

BAGHDAD (Xinhua) – The Iraqi government says that the provinces of Basra, Maysan and Anbar were identified as the entry corridors for drugs smuggled into the country. “The Iraqi Interior Ministry has identified these three provinces after a long investigation in collaboration with other government institutions,” Jamal al-Asadi, inspector general of the Interior Ministry, told al-Mirbad local radio station. Al-Asadi explained that the ministry has noted an increasing rate of drug abuse in Basra and other provinces, “thus we put forth measures to solve the problem, but the measures still require approval by the Council of Ministries.”

‘Massive Use’ of French-Made Weapons in Yemen Exposed

SANAA (Dispatches) – Journalists claim to have uncovered the “massive use” of French-made weapons in war-torn Yemen through a leak of secret military documents.

Radio France and investigative reporters from the NGO Disclose say they have obtained a classified 2018 report about French arms sold to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both of which form part of the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen since 2015.

The paper was allegedly compiled last September by France’s military agency DRM and handed over to President Emmanuel Macron and other cabinet-level officials. It apparently contains a list of all French weapons deployed in Yemen by the two Arab monarchies.

“These include Leclerc battle tanks, long-rod penetrator ammunition, Mirage 2000-9 fighter jets, COBRA counter-battery radar systems, Aravis armored troop-carrying vehicles, Cougar and Dauphin helicopters, CAESAR truck-mounted howitzers,” reads a statement on Disclose’s website.



Yemeni children protest against the Saudi-led bombing campaign on their country in front of UN offices in the capital, Sana'a, on November 20, 2017.

The journalists went on to claim that some of the French-made weapons are being used in combat operations in Yemen, including in civilian zones. Specifically, two French-made warships — a missile-launching corvette and a warfare frigate — are said to be taking part in the naval blockade of Yemen, as per the report.

The leaked report appears to include a map titled “Population

under threat of bombs”, which indicates the deployment of 48 CAESAR guns near the Saudi-Yemeni border.

“Put more simply, the guns are used to bombard Yemeni territory to open up a path for the tanks and armored vehicles invading the country,” the journalists argue. The population living within the range of potential artillery fire is estimated at being over 436,000.

According to the report, at least 129 CAESAR howitzers are due to be delivered to Saudi Arabia between by 2023. French authorities are yet to comment on the matter.

French Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly said in a radio interview in February that the military had “recently sold no weapons that can be used in the Yemeni conflict”.

Last October, she rejected claims that domestically made weapons were targeting civilian population. “To my knowledge, the weapons we have sold recently have not been used against civilians,” she told reporters.

The minister also described France’s weapons exports to Saudis as “relatively modest”, saying they were subject to tight restrictions. “We don’t sell weapons like they’re baguettes,” she added.

Disclose and Radio France note, meanwhile, that the French parliament has been “deliberately kept apart” from this information by the government, which has so far given only “fragmentary answers or even falsehoods”.

‘UN Mechanism on War Crimes Probe Hinders Intra-Syrian Dialogue’



Representatives of the Syrian government and opposition groups along with other attendees take part in the second round of the Syria talks at the Rixos President Hotel, in Astana, Kazakhstan, February 16, 2017.

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad says Damascus considers the UN Impartial and the Independent Mechanism to be illegitimate, accusing the institution of hindering intra-Syrian dialogue.

In addition, he stressed that the organization was undermining the efforts of UN Special Representative to Syria Geir Pedersen.

Recently the Trump administration voiced plans to allocate \$5 million to the institution, as well as the White Helmets, which calls itself a group of volunteer rescue workers, who allegedly carry out rescue operations in terrorist-held Syria and help local residents prepare for attacks. However, Russia has repeatedly accused the organization of participating in the staging of false-flag chemical attacks, aimed at prompting Western military intervention against the Syrian Army.

The remarks came after United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen says he has held “detailed substantial” talks with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem on efforts to find a political solution to the country’s eight-year-long foreign-backed war.

“We have had very detailed substantial discussions,” Pedersen told reporters after the meeting in Damascus.

“We are now addressing all the issues so all the issues are at the table,” the Norwegian diplomat added without giving more information.

The UN envoy pointed to his planned talks with other Syrian offi-

cial later in the day and said, “Let’s see how we are able to proceed later this afternoon.”

Meanwhile, Syria’s official news agency SANA reported that the UN diplomat and Syrian foreign minister exchanged views on the ongoing efforts to advance and complete the political process in Syria, including moves to set up a committee tasked with drawing up a post-war constitution.

Pedersen became the fourth UN negotiator aiming to settle the Syrian conflict following the resignation of his predecessor Staffan de Mistura due to family reasons.

During their meeting in March, the Syrian foreign minister and deputy prime minister told Pedersen that his country’s constitution is a “purely sovereign affair” and emphasized that Damascus would allow no foreign interference in that area.

“The constitution and all matters related to it are a sovereign issue that should be decided by Syrians themselves without any foreign interference,” Muallem said.

Writing a new constitution for a post-war Syria is part of a potential political solution to end the eight-year crisis in the Arab country. To that end, an agreement was made in the Russian city of Sochi last year for a UN backed Constitutional Committee to be formed composed of 50 members from the incumbent Damascus government, 50 opposition members, and another 50 independent figures chosen by the world body.

