

INSTITUT
KURDE
DE PARIS

Information and liaison bulletin

N°252

MARCH 2006

Contents:

- **IRAQI KURDISTAN: THE PRESIDENT OF IRAQI KURDISTAN GIVES NECHRVAN BARZANI, SECONDED BY OMAR FATTAH, THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FORMING A SINGLE GOVERNMENT FOR KURDISTAN.**
- **BAGHDAD: THE NEW IRAQI PARLIAMENT MEETS, BUT FORMING A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION IS PROVING LABORIOUS.**
- **ISTANBUL: AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ENTITLED "SEARCHES FOR A CIVIL AND DEMOCRATIC SOLUTION: TURKEY'S KURDISH PROBLEM" AT BILGI UNIVERSITY.**
- **DIYARBEKIR: THE WORST VIOLENCE IN OVER TEN YEARS SHAKES THE CITY, WHICH SEES TANKS AND PARAMILITARY MILITIA RETURN TO THE CITY'S VERY CENTRE.**
- **TEHERAN: THE IRANIAN AUTHORITIES CONTINUE TO REPRESS FREEDOM OF WORSHIP AND OPINION.**
- **DAMASCUS: THE BAATH PARTY CELEBRATES THE 43RD ANNIVERSARY OF COMING TO POWER WITH ARRESTS AND REPRESSION.**
- **THE KURDS CELEBRATED THEIR NEW YEAR, NEWROZ, PEACEFULLY.**
- **AS WELL AS...**

IRAQI KURDISTAN: THE PRESIDENT OF IRAQI KURDISTAN GIVES NECHRVAN BARZANI, SECONDED BY OMAR FATTAH, THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FORMING A SINGLE GOVERNMENT FOR KURDISTAN

On 26 March, the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massud Barzani, gave two public figures from the two major parties of the region, the responsibility for forming a single government for the Province of Kurdistan. *"This is a historic moment for the Kurds of Iraq, who need to unite their ranks"*, declared Nechirvan Barzani, due to hold the post of head of the government after being officially charged with forming a cabinet. Nechirvan Barzani, a member of the

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leadership, will be seconded in his task by Omar Fattah of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani, at present President of the Iraqi Federal Republic. On 21 January, the leaders of these two major organisations signed an agreement to set up a single administration for the autonomous region. The agreement was endorsed by Jalal Talabani and Massud Barzani during an extraordinary session of the Kurdistan Parliament in Irbil. The two main Kurdish parties had

announced on 7 January that they were putting the finishing touches to this agreement, which will put an end to two separate administrations in the autonomous region that, on 30 January elected a single 111-member Parliament for the next four years. The agreement, signed on 21 January does not, however, envisage immediately fusing the Ministries of the Interior, of Finance, of Justice or of the KDP's Peshmergas (armed forces) that control the provinces of Dohuk and Irbil nor those of the PUK, that run Suleimaniyah province. A twelve-month extension is allowed to harmonise the regulations and procedures as well as the status of the staff of these ministries. The formation of a

unified Kurdish Government could take a few weeks, mainly due to the delay being taken in forming the Federal Government in Baghdad. Since some leading figures are under consideration for both governments, a certain synchronisation seems necessary.

Furthermore, on 6 March the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR) urged some Iranian Kurdish refugees, who had fled Iraq to seek refuge in a No Mans Land on the Jordan border, to so and settle in Kurdistan. In a communiqué, the UN agency considered that the 190 Iranian Kurds who had fled from a camp West of Baghdad early in 2005 for a desert area in the West of the country "had placed themselves in a dangerous situation" and cannot be helped by the HCR for logistic reasons. It asks them to take advantage of the agreement reached in September between the UN agency and the Kurdistan regional government for settling them at Kawa, in Irbil province. The HCR has promised to supply financial assistance and transport to those refugees wishing to settle in Iraqi Kurdistan, where housing food rations and schooling will be available for them. According to the

HCR, these Iranian Kurds are demanding to enter Jordan, where a transit camp was set up just after the start of the intervention in Iraq by the coalition forces in 2003, until the HCR can settle them in a third country. These Kurds had originally fled Iran after the Islamic revolution and lived, until 2005, in a refugee camp near Ramadi, to the West of Baghdad.

