

TERHAN (Dispatches) -- Iran has put on hold "almost all" of its mining agreements with foreign investors as companies from Europe to Asia fear additional sanctions on the Persian Gulf nation's economy, according to the deputy minister of Iran's Ministry of Industries, Mines and Trade.

Less than \$100 million of projects is moving forward, out of the \$50 billion in potential investment the government is seeking from overseas mining companies by 2022, Mehdi Karbasian said Monday in an interview with Bloomberg. "Fearing they might get placed on a blacklist in the wake of the return of sanctions, the companies with whom we have made these deals have suspended almost all of the agreements and maintained a wait-and-see attitude," he said.

NEW DELHI (PTI) -- Iran wants India to pay more than triple the gas price for award of the coveted Farzad-B natural gas block to ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), the overseas arm of state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC).

Iran wants India to buy all of the natural gas to be produced from the Persian Gulf block at a price equivalent to the rate Qatar charges for selling liquefied natural gas (LNG) to India under a long-term deal. The rate being sought by Iran is triple of \$2.3 per mmBtu rate OVL is willing to pay for the gas during low global oil prices.

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By Kayhan Int'l Staff Writer

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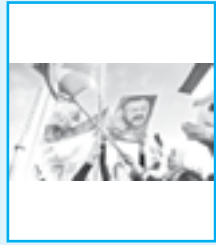
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People Across World Mark Nakba Day

RAMALLAH (Dispatches) -- Palestinians clashed with Israeli forces on Monday as the occupied territories marked the 69th anniversary of the Nakba, or "day of catastrophe" when the Zionist regime was forged after the forced removal of more than 750,000 Palestinians.

Injuries were reported in the flashpoint West Bank town of Bethlehem, where Palestinians threw stones at Israeli forces. Palestinians also clashed with police near the illegal settlement of Beit El, near the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Palestinians in occupied Palestine, the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip were holding rallies, marches and candlelight vigils.

Sirens wailed in the West Bank to mark the passing of 69 years. Cars stopped and pedestrians stood still in commemoration.

Monday also marked the 29th day of a hunger strike by 1,800 Palestinians in Israeli prisons.

Imprisoned Palestinian leader Marwan Barghouti, who is a leader of the strike, released a statement through his lawyer on Sunday denying that a recent video released by Zionist prison authorities claiming to show him eating in his cell was fake, and the cell shown in the video was much larger and cleaner than his own.

"I plan to escalate my hunger strike soon. I will stop drinking water," Barghouti was reported to have said. "There is no backtracking. We will continue until the end."

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat demanded an Israeli apology over the Nakba.

"Our nation marking 69 years of the Nakba, our national catastrophe, is symbolized in our exile and the systematic denial of our rights," Erekat said in a statement.

The official further urged the UK "to apologize for its role in the Palestinian catastrophe, beginning by the infamous Balfour Declaration and the denial of our national rights."

The document issued in November 1917 by the then British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour said the UK government "views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," settling the stage for creation of Israel.

Palestinian survivors of the Nakba and their descendants have lived outside of Palestine since 1948, with millions of them still stateless or languishing in surrounding refugee camps.

The occupying regime of Israel has prevented them from returning to their homes. Palestinians have cited UN Resolution 194 that they say preserves their "Right to Return" to Palestine.

Barghouti urged Palestinians to carry out acts of "civil disobedience" to commemorate Nakba. He also appealed to Fatah and Hamas to enter into a national reconciliation agreement.

Barghouti further warned against the resumption of talks with Israel after Palestinian Authority chief Mahmoud Abbas met U.S. leaders in Washington.

Elsewhere across the world, people rallied in Berlin in remembrance of the Nakba Day. Protesters also gathered outside the Israeli consulate in the Canadian city of Toronto in support of the hunger-striking Palestinians in Israeli jails.

In the occupied territories, human rights group Yesh Din released footage showing Israeli forces watching indifferently while Jewish settlers hurled stones at Palestinians in the West Bank.

Qalibaf Throws Weight Behind Raisi: Principlists Close Ranks Before Election Day



Tehran Mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, left, asks his supporters to use all their capacity to help Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, right, win the election.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Tehran Mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf quit the Iranian presidential race on Monday, backing instead Principlist cleric Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi in Friday's vote.

Qalibaf, a former Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) commander and police chief, was one of the main challengers to the current president, Hassan Rouhani, who is seeking a second term.

In the last election four years ago, Qalibaf finished second. Rouhani averted a second round by winning just over 50%.

This time around, Principlists who want to unseat Rouhani are mainly placing their trust in Raisi, a jurist and cleric who studied at the feet of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

"I should take an important decision to keep the unity of revolutionary forces," Qalibaf said in a statement published in state media. "I ask all my supporters around the country to use all their capacity to help my brother, Mr. Ebrahim Raisi, win the election."

Both men criticized Rouhani over unemployment rate, which rose to 12.4% last year, up 1.4% from the previous year. Raisi and Qalibaf promised to create five to six million

jobs in their first term if elected and to triple the monthly cash handouts to Iran's poor.

Rouhani told supporters on Monday he needed a stronger mandate to liberalize Iranian society.