Istanbul Vote Count Enters 3rd Week; Appeals, Recounts Spark Frustration

ANKARA (Reuters) – Electoral officials ordered a second recount of votes in an east Istanbul district on Monday, after two weeks of appeals by President Tayyip Erdogan’s AK Party against results showing it had narrowly lost control of Turkey’s largest city.

Repeated AKP challenges to the initial results have led to growing frustration among supporters of the main opposition CHP, which spilled over onto the soccer terraces at the weekend when Istanbul’s top teams played two derby matches.

“Give the mandate, give Imamoğlu the mandate now,” fans of Besiktas and Fenerbahçe chanted, as their teams played current league leaders Basaksehir, whom Erdogan has said he

supports, and runners-up Galatasaray.

The secularist Republican People’s Party (CHP) mayoral candidate Ekrem Imamoglu, who attended both matches, holds a slim lead of around 0.2 percentage points over his AK Party rival, former prime minister Binali Yildirim, according to initial results of the March 31 local elections.

The loss of Ankara ended 25 years of control over the capital by the AK Party and its predecessors. Defeat in Istanbul, where Erdogan was mayor in the 1990s, would be an even greater blow to the president who has dominated Turkish politics through a decade and half of repeated election triumphs.

On Monday electoral officials in the Maltepe district of Istanbul, where a recount of votes in 1,089 ballot boxes had already been underway for nearly a week, ruled for a fresh recount after an appeal by the AKP and their nationalist MHP allies, broadcaster NTV said.

The appeal centered around an AKP objection to the additional teams brought in to speed up the recount, and means more than half the votes in the district must be recounted again.

The AKP has already filed several other objections across Istanbul and has appealed to annul the elections in another district, Buyukcekmece.

The High Election Board (YSK) has said it would wait for

all recounts across the city to be completed before ruling on the AKP’s appeal to annul results in Buyukcekmece.

After that it may have to rule on a call by Erdogan - not yet formally submitted by the AKP - for the entire Istanbul election to be annulled over what the party said were irregularities that affected the outcome.

An appeal for annulment of the entire Istanbul election could probably be lodged only after the YSK has announced the final results.

CHP lawmaker Baris Yarkdas said his party has asked the YSK to consider previous recounts as valid and to speed up recounts across Istanbul by forming 100 new counting teams.

Zionist Settlers Attack Palestinian Family in West Bank

WEST BANK (Dispatches) – Masked Zionist settlers have been caught on camera attacking a Palestinian family in the occupied West Bank with rocks.

The Israeli human rights organization, Yesh Din, said a group of masked settlers from Yitzhar settlement attacked a family in the neighboring Palestinian village of Urif south of Nablus with stones.

Security camera footage from the village shows a Palestinian mother carrying a child into a car, while other family members walk around it. The settlers then come running down the road and start hurling stones at them.

Afterwards, the mother and a family member rush to grab their children and then flee to the house.

According to Urif residents, some 50 settlers stormed the village’s eastern neighborhood,

smashing car windows and throwing stones at houses.

The Zionist regime’s military said the “friction” between Palestinians and Israelis ended when soldiers and policemen dispersed the crowd. However, they did not arrest any settlers.

The United Nations said in a February report that acts of violence and vandalism committed by Zionist settlers against Palestinians and their property have risen since the beginning of 2019.

About 600,000 Israelis live in over 230 illegal settlements built since the 1967 occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and East al-Quds.

Palestinians want the West Bank as part of a future independent Palestinian state with East al-Quds as its capital. The Zionist regime’s

continued settlement expansion on Palestinian territories has been a major sticking point in Israeli-Palestinian talks, which have stalled since 2014.

Separately, settlers opened fire at a Palestinian who threw rocks at Israeli-plated cars near the West Bank village of Hawara earlier this month, human rights group B’tselem said Sunday.

After one of the rocks hit a settler’s vehicle, shots were “apparently” fired from inside the car. The settler, Yehoshua Sherman, then got out of his car and opened fire on Abdel Fattah who was “crouching” near dumpsters.

Another settler then exited his truck and joined Sherman and together, the two fired several more rounds at Abdel Fattah who was “lying wounded on the ground,” the report said.

‘YPG/PKK Continue Digging Tunnels in Northern Syria’

ANKARA (Dispatches) – The militant group YPG/PKK continues to dig tunnels in northern Syria, a new Anadolu Agency footage revealed on Monday.

In December, Anadolu Agency captured a footage showing the excavation of the group in the Manbij and Ayn al-Arab districts in northern Syria.

The most-recent footage recorded the ongoing efforts of the YPG/PKK in digging up tunnels to extend those existing as well as excavating new tunnels.

The excavation efforts continue in Tal Abyad, Ras al-Ayn, Qamishli and Al-Malikiyah cities along Syria’s border with Turkey.

The YPG/PKK is gearing for any possible military action of

Turkey east of the Euphrates River.

After the capture of Afrin from the YPG/PKK with the Operation Olive Branch, it was revealed that the organization dug pits at many points in order not to lose the zones in these districts.

The PKK -- listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the U.S. and the EU -- has waged a campaign against Turkey for more than 30 years, resulting in the deaths of nearly 40,000 people. The YPG is the Syrian branch of the militant group.

In the last two years, Turkey’s Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations captured the region from YPG/PKK and Daesh terrorists.