On the other hand, on 1 March the Kurdish authorities announced that negotiations are under way with a Canadian oil company, Western Oil Sands, to conclude an exploration contract in the Garmin region, about 120 Km South of Suleimaniyah, "Discussions have taken place over the details of an oil exploration contract in the Garmin region", indicated Jamal Aziz, Minister for Cooperation in the Suleimaniyah regional government. The Garmin region, which covers Kalar, Baunur and Chokel, is rich in oil and had substantial reserves. This is the second oil project announced by the Kurdish authorities. On 29 November 2005 a first test well was drilled in the Zakho region, near the Turkish border, by a Norwegian company, DNO.

outgoing Speaker, the Sunni Arab Hajem al-Hassani stressed that the country's first priority was the formation of a government of national unity. The session began with reading a few verses of the Qoran followed by a minute's silence to observe the anniversary of the chemical bombing attack against the inhabitant of the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988.

The Kurdish and Sunni Arab parties are opposed to the re-election of the outgoing Iraqi Prime Minister. "*The Kurdish and Sunni Arab groups present think that (Jaafari) is not a suitable person, and they cannot join a cabinet under him, as he does not adopt a neutral stand*", affirmed the Kurdish negotiator, Mahmud Othman, on 2 March. In February, Ibrahim Jaafari was proposed for this post by the Shiite conservatives of the Unified Iraqi Alliance, who won 128 seats out of 275 during the December elections. He had beaten the candidate of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Vice President Adel Abdel Mahdi. But this choice is now rejected by several groups: the Kurdish Alliance (53 seats), the Sunni Arab Concord Front (44 seats) and the secular list presented by former Shiite Prime Minister Iyad Allawi (25 seats). These groups consider that Ibrahim Jaafari had failed at his job last year. On 1 March the Iraqi Head of State, Jalal Talabani, sharply criticised Mr. Jaafari's visit to Ankara and indicated that any agreement with Turkey would "*be valueless*", the present government having solely a caretaker role. "*The Presidency of the Republic is extremely surprised by Mr. Jaafari's visit to Turkey without any consultation with the Iraqi government, which is in contradiction with the Fundamental Law, which is still in force*", stated a communiqué from the Presidency.

BAGHDAD: THE NEW IRAQI PARLIAMENT MEETS, BUT FORMING A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION IS PROVING LABORIOUS

Iraqi leaders are struggling to provide their country with stable institutions, three years after the intervention in Iraq by an international coalition that overthrew Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Three months after its election, on 16 March, the Iraqi Parliament held a formal opening session while the political horse-trading is still stalled over the choice of a Prime Minister and the

formation of a government of national unity. In a session that only lasted 40 minutes, the 2745 Members of Parliament, meeting in the fortified Green Zone of Baghdad surrounded by heavy security arrangements, swore their oaths of office without electing their Speaker... Before officially proclaiming the dissolution of the Interim Assembly and entrusting the Chairmanship of the session to 83-year old Mr. Pashashi, the

To advance the formation of the government, a new body, a 19-member National Security Council, was approved in principle on 19 March. But the powers of this Council, supposed to counter-balance those of the Prime Minister, remain to be defined. It must be a consultative body, according to the majority Shiite bloc, which is insisting on strict observance of the Constitution, as well as the Sunni Arabs, the Kurds and Iyad Allawi's block. The National Security Council, although not allowed for in the Constitution, is seen as a means of easing the formation of a government of national unity, including all the various and antagonistic political families. It is supposed to favour the participation of all, Shiites, Kurds and Sunni Arabs, in the decision-making process and seems to have won the support of representatives of these groups.

