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GENERAL ELECTIONS IN IRAQ: THE SHIITE ALLIANCE, UNSURPRISINGLY, WINS THE ELECTIONS AND THE KURDISH COALITION WINS 53 SEATS WITH AN INCREASE IN VOTES

AFTER having examined at length the complaints and settled the disputes, the Iraqi Election Commission, with the help of UNO experts, made the 15 December election results public. During these latest elections

12,191,133 valid votes were cast as against 8,361,961 for the 30 January 2005 elections. The Kurdish coalition increased its score of votes cast even though the number of seats it won decreased. It won 2,642,172 votes and 53 seats, whereas in the January

elections, with 2,175,551 votes it had secured 71 seats in the Iraqi Parliament. The system of allocation of seats worked against it, the higher poll reducing its percent score. Despite many objections, no political group denied the overall result, which put the Shiite conservatives (UIA) in the lead with 128 seats (5,021,137 votes) in the future 275 member Parliament (in the previous election this list had scores 4,075,295 votes and 132 seats).

According to the International Mission to the Iraqi elections, published on 19 January, many irregularities and cases of ballot rigging had sullied the 15 December elections. The body, which includes 10 countries and is presided by Canada, proposes changes for future polls but did not recommend any cancellation of votes. Some of the 220,000 Iraqi staff employed had indulged in “*doubtful or illegal*” practices, according to the report, while certain members of the security forces voted again, after having voted the day before in a poll specially organised for them.

The report of the International Mission is very cautious in its evaluation of the impact of the observed frauds. The report makes the point that the Iraq Election Commission had invalidated the results of 227 of the 30,000 ballot boxes (**Editor’s note:** that is under 1%) after investigating the most serious frauds. The Mission considered it “*regrettable*” that a fresh vote was not organised in the constituencies concerned, but did not demand that it take place. The election officials received 2,000 complaints, alleging the stuffing of ballot boxes, intimidation, violence, inaccurate electoral registers, lack of ballot papers, fraud and breaches of the end of the campaign. However, despite these problems, the International Mission considered that the Iraqis were to be congratulated for this poll that took place in a relative calm,

despite the atmosphere of violence. “*Despite these conditions, the Iraqi people voted in number that would honour democracies in calmer parts of the world*” the report observes.

The parties on the Iraqi political scene are preparing for delicate negotiations on the composition of a government of national union. Iraqi secular and Sunni organisations have agreed to form a united front in their future discussions with the Kurdish and Shiite parties on the formation of a new coalition government. The Iraqi Concord Front, the country’s principal Sunni Arab organisation, and the National Iraqi List, led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, a secular Shiite, have decided to join forces with the Unified Iraqi Front, led by the Sunni Arab Salih Mutlak. “*By negotiating together, they will increase their chances*”, declared Abdul Hadi Zubeidi, a member of the Concord Front. “*They have the same ideas, such as the formation of a government of technocrats, opposition to federalism in the South and Centre and they agree that the Ministry of the Interior should not be controlled by people linked to political parties*”. By joining forces, the Sunni Arab and secular forces will have a total of 80 seats in Parliament, making them the second largest political block in the Assembly.

During a visit to Baghdad on 7 January, the British Foreign Minister, Jack Straw, brought

London’s support for a broadened government in Iraq that would unite all the country’s communities. “It is not enough for political leaders to say, as is the case today, that there must be a government of national unity — the manner in which it must work has to be ensured”, declared Mr. Straw, in the middle of his discussions with Iraqi leaders. Mr. Straw had arrived in Basra, (Southern Iraq) where his country has 8,000 men stationed, the day before. He met the Iraqi Prime Minister, Ibrahim Jaafari (a Shiite) and the President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani (a Kurd).

The composition of the new Parliament is as follows:

United Iraqi Alliance (Shiite): 128 seats. Formed prior to the January 2005 interim election with the blessings of the most influential Shiite Imam, the great Ayatollah Ali Sistani, it is by far the largest political force. The list includes 18 Shiite groups, but is effectively dominated by three organisations: present Prime Minister Jaafari’s Islamic Dawa party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI — pro-Iranian) led by Abdel Aziz Hakim and the nationalist Sadr movement, loyal to the radical Imam, Moqtada Sadr.

The Kurdistan Coalition: 53 seats. This secular coalition unites the two main Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by the present President of Iraq, Jalal

Talabani, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Mas-sud Barzani, President of Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as a dozen small Kurdistan political organisations, including four Christian parties and the Communist and the Socialist parties — with the notable exception of the Islamic Union of Kurdistan.

The Iraq Concord Front: 44 seats. The principal Sunni Arab political block, it unites three political groups, the Iraqi Islamic Party, the main Sunni Arab organisation, led by Adnan Sulaimi and Tariq al-Hashemi; the Iraqi National Dialogue and the General Conference for the Iraqi People.

The Iraqi National List: 25 Seats. This list, led by the first post-war Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, a secular Shiite, includes 15 parties of varied views and religious affiliations, including the Iraqi Communist Party, the Sunni public figure Adnan al-Pashashi (who was Iraqi Foreign Minister before Saddam Hussein came to power) as well as tribal Sheikhs and liberal Shiite Imams.

The Iraqi Front for National Dialogue: 11 seats. This list is led by a controversial public figure, the Sunni Arab Salih al-Mutlak, and includes Baathists and former Sunni Arab nationalists opposed to the government. Salih al-Mutlak, a rich businessman, is a secular Moslem, has links with Baathists close to the insurrectionary forces. He has promised

to repeal the “De-Baathification” laws and reintegrate the former regime’s army officers.

Other organisations represented in Parliament are the Kurdistan Islamic Union, 5 seats (157,688 votes) and the Liberation and Reconciliation Block, 3 seats. The Risaliyun, a Shiite islamist list former by some followers of

Moqtada al-Sadr has two seats. The Umma (Community) Party of the Sunni leader Mithal al-Alussi, the Turkomen Front (87,993 votes as against 93,000 in January), the Yezidi Reform Movement and the Rafidain List (representing a fraction of the Assyro-Chaldean population) each won one seat.

IRAQI KURDISTAN: NECHIRVAN BARZANI GIVEN THE TASK OF FORMING A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION, WHILE JALAL TALABANI IS DESIGNATED KURDISH CANDIDATE AS PRESIDENT OF IRAQ

ON 21 January, Jalal Talabani, President of Iraq and leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and Massud Barzani, President of Iraqi Kurdistan and of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, signed an agreement preparing for the setting up of a single administration in Iraqi Kurdistan. The agreement was initialled during an extraordinary session of the Kurdistan Parliament at Irbil by Messrs Talabani and Barzani.

On 7 January the two major Kurdish parties announced that they were putting the finishing touches to this agreement that will end the presence of two administrations in Kurdistan which, on 30 January 2005, had elected a single, 111-member Kurdish Parliament in for a four-year period. The agreement, however, does not plan for the fusion of the PUK and KDP departments of the Interior, of Finance, of Justice or of the

Peshmergas (armed forces). The Kurdish parliament charged Neshirvan Barzani to form a government of national union, and the two major parties have also decided to propose Jalal Talabani, the present interim Head of State, as President of the Iraqi Federal Republic. “*It is an important achievement, which will protect Kurdistan that has become a solid base for democracy, unity and national agreement*”, stressed Mr. Talabani in a speech made during the sitting. Mr. Barzani stated, for his part, that the emergence of a single administration in the region will “help in the recovery of other parts of Kurdistan”, a reference to the city of Kirkuk and other regions inhabited by a Kurdish population. Several diplomats attended the session, including the US Ambassador in Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad.

Furthermore, on 21 January, AbdelAziz al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Council of the

Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) came out in support of a federal Iraq, at the risk of tension with the Sunni Arab parties, that want a strong central government and fear that their region be deprived of the oil wealth, concentrated in the North and South of the country. In an address on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, Mr. al-Hakim cited the red lines that should not be crossed in concluding alliances to form the next government. In particular, he stressed “*the necessity of not messing with certain articles of the Constitution*”. “*The question of the formation of autonomous regions cannot be the subject of any horse trading*”, he added.

