

**MIDDLE EAST / SOUTH ASIA DAILY BULLETIN
GÜNLÜK ORTADOĐU / GÜNEY ASYA BÜLTENİ
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1. IRAQ / IRAK

- At the same time that leader of the Iraqiya bloc Iyad Allawi was preparing to meet his election rival, Iraqi Prime Minister and leader of the State of Law coalition Nouri al-Maliki yesterday, informed political sources told Asharq Al-Awsat that that Iran is intensifying pressure to ensure that the post of prime minister remains within the electoral alliance that was formed between the Iraqi National Alliance – State of Law coalition following the March elections.

Sources within the Iraqiya bloc and the State of Law coalition described the meeting that took place yesterday between Allawi and al-Maliki – at the request of the outgoing Iraqi Prime Minister – as being "decisive." In a statement to Asharq Al-Awsat, sources said that they expect this to be the last meeting between the two leaders and that they would either "part company or come to an agreement." Other political sources revealed that deals would most likely be discussed during this meeting, although they did not expect al-Maliki to relinquish his post as prime minister.

Sources also informed Asharq Al-Awsat that "over the past two days, Iran has made quick moves to bring together the Shiite bodies and not miss out on the post of prime minister." The source, who spoke to Asharq Al-Awsat on the condition of anonymity, also revealed that Iran has intensified its pressure upon some members of the alliance that has been formed between Ammar al-Hakim's Iraqi National Alliance and Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition "in order to force them to accept any figure within this alliance [for Prime Minister] and also to set aside their differences."

This alliance yesterday held what was described as an extremely important meeting for unity in an attempt to deter some parties from backing out of this electoral coalition, in a clear reference to the Sadrist trend. Al-Hakim, who presided over this meeting, stressed the importance of unity, and sources attending the meeting said questions were raised about the outcome of the meeting that took place between Allawi and al-Sadr in Damascus.

A leading figure within the Sadrist trend, Baha Araji, informed Asharq Al-Awsat that "three points were agreed upon during this meeting; firstly that no candidate would be named for the position of prime minister but rather for the political agendas of the winning electoral blocs to be examined and for a national partnership government to be formed. Secondly, over the necessity of a government being formed before 4 August in order to ensure that the Iraqi case is not internationalized. As for the last point, this is the formation of negotiation committees from the Iraqiya bloc and the Sadrist trend through the Iraqi National Alliance."

For his part, Adnan al-Danbous, a leading figure within the Iraqiya bloc, described the meeting between Allawi and al-Sadr in Damascus as being important, especially as it took place more than 6 years after their last meeting. Al-Danbous also informed Asharq Al-Awsat that the meeting was "cordial and put the final touches on the formation of joint [negotiating] committees between the Iraqiya bloc and the Sadrist trend that will have positive results with regards to forming a new government in the coming days."

Al-Danbous denied that any of the two parties had offered concessions to the other during the meeting, stressing that "all that happened was dialogue in order to reach a common view with regards to forming a government, and the Iraqiya bloc for its part is upholding its constitutional duty and putting forward Iyad Allawi for prime minister, and we believe that in the coming days, and following the meeting with the leader of the Sadrist trend, we will see positive results in this regard."

As for Muqtada al-Sadr's recent statement calling for an independent figure to assume the post of prime minister in order to ensure complete loyalty to Iraq rather than partisan politics, al-Danbous told Asharq Al-Awsat that following his meeting with Allawi the leader of the Sadrist trend stressed that "he has no objection against the Iraqiya bloc forming a government, or even against the candidacy of Dr. Iyad Allawi for prime minister, and this is a clear indication of the Sadrist trend's support for the Iraqiya bloc forming the new government." (Asharq Alawsat)

- There are no information about the announced visit by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to Kurdistan to tackle the current political impasse in the country, two official sources from the two main Kurdish parties said on Thursday.

“We have no information yet about the visit of Muqtada al-Sadr to Kurdistan,” Saadi al-Biera, member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

A member of al-Iraqiya List, Fatah al-Sheikh, had said on Wednesday (July 21) that President of Iraq’s Kurdistan region, Massoud Barzani, invited al-Sadr to visit Arbil today, noting that a similar invitation will be sent to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Iyad Allawi to put an end to the current political crisis.

For his part, Mohammad Mulla Qader, member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), said there are media reports on al-Sadr’s visit but nothing is certain. I have no information about it. (Aswat al-Iraq)

- President of Iraq’s Kurdistan region discussed on Wednesday with Muqtada al-Sadr and Head of al-Iraqiya List Iyad Allawi the political impasse in the country, according to a presidential statement.

“The president during two separate phone calls updated the two officials with the outcome of his recent talks in Damascus,” said the statement received by Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

“The president underlined the importance of exerting more efforts to speed up forming a government of national unity,” it added. (Aswat al-Iraq)

- State of Law senior official Ali Al Dabbagh revealed that another meeting between Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki and head of Al Iraqiya List Iyad Allawi will be held on Thursday.

The last meeting between Al Maliki and Allawi was positive, Al Dabbagh said.

Both officials agreed during the last meeting to pursue talks over each party's vision of a partnership government, he added.

Premiership should be granted to the National Alliance despite rows over this issue, Al Dabbagh noted. (Al Sumeria TV)

- Meetings held by Al Sadr Front leader Sayyed Moqtada Al Sadr in Damascus do not represent the Iraqi National Coalition, Al Fadhila (Virtue) Party senior official Hassan Al Shumari told Alsumaria News.

The National Coalition is not bound by any decision taken by Al Sadr individually if the coalition is not involved in the decision making, he argued.

The national coalition meeting that was due on Tuesday was delayed for two days since the Sadr Front did not attend on account of its meetings in Damascus, Al Shumari added.

The coalition did not consider yet presenting candidates for Premiership, Al Shumari noted. (Al Sumeria TV)

- The National Alliance held a meeting on Tuesday including both coalitions' leaders.

Head of the national coalition Sayyed Ammar Al Hakim affirmed that the alliance is united.

On the other hand, Al Sadr Front senior official Bahaa Al Aaraji told Al Shraq Al Awsat Newspaper that the meeting between Al Iraqiya Leader Iyad Allawi and Sayyed Moqtada Al Sadr has agreed on three points.

It has been agreed not to personalize the Premiership post while the meeting stressed the necessity to form the government before August 4 in order not to put the Iraqi crisis on the international scale.

It has been agreed as well to form negotiations committees from Al Iraqiya and the Sadr Front through Iraqi National Alliance, Al Aaraji said. (Al Sumeria TV)

- Iraqi President Jalal Talabani discussed with his Vice President Adel Abdul Mehdi effective solutions to accelerate the formation of the government.

The meeting focused on efforts to be made in order to enhance meetings between the different political parties, a presidential statement said.

President Talabani stressed the necessity to intensify efforts in order to ease talks among the different parties over the government issue. (Al Sumeria TV)

- Officials in the Turkish Ministry of Energy said that oil flow thru Kirkuk-Yumurtalik pipeline which transports Iraq crude oil towards Turkey's Mediterranean shore was halted Wednesday morning for technical reasons but it will be resumed later. The oil pipeline that transports quarter of Iraq oil exports was subject to a blast on the Turkish side of the border earlier this month. Turkish authorities had blamed PKK rebels for the attack. (Al Sumeria TV)
- General Manager of Indonesia State-ran Oil and Gas Company said that the company is holding talks with Angola's state-run oil company Sonangol in order to buy a share in two oil fields development projects in Iraq.

The company seeks to expand its activities in order to enhance oil and gas production and it aims to take hold of many oil fields inside and outside the country.

Sonangol had mentioned that it intends to sell shares in Al Najma and Al Kayara in Iraq in which it currently owns 75% of the shares while Iraq State-run Oil Company owns 25 of these fields shares. (Al Sumeria TV)

- Kurdistan Premier Barham Saleh said that the region's government approved a series of measures to halt any illegal crude oil trade through the northern borders the measures include increasing observation operations on the borders. Saleh said he hopes that legal

oil exporting from Kurdistan will be resumed soon after halting the same after a conflict with Baghdad government. However, Saleh added that Kurdistan regional government is still waiting the decision of the central government over means to refund foreign oil companies investments. (Al Sumeria TV)

- A car bomb near a Shiite mosque in a village north of Baghdad exploded among crowds of people on Wednesday, killing at least 13 and wounding 24 others, the police said.

Residents of Abe Sayeda, a predominately Shiite village located in a heavily Sunni area, blamed the bombing on Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, the homegrown terrorist group, which has remained active in the province, Diyala.

An American soldier was killed there on Wednesday after a roadside bomb exploded as his vehicle passed, the United States military said in a statement.

The bomb site lies near a Shiite mosque, a health center and shops, and was crowded with people venturing outside Wednesday evening after the day's heat had dissipated somewhat.

"Al Qaeda is hiding in many areas surrounding this village and the families there support them," said Abdul Rachman al-Tamimi, whose clothes were bloody from helping the injured into ambulances.

Wednesday was the third consecutive day of a fatal bombing in Diyala Province. On Monday, a car bomb exploded near a coffee shop in the village of Al Ezat, killing seven and injuring 17. On Tuesday, a suicide bomber in a car drove into a bus carrying Iranian pilgrims in the town of Kesireen, killing seven people and wounding seven others.

Iraqi political leaders have been unable to form a government four-and-a-half months after parliamentary elections rendered a vote nearly evenly divided between political factions headed by former Prime Minister Ayad Allwai and Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki.

Iraqi and American military officials have said insurgent groups are seeking to use the extended political stalemate as a way to create greater divisions in Iraqi society, thereby undercutting the country's democratic institutions.

On Wednesday, political leaders were among those who received blame for the bloodshed.

"Why this killing? Why this destruction?" asked Ali Hader, 37. "Where is the security and stability the government is talking about? I hold the government responsible for what happened because they are busy fighting over seats while terrorists are playing with our blood." (New York Times)

- American combat troops are on target to leave Iraq by the end of August. President Obama — with the backing of his generals — is right to keep to his timetable, despite a recent series of bloody attacks by insurgents.

The United States, whose forces are now heavily engaged in Afghanistan, needs to relieve some of the strain on its overstretched military. After seven years, it is time for the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own security. They seem increasingly able to do so, although the country will likely be a violent place for years to come.

After Aug. 31, there will still be 50,000 American troops in Iraq, advising the Iraqi military and providing backup. All American troops are supposed to be gone by the end of next year. That makes it even more urgent for Iraq's leaders to get on with running their country.

