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UNSCO Daily Press Brief

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Diplomacy:

According to senior Israeli officials and European diplomat, representatives of the Middle East Quartet, who attended talks held in Tel Aviv and Ramallah last week with Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, emerged without much hope for the resumption of peace negotiations in the near future. (Haaretz)

UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Robert Serry briefed the Jordanian Prime Minister Marouf Bakhit on Wednesday on the Quartet's efforts to bring the Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table. PM Bakhit said in a statement that the building of Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank contradicted the search for peace, "Israel should realize that the continuation of the two processes is impossible." (DPA)

US Senator John Kerry said that US policy toward the Middle East needs a "readjustment" to reflect the new realities of the region, as people across the region engage in protests demanding better representation from their leaders. (AFP)

Palestinian Internal Affairs:

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Wednesday offered to go to the Gaza Strip for unity talks with his Hamas rivals. "I declare that I am ready to go to Gaza tomorrow to end the split and form a new government," Abbas said in a speech before senior members of his Fatah Party, referring to "this dark and dishonorable chapter of division." (AP)

Abbas's remarks came a day after Haniya invited him to Gaza for "immediate" talks to end the division, and were welcomed by the Islamists. "Hamas welcomes Abbas's acceptance of the Haniya initiative," spokesperson Sami Abu Zuhri said. "We will start preparing for the visit." (AFP)

Abbas's spokesperson Nabil Abu Rudeineh said Abbas is ready to head to the Gaza Strip in the coming days and that this step needs practical preparations and agreement from all the factions in the Gaza Strip. (Wafa News Agency)

United Nations special envoy to the region Robert Serry welcomed the move, saying he hoped Abbas would make the visit to Gaza "soon." "I think it is very important that the leaders respond to the clear wish of the people to reunite. Unity is overdue and vital for Palestinian legitimate aspirations," he said in a statement. (AFP)

Abbas also announced on Wednesday that he would not seek re-election when polls are held in an expected six months. (AP)

Gaza:

Two Hamas militants were killed Wednesday when Israeli warplanes hit a base for the armed wing of the movement in southeast Gaza Strip. (Xinhua)

Hamas police killed a Palestinian student from Bureij refugee camp on Wednesday during clashes at Al-Quds Open University. (Maan News)

Settlements' Affairs:

Israeli forces approved Itamar settlers to hold a wedding at Joseph's Tomb near Nablus on Wednesday, for the first time since the tomb was evacuated by Israeli forces in October 2000. (Haaretz)

Two Palestinian and one Israeli construction workers were attacked by seven masked men spraying mace in Shilo settlement on Thursday. (Jerusalem Post)

Egypt:

Many Egyptian political groups and figures on Wednesday expressed their rejection of the constitutional amendments and called citizens to vote against them on 19 March. (Xinhua)

Egypt – Israel:

Egyptian authorities have uncovered an espionage network working for Israel and are searching for an Egyptian and two Israelis believed to be involved in spying on the country's armed forces. Prosecutors interrogated a suspect involved in the network, who is now in police custody pending investigation. (Al-Masry al- Youm, Egypt)

An Israeli Channel 10 correspondent was arrested by Egyptian intelligence as he photographed armed forces in Cairo. He was forced to return to Israel, as were three other journalists said to be of Israel's Channel 2. (DPA)

Syria:

More than thirty protesters were arrested in Damascus on a second day of rare protests that are banned under Syria's emergency laws in place since 1963. Dozens of relatives of political prisoners demonstrated to demand their release Wednesday, a day after some 200 people took to the streets calling for liberty and political freedoms. (AFP)

The US called on Syria to exercise restraint and to refrain from violence following reports Wednesday that protesters were injured by plainclothes police in Damascus. (AFP)

Lebanon:

Lebanese Prime-Minister designate Najib Mikati said Wednesday no party or group had the right to monopolize decision-making inside the Cabinet, in what appeared to be veiled criticism of Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun's tough demands of obtaining the biggest Christian share. "The political, economic and social challenges facing our country, in addition to the dangerous developments in the region, require the formation of a balanced government, where no group would have the upper hand," Mikati said. (Daily Star, Lebanon)

A United Nations peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon said Wednesday it was targeted by stones thrown

from the Israeli side. "According to UNIFIL's preliminary reports, this morning on two occasions stones were thrown from the Israeli side across the technical fence and the Blue Line" near the Fatima Gate area at the northern border with Israel, UNIFIL spokesman Neeraj Singh said. (DPA)

The Syrian Ambassador to Lebanon invited newly elected Maronite Patriarch Beshara al-Rahi to visit Syria in the near future. (An-Nahar, Lebanon)

Libya:

Libyan rebels battled to hold a strategic eastern city against a punishing offensive by forces loyal to Moammar Gadhafi. At the same time, government troops heavily shelled the last main rebel bastion near the capital. (AP)

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon urged all sides to accept an immediate cease-fire. He warned Gadhafi's forces against a march on Benghazi, the opposition's de facto capital in the east, saying that "a campaign to bombard such an urban center would massively place civilian lives at risk." (AP)

Bahrain:

Soldiers and riot police expelled hundreds of protesters from a landmark square in Bahrain's capital on Wednesday, using tear gas and armored vehicles. At least five people were killed as clashes flared across the country. (AP)

The Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights said authorities have detained at least five prominent Shiite opposition activists. (AP)

Iran has recalled its ambassador from Bahrain in protest against the killing of Shi'ite Muslim demonstrators. (Reuters)

Yemen:

One person was killed and 200 wounded when Yemen security forces attacked protesters in the Red Sea city of Hudaida with live and rubber bullets, tear gas, clubs and daggers. (Reuters)

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