



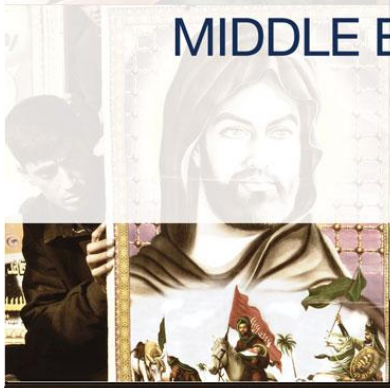
ORSAM
ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

GÜNLÜK ORTADOĞU BÜLTENİ

MIDDLE EAST DAILY BULLETIN

www.orsam.org.tr

- * **Bölge Ülkelerinde İç Siyaset**
Domestic Policy in the Middle East countries
- * **Irak'ın Yeniden Yapılanma Süreci**
The Restructuring Process of Iraq
- * **Enerji Güvenliği**
Energy Security
- * **Ekonomi Haberleri**
Economy News
- * **Barış Süreci**
Peace Process
- * **Etnik ve Mezhepsel Gruplar**
Ethnic and Sectarian Groups
- * **Devlet-dışı Aktörler**
Non State Actors
- * **Batı'yla İlişkiler**
Relations with the West





MIDDLE EAST BULLETIN

24 JANUARY 2012

NO: 1314

1. IRAQ..... 3

- Iraq Sadr Movement rebukes Suleimani statements3
- Iraq Presidency approves 11 death penalties against bloody Wednesday bombers4
- Member of parliamentary Finance Committee announces finding half of the missing \$7 billion4
- Syrian expatriates to hold conference in Erbil5
- Kurdistan plays peaceful role between Turkey and PKK6
- Maliki sacks Undersecretary of Culture Ministry7
- Hashemi will attend trial if Maliki resigns7
- Barzani, Abu Risha refer to just distribution to national wealth.....8
- Al- Iraqiya has alternatives if national conference fails - MP9
- Sadr calls to counter US embassy official's roaming in Baghdad 10
- Iraq tells Iran and Turkey not to "intervene" 10
- Deadly blasts in Baghdad's Sadr City 11

2. IRAN 12

- Iran, Russia Underline Law Enforcement, Security Cooperation 12
- Source: Western Sanctions on Iran's Central Bank "Futile" 13
- Demand Growing for Iranian Crude After EU Approves Ban on Iranian Oil Supplies 15
- Envoy Underlines Iran's Support for Establishment of Tranquility in Lebanon 16
- 'EU will be responsible for consequences of Iran oil embargo' 17
- Tehran-China ties are strategic: security official 19
- Ahmadinejad says Iran will respond to any aggression accordingly 19
- EU approves oil embargo against Iran 21

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE 21

- EU Foreign Ministers: Israel's settlement building is 'particularly' worrying 21
- Israel won't interfere with PA police stations 22
- IAF strikes Gaza weapons factory, tunnels 24
- 'UNSC changes won't help PA statehood bid' 25
- Palestinian officials warn May vote impossible 27
- As region changes, Hamas movement shifts 28

4. AFRICA and EGYPT 31

- Deputy head of Libya's NTC quits after protests 31
- First post-Mubarak parliament holds session 33
- Egypt's new assembly appoints speaker 34
- Tunisian PM says security breaches causing economic disorder 38
- Qaddafi loyalists seize Bani Walid, clash with NTC forces 38
- South Sudan says Khartoum seized oil worth \$815 million 39
- Mubarak still rules Egypt in accordance with constitution, defense tells court 41

5. JORDAN and LEBANON..... 43

- Mikati to make official visit to France in February 43



- Charbel: Lebanon asks Syria for explanation of sea border incident 44
- Mansour: Lebanon 'disassociated' itself from Arab League decision 44
- 6. SYRIA..... 45**
 - Gemayel: Countdown begins for Syrian regime collapse..... 45
 - Syria rejects Arab League transition plan..... 46
 - Head of Arab observer mission in Syria says violence dipped 49
 - Syrians feel sanctions as food prices double and power outages increase 51
 - EU adopts fresh sanctions against Syria's military brass: diplomat 53
- 7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA 54**
 - Yemen's president leaves for US, hands over power 54
 - Yemen appointment sparks air force mutiny..... 57
 - U.S. says Saleh's absence to help Yemen transition 60
- 8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN 63**
 - Roadside bomb injures 5 Afghan police 63
 - Afghan Military Official Says Attacks On NATO Soldiers 'Isolated' Cases 64
 - Killing of French soldiers by man in Afghan army uniform exposes Taliban infiltration..... 65
 - Pakistan Rejects US Findings on Deadly Border Attack..... 67

1. IRAQ

• **Iraq Sadr Movement rebukes Suleimani statements**

Iraqi Sadr Movement headed by Cleric Sayyed Muqtada Al Sadr rebuked, on Friday, Iranian Quds Forces Commander Qassim Suleimani for declaring that Iraq is subject to Iran's will and that there is a potential to form an Islamic government in Iraq. These statements are unacceptable, Sadr Movement argued assuring that it doesn't allow any pretext to interfere in Iraqi internal affairs.

"Sadr Movement rejects and doesn't tolerate Suleimani's statements which it regarded as unacceptable," Sadr Movement MP Hassan Al Jabouri told Alsumarianews pointing up that Iraq is an independent State that renounces interference from neighboring countries whether Iran, Turkey, KSA or others.

"Sadr Movement has a constant position that refuses Iranian interference which is why it insisted upon US forces' withdrawal to eliminate any pretext for neighboring countries' interference in Iraqi affairs," Jabouri uttered noting that Iraq, for its part, refuses to interfere in neighboring countries' affairs.

"Iraq seeks to engage in external relations based on mutual respect with all countries," Jabouri indicated.

Iranian Quds Forces Qassim Commander Suleimani announced, in a seminar entitled "The youth and Islamic awareness", that Iraq and southern Lebanon are subject to Iran's will and ideas. Iran can organize any action intending to form Islamic governments in both countries, he added, a source told Alsumaria.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki defends, in countless occasions, the independence of his government and denies its submission to foreign interference especially from Iran. Many Iraqi parties, European countries as well as the US accuse Iran of interfering in Iraq's internal affairs, and of providing armed groups and Shiite militias with arms and explosives.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72997-Iraq-Sadr-Movement-rebukes-Suleimani-statements.html>

- **Iraq Presidency approves 11 death penalties against bloody Wednesday bombers**

Iraqi Presidency approved death penalty sentences against 11 convicted involved in 2009's bloody Wednesday explosions, a source from Iraqi presidency revealed on Thursday.

"Iraqi presidency approved, today, death penalty sentences against 11 convicted involved in the two explosions that targeted the Foreign Affairs and Finance ministries on August 19, 2009," Iraqiya channel cited a source from Iraqi presidency as saying.

Two bombed trucks exploded, on August 19, 2009, targeting headquarters of Foreign Affairs Ministry in Salihya, central Baghdad, and Finance Ministry, western Baghdad which led to the death of 112 people and the injury of 575. Regions surrounding the explosion sites, Salihya residential compound central Baghdad and Mohamed Qassim Bridge western the capital were heavily damaged by the explosions.

Iraqi government accused, at the time, Baathist commands in Damascus of being

behind explosions and called the UN to form an international tribunal to try the accused. These accusations resulted in tension that lasted for over a year between both parties. Iraqi authorities consequently undertook tight security measures, increased security checkpoints in the capital, and brought 29 security members, including high ranked officers, to justice for neglect and shortcoming, a source told Alsumaria.

<http://www.alsumaria.tv/en/Iraq-News/1-72936-Iraq-Presidency-approves-11-death-penalties-against-bloody-Wednesday-bombers.html>

- **Member of parliamentary Finance Committee announces finding half of the missing \$7 billion**

Baghdad (NINA) - Member of the parliamentary Finance Committee, Ibrahim Al Mutlag, announced finding half of the \$7 billion, 8 trillion dinars, that were missing. They were paid incorrectly to the Ministries of Interior and Education.

He told NINA "after the allocation of 2011 budget, amounts were taken from the 2012 budget to meet the requirements of spending, and this is a huge mistake

committed, as it is not allowed to withdrawn money from the budget the following year. Therefore, we found that there are two ministries withdrew money from the budget of 2012; the Interior and Education."

He added "the Ministry of Education, when it announced the increase in the salaries of its staff by 150.000 dinars for each employee, 5.1 trillion dinars were taken from the 2012 budget."

He continued "the Ministry of Interior withdrew 2 trillion dinars after the ratification of the MOI law, which equated the salaries of army personnel and officers and employees of the MOI and on this basis, the total withdrawn amounted reached 3.5 trillion dinars."

Mutlag pointed out that the Parliamentary Finance Committee will ask the Ministry of Finance and the Cabinet with the remaining money and the mechanism in which they were withdrawing the remaining funds of the total 8 trillion dinars.

The parliament announced earlier the disappearance of \$7 billion from the budget, which equals 8 trillion dinars.

http://www.ninanews.com/english/News_Details.asp?ar95_VQ=FJLIKK

- **Syrian expatriates to hold conference in Erbil**

ERBIL, Jan. 23 (AKnews) – Syrian Kurdish expatriate opposition leaders are expected to meet in Erbil, the capital of Iraq's semi-autonomous region, next week.

More 200 Kurdish leaders from 25 countries are expected to come together for the conference that is expected to be held on Jan. 28-29 in Erbil's Saad Abdulla Convention Hall.

Among the Kurdish expats are leaders from the Kurdish opposition parties that are part of the Syrian National Council while the others are independent politicians.

Ali Shindin, spokesman for the conference told AKnews: "In the conference, the Kurdish leaders will discuss the Kurdish question in Syria, how to deal with the

Syrian opposition and how to establish Kurdish rights in Syria.”

“The conclusions of the conference will later be submitted to the opposition group the Syrian National Council so that they will deal with the Kurds according to their presence and weight, now and in the future”

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/285954/>

- **Kurdistan plays peaceful role between Turkey and PKK**

SULAIMANIYA, Jan. 23 (AKnews) – Kurdistan Regional Government's Foreign Relations Official Falah Mustafa said Kurdistan will play a peaceful role ending fighting between the Turkish state and the PKK rebels.

pkk

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was quoted by Turkish media saying Turkey has warned the Kurdish region to do what it can to stop the PKK or Turkey would do whatever necessary to end the group's activities. This has been perceived as meaning conducting military operations in Kurdistan Region to flush the PKK out of their mountain strongholds.

Davutoglu has told the Turkish parliament that Iraqi Kurdish leaders have promised Turkey in their most recent visit to Ankara that they would do what they can to prevent the PKK from operating.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki also has voiced support for Turkey in its efforts against the PKK.

Mustafa told AKnews: “We declared our position long ago that we will be playing the role of mediators.”

“We do not believe that the PKK-Turkey issue will be solved by fighting and we have not promised cooperation to Turkey to strike the PKK,” Mustafa said.

PKK has been fighting the Turkish state for three decades demanding self-rule for the Kurdish territories in Turkey. The group has been considered as a terrorist organization by Turkey and the U.S. and has been blacklisted by the EU as well.

PKK's Foreign Relations Official Ahmet Deniz told AKnews earlier that “we do not believe the Kurdish question in Turkey will be solved by war and therefore we

demand that Turkey give Kurds their rights instead of taking the military option.”

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/285933/>

- **Maliki sacks Undersecretary of Culture Ministry**

BAGHDAD, Jan. 23 (AKnews) - A source close to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki said Jaber al-Jabri, Culture Ministry undersecretary, has been sacked.jaber aljabri

The source, who preferred anonymity, told AKnews that Jabri has been replaced by Fawzi al-Atrushi. The Prime Minister is reorganizing the Culture Ministry because he believes its staff needs to be changed.

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/285913/>

- **Hashemi will attend trial if Maliki resigns**

BAGHDAD, Jan. 23 (AKnews) - Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi says he will attend his trial in Baghdad if Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki resigns. Hashemi

believes this is the only way to take political pressure off the judiciary.

