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TABLE OF CONTENTS / İÇİNDEKİLER

1. IRAQ / IRAK

2. IRAN / İRAN

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE / İSRAİL – FİLİSTİN

4. EGYPT / MISIR

5. LEBANON / LÜBNAN

6. SYRIA / SURİYE

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF / ARAP YARIMADASI VE BASRA KÖRFEZİ

8. SOUTH ASIA / GÜNEY ASYA

**PAKISTAN / PAKİSTAN
INDIA / HINDİSTAN
AFGHANISTAN / AFGANİSTAN**

1. IRAQ / IRAK

- U.S. Vice President Joe Biden insisted that despite the political stalemate in Baghdad, the United States remains on track for the drawdown of troops from Iraq by August, according to the FoxNews.

“I don’t have a doubt in my mind that we’ll be able to meet the commitment of having only 50,000 troops there and it will not in any way affect the physical stability of Iraq,” the television quoted the vice president as saying.

He added, “There is a transition government. There is a government in place that’s working.”

Indeed White House press secretary Robert Gibbs Monday echoed the vice president’s optimistic outlook, telling reporters, “I think that we are on the verge of making a considerable drawdown in Iraq, that, if I recall correctly, a year before that, many said wasn’t going to happen.”

But Biden’s comments contradict what he said a few years ago when he advocated dividing Iraq into three parts based on ethnicity. He argued at a democratic presidential debate in August of 2007 that his plan would “separate the parties and give them some breathing room in order to establish some stability.”

He added that the fundamental mistake both the Bush administration and his colleagues continued to make was simple, clinging to the hope that “there is any possibility in the lifetime of anyone here of having the Iraqis get together, have a unity government in Baghdad that pulls the country together.”

When confronted about his change in attitude, the Vice President denied having ever suggested a three way partition and boasted that the country’s political parties “are in negotiations right now to figure out how to allocate the power within that government. In other words, share power. And it is about just that. And it’s underway. And it’s going to happen.” (Aswat al-Iraq)

- Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki will hold a meeting on Tuesday afternoon with Head of al-Iraqiya List Iyad Allawi to discuss ways of solving the current political crisis, a well-informed source said.

“The meeting came in response to an invitation from al-Maliki in an attempt to solve the current crisis among political blocs,” the source told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

Differences are heating up among the al-Iraqiya, which obtained 91 seats, and Maliki’s Dawlat al-Qanoon (State of Law), which came second with 89 seats, to win the post of prime minister for the new government.

Incumbent Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki’s bloc struck a coalition with Ammar al-Hakeem’s Iraqi National Alliance (INA), together having 159 seats, in a bid to form the largest parliamentary bloc, a matter viewed by Allawi’s al-Iraqiya as a twisting of democracy on the grounds that his bloc was the largest one with votes in the elections and consequently it has the right to form a government. (Aswat al-Iraq)

- Head of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC) discussed on Tuesday with chairman of the National Congress the delay in forming the new government, according to an official statement.

“Ammar al-Hakim discussed on Tuesday (July 20) with Ahmad al-Jalabi the latest developments in Iraq and their position from the delay in forming the government,” said the statement received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

“The meeting underlined the importance of talks and consultations to solve this crisis,” the statement quoted al-Jalabi as saying.

Differences are heating up between the al-Iraqiya, which obtained 91 seats, and Maliki’s Dawlat al-Qanoon (State of Law), which came second with 89 seats, to win the post of prime minister for the new government. (Aswat al-Iraq)

- The oil ministry issued on Tuesday tough decisions against oil derivatives traffickers, in addition to tightening surveillance at oil plants and warehouses, according to spokesman of the ministry.

“The oil ministry issued tough and strong decisions against oil derivatives traffickers,” Essam Jehad told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

“The ministry coordinates with security authorities and border guards to prevent all kinds of trafficking, in addition to tightening surveillance at oil plants and warehouses,” he added. (Aswat al-Iraq)

- The Basra Provincial Council has approved an investment project that will supply the al-Faw district with electricity.

“The project was proposed by an international firm,” a source from the council told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

It noted that the project requires a work time of 30 days, and will supply the al-Faw (100 km south of Basra city) with 40 Mwatt of electricity.

The oil-rich city of Basra lies 590 km south of Baghdad. (Aswat al-Iraq)

- The Basra Governor Shaltagh al-Mayiah and the director general of a Russian firm on Tuesday discussed investment projects in the province.

“The Basra Local Authority is seeking a Russian role in rebuilding the province,” al-Mayiah told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

For his part, the director general of the Russian firm said that his company seeks to invest in a number of projects in Basra, within the fields of electricity, water purification, and water treatment.

The oil-rich city of Basra lies 590 km south of Baghdad. (Aswat al-Iraq)

- The former director general of Britain's domestic intelligence agency said Tuesday that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had greatly increased the terrorist threat to Britain and that intelligence available before the Iraq war had not been sufficient to justify the invasion of that country.

Sir John Chilcot, chairman of a panel investigating the events leading to the Iraq war. A report is expected this year.

"Our involvement in Iraq, for want of a better word, radicalized a whole generation of young people — not a whole generation, a few among a generation — who saw our involvement in Iraq, on top of our involvement in Afghanistan, as being an attack on Islam," said the former official, Baroness Manningham-Buller.

Lady Manningham-Buller, who led MI5, roughly the British equivalent of the F.B.I., from 2002 to 2007, made her remarks in testimony to a panel investigating the events leading to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The panel, led by Sir John Chilcot, has heard from a variety of witnesses, including Sir Richard Dearlove, the former leader of MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence agency, and former Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The panel is expected to issue a report later this year examining some of the mistakes that were made and making recommendations for future military operations.

Lady Manningham-Buller has said on a number of occasions that Mr. Blair's government failed to heed MI5's warning that attacking Saddam Hussein would make Britain more vulnerable to terrorism. But her remarks to the panel on Tuesday were particularly pointed and critical of the decisions leading to the American-led, British-supported invasion.

Answering questions from the panel, she also said that Iraq had presented little threat to Britain before the invasion, and that there had been no reliable evidence linking the government of Saddam Hussein to the terrorist attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001.

"There was no credible intelligence to suggest that connection, and that was the judgment, I might say, of the C.I.A.," she said.

“Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11,” she added, “and I have never seen anything to make me change my mind.”

But, she said, “it was not a judgment that found favor with some parts of the American machine” — namely Donald H. Rumsfeld, the United States secretary of defense at the time.

That “is why Donald Rumsfeld started an alternative intelligence unit in the Pentagon to seek an alternative judgment,” she said.

Lady Manningham-Buller also said that Britain relied on “fragmentary” intelligence before invading Iraq, and that MI5 had not believed that Mr. Hussein was amassing unconventional weapons in Iraq, as the government contended.

The belief that Iraq might use such weapons “wasn’t a concern in either the short term or the medium term to my colleagues and myself,” she said.

Not only was the invasion unnecessary based on what was known about Iraq, Lady Manningham-Buller said, but it diverted attention from the real threat, Al Qaeda.

“By focusing on Iraq, we ceased to focus on the Al Qaeda threat or we reduced the focus on the Al Qaeda threat in Afghanistan,” she said. “I think that was a long-term, major and strategic problem.”

The invasion led to an “almost overwhelming” increase in homegrown terrorism, she said, so much so that MI5 had to have its budget doubled in the following months. And after the invasion, about 70 to 80 Britons traveled to Iraq to join the insurgency, she said, thus creating a threat where there had been none.

“Arguably, we gave Osama bin Laden his Iraqi jihad,” she said. (New York Times)

- The former head of British intelligence has criticised the US-led war in Iraq in a testimony before an inquiry panel in London.

Baroness Eliza Manningham-Buller said that the war, which was launched in 2003, was not justified because Iraq had not posed a threat to the UK at the time.

She also said that Britain's involvement in Iraq invasion played into Osama Bin Laden's hands and radicalised British muslims.

Al Jazeera's Laurence Lee reports from London. (Al Jazeera)

- Britain's support for the war in Iraq was connected to a series of deadly bombings in London and sparked a rise in domestic attack plots that "swamped" security services, a former intelligence chief has said.

Eliza Manningham-Buller, director of the MI5 between 2002 and 2007, told a public inquiry in London on Tuesday that the 2003 invasion "undoubtedly increased the threat [of domestic attacks], and by 2004 we were pretty well swamped".

She said that the war had "radicalised a whole generation of young people," and that some British Muslims perceived the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan to be an attack on Islam.

Between 2001 and 2008, Britain investigated about 16 "substantial" domestic plots, of which about 12 were stopped, she told the hearing into the Iraq war.

In July 2005, four suicide bombers detonated bombs on London's transport network, killing 52 commuters and injuring hundreds more.

Video messages left by the attackers referred to Britain's role in Iraq.

'No link to 9/11'

Manningham-Buller told the five-member inquiry panel, appointed by Britain's government, that the decision to invade Iraq had also likely provided an impetus to al-Qaeda.

"Arguably we gave Osama bin Laden his Iraqi jihad, so that he was able to move into Iraq in a way that he was not before," she said.

By contrast, the former MI5 chief told the inquiry, Iraq had posed little threat to Britain in the years leading up to the war.

"We did not believe they had the capacity to do much in the UK," she said.

She added that there was a lack of evidence linking Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi leader, to the September 11 attacks in the US.

"There was no credible intelligence to suggest that connection and that was the judgement, I might say, of the CIA," she told the inquiry.

"It was not a judgment that found favor with some parts of the American machine."

"It is why Donald Rumsfeld started an alternative intelligence unit in the Pentagon to seek an alternative judgment," Manningham-Buller, who was a frequent visitor to the US, said.

The inquiry, chaired by former civil servant John Chilcot, was set up last year by Brown to learn lessons from the war.

Previous probes have cleared the government of any wrongdoing.

Former UN weapons inspector Hans Blix is expected to appear before the inquiry in the coming weeks.

The inquiry is expected to conclude at the end of this year, but will not apportion blame or assign criminal liability for mistakes made. (Al Jazeera)

- Following are security developments in Iraq at 1915 GMT on Tuesday.

* Denotes a new or updated item.

* BAGHDAD - A bomb attached to a car carrying a government official working at the Agriculture Ministry wounded him in Baghdad's northern district of Adhamiya, police said.

* BAQUBA - Two roadside bombs targeting a police patrol wounded 10 policemen in a small town east of Baquba, 65 km (40 miles), northeast of Baghdad, police said.

BAQUBA - One person was killed and seven others were wounded when a parked car bomb exploded near a restaurant west of Baquba, northeast of Baghdad, police said. Most of the wounded were Iranian pilgrims, police said.

QARA TAPPA - A car bomb killed two civilians and wounded 17 others when it went off in a marketplace in the small town of Qara Tappa, 122 km (73 miles) north of Baghdad, police said.

KIRKUK - A roadside bomb wounded a soldier when it struck an Iraqi army patrol southwest of Kirkuk, 250 km (155 miles) north of Baghdad, police said.

KIRKUK - A roadside bomb wounded three policemen when it exploded near their patrol in southern Kirkuk, police said.