"The day I decided to enter the election despite my personal interests, I was aware that I would face difficult and dangerous conditions," Qalibaf said in his statement, sounding out his reasons

for his withdrawal.

"The fight against pseudo-revolutionary opportunists has become highly costly, because this current is gnawing at the roots of the Revolution like a termite," the statement said.

The opportunists, Qalibaf said in his statement, "are not only at odds with the intellectual fundaments of original revolutionaries, but also represent a current whose material interests are at risk."

Qalibaf said, "Right now, the main goal of the country and the people is to change the status quo, and to that end, there is no other way than beginning a genuine fight free of slogans against aristocracy and opportunism in order to find a precise and comprehensive solution to the country's problems."

Tehran's mayor also stressed the importance of preserving the interests of the country, its people and the Islamic Revolution.

Qalibaf said a fundamental decision must be made for forging unity within the revolutionary front.

Iran will simultaneously hold its 12th presidential election and 5th city and village council elections on May 19.

Other candidates in the race are First Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri, member of Iran's Expediency Council Mostafa Aqa-Mirsalim, and former vice president, Mostafa Hashemi-Taba.

Syria Deploys Troops to Border With Jordan

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) -- Syria is reportedly moving troops to a desert region near its border with Iraq and Jordan amid reports that U.S. and allied forces are consolidating positions in the area for a possible ground invasion.

Militant sources and commanders said Monday their intelligence showed that hundreds of Syrian troops and their allies with tanks and heavy equipment had moved in the last few days to the town of Saba'a Biyar.

The remote town near the strategic Damascus-Baghdad highway was captured by the army last week as they seek to prevent areas left by Takfiri terrorists from falling into the hands of Western-backed FSA militants.

"They have sent big reinforcements from artillery, to tanks and armored vehicles," FSA spokesman for the so-called Southern Front Issam al-Reis told Reuters.

U.S. special forces operate and train FSA militants at the Tanf base near the Iraqi border in the area which is known as the Syrian Badia, meaning desert in Arabic.

The base is being expanded to become a launching pad for operations in the province of Dayr al-Zawr that straddles Iraq, Reuters cited regional intelligence sources as saying.

Syrian media on Sunday said government forces have made fresh gains against terrorists in Dayr al-Zawr.

Army units clashed with terrorist groups affiliated with Daesh in the province, leaving a number of terrorists killed and their fortifications and hideouts destroyed.

Last week, about 7,400 troops began conducting military exercises known as Exercise Eager Lion in Jordan, in what was described as the largest and most complex of their kind conducted jointly with the U.S.

The exercises prompted concerns that Washington and its allies were attempting to stage a major intervention to undermine recent gains made by the Syrian military against Daesh terrorists.

As the Syrian military began a new eastward push to drive out

Daesh from Dawr al-Zawr, Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem warned Jordan against getting involved without Syria's permission.

"If the Jordanian forces entered without coordination with the Syrian government they will be considered as hostile forces," Muallem said.

In addition to the large U.S. presence on the Jordanian side of the border, U.S. special forces were also spotted inside Syria, training a group of militants called Mughawir al-Thowra, the Newsweek magazine reported.

U.S. Airstrikes Kill Dozens of Civilians

Dozens of civilians, including scores of women and children, have been reported killed by U.S. air attacks in Syria and Iraq, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The air attack killed 23 civilians on Monday in Abu Kamal, a Syrian town held by Daesh on the border with Iraq, it said.

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Awamiyah Under Saudi 'Siege' for 6th Day

LONDON (Dispatches) -- A Saudi town spent its sixth day under "siege" from the kingdom's security services on Monday, with several reportedly killed in clashes between police and protesters.

Saudi security services launched a raid in the Eastern Province town of Awamiyah early on Wednesday, claiming the historic Almosara neighborhood was being used as a hideout for Shia militant groups.

The Eastern Province has a large Shia population. Another aim of the raid, however, appeared to be to allow the demolition of Almosara to make way for a planned renovation project. Activists have posted pictures and videos of bulldozers being accompanied by heavily armored military vehicles towards the site.

Al-Hayat newspaper reported that a man wanted by the authorities

had been shot dead, while the Mira al-Jazeera news site claimed two locals had also been killed by the security services in the ensuing clashes.

"A citizen was confirmed martyred as well as another of Indian nationality after being shot by Saudi army gunfire," the online newspaper reported on its Facebook page. The European Saudi Human Rights Organisation (ESHRO) identified one of the men as Ali Abdul Aziz Abu Abdullah.

Dozens have reportedly been injured. The interior ministry said 14 people were wounded, including two Pakistanis, an Indian, a Sudanese and four policemen.

ESHRO said the entrances to the town have been blocked by concrete slabs.

"The situation's miserable," a resident told AFP, asking for anonymity. "We think it will take a long time to finish this operation."

Residents have also reported a lack of water and can only access electricity from private generators. People from the Almosara neighborhood have been asked to leave by authorities, while photos circulating on social media have shown special police wearing balaclavas and camouflage pants moving residents in armored cars.

Ameen Nemer, an activist originally from Awamiyah, told Middle East Eye that "most of the entrances to Awamiyah" had now been blocked off so that "cars hardly go out or get in" and that there was only around one entrance still in use, which was also frequently closed.

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