Elsewhere, the third anniversary of the military intervention in Iraq has unleashed sharp criticisms of the Bush Administration. The most spectacular came from a retired Army general, who was responsible for training the Iraqi security forces in 2003 and 2004. General Paul Eaton threw the blame for the failures in Iraq on the Secretary for Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, describing him, in an opinion column in the New York Times as a rough manager who wanted to take charge of every detail himself, alienating his allies and ignoring the recommendations of the General Staff. For his part, the former Iraqi Interim Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, in an interview broadcast by the BBC on the same day, considered that Iraq was facing a civil war, whose consequences would not spare Europe or the United States. *"It's unfortunate, but*

we are in a civil war", Mr. Allawi declared, *"We are losing, every day, 50 to 60 people on average across the country – perhaps even more. If this is not a civil war, then God knows what a civil war could be like"*, he added.

In Washington, the Secretary for Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, warned that a precipitate withdrawal from Iraq would result in the terrorists seizing power in that country and would be as if Germany had been handed back to the Nazi regime after the second world war. *"Consider that if we were to withdraw now there is every reason to believe that Saddam supporters and terrorists would fill the vacuum – and that the free world would no longer have the will to face up to them"*, declared Mr. Rumsfeld on 19 March to the *Washington Post*, the day after a demonstration against the war in Iraq, which brought together several hundreds of thousands of people in the United States. *"Turning our backs on Iraq today would be the modern equivalent of returning Germany to the Nazis after the war. It is as if we had asked to liberated countries of Eastern Europe to return to Soviet domination"*, he affirmed. Finally the boss of the American forces in Iraq declared on 19 March that the US forces should stay there for the next few years, even if their numbers were to be reduced as the Iraqi forces became more powerful. On 30 March the US Army announced that 2,330 American soldiers and similar personnel had died in Iraq since the military intervention in March 2003, according to an AFP body count based on Pentagon figures. It is true that sectarian attacks are increasing. On 14 March the bodies of 44 Iraqis were found in a van and in a mass grave in Baghdad, according to a Ministry of the

Interior source. The bodies of 15 young Iraqis, their hands bound and bearing signs of hanging were found in a van in the Western part of Baghdad. According to a policeman at the Baghdad morgue, all fifteen had been hanged. The only one with any identity papers was a Baghdad Sunni Arab student, the policeman pointed out. Elsewhere, 29 other corpses riddled with bullets, their hands bound, were found in a mass grave to the East of Baghdad. These bring the number of corpses found in two days in Iraq to 80, raising fears of sectarian murders. The day before, 13 bodies were found in the Baghdad Shiite quarter of Sadr City, where six bomb attacks on 12 March had killed over 50 people and injured 204 others. Twenty-one others bullet riddled corpses, some with their hands bound and bearing traces of torture were also found on 13 March in Baghdad and Mossul.

Furthermore, on 27 March, forty people perished in a suicide bomb attack against Iraqi Army recruits in the region of Azki Kalak, in Mossul Province – the bloodiest attack on recruits to the Iraqi security forces since the one that had killed 70 people in Ramadi in January. The attack came the day after a bloody raid in Northern Baghdad in which some Shiite leaders witnessed another US Army blunder that caused 16 deaths. Following this murderous raid, Iraqi President, Jalal Talabani, announced the creation of an Americano-Iraqi enquiry commission that he will himself chair. On 20 March the magazine *Time* announced that the US Army was already investigating the deaths of 15 Iraqi civilians, who are said to have been killed by some Marines on 19 November 2005, after one of their vehicles had been hit by a bomb. Seven women and

three children are amongst those killed, according to the magazine. According to some human rights defence organisations, as quoted

by *Time*, this incident would be the most serious case of deliberate murder of Iraqis by GIs since the beginning of the war in Iraq.

