Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, in an interview in Cairo with the Saudi-owned Asharq al Awsat news source, stated that Syrian President Bashar al Assad could maintain power two more years in the face of revolt in Syria, contradicting US expectations that Assad’s fall is more imminent, according to Reuters. Maliki, seen as close to Assad’s main ally Iran, has avoided expressing overt support for either the Syrian leader or the predominately Sunni opposition in Syria.

Martin Kobler, United Nations (UN) envoy to Iraq, called upon the Shi’ite-led government of Nouri al Maliki to do more to address the grievances of the minority Sunni population, according to Associated Press (AP). Kobler stated that protesters’ issues regarding governance, rule of law and human rights “are all problems the government could solve tomorrow”. Sunni protesters demand the release of thousands of civilians they claim are held arbitrarily under counter-terrorism laws. Sunnis want the laws rescinded along with other discriminatory policies. On 07 February, The Washington Post reports that the Iraqi Parliament appears to be backing away from a controversial law that would limit freedom of speech online. The Information Technology Crimes Act, proposed in July 2012, levied life sentences and fines of up to USD 50,000 for using computers in ways that “compromise the independence of the state or its unity, integrity, safety”. The recent development over the draft legislation is seen as a potential breakthrough for Iraqi civil rights.

Seven security guards of the Taji central prison near Baghdad were killed on 05 February when a car bomb exploded close to the prison’s entrance, according to al Jazeera. Najmaldin Karim, governor of Kirkuk province, stated that, “[the increase in bombings] tells us about the fact that al Qaeda is back in Iraq”. On 08 February two car bombs exploded at a market just north of Baghdad, while two other car bombs exploded in Hilla province, south of Baghdad, reports United Press International (UPI). In total,
the bombings killed 26 and wounded scores more. The same day, AP reports that tens of thousands of Sunni protesters rallied in five major cities across Iraq, including Samarra, Fallujah, Ramadi, Mosul and Tikrit. In Mosul, gunmen killed two security guards at a checkpoint on 10 February, while later in the day, gunmen killed an off-duty soldier and targeted a van carrying oil workers, killing one oil worker, reports Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL). Also, a bomb was detonated on the roof of an Iraqi satellite television station in Sulaimaniyah Kurdistan after the channel aired criticism of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, a revered historical Kurdish nationalist and father of the current president of Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani.

Kurdistan’s approach to the crisis in Syria contrasts sharply with Baghdad’s approach, according to Reuters. While Iraq’s central government has officially maintained a “non-interference” policy regarding Syria, ethnic-Kurds in Iraq have been providing assistance to Syrian Kurds. Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) President Massoud Barzani stated, “[they are our brothers and a shared fate binds us together”.

In other humanitarian events, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon strongly condemned a mortar attack on Camp Liberty, the temporary shelter for former residents of Camp Ashraf, reports Reuters. The 10 February attack against the Iranian dissident group Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) at Camp Liberty killed at least 5 people and wounded 25 others. The UN called upon the Iraqi government, responsible for the safety of the dissident group, to fully investigate the attack.

Mali

French-backed Malian forces face pockets of resistance in northern Mali after retaking control of the region from Islamist militants in late January, according to Voice of America (VOA). As France attempts to scale down its operations in the country, the UN is considering plans to assume control with an international peacekeeping force; however, UN officials indicated that the region would need to be further stabilised before a peacekeeping force could be inserted into Mali. Islamist militants on the run from northern Mali are reportedly seeking refuge in the rugged, rocky expanse of the Adrar des Ifoghas Mountains, where the French military has reportedly carried out twenty airstrikes in recent days, according to New York Times (NYT). The mountains have long provided a retreat for Tuareg nomads from the region. Also, on 07 February, Radio Danga reports that the rebel group Sudan Liberation Movement-Abdel Wahid (SLM-AW) claims to have killed eleven Islamists from Mali during a battle against the Sudanese army in Derbat, Central Darfur. A Mali rebel, captured in the clashes, reported that there were other Malian rebels in Darfur who had recently fled northern Mali.