Tareq Hashmi"The judiciary is my only way to prove my innocence," Hashemi said in a statement. "I am not afraid of the judiciary but I fear it because of those who dominate it and took away its independence and politicized it to rob the freedom of Iraqis."

"I am ready to attend the court in any place that my political opponent does not have power, and if he insists on Baghdad then I will accept on the condition that he raises his hand from the judiciary and there is no way to do that except by announcing his resignation."

"My request is legal and objective and it is my right, but my opponent and not the judiciary refuses to avoid the scandal that will be revealed sooner or later, when the Iraqi people know the illegal means adopted to take false confessions. If there is material evidences that proves the allegations, transferring the issue to Kurdistan wouldn't have faced illegal and unjustified rejection."

Hashemi says he has evidences to respond to what he describes as fabricated confessions which he has been keeping up his sleeve.



"A group of lawyers and representatives from the legal committee were not able to meet my bodyguards and the Judicial Council said Maliki would not allow it."

On Dec. 19 the Baghdad courts issued an arrest warrant for Hashemi charging him with terrorism. He is accused of using his bodyguards as a kill squad, targeting Shiite politicians and army commanders. Iraqi state TV broadcast confessions of members of the Vice President's

protection detail. The officers allege Hashemi paid them \$3,000 USD (3.5 million IQD) for each assassination going back to 2009.

The Vice President strenuously denies the charges and has been in Kurdistan Region since, avoiding prosecution. He expressed his surprise at the rapidity of the investigation despite the complexity of the case. The announcement of his indictment came the day after the U.S. military formally left Iraq after a long period of drawing down their troop numbers.

The confessions broadcast raised widespread criticism while members of the judiciary confirmed that the presentation of confessions is contrary to the principle of "innocent until proven guilty."

<http://www.aknews.com/en/aknews/4/285906/>

- **Barzani, Abu Risha refer to just distribution to national wealth**

ARBIL / Aswat al-Iraq: Iraqi Kurdistan President Masoud Barzani stressed the importance of just distribution of national wealth and natural resources.

During his meeting with Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha and his delegation, Barzani stated that "Iraq is the country for all with its national and religious components, who are the strength of the democratic system".

In a statement issued, the delegation comprised Anbar governor, number of tribal sheikhs, parliament members and Anbar provincial council members.

On his side, Abu Risha stressed the necessity to implement Arbil agreement to solve the present political crisis and supported the initiative made by President Barzani.

He suggested opening a direct route between the Kurdish region and Anbar for the benefit of both sides.

The statement added that "both sides stressed supporting the national conference, which should concentrate on real partnership, permanent constitution and avoiding previous obstacles".

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%2853ey2g45elq13g45tdk31rys%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=146616&l=1

- **Al- Iraqiya has alternatives if national conference fails - MP**

BAGHDAD / Aswat al-Iraq: Al-Iraqiya Bloc MP Hamid al-Mutlaq said today that his bloc has alternatives should the national conference fail.

These "alternatives shall not be publicized before the media in order to not become a dividing element among the political blocs," he told Aswat al-Iraq.

"We want the media to have a constructive role, not destructive," he added.

He confirmed that the leaders of his bloc are continuing their meetings to exchange views and to be prepared for the national conference.

Mutlaq added that the Iraqiya bloc demanded political reforms.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%2853ey2g45elq13g45tdk31rys%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=146612&l=1

- **Sadr calls to counter US embassy official's roaming in Baghdad**

BAGHDAD / Aswat al-Iraq: Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr called his "resistance" followers to be prepared to face the US Embassy in Baghdad, if they did not stop their breaches.

In response to a question made to his followers, received by Aswat al-Iraq, he expressed rejection that US officials walk in Baghdad streets with their weapons.

"We will confront them if they do not cease such actions", he added.

Baghdad's governor earlier announced the arrest of four US officials in the vicinity where he lives.

http://en.aswataliraq.info/%28S%2853ey2g45elq13g45tdk31rys%29%29/Default1.aspx?page=article_page&id=146611&l=1

- **Iraq tells Iran and Turkey not to "intervene"**

PNA-BAGHDAD: Iraq on Sunday criticised neighbouring Turkey, Iran and unnamed Arab countries for trying to "intervene" in

Baghdad's month-long political crisis and not respecting its sovereignty.

The statement, posted on the foreign ministry's website, comes amid tensions between Baghdad and Ankara in particular over Iraq's claims that Turkey was interfering in internal Iraqi affairs.

It said that since the start of the year, statements from "senior officials in neighbouring countries reflect their attempts to intervene in the internal affairs of Iraq and the lack of respect for Iraqi sovereignty and the government elected by the people of Iraq."

The statement, posted in English and Arabic, continued: "Iraq did not and will not be a follower. It will never be a pawn in the others' game nor will it be an arena of clearance between the other parties."

"Therefore, we call upon the friendly neighbour, especially Turkey, Iran and some Arab countries to respect the sovereignty and independence of Iraq."

The statement was an apparent response to remarks from the head of Iran's elite Quds Force Qassem Suleimani, since

clarified by Tehran's foreign ministry, that Iraq and southern Lebanon were controlled by Iran.

"Iran is now also present in southern Lebanon and Iraq," he said, in quotes published by Iranian news agency ISNA. "In fact, those areas are in a way influenced by the Islamic republic of Iran's performance and thinking."

Al-Arabiya TV's website had earlier reported that Suleimani claimed south Lebanon and Iraq were "subject to the control" of Iran, but Tehran has issued a denial.

Iraq and Turkey have also been at loggerheads over Baghdad's claim that Ankara was intervening in Iraqi affairs when Turkish premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan telephoned Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on January 10.

Maliki has since criticised Turkey for its remarks, and the two countries have called in each others' respective ambassadors to express their displeasure.

<http://www.peyamner.com/English/PNAnews.aspx?nID=263963>

- **Deadly blasts in Baghdad's Sadr City**

At least six killed and 23 others wounded, officials say, as two car bombs explode in Iraqi capital.



Two car bombs have exploded in the Sadr City area of the Iraqi capital Baghdad, killing at least six people and wounding 23 others in the latest attack targeting Shia areas.

The first bomb ripped through a group of workers at around 6:45am local time (03:45 GMT), while the second exploded outside a bakery half an hour later, an official said on Tuesday.

"We were all standing waiting to earn our living and all of a sudden it was like a black storm and I felt myself thrown on the ground," Ahmed Ali, a 40-year-old labourer who was injured, told Reuters news agency.

"I fainted for a while then I woke up and hurried to one of the cars to take me to the hospital," said Ali, lying on a bed in the emergency room at Imam Ali hospital in Sadr City.

The attacks are the latest in a string of bombings in recent weeks, further deepening the country's sectarian divide at a time of ongoing political crisis.

Political instability

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government moved to arrest Sunni Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi on charges that he ran a death squad.

The Iraqi prime minister then sought to sideline a Sunni deputy prime minister after he branded Maliki a dictator.

Hashemi has denied the charges and has sought refuge in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region.

The Sunni-backed Iraqiya political bloc then announced a boycott of parliament and several Iraqiya ministers have stayed away from cabinet meetings in protest.

The turmoil has fuelled fears that Maliki is trying to shore up Shia power and sideline Iraqiya. The political blocs began talks last week to try to organise a national conference to resolve their differences.

A series of bombings in Shia areas of the capital on December 22 killed more than 70 people and wounded 200 others. Scores more were killed in attacks targeting Shia pilgrims this month.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201212455037577219.html>

2. IRAN

• Iran, Russia Underline Law Enforcement, Security Cooperation

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iran's Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar and his Russian counterpart Rashid Nurgaliyev stressed the necessity for the expansion of the two countries' cooperation in security and law enforcement fields.

Mohammad Najjar is in Moscow at the invitation of his Russian counterpart.

During the meeting in Moscow today, the two officials also consulted on anti-narcotics efforts.

The two officials said that they have agreed to endorse an agreement document on security and police cooperation during an upcoming visit to Iran by Nurgaliyev.

In June 2011, Mohammad Najjar stressed Tehran and Moscow's significant role in fighting illicit drugs in the region, and stated that the two sides planned to expand mutual cooperation in campaigning narcotics.

Tehran and Moscow agreed to establish a joint intelligence team to exchange information and plan joint operations, the Iranian minister said at the time.

In December 2010, Iran and Russia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation in campaigning narcotics and drug-traffickers.

The agreement was signed by Mohammad Najjar and Viktor Ivanov, here in Tehran.

Following the endorsement ceremony, Najjar told reporters that Iran and Russia embarked on signing the cooperation agreement because both countries are on the main transit route used by international drug networks.

Eastern Iran borders Afghanistan, which is the world's number one opium and drug producer. Iran's geographical position has made the country a favorite transit corridor for drug traffickers who intend to smuggle their cargoes from Afghanistan to drug dealers in Europe.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010172205>

- **Source: Western Sanctions on Iran's Central Bank "Futile"**

TEHRAN (FNA)- The EU sanction against the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) is completely futile and serves as part of the West's psychological war on Tehran since the CBI has no financial assets in the European countries, an informed source said on Monday.

"One of the sanctions announced recently was blocking the Central Bank's assets in the European countries, while the CBI

does not have even one single Rial (Iran's currency unit) in Europe," the source said.



He described the embargo as a tool used by the West to wage psychological war on Iran.

The United States imposed additional sanctions against Iran's financial sector in late December.

US President Barack Obama authorized a law on New Year's Eve imposing fresh sanctions on financial institutions that deal with the Central Bank of Iran, Tehran's main clearing house for oil payments. The US has also persuaded the European countries to impose the same embargos against the CBI.

The extra US sanctions aim to squeeze Iran's oil sales, most of which are processed by the CBI, although many even in the West believe that the move would prove futile.

During the last two years, Iran has been replacing dollar with other currencies in its trade with the outside world.

Iran has replaced dollar in its oil trade with India, China, Russia and Japan. Late in November, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) issued the needed permission to the Central Bank of Iran to open rupee accounts with two Indian banks, namely UCO and IDBI, as a long-lasting solution to the two countries' payment problems.

Both accounts were opened in the respective banks' Mumbai branches.

A top official of city-based UCO Bank said while payments for his country's oil imports would initially be in rupees, it would be then converted into a separate currency, which was yet to be decided by the apex bank.

Russia, opposing oil sanctions against Iran, has long promoted the ruble as an international currency which could be used in bilateral settlements.

In 2010 Moscow began offering to exchange ruble for Chinese Yuan as the

two nations look to boost bilateral transactions in their own currencies and reduce their reliance on the dollar.

Tehran and Moscow announced last week that they have started using their own currencies (Rial and Ruble) instead of the US dollar in their bilateral trade exchanges.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010172203>

- **Demand Growing for Iranian Crude After EU Approves Ban on Iranian Oil Supplies**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Demand is growing for Iranian crude oil in Asian and African markets after the EU's fresh decision on banning oil imports from Iran.

Iran is currently supplying 100% of Sri Lanka's oil needs, 51% of Turkey, 25% of South Africa, 14% of Greece, 13% of Italy and Spain, 11% of India and China and 10% of Japan and South Korea's oil demands.

The statistical figures of Iran's oil exports proves that the US and EU oil embargo

against Iran has little or no impact on demand for Iran's oil in global markets.

The growing demand for Iran's oil also shows that EU sanctions will leave no results but growth in global oil prices since India, China and South Africa have already demanded an increase in oil imports from Iran.

Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd, India's biggest buyer of Iranian crude, announced earlier this month that it has not cut purchase of Iranian oil supplies despite the United States' declared sanctions against Tehran.

Meantime, China made it clear last week that, whatever the commercial or political calculations driving ups and downs in its crude orders from Iran, it rejects in principle unilateral US sanctions.

"Iran is also an extremely big oil supplier to China, and we hope that China's oil imports won't be affected, because this is needed for our development," Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun told a news conference in answer to a question about whether Beijing could curtail crude from Iran under US pressure.

"We oppose applying pressure and sanctions, because these approaches won't solve the problems. They never have," Zhai told the briefing about Wen's six-day visit to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

"We hope that these unilateral sanctions will not affect China's interests."