Four months after national elections gave a cross-sectarian alliance led by Ayad Allawi, a former prime minister, a two-seat lead over Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's Shiite coalition, Iraqi politicians are still squabbling over who should form the new government. Until that is sorted out, Mr. Maliki is in charge — a caretaker with limited authority.

The list of problems for the new government to address is long. Iraq's economy is growing, but even the most optimistic estimate puts unemployment at 15 percent.

Despite billions of dollars in American aid — too much of it squandered on corruption and mismanagement — Iraqis still lack adequate electricity.

Iraqi politicians also have yet to settle some of the most difficult, and potentially combustible, political issues. The government has to come up with a better plan for protecting, and employing, former Sunni insurgents whose decision to switch sides helped quell the violence. They are increasingly the target of revenge killings by Al Qaeda in Iraq. The Parliament still has not agreed on laws for negotiating oil contracts and for sharing oil revenues. Competing Kurdish and Arab claims to the oil-rich city of Kirkuk must be settled.

The Obama administration has been careful not to favor any one politician or group, while quietly prodding Mr. Maliki, Mr. Allawi and Kurdish leaders to craft a multiethnic coalition government. The Americans also have been encouraging the Iraqis to consider a variety of political reforms — including trimming the prime minister's powers — to make a deal more feasible and give Iraq much-needed checks and balances. So far, there is no sign of an agreement.

Visiting Washington last week, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari pleaded with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton to do more. He told *The Washington Post* that the Americans have not pushed back hard enough against Iran, Turkey and others that are jockeying to ensure their various Iraqi allies come out on top.

Sending Vice President Joseph Biden Jr. to Baghdad recently was a good idea, but he clearly failed to resolve the impasse. We hope that President Obama is making the case for compromise directly to Iraqi leaders. The promise of continued American economic aid should give him considerable leverage.

If this drags on much longer, Mr. Obama may have to turn to the United Nations to lay compromise proposals on the table and convene Iraqi leaders for a decision-making meeting. There is not a lot of time left for Iraq's leaders to get their act together. (*New York Times*)

- An army officer and two policemen were wounded in two separate incidents in Mosul on Wednesday, a security source said.

“A bomb, stuck to the vehicle of Colonel Aziz Soliman of the 3rd division of the Iraqi army, went off in al-Makouk village in al-Qayara district, south of Mosul, injuring him,” the source told Aswat al-Iraq news agency.

“An improvised explosive device went off on Wednesday (July 21) targeting S.W.A.T vehicle patrol in al-Yarmouk region in western Mosul, injuring two policemen,” he added, without giving more details.

Mosul, the capital of Ninewa, lies 405 km north of Baghdad. (Aswat al-Iraq)

2. IRAN / İRAN

- İslam inkılabı rehberi Ayetullah Seyyid Ali Hamanei, Zahidan’da düzenlenen kanlı terör saldırısında şehit düşenlerin 7. günü anma törenine gönderdiği mesajda Amerika ve katil rejim İsrail’in cinayetten sorumlu olduğunu belirtti.

İran’ın Sistan Bulucistan eyalet merkezi Zahidan’da bir camiye düzenlenen hain terör saldırısında şehit düşenlerin aileleri ile acılarını paylaşan Ayetullah Hamanei, düşmanların bu tür terör eylemleri ile esas amaçlarını dini ihtilaf ve tefrika çıkarma şeklinde açıkladı.

İran İslam cumhuriyeti, küresel istikbar kuklaları, Vahabilik ve benzeri adlar altında amaçlarına ulaşmasına asla müsaade etmeyeceğinin altını çizen Ayetullah Hamanei, onlarca yıl Gazze, Filistin, Keşmir, Afganistan ve diğer İslam beldelerinde mazlum Müslümanların en büyük ve en güvenilir savunucusu olan ve olmaya devam eden İran şimdi Amerika, Siyonist rejim ve İngiltere casusluk örgütlerinin bu tür hain komplolarına hedef olduğunu ve Şii Sünni kavgası ve dini fitnelere sürüklenmek istendiğini vurguladı.

Ayetullah Hamanei düşmanların İslami İran’da ehli sünnet Müslümanların da Şii kardeşleri gibi çok kez kutsal İslami nizama bağlılıklarını ispat ettiklerini ve istikbar ve işbirlikçilerine karşı yiğitçe ve büyük bir inançla İran İslam cumhuriyeti ve aziz ülkelerini savunduğunu ifade etti.

Vahşi ve kör terörü Amerika, İngiltere ve bu devletlerin işbirlikçilerinin hain politikalarının ürünü olduğunun altını çizen Ayetullah Hamanei, yer yüzünde fesat ve Allah'a karşı savaş açmanın en bariz örneği olan bu şom ve kirli olgu ile mücadele etmek, tüm Müslümanlar için farz olduğunu kaydetti.

15 Temmuz Perşembe günü Zahidan'da gerçekleşen kanlı terör saldırısında 27 vatandaş şehit düşerken yaklaşık 300 kişi de yaralandı. (IRNA)

- İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin İslamabad Büyükelçisi ile görüşen Pakistan Başbakanı Gilani, başta ekonomi olmak üzere ikili işbirliğin geliştirilmesi için İran'ı ziyaret edeceğini belirtti.

İki milletin tarihi ve kültürel yakınlığı üzerinde duran Yusuf Rıza Gilani "İslamabad İran ile gaz, elektrik ve demiryolu alanında ikili işbirliğine ciddi bakıyor ve federal devlet bakanlarına da Tahran ziyaretiyle ikili işbirliğin geliştirilmesi için ortamı hazırlamaları belirtildi. Pakistan'ın gaz ihtiyacı çok ve bu sektörün eksiklikleri, bu projenin uygulanmasıyla giderilmeli" dedi.

Tahran ve İslamabad arasında gelişmekte olan ilişkilere işaret eden Gilani "iki ülke arasında işbirliği ve yakınlığı bölge istikrarı ve barışı için yararlıdır" dedi. (IRNA)

- Ağrı Valisi Ali Yerlikaya, Doğubayazıt ilçesindeki doğalgaz boru hattında meydana gelen patlama ile ilgili " İran-Ankara Botaş Doğalgaz boru hattının 27. kilometresinde, bölücü terör örgütü mensuplarınca yapıldığı değerlendirilen bir patlama meydana gelmiştir" dedi.

Vali Yerlikaya yaptığı yazılı açıklamada şunları kaydetti: "21 Temmuz 2010'da saat 00.20 sıralarında, Doğubayazıt ilçesi Hasankeyf Mahallesi Deprem konutları bölgesinden geçen İran-Ankara BOTAŞ doğalgaz boru hattının 27. kilometresinde, bölücü terör örgütü mensuplarınca yapıldığı değerlendirilen bir patlama meydana gelmiştir. Patlama sonucunda kısa süreli bir yangın çıkmış, İran Ankara hattında doğalgaz akışı kesilmiştir. Güvenlik kuvvetlerince olayın oluş şeklini aydınlatıcı çalışmalara başlanmıştır."

Patlamada, herhangi can kaybının olmadığını ifade eden Vali Yerlikaya, şüpheli veya şüphelilerin yakalanması için çalışmalara devam edildiğini bildirdi. (IRNA)

- U.S. officials should not think that they can promote their interests through spread of terrorism, Brigadier General Massoud Jazayeri said on Wednesday.

Terrorism will impinge on the U.S. and other NATO members and there are now some indications proving this fact, Jazayeri stated.

He said that U.S. and British presence in Afghanistan has yielded no result and now the Afghans are of the view that these countries have to pull their troops out of their land.

The U.S. is about to fail in Afghanistan and this is being facilitated since Gen. David Petraeus took command of military forces in Afghanistan.

Petraeus was in June appointed to lead all foreign forces in Afghanistan after his predecessor, General Stanley McChrystal, was dismissed for insulting remarks he and aides made about the U.S. administration in a magazine interview.

Jazayeri said it seems that even the NATO forces do not collaborate with Petraeus and therefore disagreements have been emerging in Afghanistan.

The best way to deal with the current situation would be that foreign military forces leave the country and hand the responsibilities over to the Afghan forces. (Mehr News Agency-MNA)

- Following a recent gas transfer agreement between Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan there is a strong possibility that Iran and Azerbaijan natural gas swap deal will be cancelled.

The Mehr News Agency reported that Iran and Azerbaijan had signed a natural gas swap deal back in 2004 agreeing to transfer daily about one million cubic meters of natural gas from Azerbaijan through Iran to Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic for 25 years.

However, this week high-ranking officials of Turkey and Azerbaijan signed a protocol of intent on the construction of Turkey to Nakhchivan gas pipeline which will probably lead to the cancellation of the long-term contract with Iran after only six years.

The State Oil Company of Azerbaijan and Turkey's Botas Company signed a protocol of intent for the construction of the gas pipeline from Turkey to Nakhchivan. (MNA)

- Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar announced on Wednesday that Iran will pursue the news on transfer of Mojahedin Khalq Organization (MKO) members to the Qandil Mountains at Iran's northwestern borders.

A PKK source disclosed on Tuesday that the White House had in a message called on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to harbor MKO members in the mountainous areas on the Iraq-Iran-Turkey borders.

Najjar, who was speaking on the sidelines of a cabinet session, said that the issue is under consideration. He added that the global arrogance and outsiders take advantage of any opportunity to deal a blow to the Islamic Republic.

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.

Earlier, Nazem Dabbaq, a representative of Iraq's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iran, had refuted the news, saying that the PUK reserves the right to file a lawsuit against those publishing it.

How is it possible that MKO members, who have been tried by the Iraqi government and have been ordered to leave the country, settle in another part of Iraq? Dabbaq asked.

Established in 1977, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan works for self-determination, human rights, democracy and peace for the Kurdish people of Kurdistan and Iraq.

Certain people are striving to destroy friendly relations between the Iraqi Kurdistan region and Iran, Dabbaq added.

According to Iraqi resources about 3,400 MKO members are held at Camp Ashraf in Diyala province near the border with Iran.

Mojahedin Khalq Organization is referred to as hypocrites in Iran.

The MKO began a campaign of assassinations and bombings in Iran shortly after the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The group moved to Iraq in the early 1980s and fought Iran from there until the United States invaded the country in March 2003. (MNA)

- İran İslami Şura Meclisi Ulusal Güvenlik ve Dış Politika KOMisyonu üyesi Perviz Sururi, İran'dan 4 milletvekili önümüzdeki haftada Gazze'ye gideceğinin haberini verdi.

