki, who is accompanying President Mahmoud Abbas on his visit to Bulgaria, "We always said that we need to attend the third party, and without the intervention of a third party, the talks will be a waste of time."

Al-Maliki added, "The Israeli and Palestinian sides attempted to resolve the conflict between them through direct talks since 1991, but did not produce any thing about these talks."

And said, "before we get down again to draw lessons" from previous negotiations, criticized the international community, which pays Palestinian and Israeli sides to a room bilateral negotiations "and close the room."

He continued, "the occupier and the occupation was, sitting with each other, and this atmosphere is not appropriate, does not lead to useful results because there is no equal."

Maliki said, "We want a third party not only to sit with us and watch, but to intervene and stimulates, and helps to reduce the distance between the positions of the parties, to submit proposals and help the parties move in the right direction

A poor family will receive grants between 5 and 7 thousand dollars for the establishment of productive projects"

Fayyad: an integrated program and a distinct social security

Ramallah - Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad said his participation in the meetings of the Budget Committee and the Committee on Foreign Affairs and Development in the European Parliament in Brussels, is "to inform our friends in the Parliament on the achievements of the Palestinian National Authority and the distance that they made to complete the construction of institutions of the State of Palestine and its infrastructure."

Fayyad added in his weekly radio address that his visit comes, too, to mobilize international support for the Palestinian people's rights and vital projects, which crystallized the government to pursue completion of the Plan of the Palestinian National Authority, which is based on strengthening the steadfastness of the citizens on their dedication and positive facts on the ground.

Fayyad stressed that the plan of state-building in Gaza and the West Bank and East Jerusalem as its capital, which includes a comprehensive, just and effective protection of the community. He said: "In this framework the government decided since the beginning of this month to form a special committee to work on the establishment of a fund for economic empowerment for families in need, and come to this effort under the government's attempts to continuous efforts to alleviate poverty through the active engagement and organized to enable needy families out of poverty to the Department of work and self-reliance and help them to gain access to the state of economic independence through sustainable economic empowerment program for them, which is administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs in partnership with a network of Palestinian NGOs. "

He continued: "The number of beneficiaries of the program of economic empowerment of Palestinian families disadvantaged - as one of the key interventions of the National Authority to address poverty --5,639 family where he was working with 5838 families through the granting of economic empowerment with the 1800 family by lending at 300 location in the West Bank and Gaza ".

And Fayyad stressed that the second phase of the program of economic empowerment that begins next year and continue for 4 years designed to expand the circle of its beneficiaries, as targets 12 thousand poor families registered and will receive financial grants between 5000 and 7000 dollars in order to do capital projects would enable them to self-reliance , and to improve living conditions, and progress to reach self-sufficiency and contribute to the development of the Palestinian economy and provide economic security for families in need.

The Prime Minister said: "The social protection programs and programs dealing with those less fortunate, which is the economic empowerment program of the most important, are the pillars of good governance which aims to achieve social security, and consistent with the value system that will by the State of Palestine."

He added: "Our success is not a real increase in families that benefit from aid programs, but in reduced through economic empowerment programs and enable them to enter the circle of production."

He pointed out that the poverty rate reached in 2007 about 34 and a half percent by 23.6 percent in the West Bank and 55.7 percent in Gaza, and to suffer as per quarter of the families in the West Bank and 61% of households in Gaza from food insecurity because of the occupation and practices that constrain the economy, and opportunities for promotion, and achieving sustainable development, in the introduction of such practices the siege imposed on Gaza and the closure regime and command and control that has afflicted the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The Prime Minister stressed that economic empowerment program is an essential step to free our economy from the poverty and unemployment, and the map of interventions, the national authority in social protection is not limited to material assistance but also include

emergency assistance and guarantees orphans and guarantees to enable persons with disabilities and other programs administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs .

He said: "The program of economic empowerment interventions in diverse economic sectors, with a total value of grants to enable more than 16 million dollars, are concentrated the largest proportion of these interventions in the agricultural and trade sectors."

The Fayyad government was announced about a month ago for the launch of a new program of cash transfers over from the Ministry of Social Affairs, which aims to deal with the problem of poverty and the consequent effects on the difficult and aims to expand its targeting to reach all eligible families that fall below the poverty line and standardization of channels different offering aid to these families for coordination and cooperation and disclosure of its programs and services in the area of social protection, the beneficiaries of which to be building the national database and the distribution of financial resources and investment on the best, achieves transparency, fairness and justice under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs and partnership between institutions with civil society organizations civil society and relevant international organizations and others.