The Constitution, adopted by referendum on 15 October, recognised the federal character of Iraq. Mr. Hakim’s party, at first reserved, has come round to it, and at present is supporting the idea of an autonomous region in the Centre and South of the Country. The Sunni Arabs, who inhabit areas without any oil, are fiercely opposed to federalism, even though they do not challenge the autonomous status of Iraqi Kurdistan. While the Constitution was being drafted, they secured the possibility of amending the document, with the ulterior motive of blocking the creation of autonomous regions in other parts of the country. Indeed, one of their leaders, Adnan al-Dulaimi, head of the National Concord list at the December elections, recalled this: “*There is an article in the*

Constitution on its amendment and we are determined to change any article that carries the danger of leading to the partition of Iraq”, he declared. “*We agree to giving more powers to the provinces to strengthen the decentralisation, but the creation of autonomous regions in Baghdad, in the Centre and the South threaten the country’s unity*”, he added, going on to say “*We reject this and will defend the unity of Iraq*”.

In his good wishes for the Eid, televised on 11 January, Mr. al-Hakim hoped that the successful outcome of the discussions to

form a government “*with the participation of all Iraqis, in the next few weeks*”. He saw, in the 70% turnout for the elections, a “*sign of the unity of the Iraqis who have made the choice of the political process and not of that of the loyalists of the old regime and of the takfiris*”, the extremist groups. Mr. al-Hakim stated that it was up to his list, the United Iraqi Alliance, to appoint the next Prime Minister, in conformity with the Constitution and because of “*the victory it won at the elections*”.

THE NEW REFORM OF THE TURKISH PENAL CODE ALLOWS BOTH THE LEGAL PROCEEDINGS AGAINST ORHAN PAMUK AND THE FREEING OF MEHMET ALI AGCA

ON 23 January, an Istanbul Court dropped the charges against the Turkish writer, Orhan Pamuk, prosecuted for having evoked the Armenian genocide in an interview with a Swiss paper in February 2005. This decision ends a trial that was extremely dangerous for Ankara, at a time when Turkey is knocking on the door of the European Union. The writer, winner of several literary prizes in Europe, including France’s foreign writers *Prix Médicis* for his novel “*Snow*”, was facing three years imprisonment for his remarks to the weekly supplement of the daily *Tages-Anzeige*, *Das Magazin*, in which he had stated, in particular, “*Thirty thousand Kurds and a mil-*

lion Armenians have been killed on these lands (in Turkey) and no one dares to speak about it except me”.

As from the opening of the trial, on 16 December last, the hearing was adjourned to 7 February. This delay was to allow time for a ruling on whether Article 301 of the new Penal Code punishing attacks on and insults to the Turkish Republic could be retroactively be applied to the writer. “*The Court has dropped the charges. This case should never have taken place*”, stated Orhan Pamuk’s lawyer, Haluk Inanici. The day before, the Turkish Minister of Justice, Cemik Cicek, had chosen to let the Court, before which the writer was appearing, decide whether or not to press the charges against him. According

to a senior official of the Ministry of Justice, Cemal Cicek considered that it was not up to the government to interpret Article 301 of the new Penal Code it had adopted last June. The nationalist lawyers, who had initiated the charges, promised to appeal. *“This is a scandal”,* reacted Kemal Kerincsiz, a member of the Union of Turkish lawyers. *“Orhan Pamuk must be punished for having insulted Turkey ... It’s a serious crime and must not remain unpunished”.*

With Orhan Pamuk’s trial, it was Turkey itself that risked being put on trial. *“The hardest thing to understand is why a country, officially committed to joining the European Union, should want to imprison an author whose books are well known in Europe”,* the writer summed up last December. Amongst his best-known translated works are *“My name is Red”, “Istanbul”* and *“Snow”*. Indeed, the case has strengthened the opponents of Turkey’s membership of the E.U. *“The trial of a writer who has expressed a non-violent opinion throws a shadow over the negotiations for Turkey’s membership of the European Union”* remarked the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn. Dropping the charges, he remarked, is *“good news for freedom of expression in Turkey”*. *“However, Orhan Pamuk is not the only person charged for expressing non-violent opinions in Turkey. His is just the most visible case. Other journalist, writers and academics are the targets of similar proceedings. I*

hope that the decision on Mr. Pamuk forecasts other positive outcomes for their cases, so that freedom of expression may be fully observed for all Turkish citizens”, the Commissioner stressed. Ankara must, at present, *“fill in the legal gaps”* in its new Penal Code that are liable to be used to attack freedom, he stressed. The Turkish Foreign Minister, Abdullah Gul, recently recognised that the proceedings against Orhan Pamuk have tarnished the country’s image and has declared, for the first time, that the laws limiting freedom of expression could be modified.

Orhan Pamuk’s books deal with the country’s memory and identity, torn between Western and Oriental influences, conservative and modernist, Islamic and secular. The writer has frequently raised his voice about the treatment of Kurds and criticised the lack of democracy and Turkey’s *“unbridled nationalism”*. In 1998 he refused the status of official artist.

At the same time, another disturbing event — the release and then re-imprisonment of Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turkish nationalist who had tried to kill Pope John-Paul II in 1981 — has shaken Turkey. He was re-imprisoned in Istanbul on 20 January, after a brief period of freedom and is due to be finally freed in 2010. Mehmet Ali Agca returned to the Kartal Prison he had left 8 days earlier by virtue of the laws on parole and reduction of sentence and an old

amnesty. In fact, the Court of Appeals quashed the decision to release him. The Court considered that the sentence served in Italy could not be deducted from the sentence he was serving in Turkey for completely different crimes, and that consequently his release had *“no legal basis”*. He had passed twenty-five years behind the bars, nineteen of which were in Italy after seriously wounding Pope John-Paul II on 13 May 1981 in St. Peter’s Square, in Rome, when he was 23 years of age. The reasons for his act and the identity of his possible paymasters remain a mystery. To the labyrinth of the Turkish Penal Code was added a crude calculating error in the findings of the Judge, who released him on the basis of his years in jail in Italy — given as 20 when in fact he had only served 19 years and one month. In 2000, this ultranationalist activist was extradited to Turkey, where he was incarcerated to serve out his sentences for the assassination, in 1979, of the famous liberal Turkish journalist Abdi İpekçi (**Editor’s note:** Editor in Chief of the daily *Milliyet* and one of the country’s most influential left-wing journalists) as well as for two bank robberies in the 70s. The early release of Agca was made possible by an amnesty, dated 2002, and by the system of reduction of sentences. However, this decision was vehemently challenged. The Turkish media have published, since his release, letters

he wrote from prison in which the man, described by the press as a “national killer”, offered his services to kill Ussama ben Laden or claimed to have refused an offer by the Vatican to become a cardinal. Mehmet Ali Agca’s return to prison was applauded by the press the next day. “*This result was won by society, whose reaction was encouraged in a healthy manner by the Turkish media*”, stated a jurist Turgut Kazan. “*The murderer was not able to escape*”, “*March, march all the way to jail*”, wrote the dailies *Radikal* and *Hurriyet*, welcoming his arrest. “*Back home*” rejoiced the daily *Milliyet*, considering that “*a historic mistake has been corrected*”.

The ultra-nationalist circles, on the other hand, have multiplied tributes to him. “*He was born in Malatya, he wounded the Pope! Bravo Mehmet Ali Agca!*” shouted the supporters of the First Division Malatya football team during a match on 14 January. According to CNN-Turk, ultra-nationalist activists have taken it in turns to keep watch at the grave of his mentor, Abdullah Catli, in the event that Agca should come to pay tribute. Abdullah Catli died in 1996 in a motorcar accident that remains famous because a Member of Parliament and a Police Chief were fellow passengers in the car. This event publicly revealed the collusion existing between certain political circles, the police and the mafia. As soon as Agca came out of jail, sympathisers threw flowers on

his car. One ultra-nationalist group, claiming to be part of the Grey Wolves, a movement particularly active in the 70s in carrying out a large number of assassinations of left-wing activists, came to cheer him at the Army recruiting office to which he had later gone to enrol. The more liberal circles in Turkey fear that he might become a sort of idol of the extreme right, at a time when the country was negotiating its way into the European Union — already generally critical of Turkey’s record in matters of Human Rights. Ironically, his release was partly linked to the reform of the Penal Code carried out at the request of the E.U. Apart from sporadic movements of sympathy here and there, a former Minister of Jus-

tice, Hikmet Sami Turk, suggested a connection between his release and the activity, within the State apparatus, of ultra-nationalist elements, regardless of the party in office, — a phenomenon generally summed up by the term “*the deep State*”. “*Unfortunately, this is a possibility that cannot be lightly set aside*”, he stated, linking this release with Agca’s escape from prison in 1979, dressed in a Army uniform and with the collusion of ultra-nationalist elements. The liberal daily, *Radikal* recalled, indignantly, the number of killers, members of ultra-nationalist movements, who have been released, including a dozen notorious mafia chiefs, sentenced to death for multiple assassinations and then freed.