Mehr haber ajansı muhabirinin bildirdiğine göre, bugün düzenlenen meclisin açık oturumu çerçevesinde gazetecilerin sorularına yanıt veren Sururi, kendisiyle birlikte Haydarpur, Cuicer ve Ahmedî Biğaş'ın önümüzdeki haftada Gezze'ye gideceklerinin haberini verdi.

Sururi, milletvekillerinin Gazze'ye girişi Mısır'ın Refah kapısından gerçekleşeceğini söyledi. (MNA)

- Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and his Japanese counterpart Katsuya Okada in a meeting in the Afghan capital city of Kabul on Tuesday conferred on issues of mutual interest.

During the meeting held on the sidelines of the Kabul International Conference on Afghanistan, Okada reminded his country's cooperation with Iran on bilateral, multilateral, regional and international issues as well as the two sides' consultations and cooperation on Afghanistan, Afghan refugees and campaign against narcotics.

The minister voiced Tokyo's readiness for the expansion of mutual cooperation with Iran.

Regarding Iran's nuclear issue, Okada underlined the necessity for the implementation of the 'Tehran Declaration' on the swap of nuclear fuel between Iran and possible suppliers.

The Tehran Declaration presented a solution to a longstanding standoff between Iran and potential suppliers of nuclear fuel. According to the agreement signed by Iran, Turkey and Brazil on May 17, Iran would send some 1200 kg of its 3.5% enriched uranium to Turkey in exchange for a total 120 kg of 20% enriched fuel.

Mottaki, for his part, pointed to the United States' failed policies in Afghanistan during the 9 years of occupation and stressed the necessity for reviewing such policies.

The Iranian foreign minister further called for robust consultations between Tehran and Tokyo on bilateral, regional and international issues. (Fars News Agency-FNA)

- Iranian Ambassador to Astana Qorban Seifi and Kazakhstan's Minister of Industry and New Technologies Aset Isekeshv explored ways to develop cooperation between the two countries in areas of industry and mining.

During the meeting held on Tuesday, the two sides discussed cooperation in various industrial and mining fields, and also exchanged views over other issues of mutual interest.

The Iranian and Kazakh officials agreed on the formation of a joint workgroup by the two countries' industries ministries to study cooperation in other possible fields.

Also, Seifi conveyed an invitation from the Iranian Minister of Mines and Industries Ali Akbar Mehrabian to the Kazakh minister to pay a visit to Iran.

During the future visit by Isekeshv to Tehran, the two sides are due to review the results of the studies conducted by their joint workgroup.

Iran and Kazakhstan have made efforts in recent years to boost their mutual cooperation in different fields.

Earlier in June, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev in a meeting in Istanbul underlined active presence of both countries in regional and international developments.

"Using all the existing potentials in Iran and Kazakhstan for further promotion of bilateral and regional relations is in the interests of the two nations and the nations of the region," Ahmadinejad said.

Nazarbayev, for his part, stressed that Iran enjoys a determining position in regional developments, and underlined his country's resolve to strengthen cooperation with Iran in different fields.

"Iran and Kazakhstan have ample potentials for increasing the level of their bilateral relations and mutual cooperation," he said, underlining that such capacities and potentials should be utilized. (FNA)

overwhelming numbers, citizens of Germany, France and Sweden said that they wanted the international community to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons – by 80 percent, 83% and 90% respectively – rather than agreeing that Iran has the right to develop nuclear weapons.

Those surveyed in the three countries also said they want to see the EU impose further sanctions. Germans answered that they wanted additional sanctions by a 70-22 margin, French by a 66-27 margin and Swedes by a 78-15 margin.

In addition, significant majorities of all three groups had cool rather than warm feelings towards Iran.

The poll was conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research from The Israel Project over the second and third week of July. It was conducted of just over 1,000 people in Germany and France, and 500 in Sweden. The margin of error was +/- 3.1 percent in France and Germany and 4.5 +/- percent in Sweden.

The Israel Project declined to comment on whether a possible military strike had been another possible type of international intervention posed to those surveyed. (The Jerusalem Post)

3. ISRAEL - PALESTINE / İSRAİL – FİLİSTİN

- Israel Defense Forces soldiers fired at a group of Palestinians attempting to infiltrate the West Bank settlement of Barkan late Wednesday, killing one of them. The casualty was apparently armed, the IDF spokesperson's office said.

Another Palestinian was arrested and taken into IDF custody for questioning. Soldiers are currently scanning the area for further suspects, and both the army and Palestinian officials are investigating the circumstances of the incident.

The Palestinians apparently penetrated the settlement for criminal and not terror-related purposes, the IDF said.

Due to recurring attempts by Palestinians to infiltrate the fenced-off settlement, the soldiers had been patrolling the area for several weeks, the IDF spokesperson's office said.

Earlier Wednesday, Israel Defense Forces troops fired at suspected militants that had approached Gaza's northern border with Israel. Two suspected militants were killed in the incident.

According to Palestinian sources, one militant was killed on the spot, while the second succumbed to his wounds several hours after the incident.

Six militants remained hospitalized, the sources reported.

According to initial reports, Israeli tanks targeted a suspected militant squad after receiving reports that a squad near the northern Strip town of Beit Hanoun had intended to fire an anti-tank missile toward another IDF unit.

An Israeli military spokeswoman said soldiers opened fire on suspects approaching a border fence but had no further comment. Palestinian medical workers claimed 7 people were wounded, including a 10-year-old girl. No other details were immediately released. (Haaretz)

- Israel launched a diplomatic effort yesterday to keep the latest planned flotilla from sailing from Lebanon to the Gaza Strip.

The Foreign Ministry instructed Israeli ambassadors to ask senior officials in the United States, United Nations, European Union and Egypt to pressure Syria and Lebanon to stop the flotilla, which Israel deems a "provocation" in light of its recent decision to end its civilian blockade of Gaza.

Syria has been included because senior Israeli officials say it is helping to organize the flotilla. Hezbollah is also involved, they charged.

"This is a clear and organized provocation," one official said.

Officially, the flotilla is being organized by Palestinian businessman Yasser Kashlak, who last month tried and failed to organize another flotilla from Lebanon. The two ships are slated to sail from Tripoli by the end of this week.

Israel's message to international diplomats is that it views this flotilla particularly gravely because it is sailing from the port of an enemy country.

Last week, Egypt cooperated with Israel in diverting a Libyan aid ship headed to Gaza to the Egyptian port of El-Arish, and so Israeli officials are hopeful it will do the same this time.

Israel is still refusing to release three Turkish ships captured in a May 31 raid on an earlier Gaza-bound flotilla, saying it will not do so without a written pledge from the Turkish government that the ships will not be used for such activities again. That raid, which resulted in the death of nine Turks after passengers attacked the Israeli boarding party, tore gaping holes in the already tattered Israeli-Turkish relations.

A representative of the IHH organization, which sponsored that flotilla, told the Turkish daily Hurriyet that in the past, Israel has demanded such guarantees only from the groups that organized the ships, not from the governments of the countries whence they sailed.

Ankara, for its part, is demanding that Israel supply tugs to tow the ships to Turkey. Israel has yet to respond to this demand, and is apparently unwilling to discuss it until the Turks respond to Israel's demand for a written guarantee.

Turkish officials said they believe Israel is using its possession of the ships to prove its claim that the government in Ankara played an active role in the flotilla. Turkey insists the flotilla was strictly a private initiative by IHH.

Turkey is also still demanding that Israel apologize for the raid's casualties - a demand Israel has rejected on the grounds that no casualties would have occurred had its soldiers not been attacked. Recently, however, Ankara has slightly softened its stance, saying it will hold off on insisting on an apology until Israel completes its own probe of the raid.

Ankara is angry that Washington has not launched its own inquiries, as one of the nine killed in the incident was an American citizen of Turkish descent. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan even charged that Washington is indifferent "because he was a Turk."

American officials say they have asked Turkey for the autopsy report, which is necessary to conduct any probe, but that Ankara refuses to hand it over.

IHH, for its part, is seeking to file lawsuits against Israel over the flotilla in international courts. The group recently invited Israeli lawyers to a conference to discuss how this could best be done.

One of the invitations went to Adalah - The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, which eventually decided to decline the invitation on the grounds that Israel, like many other countries, defines IHH as a terrorist organization. Attendance at such a conference could result in legal proceedings against the Israeli participants.

Private Israeli attorneys invited to attend evidently declined for the same reason, and a source familiar with the guest list said that, in the end, it includes no Israelis.

However, IHH claims the list does include lawyers from 25 other countries, including the United States, Britain, Egypt and Indonesia.

Meanwhile, American activists are trying to raise funds for their own ship to Gaza, which they plan to call "The Audacity of Hope," after U.S. President Barack Obama's best-selling memoir. (Haaretz)

- Israel's policy on how to deal with violations of the laws of war during Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip has undergone a radical change during the year and half since the fighting ended. In the meantime, it seems, Israel has paid the full price for its original position without managing to reap any significant profits from its turnabout.

Right after the fighting ended, the Israel Defense Forces' approach was that everything done in Gaza was completely proper. Violations by individual soldiers, if they occurred at all, were very rare, and in any case, things like that happen in wartime.

The IDF's internal probes were also begun with a feeling there was no need for haste. The message that trickled down from the top, even if never stated explicitly, was that it was better to keep the probes low profile and avoid legal action whenever possible. If we don't say anything, the theory went, it will all blow over.

Testimony that contradicted the official line (such as that given by graduates of the Rabin premilitary academy and soldiers who spoke to the Breaking the Silence organization) was publicly denounced as lies that aid the enemy. The United Nation's Goldstone Commission - which Israelis, with considerable justice, suspected from the start of blatant bias in the Palestinians' favor - received no official cooperation from Israel.

But international criticism of the Gaza operation just kept growing, reaching its crescendo with publication of the Goldstone report. In response, Israel changed its tune.

Many of the army's operational probes, which had been completed in the interim, were followed by criminal legal proceedings or at least disciplinary action against officers and soldiers involved in problematic incidents. The Foreign Ministry and the IDF were also careful to send periodic reports to the UN that detailed the steps Israel had taken since the last report. The latest of these bulletins was sent off on Tuesday.

Now, the time has come for the next, predictable, episode of this saga. Just as happened during the first intifada (and, to a lesser degree, during the second as well), officers are growing increasingly frustrated with the intensive legal scrutiny of their actions. The military prosecution and the military police are just doing their assigned job, but many field officers feel as if the job is being done with excessive diligence, with no concern for the toll it takes on them.

A few weeks ago, Army Radio reported some astonishing statistics: The Military Police have thus far questioned more than 500 officers and soldiers who took part in the Gaza operation. Those questioned included almost every battalion commander involved in the fighting, and some of these commanders have been questioned around 10 times already. One division commander and one brigade commander have already been reprimanded, and another brigade commander is still under investigation for the accidental killing of 21 civilians in an aerial attack on Gaza City.