The Prime Minister said: "The completion of the national registry will enable the poor by a number of interventions and other programs aimed at providing social protection for the poor and the marginalized, and not only the distribution of financial resources."

He stressed that the existence of a national database for the poor to ensure non-duplication of services to the family of one of the more than one, in the presence of tens of thousands of families who do not receive aid from any quarter.

In conclusion, the Prime Minister his radio address to thank all the workers and workers in social protection programs, and institutions working in this area vital effort in their effort to strengthen the resilience of citizens, emphasizing that "the insistence of the National Authority on access to the integrated program of excellence for social security to promote cohesion and social fabric of decent living for all our citizens

Inspected in Gaza, social and economic institutions and educational

Ashton: EU rejects Lieberman's plan to turn Gaza is a separate entity

Fayyad: You must focus on the essence of the peace process and not the form of negotiations

Catherine Ashton said the High Representative of the European Union for foreign affairs, politics and security today, Sunday the European Union's rejection of any Israeli plans to turn the Gaza Strip into a separate entity.

Ashton said, during her visit to the Assembly for the deaf children in Gaza City, said she would discuss with the Israeli foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, the situation in Gaza, but said the EU had refused the last plan revealed by the newspaper Yediot Aharonot, ^ ^ Israel Friday.

Ashton called to open Gaza's border crossings fully so as to improve the situation practically and effectively on the ground, and residents can exercise their sector, and improve their economic status for the future of their children.

She said: There is a difficulty to enter items into the Gaza Strip, despite Israel's announcement of the introduction of facilities earlier this month of the blockade imposed on the sector in response to international pressure.

And will be providing an amount of 2 million dollars for the Society for Deaf Children ^
^ to continue in its mission to serve these children.

Ashton was arrived to the Gaza Strip early today, a visit of hours across the Beit Hanoun crossing in northern Gaza Strip in the second inspection visit in four months.

Ashton and inspected upon arrival to the sector manufacturers, the first of the concrete, and the second drug they were seriously damaged during the war of occupation forces on the Gaza Strip, the end of December / December 2008 and lasted 22 days led to the destruction of hundreds of homes and factories.

Ashton also includes visit to a school and summer camp belonging to the Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), as well as meetings with representatives of civil society and independent figures.

Ashton and started Saturday's visit to the Palestinian territories and Israel last three days. Is due to meet Ashton on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman.

However, the visit represented the agenda of European diplomacy does not include any meeting with leaders of " Hamas."

Ashton was called in a press conference after meeting Prime Minister Dr. Salam Fayyad in Ramallah, yesterday evening to the full and effective implementation of the new Israeli policy to raise the quality of life for the people of the Gaza Strip.

And demanded that Ashton, the need to allow access for humanitarian needs and goods to residents of the Gaza Strip. She said: "The development and improvement of the economic situation in Gaza is very important towards the restoration of normal life."

She stressed the importance of applying the AMA to ensure free movement of persons and goods between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the importance of expanding the capacity of these crossings, and called for Ashton to the importance of inter-Palestinian differences need to build a Palestinian state.

And demanded the opening of crossings into the Gaza Strip "in both directions," noting that "should be open crossings (leading to the Gaza Strip) in both directions of the population, as consumer goods."

Ashton confirmed "that the Europeans want to be involved to mechanisms at the crossings (border), provided that the European Union clearly defined role for the exercise, and of course in cooperation with the Palestinian Authority." They noted that this case "was not an issue so far."

Ashton confirmed the continuation of European support for the Palestinian Authority to implement a plan to strengthen the Palestinian economy and build the institutions of a Palestinian state, declaring the intention of the European Union to provide 40 million euros in direct support of her new.

Fayyad calls for lifting of the embargo entirely from the Gaza Strip

For his part, Fayyad demanded to lift the Israeli siege fully from the Gaza Strip and open crossings and allowing goods to enter Gaza, and explained that he had discussed with the charge of all the European issues, topics and the latest developments in the political situation, including the situation in the Gaza Strip, and the importance of lifting the blockade completely on the sector, In addition to the importance of opening the crossings

and allowing goods to enter Gaza, and stressed the importance of there being a new policy at this level, leading to achieve this on the ground, and not just talk about the new policy, while the situation remains unchanged, in addition to the need to ensure the opening of the corridor secure link between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

He stressed the importance of focusing diplomatic efforts being made on the substance of the peace process and political issues, and of ending the occupation, rather than described excessive focus on the format of the negotiations, Fayyad said "It's not form but content," stressing that the peace process was derailed not due to lack of negotiations, but because of lack of focus and attention on the content and essence of this process, which requires a departure from the case of excessive focus on the format of negotiations and the peace process.