IRAQ: A DARK BALANCE SHEET FOR 2005: 4,020 CIVILIANS KILLED IN BOMB ATTACKS

ACCORDING to official Iraqi figures, 5,713 Iraqis, of whom 4,020 were civilians and 1,693 members of the security forces, died in the country through acts of violence in 2005. This means an average of 15 Iraqis killed every day from hundreds of attacks with car bombs, suicide bombers, and other armed assaults. The number of injured was 8,378, of whom 6,065 were civilians. These figures do not include the terrorists killed, who amounted to 1,702. The security forces

also carried out 9,264 arrests in their ranks.

The year 2006 has also begun with a flare-up of violence. On 5 January Iraq had one of its bloodiest days since the March 2003 intervention, even as its leaders were trying to form a government of national union. No less than 103 people, including nine Americans, died in bomb and other attacks, including two suicide bombs, which aroused the anger of the Shiite leaders. The country hadn’t suffered as many deaths in a single

day since September 2005, when 150 were killed. Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari considered that this violence was a response by the terrorists to the advances of the political process. In the Shiite holy city of Kerbala, a kamikaze blew himself up barely thirty metres from the entrance to the tomb of Imam Hussein, one of the most revered of Shiite holy places. The explosion killed 63 people and injured 120 others. The kamikaze is said to have used 8 kilos of high explosives and several grenades. In the same morning, at Ramadi, 115 Km West of Baghdad, a kamikaze aimed at the queue of about a thousand recruits to the Iraqi police. At least 56 were killed and 60 others injured. A landmine also exploded as a US convoy to Kerbala was passing, killing five American troops. The day before, at least fifty-three people were killed, 34 of them by a kamikaze, who exploded his bombs during a Shiite funeral at Muqdadiyah, in Diyala Province, about 90 Km North of Baghdad.

The number of attacks on American troops and those of their allies in Iraq increased by 29% in 2005 compared with the year before, according to the 23 January issue of *USA Today*, quoting US Army figures. The insurgents made 34,131 attacks last year as against 24,496 in 2004. Despite this increase in the number of attacks, the US forces claim that they are more efficient in protection against terrorists. In 2005, 673 US soldiers were killed as against 714

in 2004. The number of wounded dropped by 26% over the same period. Also over the same period, the insurgents have extended their attacks to the Iraqi forces engaged in the fighting, the report points out. According to US Army sources, the number of trained and equipped Iraqi soldiers has increased to 227,000 and the Iraqi security forces are thus more often the targets for rebel attacks. The number of car bomb attacks has more than doubled in Iraq, going from 420 in 2004 to 873 in 2005. Bombs placed by the roadside continue to be the weapons most frequently used by the terrorists and attacks of this kind have risen from 5,607 in 2004 to 10,953 in 2005.

Moreover, on 29 January, a series of coordinated attacks hit seven churches in Baghdad and Kirkuk, killing three people and injuring 17 others. Five churches were targeted in the capital, causing 6 injured. The attacks in Kirkuk caused 3 deaths and 11 injured. Places of worship, Christian as well as Moslem, are regularly targeted in Iraq. Last August a series of attacks on Churches had caused 11 deaths. Car bombs exploded at 20 minutes interval in Baghdad and Kirkuk. Colonel Birhan Taha stated that three civilians had perished in the attack on the Church of the Virgin in Kirkuk at 4.30 pm. Quarter of an hour later, another car bomb exploded outside an Orthodox Church injuring five civilians. In Bagh-

dad, a car bomb blew up at 16.10 in front of the Catholic Church of Peter and Paul in Sina'a suburb, injuring two people, according to Major Qussai Ibrahim. Twenty minutes later another vehicle exploded outside an Anglican Church in the Eastern suburb of Nidhal, without making any victims. At about the same time, a fifth vehicle exploded about fifty metres from the Vatican Mission in the capital, without causing any casualties, according to police Major Abbas Mohammed. Christians only form 3% of the Iraqi population.

On the other hand, all cooperation is over between the Sunni Arab nationalists and their former al-Qaida allies since the attack that caused 80 deaths amongst the Iraqi police recruits on 5 January in Ramadi. According to US General Rick Lynch, not only are some nationalists engaged in armed fighting with the terrorists and foreign fighters, but, still more, they are coming to inform the authorities about them. Confirming this information, the international Arabic language daily *Al Hayat* published, on 23 January, a statement from six armed Iraqi groups announcing that they had formed a Front to fight the Iraqi branch of al-Qaida. Called the "*People's Cell*" this alliance condemns "*armed operations that are aimed at innocent people*" and declares "*the end of cooperation with al-Qaida*", whose Iraqi branch is led by the Jordanian Abu Mussab Zarkawi.

Moreover, on 21 January, the Kurdish authorities in Iraq declared that, while carrying out work on road improvements, they had brought to light a mass grave dating from the Saddam Hussein regime period. “Some bulldozer drivers informed us that they had found the remains of four corpses near Shamshamal, 100 Km South of Suleimaniah, and had decided to stop the work”, declared the head of the local police, Lieutenant-Colonel Mehdi Mohammed Ali. “We are guarding the site pending the arrival of specialised teams from the Department of human

rights ... this locality was used by members of Saddam Hussein’s security forces to check on traffic in and out of Kurdistan after 1991”, the police officer recalled. “We believe that Saddam Hussein agents, who manned this post until the fall of the regime, were responsible for many kidnappings and executions”, he indicated. Many mass graves have been brought to light since 2003 — of Kurds in the North and of Shiites in the South. They are attributed to the repressions carried out against members of these two communities under the old dictatorship.

“the deadlock” between Damascus and Beirut and to efforts of negotiations being made by Mr. Mubarak.

For his part, former Syrian Vice-President Abdel Halim Khaddam made public the discussions taking place between different components of the opposition in Syria to agree on the action to be taken for a peaceful political change. “Discussions took place between representatives of political, ideological, cultural and social trends, in Syria with the aim of achieving a united opposition”, stated Mr. Khaddam in Arabic on his internet site *Elaph*, later reproduced in the Lebanese daily *An-Nahar*. Mr. Khaddam stated that his “call for unification of the opposition was addressed to all categories of the Syrian people (...). It is an call to save Syria and to find a positive response”, he declared. According to him, this “opposition from outside is working for a change from inside, by peaceful and democratic means”. “The time for coups d’état is past”, he pointed out. He stressed that no action had yet been decided and announced that “broad consultations on this subject between Syrian leaders” of the opposition were taking place, stressing that his “action was solely Syrian, without being directed by any outside strings”. “When things will be riper (...) there will be a general peoples movement in Syria” he added, pointing out that he would then return to his country.