Earlier today, Dutch Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal said that European Union foreign ministers agreed to ban oil imports from Iran starting July 1

"As of July 1, we have a ban on the import of oil and oil products from Iran," Rosenthal said in Brussels.

New contracts on oil imports from Iran and extensions of existing deals will be banned under the embargo, EU diplomats said. Shipments under agreements already in place can continue until the end of June.

Diplomats said EU measures against Iran also include a freeze on Iranian central bank assets and a ban on petrochemical imports from May 1.

After the EU announcement, the oil price breached \$110 a barrel this morning.

Analysts said the price jump could have been higher but was held down by mounting concerns about Greek debt and the global economic outlook, which would could reduce demand for oil.

Last week, Pirouz Mousavi, General Manager of Iran's oil terminals in the National Iranian Oil Company denied media reports that Tehran is storing oil on tankers in the Persian Gulf.

He stressed that crude exports have not been disrupted amid mounting international pressure and sanctions.

"We do not have even one drop of oil (stored) in the Persian Gulf... Iran's oil exports are taking place according to OPEC policies," Mousavi stated.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010172201>

- **Envoy Underlines Iran's Support for Establishment of Tranquility in Lebanon**

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Ambassador to Beirut Qazanfar Roknabadi stressed Tehran's support for the establishment of peace and tranquility in Lebanon, and underlined that Iran's foreign policy is based on non-intervention in other countries' internal affairs.



Roknabadi made the remarks in a meeting with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman in Beirut on Monday.

He also reiterated the Islamic Republic of Iran's resolve to implement the agreements already signed between the two countries, and announced the Iranian technical and engineering companies' readiness to cooperate in development and service-providing projects in different parts of Lebanon.

During the meeting, the two officials also discussed the latest regional and international developments.

Iran and Lebanon enjoy cordial relations and have further expanded these ties in recent years.

The two sides have exchanged several delegations of high-ranking officials in the last two years.

Iranian and Lebanese officials have recently doubled efforts to further expand the bilateral relations and mutual cooperation between the two nations.

The two countries signed a cluster of economic agreements during Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's landmark visit to Beirut in October 2010.

<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9010172199>

- **'EU will be responsible for consequences of Iran oil embargo'**

TEHRAN, January 23 (MNA) - In a statement issued on Monday, the Iranian Foreign Ministry said that the European Union will be responsible for the consequences of its ill-advised decision to impose oil embargo against Iran.

The EU formally adopted an oil embargo against Iran and agreed a freeze on the assets of the Central Bank of Iran on Monday.

Following is the text of the Foreign Ministry statement:

The EU council of foreign ministers, in their meeting on Monday, January 23, adopted illogical and unjustifiable decisions about the Islamic Republic of Iran in line with their illegal policies.

The Islamic Republic of Iran condemns this unprincipled move, one again emphasizes its responsible policies which are based on the regulation of relations with the world's countries based on international rights and regulations and the principle of mutual trust, and believes that such decisions will have unpleasant effects and consequences on and for the European people and others.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has repeatedly emphasized that its nuclear program is peaceful and has always continued cooperation within the framework of its commitments to the International Atomic Energy Agency and

has spared no effort to further demonstrate the transparency of its nuclear program.

It seems that the European Union has been illogically pursuing the U.S. policies and has been seeking to divert the world's attention from the popular awakening, which is calling for justice, and anti-discrimination and anti-capitalist movement through creating an unreal atmosphere with the aim of diverting attention from its economic and social problems.

The Iranian nation has repeatedly proved that it has never relinquished their legitimate and legal rights under pressure and cruel measures and will definitely not succumb to such methods in future through resistance within the framework of the principles of justice and belief in international peace and stability and reminds leaders of Western countries about the fact that opposing the independence and progress of independent countries will compound the complicated problems of today's world and that the European Union will be responsible for the consequences of such

injudicious decisions and effort to create tension and crisis.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1516211>

- **Tehran-China ties are strategic: security official**

TEHRAN, Jan. 23 (MNA) - The deputy secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council has said that ties between Iran and Beijing are strategic.

Ali Baqeri made the remarks in an interview with reporters after his meeting with Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Wu Hailong in Beijing on Friday.

Baqeri made a two-day visit to Moscow on January 18 and 19 before heading for Beijing.

"Relations between Iran and China are not limited to bilateral ties, and the two countries have strategic cooperation in regard to regional and international issues," Baqeri said.

On the purpose of his trip to Beijing, he said, "We usually hold consultations with

Chinese officials before negotiations with the 5+1 group (the United States, Britain, France, Russia, China, and Germany)."

Iran and the 5+1 group have recently signaled readiness to hold a new round of negotiations.

Baqeri added, "Trips were made to Moscow and Beijing at the invitation of our Russian and Chinese friends with the aim of studying the latest developments in regard to negotiations with the 5+1."

Asked about the content of his dialogue with Chinese officials, he stated that both sides had a similar view on the confrontational approach adopted by certain major powers and Chinese officials did not approve of it.

Baqeri added that Chinese officials believe that Iran's approach indicates that Tehran is determined to hold "effective" and "constructive" negotiations.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1515893>

- **Ahmadinejad says Iran will respond to any aggression accordingly**

TEHRAN, January 23 (MNA) - President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has warned that Iran will respond to any threat and aggression accordingly.

Ahmadinejad made the remarks in a recent interview with Mexican television network Televisa.

Commenting on the threats issued by the United States against Iran over its nuclear activities, Ahmadinejad said, "Iran's nuclear issue has become a completely political issue, and it is obvious to everyone that the United States and its allies are seeking to find a pretext to hinder the progress of the Iranian nation since they plan to establish complete dominance over the Middle East and consolidate the Zionist regime and regard Iran as an impediment to such goals. Besides, such remarks and threats are the continuation of the hostility of the U.S. government and the hegemony toward the Iranian nation."

"We believe that there are intellectuals in the United States who will prevent insane actions by a number of people," he stated.

"On the other hand, history shows that those who had intended to commit an act of aggression against Iran failed and regretted their actions. However, if the U.S. government or any other person seeks to commit aggression against Iran and infringe on the rights of the Iranian nation, our nation will defend itself accordingly," he added.

On Israel, Ahmadinejad said, "There is no need for nuclear bomb or war to annihilate the Zionist regime because a regime, which is founded on oppression and killings, has already been destroyed. The Islamic Republic of Iran had suggested that a free referendum be held in the occupied territories, but they (the Zionists) did not accept it."

Sanctions have no impact on Iranian nation

Commenting on the sanctions imposed on Iran, Ahmadinejad said, "Unjust sanctions imposed by the hegemony on the Islamic Republic of Iran have had and will have no impact on the Iranian nation."

On reports charging Iran with violating human rights, the president said,

"Everyone can write such reports on the violation of human rights that are being published. But the question is that why such reports are being written only against those who are opposed to the policies of the U.S. government while there are governments in our region which have not held even one election in their political lives and do not allow women to drive. However, no report is being issued against them since they are subservient to the U.S. government."

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1515803>

- **EU approves oil embargo against Iran**

While Iran and the major powers are expected to resume talks in coming days, the European Union on Monday formally approved an oil embargo against Iran.

The decision, which was adopted in Brussels by the EU's 27 foreign ministers, also includes a freeze of the assets of Iran's central bank

Diplomats said the measures include an immediate embargo on new contracts for crude oil and petroleum products, while

existing contracts will be allowed to run until July, the Associated Press reported.

The new moves by the EU are intended to put more pressure on Iran for its nuclear program.

Analysts argue such measures would act as counterproductive to a likely breakthrough in dialogue between Iran and the West.

As a signatory to the nuclear non-proliferation regime (NPT) Iran is legally entitled to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

<http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1516031>

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE

- **EU Foreign Ministers: Israel's settlement building is 'particularly' worrying**

In a joint statement, ministers also welcome efforts by Jordan to restart negotiations; EU top diplomat Ashton to travel to Mideast Tuesday.

Israel's continued settlement building on occupied Palestinian land last year was "particularly" worrying, European Union foreign ministers said Monday.



"Against the backdrop of worrying developments on the ground in 2011, particularly with regards to settlements, the EU reaffirms its commitment to a two-state solution," ministers said in a joint statement after a meeting in Brussels.

Settlement building - Motti Milrod

Illegal construction in the Neveh Shoham neighborhood of the Eli settlement in the West Bank.

Photo by: Motti Milrod

Palestinians have refused to re-engage in peace talks with the Israelis over their refusal to stop building over the West Bank. But this month, the two sides entered into Jordan-brokered talks about a resumption of direct peace talks.

Ministers said the EU "welcomes the efforts by Jordan" and urged the Palestinians and the Israelis "to come forward with comprehensive proposals on borders and security" as called for by the Quartet - the international panel comprising the EU, the United States, the United Nations and Russia.

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said she would travel to the Middle East and meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman from the Israeli side, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

Her visit, from Tuesday to Thursday, will also include a stop in the Gaza Strip, EU officials told DPA.

<http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/eu-foreign-ministers-israel-s-settlement-building-is-particularly-worrying-1.408879>

- **Israel won't interfere with PA police stations**

Israel turning a blind eye to establishment of two police stations on border of J'lem as it considers goodwill gestures to Abbas.

Talkbacks (21)

Israel is turning a blind eye to the establishment of two Palestinian Authority police stations on the border of Jerusalem as it considers a series of goodwill gestures to President Mahmoud Abbas.



One of the police stations was established recently in the village of a-Ram, which lies northeast of the Jerusalem neighborhood Neveh Ya'acov, just outside the capital's municipal borders. The second station was established in what is known as the Biddu enclave – a group of eight Palestinian villages located near Ramallah and along Road 443.

The stations were established in territory marked as Area B, which according to the Oslo Accords is land under Israeli security control and Palestinian civilian control.

In recent years, the IDF has allowed the PA to establish police stations within villages

in Area B, in line with government policy, to bolster Abbas's government and grant it the necessary tools to enforce law and order in the Palestinian territories.

The Jerusalem Post has learned, however, that the two police stations in the Jerusalem-borderline villages were established without Israeli government approval. Nevertheless, the state is not demanding that the PA remove them, since it prefers not to insert its own police and military forces in the villages.

“There is something of a blind eye being turned to the establishment of the stations,” a senior official familiar with the issue told the Post. “Israel does not want to have to send its own forces inside, and the Palestinians are looking to extend their reach and authority. In the meantime, everyone benefits.”

The government has worked for years to curb PA attempts to gain a foothold inside Jerusalem and its neighboring villages, due to the symbolic significance of having official PA offices and armed policemen in close proximity to the Israeli capital.

The station in a-Ram – a village of some 70,000 residents – is located close to the security barrier erected to prevent terrorist infiltrations into Jerusalem. A large portion of a- Ram’s population – some estimates claim 50 percent – are in possession of blue Israeli identity cards.

Another defense official told the Post on Monday that while the Defense Ministry was aware of the existence of the police stations, it did not plan on ordering their closure and would likely approve them as part of a larger package of goodwill gestures the nation is expected to make to Abbas.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has been under increasing pressure from the United States and the European Union to make gestures to Abbas as part of an effort to renew direct peace negotiations with the Palestinians. Netanyahu has resisted until now.

The country has quietly supported the bolstering of PA security forces in recent years.

So far, eight battalions trained by the United States in Jordan have deployed in

the West Bank and another two are scheduled to join by the end of the year. Each battalion numbers about 500 security officers who were trained by the office of the US Security Coordinator to Israel and West Bank Lt.-Gen. Michael Moeller.

<http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=254876>

- **IAF strikes Gaza weapons factory, tunnels**



Three tunnels associated with terrorist activity, weapons site targeted, 2 reported injured.

The IAF on Monday night struck a weapons manufacturing site in central Gaza, two tunnels associated with terrorist activity in northern Gaza and a tunnel in the southern part of the Strip.

IAF aircraft recorded direct hits on its targets. Palestinian media reported two injuries in the strikes.

In a statement released after the strike, the IDF Spokesman reiterated that it holds Hamas responsible for all terror activity emanating from Gaza and will continue to respond forcefully to attacks on Israeli citizens.