In Timbuktu, almost every Arab resident has been expelled from the city, fleeing mainly to refugee camps in neighbouring Algeria and Mauritania, reports The Telegraph. Ethnic divisions in the northern city have been exacerbated during its ten month occupation by Islamist militants. While Timbuktu’s Arab population were once the city’s commercial class, running the biggest shops and businesses, mobs have taken their revenge by pillaging Arab businesses and homes. AP reports that reprisal killings carried out by Malian troops against Tuaregs and Arabs has been taking place since French-led troops liberated the ancient city on 28 January. French military spokesman Colonel Thierry Burkhard indicated that French troops had begun their withdrawal from Timbuktu on 07 February, as they refocused their efforts to secure the northern city of Gao, according to AP.

The armed rebel group Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) claimed responsibility for an attack on Gao in northern Mali, as well as a suicide bombing, according to al Jazeera. A Tuareg suicide bomber on a motorcycle blew himself up at an army checkpoint in Gao on 08 February, according to al Jazeera. On 09 February, a massive explosion in the Gao region raised fears among the city’s inhabitants, according to Agence France-Presse (AFP). Then, on 10 February, a surprise attack on Malian troops stationed in Gao, occurring only two weeks after French and Malian troops routed the al Qaeda-linked fighters from the most populous city in the North, underscored that the battle against insurgents was far from over. Attackers used canoes to cross the Niger River and infiltrate the city, according to French General Bernard Barera. Witnesses reported that attackers hid in the city’s empty central police station and struck Malian soldiers when they arrived. Snipers then opened fire on Malian troop reinforcements who arrived to assist. Rocket propelled grenade explosions and fire from heavy machine guns could be heard in the city. Also, 1,800 Chadian troops entered Kidal in northeastern Mali to secure the town, which is considered the last Islamist northern stronghold in Mali, according to Radio France Internationale (RFI).

UN Undersecretary-General Jeffrey Feltman stated that success in Mali is not only defined through its military intervention, but also by political progress, according toUPI. Feltman asserts that Mali requires a dual-track approach and indicated that “with parts of the north freed, it’s time to push for political developments in a country shaken by coups”. The successful military intervention allows for an “inclusive dialogue toward national cohesion and reconciliation as Malian authorities progress towards visible progress in the preparation for free, fair and transparent elections as soon as possible”. Meanwhile, clashes between rival Malian army factions broke out in Bamako on 08 February when forces loyal to Mali’s unelected government stormed the camp of the “red beret” presidential guard that remain loyal to Mali’s former democratic president Amadou Toumani Toure, deposed in a coup in March 2012, reports The Guardian. Troops loyal to interim Prime Minister Dioncounda Traore surrounded the base with armoured vehicles, opening fire on women and children who had gathered near the camp gates. International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor Fatou Bensouda launched a
formal investigation into the Mali conflict on 16 January 2013, according to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR). While Bensouda will look at abuses committed by all sides in the conflict since July 2012, Mali is the first time that the ICC will be addressing the issue of armed Islamist groups. Some experts believe prosecutions could embolden rather than deter jihadists.

Former US Ambassador to Mali Vicki Huddleston reported that France paid USD 17 million to free hostages seized by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb AQIM from a uranium mine in Niger in 2010, which bolstered Islamist groups that France is now fighting against, according to AP. Huddleston also stated that other European countries, including Germany, had paid ransoms for hostages totalling nearly USD 90 million, reports BBC. France, according to the report, has always denied that it pays ransoms for the release of hostages.

Syria

On 09 February, Syrian President Bashar al Assad overhauled his cabinet by appointing seven new ministers in an attempt to stabilise an economy that has been damaged by the two-year revolt, according to Bloomberg News. Syrian television reported that Assad replaced the heads of finance, agriculture and those relating to oil and labour. Power rationing has worsened since the start of violence, as fighting disrupts supplies and prevents repairs to damaged infrastructure. Fuel is also in short supply.