On 5 January, the official Syrian

THE SYRIAN PRESIDENT MAKES SURPRISE VISITS TO SAUDI ARABIA AND EGYPT WHILE HIS FORMER VICE-PRESIDENT ARGUES FOR A CHANGE OF REGIME

ON 8 January, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad carried out some surprise visits to Saudi Arabia and Egypt to secure the support of their leaders at a time when Syria is being accused of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. These visits coincided with accusations by former Syrian Vice-President Abdul-Halim Khaddam that the boss of Damascus had threatened Mr. Hariri before the bomb attack that had cost him his life — an accusation denied by Bashar al-Assad. The Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faisal, first went to Damascus, where

he met the Syrian President as well as his Syrian opposite number Faruk al-Shareh. Without giving any details, he made the point that this visit was to prepare an “important” visit to Saudi Arabia by Bashar al-Assad. A few hours later, the Syrian Head of State flew to the Daudi port of Jeddah, where he had discussions with King Abdullah. Following these talks, President al-Assad visited Sharm esh-Sheikh, in Egypt, for talks with his Egyptian opposite number Hosni Mubarak in another surprise visit. Suleiman Awad, Egyptian presidential spokesman stated in a communiqué that the one-hour meeting was devoted to

daily, *As-Sawra* announced that all property belonging to Abdel Halim Khaddam and his family had been “impounded” pending the conclusion of an enquiry into his involvement in scandals of corruption. “*The Minister of Finance has decided to impound the property of Abdel Halim Khaddam, of his wife, of his sons and their families as well as his grandsons, pending the conclusions of the enquiry*”, wrote the paper. Mr. Khaddam has three sons and one daughter, who own many firms. Mr. Khaddam, hitherto considered one of the pillars of the Syrian regime, maintains, in

his interview, that the Syrian leaders, including President Bashar al-Assad, had uttered threats against former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri before his assassination on 14 February in Beirut. He also stated that the Syrian intelligence could not have assassinated Mr. Hariri without Mr. Assad’s approval. Mr. Khaddam, 73 years of age, has been living in Paris for several months past. He had announced his resignation from his offices in the State and the Baath party, on the occasion of the last Congress of the ruling party.

lion dollars a year, the Iranian Ambassador indicated. Iranian investments in Syria, which are continuously increasing, have reached some 750 million dollars. Amongst the Iranian projects in Syria are the building of a cement works, (200 M US\$); ten silos for grains (200 M US\$) as well as projects in the area of fuel and power.

The Iranian President also met, in Damascus, leaders of ten radical Palestinian movements, including the Islamic Jihad and Hamas. The Iranian President reaffirmed that “he strongly supported the struggle of the Palestinian people” in the course of this meeting, in which took part the head of the Islamic Jihad, Abdallah Ramadan Shalah, of Hamas, Khaled Meshaal and of the PFLP-GC Ahmad Jibril. In the course of his visit Mr. Ahmedinjad returned to his old refrain by challenging the European countries to receive all the Jews from Israel and give them a State. “*Give these migrants permission to go to you and you will see that they will no longer live in the occupied (Palestinian) lands*”, he challenged in a meeting with Syrian elites. Before leaving, Mr. Ahmedinjad visited the Shiite holy places there as well as the famous Omayad Mosque in Damascus. Syria receives tens of thousands Iranian pilgrims every year.

WHILE VISITING DAMASCUS, THE IRANIAN PRESIDENT SEEKS TO CONSOLIDATE THE SYRIO-IRANIAN TANDEM

IRANIAN President Mahmud Ahmedinjad, elected in June 2005, saved his first bi-lateral visit abroad for Syria, responding to that made by the Syrian head of state, Bashar al-Assad, to Iran last summer. On 20 January he ended his official 2-day visit to Syria, consolidating the old alliance of Teheran and Syria, both being subjected to strong international pressure. This visit to the Syrian President comes while Iran is facing increasing pressure over the

resumption of its nuclear programme, while Syria has focused on it the limelights of the enquiry into the assassination former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. The Iranian President indicated that Syria and Iran formed a “*front*” against “*arrogance and domination*”. “*Our relations are solid and deeply rooted and our countries have common stands*”, insisted the Iranian President for his part, evoking the “*excellent results*” of his visit. Trade between Syria and Iran have reached 100 mil-

IRANIAN KHUZISTAN (ARABISTAN): TWO BOMBS CAUSE EIGHT DEATHS AND OVER 40 INJURED WHILE THE PRESIDENT WAS DUE FOR A VISIT

ON 24 January, two bombs exploded in the town of Ahvas (South-West Iran) causing at least eight deaths and 46 injured. The bomb attacks were directed at a bank and a Environmental Agency in this capital of the oil producing province of Arabistan (Khuzistan), on the Iraqi borders inhabited mainly by Arabs. The Iranian President, Mahmud Ahmadinjad had planned to visit this city — a visit that was cancelled at the last minute, officially for reasons connected with the weather, as rain had been forecast. Ahmadinjad and the whole of his government was expected in Ahvaz as part of a series of visits to provincial capitals.

The government spokesman indicated, in the evening, that Mr. Ahmadinjad had ordered an enquiry into what he described as a “brutal act”, carried out by “international terrorists”. An official close to the head of state indicated that the bombs had exploded at the very hour that Mr. Ahmadinjad was due to make a speech. The Manar television network, of the pro-Iranian Lebanese Hizbollah stated that the bombs were aimed at killing the Iranian President. The Teheran correspondent of the network asserts that the head of State had cancelled his

visit following a security alert regarding his safety.

Ahvaz had already experienced bomb attacks in June 2005. On 12 June 2005, three bombs exploded simultaneously near public buildings in that town, causing eight deaths and about twenty injured. On 15 October 2005 two bomb explosions in a shopping centre in Ahvaz, killing six people and injuring 50 others.

The province of Arabistan, renamed Khuzistan by the Iranians, has long been an apple of discord between Iran and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. It is a major strategic issue as it contains Iran’s largest oil fields. Last April, Ahvaz had been the scene of two days of riots after Arab separatists spread the news that Teheran was encouraging the transfer of populations to reduce the proportion of Arabs in the province. Iran unceasingly accuses London of stirring up trouble in Khuzistan, which borders the Southern zone of Iraq, which is controlled by 8,500 British troops.

KURDISTAN IS HIT BY BIRD FLU

AFTER Turkish Kurdistan, Iraqi Kurdistan has in turn, been hit by bird flu. Some 500,000 fowl were slaughtered in a wide border area of Iraqi Kurdistan, where a first case of death due to the H5N1 bird flu virus was confirmed, indicated Tahsin Namek Kurdish officer of Health for Suleimaniyah, on 31 January. Shanjin Abdelkader, a Kurdish adolescent from the region of Rania, died on 17 January from the H5N1 variety of the flu virus. In some sectors, 50% of the stock has been destroyed, in others 30%, according to the Kurdish authorities. Fourteen suspect cases have, moreover, been reported, two of which, (a man and a woman) are strongly sus-

pected of being contaminated by this deadly virus. The woman, Mariam Kader is in hospital in Suleimaniyah. On 31 January, the Kurdish authorities received, from Geneva, a delivery of the Tamiflu anti-viral vaccine for treating people contaminated by this bird flu, stated a local health service official at Irbil Airport. Dr. Sirwan Nureddin made the point that “30 doses have been sent to Suleimaniyah and 20 to Irbil to treat suspect cases”.

For his part, the Health Minister, Abdel-Muttaleb Mohammed Ali, announced the despatch to Kurdistan of five mobile hospitals: two each for Suleimaniyah and Irbil and one for Dohuk. Technicians and vets have been given the responsibility of

destroying hundreds of thousands of fowl. The area extends from the holiday resort of Dukan, 60 km from Suleimaniah to Rania, near the Iranian borders, that is about 50 hamlets and inhabited localities are involved. The disinfecting teams spray the cars, the drivers and passengers have to wipe their shoes on a mat impregnated with disinfectant. The teams' head, Abbas Ali, a vet, complains of the slowness of help coming from Baghdad to contain any danger of a pandemic of bird flu. *"We had to buy ten tons of disinfectant ourselves, which cost 200,000 dollars. That is money taken out of the province's budget"*, he stated. The head of the groups fighting against bird 'flu also regretted the lack of Tamiflu, the most effective treatment for bird 'flu, for treating his men, who after all, are in contact with the virus.

Furthermore, the means at their disposal are ludicrous compared with the sophisticated ones of developed countries. Chickens, ducks, nothing escapes. The birds are immediately put in a bag and carried away on a tractor to end up in a specially dug pit. At first the villagers were very unwilling to let their birds go, but after promises of compensation announced by the government, they accepted to do so.