According to the statement, the raid comes in retaliation to three mortar shells fired from Gaza in recent days.

A rocket was fired onto southern Israel on Friday and three mortar shells exploded in the Eshkol Regional Council on Saturday. No injuries or damages were reported. In response, the IAF struck terrorists in southern Gaza on Saturday.

<http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?id=254875>

- **'UNSC changes won't help PA statehood bid'**

US Ambassador to UN Susan Rice says replacement of 5 council members won't help PA in win full UN membership.

NEW YORK - Security Council dynamics are no more favorable now to a Palestinian UN membership bid than they were last year despite a partial change in the council makeup, the US ambassador to the United Nations said on Monday.



In the teeth of strong opposition from the United States and Israel, the Palestinian Authority applied to the council last September for UN membership. But a committee to consider the application failed to reach consensus, and the Palestinians have not so far requested a formal vote in the council.

Addressing a Jewish audience in New York, Ambassador Susan Rice said that since the committee's report, the application had "essentially stayed there for the time being."

"I presume that is because the Palestinians decided that, given the voting likely outcome in the council, it wasn't timely to push it to a vote," she told the governing board of the American Jewish Committee, or AJC. "The fact is, nobody knows for sure what the Palestinians will choose to do."

Asked whether the replacement of five members of the 15-nation council as of Jan. 1 might affect the issue, Rice said, "I think that we are roughly in the same place now as we were last year, and potentially even in a better position."

The issue for the Palestinians last year was not whether their application would get council approval - since the United States was considered certain to veto it - but whether they could score a moral victory and force Washington to use its veto by winning nine votes in favor from other members.

In the absence of a veto, a council resolution needs nine votes to pass. But diplomats said at the time the Palestinians would get only eight votes in support, with other countries voting against or abstaining.

Diplomats say that situation remains despite the changes in the council membership. Newcomer Azerbaijan is thought likely to support the Palestinian application, whereas its predecessor, Bosnia, was expected to abstain. But Guatemala is unlikely to follow its predecessor, Brazil, in backing the Palestinians. The other three newcomers represent no change.

The Palestinian choice is whether to push for a Security Council vote anyway, take the issue to the UN General Assembly - which cannot confer membership but can upgrade their status as observers - or do nothing as contacts continue with Israel over a possible resumption of peace talks.

Rice reaffirmed the US line that a Palestinian state would come only through direct negotiations with Israel, not "through a short-cut at the United Nations."

In her remarks to the AJC, Rice stressed US backing at the United Nations for Israel. Some US Republicans have accused President Barack Obama of being

insufficiently supportive of the Jewish state.

With the US election campaign heating up, one of Rice's deputies spoke publicly last week on the need for reforming UN practices, addressing another concern of Republicans who charge the Obama administration is too close to the world body.

<http://www.jpost.com/DiplomacyAndPolitics/Article.aspx?id=254854>

- **Palestinian officials warn May vote impossible**

It is “impossible” for the Palestinians to hold presidential and legislative elections in May as planned, a senior Palestinian MP warned on Monday.

Mustafa Barghuti, who heads the Freedom Committee set up to help implement a reconciliation deal between rival Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas, said the preparations necessary for holding a vote in May had not been made.

“According to the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (CEC), it has become impossible to hold the elections this May,

and we will have to work fast to hold the elections this year,” Barghuti told AFP.

“This requires the commission to begin its work in Gaza,” he said.



Under the terms of the reconciliation deal inked by Hamas and Fatah in Cairo on May 3, presidential and legislative elections are to be held within a year of the signing of the accord.

But the last Palestinian elections were held in 2006, and the electoral register in Gaza has not been updated since, with the CEC yet to begin work in the territory, which is under Hamas control.

CEC head Hanna Nasser confirmed the commission had not yet been able to start work in Gaza, in a statement released on Monday.

“Hanna Nasser confirmed today the continuation of the closure of CEC headquarters in the Gaza Strip despite a statement issued two weeks ago indicating the re-opening of district offices,” it said.

“Nasser indicated that recent communication with officials in Gaza resulted in a promise to tackle this issue soon.”

The commission's failure to begin preparations for the scheduled elections comes as Hamas and Fatah struggle to make progress towards the formation of the interim government of independents called for by the reconciliation deal.

Under the accord, a caretaker government was to have been formed to help oversee preparations for the elections, but disagreements over its make-up and who would head it have yet to be resolved.

Barghuti said it was crucial that progress be made towards forming the interim government.

“Discussions on forming the government haven't started yet, giving the impression

that the deadlines don't matter,” he warned.

“We must work quickly to implement what was agreed upon, including the formation of the consensus government.”

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190124.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jktnav9cgv4>

- **As region changes, Hamas movement shifts**

GAZA CITY, Palestinian Territories, (AFP) — Buffeted by the winds of the Arab Spring, the Hamas movement is transforming, with power shifting from its exiled leadership towards its government on the ground in Gaza, analysts say.

Recent months have seen the group forced to deal with the new regional realities created by the Arab uprisings, including the increasingly precarious situation in Damascus, where its leadership-in-exile is based.

The group has also moved towards reconciliation with its longtime rival Fatah, and its chief Khaled Meshaal has talked

about the need to focus on peaceful protest.

But the shifts have created a new tension within the Islamist group, with the Gaza leadership appearing increasingly emboldened to voice differences of opinion with Meshaal and the leadership-in-exile.

On Saturday, Hamas announced that Meshaal did not plan to stand for reelection to the head of the movement, a decision that comes as the group experiences a fundamental reshaping, according to Omar Shaban, director of the Gaza-based Palthink think-tank.

"Hamas is going through a transformational process," he told AFP, attributing the movement's reshaping to both internal and external factors.

On the internal front, according to Shaban, some within the movement's Gaza-based leadership believe Hamas has suffered as a result of being charged with improving the lives of 1.3 million people in Gaza.

Externally, Shaban says, Hamas is caught between the differing fates of the Muslim Brotherhood -- the organisation that gave birth to Hamas -- in Egypt and Syria.

Hamas is caught between "the hope of Egypt," where the Muslim Brotherhood has swept democratic elections, and "the pressure of Syria," where a government crackdown is targeting activists, including members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The situation in Syria has been particularly problematic for Hamas, which is eager to avoid being seen as interfering in internal issues, but also finds it hard to see the Muslim Brotherhood being targeted.

"The atrocities of the Syrian regime are inflicted on the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas is no longer able to maintain its presence in Damascus," said Mukhaimer Abu Saada, a professor of political science at Gaza's Al Azhar University.

Internal rumblings and external pressures have helped create a situation in which Meshaal, long considered a radical, now appears more pragmatic than Hamas's Gaza leadership, Abu Saada said.

"When Meshaal was getting complete support from the Syrian regime, from Iran, he connected himself with this camp, so he could not make compromises," he said.

But the peaceful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, along with his detachment from Iran and Syria, appear to have shifted Meshaal's thinking, convincing him that peaceful "popular resistance" can be effective.

"That is something new," Abu Saada said, acknowledging that "there has been no consensus within Hamas regarding this issue."

Mahmud Zahar, one of Gaza's senior Hamas officials, notably responded that "armed resistance can be popular."

Zahar's willingness to challenge Meshaal, on issues ranging from resistance to reconciliation, are another sign of the shifting dynamics in the movement, Abu Saada said.

"The balance of power is shifting from outside to inside. Hamas's leadership in Gaza is on its own territory," he said,

noting Hamas in Gaza is increasingly less dependent on regional aid.

The Hamas government has a 2012 budget worth \$769 million, a 22 percent increase over 2011, based on an expected intake of \$174 million dollars in tariffs and taxes, particularly from the flourishing Egypt-Gaza tunnel industry.

The Hamas government is also wielding the freedom of movement that has come with Egypt's decision to open its border with Gaza.

Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya has already completed one major tour to Egypt, Sudan, Turkey and Tunisia -- his first since taking office. He is reportedly considering a second trip soon, with stops in Qatar and Iran.

"Haniya's visit has halted the political siege on Gaza," said Walid al-Mudallal, a political science professor at the Islamic University of Gaza, noting the movement's parliamentary delegation visit last week to Switzerland to take part in the the Inter-Parliamentary Union meeting.

According to Mudallal, " Hamas is closing the gap with the Palestinian consensus to achieve reconciliation, and to be able to deal with the international community."

One wildcard in the movement's transformation is the future role of its powerful armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, once considered largely under Meshaal's direction.

According to Abu Saada, that allegiance could be shifting.

"The armed wing of Hamas, Ezzedine al-Qassam, gives loyalty to whoever is giving the money to pay for the weapons," he said.

"Ezzedine al-Qassam has been showing more loyalty to the Hamas in Gaza."

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28202>

4. AFRICA and EGYPT

- **Deputy head of Libya's NTC quits after protests**

BENGAZI, Libya (Reuters) - The deputy head of Libya's ruling National Transitional

Council (NTC) said on Sunday he was resigning after a series of protests against the new government which the country's leader warned could drag Libya into a "bottomless pit."

Late on Saturday, a crowd demanding the government's resignation smashed windows and forced their way into the NTC's local headquarters in Benghazi, in the most serious show of anger at the new authorities since Muammar Gaddafi was ousted.

The NTC has the support of the Western powers who helped force out Gaddafi in a nine-month conflict, but it is unelected, has been slow to restore basic public services, and some Libyans say too many of its members are tarnished by ties to Gaddafi.

Abdel Hafiz Ghoga, vice-president of the NTC and one of the council's highest-profile members, was the target of some of the protesters' criticism. He said he was quitting to try to limit the damage to the council.

"My resignation is for the benefit of the nation and is required at this stage," Ghoga told Al Jazeera television.

He said the national consensus that helped the country rise up and end Gaddafi's 42-year rule had not lasted into peace-time, giving way instead to what he called an atmosphere of "hatred."

"I do not want this atmosphere to continue and negatively affect the National Transitional Council and its performance," said Ghoga, who also acted as the NTC's spokesman.

Ghoga is one of the most senior of Libya's new rulers to have left office since Gaddafi's overthrow in August. His departure will revive doubts about the NTC's ability to form a cohesive and effective government.

He was jostled by an angry crowd of students when he visited a university in Benghazi on Thursday. He had to be pulled away to safety.

"BOTTOMLESS PIT"

NTC chief Mustafa Abdel Jalil, speaking in Benghazi earlier on Sunday, appealed to the protesters to be more patient.

"We are going through a political movement that can take the country to a bottomless pit," he said. "There is something behind these protests that is not for the good of the country."

"The people have not given the government enough time and the government does not have enough money. Maybe there are delays, but the government has only been working for two months. Give them a chance, at least two months."

In a glimpse of the lack of coordination which Western diplomats say pervades the workings of the NTC, Abdel Jalil was asked if Ghoga would be stepping down and said he would not.

The protests in Benghazi, in eastern Libya, are particularly troubling for the NTC because the city was the birthplace of the revolt against Gaddafi's 42-year rule. It was the site of the NTC's headquarters during the revolt.

Abdel Jalil said he met with religious leaders and protesters to discuss their grievances.

He said he had accepted the resignation of the head of the Benghazi local council, Saleh El-Ghazal. Like most Libyan officials, the head of the council was appointed but Abdel Jalil said his successor would be chosen through an election.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28198>

- **First post-Mubarak parliament holds session**

CAIRO (AP) — The parliament elected in Egypt's first legislative vote after Hosni Mubarak's ouster nearly a year ago held its inaugural session on Monday, with Islamists dominating the 498-seat chamber.

The session was chaired by Mahmoud el-Saqqah, the chamber's oldest lawmaker.

The lower and more powerful of parliament's two chambers, known as the People's Assembly, was due to elect a speaker and two deputies later in the session. The speaker was expected to

come from the Muslim Brotherhood, a fundamentalist group that won just under half of the seats.

Held over several weeks starting Nov. 28, the parliamentary election was the freest in Egypt's modern history. Elections for parliament's upper chamber, a largely toothless body known as the Shura Council, will begin later this month.