TAL AFAR - Iraqi army forces, tipped off by intelligence, killed a suicide bomber trying to blow himself up in a residential area of Tal Afar, 420 km (260 miles) northwest of Baghdad, on Monday, police said.

BASRA - A roadside bomb wounded three soldiers when it hit a military convoy in central Basra, 420 km (260 miles) southeast of Baghdad, on Monday, police said. (Reuters)

- Iraq has signed a raft of deals with foreign oil companies that could take its crude output capacity up to 12 million barrels per day, rivalling top producer Saudi Arabia.

There are still hurdles in the way, not least a political impasse following a March 7 parliamentary election that produced no outright winner and as yet no new government.

A new Iraqi government could be inclined to renegotiate some of the deals, though the lure of billions of dollars in revenues could persuade whoever forms the next government to allow the contracts to stand unchallenged.

The following are the signed deals, listed in order of the size of the reservoirs involved, and others still in the works:

* RUMAILA

Britain's BP Plc (BP.L) and China's CNPC signed the first major post-U.S. invasion oil deal in November for supergiant Rumaila field, with estimated reserves of 17 billion barrels. The two companies aim to boost production to 2.85 million bpd from around 1.066 million bpd currently, and have accepted a remuneration fee of \$2 per barrel.

BP said it would invest around \$15 billion. BP has a 38 percent stake and its partner CNPC has 37 percent while Iraq holds 25 percent.

* WEST QURNA PHASE TWO

Russian energy giant Lukoil (LKOH.MM) and Norway's Statoil (STL.OL) sealed a deal for the supergiant, 12.9-billion-barrel oilfield in Iraq's south on Jan. 31. The partners agreed a remuneration fee of \$1.15 per barrel and pledged to take production to a plateau of 1.8 million bpd.

Iraq holds a 25 percent stake, Lukoil 56.25 percent and Statoil 18.75 percent. Statoil has said it would invest \$1.4 billion over 4-5 years. Lukoil put total investment at more than \$30 billion. The firms would start recovering costs when output reaches 120,000 bpd.

* MAJNOON

The massive 12.6-billion-barrel Majnoon oilfield was taken by Royal Dutch Shell (RDSa.L), Europe's largest oil company, and Malaysia's Petronas [PETR.UL], which inked the final pact on Jan. 17. Shell officials have said the firms would invest "tens of billions" of dollars.

Shell has a 45 percent share, with partner Petronas holding 30 percent and Iraq 25 percent. The firms will receive a remuneration fee of \$1.39 per barrel for boosting output to a plateau production target of 1.8 million bpd from current output of just under 50,000 bpd. Firms can start recovering costs once output hits 175,000 bpd.

* WEST QURNA PHASE ONE

West Qurna Phase One found no bidders in the first auction, but a subsequent competition behind closed doors led to a deal with Exxon Mobil (XOM.N) and Shell. The companies inked the final pact on Jan. 25.

The field has reserves of 8.7 billion barrels. The consortium aims to boost output to 2.325 million bpd after setting baseline production at 244,000 bpd. [ID:nRAS832007]

The group accepted a fee of \$1.90 per barrel. Exxon has a 60 percent interest in the consortium, with Iraq holding 25 percent and Shell the remainder. An Exxon executive said on July 19 that the group aims to raise production by 10 percent by the end of the first quarter of 2011.

* HALFAYA

China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), France's Total (TOTF.PA) and Petronas clinched the final contract for Halfaya on Jan. 27, with a fee of \$1.40 per barrel and a plateau production target of 535,000 bpd from a current 3,100 bpd.

Total holds an 18.75 percent interest in the consortium, and CNPC with 37.5 percent, Petronas 18.75 percent and Iraq 25 percent. Halfaya, situated in southern Iraq, has estimated reserves of 4.1 billion barrels of oil. The firms would start recovering costs when output hits 70,000 bpd.

On April 22, Total said it is considering a bigger stake in the Halfaya oilfield. [ID:nLDE63L107]

* ZUBAIR

Italy's Eni (ENI.MI) sealed the final contract with Iraq on Jan. 22 for the 4-billion-barrel Zubair oilfield. Eni and partners, U.S.-based Occidental Petroleum Corp (OXY.N) and KOGAS, set an output target of 1.2 million bpd. The group agreed with Iraq to set the baseline production level at 183,000 bpd. [ID:nRAS832007]

The consortium planned to invest over \$20 billion and accepted a remuneration fee of \$2 a barrel. Eni has a 32.81 percent stake, Oxy 23.44 percent, KOGAS 18.75 percent and Iraq's Missan Oil Company 25 percent.

* MAYSAN

Iraq signed a final deal on May 17 with China's CNOOC (0883.HK) and state-run Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) for a service contract for the 2.5- billion-barrel, three-oilfield Maysan complex.

The fields were offered in the first auction of oilfield contracts but not awarded. According to Iraqi officials, CNOOC accepted the proposed remuneration fee of \$2.30 for every additional barrel of oil produced, compared with more than \$20 per barrel it and its old partner China's Sinochem -- which pulled out of the deal -- had originally sought.

CNOOC and TPAO set a plateau target for the oilfields at 450,000 bpd after six years. CNOOC said it will hold a 63.75 percent stake in the venture while TPAO holds 11.25 percent. Maysan comprises three fields -- Bazargan, Abu Gharab and Fakka in southern Maysan province.

* AL-AHDAB

CNPC started work last March on the al-Ahdab oilfield in southeastern Wasit province after successfully renegotiating an old development deal that dated back to Saddam Hussein's government.

CNPC hopes to pump 110,000-130,000 bpd from the field, which has estimated reserves of 1 billion barrels.

* GHARAF

A smaller oilfield with 900 million in reserves, Gharaf was won by Petronas and the Japan Petroleum Exploration Co (Japex) (1662.T) in a fierce competition in the second bidding round, and the deal was signed on Jan. 18.

Petronas will hold 45 percent, Japex 40 percent and Iraq 25 percent, and will receive a fee of \$1.49 per barrel. Gharaf has a production target of 230,000 bpd. The consortium expects to invest \$7-\$8 billion. The firms can start recovering costs once output reaches 35,000 bpd. (Reuters)

2. IRAN / İRAN

- İslami Şura Meclis Başkanı Ali Laricani, BM Güvenlik Konseyi'nin İran'a karşı yeni yaptırımlar ilan etmesinin, nükleer program konusunda anlaşmaya varan İran, Brezilya ve Türkiye'ye karşı saygısızlık olduğunu belirtti.

Laricani, İsviçre'nin Cenevre kentinde Parlamentolararası Birlik tarafından düzenlenen Dünya Parlamento Başkanları 3. Konferansı çerçevesinde düzenlediği basın toplantısında, İran ile uzlaşma için Türkiye ve Brezilya'nın ABD tarafından görevlendirildiğini ve üç ülkenin barışçıl bir çözümün yolunu açan bir anlaşma olarak sundukları 17 Mayıs'ta imzalanan anlaşmanın, nükleer yakıtın takasını öngördüğünü belirtti.

Ancak anlaşma belgesinin Washington tarafından eleştirildiğini ve BM Güvenlik Konseyi'nin 9 Haziran'da ülkesine yeni yaptırımlar kararlaştırdığını söyleyen Laricani, "Güvenlik Konseyi ve ABD'nin yaptığı İran, Türkiye ve Brezilya'ya hakarettir. ABD bir görev verdi (Türkiye ve Brezilya'ya) ve biz bir anlaşmaya vardık, sonra da ihanete uğradık" diye konuştu.

İran'ın Rusya ile normal ilişkileri bulunduğunu belirten Laricani , Rusya Devlet Başkanı Dimitri Medvedev'in İran'ın nükleer programıyla ilgili açıklamalarına değinerek, "Medvedev'in söylediklerine karşıyım. Başbakan Putin ile bir diplomasi ve çok aktif ilişkiler oluşturduk. Ruslar nükleer silahımız olmadığını iyi biliyor, Amerikalılar da bunu biliyor" dedi.

İran, 17 Mayıs tarihinde Türkiye ve Brezilya'nın arabuluculuğunda imzalanan ve Tahran Deklarasyonu olarak bilinen anlaşma çerçevesinde, düşük düzeyde zenginleştirilmiş 1,200 kilogram uranyumunu, Türkiye üzerinden yüksek oranda zenginleştirilmiş 120 kilogram uranyumla takas etmeyi kabul etmişti. (IRNA)

- İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanı Menuçehr Mutteki ve Avrupa Birliği (AB) Dışişleri Yüksek Temsilcisi Catherine Ashton Kabil'de biraraya geldiler.

Kabil'de ülkenin geleceğini görüşmek üzere 70'den fazla ülke ve uluslararası örgütün temsilcilerinin biraraya geldiği Afganistan konferansı çerçevesinde va Ashton'un isteği ile yapılan görüşmede, Mutteki, teröristlere karşı Avrupa'nın çifte standart tutumunu eleştirerek, terörist örgütü Cundullah lideri Abdulmanlik Rigi'nin bazı yabancı ülkelerle ilişkileri olduğuna ilişkin itiraflarına işaret etti.

Görüşmede bölgesel meselelerine de değinen Mutteki, Afganistan'ın yeni bir tecrübe kazanma yolunda olduğunu, bu ülkenin sorunlarının çözümü için onların adet ve geleneklerine teveccüh edilmesi gerektiğini vurguladı.

İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanı, Afganistan'da yenilgiye uğrayan Bush'un politikasının devamı olan ve bugün de uygulaması devam eden politikalara işaret ederek, Obama ve Bush'un politikaları arasında hiçbir fark olmadığını hatırlattı.

Mutteki, konuşmasının devamında, İran'ın barışçıl nükleer hakkına da vurguladı.

Görüşmede Ashton, nükleer konulu müzakerelerin başlamasının gerekliliğini vurgulayarak görüşmelerin yeniden başlaması için AB'nin hazır olduğunu tekrarladı.

Görüşmede Ashton'un , "İran İslam Cumhuriyeti ile temas halindeyiz ve her iki taraf için kabul edilebilir bir çözüm bulunmasında kararlıyız" dediğini belirtiyor. (IRNA)

- İran İslam Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı sözcüsü Ramin Mihmanperest, ABD ile görüşme ve müzakerenin şimdilik mümkün olmadığını bildirdi.

Mihmanperest, haftalık olağan basın toplantısında yaptığı açıklamada Amerikan yönetiminin, İran aleyhindeki politikalarının sürdüğünü belirterek,

"Düşmanca siyasetleri, BM Güvenlik Konseyinde yaptırım kararı aldırması, tek taraflı yaptırım uygulaması ve İran vatandaşlarına karşı yanlış tutumları yüzünden ABD ile görüşme ve müzakere şimdilik mümkün değildir" dedi.

Mihmanperest, Zahidan kentindeki terör saldırısı ile ilgili olarak bölge ülkelerinin terörle mücadele için plan yapmaları gerektiğinin altını çizerek Pakistan hükümeti ile müzakerenin bu yönde gündemde bulunduğunu söyledi.