In conversations with battalion and brigade commanders in recent weeks, the following allegations have been heard repeatedly: Officers are being harassed by a plethora of interrogations that have no justification. Reports on the steps that have been taken, including indictments or the opening of investigations against senior officers, have been given to the UN and the media even before the army itself is informed. And the changes now being ordered in the IDF's combat doctrine have not been sufficiently explained to the troops.

These are all serious allegations. The IDF's high command must address them thoroughly if it wants to prevent a crisis of motivation among the troops on the front lines. (Haaretz)

- Everything about the last test of the Iron Dome missile defense system, created to intercept all manner of launched projectile within a 40 kilometer radius, came up smelling like roses.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak said the test was "an important milestone for the security system and the defense industries." Ministry director general Udi Shani promised "We will act to actively deploy the batteries in the field as soon as possible." Brig. Gen. Eitan Eshel, head of research and development in the defense ministry, praised the system's performance and Yossi Drucker, the administrative head of the weapons development authority, Rafael Advanced Defense Systems.

But the most cloying description was beyond all doubt supplied by Uzi Rubin, one of the pillars of weapons projects in Israel. Still under the strong impression the test made on him, Rubin wrote: "This is a milestone in military technology. Whoever did not witness

the clouds of destroyed grads in the skies has never seen such a soul-warming display in his life. During the test, a missile like a Qassam with a very short-range was fired and the Iron Dome missile was fired toward it. What happened was that the Iron Dome missile set out an extremely short time after the Qassam registered on the radar equipment, flew up, was bored and made a couple of rounds to pass the time, and when the Qassam arrived, the missile intercepted it like lightning and turned it into a wave of splinters. I have never seen anything like it in my life, and even the people from Rafael were amazed."

But, despite the admiration and praise which the Rafael engineers deserve for developing the system in record time, the truth is that the capabilities of the Iron Dome and the test results are more complicated than that.

Dr. Nathan Farber, a lecturer in aeronautics at the Technion, and a former rocket scientist for the military industry, is skeptical.

His estimates are based on a decade of experiments, and what he saw in a short, censored video the Rafael staff and the defense ministry supplied to television stations.

"Five rockets were fired (three grads and two Qassams). That's not exactly a shower of grads. Of the five, two were expected to hit on target, and they were successfully intercepted. None of them was short-range. I checked the angle of fire a few times, and in no case were they lower than 45 degrees. That means that that only steeply routed rockets were intercepted. The matter of flat routes was not examined in this test. It will continue to be the weak point of the system whose capabilities will only be revealed unfortunately during a war."

Farber sounded the alarm on Iron Dome's weaknesses years ago. He believes Sderot should be defended with the Vulcan-Phalanx cannon, which are available and much cheaper.

"I never claimed the Iron Dome could not intercept rockets with high route angles," he said. "It definitely can intercept missiles at a range of 20 kilometers. The problem is that it has weaknesses, which they are attempting to conceal from the public."

The most prominent weakness is that the system has difficulty intercepting mortar shells and Qassams (flat route weapons) whose range is 4.5 kilometers or less. These are the mortar shells and Qassams that have been launched at Sderot and the areas bordering Gaza for the better part of a decade, and the reason Iron Dome was reportedly developed in the first place.

The generals, with chiefs of staff Dan Halutz and Gabi Ashkenazi and air force commanders in the lead, did not see defense of the home front as a critical element in their war plans. In their view, as defined by Uzi Rubin, "defense of the home front is not [the army's] problem, and doesn't have to be funded by the defense budget." And so they fought bitterly to defeat any effort to fund and develop a system of defense against short and mid-range missiles, in sharp contrast with their support for the Arrow (Hetz) system against long-range Scud and Shahab missiles.

In the end the generals gave in, because of pressure from then-defense minister Amir Peretz and public opinion following the trauma of the massive firing of Katyushas by Hezbollah in the Second Lebanon War, and the near-constant firing of Qassams on Sderot and the surrounding area. In other words, the army gave up its struggle for an active defense in Israeli military doctrine.

It wasn't a knockout, though. A rearguard war continues to be conducted. The air force founded and trained, with an obvious lack of enthusiasm, a special anti-aircraft battalion to operate the Iron Dome. But there are only two such batteries to date, because the defense system is having difficulties funding additional equipment.

And so the defense ministry is counting on sales of the system to other countries. The French journal Intelligence Online says that Singapore paid for a large part of the development, and is planning on making purchases. American magazine Defense News reports that India is also interested. Defense Minister Ehud Barak also had to try to collect money from U.S. President Barack Obama, and received a promise of over \$200 million for equipment.

For any reasonable home front defense in the north and south, there is a need for 200 batteries of defense systems at a cost of \$500 million. There is no chance that the money will be found.

And there is another problem: the cost of an Iron Dome missile is \$100,000, as Yossi Drucker himself admitted in an interview with American media. That is a very high price to take out a homemade missile that costs about \$100. And beyond all else, Iron Dome, developed in order to defend Sderot and the areas around Gaza, still has difficulties defending them against short range Qassams.

Yet another problem: Despite the success of the tests, they are only experiments and don't reflect the uncertainties of a battlefield.

Here is a suggestion to Rafael, the army and the defense ministry: Remove all doubt that the system can intercept missiles under real conditions. Why not place the experimental Iron Domes in the Negev (and even change their positions from time to time, in order to confuse the enemy).

This way it will be possible for the system and its operators to gather real experience. At Rafael they claim to have produced hundreds of missiles for tests. Use some of them for "real time" interceptions, not perfectly timed and pre-planned experiments.

It would also be a wise step before mass producing these interceptor missiles, which have not been tested under battlefield conditions. If they succeed, fantastic. If not, the state of Israel will save a lot of money. And aside from that, the accumulated experience can help improve the system.

Why tell fairy tales about the Iron Dome missile looping lazily in the air? Bring down Qassams without going in circles. (Haaretz)

- Israel Defense Forces troop fired at suspected militants that had approached Gaza's northern border with Israel, Israel Radio reported on Wednesday, with two suspected militants reportedly killed in the incident.

According to Palestinian sources, one militant was killed on the spot, while the second fatality succumbed to his wounds several hours after the incident.

Six militants remained hospitalized, the sources reported.

According to initial reports, Israeli tanks targeted a suspected militant squad after receiving reports that a squad near the northern Strip town of Beit Hanoun had intended to fire an anti-tank missile toward another IDF unit.

An Israeli military spokeswoman said soldiers opened fire on suspects approaching a border fence but had no further comment. Palestinian medical workers claimed 7 people were wounded, including a 10-year-old girl. No other details were immediately released.

The militant killed in the incident was reportedly a central Islamic Jihad militant.

Since Israel's Gaza offensive 18 months ago, cross-border violence has largely abated.

But there are occasional rocket and mortar salvos by Palestinians, usually claimed by militant groups unaligned with the dominant Islamist Hamas movement.

Last week, hospital officials said that an IDF shelling killed a Palestinian woman and wounded two of her relatives in the central Gaza Strip.

Asked about the incident in the village of Johar a-Deek, which is near Gaza's border with Israel, the IDF Spokesperson's Office confirmed that soldiers had opened fire on two suspicious figures who were seen approaching the border fence. (Haaretz)

- Israel is expected to make a decision in the coming weeks regarding the purchase of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF), senior defense officials said on Wednesday.

This would make Israel the first foreign customer to sign a contract to purchase the advanced stealth fighter jet.

Udi Shani convened a meeting with top IDF officers Wednesday evening to discuss the potential deal, which is expected to be decided upon at a meeting later this month that will be chaired by Defense Minister Ehud Barak.

Last month, the Pentagon sent the Defense Ministry a Letter of Agreement and gave it about 60 days to respond.

Under the proposed deal, Israel will likely purchase a single squadron of the advanced fifth-generation stealth fighter jet, which it would begin to receive in 2015, assuming that

the project does not encounter additional delays in its development. The JSF is manufactured by Lockheed Martin.

“The ball is in their court,” V.-Adm. Jeffrey Wieringa, who heads the Pentagon’s Defense Security Cooperation Agency, told Reuters on Monday. “I am waiting for them to make a decision any day.”

Israel is primarily concerned with the price of the aircraft, which could go as high as close to \$150 million.

As a result has also considered delaying the procurement and instead purchasing additional F-15s from Boeing.

The F-35 will be one of the most advanced fighter jets in the world and, according to the IAF, would significantly boost Israel’s deterrence in the region.

Israel is also seeking to receive a high level of “offset” on the aircraft and has held talks with the Pentagon that could lead to business for Israeli industries valued at close to \$4 billion.

This would mean that Israeli defense industries would receive a large percentage of the business so that money Israel spends on the acquisition is put back into the country’s economy.

One example of offset is the contract Israel Aerospace Industries has won to produce wing boxes for F-16s made by the Bethesda, Maryland- based Lockheed Martin, which is also the primary contractor for the F-35.

Israel Air Force chief Maj.- Gen. Ido Nehushtan held talks in recent days with his Canadian counterpart, Lt.- Gen. Andre Deschamps, who arrived in Israel on Sunday for his first visit here for talks with senior IDF officials on various issues, among them the JSF.

Last week, Canada announced that it will buy 65 F-35 fighter jets in a deal that will reach over \$6.5b.

The first aircraft will arrive in 2016 and are scheduled to replace Canadian F-18 Hornets.

During their talks, Nehushtan presented Deschamps with a updated intelligence review of the Middle East, with a focus on Iran as well as Hizbullah.

Deschamps visited the Tel Nof Air Force Base and the newly established squadron of the Heron TP, Israel's largest unmanned aerial vehicle, which was declared operational earlier this year. He also visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem.

In 2008, Canada purchased Heron 1 UAVs from Israel Aerospace Industries in a \$95m. deal. The drones were used for operations in Afghanistan.

"The relationship between the IAF and the Canadian Air Force are extremely important," Deschamps said.

"This was an excellent opportunity to visit here. I learned a lot from you." (The Jerusalem Post)

- Most Israelis – 57.5 percent – think that US President Barack Obama favors the Palestinians, and a fifth of Jewish Israelis have participated or plan to participate in protests to free captive IDF soldier Gilad Schalit, according to the July Peace Index released Wednesday by the Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University.

This month's index also revealed that a slim majority, 52%, of the Israeli public favors renewed construction in the West Bank after the settlement freeze ends in September, claiming that "continuing the freeze means capitulation to the Americans and the Palestinians."