The chamber's top priority is to elect a 100-member panel to draft a new constitution, which will have to be put to a vote in a nationwide referendum. Presidential elections are scheduled to be held before the end of June, when the military generals who took over from Mubarak in February last year are due to step down.

Mubarak was forced out of office by an 18-day popular uprising.

Several independent lawmakers and others representing the liberal groups that engineered the anti-Mubarak uprising wore yellow scarves saying, "No to military trials for civilians," a reference to the hauling of at least 12,000 civilians

before military tribunals since the generals took over power 11 months ago.

El-Saqqah began the proceedings by ordering lawmakers to stand in silence for a minute in memory of the hundreds of protesters killed during the protests.

Mubarak, 83, is on trial for complicity in the killing of the protesters. He could face the death penalty if convicted.

What was supposed to be a quiet procedural session turned briefly chaotic when some lawmakers improvised additions to the text of the oath they were taking in turn, provoking angry protests from the speaker.

The oath ends with a pledge to respect the constitution and law, but an Islamist lawmaker added "God's law." Two pro-reform lawmakers pledged to "continue the revolution" and "be loyal to its martyrs."

Security was tight in the area around the parliament building, scene of recent deadly clashes between troops and protesters demanding that the generals immediately step down. The building is

also a short distance away from Tahrir Square, birthplace of the uprising that topped Mubarak's 29-year regime.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28203>

- **Egypt's new assembly appoints speaker**

Islamist-dominated lower house of parliament convenes after completion of first elections since Hosni Mubarak's fall.

Egypt's new lower house of parliament has convened its first session just days after completing a historic election that put Islamists in the legislative lead after the fall of former president Hosni Mubarak in February.

Mahmoud al-Saqa, 81, a member of the liberal Wafd party and the oldest member of parliament, opened the session in the capital, Cairo, on Monday as acting speaker, beginning with a moment of silence for those killed in the uprising against Mubarak.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party, which took roughly 43 per cent of the People's Assembly, nominated

its secretary-general, Saad el-Katatni, to be speaker of the house, and his nomination was duly approved by the body during the session.

"We want to build a new Egypt, a constitutional, democratic and modern Egypt," said Katatni, who won 399 out of 496 votes cast in the poll for the position.

"Democracy will be the source of our parliament's power," he added in remarks greeted with applause.

Al Jazeera's Rawya Rageh, reporting from outside the parliament building in Cairo, said currently the session's duties are largely procedural but Egyptians are waiting to see how the people's assembly will interact with the military rulers.

"There is a lot of talk of backroom deals between certain Islamist groups and the military, but there is no confirmation on this," she said.

"People want to see if they will be able to move beyond the procedural matters, and move towards a political consensus.

"[The parliamentarians] understand the level of expectation of the Egyptian people."

As members of the parliament took their oaths of office, there was some moments of controversy, as certain members attempted to add lines of their own, including invocations to either God or the revolution. The acting speaker, who was administering the oaths, insisted that all members swear an identical oath, without reference to religion or the uprising that toppled Mubarak.

Civilian rule

The FJP has vowed to guide Egypt through the transition from military to civilian rule while upholding personal liberties.

Interactive: The new parliament
Click for an interactive look at the makeup of the new parliament, with details about each political party and alliance

The Brotherhood has pledged not to ally with the ultra-conservative Nour Party, which largely represents Egypt's fundamentalist Salafi community and came in second, winning around 21 per cent of available seats.

The rise of the Islamists marks a stark change from the Mubarak era, when parliament was a compliant body dominated by a supermajority of his National Democratic Party (NDP).

The Brotherhood was officially banned, and though its members won an unprecedented fifth of parliament in 2005 by running as independents, in practice no party but the NDP could ever affect legislation.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which took power on February 11, have promised to remain in charge only until a presidential election in June, though many Egyptians suspect the army may seek to cling on to power from behind the scenes even after that.

"It will be a historic session in Egypt's transition to democracy and civilian rule," Mohamed Beltagy, a leading member of the Freedom and Justice Party, said on Sunday.

"Today we resume the revolution. We have wasted a year. We have work to do," said Kamal Abu Etta, a prominent labour

union activist and member of the non-religious Karama party.

The SCAF handed over legislative powers to the lower house of parliament on Monday, according to a statement from the country's cabinet.

"Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, has announced in a letter to the people's assembly the transfer of legislative power to the assembly," the cabinet said on its Facebook page.

Youth movements

Youth movements, who sparked and led Egyptians in the 18-day revolt against Mubarak, said they would demonstrate outside the assembly to ensure protesters killed in the uprising were not forgotten.

They are barely represented in the People's Assembly. After the FJP and Nour, whose coalitions combined make up 70 per cent of the lower house, there is the Wafd, an eight-decade-old party with eight per cent, and the Egyptian Bloc, a new liberal coalition led in part by

billionaire telecom mogul Naguib Sawiris, which won almost seven per cent.

"We do not contest the popular mandate of parliament, but it better deliver on the rights of martyrs and wounded. We fear political parties may vie for political gain and ignore the youth," activist Mohamed Fahmy said.

Al Jazeera interviews Abdullah Alashaal on the Egyptian parliament

Though liberals and youth harbour suspicions and even fears of the Brotherhood and the Salafis, most agree that the main obstacle to a democracy is the military council, which has failed to reform the loathed security forces and halt military trials of civilians. Military police have also attacked and killed demonstrators on multiple occasions.

The Brotherhood represents the most powerful counter to the military, and though its members have said they are willing to negotiate with the SCAF during the transition, the two sides have clashed over the powers of the new parliament.

Parliamentarians see the new assembly as bringing Egypt a step closer to ending military rule.

"We say that we respect and appreciate the army but the military council must be held accountable for any mistakes ... No one is above accountability," the Brotherhood's general guide, Mohamed Badie, said last week.

Some analysts have suggested the army will not fully abandon politics unless the Brotherhood and other prominent political parties offer guarantees that it will not face legal retribution over the killing of protesters.

Mubarak, 83, is now on trial for his role in the deaths of 850 people during the uprising. Scores of people have been killed in sporadic eruptions of violence since then, including demonstrations against army rule in November and December.

A Brotherhood source said its members would form a human chain around parliament to stop any protest turning violent.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201212385710930414.html>

- **Tunisian PM says security breaches causing economic disorder**



Tunisian Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali on Monday deplored serious security breaches in key sectors which were wreaking economic havoc.

Jebali criticized such actions as the “cordoning of entire towns, attacks on hospitals, the destruction of equipment and enterprises closing down.”

He said it cost the Tunisian economy 1.7 billion euros (\$2.2 billion) in 2011.

A spate of protest actions is paralyzing parts of Tunisia one year after the north African country's popular revolt sparked the Arab Spring uprisings.

“I am not calling into question strikes and legal protests which are a right, but I am speaking of dangerous and serious practices which impinge on the rights of our people,” he said.

Jebali said some of these actions were “exploited for political ends”, but did not elaborate.

He added that “some foreign companies are closing shop and the next tourist season is threatened”, due to the insecurity.

Tourism earnings in Tunisia fell almost 40 percent year-on-year in the first nine months of 2011 to 1.5 billion dinars (780 million euros).

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/24/190158.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jktnav9cgv4>

- **Qaddafi loyalists seize Bani Walid, clash with NTC forces**

Diehard supporters of slain Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi seized control Monday of “the entire city of Bani Walid,” a local official said, prompting the deployment of

National Transitional Council forces to regain the town.



“The loyalists of Qaddafi took control of the entire city of Bani Walid,” said M’barek al-Fotmani, a former member of the ruling National Transitional Council in the desert oasis, 170 kilometers (110 miles) southwest of Tripoli.

The resident, who did not want to be named, said four people were killed and 20 wounded in the fighting. He said the sides were using heavy weaponry including 106 mm anti-tank weapons.

The violence was sparked when members of the militia loyal to the NTC arrested some Qaddafi loyalists, prompting other supporters of the former leader to take up arms, the resident said.

Bani Walid, base of the powerful Warfallah tribe, was a Qaddafi strong-hold

during Libya’s nine-month civil war. Anti-Qaddafi rebels fought for months to take the town.

Local tribal elders eventually agreed to let NTC fighters enter the town, but relations have been uneasy since and there have been occasional flare-ups of violence.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190126.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jktnav9cgv4>

- **South Sudan says Khartoum seized oil worth \$815 million**



South Sudan President Salva Kiir accused Sudan on Monday of seizing \$815 million worth of its crude oil in a row over how to share oil revenues between the former civil war foes.

South Sudan seceded last July under a 2005 peace deal that ended decades of

civil war between north and south, but the two countries are locked in a row over sharing oil revenues.

The new landlocked nation needs to use a northern pipeline and the port of Port Sudan to export the crude but has failed to reach an agreement with Khartoum over a transit fee, prompting Sudan to seize part of its oil as compensation.

Juba said last week it was preparing to shut down its oil output, which officials had said was 350,000 barrels a day.

“In total, the revenue that the government of Sudan has looted since December amounts to approximately \$815 million,” Kiir told parliament in Juba.

He accused Khartoum of having built a tie-in pipeline to divert 120,000 barrels per day of southern production flowing through the north.

Officials in Khartoum could not immediately be reached for comment.

Sudan President Omar Hassan al-Bashir said this month Khartoum would impose a fee since Juba had failed to pay any fee for

using northern export facilities since its independence.

“Given our history with the administration of President Bashir, we realize that unfortunately we must prepare for a disruption of revenue that could last many months,” Kiir said.

Sudan said last week it would continue seizing southern oil as part of compensation for what it said were unpaid transit fees. Khartoum is demanding \$1 billion for fees since July and \$36 a barrel, officials have said.

Kiir said the government would have to reduce its dependence on oil revenues, which make up 98 percent of state income.

“We will need to find other sources of funding. In doing so I have instructed the ministry of finance to initiate contingency plans for revenue collection and allocation,” he said.

Ravaged by decades of civil war, South Sudan is one of the most underdeveloped countries of the world. The government

wants to diversify the economy away from oil, but analysts see little progress so far.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190048.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jktnav9cgv4>

- **Mubarak still rules Egypt in accordance with constitution, defense tells court**



Hosni Mubarak is still the president of Egypt and the court trying him has no legal jurisdiction to do so, his defense lawyer said on Sunday, trying to undermine the prosecution's case against the leader deposed in a popular revolt last year.

Lawyer Farid al-Deeb was defending Mubarak for the fifth and final day of his closing remarks in a trial that Egyptians who rose up against Mubarak's 30-year-rule hope will bring justice.

The prosecution is seeking the death sentence on a charge that Mubarak was involved in the killing of some 850 protesters in the uprising.

Mubarak's defense has denied those charges and attacked the prosecution's case on other charges of corruption and abuse of power. Many Egyptians who want to see Mubarak held to account worry the case is not as strong as it should be.

A light sentence or an acquittal may fuel more rage and is likely to lead to street protests. Activists are calling for mass demonstrations on Jan. 25, the anniversary of the uprising.

"Is Hosni Mubarak still the president? I say yes. In accordance with the constitution, he is still the president until this day," Deeb said to applause and chants of "God is Greatest" among the defense team.

"We have a clear constitutional article that stipulates that the president of the state is to be tried by a special court."

Citing texts from the 1971 constitution, Deeb said the president can only be

referred to trial by two-thirds of parliament and that only a special tribunal can try him.

“Any law that contradicts that article is over-ruled,” Deeb said, as the security officers who filled up the court room, looked at each other in amusement and shock.

Mubarak’s defense told the court, as plaintiffs interrupted with verbal objections and others walked out, that Mubarak did not step down from office in accordance with the constitution. He would have had to send a written resignation to parliament.

Instead, his deputy read out a televised statement in which he avoided the word “resignation” and said Mubarak was “handing power” to the Supreme Military Council, a group of army generals who have ruled Egypt since Feb. 11.

“There is no such thing as a president of a state resigning just by informing his vice president,” Deeb said, raising the pitch of his voice and flaring his arms in the direction of the cage where Mubarak and other defendants were.

Some of the lawyers representing about 850 protesters killed during the uprising yelled “this is a revolution!”

