

## NEWS IN BRIEF

## Abbas seeks US backing in UN settlement condemnation

**RIO DE JANEIRO:** Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said his new attempt to get the United Nations to condemn Israeli settlements was specifically designed to win US support, in a Thursday speech in Brazil. The Palestinians have drafted a proposal and are lobbying for a Security Council resolution that would declare West Bank settlements illegal and an "obstacle to peace." The US has said it does not support the move. Israel says it's an attempt by the Palestinians to avoid negotiations. Abbas says the Palestinian draft used the "same words" as US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton has in criticizing settlements, and he "doesn't see why" the US would veto the move. -AFP

## Turkish police detain 10 Al-Qaeda suspects

**ISTANBUL:** Turkish police have detained 10 suspected Al-Qaeda militants who they believe were planning an attack ahead of New Year, state-run Anatolian news agency reported. The agency said the suspects, eight of whom were detained in anti-terror raids in the northwestern city of Bursa on Wednesday, were expected to be brought before a court on Friday. A further two people were detained in Istanbul and taken to Bursa, the agency said. Bursa police said in a statement that eight suspects linked to a terror group had been detained. Turkish police often arrest suspected Islamist militants and describe them as having links to Al-Qaeda, though details seldom emerge. -Reuters

## Iran threatens trial for opposition leaders

**TEHRAN:** Tehran's chief prosecutor said Friday it was only a matter of time before opposition leaders are put on trial for the unrest following the disputed 2009 presidential election, the latest sign that Iranian authorities may make a potentially explosive escalation of their crackdown. Hundreds of opposition supporters have been arrested and tried in the fierce crackdown that crushed opposition protests in the wake of the election, which the opposition claimed hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won by fraud. So far, authorities have stopped short of trying to jail the reform movement's top leaders - Mir Hossein Mousavi, who claims to have been the real victor in the election, fellow candidate Mahdi Karroubi and former President Mohammad Khatami - apparently out of concern it could spark a new wave of protests and fuel the opposition. -AP

## 'Mossad, US, UK cooperating to sabotage Iran nukes'

**PARIS:** US and UK intelligence services are cooperating with the Mossad to sabotage Tehran's nuclear program in exchange for Israel agreeing not to launch a military strike on Iran, the French weekly *Le Canard enchaîné* reported on Thursday, quoting French intelligence sources.

Acts of sabotage carried out in the past year in Iran were conducted by Israel with the help of the CIA and MI6, the sources said. Ahmadinejad admits centrifuges damaged by virus.

The sabotage included, according to the report, the introduction of the Stuxnet computer virus into 30,000 computers in Iran's nuclear reactors and explosions in October in which 18 Iranian technicians were killed at a factory in the Zagros mountains that manufactured Shihab missiles.

According to the sources, the assassination of five Iranian nuclear scientists were also carried out by the Mossad in cooperation with the American and British intelligence agencies.

The sources said the cooperation continues, and more joint actions aimed at stopping Iran from completing its nuclear program are expected. -AP

## US frustrated with Egypt military, show Wikileaks

**CAIRO:** Egypt's military, the biggest recipient of US military aid after Israel, is in decline, according to American diplomats, who blame the Arab nation's top brass for failing to modernize and adapt to deal with new threats.

US diplomatic memos leaked this month show previously unknown friction between the two allies over military assistance and strategy. Military cooperation has always been seen as an unshakable link between Egypt and the US, even as the political side of the alliance has gone through public ups and downs over Washington's on-and-off pressure on reform and human rights.

The disagreements, the memos show, are over a wide range of topics, with the US pressing Egypt to focus its military toward terrorism, halting cross-border smuggling and helping out in regional crises. They also suggest that, to the dismay of the Americans, the Egyptian military continues to see Israel, its enemy in four wars spanning 25 years in the last century, as its primary adversary 31 years after the two neighbors signed a peace treaty.

"The United States has sought to interest the Egyptian military into expanding their mission in ways that reflect new regional and transnational security threats, such as piracy, border security, and counterterrorism," said a memo dated Dec. 21, 2008, released by WikiLeaks.

"But the aging leadership, however, has resisted our efforts and remained satisfied with continuing to do what they have done for years: train for force-on-force warfare with a premium on ground forces and armor."

The memos exposed that public talk of shared goals between the US and Egyptian military is just rhetoric, says Steven Cook, a fellow at the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations and the author of a book on the Egyptian military.

"There doesn't seem to be much more and there hasn't been much for a while," he said. "The US criticism further reinforces what the Egyptian military is all about - the ultimate instrument of political control. They are not there to project power, but to protect the regime."

The military is the power base of the regime of President Hosni Mubarak, himself a former air force pilot. The army ousted the monarchy soon after it seized power in a 1952 coup and all of the country's presidents since have come from the ranks of the military.

Egypt has its own complaints, too.

Egyptian military officials don't welcome pressure by the Americans to change the doctrine of their armed forces. They also complain that Washington has increased annual military aid to Israel - growing from 2.55 billion US dollars in 2009 to an expected \$3 billion in 2011.