Mehmanperest 70 ülke dış işleri bakanları ve temsilcileri ve usulararası ve bölge kuruluşları ile mali kurumlar temsilcilerinin katılımıyla Afganistan'da düzenlenen Kabil konferansı hususunda ise bölgesel krizin giderilmesi için çözümlerin bölge ülkelerinin katkılarıyla bulunabileceği ve Afganistan konusunun hatalı tutumlar ve askeri girişimlerle sonuca varmayacağını söyledi.

Sözcü ayrıca bölge ülkeleri ve komşuların sorunların çözümlenmesinde belirleyici rol oynadığı ve Afganistan hükümeti ve milletinin sorumlulukların başında yer alması gerektiği İran'ın ise buna destek verdiğini belirtti. (IRNA)

- BM Genel sekreteri Ban Ki Mun, Afganistan'da istikrar ve barışın sağlanmasında İran İslam Cumhuriyetinin rolünün çok önemli olduğunu bildirdi.

Mun dün Kabil'de düzenlenen Afganistan uluslararası konferansın kulisinde İran İslam Cumhuriyeti dışişleri bakanı Menuçehr Mutteki ile yaptığı görüşme sırasında, İran'la Afganistan'ın iki komşu devlet olmaları ve aralarında uzun sınırların bulunması hasebiyle Afganistan'da barış ve istikrarın sağlanmasında Tahran'ın rolünün çok önemli olduğunu bildirdi.

Ban Ki Mun, nükleer mesele konusunda dostluk görüşmelerinin devam etmesi zaruretini de hatırlatarak İran'la Viyana grubu arasındaki görüşmelere en kısa zamanda yeniden başlanması çağrısını tekrarladı.

İran İslam Cumhuriyeti dışişleri bakanı Menuçehr Muttaki ise bu görüşmede Amerika'nın son 9 yıl içinde Afganistan'da izlediği siyasetleri eleştirerek krizlerin çözümlenmesi amacıyla bölgesel yaklaşımın olması zaruretini hatırlatarak, bu konuda uluslar arası alanda da destek sağlanmasını istedi.

Muttaki, İran'ın Zahidan kentinde gerçekleşen ve çok sayıda kişinin şehit olduğu veya yaralandığı terör olayıyla ilgili Ban Ki Mun'un taziyelerinden dolayı teşekkürlerini bildirerek, teröristlerin bir takım yabancı devletlerle yakın ilişkilerinin bulunduğu itiraf etmelerinin üzerinde durulması gereken önemli bir mesele olduğunu, İran halkı ve devletinin bu meselenin takib edilmesini beklediklerini söyledi. (IRNA)

- Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast has announced that Iran is ready to hold negotiations with Pakistan over the issues of security and counter-terrorism.

The Islamic Republic believes that establishing regional security and tackling the issue of cross-border terrorism require considerable efforts and full-fledged cooperation among regional countries, Mehmanparast said at his weekly press briefing on Tuesday.

Regional countries can play a significant role at this juncture, and thus negotiation with Pakistan is high on the agenda, he added.

The fact that some Western countries have condemned the recent terrorist attack in the southeastern Iranian city of Zahedan is a step in the right direction, but actions speak louder than words, he noted.

However, Western countries should stop providing safe havens for terrorists and cut all channels of communication with them, he suggested.

Two suicide bomb attacks left 27 people dead and about 300 people injured in Zahedan on July 15.

The terrorist group Jundullah has claimed responsibility for the attacks. In a statement posted on its web site, Jundullah described the attacks as retaliation for Iran's June 21 execution of the group's former ringleader, Abdolmalek Rigi.

Iran executed Abdolmalek Rigi a month after his brother Abdulhamid Rigi, who had been captured in Pakistan in 2008 and extradited to Iran, was hanged in Zahedan.

Zahedan is the capital of Sistan-Baluchistan Province, which borders Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Some parts of Pakistan have become safe havens for terrorist groups who seek to destabilize Iran's border regions. After launching their attacks in Iranian territory, they flee across the border into Pakistan.

Many analysts, including a number of former senior CIA officials, are of the opinion that the United States is supporting Jundullah in order to pressure Iran to halt its uranium enrichment program. (Mehr News Agency-MNA)

- Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki proposed five principles to help resolve the Afghanistan crisis at the international conference on Afghanistan.

The international conference on Afghanistan opened in Kabul on Tuesday, with Afghan President Hamid Karzai delivering the opening speech.

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and delegates from more than 70 countries and several international organizations attended the one-day conference.

The foreign forces came to Afghanistan to establish stability and security in the country, but the situation has deteriorated during the approximately nine years they have been in the Central Asian nation, Mottaki said.

He also expressed his concern over the escalation of drug trafficking during the past few years due to the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan, adding that in order to be successful, the campaign against drug smuggling requires international as well as regional cooperation.

The Iranian foreign minister also expressed hope that the conference would explore ways to resolve the crisis based on the political, security, and economic realities of Afghanistan and the region.

In his address to the conference, Mottaki proposed the following five-point plan to help resolve the Afghanistan crisis:

(1) The Constitution of Afghanistan is the greatest achievement of this country, so it must be used as the criterion for any measures taken by the country. In addition, the process of forming a government and strengthening civil institutions should be supported.

(2) The presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan will not improve the situation in the country. The Afghan government and people must be trusted, and a timetable should be set for the withdrawal of foreign forces.

(3) Selective and double-standard approaches toward fighting terrorism and extremism must be avoided.

(4) Security and development must be regarded as two inseparable factors. The international community should pay more attention to the reconstruction of Afghanistan and its infrastructure. Iran has assumed an active role in this process and expresses its solidarity with Afghanistan.

(5) The regional approach must be regarded as the best way to resolve the Afghanistan crisis, and the international community should support it. Iran has been the initiator of regional summits. A summit will be held in Tehran in the near future with the attendance of the foreign ministers of six of Afghanistan's neighbors. Iran hopes such regional cooperation will help resolve the crisis. Increasing economic cooperation in various areas, such as transportation, the transit (of goods), and the transfer of electricity, is on the top of the agenda.

In conclusion, he stated that a secure Afghanistan would help promote regional and international security. (MNA)

- In a meeting with his Greek counterpart, Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani stated that Iran has always been against proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Holding talks with Philippos Petsalnikos on the sidelines of an Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) conference in Geneva, Larijani criticized the world powers which chant "empty slogans" while "modernizing" their nuclear weapons.

Larijani also called for further Tehran-Athens cooperation.

Petsalnikos, for his part, highlighted the importance of the parliamentary friendship groups in strengthening bilateral ties.

Petsalnikos said Greece is a peace-loving country and calls for non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The Greek parliament speaker also noted that the two countries have the potential to help resolve the Palestine and Cyprus crises.

Larijani invited his counterpart to visit Iran.

In another meeting, Ali Larijani and his Syrian counterpart Mahmoud al-Abrash urged the Islamic parliaments to set up a fund to help the people of Gaza.

The two parliament speakers also exchanged views on the latest developments in the Middle East as well as attempts by the U.S. and Israel to overshadow the attack on the freedom flotilla on May 31 in which 9 Turkish nationals were killed. (MNA)

- Iran's bordering areas enjoy good and desirable security, a senior official stressed on Tuesday, noting that a major part of the insecurities seen on the rims of the country are sparked by the foreign enemies spearheaded by the US and Israel.

"Desirable security conditions are dominating the country's borders and we believe that Iran's borders with the neighboring countries are the borders of peace and security," Deputy Interior Minister for Security and Law Enforcement Affairs Ali Abdollahi said.

"All Iranian statesmen and people believe that the borders of the Islamic Republic of Iran are secure areas for all the neighboring states, indicating the Iranian nation's age-old brotherhood and friendship with the Muslim neighboring nations," Abdollahi added.

He further pointed to some recent incidents at Iran's bordering areas, which impaired security in the country to a little extent, and said, "A major part of insecurities in Iran are imported commodities as these insecurities are created through the support of the arrogant powers spearheaded by the US and the Quds occupying regime (Israel)."

His remarks alluded to two bomb blasts in front of the Zahedan Grand Mosque in Sistan and Balouchestan in southeastern Iran on Thursday night which killed at least 27 people and injured over 270 more.

Political sources said that the Pakistan-based Jundollah terrorist group, directly sponsored and supported by Washington, has claimed responsibility for the attacks.

The executed ringleader of Jundollah, Abdolmalek Rigi, confessed after his arrest in late February that his group was assisted and supported by the US and disclosed that he was on route to Bishkek to meet a high-ranking US official at a nearby military base when he was arrested by Iranian security forces.

Rigi also said that he and the US official were going to discuss new terrorist attacks on Iranian territory. (Fars News Agency-FNA)

- The Iranian Foreign Ministry announced on Tuesday that it believes conditions are now ripe for expanding and boosting ties and cooperation with Saudi Arabia.

"Iran and Saudi Arabia are two major countries of the region, with very high potentials for cooperation," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Ramin Mehman-Parast told reporters in response to frequent questions about the recent remarks by Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal who had said in an interview with French daily Liberation on Saturday that Iran "deserves" to be treated as a leading force in the Middle East.

"We can play highly serious roles in the establishment of tranquility and development of our own region through cooperation," he continued.

"The ground is now prepared for promoting the (two countries') relations to the highest level possible," the spokesman reiterated.

Mehman-Parast reiterated that Iran and Saudi Arabia should increase their regional cooperation seriously, and cautioned that differences and disagreements among the regional countries merely serve the interests of the Zionist regime and enemies of the region and the Muslim world.

"It is fully clear that Iran considers a very high position for Saudi Arabia and we believe that all the regional countries should pursue a trend of convergence through cooperation and a collective plan in a bid to have the best conditions dominate our region," he said.

Despite ups and downs in bilateral relations between the two countries, Iranian and Saudi officials have tried to bolster ties in recent years.

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said in August 2009 that Iranian and Saudi leaders are resolute to enjoy proper ties.

"Iran and Saudi Arabia are two important, great and influential countries in the region and they have various goals and prospects (in mind) at the bilateral, regional and

international levels although they have different viewpoints in some regional issues," he added. (FNA)

- The White House has in a message called on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to harbor the members of the anti-Iran terrorist group, the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO), in the mountainous areas on the Iraq-Iran-Turkey borders, a PKK source disclosed on Tuesday.

"A message was sent from the White House officials to the leadership council of the PKK on Saturday demanding the PKK officials to permit the members of the MKO to settle in the Qandil Mountains at Iranian borders," a senior PKK official told FNA on the condition of anonymity.

Asked about the PKK incentives for accepting the US demand, the source revealed that Washington has vowed to stop Turkish Army attacks against the PKK in return for the Kurdish group's cooperation with the White House in this regard.

He underlined that the PKK is still mulling over the deal, but declined to reveal any further detail.

The source also reserved judgment over the PKK's possible response to the White House demand.

The PKK is listed as a terrorist organization internationally by a number of states and organizations, including the United States, the United Nations, NATO and the European Union.