The Iraqi government has committed 26 million dollars to compensate the villagers whose birds are destroyed. The Minister of Agriculture, Ali al-Bahadi,

announced a plan of systematic slaughter of birds in Iraqi Kurdistan to prevent the extension of the disease coming from Turkey. The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced on 31 January that a team would be sent to Iraqi Kurdistan to enquire into the danger of transmission to human beings of the virus that killed a young boy in this country.

The H5N1 virus has been rife in Turkish Kurdistan, where it has made human victims, with a total of 21 people infected, four of whom have died. It appeared at the end of December at Dogubeyazit, near the Iranian border, and has rapidly spread East and West. Parallel to a campaign of information in the media and the distribution of brochures throughout the country, the Turkish authorities have already slaughtered over a million birds. However the Kurdish villagers too often turn a deaf ear to the dangers that their fowl might mean, since they often are their only source of revenue. For her part, the mayoress of Dogubeyazit criticises the government's management of the crisis and attacks the *"prejudices"* against the Kurdish population. *"Neither precautions nor suitable measures are taken here to tackle the bird 'flu"*, stated Mrs. Mukaddes Kubilay, elected in 1999 on the ticket of the pro-Kurdish DEHAP party. *"At Kiziksa, the authorities reacted immediately, at Aralik as well so why not at Dogubeyazit?"*, she

asks. *"There is a refusal to accept us, some prejudices against the inhabitants of our region"*. The mayoress was referring to the village in Western Turkey where the first cases of the H6N1 virus were detected in geese, and to a township about 150 Km North of Dogubeyazit, where quarantine measures and the slaughter of birds were undertaken as from the end of December. According to veterinary sources, the sub-prefecture of Dogubeyazit, which has slightly over 56,000 inhabitants, has at present 12 teams of three people each to collect and slaughter the birds, backed up by the Army to transport the. In here view, the central administration is making the inhabitants of Dogubeyazit pay for their support of the pro-Kurdish party. *"The people in the administration who belong to the party in office say: "You didn't vote for us, you voted for Dehap — go and ask for help from your Drhap mayor"*, pointed out Mrs. Kubilay, adding that *"it is the local officials, the police who say this"*. Turkish Kurdistan is not only mountainous and hard of access, it is one of the most disadvantaged regions of Turkey. At Dogubeyazit, there is no industry. The population lives from stock rearing (cattle and sheep), a little agriculture — and smuggling alcohol and cigarettes into neighbouring Iran...

The Turkish Minister of Health, Recep Akdag, who arrived at Dogubeyazit, heavily escorted, on 9 January, was

booed by the inhabitants who attacked the government's inaction. Accompanied by a delegation of WHO experts, Mr. Akdag intended to show the local population that the authorities had not left them to their fate. However, it was to the journalists, and hidden behind a hedge of policemen preventing any access to the inhabitants, that he repeated his assurances about building a new hospital (**Editor's note:** there are only four doctors at Dogubeyazit hospital) and his advice on how to avoid the illness. First interrupted by a local journalist who exclaimed "It is not the bird 'flu that is hitting Dogubeyazit — it is poverty, unemployment and despair", the Ministers speech ended with his running as fast as he could to the bus that brought the delegation, to the boos of about forty inhabitants. "We want doctors", shouted the demonstrators as the convoy left at top speed. His visit, to a snow-covered hill on the outskirts of the town, was made under the protection of armoured cars positioned all along the route and soldiers armed with submachine guns on the heights overlooking the dilapidated houses.

The authorities are facing a great deal of criticism, which accuses them of dragging their feet: the first alarms about bird flu in Turkish Kurdistan go back almost two months. The Turkish Veterinary Union accused the government of

showing "lassitude", after having contained the first outbreak of bird 'flu in the North West in October. In Dogubeyazit fowl are still seen free in the streets and people are catching them

with their bare hands to slaughter them. Poor children in Batman kill chickens for one Turkish Lire (\$ 0.75) each without wearing any gloves.

A NEW JUDGE FOR SADDAM HUSSEIN'S TRIAL

THE new Kurdish judge, Rauf Rashid Abdel-Rahman, showed firmness when he presided, for the first time, the hearing of the Iraqi High Criminal Court that is trying Saddam Hussein and seven of his lieutenants for the massacre of 148 Shiites in 1982. This judge replaced his predecessor, Rizgar Amin, also a Kurd, who had resigned after being criticised for his alleged laxity towards the fallen president. From the outset the new Judge showed his will to establish his authority by dealing ruthlessly with Saddam Hussein's half-brother, Barzan al-Tikriti, who started to speak without asking leave and continued to make a speech after he had been told to be silent by the Judge. The latter then decided to expel the accused from the courtroom by force. "Remove him from Court" he ordered the ushers who, thereon, removed him under the dumbfounded eyes of the other accused.

In the course of the previous seven hearings, Barzan al-Takriti had repeatedly spoken and, even if regularly called to

order, had never been expelled by Judge Rizgar Amin. The new Judge then issued a warning to the other accused. "Understand that you have the right to speak. But political speeches are out of place in this building. I ask you to observe the proper procedure. Any speech that is made out of this context will be deleted from the court's minutes" he declared. "Whosoever wants to make political speeches can do so elsewhere, because we will not allow any political speech or breach of regulations" he thundered, as if to mark his difference from Judge Amin, who political leaders and the Iraqi press had accused of allowing the accused to speak and transform the Court into a "political platform". "Any accused", he continued, "who oversteps these limitations or who attacks the authority of the court or one of its members will be expelled and his trial will continue in accordance with the law" as if he were present. When Saddam Hussein asked to leave the courtroom he replied "Go then" and ordered the ushers to escort him out of the court, ordering them "Take him out". Despite this, the fallen president launched into a long diatribe on

his status as former master of Iraq and as a connoisseur of law. Unimpressed by this monologue the Judge sought to put Saddam Hussein in his place. *"I am the Judge and you are the accused and you must obey me, You have disturbed the hearing and I am here to carry out the law"*, he pointed out.

After Saddam Hussein's departure, followed by that of two other of the accused, Taha Yassin Ramadan, former Vice-President and Awad al-Bandar, a Judge on the Saddam Hussein's Special Revolutionary Court, Judge Rauf Rashid Abdel-Rahman wanted to give proof of his authority before the remaining four accused in the Courtroom. *"Measures will be taken against any who overstep the limits of courtesy and politeness inside this court ... (the presidency) of the court has expelled those who have overstepped these limits, by virtue of Article 58 of the procedural code that provides for measures to be taken against those who fail to observe the Courts regulations"*. Judge Abdel-Rahman's strong manner contrasts with the calm and serene manner of his predecessor, Rizgar Amin.

One of Saddam Hussein's lawyers, Saleh al-Armuti, stated on 31 January that the defence would not attend the next hearing, planned for 1st February, and that it *"would only return if the Judge was fired. The Court was behaved aggressively towards our clients and the lawyers"* he declared. Mr Armuti added that, in addition to the firing of the

Judge, the defence lawyers have presented a written demand for the Court to be transferred to Jordan or to Qatar, which the Judge rejected. On 17 January, Iraqi President, Jalal Talabani, proposed that the trial be transferred either to Baghdad or to Kurdistan so as better to ensure its safety. *"If there are any Judges here who feel that they might be in danger in the future, we are ready to take them to Kurdistan, where they will be safe and well protected"*, stated Mr. Talabani.