**ISTANBUL: AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ENTITLED
"QUESTS FOR A CIVIL AND DEMOCRATIC SOLUTION: TURKEY'S
KURDISH PROBLEM" AT BILGI UNIVERSITY**

A number of Turkish and Kurdish intellectuals met over the 11 to 12 March in Istanbul to seek a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey at a time when the country is negotiating to join the European Union. Under the heading of "*Quests for a civil and democratic solution: Turkey's Kurdish problem*" the two-day conference opened under high security cover, some ultra-nationalist groups having threatened to disrupt the meetings. Police searched those taking part at the entrance to the campus of the private Bilgi University, where the discussions took place while a number of anti-riot police were deployed all round. Former Minister of Culture, Ercan Karakas, who was involved in the project, declared that "*ultra-nationalist groups have threatened to sabotage the conference*". Only a small group of "Left" nationalists demonstrated to attack the conference. Mr Karakas considered that "*despite certain steps in favour of the Kurds, the problem remains entire*". However, he recognised that some progress had been achieved in society for it to be possible to even discuss the Kurdish conflict, a subject previously tabooed. "*Such a conference would have been unthinkable 20 years ago*", he stated.

This is not the first meeting of this kind but, seeing the number of participants and the subject tackled, the conference, which has given the floor to over fifty intellectuals, academics, politicians, journalists

and actors in the country's cultural life, is the most important and largest for years. The different panels provided opportunities to discuss the following subjects: "*The background and development of the Kurdish problem*", "*Organisations and experiences*", "*The exoduses and their psychological and social consequences*", "*Nationalism*", "*The Iraqi experience and its regional impact*", "*Rights and identity, the social and cultural dimensions*", "*The concept of Minority*", "*The Kurdish question and State policies*", "*The Kurdish question and the media*".

The conflict between the Turkish Army and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that took up arms against Ankara in 1984, caused 37,000 deaths, over 3 million displaced persons, and led to violations of human rights such as the systematic use of torture and the burning down of thousands of Kurdish villages by the Turkish forces. The Turkish Association for Human Rights speaks of 3,400 Kurdish villages destroyed, burnt down or forcibly evacuated.

During the conference, Ismail Besiksi, a Turkish sociologist and writer who has spent 14 years in Turkish jails because of his university research on the Kurds, received a very warm ovation from the hall. The sociologist, in the course of his contribution, deplored the fact that the Kurds, throughout their long history, were considered "a source of problems" by the regions states, amongst which they had been carved up, including Turkey.

The participants as a whole called on the PKK to renounce the use of violence. Sertaç Bucak, a defender of Kurdish rights, urged the Kurdish fighters to lay down their arms so that a "*federal solution*" might be found to the conflict, as in other European countries, previously hit by nationalist separatism, such as Spain. "*Violence engenders violence and only benefits those who profit from the fighting*", he stressed.

Nilüfer Akbal, a popular Kurdish singer who urges the lifting of all the restrictions imposed on the Kurdish language in Turkey, stated: "*I want to sing in my mother tongue, it's my most legitimate right*". The artist considered that if Turkey wanted to become democratic, it should, above all, start with the Kurdish language. As she said on the second and last day of the conference: "*I have always experienced the feeling that I was one of the others, someone who was different from other people*", (that is from Turks) she pointed out. Singing in Kurdish is now authorised, but Mrs. Akbal deplores the fact that there are still many prejudices: "*When I tell someone that I play Kurdish music I am looked at askance, as if I were a terrorist*", the artist explained. As with other Kurdish artists, she attacked the pressure from police authorities. "*We Kurdish artists are all on file with the police and we have to prove that we have a clean police record every time we want to give a concert*", stated the singer.