Conversely, 41.5% say the freeze should continue, in order to "help advance the negotiations with the Palestinians and improve Israel's image in the international community."

Meretz (88.2%), Labor (62.5%) and Kadima (60.2%) voters favor continuing the freeze, while Shas (81.2%), Yisrael Beiteinu (73.8%) and United Torah Judaism (67.8%) want to end it.

While 71.5% of Israeli Jews support holding talks with the Palestinians, but only 32.3% believe they will lead to peace.

High support for talks along with pessimism about their outcome has characterized public opinion since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, note researchers Prof. Ephraim Yaar and Prof. Tamar Hermann.

Most Israelis – 62% – support direct dialogue, with only 14% supporting the proximity talks mediated by US envoy to the Middle East George Mitchell.

Over 42% view Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s policies towards the Palestinians as balanced, with most of the rest divided between seeing them as too yielding (29%) or too tough (17%).

While the involvement in “free Schalit” activism may be a world record for “public participation in civil protest,” note the researchers, the public is split almost evenly about whether the Schalit family should “intensify its protest measures,” with 48.5% in favor of intensification, and 43% against it.

The Peace Index project, which issues reports almost every month, is conducted under the auspices of the Evens Program for Conflict Resolution at Tel Aviv University and the Israel Democracy Institute. This most recent survey of some 600 Israelis, representing a cross-section of the population, was carried out by telephone on July 6-7 by the Dahaf Institute. The margin of error is 4.5%. (The Jerusalem Post)

- The Palestinian envoy to the UN is accusing Israel of talking peace while carrying out "illegal schemes" to try to impose the settlement it wants before peace negotiations start.

Riyad Mansour said Israeli actions, including settlement construction and demolition of Palestinian homes in east Jerusalem and over 900 military incursions in the West Bank in the last three months, are seriously hampering progress in indirect talks with Israel mediated by the United States.

He told the UN Security Council on Wednesday that the international community must stop appeasing Israel.

Israel's UN Ambassador Gabriela Shalev called for direct negotiations with the Palestinians with "no preconditions, no delays" but the Palestinian observer said a total settlement freeze "is essential" first.

In her speech, Shalev also addressed reports of another flotilla that is scheduled to leave Lebanon for the Gaza Strip. She called on the international community to prevent the sail, warning of the dangers such a voyage entails.

The ambassador also urged the international community to work toward the immediate release of captive IDF soldier Gilad Shalit. (Yedioth Ahronoth)

4. EGYPT / MISIR

- Egypt urged Turkey on Wednesday to ease current tensions in the latter's relations with Israel in order to restore the Turkish role in resolving regional disputes.

Cairo denied the existence of competition with Ankara in terms of regional leadership, saying that Turkey's diplomatic role merely complemented its own.

"If Turkey is to resume playing its part in regional issues, its troubled relations with Israel will not help it-- and Ankara is aware of this fact," said presidential spokesman Suleiman Awwad.

In a press statement following a meeting between Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gul, Awwad told reporters that, "Both the Israeli and Turkish sides will work on containing tensions by a number of means, which were reflected at a recent meeting between Israeli Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben Eliazar and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu" in Munich, Germany.

Awwad went on to stress that the tension had a negative impact on the two countries' ability to play their roles or to offer mediation. Awwad also hoped for progress on the Syria-Israel peace track, with Turkey and Arab states contributing on this front.

“Egypt is not afraid of the part Turkey is playing in the region”, Awwad noted. “Egypt is not seeking a renewed regional standing since its role has been secure for years. The Palestinian factions admit the centrality of our role.”

Asked whether Turkey would be permitted to take part in the reconciliation process between Palestinian factions, Awwad answered: "The Turkish role completes Egypt's role, as has been noted by Turkey's president, prime minister and foreign minister."

He added that Turkey was attempting to consummate Egypt's role by providing support both on the level of peace negotiations and in terms of Palestinian reconciliation. Awwad concluded by saying that Egypt remained adamant in its position on the issue. (Al Masry Al Youm)

- Shalateen, Southern Egypt--The dispute between Egypt and Sudan over the Halayeb Triangle, which straddles the border between the two countries, has flared up again following recent Sudanese claims on the area.

On 30 June, Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir declared that the triangle "is Sudanese, and will stay Sudanese," according to English-language daily The Sudan Tribune.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul-Gheit was quick to respond by declaring that Egypt's southern borders were "well known and well demarcated." The FM went on to stress the "futility" of reopening the historical dispute.

Since the 1950s, following the independence of Sudan, both countries have laid claim to the triangle, which comprises some 20,500 square kilometers of land at the southern end of the Red Sea. Although the issue flared up intermittently in the 1990s, it has since been relegated to the back burner for the most part--until now.

As it currently stands, Egypt exercises control over the territory, which it has shored up by offering free services--and, in some cases, citizenship--to local tribes in the area.

Halayeb residents say they receive free water and electricity from the Egyptian authorities, while Egypt's ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) maintains offices in the

area. According to one local resident, school children receive free meals from Egyptian authorities, along with a modest daily stipend.

The Egyptian government has also established a special body mandated with handling tribal issues and mediating inter-tribal disputes. Members of friendly tribes in the area, meanwhile, have been granted Egyptian citizenship and national identity cards in many instances.

Further staking its claim to the area, Egypt has recently inaugurated some LE13 million worth of development projects and services in Halayeb, including the construction of schools, roads and housing facilities, according to NDP sources.

In the aftermath of the el-Bashir's contentious statements, the Egyptian press, especially state-run newspapers, scrambled to run interviews with members of tribes in the area, who stressed their loyalty to Egypt.

Leaders of the local Ababda and Beja tribes, for example--both of which originally hail from Sudan--told Al-Masry Al-Youm that, since the end of Anglo-Egyptian rule over Sudan in 1956, the border had been set at the 22nd parallel, putting Halayeb inside Egypt proper. Many local tribesmen insisted they were Egyptian rather than Sudanese, pointing out that tribal chiefs were often NDP members or deputies in Egypt's parliament.

Echoing the position of other Egyptian officials, Salah Karar, member of the Beja tribe and head of the NDP in Shalateen--located some 300 km south of Halayeb and the closest point to the triangle--said that Sudan's decision to reanimate the issue was little more than an attempt to "deflect attention away from other internal matters in Sudan."

One month before Sudanese presidential elections in April, Khartoum had officially declared Halayeb a Sudanese electoral district, announcing its intention to set up polling stations throughout the territory to allow thousands of Ababda and Beja tribemen to vote. Egyptian independent daily Al-Shorouq, quoting an unnamed Egyptian diplomatic source, reported at the time that Cairo had allowed some polling stations to operate in Halayeb in order to bolster el-Bashir's electoral prospects.

Mahjoub Faidhul, former aide to the Sudanese president, however, challenges Egyptian claims on the territory, insisting that that the Halayeb Triangle is "Sudanese land." He

told Al-Masry Al-Youm earlier this week that Khartoum had raised a case in 2009 against Egypt's claim at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), adding that Sudan had renewed its appeal for UN intervention in the dispute in the same year.

Repeated telephone calls to the ICJ and the associated Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) were, however, unable to confirm this.

According to PCA legal secretary Vilamante Blink, cases that are not mentioned publicly or listed on the court's official website were "confidential." Blink declined to comment on the Halayeb dispute "because some cases are not open to the public."

Attempts to reach the Egyptian Foreign Ministry and the Arab League for clarification on the issue were unsuccessful.

The only reference made to possible arbitration by an Egyptian official was made by Mostafa el-Fiqi, head of the foreign relations committee at Egypt's Shura Council, who, in statements to the press, explicitly stated that Egypt would win the case at the ICJ. But no other official has since followed up on el-Fiqi's comments, and it remains unclear whether they represented a de facto confirmation that Egypt was even aware of the ICJ case.

Locals in Halayeb and Shalateen, for their part, told Al-Masry Al-Youm that the arbitration expected by Sudan would decisively settle the issue. Some, however, expressed anxiety as to what would become of the Egypt-provided services if the court decided the case in Sudan's favor.

Meanwhile, Halayeb residents and an NDP official from the Ababda tribe told Al-Masry Al-Youm that tribal movements in the triangle were being restricted by Egyptian authorities. Reporters, meanwhile, remain barred by Egyptian authorities from entering the disputed territory.

Shalateen residents said they had heard rumors that the popular camel market--one of the main reasons for the heavy tribal traffic between Sudan and southern Egypt--would soon be relocated to Halayeb. Some of the more cynical locals suggested the move was a "political" one aimed at cementing Egypt's authority over the triangle. (Al Masry Al Youm)

- The Muslim Brotherhood said today it has managed to gather more than 100,000 signatures for ElBaradei's pro-reform statement.

The organization said that such a swift development proves that Egyptians are responding well to the signature-gathering campaign launched by the National Association for Change (NAC), which only started 14 days ago via the internet.

The NAC also launched last Thursday a nation-wide door-knocking campaign to gather hand signatures for the petition.

Campaigners have reportedly gathered 7000 signatures over the past three days. The target is to gather one million signatures for the reform statement within a three-month period ending in October. Achieving such a target will require gathering 10,000 signatures per day.

The statement calls for ending the state of emergency, enabling the judiciary to fully supervise the election process, giving all candidates in the presidential election equal time in the media, giving expatriate Egyptians the right to vote, and opening up the way for nominations for the presidency. (Al Masry Al Youm)

- President Hosni Mubarak held talks Wednesday with his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gul, who arrived in Cairo yesterday for a two-day visit.

Talks included efforts to push the peace process in the Middle East forward, cooperation among the two countries in political, economic and investment fields, plus several international and regional cases of joint concern.

Gul attended along with Mubarak the graduation ceremony of a new batch of police officers at the military academy in Heliopolis.

In press releases, Gul denied any form of competition between Turkey and Egypt over roles in the Middle East, saying, "Egypt and Turkey are two key countries that have strong historical relationships and are currently working on developing relations."

Observers see Egypt as conservative as regards its acceptance of the Turkish role in the region, not wanting to diminish its own role as prominent mediator in the Middle East peace process.

However observers also say that Turkish involvement gives new hope in Middle East issues at a time where Israeli-Arab conflict has reached an impasse. (Al Masry Al Youm)

5. LEBANON / LÜBNAN

- Following his Wednesday meeting with Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Progressive Socialist Party leader MP Walid Jumblatt said that some political statements predicting conflict and assassinations only add fuel to the fire amid the threats that Lebanon is currently facing, Al-Hayat newspaper reported on Thursday.