“Based on this fact, all the investigations and the referral to court is void and this court is not entitled to hear this case,” Deeb said.

“I call for a verdict in which this court says it is not entitled to hear the case,” he added, calling for a preliminary innocent verdict to release the defendants.

As in previous sessions, the 83-year-old Mubarak was wheeled into the courtroom on a hospital trolley. The former air force commander listened to the defense, alongside him his two sons who are standing trial on charges of corruption, his former interior minister and other senior officers.

Broadcast live in its early stages, the trial mesmerized millions of Arabs. Mubarak is the first Arab leader toppled in a wave of protests to appear in court in person.

“Mubarak, I tell you, as you are surprised by the betrayal... do not despair as you

hear and listen to your sons, your people, your brothers, turning on you,” Deeb said.

“You who have carried Egypt on your shoulders when you fought for Egypt and for the Egyptian people,” he added.

As security officers and defense lawyers applauded, plaintiffs responded with chants of “down with Hosni Mubarak.”

The presiding judge suspended the trial until Monday, closing up his notes and leaving the room. The judge has given the defense until Feb. 16 to make their case.

Mubarak’s defense has said his accusers have no evidence that he ordered the killing of protesters and pointed out irregularities in their investigations.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/189982.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jktnnav9cgv4>

5. JORDAN and LEBANON

- **Mikati to make official visit to France in February**

Prime Minister Najib Mikati will make an official visit to Paris next month in

response to an invitation from French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The premier is set to travel to France on February 10 and meet with several other officials, including his French counterpart, Francois Fillon and French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, An-Nahar newspaper reported on Tuesday.

The daily quoted an unnamed diplomat as saying that Mikati will discuss “several political issues, especially the Syrian crisis” with French officials.

The diplomat added that officials in Paris “understand Lebanon’s position regarding the situation [in Syria] and its decision to ‘disassociate itself’ from the crisis.”

Lebanon’s political scene is split between supporters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, led by Hezbollah, and the pro-Western March 14 camp.

Assad’s troops have cracked down on protests against almost five decades of Baath rule which broke out mid-March, killing over 5,400 people and triggering a torrent of international condemnation.

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=356249>

- **Charbel: Lebanon asks Syria for explanation of sea border incident**

Interior Minister Marwan Charbel said that Lebanon has requested the relevant Syrian authorities explain the reasons behind the incident that occurred on the Lebanese-Syrian maritime border last week.

“Lebanon requested an explanation for the incident and the reasons behind [Syria’s] questioning of the [fishermen] who were on the boat,” Charbel said in an interview with Al-Jumhuriya newspaper published on Tuesday.

He also called for “exerting self-restraint and raising the citizens’ awareness” in the northern area where the incident took place.

A Lebanese boy was fatally wounded after gunmen opened fire on a fishing boat along the maritime border with Syria on Saturday.

Syrian authorities on Saturday returned the body of the Lebanese boy and freed his two uncles.

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=356241>

- **Mansour: Lebanon ‘disassociated’ itself from Arab League decision**

Foreign Affairs Minister Adnan Mansour said in Beirut on Monday after his return from Cairo, where he took part in the Arab League’s ministerial meeting, that Lebanon “disassociated itself” from the pan-Arab body’s decision on the Syrian situation, the National News Agency reported.

Mansour also said that Syria “did neither reject the decision to extend or strengthen the work of the Arab observers’ mission [in Syria]. [Syrian authorities] refused the [resolution], which is comprised of various specifications that [target] Syria’s sovereignty directly.”

“The Syrian government has the right to accept or refuse.”

Syria on Monday rejected the Arab League plan for President Bashar al-Assad to transfer power to his deputy, calling the initiative a "flagrant interference."

The Arab League on Sunday asked the UN to support a new plan for resolving the crisis in Syria that sees Assad transferring power to his deputy and a government of national unity within two months.

Mansour added that the "two sides in Syria" need to be asked to halt the killings, in reference to the Syrian regime and the opposition.

"Focusing on one side without the other, will not help [resolve the Syrian situation] and this is what the upcoming days will prove."

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=356084>

6. SYRIA

- **Gemayel: Countdown begins for Syrian regime collapse**

Kataeb Party leader Amin Gemayel said that "the countdown has begun" for the

collapse of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

"The countdown has begun... and the number of people killed in Syria does not allow Assad to [remain in power], so how will he deal with his people?" Gemayel asked during an interview with MTV on Monday night.

However, the Kataeb leader also warned Lebanese officials against "getting involved" in the Syrian crisis.

"Dragging ourselves into the issue will be catastrophic for Lebanon," Gemayel said, adding that he supports "anything that provides stability."

Commenting on Syrian violations of the Lebanese border, he said that "this is [typical] Syrian behavior."

"Humans are worthless to them, and killing people is easy for them," Gemayel added after Syrian gunmen opened fire on a fishing boat along the maritime border with Syria, killing one boy and detaining the two other fishermen.

Syrian authorities on Saturday returned the body of the Lebanese boy and freed his two uncles.

Assad's troops have cracked down on protests against almost five decades of Baath rule which broke out mid-March, killing over 5,400 people and triggering a torrent of international condemnation.

<http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=356228>

- **Syria rejects Arab League transition plan**

Syria has condemned a new Arab League initiative that calls on President Bashar al-Assad to cede power by holding early elections and forming a "unity government".

The Arab League has called on Assad to delegate power to his vice-president and for elections to be held under a "national unity government", the latest step in a diplomatic effort to end 10 months of political violence in Syria.

"Syria rejects the decisions taken which are outside an Arab working plan, and considers them an attack on its national

sovereignty and a flagrant interference in internal affairs," Syrian state television quoted a government official as saying on Monday.

The source also said that the resolution was part of a conspiracy against the Syrian people.

The Arab League's members agreed to a political initiative that would call for a unity government and early elections to end the Syrian crisis, Qatar's prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, said, after a meeting on Sunday of the 22-member body in Cairo, where the headquarters of the Arab League is located.

The new plan envisioned the "peaceful departure of the Syrian regime" and resembled the arrangement in Yemen, where Gulf states convinced Ali Abdullah Saleh, the outgoing president, to delegate power and leave the country, he said.

Peter Wittig, Germany's UN ambassador, said on Monday he had sent a letter to the president of the Security Council, the South African ambassador Baso Sangqu, to invite Nabil Elaraby, the Arab League

secretary-general, to brief the UN body on the situation in Syria later this week.

A senior Security Council diplomat said that Western delegations on the 15-nation body would meet later on Monday with their Gulf Arab counterparts to discuss possible next steps.

Security Council support

The Syrian rejection of the Arab League initiative came as opposition activists said thousands of people poured into the streets on Monday in a suburb outside the capital, Damascus, to mourn 11 residents who were killed a day earlier.

The crowd in Douma - which one activist said was 60,000-strong - was under the protection of dozens of army defectors who are in control of the area after government forces pulled out late on Sunday, Samer al-Omar, a Douma resident, said.

Nisreen El-Shamayleh reports on the statement by the head of the Arab League mission, Mustafa al-Dabi

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said troops and army defectors clashed on Monday near the western town of Qusair, close to the Lebanese border.

The opposition group said five soldiers were killed and 13 were wounded.

The SOHR also said that 11 civilians were killed by security forces in different parts of Syria, five of them in the northwestern province of Idlib, that borders Turkey.

The LCC, another Syrian opposition group, put Monday's death toll at 10.

The reports could not be independently confirmed.

In his statements in Cairo on Sunday, Sheikh Hamad said the Arab League's observer mission would be extended, and that the monitors would be given additional equipment after the head of the team, General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi of Sudan, said he wanted his mandate to be strengthened.

"We understand that al-Dabi has said to the Syrian committee that the mission has

not gained enough momentum yet to get a full judgement on it," Al Jazeera's Mike Hanna reported from Cairo on Monday,

"He said that he needed more time with the added monitors that he's received in recent weeks and the added geographical places in which the monitoring mission is now extended to see if this mission can in fact work."

'Dip in violence'

Speaking in Cairo on Monday, Dabi said that violence in Syria dipped after the observers arrived.

"After the arrival of the mission, the intensity of violence began to decrease," he said. "The mission's role is monitoring and is not stopping the killing or stopping the destruction or otherwise."

Dabi also maintained that "heavy military equipment" was removed from "all cities" in Syria.

The opposition activist group, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, said on Sunday that at least 840 Syrians have been

killed since December 23, when Arab League observers entered Syria.

David Hartwell, a risk analyst at IHS Jane's, talks to Al Jazeera on Arab League's presence and EU's sanctions

In a written statement, a spokesperson told Al Jazeera that the Arab League had failed to limit the bloodshed or oversee the implementation of its own peace plan.

Critics say the Arab mission has only provided diplomatic cover for Assad to pursue a crackdown that has already killed more than 5,000 people since anti-government protests erupted in March 2011, according to a UN count.

In another development on Monday, EU foreign ministers tightened sanctions against Syria, adding 22 people and eight entities to a list of banned people and groups.

They also reiterated that Assad's crackdown against protesters was unacceptable.

The individuals concerned were responsible for human rights violations and the entities supported Assad's government, the EU officials said in a statement issued after a meeting in Brussels.

Those proscribed will have their assets frozen and the individuals will be banned from entering the European Union.

"The message from the European Union is clear," the EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, said. "The crackdown must stop immediately."

The latest tightening of EU measures brings the total number of Syrian entities targeted by an asset freeze to 38 and the number of individuals subject to an asset freeze and visa ban to 108.

However, Syria appeared to have got a serious boost from allies in Russia. Russia's business daily, Kommersant, reported on Monday that Russia has signed a contract to sell 36 Yak-130 combat jets to Syria

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/201212305618873831.html>

- **Head of Arab observer mission in Syria says violence dipped**

The general who headed the Arab monitoring mission in Syria said on Monday that violence in the country had dipped after the observers arrived, contradicting accounts by Syrian activists who said the killing continued unabated.

"After the arrival of the mission, the intensity of violence began to decrease," Sudanese General Mohammed al-Dabi told a news conference at the Cairo-based Arab League.

The head of the monitoring team reported 136 deaths and the number includes supporters of both the opposition and the government.

"We have reported 136 cases of killing ... and they included both sides, opposition and the government, and included the recent explosions," Dabi told a news conference at the Arab League in Cairo.

There have been several explosions in Syria since the monitors arrived in December.

Dabi's appointment as head of the Arab mission was heavily criticized by the opposition as well as international rights groups who accuse him of involvement in crimes committed in Sudan's western region of Darfur.

The U.S.-based Enough Project created to fight genocide and crimes against humanity called Dabi's appointment as "perplexing" given "his record of turning a blind eye to human rights crimes, or worse," reported The Sudan Tribune.

The online publication quoted the group's Sudan analyst Omer Ismail as saying that "alleged war crimes were committed on Dabi's watch when he was serving as former head of the military intelligence."

He also said the mission's job was not to stop violence but to monitor what was happening on the ground and whether Syria was adhering to an Arab peace plan.

"Our job was to check what is going on the ground and not investigate it," he said.

Syrian activists have been critical of the mission saying it has simply bought time

for Assad without ending the violent 10-month crackdown on protests.

"I assure that the heavy military equipment has been withdrawn from all cities ... " Dabi said.

Despite criticism over the monitors' failure to end the bloodshed, the Arab ministers agreed to extend the mission, expand it and boost its technical and logistical support.

The extension was, however, overshadowed by Saudi Arabia's decision to withdraw its own monitors and urge the international community to exert "all possible pressure" on Damascus.

"The mission's role is monitoring and is not stopping the killing or stopping the destruction or otherwise," Dabi said, adding that the monitoring mission was sent to check whether Syria was adhering to an Arab peace plan.

That plan included calling for withdrawing the military from residential areas, releasing detainees, giving free access to the media and opening dialogue with the opposition.

“On releasing detainees, statements we got were based on general reports from opposition sources saying 12,000 have been detained or so but when we audited them we found that those reports lacked solid information and could not be verified,” Dabi said.