The organization has been listed as one of the 12 active terrorist organizations in Turkey as of 2007 and Turkey labeled the organization as an ethnic secessionist organization that uses terrorism and the threat of force against both civilian and military targets for the purpose of achieving its political goal.

Also, the MKO, whose main stronghold is in Iraq, is blacklisted by much of the international community, including the United States.

Before an overture by the EU, the MKO was on the European Union's list of terrorist organizations subject to an EU-wide assets freeze. Yet, the MKO puppet leader, Maryam Rajavi, who has residency in France, regularly visited Brussels and, despite the ban, enjoyed full freedom in Europe.

Some other members of the MKO who have had a role in the assassination of a large number of Iranian citizens and officials are currently living in France.

The group started assassination of Iranian citizens and officials after the Islamic Revolution in a bid to take control of the newly established Islamic Republic. It killed several of Iran's new leaders in the early years after the revolution, including the then President, Mohammad Ali Rajayee, Prime Minister, Mohammad Javad Bahonar and the Judiciary Chief, Mohammad Hossein Beheshti who were killed in bomb attacks by MKO members in 1981.

The group fled to Iraq in 1986, where it was protected by Saddam Hussein and where it helped the Iraqi dictator suppress Shiite and Kurd uprisings in the country.

The terrorist group joined Saddam's army during the US-backed Iraqi imposed war on Iran (1980-1988) and helped Saddam and killed thousands of Iranian civilians and soldiers during the war.

Iraqi security forces have recently taken control of the training base of the MKO at Camp Ashraf - about 60km (37 miles) north of Baghdad - and detained dozens of the members of the terrorist group.

The Iraqi authority also changed the name of the military center from Camp Ashraf to the Camp of New Iraq. (FNA)

- Tehran is eager to expand and strengthen relations with the African states in all fields, a senior Iranian legislator said on Tuesday.

"Development and expansion of all-out relations with the African states, specially parliamentary ties, sets a priority in the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy," Head of the parliament's Cultural Commission Gholam Ali Haddad Adel said.

Haddad Adel made the remarks in a meeting with Zimbabwean Minister of Tourism and Hospitality Industry Walter Mzembe here in Tehran today.

Noting that the Islamic Republic of Iran has always supported the anti-colonialist campaigns of the African states, he reiterated that development and progress of the black continent in all the economic, social and cultural spheres depend on its independence and severance of its relations with the aggressive powers.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration has striven hard to maximize relations with the African continent.

Ahmadinejad started a bi-nation tour of Africa in April 2010 which took him to Zimbabwe and Uganda.

Ahmadinejad underlined at the start of his bi-nation tour that Tehran is eager to expand and strengthen relations with the African states more than ever.

Tehran has prioritized promotion of its economic and political ties with the African states and the country is now considered as one of the African Union's strategic partners.

Tehran's efforts to boost ties and cooperation with Africa have led to its acceptance as an observing member of the African Union (AU), where it has shown an active presence in the AU summit meetings. (FNA)

- Head of Tajikistan's Customs Office Nemat Rahmatov described Iran as a stable and trustworthy partner of his country in economic and trade ties and cooperation.

"Iran, along with China, Russia, Turkey and Kazakhstan, is one of the countries which have stable and growing exchanges with Tajikistan," Rahmatov told FNA on Tuesday.

He mentioned that Iran and Tajikistan have exchanged \$94.4 mln worth of goods during the current year, adding that Tajikistan has imported \$66,400,000 worth of commodities from Iran while Iran's imports from Tajikistan stood at \$28mln during the said period.

Rahmatov also underlined that the dire consequences of the global economic meltdown as well as the obstacles created by certain regional countries for the transit of goods to Tajikistan have not affected the volume of his country's trade exchanges with Iran.

Iran and Tajikistan have recently accelerated expansion of their ties and cooperation and observers believe that the good achievements of their mutual cooperation, specially in energy and industrial fields, should be deemed as a result of the efforts made by the two countries' officials.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, heading a high-ranking politico-economic delegation, visited Dushanbe on January 4 on the first leg of his bi-nation tour of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to confer on the further bolstering of bilateral ties and cooperation in meetings with senior officials of the two Central Asian states.

The two countries inked three Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and two documents with Iran on mutual cooperation as well as a joint statement during Ahmadinejad's trip to Dushanbe. (FNA)

- The Iranian parliament passed a bill here on Tuesday requiring the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to enrich uranium to the purity level of 20% to supply nuclear fuel to the country's research and training reactors.

Based on the bill which was approved by 134 yes votes, 2 oppositions and 8 abstentions, the government is also only permitted to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) within the framework of the 'Safeguard Agreements' of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Also the parliament necessitated the government not to cooperate with the IAEA beyond the Safeguard Agreements and reject any demand made by the UN nuclear watchdog beyond this limit.

Meantime, an Iranian lawmaker announced on Sunday that Iran would not allow those IAEA inspectors who have transgressed their responsibilities in supervising Iran's nuclear activities to enter the country.

"With the approval of the bill for safeguarding (Iran's) nuclear achievements (at the parliament), those (IAEA) inspectors who have infringed their real task in monitoring Tehran's nuclear activities will be prevented from entering the country," member of the parliament Mohammad Karim Shahrzad told FNA.

"Once the bill is approved, the level of Iran's cooperation with the IAEA will become proportional to the level the Agency feels responsibility for (cooperating with) Iran," he added.

The lawmaker criticized the IAEA for becoming a tool in the hands of the bullying powers, barring the member states from achieving their rights, and stated, "Opposite to its legal duties and responsibility for cooperating with the world countries, the IAEA refrains from supplying nuclear fuel to Iran and treats Iran's nuclear issue through a political approach which is against all legal norms and rules." (FNA)

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE / İSRAİL – FİLİSTİN

- A new Israeli report on the 2008-2009 war in the Gaza Strip says that the Israel Defense Forces is taking steps to reduce the number of civilian casualties in future wars and will restrict the use of white phosphorous.

The 37-page report, which was posted on the Foreign Ministry's website, was delivered to the office of United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Monday in compliance with a General Assembly resolution, UN officials said.

"The IDF has ... implemented operational changes in its orders and combat doctrine designed to further minimize civilian casualties and damage to civilian property in the future," the report said.

"In particular, the IDF has adopted important new procedures designed to enhance the protection of civilians in urban warfare, for instance by further emphasizing that the protection of civilians is an integral part of an IDF commander's mission," it said.

Among those measures will be the inclusion of a humanitarian affairs officer in each combat unit.

About 1,400 Palestinians, including hundreds of civilians, and 13 Israelis were killed in Israel's December 2008-January 2009 offensive in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip that was aimed at ending cross-border rocket fire from Palestinian militants.

A UN report by a team headed by South African jurist Richard Goldstone was issued in September and found that both the Israeli army and the militant Islamist group Hamas, which controls Gaza, were guilty of war crimes in the conflict but focused more on Israel.

Israel, which refused to cooperate with Goldstone, has condemned his report as distorted and biased and rejected the war crimes allegations. Hamas denied its fighters committed war crimes but has said it regrets Israeli civilian deaths

The report also said Israel has launched some 47 criminal investigations into alleged misconduct by its soldiers in the Gaza war, 11 more than in January.

A November 2009 resolution of the 192-nation General Assembly demanded that the Israelis and Palestinians credibly investigate allegations of war crimes during the conflict.

The Palestinian Authority's UN delegation also submitted a progress report to Ban's office, but it was not immediately available. The West Bank-based Palestinian Authority has no influence over Gaza and is unable to investigate Hamas.

Israel said in the report it was planning to impose restrictions on using white phosphorous weapons, smoke-screening munitions that can cause serious burns.

In response to criticism of its use of white phosphorous during the Gaza war, the IDF implemented mandatory buffer zones of several hundred meters and restricted use of it near sensitive sites. The report said the use of white phosphorous remains legal, though the IDF did conduct a review of its use.

"As a consequence, the IDF is in the process of establishing permanent restrictions on the use of munitions containing white phosphorus in urban areas," the report said.

The United Nations has yet to react to the Israeli report.

Israel is under pressure to accept another international investigation into a deadly May 31 raid on a flotilla of aid ships that attempted to break through the Israeli naval blockade of Gaza. The raid left nine Turkish pro-Palestinian protesters dead.

Israel has launched multiple investigations into the incident but Ban wants an independent probe that includes Turkish and Israeli participation. (Haaretz)

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has told the European Union's foreign policy chief that he is ready to take a political risk to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, but only if he does not have to take a security risk, sources say.

During talks with Catherine Ashton, Netanyahu reiterated that he seeks to move forward quickly if direct negotiations with the Palestinians begin. He believes it would be possible to reach an agreement with the Palestinians within a year. A deal would then be implemented gradually over a number of years.

Netanyahu spoke as diplomacy geared toward launching direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has not yet produced results. Washington and Jerusalem are hoping that officials at the Arab League Summit on July 29 will convince PA President Mahmoud Abbas to agree to direct negotiations.

Meanwhile, Israel is preparing for the end of the freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank, due in late September. The members of the forum of seven senior ministers are divided on the issue, and Netanyahu is ambivalent.

In recent weeks Netanyahu has coordinated efforts to move toward direct talks with the Palestinians. In recent day he has tried to rally the support of Ashton, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and the head of the international Quartet, former British prime minister Tony Blair.

Netanyahu is also trying hard to avoid the sensitive issue of the future of the construction freeze. He has not offered a clear position on the issue so as not to prevent the talks from moving to a direct phase. He says the freeze has not produced the results he had hoped for - direct negotiations with the Palestinians.

PM mum on freeze

On the other hand, Netanyahu is not willing to say clearly whether he will end the freeze or, more importantly, resume construction. He says that for now the cabinet's decision on the freeze remains in place. That decision states that at the end of 10-month construction hiatus Israel will resume the construction policy of previous governments.

The governments of Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert never said so publicly but had tacit understandings with the Bush administration, which allowed Israel to keep building in the large settlement blocs. However, they hardly built in the small and isolated settlements.

Ahead of the freeze deadline, tensions are mounting in the forum of seven. Intelligence and Atomic Energy Minister Dan Meridor told Army Radio on Tuesday that at the end of September Israel will no longer be bound by the freeze. The question will simply be where to build.

"My view is that it would be wrong to build in places where there will be a Palestinian state," Meridor said. "But it would be right to build in places that are destined to be part of the State of Israel, in the settlement blocs and the communities along the [separation] fence. The government needs to discuss this." (Haaretz)

- The IDF's Civil Administration destroyed a Palestinian village Monday morning that had earlier been cleared out when its water supply was cut off.

The IDF demolished about 55 structures in the West Bank village of Farasiya, including tents, tin shacks, plastic and straw huts, clay ovens, sheep pens and bathrooms. These structures served the 120 farmers, hired workers and their families who lived in the Jordan Valley village.

The Civil Administration said they had declared the area a live fire zone and posted eviction orders for 10 families in tents on June 27.

"Since no appeal was filed in the following three weeks, and given the danger posed by the location of the tents, they were removed," they said in response.