This comes in a possible reference to Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, who voiced his fear during a Tuesday interview with MTV that political assassinations might strike Lebanon again.

Jumblatt called for adopting political dialogue to avoid any conflict, adding that the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) must not be politicized.

“Is it a mere coincidence that someone warns of political assassinations right after Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi warned that the STL’s indictment in September may lead to the deterioration of the situation in Lebanon?” he asked.

This comes after media outlets have reported that the tribunal will indict Hezbollah members for being involved in the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Nasrallah warned on Friday that the STL is an Israeli project aiming to incite sectarian strife in Lebanon.

According to As-Safir newspaper, Nasrallah told Jumblatt during their Wednesday meeting that he fears a violent reaction by Sunni fundamentalists in case the STL accuses Hezbollah. However, the daily did not elaborate further.

Jumblatt said that he tackled local, regional and international developments with Nasrallah, adding that they also discussed the means to face their possible impact on Lebanon. (Now Lebanon)

- Information Minister Tarek Mitri said following Wednesday's cabinet session that the government agreed to file a complaint with the UN Security Council against Israel for spy rings uncovered in Lebanon since April 2009, adding that they are in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

Interior Minister Ziad Baroud praised the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Lebanese army for uncovering spy rings in the country, according to Mitri.

Three Alfa telecom employees have been arrested since June 24 for collaborating with Israel.

Mitri also said the cabinet agreed to issue a detailed report on spy networks in Lebanon. The government then agreed to form a ministerial committee to look into draft bills on wiretapping to be headed by Prime Minister Saad Hariri and include Baroud, Justice Minister Ibrahim Najjar, Telecommunications Minister Charbel Nahhas, Minister of State for Administrative Reform Mohammad Fneish and State Minister Jean Ogassapian.

"There seems to be a commitment [by all ministers] not to exaggerate things or to resort to fiery rhetoric," said Mitri.

The information minister also told reporters that the cabinet was mainly concerned with clarifying why the ISF failed to arrest alleged spy Charbel Kazzi earlier, after Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah raised questions regarding the issue during his Friday speech.

According to the ISF, the Telecommunications Ministry waited until after Kazzi was arrested by the Lebanese Army on June 24 to hand over phone records that could have led to his arrest earlier.

"The most important thing is that there was no negligence by the ISF or army," said Mitri.

He also said that the cabinet touched on the Hizb al-Tahrir's Sunday meeting – that the party aims to turn the country into an Islamic nation, which could then become part of a greater Islamic nation across the Middle East – saying that Baroud explained to the cabinet that since the party held a closed meeting, there are no grounds for withdrawing the group's license.

This comes after several ministers slammed Baroud for not withdrawing the party's license following its statement.

Meanwhile, the minister said Hariri briefed the cabinet on his Sunday trip to Syria, saying it was a step in the right direction for developing good relations with Syria. The PM and Lebanese delegation signed 17 cooperation agreements during the two-day visit. President Michel Sleiman underscored the importance of benefiting from a positive relationship with Damascus, according to Mitri. (Now Lebanon)

- Kataeb Party leader Amin Gemayel on Wednesday night repeatedly challenged Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah over comments he made almost a week ago, but that continue to spur response from Lebanon's political circles, saying, "We have all survived the same challenges, and we have all been through the same crises, so Hezbollah will not have its way."

In a speech last Friday, Nasrallah called the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) an "Israeli project" designed to target Hezbollah by stirring up sectarian strife in the country.

Gemayel said Nasrallah's speech was dangerous because the Hezbollah leader spoke as if he is anticipating a new May 7 events. Gemayel warned the party cannot call the shots just because it is armed.

"Nasrallah's statements do not frighten us, but they make us concerned about the country," he added.

By taking on the STL, Gemayel said Nasrallah is essentially going up against the international community. If the Hezbollah leader's claim that the STL is trying to frame the party is true, then Nasrallah should come up with an alternative solution to

investigating the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Gemayel added.

There are only two options from here, according to the Kataeb Party leader, “We either confront Nasrallah, which will widen the gap [between us], or we hold onto state institutions and the STL. The latter is [our] best response to Nasrallah.”

He affirmed a desire for good relations with Damascus, but said, “Coordinating [our] foreign policy with Syria is critical, because there are regional issues that we do not see eye-to-eye.” (Now Lebanon)

- President Michel Sleiman resumed talks with political leaders of the National Dialogue committee in a bid to contain domestic tensions after Hizbullah’s condemnation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) as an “Israeli project.”

After meeting Tuesday with leaders of Hizbullah parliamentary bloc, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and the Future Movement, Sleiman held talks Wednesday with Phalange Party head Amin Gemayel, Marada Movement leader Sleiman Franjeh and March 14 MP Labor Minister Butros Harb.

“President Sleiman resumed his meetings with leaders and officials to strengthen national unity and defend Lebanon against dangers that could result from overlapping regional issues particularly given Israeli intentions to destabilize the Lebanese domestic scene,” the president’s media office said.

But Sleiman’s efforts did not constrain March 14 parties and Hizbullah from trading accusations of seeking to destabilize the security situation.

Hizbullah MP Qassem Hashem accused Lebanese Forces chief Samir Geagea of seeking to exploit the STL to target Lebanon to serve the interest of a US-Israeli plot.

“Geagea is predicting assassinations and hinting at the outcome of the indictment to confirm the intersection of media reports with the interests of certain parties,” Hashem said, in reference to Western reports and Israeli statements that the STL’s indictment would involve members of Hizbullah and cause major chaos in Lebanon.

In a televised interview Tuesday night, Geagea said political assassinations could potentially resume but added that he had no information on the issue.

While Future Movement officials hailed Sleiman's efforts to diminish tensions, the March 14 Secretariat General described Hizbullah's stances as "a threat to resort to violence and a civil strife precursor," in a high pitched statement.

"The STL was endorsed by all parties during National Dialogue sessions, and let us leave it to work on the issue as we will accept its results regardless of the price and we hold on to this position," said Future Movement member Amar Hourri.

"The STL is on the right track and no one is capable of changing its direction," he added.

Meanwhile, the March 14 Secretariat General said in their statement that Sayyed Nasrallah's speech last week was a threat to resort to violence in a continuous attempt to overthrow the Cabinet and the 2008 Doha Accord.

The Doha Accord ended bloody clashes between pro-opposition and government supporters after gunfights almost led to civil strife following the Cabinet's decision to dismantle Hizbullah's private telecommunications network.

"The March 14 secretariat condemns the escalatory rhetoric and accusations of treason that Sayyed Nasrallah launched against more than 1.5 million Lebanese that sought truth and justice since Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005," the statement said.

The March 14 Forces also accused FPM leader MP Michel Aoun of provoking Nasrallah to violence and undertaking military action in Christian regions.

Aoun told As-Safir last week that he warned Nasrallah against certain parties arming in Christian regions to instigate strife in parallel with Israeli aggression against Lebanon that would coincide with the STL's indictment of Hizbullah members. "We call on the state, its political authorities and its security and military forces to assume their responsibilities in protecting civil peace against threats by certain parties drawing various scenarios," the statement said.

Nasrallah is scheduled to hold a news conference Thursday to address the issue of spying networks and the ongoing debate about the STL's expected indictment. Hizbullah's press office described the news conference as an "important one."

Commenting on the STL's potential indictment of Hizbullah members, Bouthaina Shaaban the political and media adviser to Syrian President Bashar Assad, said the issue was discussed during Premier Hariri's visit to Damascus. "We discussed everything though Syria does not interfere in Lebanese affairs. However, regional developments are of interest to Damascus since all developments are related and plans against the region did not and will not stop," she said. (The Daily Star Lebanon)

6. SYRIA / SURIYE

- A workshop on Syria's joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) was held here Wednesday by Ministry of Economy and Trade in cooperation with Syrian Enterprise & Business Centre (SEBC).

The first session of the workshop focused on the process of joining the Organization as the second one dealt with the topic of international expertise.

Director of the World Trade Organization in Ministry of Economy and Trade, Salma al-Sayad reviewed the facilitations provided to join WTO through adapting and renewing legislations, finding the suitable institutional framework, preparing staff for negotiations and setting memo of external trade.

For his part, Director of the National Center for Agricultural Policies Atyeh al-Hindi spoke about the process of negotiations and its requirements, adding that the joining process needs high level of technical expertise.

Foreign policy expert in the Trade Promotion Program Paul Packer spoke about the international experiences with regard to joining WTO and its impacts on trade.

He pointed out that the application of the strategic trade policy would protect emerging industries, boost exports, encourage investment, upgrade national welfare and seek suitable prices and diversity of products in addition to creativity.

He referred to the importance of Syria's joining the organization which is manifested through tariff reductions as a step forwards to unify them in order to reach a sort of qualification and encourage direct foreign investments.

Trade law expert in the Trade Promotion Program Gustav Prink pointed out to the importance of applying the laws, regulations and judicial decisions as soon as possible to enable the government and merchants to get acquainted to them.

Syria was recently admitted to WTO as an observer member. (Syrian Arab News Agency-SANA)

- Speaker of People's Assembly Mahmoud al-Abrash's on Wednesday held talks with Bahraini Parliament Chairman, Kuwaiti National Assembly Speaker, Speaker of Palestine National Council and Moroccan Parliament Speaker on the sideline of the 3rd World Conference of Speakers of Parliament.

Talks dealt with the preparations necessary for the solidarity visit that some Arab and Islamic parliamentarians will start to Gaza Strip before Ramadan month.

The visit was agreed upon during the extraordinary Conference of the Parliamentary Union of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)-member states (PUOICM) held last month in Damascus.

The talks also discussed the measures required to implement the conference decisions and intensify efforts at international forums to put pressure on Israel to end its siege on Gaza and to abide by the UN Security Council resolutions regarding the Middle East and conveying humanitarian aid to Gaza People. (SANA)

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

- Gunmen killed at least five Yemeni soldiers on Thursday in a suspected al Qaeda ambush on a military convoy in the south, while a northern battle with Houthi rebels killed 20 people, officials said.

North of Yemen

Fighting overnight between the Houthi rebels and army-backed tribes in northern Yemen killed 20 people on both sides, a tribal official said.

"Violent clashes took place overnight between Houthis and Bin Aziz tribes... leaving 20 dead from both sides," the official said.

Yemeni forces deployed in the area intervened to break up the fighting, he added.

Fighting in the mountainous north between the two sides over the past four days had left at least 49 people dead, threatening a fragile truce, tribal and rebel sources had said on Wednesday.

South of Yemen

The attack in the south would be the third by a resurgent regional arm of al Qaeda against the Yemeni government in five weeks.