Rauf Rashid Abel-Rahman is 65 years old and born in the martyred Kurdish town of Halabja, bombed with chemical weapons by the deposed president in 1988, has a record of political and human rights activity. He entered Baghdad law school in 1959, a year after the overthrow of the monarchy and was arrested in 1963 for membership of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, then led by Mollah Mustafa Barzani, the father of Kurdish nationalism. He spent eleven months in jail but maws authorised to sit his law exams while in prison. Judge Rauf Abdel-Rahman still bears the marks of the torture undergone at this time, since according to those close to him he still has difficulty walking. Sentenced to life imprisonment for *"rebellion"* in 1965, he was pardoned two years later, then against sentenced under the same charge in 1973 and pardoned in 1975, the year of the Algiers agreement between the Shah of Iran and the strong man of Baghdad,

then officially only Vice-President. After 1975 Rauf Rashid Abel-Rahman settled in Baghdad, where he practiced law before moving to Suleimaniah in 1983, where he was elected, a year later, an executive member of the lawyers union. In 1991, the year during which Kurdistan escaped from the Baghdad regime's control when its troops were driven out of Kuwait in disorder, he took part in the creation of a local Human Rights Association. He was also active in Kurdish Lawyers Association and of an NGO involved in the reconstruction of Halabja, as well as taking part in commissions given the responsibility, by the Kurdistan Democratic Party, of setting up a legal system for the two provinces of Irbil and Dohuk. Rauf Rashid Abdel-Rahman also continued his legal career in Kurdistan, first as judge in the Irbil county court, then as President of the city's Assizes. Prior to being asked to sit on the Iraqi High Criminal Court, he was Vice-President of the Irbil Court of Appeals. A leading figure in Kurdish legal circles, he has translated legal terms from Arabic to Kurdish and supervised, as a judge, a number of elections, particularly those of the students' unions in Kurdistan and the municipal elections held in 2002.

Furthermore, the Dutch national Public Prosecutors Office has appealed against the verdict in the trial of the Dutch businessman Frans van Anraat, sentenced to 15 years imprison-

ment at The Hague for complicity in war crimes in Iraq, according to Dutch sources. In its ruling, the court had indicated that, while genocide did take place against the Kurdish population in Iraq, and that it found van Anraat guilty of having supplied the Saddam Hussein regime with chemicals used during the gas attacks on the population during the 80s, Frans van Anraat was nevertheless acquitted of complicity in genocide. It is on this last point

that the Prosecution want a ruling from “a higher legal authority” — in fact the Court of Appeals, according to a brief communiqué by the Public Prosecutor’s office dated 6 January. Van Anraat was sued before The Hague Court following a ruling by the Dutch Supreme Court giving Dutch courts universal jurisdiction to try persons suspected of war crimes and genocide if they were resident in the country.

during which several million dollars evaporated. The report estimates that the Provisional Authority had, amongst other things, grossly underestimated the bad condition of the country’s infrastructures. The audit drawn up by the services of the Inspector General on Reconstruction in Iraq considers that the CPA for the South-Central provinces (Anbar, Babil, Kerbala, Najaf, Qadissiyah and Wasit Provinces) “*did not manage correctly*” over 2,000 reconstruction contracts representing a total of \$88.1 million. The enquiry thus noted that in a number of cases there was no checking on whether projects, that had been paid for in advance, had really been carried out, that the staff had not reported lost money, that there was often no written trace of any follow up of projects financed etc. “*Indications of potential fraud*” were also found and “*enquiries are still going on*” added the audit. Already in 2005 Stuart Bowen had published several reports calling to question the management and supervision of reconstruction contracts in Iraq by the Provisional Authority, directed, at the time by US Administrator Paul Bremer. The report. That has just been published, supplies new information on this bad management. In particular it advises US Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad “*to secure the reimbursement of \$571,823 unduly paid on 11 contracts*”. The US government is said to have no

THE FUNDS INTENDED FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IRAQ ARE RE-ALLOCATED BECAUSE OF THE REIGNING INSECURITY

ACCORDING to a report of the US government audit, several billions of dollars, destined to improving the Iraqi water purifying, sewage and electrical systems in Iraq have been reallocated to maintaining security. Since 30 September last, nearly a third of the 18.4 billion dollars (15 billion euros) that the US Congress had released in 2003 for the reconstruction of Iraq (in fact 5.6 billion dollars) have been redirected to security priorities. In consequence a number of projects for repairing reservoirs, water purifying works and the building of sewers, all essential to improve the sanitary conditions in several Iraqi towns, will never see the light of day.

Only 49 of the 136 projects for the rehabilitation of the water

drainage systems will be completed and 300 of the 425 projects initially planned for electrical infrastructures, according to the report by Stuart Bowen, Inspector General for the reconstruction of Iraq. “*About 60% of the projects regarding water resources and sanitary installations have not been fully carried out*”, the report indicates. In the case of the electricity network, production capacity has increased by 2,109 megawatts instead of the 3,400 initially planned. Budgets covering water supply installations have been halved — down to \$2.1 billion from the \$4.3 billion and those covering electricity cut by a quarter from \$5.5 billion to \$4.3 billion.

This report follows an enquiry into the reconstruction activity of the former Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq,

intention of asking Congress for supplementary aid for Iraq when it presents its 2007 budget in February.

Furthermore, on 22 January, Assem Jihad, the Ministry of oil spokesman in Baghdad stated that Iraq will settle its arrears of payment to Turkish companies that have stopped their deliveries of oil products. *“Iraq will settle its arrears to Turkish and multinational firms and paid them \$250 million two days ago”* stated Assem Jihad. *“Production from Iraqi oil refineries has increased from 10 million litres of oil products a day to 14 million litres per day, and we hope to reach 18 million in the next few months”*, specified Mr. Jihad. *“If we reach this level of production the import needs will diminish as well as the bill, which at the moment is \$6 billion”*, pointed out the spokesman. The Turkish companies, active in the business of exporting oil products to Iraq decided, on 21 January, to stop deliveries because of Baghdad’s substantial arrears of payment. In particular, the 34 Turkish companies active in the export of petrol to Iraq decided no longer to load their tankers, pending the reimbursement of a debt of over one billion dollars (824 million euros) according to the same source.

Iraq is having great difficulty in reaching its pre-war oil production level. In 2005, exports of crude had fallen by 4.7% compared with 2004, giving a total of 508 million barrels, or 1.41 million a day. Before the war

Iraq exported 2.2 million barrels a day and the government has set itself the target of reaching between 1.6 and 1.7 million barrels a day. Because of persistent acts of sabotage against the Kirkuk oil installations, the bulk of the exports are from the country’s Southern terminals. Over the year, 496 million barrels were exported from the South as against 19 from the North. On 18 December the Iraqi government raised the prices of diesel fuel and kerosene in particular, multiplying them by a factor of five and even seven. A decision aimed at fighting against their resale on the black market abroad. The price of petrol has long been subsidised by the state and remains relatively low compared to the rest of the world. The government has denied rumours of a fresh increase in price.

Moreover, Iraq needs at least \$8 billion to reconstruct its health system, badly damaged by successive wars and the embargo in the recent past. *“In the course of the next four years we will need \$8 billion solely to rebuild our health system. Moreover this does not include the running costs”*, estimated Ammar al-Saffar, Deputy Minister of Health, in a statement on 11 January. The state of Iraqi finances don’t allow such and investment, the Minister warned. *“We are sending out an appeal for help to the international community”*, he added. The United States has already been urgently asked for help. In 2004 it had promised to devote

\$786 million to building hospitals and purchasing equipment and medicines, but 25% of this budget was devoted to protecting the construction sites and the firms working on them. Washington had committed itself to building and equipping 150 health centres by mid-2006 but the number has been reduced to 142 and their completion date delayed to the end of the year — at best. The United States had also promised to renovate 19 Iraqi hospitals, but this has only been done to one, in the Shiite holy city of Najaf. Moreover it is again being repaired after having been the target of a bomb attack, according to a US official. As for the \$75 million earmarked for equipping Iraqi hospitals (beds, mattresses, sterilisation equipment, fans scanners etc.) they are due to be paid by April.

On 10 January, George W. Bush, faced with the exorbitant cost of reconstruction in Iraq, called on the international community to cancel the debts contracted by Baghdad and keep its promises to help in the reconstruction. After the United States, Slovakia and Malta, which have announced the cancellation of Iraqi debts, *“more countries must do the same so that the Iraqi people be not weighed down by the crushing load”* of the debts accumulated by Saddam Hussein, he declared in a speech in Washington before a Veterans association. He also appealed for *“all the governments that have promised help to put their promises into prac-*

tice as quickly as possible so that the Iraqis can reconstruct their country". "To date the members of the international community have promised \$13 billion of aid to Iraq, but many have shown themselves slow at holding to their commit-

ments", he pointed out. He called on "the many nations that have not yet release Iraqi assets frozen under the Saddam Hussein regime" to restore them to their "rightful owners".