Anxious to affirm its credibility as a democratic regime so as to join the E.U., the terms of which it began negotiating last October, Turkey authorised the private teaching of Kurdish in 2003 as well as its very limited and controlled use in broadcasting. However, the Kurds of Turkey, estimated at 18 million out of a total of 72 million,

are asking for more and call on the government to give Kurdish the status of an official language. The Turkish Constitution bans the use of any other language than Turkish, the sole official language, in public bodies or institutions. Turkey's principal pro-Kurdish party, the Party for a Democratic Society (DTP) demanded, last week, that the Turkish government grant the Kurdish language the status of an official language – an appeal that has had little effect on Ankara. *"We are insisting that Kurdish be taught at school and have an official status"*, explained Ahmed Turk, a former Kurdish member of parliament and joint President of the DTP, who was also present at the conference.

Several private establishments to teach Kurdish did open following Ankara's pro-European reforms,

but most of them are closed – mainly through lack of money and pupils. "Kurdish has no social prestige (...) people know that they can't use it in public services or in business but only at home, for everyday use, so they don't send their children to study in these private schools", pointed out Dr. Salih Akin, a research worker at Rouen University, in France. He urged the government to amend the Constitution so that Kurdish could become the *"second official language"* of Turkey.

The conference was very fully covered by the international press – which, in itself, is a "first ever". It made the front page of the Turkish papers and included, amongst those taking part several delegations of foreign representatives in Turkey

another child, this time a 7-year-old. According to official figures of 31 March, sic people, including 2 children, were killed and over 350 others injured, mostly members of the security forces, during these riots.

About 200 demonstrators were arrested in the course of the violence – the worst in ten years in Diyarbakir, according to the city's governor, Efsan Ala. The incidents in this city of one million inhabitants spread rapidly to nearby towns. Thus at Batman, to the East of Diyarbakir, some 3,000 Kurdish demonstrators set alight the local branch of a bank and a railway building on 30 March. Similar incidents occurred at Siirt, 100 Km East of Diyarbakir, but also at Adana (Southern Turkey), which has a large Kurdish community.

The Turkish nationalists are blaming Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, who had visited Diyarbakir last summer where he had stated that Turkey had made mistakes in its handling of the *"Kurdish problem"*. On the evening of 30 March, on his return from Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan insisted that *"no action that fails to conform with the law will be tolerated"* in the city. *"Our people must feel safe. The security forces will do whatever is necessary"*, he declared. The Minister of the Interior, Abdelkadir Aksu, for his part, arrived in Diyarbakir late on 30 March for a tour of inspection. A sign of the growing tensions, the Minister of the Interior announced that an investigation had been started into the remarks favourable to the demonstrators made by the Mayor of Diyarbakir, Osman Baydemir. Ankara suspects Mr. Baydemir – whose Party for a Democratic Society (DTP) is campaigning for political and cultural rights for the Kurds – of being linked to the

DIYARBEKIR: THE WORST VIOLENCE IN OVER TEN YEARS SHAKES THE CITY, WHICH SEES TANKS AND PARAMILITARY MILITIA RETURN TO THE CITY'S VERY CENTRE

On 28 March, riots shook Diyarbakir, the politico-cultural capital of Turkish Kurdistan, when several thousands of people confronted the Turkish police after the funeral of 14 Kurdistan Workers' Party fighters, killed on 25 March in clashes with the Army in Mus province. The police fired into the air and threw tear-gas grenades to disperse a crowd, estimated to be ten thousand strong, that was shouting slogans after the funeral. The demonstrators threw stones at official buildings during the incidents, which were mainly in the Baglar quarter. The anti-riot police retaliated with tear gas and water canons and warning shots. Reinforcements, including paramilitary groups, were sent from the five neighbouring

provinces, according to the local authorities. Tanks arrived from a garrison located on the city outskirts, and patrols crossed back and forth throughout the town. Members of the police special forces, armed with sub-machineguns and backed by tanks, were deployed a hundred metres round a mosque where the demonstrators had begun to assemble in the morning. The rioters wrecked several shops and attacked official buildings in the city. Fresh violence broke out on 30th as thousands of people attended the funerals of three victims of the clashes a couple of days earlier – two young men and a child of eight. Some members of the funeral procession attacked a police station. The police retaliated again with tear gas and lashing out with their truncheons, killing

PKK. *"Using women and children in a terrorist struggle shows a lack of respect for human beings (...) It is out of the question for the government to tolerate outlaw activities. No one can expect us to compromise on that",* declared Mr. Erdogan. A joint communiqué by the Army, the police and the local authorities announced that they had taken *"all the measures necessary, in the context of the law and democracy, to fight separatism as well as terrorism and to apply them with an absolute determination"*.