Since its peace deal with Israel, Egypt has received nearly \$36 billion in military assistance - an annual installment of \$1.3 billion.

With an estimated 1 million active and reserve personnel, the Egyptian military's last combat mission was in the 1991 Gulf War, when it fought as part of a US-military alliance to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.

According to the leaked US memos, Egyptian officials told visiting US defense officials they must convince Congress that Egypt was worth more than the \$1.3 billion a year it is getting in military aid, according to a memo dated Feb. 28, 2010.

In the memos, US diplomats lament that the Egyptian military has a "backward" posture and has been resistant to US efforts to "adjust its focus to reflect new regional and transnational threats."

They also criticize the military for assuming a direct role in the Egyptian economy, saying it "stifles free market reform" with large military-owned companies active in industries like retail, construction and hospitality.

One memo specifically singles out Egyptian Defense Minister Mohammed Hussein Tantawi, in office since 1991, as the "chief impediment" to US efforts to develop military ties between the two allies.

"During his tenure, the tactical and operational readiness of the Egyptian Armed Forces has decayed," a memo addressed to U.S. Gen. David Petraeus ahead of a visit he made to Egypt in 2008. Petraeus is now the top commander of the NATO force in Afghanistan. Egypt has resisted sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan and only recently started training military personnel from the two nations where US forces are fighting stubborn insurgencies.

Instead, the memos say, Egypt places emphasis on trying to achieve military parity with Israel through the acquisition of modern conventional arms such as aircraft and tanks.

One US diplomatic memo said Congressional debate to review - and attach conditions to - aid to Egypt may act as a pressure tool to force the Egyptian military to change its doctrine. -AP



An Egyptian soldier watches from his tank as a US marine corps Cobra helicopter flies overhead during Bright Star war games on Egypt's north west coast. (AP)

## Rain exposes poor drainage in Jeddah

**JEDDAH:** Parts of the western region of Saudi Arabia were once again struck by heavy downpours on Thursday morning that wreaked havoc and raised concerns of flash-flooding. Jeddah's roads were clogged with traffic as drivers navigated through raging rivers of rainwater that exposed the city's drainage problems.

Trees fell and manhole covers popped up as the existing drainage network quickly reached capacity in some parts of the city.

Makkah Gov. Prince Khaled Al-Faisal said the situation in Jeddah and other parts of the province is under control. "The floods caused the death of a man and three children in the suburbs of Makkah, the collapse of many houses in Al-Sawaed and Umm Al-Khayr districts and serious injuries to a security man in Jeddah," he said.

The man and the three children died when the car they were traveling in was swept away by a torrent in Wadi Al-Bajidi.

The body of a drowned child was recovered from a large pool of rainwater in Al-Ais, north of Madinah.

Several women and children were airlifted from a marooned residential building in Jeddah's Quwaiza district, which was one of the worst flood-devastated areas of the Nov. 25, 2009 flash floods that killed at least 123 and destroyed near-

ly 10,000 vehicles.

"Civil Defense helicopters rescued four women and five children in the Umm Al-Khayr residential complex in the Quwaiza district," said Commander of the Civil Defense Helicopter Division Maj. Gen. Muhammad Al-Harb.

Traffic was halted on Haramain Expressway to the north after the roads close to the Palestine Overpass and the Harazat district became lakes of water deep enough to submerge vehicles.

The Civil Defense declared underemergency in the area in the afternoon. A number of dinghies were brought out to help in rescue operations in the Wadi Qaus.

The underpass of King Abdullah Street was once again under water as it was during the November 2009 floods when the problem of lack of drainage was identified as the cause.

"I wonder why the municipal officials did not learn from the experience just a year ago," a bystander near the waterlogged underpass told Arab News. Last year, dozens of washed-away vehicles were retrieved from the completely submerged underpass, but no bodies were discovered.

"Rubber boat teams rescued 190 people in the Al-Harazat district while ground teams rescued seven members of a family in a car that submerged in the water in the midst of the wadi,"



Like a triumphal arch, this traffic light, uprooted by the combination of rain loosening the foundations and high wind tearing at it, lies across a road in Jeddah. (AP)

said spokesman of the Civil Defense in Makkah province Maj. Abdullah Al-Amri.

According to an official source in the Civil Defense, the flood waters gushing in from outside collected in Wadi Marikh and caused power failure in the Umm Al-Khayr residential complex in the Quwaiza district and also inundated the lower stories of buildings.

Jeddah Mayor Hani Abu Ras visited flood-hit spots including Madinah Road, King Abdul Aziz Street, Al-Andalus, King Abdullah Underpass and neighborhoods in the east of the Haramain Expressway.

Municipal authorities were busy pumping out surface water in many neighborhoods.

In Taif, police closed down Al-Kar and Al-Hada roads for more than one hour because of fallen debris. The road was reopened to traffic later.

Part of an old three-room house in Al-Jarif district in Madinah collapsed due to heavy rains. None of the 13 inhabitants was hurt or injured.

"Our monthly income is 1,700 riyals so we are unable to move," said Um Abdul Hamid, the owner of the house, who is in her 60s.