Hundreds of Syrians have been reported killed since the unarmed observers began their work. At least three monitors have told Reuters of deep civilian suffering and complained that the Syrian government has shown no will to end the crackdown.

Countering those who have said the mission has been buying time for the Syrian government, Dabi said: “I stressed (to Arab ministers) the necessity of bringing forward the peace process so that the national dialogue would take place simultaneously with the monitoring mission’s work.”

The European Union on Monday threw its weight behind an Arab League plan for a transitional government in Syria leading to elections, an attempt to end the violent repression by the regime of President Bashar Assad.

EU foreign ministers also extended measures against Assad’s government by adding 22 more officials and eight more companies to a sanctions regime. EU nations also called for United Nations action to end the repression that the U.N. says has left more than 5,400 people dead.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190089.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jktnav9cgv4>

- **Syrians feel sanctions as food prices double and power outages increase**



Syrians are beginning to feel the brunt of economic sanctions as food prices have almost doubled in recent weeks with the Syrian pound having plummeted to its lowest records against the dollar, prompting the government to announce partial floating of its currency and allowing

its value to be determined by the fluctuations in the foreign exchange market.

People across the county are struggling to cope with continuous power outages of up to six hours every day, an increase in tariffs and oil and fuel shortages.

A man who works in an import-export company, who did not want to be named, said his company stopped all its business activities because of the economic crisis and the “loss of confidence in the partner which are Syrian government transportation firms.”

He said these firms tend to confiscate imported products transported from ports of entry to distribution centers only to later claim that “terrorists” ambushed these vehicles.

A woman in the Damascus suburb said prices of some locally-produced basic food products have increased by 30 to 50 percent, while some imported food products were no longer available in the market.

The price of a gas canister, for example, increased from 250 to 400 pounds (\$2.5 to \$4) on Sunday in some areas while in other places its reached 700 pounds in other areas that are hard-hit by violence and locked military and security forces.

The rise in the price of gas was met with immediate anger even among the staunchest of the regime’s supporters.

The Syrian al-Dounia television quoted Adnan Dakhakhni, head of the Consumer Protection Association, as criticizing the decision to increase the price of gas, which he said affected people throughout the country.

But the crisis appears to have hit government institutions as well. Prime Minister Adel Safar has sent a letter to ministries to cut spending and halt new projects in the 2012 budget.

The Arab League, Turkey, the European Union and the United states have all imposed various economic sanctions on Syria, targeting its oil and gas industries and financial sectors.

Meanwhile, the continuous devaluation of the Syrian pound against the dollar has deepened the plight of Syrians. The exchange rate for the black market rates reached 75 pounds to the dollar, while the official rate was 57 pound to the dollar. Before the uprising, both the official and the black market rates were about 47 pounds to the dollar.

As the crisis in the country prolongs and the pound continues to devalue, the demand for the dollar as a safe haven increased. But private banks have become reluctant to sell the dollar at the official exchange rate, significantly lower than the exchange rate in the black market.

By allowing the banks to sell the dollar at the market rate, the government hopes to see more money flow into the economy, despite fears that the Syrian pound will further be devaluated.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190079.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jktnav9cgv4>

- **EU adopts fresh sanctions against Syria's military brass: diplomat**

EU foreign ministers adopted fresh sanctions against Syria's military brass on Monday, targeting a large number of security officials on a new list of people and firms hit by a travel ban and asset freeze.

Ministers targeted 22 people and eight companies in this 11th round of EU sanctions to protest the ongoing repression in Syria, said a diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"We call again for the violence to stop, for the (Arab League) monitors to be able to do their job unheeded," said European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton as she went into talks with the EU's 27 foreign ministers.

"We're deeply concerned with the situation in Syria," she added. "There needs to be a peaceful transition in that country."

No details were immediately available on the identities of the new targets.

The EU has already agreed 10 rounds of sanctions against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, with some 120 people

and companies targeted so far by an assets freeze and travel ban.

It is also enforcing an arms embargo and a ban on imports of Syrian crude oil.



In December, it expanded its sanctions list to include Syria's finance and economy ministers, state-owned oil companies and two media organizations.

The EU move comes after Syria rejected an Arab League plan for al-Assad to transfer power to his deputy and make way for a national unity government.

"Syria rejects the decisions taken which are outside an Arab working plan, and considers them an attack on its national sovereignty and a flagrant interference in internal affairs," state TV quoted an official as saying.

The Arab League on Sunday asked the United Nations to support a new plan for resolving the crisis in Syria that would see Assad transfer power to his deputy and a government of national unity within two months.

Assad should "delegate powers to the vice president to liaise with a government of national unity," to be formed in two months, according to a statement read by Qatari premier Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani.

The statement followed a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo to determine the fate of their Syrian observer mission.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190031.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jkttnav9cgv4>

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA

- **Yemen's president leaves for US, hands over power**

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh left his battered nation Sunday on his way to the U.S. for medical treatment after passing power to his

deputy and asking for forgiveness for any "shortcomings" during his 33-year rein.

But in a sign that Saleh's role as Yemen's top power broker is likely far from over, he said he would return to Yemen before the official power transfer next month to serve as the head of his ruling party.

Saleh's departure marks a small achievement in the months of diplomatic efforts by the U.S. and Yemen's powerful Gulf neighbors to ease the nearly year-old political crisis in the Arab world's poorest country. An active al-Qaeda branch there has taken advantage of the turmoil, stepping up operations and seizing territory.

After months of diplomatic pressure and mass protests calling for his ouster, Saleh signed a deal in November to transfer authority to his vice president in exchange for immunity from prosecution. Still, Saleh continued to exercise power behind the scenes, sparking accusations he sought to scuttle the deal and cling to power.

His departure could help the deal go forward.

Presidential spokesman Ahmed al-Soufi told The Associated Press that Saleh left Yemen's capital Sanaa late Sunday on a plane headed for the Gulf sultanate of Oman. He did not say how long Saleh would remain there, but added that he would make "another stop before heading to the United States of America."

A senior administration official said Ali Abdullah Saleh would travel to New York this week, and probably stay in the U.S. until no later than the end of February. U.S. officials believe Saleh's exit from Yemen could lower the risk of disruptions in the lead-up to presidential elections planned there on Feb. 21.

The Obama administration faced a dilemma in deciding whether to let Saleh enter the U.S. after he requested a visa last month. It has long seen getting Saleh out of Yemen as an important step in ensuring the power transfer goes forward.

But some in the administration worried that welcoming Saleh would spark charges from the Arab world that the U.S. was harboring an autocrat responsible for deadly crackdowns on protesters.

To protect against this, the administration has sought assurances that Saleh will not seek to remain in the U.S.

An official close to Saleh said Sunday the president would undergo medical exams in Oman before heading to the U.S. The U.S. has forbidden him from any political activity in the U.S., the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to disclose diplomatic talks.

Saleh is likely seeking treatment for injuries sustained in a blast in his palace mosque last June 3 that left him badly burned. After the attack, Saleh traveled to Saudi Arabia for treatment, leaving many to suspect his power was waning. A few months later, however, he made a surprise return to Yemen and resumed his post.

Under the power transfer deal signed in November, Vice President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi is to be rubber-stamped as the country's new leader in presidential elections. The political parties that signed the deal agreed not to nominate any other candidates.

In a farewell speech Friday reported by Yemeni state media, Saleh said he was passing his powers to Hadi, whom he promoted to the rank of marshal.

Saleh portrayed himself as a patriot who "gave his life in the service of the nation," called for reconciliation and apologized for any mistakes.

"I ask for forgiveness from all sons of the nation, women and men, for any shortcomings during my 33 years in office," Saleh said according to Yemen's state news agency.

He also called on Yemen's youth, who have spearheaded the mass protests calling for his ouster and often faced deadly crackdowns by Saleh's security forces, to go home.

"I feel for you and call on you to return to your homes and turn a new page with a new leadership," he said.

Yemen expert Gregory Johnsen of Princeton University said Saleh's departure could help the power transfer deal progress, though it will do little to

address protesters' demands for a fundamental change of how politics in Yemen works.

Throughout his rule, Saleh has put close members of his family and tribe in charge of key state institutions and security forces, Johnsen said. Leaving that network intact could allow Saleh to continue to shape events in Yemen, even without the title of president.

"I don't think we have seen the last of President Saleh," Johnsen said.

Inspired by popular uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, Yemenis took to the streets nearly a year ago to demand Saleh's ouster and call for democratic reforms. Saleh's security forces have met them with often deadly crackdowns, killing more than 200 protesters. Many others have been killed in violent clashes between armed groups that support the protesters and security forces.

Al-Qaeda's active Yemeni branch has also taken advantage of the security collapse to seize territory in the country's south, even taking control of a town 100 miles from the capital Sanaa earlier this month.

The protests have continued despite the power transfer deal, which many say falls far short of their demands. They also reject the immunity clause, saying they want to see Saleh tried for his alleged role in the protester deaths.

<http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=28201>

- **Yemen appointment sparks air force mutiny**



Air force personnel based in Sanaa left their base to protest at the home of Yemen's vice-president on Monday [AFP]

A wave of mutinies demanding the removal of Yemen's air force commander has spread to four military airbases, a day after the nation's outgoing president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, left the country to seek medical treatment in the US.

Members of the air force called for the sacking on Monday of Major-General Mohammed Saleh, a half-brother of Saleh, at bases in Sanaa, Al Anad, Taiz and Hodeida.

A senior officer in the Yemen's largest airbase of Al Anad in the southern Lahj province, Abdul-Qader Sufian, said on Monday that the troops at his base were demanding the general's removal.

"No to injustice, no to dictatorship, no to corruption," one banner hanging on Al Anad's walls read.

Colonel Mohammed al-Qubati at the air base in Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, said that about 200 airmen were continuing a protest that they started on Sunday.

They had been pushed from the air base by loyalist troops but had moved into the city, and were protesting at the nearby residence of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the vice-president who is set to assume presidential powers.

The officers said that the garrisons of two more bases, at Taiz in the south and at Hodeida in the west, were also protesting.

Saleh's departure

Saleh left Yemen on Sunday after passing power to Hadi and asking forgiveness for any "shortcomings" during his 33-year rule.

The US granted Saleh a travel visa, but officials said that his time there would be "limited".

"As we have indicated, the sole purpose of this travel is for medical treatment and we expect that he will stay for a limited time that corresponds to the duration of this treatment," the state department said in a statement on Sunday.

For more on Yemen, visit our Spotlight page

Saleh left Sanaa airport aboard a private Saudi jet on Sunday evening, according to the Yemeni news website Mareb Press.

In an address to Yemeni media earlier in the day, Saleh said he would return to the

country as head of the ruling General People's Congress party.

Protesters on Sunday tried to march to the US embassy but were stopped by Yemeni security forces.

"It is our duty... to execute the butcher," chanted the protesters gathered in Change Square, the centre of the democracy movement that has been calling for Saleh's removal since January last year.

After months of diplomatic pressure and mass protests calling for his ouster, Yemen's parliament adopted a law on Saturday giving Saleh "complete" immunity from prosecution in return for stepping down.

"To the politicians, we say there will be no immunity at the expense of the blood of our martyrs," the protesters said, referring to the hundreds killed in the government crackdown.

Saleh's immunity is part of a Gulf Cooperation Council-negotiated power transition deal aimed at ending the unrest in the country.

World Bank 're-engagement'

In another development on Monday, the World Bank lifted a funding freeze on Yemen and said it would resume relations with the new power-sharing government after closing its office in March 2011 due to political turmoil.

"The bank's re-engagement comes as a result of the improving security situation in Sanaa and the establishment of the new national unity government," the Washington-based lender said.

The World Bank said it would resume disbursements of credits and development grants to Yemen, and announced plans to conduct a social and economic impact study together with the United Nations, European Union and Islamic Development Bank.

"The bank will accelerate the implementation of key projects to restore the urgent basic services in areas affected by the crisis and to help in generating jobs," Wael Zakout, World Bank's country manager for Yemen, said.