The villagers made a living by sheep farming and working land owned by families in the town of Tubas. Some of them have been living in Farasiya for decades.

A packaging warehouse that was built together with Agrexco in the late 1970s was also torn down.

Atef Abu al-Rob, a photographer for the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, who arrived at the village hours after the demolition, said mattresses, pipes and broken furniture were lying on the ground in the debris.

Since 1967, Israel has prevented Palestinian communities in the Jordan Valley from growing, whether by cutting off their water supply, declaring large areas as live fire zones or banning all construction.

About a year ago the IDF set up hundreds of warning signs near Palestinian farming communities, marking them closed military areas. Such a sign was set up at the entrance to Farasiya.

The families had recently been forced to leave the village when the Israeli authorities cut it off from its water sources, said the popular committees' coordinator in the valley, Fathi Hadirat. The villagers were forbidden to use the water wells the Mekorot Water Company had dug in the area.

Hadirat said a few years ago the Civil Administration destroyed the pipe the villages had laid from a nearby stream used for drinking water and irrigation.

Since then they have been watering the sheep and fields with water unfit for human consumption, pumped from a salt water source. They received drinking water in tanks.

About four months ago the IDF confiscated their pumps. On Sunday, 10 families from Bardala, a village north of Farasiya, were given demolition notices.

A farmer who owns 300 sheep was told to leave in 24 hours or his herd would be confiscated. (Haaretz)

- Israel's Counter Terrorism Bureau has lifted a severe warning issued last month for Israelis to avoid traveling to Turkey, citing an end to stormy protests over Israel's deadly raid on a Gaza-bound flotilla.

The Israeli statement Tuesday said "in light of the calm in Turkey and the absence of large-scale anti-Israeli demonstrations," it was lifting its travel warning.

After the May 31 raid in which Israeli navy commandos killed nine Turkish pro-Palestinian activists in a violent clash, Turkey's government harshly criticized Israel and withdrew its ambassador, as anti-Israel demonstrations swept across the country.

Turkey had been a popular vacation spot for Israelis, but tourism dropped significantly after the raid.

Lifting the travel warning is the first sign that relations between Israel and Turkey, formerly close allies, could be warming. (Haaretz)

- The foreign ministers of Spain, France, Italy, Britain and Germany have postponed their planned visit to the Gaza Strip, which was intended to evaluate the easing of the blockade imposed by Israel on the Strip. A Spanish diplomatic source said the visit has been postponed to September for technical reasons. (AFP)

4. EGYPT / MISIR

- BP has signed an agreement with Egypt to develop two offshore gas fields in the largest deal for the beleaguered energy giant since its drilling rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

Egypt's petroleum ministry said in a statement on Monday, the deal with Egyptian General Petroleum Corporation would develop reserves of around five trillion cubic metres of gas from the North Alexandria Deepwater block and the Western Mediterranean block.

The fields will produce 900 million cubic metres of gas a day starting from 2014, the ministry said.

BP said the agreement "amends the commercial terms for the two concessions located in the West Nile Delta, enabling BP and its partner RWE Dea to proceed with development."

BP and its German partner RWE will raise the nine billion dollars in investment for the project according to their stakes. BP holds 60 percent of the North Alexandria block and 80 percent of the West Mediterranean block.

'Great advantages'

The petroleum ministry statement quoted Sameh Fahmy, Egypt's Minister of Petroleum, as saying the amendments "included conditions that guaranteed Egypt great advantages."

The amendments impose production deadlines on BP and do not require Egypt to contribute to the nine-billion-dollar investment, while BP and its partner will sell each cubic metre of gas starting from three dollars, up from 2.65 dollars.

BP spokesman Robert Wine told AFP that negotiations for the agreement "had been a long process."

"Under the previous terms it was not commercially viable for us. The government now has a deal it finds acceptable," he said.

Wine said the Egyptian deal was BP's "biggest development we put our signature to" since the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion in April.

Under fire

BP, whose share value has plummeted since the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, is the largest foreign investor in Egypt and provides with its partners about 35 per cent of the country's gas.

The company has come under fire from the US government over alleged lapses in safety standards.

It could face a seven-year offshore drilling ban in the United States after a house committee agreed a bill to ban licences for any company that lost 10 workers in operations.

Wine said the agreement showed the company could operate "viable projects."

"BP's day-to-day operations are continuing after the spill. There are a lot of very steady good operations around the rest of the world," he said.

BP said on Monday the bill from the oil spill had risen to \$3.95bn.

The total includes the bill for containing and cleaning spilt crude, relief well drilling, grants to Gulf states and money paid to the US federal government, it said in a statement. (Al Jazeera)

- Victim's families caught up in Egypt's worst maritime disaster are taking their fight to Italy to seek justice four years after the accident took place.

The Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 sank in the Red Sea on February 3, 2006 as it was en route from Saudi Arabia to the Egyptian port of Safaga.

Shortly after the ship's departure, an electrical fire broke out, which crew extinguished with water hoses. According to an Egyptian parliamentary report, the ferry's drains were blocked, causing an accumulation of water which led to the ferry capsising.

The 36-year-old vessel was routinely overloaded with passengers and was originally licensed in Italy to carry 1,187 people, but was permitted to carry up to 2,890 passengers by Egyptian authorities.

Now, victim's families are filing a civil suit against an Italian organisation that gave the go-ahead for the ill-fated ferry to sail from Saudi Arabia before it sunk on the way to Egypt, killing more than 1,000 people.

Al Jazeera's Ayman Moyheldin reports. (Al Jazeera)

- BP PLC (BP) said Monday it has signed a new agreement in Egypt to develop significant gas resources in two deep water blocks--a badly needed vote of confidence in the UK company whose reputation has been damaged by the deep water oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"Production from the West Nile Delta development is projected to reach up to 1 billion cubic feet per day, providing a major new source of gas for the domestic market in Egypt," said BP in a statement.

BP will use subsea infrastructure and a new purpose-built onshore gas plant on Egypt's Mediterranean coast to develop the fields, BP said.

First gas is expected in late 2014.

"BP and the Egyptian General Petroleum Corporation have a long-standing and successful partnership, and the agreement we signed today takes that to a new level in developing these deep-water resources, as well as creating an important source of future growth for BP," said BP Chief Executive Tony Hayward.

The oil and gas exploration arm of German utility RWE AG (RWE.XE) has a minority share in the development. (Al Masry Al Youm)

- Reports about deterioration in Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's health are categorically false, his information minister said on Tuesday, two days after a U.S. newspaper said Mubarak was dying of cancer.

"The president is in good health and has been given a clean bill of health by his doctors, following his recent gallbladder surgery in Germany,"

Information Minister Anas El Fekky said in a statement to Reuters.

"We obviously understand the interest in this issue given Egypt's geopolitical weight, and the president's role as a force for stability in the Middle East. However, the media reports published on the president's health are based on nothing more than rumor and

speculation without any factual basis whatsoever, including a recent report citing anonymous intelligence sources."

An article in The Washington Times on Sunday said Mubarak was thought by most Western intelligence agencies to be suffering from terminal cancer affecting his stomach and pancreas.

It cited a central European intelligence officer as saying the 82-year-old leader could have less than a year to live.

Rumors about Mubarak's health have rattled markets in the past because he has no designated successor. He has not picked a vice president, the post he held before taking office in 1981.

The president has returned to a regular schedule of meetings with visiting officials since having surgery at Germany's Heidelberg University Hospital in March. On Sunday he met Palestinian and Israeli leaders and other officials.

He also appeared on Egyptian television on Tuesday attending a graduation ceremony for the Egyptian police academy. Television footage showed Mubarak standing to pin medals on graduates.

The Washington Times report was the latest of several reports questioning the president's health.

The Economist published an extensive report this week on Egypt which described his health as "not good".

Egypt dismissed last week a report in Lebanon's As-Safir newspaper that Mubarak would travel abroad for treatment.

El Fekky said Mubarak was maintaining a full schedule, citing his weekend meetings and recent trips to Algeria and France. Mubarak would meet Turkish President Abdullah Gul on Wednesday and would be making a speech to mark Egypt's national day, he added.

Stockbrokers in Egypt said they had not heard any new speculation about Mubarak's health on Tuesday, but recent reports could be putting some pressure on the market.

Mubarak has not said if he will run for a sixth six-year term in a presidential election in 2011. If he does not, his politician son Gamal, 46, is seen as a likely successor. Both Mubarak and his son deny any such plan. (Al Arabiya)

5. LEBANON / LÜBNAN

- Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah met with Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt on Wednesday to discuss current developments, including the Special Tribunal for Lebanon's (STL) pending indictment, according to a statement issued by Hezbollah.

Media outlets have reported that the tribunal will indict Hezbollah members in its investigation of the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Nasrallah on Friday called the STL an Israeli project aiming to incite sectarian strife in Lebanon.

Nasrallah and Jumblatt also addressed the issues of granting rights to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the recent arrests of three alleged telecom spies, the statement said.

Police have arrested three suspects over the past month in an expanding probe into an alleged network of Israeli spies employed in the country's telecom sector.

Ministers Ghazi Aridi and Akram Shehayeb—who belong to the PSP—as well as Hezbollah official Wafiq Safa participated in the meeting, the statement added.

It also said that the members of the meeting “agreed to enhance relations between [Hezbollah and the PSP].” (Now Lebanon)

- Health Minister Mohammad Jawad Khalifeh told Future News on Wednesday that a war in the Middle East is unlikely.

It is too soon for the media to analyze the Special Tribunal for Lebanon's (STL) work, he added.

This comes after the war of words following Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's Friday statement that the tribunal is an Israeli project aiming to incite sectarian strife in Lebanon.

Media outlets have reported that the STL will soon issue an indictment—that includes Hezbollah members—in its investigation into the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. (Now Lebanon)

- The Druze diaspora conference kicked off its second day-activities Tuesday with a number of discussions addressing the concerns of the Druze expatriates.

Participants in the conference convened in Al-Amir Amin palace in the Chouf village of Beiteddine.

The meeting was attended by representatives of Lebanese Democratic Party leader MP Talal Arslan and the Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Naim Hassan, head of the Druze Religious Council's diaspora committee Kamil Sarieddine along with heads of Druze communities abroad.

Addressing the attendants, Sarieddine presented a detailed and comprehensive study on the situation of expatriates and made proposals, which he requested be included in the conference's recommendations.

Heads of the diaspora delegations delivered speeches in which they touched on conditions of expatriates, highlighting the need for communication between communities abroad and Lebanon.

Also, Marwan Kheireddine gave a lecture on the Lebanese economy and the deputy governor of the Central Bank Saad Andari presented a study on youth projects.

The afternoon session saw discussions of the consequences of the economic situation in Lebanon on expatriates.

Some 35 Israeli Druze are participating in the conference, coming to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria.

Many of the attending Israeli Druze refused the compulsory Israeli military service.

Around 30 of them accompanied by Sheikh Naim Hassan visited the head of the Druze sect spiritual committee Sheikh Abu Mohammad Jawad Waliyyeddine in the Chouf village on Baaqline.