Civil Defense Maj. Khaled Al-Johani said the situation in rain-soaked areas was under control. "A number of cars were stuck on the flooded streets but this has been overcome and traffic is back to normal," he said Thursday afternoon.

Huge traffic jams were seen on Makkah's main streets. The traffic department had a hard time clearing the jams. Floods caused by the downpour dragged a number of cars and blocked roads. Some roads were totally blocked as vehicles drove in the opposite direction to avoid traffic.

Makkah Municipal Council members conducted field trips to number of neighborhoods to examine conditions there. The members were trying to find out whether the recent water drainage projects were working.

In what has become a driving tradition in Jeddah, the "shebab" (youths) came out in force, plowing through water-filled roads in 4x4 vehicles creating bow-waves that both soaked passersby and flooded slow moving cars' engine compartments. Among the young ones could also be seen adult members of the driving fraternity in expensive SUVs. Many drivers in smaller vehicles miscalculated the depths of the pools, flooding their engines and leaving them stranded with no immediate hope of rescue. -AP

## January a decisive month, says Lebanon Parliament Speaker Berri

**BEIRUT:** January is "a decisive month" for Saudi-Syrian efforts to find a solution for Lebanon's months-long political stalemate, the Parliament Speaker said Thursday.

Speaker Nabih Berri told visitors that a solution for the Lebanese crisis had almost been completed before Eid Al-Adha in November.

"But (Saudi) King [Abdullah] fell ill, so the solution fell ill. Now, the king has recovered, so the solution has recovered," Berri said. He added that now that Abdullah was recuperating in New York following back surgeries, a solution was being reworked. A source "very close" to Berri said a Saudi-Syrian-mediated settlement to break the Lebanese deadlock over an impending indictment into former Premier Rafik Hariri's killing was now in its final stage.

"The settlement is ready. It is being promoted at the local, regional and international levels," the source told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia and Syria, trying to broker a settlement acceptable to both the March 8 and March 14 factions, said Thursday that dialogue and cooperation among rival parties were essential for any solution.

Despite the Saudi-Syrian mediation bid launched in July, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Lebanon, Ali Awad Osseiri, stressed that the feuding Lebanese parties should take the initiative to break the deadlock over the indictment.

"All the (Lebanese) parties must return to the dialogue table ... The initiative (for a solution) should be taken by the Lebanese," Osseiri told MTV. He said Riyadh and Damascus were continuing their efforts to promote a solution for the Lebanese crisis. Osseiri added that Saudi Arabia does not interfere in the work of the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), whose upcoming indictment is threatening to destabilize the country.

The indictment is widely expected to accuse some Hezbollah members of involvement in the bombing that killed Hariri and 22 others in Beirut on Feb. 14, 2005. Hezbollah has denied involvement in Hariri's assassination.

For his part, Syrian Ambassador Ali Abdel-Karim Ali voiced optimism that Saudi Arabia and Syria would eventually clinch a deal to defuse political tension over the STL's indictment, but emphasized that cooperation and dialogue among rival Lebanese parties were essential for a solution.

"We hope that the New Year will be an occasion for reconciling views to consolidate national unity and end divisions for the good of Lebanon," Ali told reporters after meeting with Foreign Minister Ali Shami. Asked if reports that a Saudi-Syrian agreement has been finalized were true, Ali said, "We are optimistic, God willing. But this depends on the efforts of the Lebanese parties and their cooperation and dialogue." -AFP

## Iraq Christians bury their dead after more attacks



Coffins of slain Christians, Fawzi Rahim, 76, and Janet Mekha, 78, are seen during their funeral Mass at St. George Chaldean Church in Baghdad, Iraq, Dec. 31. (AP)

**BAGHDAD:** Iraqi Christians are burying their dead after fresh attacks hit the country's dwindling Christian community that had even toned down Christmas celebrations in fear of more violence.

Father Mukhlis - a priest at Baghdad's Our Lady of Salvation church where 68 people died during the October siege by Islamic extremists - says as many as 12 violent incidents occurred against Christian homes across the capital Thursday night.

Police said militants targeted at least four Christian homes, killing two people in a combination of grenades and bomb attacks.

The attacks were the first since Al-Qaeda-linked militants last week threatened a wave of violence against Christians in Iraq. -AP

## Obama names temporary ambassadors to Syria, Turkey

**HONOLULU:** US President Barack Obama took the rare step on Wednesday of temporarily appointing US ambassadors to Syria, Turkey and Azerbaijan, restoring a top US envoy to Damascus after an absence of nearly six years. All three countries are seen as vital to US interests - Azerbaijan for its gas reserves, Turkey as a NATO ally and frontline state in effort to contain Iran, and Syria, which Obama has sought to engage despite conflicts over its role in Lebanon, for its ties to Iran and its support for Hamas. The White House announced Obama would make "recess appointments" of Robert Stephen Ford as ambassador to Syria, Francis "Frank" Ricciardone as ambassador to Turkey and Matthew Bryza as ambassador to Azerbaijan. All three are career diplomats whose nominations would ordinarily be expected to move through the US Senate - which under the constitution has the right to reject the president's nominations - without controversy. -AP