AS WELL AS ...

• ABDULLAH OCALAN, CONFINED TO HIS CELL, DEMANDS TO BE RETRIED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE RULING BY THE EUROPEAN HUMAN RIGHTS COURT.

On 31 January, one of the lawyers representing Abdullah Ocalan, boss of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) declared that his client was demanding to be retried, in accordance with the ruling to this effect of the European Human Rights Court (ECHR). However, there are legal obstacles to this demand. "Our client has submitted his petition to the prison authorities for them to pass on to the Court his application to be retried", stated the lawyer, Ibrahim Bilmaz.

In 2005, the ECHR recommended to the Turkish authorities that they organise a new trial for A. Ocalan, since they considered that his 1999 trial was "*inequitable*". Since his trial, at which he was sentenced to death, he has been confined to the island prison of Imrali (North-West Turkey). Turkey

would have to amend a law that allows retrials of prisoners whose trial has been condemned by the ECHR, because it excludes A. Ocalan and about a hundred other people, explained Mr. Bilmaz. "*This law is still in force and should be altered*", stressed Mr. Bilmaz, recalling the commitments made by the Turkish authorities when the ECHR made public its ruling in Abdullah Ocalan's case. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had affirmed, at the time, that "*Turkish justice will follow the decision*" of the ECHR. The sentence of death for "*treason and separatism*" had been commuted to life imprisonment in 2002 following on the abolition of capital punishment in Turkey — one of the measures adopted by Ankara so as to conform with European standards. A new trial for the PKK chief, who is still regarded as public enemy N°1, would be a headache for the government because of the many criticisms it would have to face domestically, especially from nationalist circles. The man most concerned, for his part, indicated a few

months ago that he refused to be retried in Turkey so long as the impartiality of the judges could not be ensured.

On 17 January, Abdullah Ocalan's lawyers also denounced, in Istanbul, the fact that their client was confined to his cell, a punishment that prevented hi, from receiving the slightest visit. During a press conference, Irfan Dundar had pointed out that their client had been "*confined to his cell for 20 days*". "*On 11 January, when they were preparing to visit Mr. Ocalan, members of his family were informed by the military authorities that they would not be able to meet him because he had been confined to his cell*", Mr. Dundar had declared, reading a statement co-signed by several pro-Kurdish organisations. Mr. Dundar deplored the "*obstacles*" raised by the Turkish authorities for the past several months to prevent visits to their client by his lawyers, mentioning a succession of "*unfavourable weather conditions*" or "*the car had broken down*".

Furthermore, Selim Sadak and Hatip Dicle, former Members of Parliament of the Party for Democracy (DEP — pro-Kurdish and banned in 1994) were charged on 26 January by the Ankara Public Prosecutor for having made "*favourable remarks*" about Abdullah Ocalan, and face up to two years jail each. They are charged because of an interview they gave to the Denmark-

based Kurdish television network *RojTV*, which Turkey accuses of having “links with the Kurdish rebels”. The two men are accused, in particular, of having described Ocalan’s imprisonment as “isolation” and of having stated that “this will never be accepted by the Kurdish people” of Turkey. Messrs Dicle and Sadak, at present members of the Party for a Democratic Society (DTP — pro-Kurdish) have already spent ten years behind bars, with their comrades Orhan Dogan, and Leyla Zana, for “separatism”, until they were released in June 2004 pending a third trial (the two previous being judged “inequitable”).

• **THE FIRST VISIT TO SYRIA, OF A DELEGATION FROM AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, IN NEARLY TEN YEARS.** On 22 January, the President of the Syrian State Security Court, emergency special court, received a delegation from the human rights organisation Amnesty International that had been visiting Syria since 17 January, the human rights lawyer Anouar Bounni let it be known. This visit, which ended on 23 January, is the first visit on an Amnesty International delegation since 1997. The two-member delegation was received by officials of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Justice, and the Interior. In addition it met many human rights activists and members of civil society. Mr. Bounni described the Amnesty visit as a “positive step that allowed it to be

informed about the human rights situation in Syria as well as violations”. In 2004, Syria joined the International Convention against torture, but expressed some reservations about the Committee responsible for checking that member countries were observing it.

The two officers of Amnesty International particularly visited five opponents who had been released on 18 January, amongst whom were two former Members of Parliament, Riad Seif and Maamoun Homsî, whose arrest in 2001 sounded the knell of the “Damascus Spring”, a period marked by a certain freedom of expression. “The members of Parliament, Riad Seif and Maamoun Homsî were freed by decision of the Courts. Three other opponents, Habib Issa, Farwaz Tello and Walid Bounni were also released” stated Anouar Bounni. These public figures had organised or taken part in the “political salons” that emerged in the country between September 2000 and February 2001. Messrs Seif and Homsî were sentenced to five years imprisonment by the Criminal Court for having wanted “to change the Constitution by illegal means”. The other three, tried by the State Security Court, received the same sentence for similar charges: attempts to change the constitution by illegal means and to harm the image of the State, incitement to sedition, propagation of untruthful information. Riad Seif stated that these releases had not been the

result of bargains with the authorities. “We refused any prior conditions ... We even insisted on deleting the usual formula “I have mended my ways” when we signed our application for release ... We have not “mended our ways” because we have never done anything wrong... Four years and seven months after our arrest it has become evident that we were right”, he stated. The five opponents were released by virtue of a law allowing detainees to be released after serving three quarters of their sentence, he said. Mr. Bounni “welcomed” these releases while considering it “necessary to finally and permanently close this file by releasing all political prisoners and by abolishing the Special Courts”. He estimated the number of political prisoners at about 1,500.

Both from Damascus and abroad the Syrian opposition regularly issues calls for a profound democratic reforms. The release of political detainees, particularly of the two Members of Parliament, was one on the conditions laid down by the European Union in the signing of the association agreement with Syria — which is still frozen for political reasons. Amongst the people arrested in 2001, the economist, Aref Dalifa, who is serving a ten-year sentence, Kamal Labouani, the founder of a movement that is not authorised in Syria and Habib Saleh, a human rights activist, are still behind bars. The other people arrested in 2001 are a teacher, Hassan

Saadoun, freed after two and a half years in jail, and the communist activist Riad Turk, released in 2002 after over a year in detention.

• TEHERAN TEMPORARILY SUSPENDS AN ECONOMIC DAILY, BLOCKS THE BBC PERSIAN INTERNET SITE, JAMS THE CNN NETWORK AND CONTINUES TO JAIL JOURNALISTS.

On 2 January, the Iranian economic daily, *Asia Daily*, received an order from the government to suspend publication. “*This morning the Ershad Ministry (Islamic Culture and Guidance) told us that the paper was temporarily banned*”, stated Saghie Baghernia, the paper’s owner, making the point that the authorities had not “*given any reason*”. “*We did not receive any warning of this radical measure*” and no indication of the length of time was given, she added.

This is the first time a daily paper has been subjected to such an order since the election last June of the ultra-conservative President, Mahmud Ahmedinjad. During the two term of his predecessor, the reformist Mahmud Khatami, several publications were closed down on the orders of the authorities and journalists had been jailed by the courts. *Asia Daily* was forced to close down from June 2003 to March 2005 after having published a photo of Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the People’s Mujahiddeen organisation, the main armed opposition to the

regime. Now based abroad, this body is considered by Teheran as a terrorist organisation. Mrs Baghernia’s husband, Mr. Jamshidi, was jailed for thirteen months during this period.

Furthermore, on 24 January the BBC announced that its Persian language news site had been blocked in Iran, at the order of the Teheran authorities. “*Access to BBC Persian.com, the BBC’s international news site and the biggest Persian language internet site, is blocked in Iran on the orders of the authorities*”, specified the BBC in a communiqué. “*We are very concerned at this action and regret that it deprives a great number of Iranians of a reliable source of impartial and editorially independent news*”, stated Nigel Chapman, director of the BBC World Service.