A renewal of violence has been noted since June 2004, when the PKK declared the end of its ceasefire since Ankara was refusing any dialogue with it, considering the PKK to be a *"terrorist"* group. On 29 March the Turkish Foreign Ministry urged Denmark to close down the Kurdish satellite television network

RojTV that broadcasts from Denmark and which, according to Ankara, encouraged the Kurds in this weeks *"uprising"*. Ankara accused RojTV of being a PKK organ, while the network denies any links with it.

Following the example of the police spokesman in Ankara, Ismail Caliskan, who conjured up a *"provocation"* of the Kurdish fighters, and accused the rioters of having used children in the incidents, the Turkish press called on the government, on 31 March, not to throw in the towel in the face of what it considered a PKK *"provocation"*. *"A country that is marching on the road to membership of the E.U. and carrying out courageous reforms must not give way before what has happened"*, considered a columnist in the *Turkish Daily News*.

kg, who was back at his home in Northern Teheran, limited himself to broad smiles and hand gestures. *"He has decided not to speak because of his weak physical condition, he must not be tired"*, stated his lawyer, Mostafa Molai, who stayed at his side. *"This has nothing to do with any pressures or any demand by the authorities"*, he added. Mr. Ganji, was arrested in April 2000, when he was working for the daily paper *Sob-e Emrouz*, and sentenced in 2001 to six years imprisonment following a series of articles implicating several of the regimes dignitaries in a series of murders of intellectuals and writers. From his cell he also wrote several scathing attacks, severely criticising the Supreme Guide, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, even calling for his resignation. Last summer he went on a long hunger strike to demand his release, but the authorities refused to give way. In August 2005, he finally ended his hunger strike, which had lasted over 60 days, before being sent back to prison from the hospital where he was being treated. Last month his wife pointed out that her husband's state of health had deteriorated after five months in solitary confinement.

Moreover, on 5 March, the Iranian lawyer, Abdolfattah Soltani, a colleague of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, was released on bail. He had been kept in detention for over seven months. *"After the court had agreed to reduce the amount of his bail from eight billion to one billion rials (\$874,000 to €109,000), a bond of an equivalent value was raised and given to the court by his friends, and he was released last month"*, stated his wife. She also pointed out that no date had been set for the start of his trial and that his lawyers had not been allowed to see the charge sheet. Mr. Soltani was kept in detention

TEHERAN: THE IRANIAN AUTHORITIES CONTINUE TO REPRESS FREEDOM OF WORSHIP AND OPINION

On 28 March, the Baha'is in France showed their anxiety after the launching, in Iran, of an operation to make a census of and supervise their co-religionists – an operation attacked by a UN human rights specialist. In a communiqué, the Baha'is of France said they were *"very concerned for the lives of the 350,000 Iranian Baha'is, the country's largest non-Moslem minority"*. They stress that *"the setting up this file and the present climate recall the campaigns that had preceded the previous waves of massive repression"*, in particular those of 1955 and 1979. The week before, Mrs. Asma Jahangir, special reporter of the UN Human Rights Commission on freedom of worship or conviction, had published a communiqué denouncing the instructions issued at the end of October to make a

census of the Baha'is of Iran and place them under supervision.