"There was an ambush targeting the soldiers' vehicle and five were killed and a sixth was wounded. There is suspicion that al Qaeda was behind the operation," an official in the southern province of Shabwa said.

Yemen, neighboring top oil exporter Saudi Arabia, leapt to the forefront of Western security concerns after al-Qaeda's Yemen-based regional wing claimed responsibility for a failed attempt to bomb a U.S.-bound plane in December.

Al Qaeda in Yemen had mostly focused its high-impact attacks on hitting foreign targets, but last month gunmen raided the regional headquarters of the political security office in

Aden, killing 11, an attack al Qaeda said was revenge for a state assault on a militant stronghold.

Last week, more suspected al-Qaeda gunmen attacked two security buildings, igniting clashes that killed four people.

Separately in northern Yemen, a mortar and machinegun battle between Shi'ite rebels and pro-government tribesmen drew in government forces overnight, killing at least 19 people and complicating efforts to cement a truce.

The northern violence marked the deadliest day of fighting since a truce was sealed in February to end a civil war that has raged on and off since 2004 and displaced 350,000 people.

"There were very violent confrontations. Nine soldiers and pro-government tribesmen were killed as well as about 10 Houthis," a local official in the Harf Sufyan region said.

"It remains very tense after the failure of efforts to stop the fighting between the two sides," he added. (Al Arabiya)

8. SOUTH ASIA / GÜNEY ASYA

PAKISTAN / PAKİSTAN

- President Asif Ali Zardari has welcomed NATO's intention of establishing a trust fund to support training activities related to counter-terrorism and counter-insurgencies. He hoped that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would provide equipment for capacity building of Pakistan's counter-terrorism units under the proposed trust fund. During his meeting with NATO Secretary General Andres Fogh Rasmussen here at the Aiwan-e-Sadr on Wednesday, the President appreciated training facilities offered by the NATO to Pakistani officers and called for further increasing such facilities.

He said that the capacity building and training of military as well as civilian officers was essential for effectively combating the challenges posed by militancy and terrorism.

The President said, "The NATO and Pakistan share common objectives of enhancing regional and global peace and are partners in the international coalition against terrorism".

He hoped that the strong ties between the NATO and Pakistan would further deepen with maturing of a political dialogue between the two sides.

Those who were present during the meeting included among others Babur Hizlan, Turkish Ambassador, Martin Howardm, Mark Sedwill, Robert F. Simmons, Mrs. Fiona Morrison, James Appathurai, Michael Ulveman and Gilles Vander Ghinst.

Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Interior Minister Rehman Malik, Secretary General M. Salman Faruqui, Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir, Secretary Defence Lt. Gen[®] Syed Athar Ali and spokesperson to the President former Senator Farhatullah Babar were also present besides other senior officials.

Briefing the media, Farhatullah Babar said that the President said that war against terror was not confined to the borders of Pakistan but the whole world was suffering through this menace.

Pakistan, however, was paying the greatest price in terms of human and material losses, he added.

He said that owing to the heavy price being paid by the country and the great sacrifices being made by the security forces as well as civilian population, the government had always urged its partners to augment efforts and provide the country with necessary tools to fight militancy.

The President said that the democratic government of Pakistan understood the potential of destabilization of the world by extremists' forces and took on the challenge to exterminate this menace.

“We have proved to the world that we have the determination and the capability to effectively take on the challenge, but we need resources and capacity-building with necessary tools and equipment”, he added.

The President said that Pakistan’s designation as a major non-NATO ally was a clear recognition of the vital role Pakistan has played in the war against terror.

“Our resolve and determination stand beyond any doubt”, the President emphasized.

He said that Pakistan had been urging the international community to help the country in creating opportunity zones in the conflict ridden areas in order to change militant mindset and to win the war which was essentially a battle of hearts and minds.

The President, while appreciating NATO’s assistance for securing preferential market access for Pakistan, said that the development and creation of opportunities were the only way out for ridding those areas that were worst hit by militancy.

Discussing the regional situation, the President said that Pakistan has legitimate interests in promoting peace and stability in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Strong and stable Afghanistan would help in putting a permanent end to the sources of funding and weapons to the terrorists, he said.

The President said that the drugs were being used as a weapon for funding and equipping the militants and there was an urgent need for the international community to especially focus on putting an end to drug trafficking.

He said that poppy cultivation could be effectively eliminated through introduction of alternate crops and facilitating the farmers in this regard.

Farhatullah Babar said that the President also pointed towards inadequate compensation and remuneration levels of the security forces who were operating against the militants.

On the other hand, the President pointed out, the drug money was being used for not only offering lavishly attractive packages to the militants but also for attracting frustrated and unemployed youth.

The President said the international community was yet to fully appreciate the implications of drug trafficking and inadequate remuneration levels of the security personnel and urged upon the NATO Secretary General to use his influence upon international community to address these issues on priority.

The President further said that the international community needed to synergize their efforts for restoration of peace, stability and prosperity of Afghanistan and emphasized upon the need for the international community to stay engaged and facilitate efforts for re-building of Afghan state institutions.

He said that Pakistan would complement and support international efforts for the peace and stability and would provide all assistance for capacity building of the Afghan institutions.

The NATO Secretary General thanked the President for meeting and appreciated the steps taken by the government in fighting militancy within its borders and supporting and promoting political solution to the problems across its border. (Associated Press of Pakistan-APP)

- Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani on Wednesday emphasized the need for joint monitoring of Pakistan-Afghan border and increased sharing of information on the cross border movement of militants and terrorists between Pakistan and NATO-ISAF forces. The Prime Minister also underscored the importance of closer consultation and better understanding on all issues of common interests between Pakistan and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Prime Minister was talking to Anders Fogh Rasmussen, NATO Secretary General, who called on him at the Prime Minister's Secretariat here.

The Prime Minister welcomed the proposal for signing a framework agreement between Pakistan and NATO through Joint Political Declaration and hoped that both sides would exchange drafts of a proposed declaration in the near future to finalize it for signing as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister also appreciated NATO's training facilities for Pakistan's military and civilian personnel and hoped that this cooperation would be further expanded to strengthen his country's counter-terrorism and counter insurgency capabilities.

The Prime Minister thanked the NATO's Secretary General for his intercession with the European Union leadership on Pakistan's behalf for granting the GSP Plus facility and greater access to Pakistani products in the European markets.

Pakistan's economic development and progress, he said, was a pre-requisite for successfully confronting the threat of terrorism and its allies must help it in this regard through greater market access.

The Prime Minister drew the attention of the Secretary General to the need of refurbishment of the road infrastructure for facilitating smooth supplies to ISAF forces through Pakistan and sought NATO's assistance in improving the related road network in the country.

The Prime Minister stated that despite immense human and material losses, Pakistan has demonstrated its commitment to combat terrorism, extremism and militancy.

The sacrifices made by the people of Pakistan and its armed forces remain un-paralleled but his government has been able to retain the domestic consensus and people's ownership of struggle against terrorism.

The government of Pakistan attaches high priority to provide relief and rehabilitation to the returnees to the affected areas and reconstruction of the areas cleared from the militants. The international community should assist Pakistan in these efforts, he added.

Dilating on NATO and ISAF forces' role in Afghanistan, the Prime Minister stressed that the international community must stay engaged and facilitate efforts of the Afghan government to rebuild its state institutions and related capacity.

He reiterated Pakistan's offer for training of the Afghan National Army, National Police and civil bureaucracy.

The NATO Secretary General commended the Prime Minister, his government and Pakistan armed forces for resolutely pursuing the campaign against terrorism.

He expressed his satisfaction over the on-going cooperation between Pakistan and NATO and vowed to expedite finalization of Joint Political Declaration between the two sides.

The Secretary General said that the NATO would like to have a long term and robust cooperation going beyond resolution of the Afghan crisis.

He stated that the NATO, besides capacity building of Pakistan's military and civil officers in anti-terrorism fields, was willing to provide training to concerned Pakistani agencies personnel in anti narcotic drive.

He termed the Kabul conference held on Tuesday as very successful and stated that the participating countries had agreed with Afghan President Hamid Karzai's idea that the Afghan forces should be enabled to take over the law enforcement duties from the NATO and ISAF forces by the end of 2014.

The NATO would accord every possible assistance to the Afghan government to achieve that goal, he added. (APP)

- In occupied Kashmir, a protest demonstration, participated by thousands of people was held in Pampore on Wednesday to reiterate the demand of people's inalienable right to self-determination, reports KMS.

People on the occasion, shouted popular slogans like, Go-India Go and Jeeway Jeeway Pakistan. Hurriyet leaders said that the people of Kashmir would not give up their liberation struggle, come what may.

Curfew and restrictions continued to remain in force in Srinagar, Sopore and Baramulla to prevent people from holding pro-liberation demonstrations.

Complete shutdown was observed across the Kashmir valley in protest against the civilian killings by the troops and large-scale detentions by the authorities.

Business establishments, shops, private and government offices, educational institutions and banks remained closed. Public transport was mostly off the roads.

Indian police personnel continued to raid the houses of civilians and arrest innocent youth. The official sources said more than 1,000 persons including teenagers have been taken into custody during the past three weeks and several of them have been booked under draconian law, Public Safety Act.

On the other hand, Indian troops in their fresh act of state terrorism, martyred two more innocent youth in Sopore. Their dead bodies were recovered from the debris of the house destroyed by the troops during crackdown operation. Earlier, an Indian trooper was killed in the area. Unidentified gunmen killed a civilian at Panjradi in Kishtwar. (Pakistan Times)

INDIA / HINDISTAN

- Two militants were killed in a gunbattle with security forces in Kupwara district of North Kashmir, a defence spokesman said on Thursday.

The encounter broke out between militants, hiding in Rajwar forest in Handwara, 90 kms from here, and security forces on Wednesday night, defence spokesman Lt Col A S Brar said.

On specific information about the presence of militants in the forest, security forces had cordoned off the area.

The militants opened fire on the search party and in the ensuing gunbattle, two militants, who are yet to be identified, were killed last night, he said.

The gunbattle was going on when reports came in last. (Times of India)

- Curfew was on Thursday lifted from Baramulla and Sopore towns but restrictions continued on the movement of people in most parts of the Kashmir Valley.

The decision to lift curfew from the two towns in north Kashmir came after deputy commissioner, Baramulla, Bashir Ahmad Bhat held a meeting with local representatives and discussed various measures to restore law and order on Wednesday evening.

During the meeting locals had demanded the release of youth, who were detained during the recent protests in the two towns, official sources said.

Bhat assured them that the issue will be seriously considered on a case-to-case basis after proper investigation.