The delegation then headed to the memorial statue of Sheikh Abu Hassan Aref Halawi in Barouk, where they were received by a number of Druze Sheikhs.

They toured a number of other Chouf villages as well.

The opening session of the conference, held Monday at the Beirut International Exhibition and Leisure Center (BIEL) was attended by Druze prominent leaders, including head of the Progressive Socialist Party Chouf MP Walid Jumblatt, MP Arslan and heads of the Druze communities abroad. Addressing the attendants, Jumblatt said “unfounded moments of confusion and extremism even if only verbally” has distorted the history of the Druze Arab community, a reference to five years of broken ties with Damascus and political tensions.

The PSP leader has in the past accused Damascus of hindering Lebanon’s sovereignty and being involved in former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s assassination in 2005.

“I tell you that what we have been through is circumstantial and contrary to the Druze natural path in Lebanon in support of the Palestinian cause and their fight for Lebanon’s Arabism as well as against Israeli aggressions in connection with our natural and essential supporter, the Arab Syrian depth,” he said.

Jumblatt stressed the Druze’s commitment to the Taif Accord that highlighted Lebanese-Syrian special relations based on preserving both countries’ security and joint interests.

The PSP leader also underlined the Taif Accord’s rejection of a separate peace agreement with Israel at the expense of a joint strategy with Damascus and the Palestinians.

The conference is running until Thursday, which will see a meeting with Druze spiritual leader Sheikh Naim Hassan at the Druze sect’s headquarters in Beirut. (The Daily Star Lebanon)

- The Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL)'s general prosecutor said Lebanese army officials have insinuated that the army would not arrest any Hizbullah official accused of involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, As-Safir newspaper reported Tuesday.

The newspaper said that STL's Prosecutor Daniel Bellemare headed to the US during the second week of July to ask for US financial support for the STL in light of his fear that the Lebanese government would not cover its assigned 49 percent of the Tribunal's expenses.

However, the newspaper reported that based on official information it received, Bellemare told US officials in New York that the STL's indictments would be issued in at least two rounds, between September and the end of the 2010.

The first round would target between three and five Hizbullah officials and the second would indict around 20 of them, it said.

According to As-Safir, the ranks and levels of indicted Hizbullah officials would rise gradually, but no accusations would be made against the party's command.

Also, Bellemare voiced his fear that the absence of any Syrian citizens among the indicted would be considered as "an acquittal of Syria."

According to the paper, reports circulating in New York and at the STL suggest that a diagram of cellular telecommunications was first presented via power point to Bellemare's predecessor Serge Brammertz, but the latter did not take the information seriously.

Upon assuming his post, Bellemare decided to build on the diagram, a fact that changed the course of the investigations.

The diagram was prepared by the head of the technical section in the Internal Security Force's Information Branch Captain Wissam Eid, who was assassinated on January 25, 2007.

STL's general prosecutor said he had enough evidence to back six or seven indictments, but voiced concern that he would not be able to provide "strong legal evidence" when

the trial kicks off, a period during which the STL would base its charges on cellular communications reports rather than witnesses.

Bellemare said that Lebanese Army officials have unofficially informed him that the army would not act if Hizbullah faced accusations.

He also urged the international community “to do its best to respond to Hizbullah’s attacks on the tribunal” via statements and public addresses.

During a speech he delivered on Friday, Hizbullah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah made a strongly worded statement accusing the STL of being an “Israeli project” and focused on the recent discovery of Israeli agents and espionage networks, allegedly operating out of mobile telephone firm Alfa.

According to reports, the STL is believed to depend on telecommunications reports when issuing its indictments.

Hariri was assassinated in a massive car bomb in Beirut on February 14, 2005.

Fingers were pointed by many Lebanese figures along with Western states and the US toward Syria. But Syria repeatedly denied any involvement.

However, rumors of Hizbullah’s involvement in Hariri’s assassination surfaced following a report published by German Der Spiegel magazine that hinted to such a possibility.

The report was published in May 2009.

A senior former official in the US administration told As-Safir that the US policy regarding Lebanon would not change after the STL issues indictments. (The Daily Star Lebanon)

6. SYRIA / SURİYE

- President Bashar al-Assad on Monday morning reiterated Syria's support to any agreement between the Iraqi parties based on maintaining Iraq's unity, Arabism and sovereignty.

The remarks came during President al-Assad's meeting with Chairman of the Iraqi National List Ayad Allawi. President al-Assad and Allawi reviewed the developments regarding the efforts exerted for the formation of the Iraqi government.

Talks also dealt with Syrian-Iraqi relations and the importance of bolstering them in several domains to serve the interests of the two sisterly countries.

Allawi lauded Syria's hosting of the Iraqi refugees, expressing appreciation over Syria's support to the Iraqi people and the efforts it exerted to maintain Iraq's unity and restore security and stability to the country.

Assistant Vice-President Mohammed Nassif, Presidential Political and Media Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban and Allawi's accompanying delegation attended the meeting.

In a statement to the press following his meeting with Leader of al-Sadr Movement Muqtada al-Sadr in Damascus, Allawi described the meeting with President al-Assad as positive, fraternal which dealt with important issues.

"We, as an Iraqi List, have kept on contacting with President al-Asssd and leaderships in Syria because a lot of joint issues gather us in the interest of the two peoples, security and stability of the region," Allawi said.

He added "we have listened to President al-Assad's viewpoints which are positive and accurate. They indicate to big commitment to Iraq and its unity and the need for forming a government that represents all political spectrums as well as non-interfering in the Iraqi affair by any side, whether it is regional or international."

A number of Iraqi officials visited Syria during the last months including Leader of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council Ammar al-Hakim, Chairman of the Iraqi National List Ayad Allawi, Iraqi vice president Adel Abdel Mahdi, Head of Iraqi Accord Front Ayad al-Samarrai and Leader of al-Sadr Movement Muqtada al-Sadr.

Talks underlined the need to form a new Iraqi government that ensures the participation of all segments of the Iraqi people in the political process to maintain the political unity of Iraq and preserve its security and stability. (Syrian Arab News Agency-SANA)

- President Bashar al-Assad met on Monday Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri at his residence in Damascus.

President al-Assad and visiting Premier al-Hariri resumed their talks, expressing contentment over the steps that were achieved in developing relations between the two countries and affirming their determination to continue boosting these relations to meet the aspirations of the two brotherly peoples in both countries.

The two sides also discussed means for using the agreements signed between Syria and Lebanon to create a network of mutual interests for the two countries and their people.

Later, President al-Assad held a luncheon in honor of Premier al-Hariri and visiting Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu, during which they discussed relations among the three countries and means for bolstering them to reflect positively on regional issues, particularly the Palestinian cause.

On Sunday, the Syrian-Lebanese Follow-up and Coordination Commission held a meeting chaired by Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri and Premier al-Hariri, during which they signed eighteen cooperation agreements, memos of understanding, executive programs and protocols. (SANA)

- President Bashar al-Assad discussed on Monday with Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu the distinguished relations between Syria and Turkey and their rapidly-developing process.

President al-Assad and Davutoglu affirmed the two countries' desire to invest these relations to achieve peace and stability in the region, stressing that the solutions to the region's problems come from within their countries, not from outside.

Talks dealt with the situation in the Middle East and the stalled peace process due to the hostile practices of the extremist Israeli government as some powers still consider it above international laws and norms.

The two sides affirmed the need for an independent international investigation into the crime committed by Israel against defenseless civilians on board the Freedom Flotilla.

President al-Assad and Davutoglu also stressed the need to intensify efforts to break the inhuman siege imposed on Gaza Strip and the importance of realizing Palestinian reconciliation as a guarantee to support the Palestinian people's struggle to restore their rights.

Regarding the situation in Iraq, viewpoints were in agreement regarding the need to exert efforts to form a government that unifies the Iraqis as soon as possible to establish security and stability in the country.

The meeting was attended by Assistant Vice President Hassan Tourkmani, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, Presidential Political and Media Advisor Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban and the Turkish Ambassador in Damascus.

Later, President al-Assad held a work luncheon banquet in honor of Davutoglu and visiting Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, during which they discussed the relations among the three countries and means for bolstering them to reflect positively on regional issues, particularly the Palestinian cause.

President al-Assad held talks in June with Turkish President Abdullah Gul and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul on the critical situation in the Middle East due to Israel's hostile practices.

During the meetings, President al-Assad expressed the support of Syria's leadership and people to the families of the Turkish victims of the brutal Israeli aggression on Freedom Flotilla carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza.

President al-Assad also paid an official visit to Turkey in May, during which he discussed bilateral relations and regional and international developments with President Gul, in addition to participating in a tripartite meeting with Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and the Turkish Premier.

During this visit, the two sides signed an agreement for primary cooperation in tourism and media and a second agreement on the joint use of border crossing points of Qamishli and Nassib. (SANA)

- Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs Abdullah al-Dardari discussed on Tuesday with a delegation of Iranian businessmen and investors representing 40 companies prospects of future cooperation between the two countries in the fields of economy, trade, industry and investments.

Talks during the meeting focused on bolstering cooperation by establishing investment, tourist, industrial, medical and development projects, in addition to establishing a joint free trade zone and removing customs barriers to increase trade exchange.

Al-Dardari stressed the need for establishing partnerships between the Syrian and Iranian private sectors, pointing out to the facilitations provided by the Syrian government to investors through financial and administrative reforms.

For his part, Chairman of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines Ala-e-din Mir Mohammad Sadeghi affirmed the desire of Iranian companies and businessmen to invest in Syria.

Earlier on Tuesday, Chairman of Syrian Investment Agency (SIA) Ahmed Abdulaziz said that the Agency is responsible for regulating the investment process in Syria based on a solid legislative basis which has created a motivating investment environment in various sectors.

During the meeting of Syrian-Iranian Businessmen Council, Abdulaziz pointed out to the SIA's efforts in facilitating measures which have been made easier particularly after applying the Single Window System which helps investors save efforts and time.

Investors could get the required information through the investment map found on the Agency's official website in twelve languages including Persian, Abdulaziz added.

He hailed the increase of the Iranian investments in Syria, underlining the importance of the cooperation protocol signed on the sidelines of the Southern Area Investment Conference held recently in Syria.

In turn, head of the Iranian trade delegation Mir Mohammad Sadeghi praised the economic development in Syria, particularly in terms of the recently issued laws and legislations which have already attracted a growing number of investors. (SANA)

- Prime Minister Mohammed Naji Otri on Wednesday reviewed with General Director of Tunisia's National Institute of Family and Population (ONFP) Nabiha Gueddana means of bolstering cooperation between the ONFP and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs (SCFA).

Both sides dealt with exchanging expertise, studies and researches between the ONFP and the SCFA on issues of population, family affairs, health care and reproduction health.

Otri stressed the importance of benefiting from Tunisia's pioneer experience in family planning, and of supporting population policies in line with the developmental and social plans for the coming period. (SANA)

- Türk işadamlarından oluşan bir heyet dün Şam Ticaret Odasını ziyaret ederek iki ülke arasında ekonomik işbirliği imkanlarını, yatırım ve ortaklık hacminin geliştirme yöntemlerini görüştü.