Mrs. Jahangir pointed out that she had learnt of a confidential letter attributing these instructions to the Head of State, Ali Khamenei, and sent on 29 October 2005 by the Iranian Chief of Staff to various government agencies including the Guardians of the Revolution and the police. *"These latest developments show that the situation of religious minorities in Iran is really deteriorating"*, said Mrs Jahangir's communiqué, further fearing that this supervision *"might be used as a base for further persecutions of and discriminations against followers of the Baha'i faith"*.

Furthermore, on 18 March the Iranian political dissident, Akbar Ganji, was released after having served six years imprisonment. Wearing a long beard, the dissident, who now only weighs 49

for 218 days, 43 of them in solitary confinement, according to Mrs. Dehghan. Abdolfattah Soltani was arrested on 30 July 2005, while he was conducting a sit-in in one of the premises of the Teheran Bar association, in protest at a warrant of arrest issued against him. In 2004, Iran had announced that it had arrested a dozen people spying on nuclear installations on behalf of the United States and Israel. Mr. Soltani is a member of Nobel Prize-winner Shirin Eabdi's group of lawyers, which is handling cases as sensitive as those

of the nuclear spies.

According to a breakdown by AFP, based on information in the press and from witnesses, 28 people have been executed in Iran since the beginning of the year. According to the same breakdown, at least 81 people were executed in Iran in 2005. Treason, espionage, murder, armed robbery, drug trafficking (on the basis of possession of over 5 Kg of opium), rape, sodomy, adultery, prostitution and apostasy are all capital offences punishable by execution in Iran.

DAMASCUS: THE BAAATH PARTY CELEBRATES THE 43RD ANNIVERSARY OF COMING TO POWER WITH ARRESTS AND REPRESSION

On 8 March Syria celebrated the 43rd anniversary of the coming to power of the Baath Party, in an atmosphere of isolation against a background of international accusations of its implication in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri. On the eve, the official organ of the party in power, "*al-Baas*", declared that "*the 8 March revolution was not an ordinary event*" and called on the Syrians not only to see "*some mistakes*" committed by the way in this long journey. Since the assassination of Rafic Hariri, on 14 February 2005, the international community has had its eyes on Syria. UNO, Washington and Paris, in particular, have been demanding that Syria cooperate totally with the enquiry into this assassination.

Despite the recommendations of the Baath Party, during its Congress in June 2005, in favour of reforms, the authorities have increased the number of arrests and the harassment of democratic activists. Eighteen Kurds, along with dozens of other people, arrested on 20 March by the Syrian security forces at

Aleppo, were released on 28 March, stated Ammar al-Kurbi, a Human Rights defence lawyer in a communiqué. "*The Syrian authorities released 18 Kurds, out of 36 people being prosecuted, who were arrested during the celebrations of the Kurdish New Year in the Achrafia quarter of Aleppo*", pointed out Ammar al-Kurbi. He called for "*a solution to the problem of the Kurdish people in Syria, the promised granting of Syrian nationality, and the freeing of all political prisoners*". On 26 March, Mustafa Suleiman, a Human Rights activist and defence lawyer, pointed out that the 36 people who were arrested on 20 March were "*accused of damaging public property, incitement to religious sectarianism, and violently resisting arrest*" by the security forces. On 20 March, some 3,000 Kurds carrying Kurdish flags had gathered in the Achrafia quarter of Aleppo to celebrate the Kurdish New Year festival of Newroz. The police went into action to disperse them with tear gas, and the demonstrators retaliated by throwing stones at the police. These clashes occurred at a time when Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria, located some 350 Km North of Damascus, was celebrating its

nomination as capital of Islamic culture for the year 2006 by the Arab Region of the Islamic Organisation for Education, Science and Culture (IOESC). Films, plays, lectures as well as round tables, book fairs, concerts and parades took place. Moreover, according to this communiqué, two students, Mohammad Ussama Kash (arrested in 2003) and Abdel Rahman al-Sherif (arrested 2004) as well as Hussein Rejab al-Abud, were sentenced to ten years imprisonment without any charges being specified. "*The writer, Fayez al-Hallak was arrested following the publication of his latest book and brought before a military court (Editors Note: on 27 March)*" according to the communiqué. "*These arrests are not even justified by the Syrian authorities and are harmful to the country*", Mr. al-Kurbi declared.