Since the leader of the Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC), Moaz al Khatib, offered Assad the opportunity to engage in talks, controversy and bitter recriminations have been raging in the ranks of the opposition, according to The Guardian. Initially Khatib conditioned talks with vice president Faroq al Sharraa on the release of 160,000 prisoners and the issuance of passports for Syrians abroad. In further developments, Khatib, with the support of Arab League and UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, said he was willing to hold talks with Assad representatives in rebel-held areas of northern Syria, reports al Jazeera. However, the Muslim Brotherhood, which controls a large bloc within Khatib’s National Coalition, is against any dialogue initiative. According to ANSAMED, Assad forces burned down Khatib’s home in Damascus on 10 February. The Druze community, a small, but significant minority in Syria, is joining the opposition in increasing numbers, according to The Washington Post. Maintaining the support of minorities is a critical goal for the Assad regime, which has tried to portray the conflict as a foreign plot. In a mid-January clash, dozens of Druze fighters joined a rebel assault on a Syrian radar base on a mountaintop in Sweida province. The fighters killed several government soldiers but were ultimately routed by Syrian troops. In other opposition developments, Jabhat al-Nusra, or the Nusra Front, considered a terrorist organisation by the United States, is distributing bread and other staples in Aleppo, attempting to garner civilian support, according to UPI. The group is winning loyalty in the city and sources report that the group appears to be well-funded. Al-Nusra is running bakeries and bread stores and is selling staples at a significant discount.

Israel’s recent airstrike targeting weapons destined for the Lebanese group Hezbollah may mark the beginning of a more aggressive campaign by Israeli leadership to prevent arms transfers in the region to enemies of Israel, according to The Washington Post. Israel is ready to strike again if suspected transfers of advanced or nonconventional weapons are attempted. On 06 February, the Israeli army deployed its third Iron Dome air defence battery in north Israel approximately ten days after targeting a weapons convoy destined for Hezbollah, reports UPI. The Washington Post reports that it is unlikely that US leadership will shift its position over expanding its role in the Syrian conflict. While top defence and intelligence officials favoured a plan that provided for the limited arming of rebels, President Barak Obama determined that the risks were too great, considering the possible infiltration of rebel forces by extremist elements. Meanwhile, on 06 February, Turkish, Egyptian and Iranian officials, meeting in Cairo, began a joint effort to end the 22-month long conflict, according to UPI. Turkish President Abdullah Gul reported that the three countries had started work to “try and avoid Syria from consuming itself”, and were working on the details of the plan. In a bold diplomatic move, the Syrian opposition are reportedly opening offices in Washington and New York as part of their efforts to take Syria’s UN country seat from the Assad regime, reports AFP. Syrian coalition envoy Najib Ghadbian stated, “[t]he Assad regime has lost its legitimacy, so we have the goal of taking over the Syrian seat at the UN”, while acknowledging that it would be a “long legal and political battle”.

On 06 February, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported the deaths of 54 people in central Syria when an explosion struck their bus as they returned home from work, according to Reuters. On the same day, fierce fighting reignited in Damascus after several days of relative calm in the city, according to The Washington Post. Also, Syrian warplanes launched a new air campaign on the outskirts of Damascus on 09 February, reports AFP. Islamist al-Nusra Front rebels killed seven Syrian soldiers at a checkpoint in the northern city of Safireh on 08 February, after losing more than one hundred fighters in the area in recent days, reports AFP. Meanwhile, intense clashes erupted in the embattled town of Daraya between rebels and troops in the government’s bid to dislodge rebel zones surrounding the capital. The Washington Post reports that Iran and the Hezbollah are building a network of militias inside Syria to preserve and protect their interests in the event that President Bashar al Assad’s government falls or is forced to retreat from Damascus, according to US and Middle Eastern officials. The militias are fighting alongside Syrian forces in order to keep Assad in power, but officials believe Iran’s long-term goal is to have reliable operatives in place in the event that Syria fractures into separate ethnic and sectarian enclaves. According to an Obama administration official, Tehran was backing as many as 50,000 militiamen in Syria. Kurdish nationalists have their own militias with control over major portions of northeastern Syria. In other news, rebels seized
control of the largest dam in Syria, located on the Euphrates River in the northern province of Raqa, reports AFP. Also, jihadist fighters from al-Nusra Front, the Awayis al Qurani and Ahrar al Tabqa battalions took over three districts in the adjacent town of Tabqa.