He Fayyad said the failure to reach a suitable point to launch negotiations resulted in a lack of commitment on Israel to halt settlement activity and said, "If it does not a cessation of settlement, we see that the substance is absent, hindering the transition to the next stage, which must include steps convincing towards peace ".

He praised Fayyad, financial and political support provided by the European Union for the Palestinian people, stressing the PNA's appreciation for this support and the political attitudes and efforts to revive the peace process, including the Palestinian people to establish independent state of Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in the heart of Jerusalem.

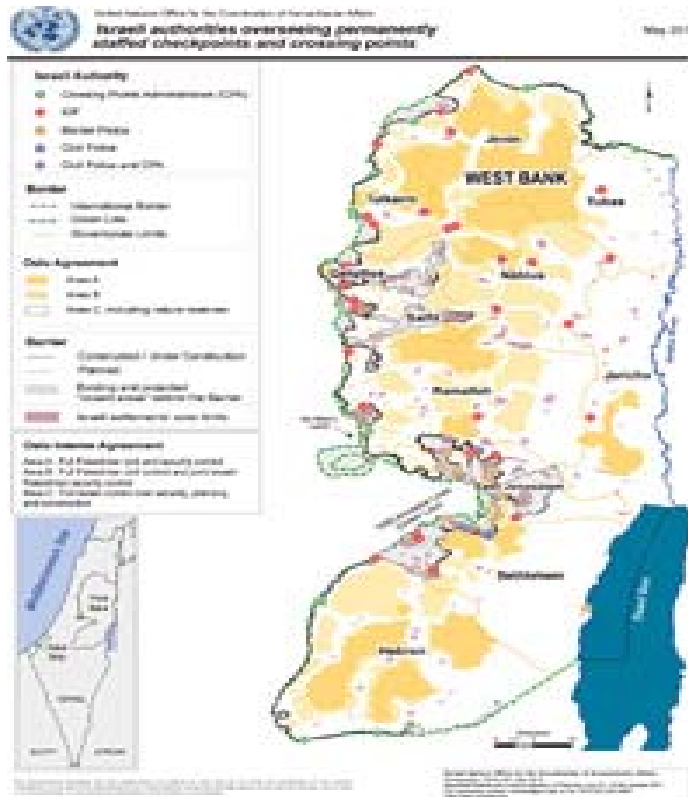
As Prime Minister Olmert referred to the importance of the visit of the Ashton to the Gaza Strip, in order to see the conditions there, and the projects implemented with the support of the European Union, pointing out that the visit of a number of European foreign ministers to the sector will be in full coordination with the National Authority, said: " I do not know specifically the date of the visit, but will be coordinated with us, and with the participation of the Palestinian National Authority that the circumstances permit. "

Ashton and return to visit the city of Ramallah in the West Bank on Monday met by President Mahmoud Abbas

UN Report: Severe water crisis in West Bank

Sunday July 18, 2010 UN News Service

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Israeli control of water supplies in the West Bank has led to a severe water crisis for Palestinian residents. The situation is worst in the Israeli-controlled stretch of land known as Area C, where the Palestinian Authority (PA) is technically responsible for water services, but



simply unable to deliver.
West Bank map (UN photo)

Cara Flowers, an officer with the Emergency Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Group (EWASH), said the health and livelihoods of communities living in Area C - covering 60 percent of land in the West Bank and home to some 60,000 of the West Bank's 2.3 million people - were hardest hit as they have a severe lack of access to water and sanitation infrastructure.

“Many vulnerable communities are 40km from the nearest filling point,” said Flowers. “This makes drinking water less accessible and more costly during summer months.”

She said EWASH was struggling to implement emergency humanitarian water projects in Area C as it lacked the necessary permits from the Israeli authorities.

The 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (also known as Oslo II) categorized land in the West Bank into areas A, B and C.

According to the agreement, Area A is under the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Area B under the joint control of Israel and the PA. About 95 percent of the Palestinian population live in these two areas, though they make up only 40 percent of the land area.

In Area C, Israel has retained full control over security and while responsibility for the provision of services falls to the PA, according to EWASH.