Şam Ticaret Odası Başkanı Ğassan el-Kalla; Suriye ve Türkiye arasında birçok anlaşma imzalandığını bunların en önemlilerinin Serbest Ticaret Bölgesi Anlaşması ve iki ülke arasında vizenin kaldırılması olduğunu, bu anlaşmaların son yıllarda ticari alış veriş hacminin büyümesini sağladığını ve karşılıklı olarak insanların geliş gidişini kolaylaştırdığını dile getirdi.

El-Kalla; Suriye'de ekonomi ve hizmet alanlarını geliştirmek amacıyla Türkiye'nin deneyiminden faydalanmak gerektiğine değinerek, iki taraf arasındaki işbirliğinde karşılaşılan zorlukları ortadan kaldırmak için ortak çalışma yürütme ve ilişkilere yeni ufuklar açarak iki ülkede bulunan fırsatlardan yararlanmanın önemine dikkat çekti.

Türk işadamlarına kamu ve özel sektörlere bağlı şirketlere sunulan yatırım fırsatlarını incelemek amacıyla bulunduğumuz ayın sonunda İstanbul'da düzenlenecek Suriye Yatırım Konferansına katılma çağrısı yapan el-Kalla, yatırım ve ticari projelere gerekli finansı sağlamak hedefiyle Suriye-Türkiye ortaklığında bir banka kurma çalışmalarının sürdüğünü bildirdi.

Şam Ticaret Odası Başkanı Yardımcısı Bahaddin el-Hasan, iki ülke arasında ticari ve ekonomi işbirliğinin başka ülkeleri de kapsayacak bölgesel işbirliğine temel oluşturduğuna işaret etti.

Diğer yandan Adana Ticaret Odası Yönetim Komisyonu ve Türk heyeti başkanı Başkan Şaban Baş; iki ülke ilişkilerinde sağlanan gelişmelere, imzalanan mutabakat zabitleri ve anlaşmalara değinerek bu ilişkilerin bütün sektörlerle olumlu yansımaları temenni ettiğini dile getirdi.

Baş; son yıllarda iki ülke arasında ticari alışverişin artmasına rağmen hala istenilen seviye ulaşmadığını belirterek ticari işbirliğinin gelişmesinin önündeki engelleri kaldırmak amacıyla bir çalışma yürütmenin, daha fazla ortak yatırım projesi kurmanın ve iki tarafta yatırım fırsatlarını değerlendirmenin önemine dikkat çekti.

Suriye-Türkiye ilişkileri son yıllarda özellikle de Serbest Ticaret Bölgesi anlaşmasının imzalanması ve 2007 yılı başlarında uygulanmaya başlanmasının yanında imzalanan ekonomik işbirliği anlaşmalarıyla Türk şirketlerin yatırım için Suriye'ye akması ile son yıllarda hızlı bir gelişme gösterdi.

Bu gelişmenin sonucu iki ülke arasında ticari alışveriş hacmi geçtiğimiz yıl iki milyar doları buldu. İki ülke, önümüzdeki birkaç yıl içerisinde bu hacmin 5 milyar dolara yükselmesini hedefliyor. (SANA)

7. ARABIAN PENINSULA AND THE GULF OF BASRA / ARAP YARIMADASI VE BASRA KÖRFEZİ

- King Abdullah, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, and US President Barack Obama are determined to maintain security and stability in the region and in Islamic countries – and find just and comprehensive solutions to the issues facing the Muslim World, a top US official has said.

“Riyadh and Washington serve as a center for dialogue between the East and the West. In view of this role, they have begun making every effort to boost cohesion between the

Islamic World and the US,” Rashad Hussain, President Obama’s special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), said.

Hussain spoke exclusively to Saudi Gazette and Okaz during his visit to the main office of Okaz Organization for Press and Publication here recently.

“The Kingdom, in its capacity as the pioneer of Islamic work, and the US, in its capacity as an influential country in the world, can work together to defuse tension and work out strategies to solve crises in the Islamic World,” he said.

King Abdullah, Hussain said, is a seasoned political leader with a strategic vision. It makes him an ideal person to dedicate the Middle East and Islamic World to security and peace.

Interfaith dialogue

Hussain said the interfaith dialogue initiated by King Abdullah has contributed to dedicating the culture of dialogue and peaceful coexistence. It has also paved the way for understanding the “other culture” and deepened the relationship between the East and the West.

He stressed that Washington maintains good relations with the Islamic World, particularly with the Kingdom.

The official emphasized his country’s determination to strengthen the bonds of friendship with the Kingdom, because it has a significant role in leading the Arab World, and strengthen the pillars of peace and stability in the Middle East and throughout the world.

Arab-Israeli conflict

Hussain emphasized Obama’s determination to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, resolve other problems between the Islamic World and

the US, find solutions to the region’s crises and regain the trust of the world Muslims.

He said President Obama has a long-term strategy for strengthening dialogue and boosting cooperation with the Islamic World.

Hussain said lack of tangible progress and a breakthrough in the Arab-Israeli conflict, despite strenuous American efforts, does not mean the end of the road. He stressed that Obama understands the importance of finding a just and comprehensive solution to the crisis and noted that the president sent a special envoy, George Mitchell, to the region to revive peace efforts.

He said the American administration's peace efforts remain intensive and hopes that indirect talks will progress to direct talks between Palestinians and the Israelis so that peace prevails in the region. Hussain stressed that Obama is committed to the two-state solution with Palestinian and Israeli states living side-by-side in peace.

Cairo speech

"President Obama's vision cannot be achieved over a day or night," Hussain said referring to the US leader's attempt at arriving at an understanding with the Islamic World.

He said President Obama's speech in Cairo is a road map to the nature of future relations with the Islamic World, especially relationships with Islamic countries and the Palestinian cause, which will be carried out in letter and spirit with an impartial view.

"We still have a long way to go, despite the fact we have taken the first step, and we will continue in this direction until the president's vision for boosting the dialogue and relations with the Islamic World is materialized," Hussain said.

He also underlined the great importance the American administration places on strengthening its relations with the OIC. "Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to the OIC's headquarters in Jeddah serves as a turning point in the relationship between the OIC and the Obama administration," he said.

Hussain said he was making an effort to open channels of dialogue with Islamic countries not only in the realm of political matters, but also in matters relating to health, culture, education and technology; present a correct vision about Islam; and confront the so called "Islamophobia."

He said President Obama was also giving due attention to reducing tensions with Islamic countries, strengthening the dialogue with the Islamic countries and narrowing the gap between the East and the West.

Role of Muslims

Hussain, who said a real, significant change in the American policy is the president's conspicuous recognition of the role played by Muslims in the US and the world. The administration does not believe Islam is a religion of terrorism, he said. "It is impossible to look at what is being done by an extremist group as a reflection of the tolerant Islamic religion," he added.

Hussain dismissed any contention that anti-Islam feelings are increasing in the US and stressed that Muslims in America are free to practice their religion. Muslim women in the US will not be prevented from wearing a veil, he said.

Hussain said one of the Obama administration's key objectives is to establish strong relations with the Islamic World, which reflects that President Obama believes this partnership should be based on understanding, mutual interests and trust.

He acknowledged that a comprehensive change in understanding and opinions will take some time and said it takes a joint effort to improve relations between Islamic countries and the West.

He said the Obama administration has worked to address American misconceptions about Islam and added that misconceptions in the minds of some Muslims also need to be addressed. It will take efforts on both sides to improve mutual understanding, he added.

Hussain, who said there is an unprecedented opportunity to achieve broad contact with the Islamic World on the basis of the principles laid out in Cairo, hopes that relations with Islamic countries will be boosted in the areas of education, science and technology. "It is evident that we are not going to agree on all issues. Our task will be to strengthen and promote the aspects we agree on and also look at the areas where we differ, in order to develop the best policies," he said.

Hussain was bitterly criticized in the US for critical comments about George Bush administration's approach to terrorism. President Obama appointed Hussain to assure the Islamic World that the American administration was serious about its efforts to reduce anti-Islam views in the West.

In a recorded address to an international Islamic forum held last year in Doha, Qatar, President Obama said extremist Muslim groups have exploited tensions between the West and Muslims and stressed that Islam is not part of the problem. (Saudi Gazette)

- HH the Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and Slovenian President Dr Danilo Turk held a round of official talks at the Presidential Palace in Ljubljana yesterday. The talks were attended by members of the official delegation accompanying the Emir.

On the Slovenian side, the talks were attended by Finance Minister Dr Franc Krizanic, Health Minister Dorijan Marusic, head of the president's office Mojca Seliskar Tos, adviser to the president on diplomatic affairs Dusan Snoj, adviser to the president on economic issues Franci Percic, adviser to the president on public relations Bostjan Lajovic and plenipotentiary at the foreign ministry Tanya Miscova.

HH the Emir at the official welcome ceremony in Ljubljana yesterday

The talks dealt with mutual co-operation and ways to enhance them in various fields. Several regional and global issues of common interest were also reviewed.

After the talks the Emir and the Slovenian president witnessed the signing of a number of agreements and memorandums of understanding. Among them were a memorandum of understanding on co-operation in the health sector and another one in the field of sports between Qatar Olympic Committee and the Slovenian Olympic Committee, an agreement for exchange of news between Qatar News Agency and Slovenia News Agency, a consultation protocol between the two countries' foreign ministries, a memorandum of understanding for the establishment of a joint ministerial committee between the two countries, a memorandum of understanding for co-operation in the field of tourism and an agreement for the donation of 100,000 euros for the rehabilitation of Gaza children at Ljubljana university rehabilitation hospital.

HH the Emir with President Danilo Turk and First Lady Miklic Turk

They were signed by HE the Minister of State for International Co-operation Dr Khalid bin Mohamed al-Attiyah and HE the Minister of Business and Trade Sheikh Jassim bin Abdulaziz bin Jassim al-Thani for Qatar.

The Emir expressed thanks to the Slovenian president for inviting him to visit Slovenia and for the warm welcome he was accorded during the visit. He also expressed the hope that the visit would contribute to the support of relations of friendship and co-operation between the two countries “which are witnessing steady progress”.

In a statement to reporters after the talks, the Emir expressed appreciation for the visit the Slovenian president had paid to Qatar last January when many agreements were signed. The Emir said his current visit to Slovenia “came to underline the two countries’ keenness to strengthen their bilateral relations”.

In his statement, the Emir underlined the need to intensify efforts to reach a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict “which threatens the security of the region, Europe and the world”.

The Slovenian president said that the agreements signed yesterday would further enhance relations between the two countries. “During the talks we agreed to enhance relations and continue consultations between the two countries.”

He said: “Our relations are not confined to foreign relations but also include broader areas... We view that the State of Qatar is working in the direction of the security and stability of the Balkan countries.”

He stressed that Slovenia could contribute to the Middle East security, explaining that his country, as a member of the European Union, had been involved in many projects related to the region’s issues, specially in the field of disabled rehabilitation in the Gaza strip. “We have been working in this project for one and a half years,” the president said, expressing the hope that the project would achieve progress to provide strong support to people affected by the war on Gaza.