Early presidential elections are scheduled to be held on February 21.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/2012123141624515166.html>

- **U.S. says Saleh's absence to help Yemen transition**



By Al Arabiya with Agencies

The White House said Monday President Ali Abdullah Saleh's absence from Yemen for medical treatment in the United States would aid a political transition that ends his three-decades of strong-arm rule.

But White House spokesman Jay Carney denied the decision to admit Saleh was part of a plan to influence events ahead of Yemen's election in February, saying the issue was purely a question of medical necessity.

"The fact of the matter is Mr. Saleh's request to travel to the US for medical treatment has been approved and the purpose of this travel is for medical treatment alone," Carney said.

"We expect that he will stay for a limited time that corresponds to the duration of this treatment."

While ruling out a behind-the-scenes effort to choreograph political change in Yemen, where an al-Qaeda insurgency is gathering strength, Carney argued that Saleh's departure from Yemen would be beneficial.

"We at the same time believe that his absence from Yemen at this critical juncture will help facilitate a transition that completes the end of his rule, helps Yemen and ultimately has a positive effect on the rights and dignity of the Yemeni people.

"Our policy focus remains on preventing further instability and keeping that transition on track."

On Sunday, Saleh gave a televised address apparently marking the end of his rule and

appealed for forgiveness from the Yemeni people for “any shortcomings” during his 33 years in power.

“The president... is on his way to the United States to continue what is left of his medical treatment” for wounds sustained in a June bomb attack on his compound, SABA news agency said on its website.

In his speech, Saleh said he would return to Yemen but not as president, apparently signaling he aims to follow through on a Gulf-brokered transition plan which provides for his ouster.

Extra forces

Meanwhile Yemen’s military has sent extra forces to a town seized by Islamists last week after negotiations with the militant group’s leader broke down, residents and witnesses said on Monday.

Tanks and armored vehicles were making their way towards Radda, about 170 km (105 miles) southeast of the capital Sana’a.

A year-long uprising against Saleh has been punctuated by bursts of open combat between his troops and those of a rebel general and tribal militiamen, while militants have exploited weak government control to grab territory, notably in the southern province of Abyan.

Islamist militants entered Radda a week ago, led by Tareq al-Dahab, a relative of U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki, whom Washington accused of a main role in the Yemeni branch of al Qaeda and assassinated in a drone strike last year. Witnesses said the military had sent heavy armor to the town on Monday.

Neighboring Saudi Arabia and the United States - which long backed Saleh as a key to its “counter-terrorism” policy - fear political paralysis over Saleh’s fate could embolden al-Qaeda’s regional, Yemen-based wing.

They support plans to end his 33 years in power by granting him immunity from prosecution over the deaths of protesters in the uprising.

Saleh, formally handed power to his deputy Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi in November.

Talks fall through

Dahab had said he would withdraw from Radda on condition that a council was set up to govern the town under Islamic law and that several jailed comrades, including his brother Nabil, were released. But talks fell through.

“As we were leaving Radda we saw 15 tanks and more than 20 armoured vehicles heading for one of the military bases on the west side of town,” one witness called Abdallah said on Monday.

Another said soldiers at checkpoints outside the town informed him that the reinforcements were meant to back an attack on the town.

A tribesman involved in negotiating with Dahab on the government’s behalf said other tribesmen were taking positions in the town and getting ready to fight.

“The fighters are equipped with machine guns, mortar shells, rocket-propelled grenades and shoulder-borne rockets.

Shop owners have moved their goods into storehouses outside the town and the situation could explode at any moment,” he said.

Militants shot dead a prison officer on Monday in the province of Dhamar, just south of Sanaa, a security official told Reuters.

Earlier, a spokesman for the militant group Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic law) said militants had ambushed and killed Saleh al-Jabri, the head of the prison. The security official said his rank was that of officer.

A military committee set up to normalize the situation after Saleh stepped down called on military and security bodies to release all those detained during the anti-Saleh protests in the past year, the state news agency Saba said.

The World Bank on Monday lifted a funding freeze to Yemen and said it would resume relations with the new power-sharing government. It closed its office in March 2011 due to political unrest.

Hadi, whom parliament has endorsed as sole candidate in an election to pick Saleh's successor next month, spoke on Sunday to U.S. counterterrorism chief John Brennan, who promised U.S. support, state news agency Saba reported.

Despite his departure, many Yemenis fear Saleh and his supporters will continue to hold sway over the country.

Hundreds of members of the air force gathered outside Hadi's residence in the capital on Monday demanding the resignation of their commander, Saleh's half-brother, whom they accuse of corruption.

Workers at the al-Anad air base in the southern province of Lahej went on strike and said they would not resume work until General Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar resigned, a worker there said.

<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/23/190149.html?PHPSESSID=g4eg3cbcigtmd7jktnav9cgv4>

8. AFGHANISTAN - PAKISTAN

• Roadside bomb injures 5 Afghan police

Press TV

January 23, 2012

At least five Afghan policemen have been injured in a roadside bomb attack in Afghanistan's eastern province of Khost, officials say.

The blast took place on Monday morning when a police vehicle hit a roadside bomb in Mando Zayi district near the Khost city.

Official said that the injured policemen were transferred to a hospital in the city for treatment.

Taliban militants have claimed responsibility for the attack. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed that the five policemen were killed during the attack.

Roadside bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are by far the most lethal weapon Taliban militants use against Afghan forces, foreign troops, and civilians.

The homemade explosive devices accounted for half of the about 1,500 civilian deaths in Afghanistan in the first six months of 2011, according to the United Nations.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **Afghan Military Official Says Attacks On NATO Soldiers 'Isolated' Cases**

January 23, 2012

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

A senior Afghan military official says recent incidents of security forces opening fire on NATO soldiers are isolated cases and not the result of increased Taliban infiltration of Afghan security forces, RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan reports.

The comment came in the wake of an incident in which a purported Afghan National Army soldier shot and killed four French troops and wounded at least 15 others in the eastern Kapisa Province, the site of the main French base in Afghanistan, on January 20.

That shooting was the latest deadly incident involving Afghan security forces

and foreign troops, undermining trust as NATO accelerates the training of Afghan forces ahead of the withdrawal of foreign combat troops in 2014.

France announced it was suspending all its joint combat operations and training programs for Afghan troops after the January 20 attack.

General Afzal Aman, the Afghan National Army's operations chief, told RFE/RL that the motive for the shooting was unclear and could have been a result of "different reasons."

"One of the reasons could have been provocation from our enemies," Aman said. "It could have been the mental illness that soldiers in the national army suffer from. Sometimes two or three people have arguments and then on the field something happens. The reasons for these actions against the French [soldiers] are not exactly known."

In response to the latest incident, Taliban spokesman Zabibulah Mujahid said in statement that "It is not yet clear whether the attacker belonged to the forces of the

Islamic Emirate," in a reference to the Taliban's label for Afghanistan since 1996.

Similar attacks in recent months have raised fears of increased Taliban infiltration into the Afghan police and army.

Last month, two French soldiers were killed in the same region by a man dressed as an Afghan soldier. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

But Aman said it was too soon to conclude that insurgents were infiltrating Afghanistan's armed forces.

"In the past, incidents have occurred in similar circumstances, but it is not likely the result of enemy infiltration," Aman said. "We haven't found enough evidence which shows that our enemies had infiltrated [our forces]. These cases were more the result of a personal reaction."

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **Killing of French soldiers by man in Afghan army uniform exposes Taliban infiltration**

By Abdul Haleem, Chen Xin

KABUL, Jan. 23 (Xinhua) -- In a dreadful incident, a man dressed in Afghan army uniform opened fire on Friday, killing four French soldiers and injuring 15 others in Kapisa province, 65 km northeast of Afghan capital Kabul.

The shocking incident, second of its kind over the past one month in militancy-plagued Afghanistan has prompted Paris to send its defense minister to the conflict-ridden country for inspection of the situation.

French Defense Minister Gerard Longuet, who landed on Afghanistan a day later on Saturday and visited his troops stationed in Kapisa province, has pointed finger at Taliban penetration into the Afghan army, according to local media reports.

"The man who opened fire on French soldiers in Tagab district of Kapisa province on Friday was a Taliban member and had received training in Pakistan," Daily Mandegar quoted the French Defense Minister as saying. The shooter has been arrested.

Nevertheless, Defense Minister Gerard Longuet in meeting with President Hamid Karzai assured of Paris continued support to Afghanistan.

A statement released by Afghan Presidential Palace on Sunday said that French Defense Minister in meeting with President Karzai emphasized that France would remain committed in bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan.

Afghan President besides extending deep condolences to the people and the government of France, had ordered concerned authorities to thoroughly investigate the bloody shooting, according to the statement.

The Taliban outfit, according to media reports, has claimed responsibility for the shooting, stressing its man carried out the attack.

Interestingly on the same day Friday, scores of Afghan soldiers had been poisoned.

A statement of Afghan Defense Ministry admitted "more than 100 soldiers were poisoned on Friday in Kabul Military

Training Center after taking lunch," adding investigation has been initiated.

However, Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman General Zahir Azimi in remarks covered by local media on Monday rejected the reported poisoning plot of soldiers as baseless, saying medical investigations has indicated that the poisoning was caused by careless washing of fruits and vegetables given to soldiers.

In an previous identical attack against French troops also in Kapisa province, a man in Afghan army uniform opened fire and killed two French soldiers on December 29, 2011.

Latest attack on French troops took place just days after NATO- led forces spokesman had rejected Taliban penetration into security apparatus.

"There were no signs that the Taliban are seriously infiltrating the Afghan security forces," Brigadier General Carsten Jacobson, the spokesman of NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), told reporters at a press conference on January 16.

Earlier, in a similar incident, a man in Afghan army uniform during a training mission opened fire on foreign troopers, killing a U.S. soldier and injuring at least five others before being shot dead in southern Zabul province on Jan. 8 this year.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

- **Pakistan Rejects US Findings on Deadly Border Attack**

VOA News
January 23, 2012

Pakistan's military has formally rejected the findings of a U.S. inquiry into last month's NATO attack that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers along the Afghan border.

The military said Monday that it does not agree with several portions of the investigation report, calling them "factually not correct."

U.S. defense officials blamed inadequate coordination by both Pakistani and U.S.-led forces for the November 26 attack. The U.S. military probe also found that

U.S. forces acted in self-defense and with appropriate force after being fired upon.

Pakistan's military on Monday dismissed the U.S. findings and said that holding Pakistan partially responsible for the incident on Pakistan is "unjustified and unacceptable."

Pakistan responded to the NATO attack by shutting down the two main overland routes the coalition uses to send nonlethal supplies to Afghanistan.

The border attack brought U.S.-Pakistan relations to a new low point, with ties already strained over the covert U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden last year and a number of U.S. drone strikes targeting militants in Pakistan's northwest.

In the latest strike, Pakistani officials say missiles fired by a U.S. drone hit a vehicle and a house Monday in North Waziristan tribal agency's Degan village, near the Afghan border. Authorities say four militants from Turkmenistan were killed in the attack.

Drone strikes resumed earlier this month after a drop-off in such attacks following the deadly November 26 NATO airstrike.

Pakistan has condemned drone strikes as a violation of the country's sovereignty, but they are believed to be carried out with the help of Pakistani intelligence.

U.S. officials have never publicly acknowledged the missile strikes against militants in Pakistan's tribal areas, but have anonymously confirmed such attacks to various news outlets.

<http://www.aopnews.com/today.html>

Ortadoğu ülkelerinin yerel haber kaynaklarından derlenmektedir. Belirtilen görüşler bölge ülkelerinin haber kaynaklarına ve ismi geçen yazarlara ait olup ORSAM'ın görüşünü yansıtmamaktadır.

**This media summary is prepared by ORSAM Middle East Research Assistants Nebahat Tanrıverdi O and Sercan Doğan. It covers news and commentaries as reported by the national media sources publishing in the Middle Eastern countries. The views expressed are not those of ORSAM and their inclusion does not imply factual accuracy.*

**Bu bülten ORSAM Ortadoğu Uzman Yardımcıları Nebahat Tanrıverdi O ve Sercan Doğan tarafından hazırlanmaktadır. Bülten*