But the Palestinian Water Authority says it has very limited control over water resources in the West Bank.

Rights body Amnesty International accuses Israel of denying Palestinians the right to access sufficient water supplies in the West Bank by maintaining total control over the shared water resources and preventing the development of adequate water infrastructure there.

The Mountain Aquifer is the only source of water for Palestinians in the West Bank, but one of several for Israel, which also has sole access to water available from the Jordan river.

“Israel uses more than 80 percent of the water from the Mountain Aquifer, the main source of underground water in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, while restricting Palestinian access to a mere 20 percent,” said Amnesty.

This is no clearer than to the more than 100 Bedouin families living in the water-stressed village of Ras al-Awja near Jericho in Area C. While they are forced to pay inflated prices for tanker water from the nearest filling point some 7km away, nearby unlawful Israeli settlements have irrigated gardens and productive farmland, according to EWASH.

A water filling point that once served the Bedouin community has been welded shut by the Israeli authorities, causing a canal irrigation system to empty and stopping all piped water to Palestinians in the area. Without ample supplies of water, the existence of this livestock and subsistence farming-dependent community is under threat.

Israel says it has responded to the needs of the Palestinians and has increased the quantity of water provided to them far beyond that specified in the Interim Agreement.

Meanwhile, the West Bank’s water crisis is worsening, according to a March 2010 report by EWASH. Only 31 percent of communities in the West Bank are connected to a sewage network, it said.

Netanyahu: Peace Agreement Unattainable By 2012

Monday July 12, 2010 12 - 1 of International Middle East Media Center Editorial Group
The Israeli Prime Minister expressed doubts over negotiations as well as concerns about Iran as the 'ultimate terrorist threat today.' In an interview held on Sunday, Benjamin Netanyahu said that he does not think a Middle East peace deal will be attained by 2012, which runs contrary to Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's goal to have infrastructure for a Palestinian state by the end of next year. In regards to whether or not he thought peace was attainable by 2012, the prime minister told Fox News, "Can we have a negotiated peace? Yes. Can it be implemented by 2012? I think it's going to take longer than that."

The news agency Reuters reported that Netanyahu discussed the future of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with U.S. President Barack Obama last Tuesday in Washington D.C. The two leaders are optimistic that direct talks will commence in the near future.

For the time being, the Israel government is communicating to the Palestinians through Obama's Special Envoy for Middle East Peace, George Mitchell. Netanyahu stated publicly that we would take "concrete steps" within the next few weeks to encourage the Palestinians to catalyze the peace process.

The Israeli Prime Minister will meet this week in Egypt with President Hosni Mubarak for further discussion on the topic of direct peace talks.

In the interview with Fox, Netanyahu declared that Iran is "the ultimate terrorist threat today." The prime minister extended his concern when he stated that Iran was "just moving on with its efforts" in its nuclear weapons development program which he considers, "very, very dangerous."

Netanyahu stated, "...we should not allow irrational regimes like Iran to have nuclear weapons. It's the ultimate terrorist threat today." The prime minister also said, "[w]e always reserve the right to defend ourselves." The Israeli government has yet to confirm or deny the long held beliefs that Israeli military possesses the only nuclear weapons supply in the Middle East.

The Iranian government maintains that its nuclear program is only for providing fuel to a civilian energy program. Yet, the U.S. and other countries are not convinced by Tehran's claims and have implemented a round of U.N. and unilateral sanctions against Iran to halt its nuclear ambitions.

Netanyahu stated, "There's only been one time that Iran actually stopped the program and that was when it feared U.S. military action...So when [Obama] says that he's determined to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and that all options are on the table, I think that's the right statement of policy."

The prime minister did not seem interested in answering a question about the possibility of the Middle East being an area which has no nuclear weapons. He used the question as an opportunity to accuse Iran, Iraq, and Libya of violating a non-proliferation pact.

Netanyahu does not believe that Israel is the problem in the Middle East, "It's these dictatorships that are developing nuclear weapons with the specific goal of wiping Israel away."

Palestinian collaborators fess up during Hamas' 60 days of amnesty

Sunday July 11, 2010 - IMEMC News

As the 60 day period offered by Hamas for collaborators with Israel to give themselves up without consequences, Hamas officials announced that a number of collaborators had

given themselves up, and are being “dealt with in closed circles so as not to harm their reputations”.