Baramulla and Sopore towns were brought under curfew on Wednesday after protests over the killing of a youth, Fayaz Ahmad Khanday, in police firing on Monday.

Locals have also been demanding action against security forces allegedly involved in the death of Class VII student Faizan Ahmad Buhroo, who drowned in river Jhelum during a clash between police and protestors last week.

Though curfew has been lifted from the two towns, restrictions continued in many places on the movement of people as a precautionary measure, police said.

Police and paramilitary forces were deployed in strength in Baramulla and Sopore on Thursday morning to strictly enforce prohibitory orders.

Restrictions on the movement of the people also continued in most parts of old city especially in areas falling under police stations of Nowhatta, Khanyar, Rainawari, Maharajgunj, Safakadal, Zadibal and Lal Bazar.

Prohibitory orders are also in force in Batmaloo, Maisuma and Parimpora in uptown Srinagar, police said.

Meanwhile, life continued to remain disrupted in the Valley due to the week-long shutdown called by the hardline faction of Hurriyat Conference led by jailed leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani on July 17 to protest killing of several youths in the past one month.
(Times of India)

AFGHANISTAN / AFGANĪSTAN

- The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has signalled that it aspired to playing a role for bringing about peace in South Asia and its periphery even after its combat mission in Afghanistan. Pakistan would be a key partner in the new role.

“We would also stay committed beyond the date our combat mission (in Afghanistan) ends because it is utmost important that we make our contribution to the regional peace and security,” Nato Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said at a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi after their talks here on Wednesday.

Mr Rasmussen, who was on his first visit to Pakistan, however, did not explain how Nato intended to ensure peace and security in the region.

Although Nato has since long been talking of staying committed to Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Western troops, it was probably the first time that the secretary-general spoke of a role for the entire region and not just of a partnership with post-conflict Afghanistan.

His words come alive with significance if read with “Nato 2020” — a policy paper outlining the alliance’s ambition of a global role. The strategy is to be unveiled in November.

The Nato’s top official said the alliance viewed Pakistan as a long-term partner as it is an important country in the region.

During his talks at the Foreign Office, Mr Rasmussen proposed a framework agreement between Pakistan and Nato through a joint political declaration which could boost their bilateral political consultations and military cooperation.

Foreign Minister Qureshi said Pakistan had responded positively to the suggestion. He said it was important that the relationship “does not remain confined to the needs in Afghanistan, but goes beyond Afghanistan”.

Ever since Nato started contemplating a makeover from a Western alliance to a global player, Pakistan has always figured prominently in its calculus for this region.

It is in this context that 'Nato 2020' proposes Pakistan as one of the 'partners across the globe'. Other partners in the category include Afghanistan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea, all of whom are playing a crucial role in the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) campaign against Taliban.

Nato believes countries in Central and South Asia have a major stake in stability in their region.

Nato is already helping Pakistan through its capacity-building programmes for army personnel, civilians, police and counter-terrorism officials.

An agreement for sharing secret information is also under consideration. A Nato official told Dawn there was a consensus that the alliance must get ready to respond to global threats.

"We have ended the in-area/out-area debate for Nato operations. Although we continue to be a transatlantic organisation, Article 5 on collective defence has global implications," he added.

Pakistan's agreement to play ball with Nato vis-a-vis its long-term presence in the region could ruffle feathers in its neighbourhood, affecting Islamabad's regional ties. Beijing is opposed to a long-term western military presence in China's environs. Iran could be another country to have serious reservations.

At his meeting with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, too, Secretary-General Rasmussen talked on similar lines, saying: "Nato would like to have a long-term and robust cooperation going beyond resolution of the Afghanistan crisis".

AFGHANISTAN

The secretary-general, at the press conference, looked unsure about the success of the Afghan reconciliation process in which Pakistan expects to play a major role.

“I don’t know whether reconciliation would be a success, but I think we should give it a try if the (warring) groups engage positively, support their government, abide by the Afghan constitution and put down arms.”

He also endorsed a role for Pakistan in the process, but insisted it must be Afghan-led. Mr Rasmussen advocated a condition-based transition in Afghanistan and cautioned against premature withdrawal.

“So the transition will not be driven by the calendar, it will be driven by conditions.”

He further said: “If we were to leave Afghanistan before we have finished our job then the Taliban will just return to Afghanistan and create again a safe haven for international terrorism. Afghanistan could once again serve as a launch pad for terrorist attacks.”

At a conference in Kabul on Tuesday, President Hamid Karzai had announced that his government would be able to take over security completely by 2014. But US President Barack Obama had previously spoken about start of US withdrawal by July next year and now British Prime Minister David Cameron has indicated that UK troops could start returning early next year. (Dawn)

- The US on Thursday said Lashkar-e-Taiba terror outfit was as dangerous as Taliban and al-Qaida with which it was working in close coordination and that Pakistan has been asked to deny it a foothold in that country.

US special envoy on Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke also emphasised the urgent need for bringing to justice the perpetrators of Mumbai attacks, saying Pakistan has taken "some steps" in this regard but these were not enough.

Holbrooke, who met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh here last evening to give his assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, said India has a "vital role" to play in the peace and stability in that country and insisted that the US was not trying to "diminish" that scope.

At the same time, he emphasised that Afghanistan cannot be stabilised without the participation of Pakistan, which has "legitimate concerns" in that country.

In an interaction with a group of journalists here, he said the LeT's goal was to create "maximum problems" between India and Pakistan besides working against the interests of western countries.

"When we talk about major terrorist groups we consider it as dangerous as other groups," Holbrooke said when suggested that the US did not appear to be keen on tackling LeT on the same lines as Taliban and al-Qaida.

"We understand, as government, that it (LeT) is a threat and we talk about it all the time with Pakistani military (asking them) to deny their territory to this organisation," said Holbrooke, who arrived here yesterday after a visit to Islamabad.

The special envoy said, "We all know what it (LeT) did and what they want to do."

He identified LeT as a part of terror conglomerate comprising Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban and Haqqani network. "Taliban has almost become a brand," he observed.

"Under intense pressure these groups seem to be growing closer to each other. Two or three years ago, they were more distinct than now," Holbrooke said.

He said these groups work more closely and help each other as their long-term objective is similar - to hurt western ideologies and create "maximum problems between India and Pakistan.

"Tackling it (LeT) is equal to any other priority in the region," he said.

To a question on Mumbai attacks, he said Pakistan has taken "some steps but these are not enough". He said the US was talking "frankly" to Pakistan on such issues.

Holbrooke, who attended the Kabul Conference on Tuesday, said the US recognises that Afghanistan's "neighbours and near neighbours have genuine security concerns" in that country and "that includes definitely India."

To a question about worries here that India's stakes and role were not being appreciated by the US, he insisted that "nobody wants to diminish India in Afghanistan."

The US envoy, who also met National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon, said "India has a vitally important role to play" in Afghanistan. He, however, refused to define that role saying it was for the Indian leadership to do so.

At the same time, he added that there was no "zero sum game" between India and Pakistan.

He sought to allay apprehensions here that Pakistan would be taking control of Afghanistan after the US-led forces leave the country.

"Pakistan is not going to take over Afghanistan nor is Taliban. But every country in the region has to be part of the solution," he underlined.

But, he added, "you cannot stabilise (Afghanistan) without the participation of Pakistan which has legitimate concerns."

Holbrooke said Taliban poses a "formidable threat to security and stability of Afghanistan and the region."

He also sought to allay concerns here over the US' efforts to develop relations with Pakistan.

"Improved (US) relations with Pakistan is not bad for India and improved (US) relations with India is not bad for Pakistan," he said, while pointing out that he hears worries on this count every time he visits Islamabad or here.

"The truth is that America has closer relations with India and closer relations with Pakistan than you two countries have with each other," he said.

He said the US firmly believes that its improved relations with Pakistan and India are in interest of both the countries. "So, that is the reason we have strategic dialogue, to improve relations with Pakistan."

On the recent trade and transit pact signed between Afghanistan and Pakistan, he said it was the "most important" agreement reached in 50 years and was better than the 1965 pact between Afghanistan, Pakistan and India which was "outmoded and disregarded".

This agreement does not include India but it does allow Afghan trucks to come up to Wagah crossing on Indian border and offload goods directly to Indian trucks, he said, terming this as a "big step" for Afghan-India relations.

"I hope it is just the beginning of more such steps," he said. (Times of India)

- Britain could start withdrawing troops from Afghanistan as early as next year, British Prime Minister David Cameron said Wednesday.

Britain has said it wants to pull the bulk of its 9,500-strong force out of the war zone within five years, in line with an international aspiration to give Afghans full control of their security by the end of 2014.

The United States, which has committed the bulk of foreign troops deployed in Afghanistan, hopes to start bringing soldiers home from July 2011.

Asked in an interview with BBC radio whether Britain could match that, Cameron said: "Yes, we can but it should be based on the conditions on the ground."

"I mean, the faster we can transition districts and provinces to Afghan control, clearly the faster that some forces can be brought home," he said during a visit to Washington.

"I don't want to raise expectations about that because that transition should be based on how well the security situation is progressing."

The new prime minister, in charge of a Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition that took power in May, said the public should be clear that, by 2015, Britain would not have "combat troops or large numbers" in Afghanistan.

Cameron visited the Arlington military cemetery Wednesday where he laid a wreath and met 20 British veterans.

In London, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg confirmed the timetable for the withdrawal of British combat troops.

"We do not wish to see British troops in a combat role in Afghanistan by 2015," Clegg told parliament.

"No timetable can be chiseled in stone but we are absolutely determined, given how long we have been in Afghanistan, given that we are six months into an 18-month military strategy, embarking on a new political strategy, that we must be out in a combat role by 2015," he added.

Cameron discussed Afghanistan and exit strategies with U.S. President Barack Obama Tuesday in his first visit to the White House as prime minister.

Both men are under strong domestic pressure to bring troops home but have also said they are determined to succeed in their mission to stabilize the country.

"Victory in this war is being able to hand over to an Afghan government and an Afghan army and police force that are capable of securing their own country," Cameron said in an interview with Britain's GMTV, also screened Wednesday. (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.*

**Bu bülten Kasım 2009'dan beri ORSAM Ortadođu Uzman Yardımcısı Sercan Dođan tarafından hazırlanmaktadır. Bülten Ortadođu ülkelerinin yerel haber kaynaklarından derlenmektedir. Belirtilen görüşler bölge ülkelerinin haber kaynaklarına ve ismi geçen yazarlara ait olup ORSAM'ın görüşünü yansıtmamaktadır.*