Spillover violence continues to threaten stability in Lebanon after a deadly gun battle on 01 February left at least one Sunni militant and two Lebanese soldiers dead, according to the Christian Science Monitor. A tense standoff ensued in the Lebanese town of Arsal when Lebanese Special Forces were deployed, demanding residents turn over the gunmen who fought against the army. Meanwhile, residents are seeking an independent investigation into the clash. Finally, the chief of the Netherlands’ top intelligence agency reports that dozens of Dutch citizens are fighting alongside Syrian rebels and could possibly return home further radicalised, militarily trained and traumatised, creating a security risk for the country, according to AP.

On 08 February, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reports a surge of civilians fleeing Syria for safety, with new data suggesting there are now 800,000 refugees. The Syrian conflict is forcing approximately 5,000 people each day from the country, and neighbouring countries report that the number of refugees has risen by 25 per cent in the past month. Also, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reports that new assessments show civilians in conflict zones have only one-third the water supplies of pre-crisis levels. Aleppo, rural Damascus, Deir al Zour, Homs, Idlib and Raqqa are the most significantly impacted. Also, a UNHCR official stated that if the high volume of Syrian refugees continues to cross the border into Lebanon, the country may be left with no other alternative than to establish formal refugee camps, according to Reuters. Lebanon currently hosts 260,000 Syrian refugees, equivalent to 6.5 per cent of the country’s population, and has attempted to absorb refugees through more informal networks of homes and communities. Ninette Kelly, the UNHCR representative in Lebanon, stated, “[UNHCR] have advised the government that it may be time to start having at least two transit sites, where refugees could be offered temporary food and shelter before other accommodation is found”. UNHCR has also made contingency plans to establish formal refugee camps if the mass influx continues, although the camps would require prior authorisation by the Lebanese government. On 11 February, high-ranking Palestinian Authority officials travelled to Syria to discuss the plight of Palestinian refugees caught in the Syrian conflict, according to UPI. The delegation met with Syrian officials to determine ways to protect residents of the Palestinian Yarmouk refugee camp. Over 600 Palestinians have been killed during the two year conflict in Syria. In addition, the meeting participants discussed ways to return 130,000 displaced persons from Yarmouk Camp after fighting between rebel and government forces forced many to flee for safety. The opposition Deir Press Network reported that the humanitarian situation in Deir Ezzor is dire, stating the western countryside is without water and electricity for the eleventh consecutive day, according to al Jazeera.

IED & Demining

Linda Lavender  linda.lavender@cimicweb.org

The CFC publishes a weekly IED and Demining Events map. This global compilation identifies and links to articles pertaining to IED events and other demining efforts. (Reporting period from 06 – 12 February 2013)

GLOBAL NEWS

Colombia: A bomb exploded near Neiva Colombia at a military checkpoint, reports United Press International (UPI).

Somalia: A suicide car bomb detonated in Galkayo that injured three police officers, reports Garowe Online.

Thailand: Five soldiers were killed in a bomb attack by suspected insurgents in the village of Yala; southern Thailand, according to Agence France-Presse (AFP).

For more IED & Demining news click here or click on the map above.

The CFC is pleased to announce the launch of its 2013 Kenya Elections webpage providing detailed coverage of the upcoming Kenyan elections.