HH the Emir and the Slovenian president held a meeting before the official talks which were attended by HH Sheikha Mozah Nasser al-Misnad and Slovenian First Lady Miklic Turk.

The Emir arrived at the Guest Palace shortly before the talks to an official welcome ceremony.

Earlier, the Emir met Slovenian Prime Minister Borut Pahor at the council of ministers headquarters. Discussions dealt with ways to strengthen co-operation between the two countries as well as a number of issues of mutual interest.

The meeting was attended by members of the official delegation accompanying the Emir.

HH the Emir and HH Sheikha Mozah are on a two-day official visit to Slovenia. They were welcomed upon arrival at Ljubljana Jose Pucnik International Airport by Slovenia's Finance Minister Dr Franci Krizanic, adviser to the president for diplomatic affairs Dusan Snowe and Qatar's Ambassador Abdurrahman bin Mohamed al-Kholeifi. (Gulf-Times)

- The largest pan-Islamic group has strongly condemned a suicide bombing that targeted Iraq's government-backed anti-al-Qaida militiamen in Baghdad on Sunday that left 45 people dead and dozens of others injured, according to Xinhua.

"The Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, expressed his strong condemnation of the suicide bombing that ripped through the Radwaniya neighborhood in Baghdad," the Jeddah-based body said in a statement posted on its website.

The attack took place on Sunday morning when a suicide bomber blew up his explosive vest among a group of Sahwa (Awakening) fighters who were lining up outside an army base to collect their salaries. Most of the fatalities were Sahwa members while several others were Iraqi army soldiers.

Another suicide attack occurred Sunday in the city of al-Qaim in the western province of Anbar, some 330 km west of Baghdad, killing four Sahwa leaders who were holding a meeting at the militia headquarters in the city.

Depicting the attacks as "despicable acts of terrorism," the chief of the 57-state body urged the Iraqi people to refrain from violence and preserve the unity of their country.

Ihsanoglu also "called upon the political leadership in Iraq to accelerate the process of forming a new government, as this will help stabilize the situation in Iraq and provide peace and security in the country," the release said. (Saba News Yemen)

8. SOUTH ASIA / GÜNEY ASYA

PAKISTAN / PAKİSTAN

- The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was meeting Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi at the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad on Wednesday, DawnNews reported.

The two officials were discussing the situation in Afghanistan, ministry sources said.

Pakistan's role is significant for peace in the region, Rasmussen said, adding that the Pak-Afghan trade transit agreement was a positive step toward that goal.

Rasmussen will also be holding talks with President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani.

The talks will focus on promoting defence cooperation between Nato and Pakistan, Foreign Office sources said.

Talks will also focus on the war against terror and the overall situation of peace and security in the region, sources said. (Dawn)

- Indian security forces opened indiscriminate fire on the border near Sialkot on Wednesday, DawnNews reported.

Retaliatory firing from Chenab Rangers stopped the shooting, sources said.

Area residents and locals panicked. However, there were no casualties as a result of the firing.

The firing started near villages around the Sialkot border at around 6:00 am and continued for a half hour, officials with the Chenab Rangers said.

Firing started again at 9:00 am and went on for nearly an hour. (Dawn)

- Pakistan and NATO on Wednesday agreed to initiate work on strengthening political framework besides their ongoing military to military cooperation. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and Secretary General of NATO Anders Fogh Rasmussen at a joint press conference following a round of talks vowed to further expand their political cooperation. Qureshi said Pakistan and NATO will continue to work as close partners for the stability of region and to achieve shared objectives. "Pakistan and NATO enjoy an important relationship and intend to build upon it ... It goes beyond Afghanistan," he added.

The NATO Secretary General said the alliance sees Pakistan as an important player in the region and appreciates what it has done to achieve regional peace and stability.

He commended Pakistan's operations in the tribal belt and to improve the overall security situation. He mentioned the tripartite arrangement with NATO and said it would encourage Pakistan to continue with it.

He was also appreciative of the recently inked Afghan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA) and said "it will promote peace and stability in the region and lead to economic development for mutual benefit of all countries of the region."

Qureshi said Pakistan has addressed all major concerns regarding the ATTA. He said the demand of Afghanistan for "Indian exports through Wahga were addressed by saying NO and this was a major concession extracted in our talks."

Pakistan clearly explained its position and Afghanistan ceded to this, Qureshi said and added there was also threadbare discussion on concerns over unauthorised trade.

“We intend to check this practice and we have suggested that we plan to transport these goods through containers [monitored by] a tracking system.”

Qureshi said trade was already taking place between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Pakistani trucks would be allowed inside Afghanistan and beyond and he pointed at the huge potential of trade with the Central Asian Republics.

“This bilateral agreement is between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Lets not add a third party to it,” he said.

When asked to comment on a statement that Osama bin Laden and other top Taliban leadership was in Pakistan, Qureshi said had they been here “we would have arrested them as they are not friends of Pakistan, the region or the globe.”

“If there is credible information, it should be shared with Pakistan,” he added.

The NATO Secretary General described the Kabul conference as a great success for Afghanistan and the region and said the alliance was committed to Afghanistan for the long term.

He made it clear that “we will not leave Afghanistan prematurely.”

NATO was there for the overall security of the region and its stay would be “driven not by calendar, but by commitment,” said Rasmussen.

It was important that the NATO makes contributions to regional peace and stability while having a long term partnership with Pakistan.

“We will not leave behind a vacuum and create an unstable situation in your neighbourhood,” he added.

“It is also in the interest of Pakistan that we stay committed and the situation in Afghanistan is stabilised and its security forces manage the situation and the Afghan government is capable of good governance.”

He said the Afghan security forces will be trained so that they are able to take responsibility of their country’s security.

He said if the NATO leaves Afghanistan prematurely; “Taliban will return and create a safe haven for terrorists and Afghanistan will become a launch pad against North America and Europe.”

“We have to make sure conditions are right before handing over the responsibilities to the Afghan police and army,” he said.

Regarding the “reconciliation and re-integration” process initiated by the Afghan government Foreign Minister Qureshi said Pakistan was not trying to have a role, “but if they want we can assist.”

He said Pakistan wants it to be an Afghan-led role and the people of Afghanistan have to determine what they desire.

The NATO Secretary General said any reconciliation and reintegration must be led by Afghan government.

“We should give it a try ... the groups involved must respect the principles on which Afghan democracy is based.” (Associated Press of Pakistan)

- Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi Wednesday categorically said Osama Bin Laden or other Al-Qaida leaders are not in Pakistan and if any one has verifiable information it should be shared with Pakistan. Addressing a press conference along with Secretary General NATO Anders Fogh Rasmussen here at Foreign Office, when he asked to comment on the statement of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about the presence of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, he said had they been here “we would have arrested them as they are not friends of Pakistan, the region or the globe.”

Qureshi said, “If there is credible information, it should be shared with Pakistan.”

He said statements on Osama bin Laden and other Al-Qaida leaders’ presence in Pakistan were not being made for the first time and reiterated that in case of credible information, Pakistan would take action.

He said, “There are speculations (about the presence of Osama in Pakistan) but no credible information from any side in this regard.”

If credible information is provided about the whereabouts of Osama, the government will take action without delay, he said. (Associated Press of Pakistan)

INDIA / HINDISTAN

- A strike called by separatists in Indian-administered Kashmir has forced shops and businesses to close for a third successive day.

Tuesday also witnessed more protests as both separatists and pro-Indian Kashmiris observed "Martyrs' Day" to commemorate the killing of 21 Muslims by guards of the erstwhile king during an uprising in 1931.

AFGHANISTAN / AFGANĪSTAN

- U.S. and Afghan soldiers have begun joint patrols in one of the most dangerous areas of the Taliban heartland in a bid to cut mounting casualties and tackle insurgents now running rampant.

U.S. and NATO coalition commanders believe Afghan soldiers, with their local understanding, will be able to curb a mounting toll among newly-arrived U.S. troops, caused mainly by hidden insurgent bombs.

"They have a better understanding of the atmospherics, if you like. They know when a pothole in the road is new. It's like having an angel on your shoulder," one senior coalition commander with responsibility for integration with the Afghans told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

Improvised Explosive Devices, or IEDs, mostly hidden in pots and using pressure plates as triggers, have maimed five U.S. soldiers in the hotly contested area around Combat Outposts Terra Nova and Nolen, near the Taliban stronghold of Charqulba village. One soldier lost both legs.

Grape and pomegranate plantations in the area provide perfect cover for insurgents to move unseen in the valley, a crucial infiltration route to Kandahar city.

Fighting in Arghandab and other areas neighboring Kandahar is intensifying as U.S.-led forces prepare an offensive against Taliban strongholds, while simultaneously supporting government-friendly local councils and politicians.

Two other soldiers have died in Arghandab in recent days, one shot in the head at long-range by a hidden gunman, raising fears that foreign fighters or mercenaries could be moving in to reinforce local insurgents as snipers or bomb makers.

DAILY ATTACKS

U.S. troops at Nolen, belonging to the 2nd Brigade combat team of the 101st Airborne Division, have had an especially hard time, with daily attacks from Charqulba, now deserted by villagers. The walk out from battalion headquarters only 700 meters away at Terra Nova is also potentially lethal.

Nolen is ringed on three sides with crude but deadly hidden bombs, while keeping the other side open is a constant battle, as insurgents bury more IEDs each night.

While the bombs are smaller than the armored vehicle breaking bombs favored by Iraq insurgents, their use reached a high across Afghanistan in late June with more than 300 exploded or located, up from about 50 a week in mid-2007.

The United States is shipping \$3 billion worth of counter-IED equipment to Afghanistan.

In Arghandab, troops are equipped with huge bomb and ambush resistant trucks carrying jamming equipment and heated "rhino" booms at the front to trigger bombs.

"I've been to Iraq, but this place is something else. We've only been here a month and already I've been shot at three times and an IED exploded just near my face," Squad Leader Matthew Hubbard, 28, said.

While the killing of three British Gurkhas this month by a rogue Afghan soldier has stretched trust between 150,000 U.S. and NATO troops and the Afghan army, U.S. combat medic Dylan Schwinn said it was safer to patrol jointly.

"They know if something is out of place or if something doesn't look right," Schwinn said.

Afghan sergeant Ezatallah Yusafi, 22, said his troops fought in bloody clashes around Marjah, in Helmand province, in February and were now ready to secure Arghandab.

"Our guys, they are really smart. On some days in Jahar, they found around 20 IEDs and reported it to the U.S. army," he said, referring to a town near the outposts.

U.S. battalion commander David Flynn said having Afghans on joint operations would have a decisive effect on the Taliban, as villagers were supportive of the Afghan army, if not always of U.S. troops.

"The villagers here will for the first time see a large group of Afghans that are here to protect their own people and protect their own country. But there is no one operation where we can say, 'alright, the witch is dead'," Flynn said. (Reuters)

**This media summary is prepared by ORSAM Middle East Research Assistant Sercan Dođan. 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.*

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