Israeli forces have been documented on a number of occasions trying to force Palestinians to become informants in order to receive needed medical care for themselves or a family member – a type of pressure that is deemed illegal under international law. It is not known what method was used to recruit the informants that turned themselves in during the 60 days of amnesty offered by Hamas. But the Hamas-led government in Gaza did reveal that at least one of the informants who sought amnesty had been spying on Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh.

According to Hamas representatives, the informant said he watched the Prime Minister during trips to the beach and when the Prime Minister went jogging, and sent the information to Israeli agents using an Israeli cell phone.

Two months ago, the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority in the besieged Gaza Strip offered amnesty to collaborators for sixty days, promising they would not be harmed or imprisoned if they freely turned themselves in.

In the past, Hamas supporters have been accused of killing collaborators or torturing them during imprisonment.

Political front

Ya'alon: "entrusting the Israeli government" found it impossible to

Tel Aviv - The Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Ya'alon said that there is a consensus among the members of the Ministerial Forum Sibai on the impossibility of reaching a permanent settlement with the Palestinians in the near future.

The minister said in a television interview, Ya'alon on the need to manage the crisis and not try to solve them.

He added that construction in the settlements will resume at the end of the standstill period in September even though he is expected to take place to negotiate with the Palestinians.

He ruled that the work of such construction to blow up the negotiations on the Palestinian track

Called "Hamas" to put the national interest and sign a paper understandings

A well-informed sources said that Egypt would not accept the existence of other reference to the Palestinian national reconciliation, except that the reconciliation that was agreed upon, a Palestinian and an Egyptian collection, in reference to the reconciliation paper drafted by Egypt.

The sources added that the claim of some add-Palestinian understanding - a Palestinian reference another reconciliation along with the Egyptian paper is unacceptable because it is not realistic and will not succeed, adding that this will bring us back to back and we start from the beginning, and the loss efforts and the efforts that were made during the periods of the Palestinian dialogue - the Palestinian sponsored by Egypt, which resulted in points of consensus have been translated in a paper compiled by the Palestinian reconciliation, Egypt and then formulated.

Asked about the sources of what harm Egypt, the Palestinians reach understandings with respect to points which have custody of them Hamas, in a paper reconciliation and are Vqrra Liberation Organization and the Central Election Commission, replied that Egypt is holding firm to its sponsor and the need for Hamas to sign a paper reconciliation first like to open, and this not as a radical or out of stiffness in the opinion, these two paragraphs do not relate only Pfeselin (in reference to Fatah and Hamas).

She told the newspaper al-Hayat that any treatment, for example, in the paragraph that deals with the PLO, you need to Palestinian consensus - a comprehensive Palestinian (...) It requires looking at the level that all Palestinian factions and forces, both affiliated under the umbrella of the Organization or other (...), and this Sergena back because he needs to re-organize a dialogue and meetings consume time and effort and if we start again.

With regard to the paragraph on the Central Election Commission and that is reserved also by Hamas, the sources said: "Here it will be more difficult and more complicated because this particular paragraph was extended to all Palestinians, including independents as well, and deal with this file is not limited to the will or the desire of both Fatah and Hamas, whether combined or Mnfredtin. This is an issue related to all other Palestinians, "adding," The decision here must be sincere and Palestinians with this faction or that. " The sources added that "there is no way out of the current deadlock in the process of reconciliation, but to overcome Hamas's supreme national interest that says enough for the division and the suffering that goes through the Palestinian people, especially in the Gaza Strip, as a result of this division, with a rise in leadership to the level of responsibility for serious and informed consent to take the right decision is to sign a paper reconciliation, and then what reservations and observations will be taken up and addressed during the implementation mechanism. "

In terms of meetings between the leaderships of these movements in order to reduce the distance between them, as well as the efforts are being made by independent and national figures in order to bridge the gap between the two movements, the sources said: "We are following these efforts and we welcome them and support them, but we have not yet seen any positive result or provide a realistic progress on the ground has been achieved. "

The sources pointed out that reconciliation is a strategic decision in Egypt. We know the difficulties and the facts established on the ground caused the split, warning that the continuation of this divide will have serious consequences for the very future of the Palestinian issue as a whole, and will break any hope can be achieved particularly with regard to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

She added: We are working to overcome the difficulties and failure to recognize the status quo, both in terms of the peace process and peace negotiations at the level of the complex situation in the Palestinian arena as a result of division.

She stressed that there is no option other than Egypt achievement of reconciliation and the success of the peace negotiations in order to achieve the establishment of independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital (...) There's a strategic decision in the two reviewed the two affairs