The BBC’s *Persian.com* site (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/index.shtml>) registers 30 million hits a month and is used by a third of the seven million internet users in Iran, according to the BBC. The BBC points out that its English language international site is not affected by this blockage. The BBC is the second major international medium hit by a measure of interdiction recently in Iran. The US television network, CNN was briefly banned for having reported the President Mahmud Ahmedinjad as saying that Iran wanted the atom bomb. CNN apologised the next day and the President authorised it to resume its activities.

During a Press Conference on 14 January by the Head of State, the network’s simultaneous translation had shown him as saying “*the recourse to nuclear weapons is a right for Iran*”. In fact what he had said was “*Iran has the right to nuclear energy*”. The Atlanta based network corrected its report and apologised the next day. Mohammad Hossein Khoshvaght, responsible for the foreign press at the Ministry had, however, stated that the ban also covered the CNN stringers in Iran and that it was not due to the issue of the translation but CNN’s coverage of Iran in general.

Furthermore, the wife of the imprisoned Iranian journalist Akbar Ganji, stated on 2 January that the physical condition of her husband “*has deteriorated after 122 days in solitary confinement*”. “*Ganji’s illnesses have got worse, with the appearance of digestive problems, and he is receiving no treatment*”, pointed out Masumeh Shafiee, the day after her third visit to her husband since he came out of hospital, on 3 September.

The best known of Iranian political prisoners, he was sent back to prison after accepting to end a hunger two-month hunger strike. “*There has been no improvement in his condition ... he still only weighs 50 kilos*”, added his wife who was allowed to see her husband for an hour, accompanied by her daughters, her mother and her lawyer. Mrs. Shafiee is worried at the judicial

authorities' silence about the possible early release for Mr. Ganji, which is in any case due to end on 21 March. Arrested in April 2000 when he was working for the daily Sob-e Emrouz, Akbar Ganji was sentenced in 2001 to six years jail after a series of articles implicating several of the regimes dignitaries in the murders of intellectuals and writers that occurred in 1998.

• JACK STRAW, ON A VISIT TO BOTH PARTS OF CYPRUS, IRRITATES THE GREEK CYPRIOTS BUT HE STATES THAT “THIS DOES NOT MEANS RECOGNITION OF NORTH CYPRUS”.

On Tuesday, Turkey launched a diplomatic offensive, aimed at lifting the trade restrictions on Cyprus in the hope of reviving the peace process on the island, which has been at a standstill since 2004. On 26 January, the British Foreign Minister, Jack Straw, strongly supported the proposals formulated by Turkey on the 24th for settling the Cyprus conflict while Ankara called on the Greek Cypriots to give a positive response to its “*plan of action*”. Following a meeting with his Turkish opposite number, Abdullah Gul, Mr. Straw declared “*it is in no one's interest in Cyprus that the island remain divided to the detriment of both communities*”. Stressing that the ten-point plan proposed by Ankara had been welcomed by UNO and the European Union, the head of the Foreign Office

expressed the hope that the measures would be approved by the other parties concerned. “*I hope that this is seen as a constructive initiative, that is not the last word on the question but helps things forward*”, he remarked.

The “*plan of action*” presented by Mr. Gul on the eve of Mr. Straw's arrival in Turkey envisages reciprocal lifting of the restrictions on economic exchanges with the island in the hope of facilitating the overall conflict that has divided the island since 1974. It was immediately criticised by the Greek Cypriot government, the island's only internationally recognised one, as well as by Greece, who considered that it contained nothing new. After having met Mr. Straw at Ankara airport, the Turkish Prime Minister called on the Greek Cypriots to consider the Turkish proposals carefully, and to take the necessary steps towards settling the conflict. “*We are at ease, because we have always been one step ahead*” in the efforts to reunite the island, declared Mr. Erdogan to the press. “*We are now waiting for the other side to take a positive step in response to those we have made*”, he added.

Ankara's plan envisages the opening of Turkish ports and airports to Greek Cypriot ships and planes, as required by the E.U. in exchange for a lightening of the economic sanctions against the so-called “*Turkish Republic of North Cyprus*”, promised by the European block

but not applied. Jack Straw acknowledged, in Istanbul on 25 January, that “*The E.U. as well as Turkey has some responsibilities to fulfil*”, but considered that they were two “*separate*” problems that did not necessarily have to be settled simultaneously. Although the Turkish plan may “*lead to a better atmosphere in Europe*”, Ankara has, nevertheless, to fulfil its obligations so he pointed out. “*Turkey, like any other candidate member, is subject to certain obligations ensuing from its application for membership of the E.U.*” he stated.

Negotiations for Turkey's membership of the E.U. began on 4 October 2005. In an interview on the Turkish news channel *CNN-Turk*, Mr. Straw deplored the hostility with which the Greek Cypriots reacted to his visit, the day before, to both parts of Cyprus. “*If we are to find a solution and if we are going towards a federative solution, with two parties and two regions (...) it is then necessary to be able to meet both parties and discuss with the Turkish Cypriot leaders*”, Mr. Straw consider. “*This does not mean recognition of the TRNC*”, he insisted. On 25 January, the Cypriot Foreign Minister, George Iacovou, stated to Jack Straw that Nicosia rejected the proposal. “*I asked Mr. Starw to transmit our reply to the Turkish Foreign Minister, Abdullah Gul*”, declared Mr. Iacovou. “*Opening up the ports and airports is an obligation that Turkey must fulfil to become a member of the Euro-*

pean Union. This has nothing to do with the Cyprus problem”, affirmed Mr. Iacovou.

The President of the Republic of Cyprus, Tassos Papadopoulos, refused to meet Mr. Staw in protest at his visit to the “President” of the TRNC. Mehmet Ali Talat, perceived as a form of backstairs recognition of a unilaterally proclaimed entity. Cyprus has been divided since 1974 and the invasion of the island by Turkish troops in reaction to an attempted coup d'état by Cyprus Greek nationalist aiming at uniting the island to Greece. In April 2004 the United Nations had proposed a plan for the reunification of Cyprus. In a referendum on it, the plan had been approved by the Turkish Cypriots (against the recommendation of their “President”) but was rejected by the Greek Cypriots.

• **CREATION OF A UNITED KURDISH FRONT TO DEFEND THE RIGHTS OF KURDS IN IRAN.** On 2 January, Bahaeddin Adab, a former Iranian member of Parliament, announced the creation of a United Kurdish Front to defend the rights of Kurds “neglected” by the Islamic Republic. “A considerable number of prominent Kurdish activists and NGOs have come

together in an independent front peacefully to demand rights denied to the Kurds” declared its founder, Mr. Adab, to the Press. He insisted that his movement did not have any separatist objectives, unlike, according to him, many Kurdish opposition parties. “We insist on working within the framework of the law and of avoiding any violence”, he stressed, explaining that the decision to create the Front had been accelerated by the disturbances between the authorities and the population of two provinces whose population was essentially Kurdish, those of Kurdistan and Western Azerbaijan. “The Kurds have not had any say in decisions that affect them and they are denied those of their rights mentioned in the Constitution” added Mr. Adab, who expressed the hope that the regime would authorise the registration of his movement or at least not oppose its activity. Political parties and NGOs have to be registered if they want to publicise themselves, hold meetings or enrol members. Iranian Human Rights defenders, like the Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, regularly accuse the Ministry of the Interior of obstructing the registration of such organisations.

Mr. Adab, who was disqualified

from standing at the last elections, in 2004, by the Council of Guardians, deplored the rise in unemployment and the proportion of drug addicts that afflict the Kurdish population and provinces, as well as the restrictions imposed on Kurdish language publications. Several Kurdish activists and journalists have been sentenced to long periods in prison following disturbances, particularly those last August. “You cannot keep a country united by threats. If there were freedom and equality, separatist movements would die”, he pointed out.

Over 10 million Kurds, out of a total Iranian population of 68.5 million, live, mainly in the four Northwestern provinces, which are amongst the least developed in the country. The Kurds massively took part in the Presidential elections of 1997 and 2001, which saw the victory of the reformist President, Mahmud Khatami, who had promised recognition of Kurdish cultural rights. According to Mr. Adab, “the government did not do enough to satisfy Kurdish demands and they showed their dissatisfaction by not taking part in the (recent) elections” of 2005, which brought the ultra-conservative, Mahmud Ahmedinjad, to power.