Moreover, on 19 March the Syrian State Security Court sentenced six Kurds to serve between six months to seven years. Balkhati Abdo, Mohammad Khalil Aalo and Walat Yunès, members of the Party of Democratic Unity, a banned Kurdish organisation, were sentenced to two and a half years jail for being members of "*a secret organisation*", stated the Human Rights lawyer Anouar Bounni. Sadeq Aalo and Loqman Othman were sentenced to seven years imprisonment and Ali Mahii to six months for having tried to "*annex a part of (Syrian) territory*" to a foreign country.

Furthermore, a Syrian Arab, Ahmad Haj Omar, charged with wanting "*to modify society and weaken national feelings*" was sent down for ten years in prison. A Jordano-Palestinian of whom only the surname, Abu-Mayyala, is known was sentenced to three years jail to be followed by expulsion from Syria, on the grounds of "*offending the image of the (Syrian) State*", Mr. Bounni continued. In addition, two Syrian Students, Omar Abdallah and Diab Serrieh, were

arrested on Saturday for having wanted "to set up a democratic gathering of young people to discuss the problems of youth". In all, eight students are incarcerated at the moment for having wanted to form a political group, Anouar Bounni pointed out.

Mr. Bounni, Director of the Syrian Centre for legal Studies has asked the Syrian authorities to "stop carrying out a policy aiming at terrorising society and activists by repressing any activity and by having recourse to the State Security Court, which is an illegal court". Furthermore, five Human Rights defence organisations have asked the Syrian government, in a joint communiqué, "immediately to free all the political prisoners being held in Syrian jails and urgently to take serious measures to introduce democracy". "It is necessary to lift all the interdictions that gag the right to free expression and to the formation of political parties and organisations of civil society", the communiqué added. Amongst the signatories are the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights and the Committees for the Defence of Democratic Liberties and Human Rights in Syria.

From 12 to 17 March 2004, bloody confrontations took place for five days between Kurds on the one hand and the police and Arab tribes on the other. These clashes mainly occurred at Qamichlo and Aleppo, and caused 40 deaths, according to Kurdish sources but only 25 according to the Syrian authorities. The Syrian opposition ex-Member of Parliament Riad Seif was released during the night of 13 March, several hours after his arrest during a Damascus sit-in in memory of these clashes between Kurds and the police, in March 2004. Mr. Seif was arrested while he was among the demonstrators who had tried, on 12 March, to send a message to the Syrian Prime Minister,

Mohammad Naji Otri, calling for the release of political detainees. Four Kurdish activists, Ismail Mohammad (a student), Zubeir AbdelRahman Haidar, Assaad Cheikho and Tamr Mustafa of the Kurdish Progressive Democratic Party, who were arrested in Mr. Seif's company, are still in detention. Moreover, on 12 March, the Syrian Organisation for Human Rights announced that the spokesman of the Arab Organisation for Human Rights in Syria, Ammar Qurabi, had been arrested at Damascus International Airport on his return from a tour of France and the United States. The judicial authorities have also "strengthened the charges" against the opposition public figure, Kamal Laouani, arrested in November 2005 at the airport on his return from the United States. Mr. Labouani, founder of the Liberal Rally, is now accused of "contacts with a foreign country to incite it to launch an aggression" against Syria. This charge is punishable by "forced labour for life". Previously, Mr. Labouani had been accused of "having spread lying information", a charge that carries a three-year sentence. During his visit to Washington, Mr. Labouani had, in particular, had a meeting with President George W Bush's Assistant Advisor on National Security. The latter has called for Mr. Labouani's release.

The press, controlled by the Baath Party, which has ruled with absolute power for the last forty years, also, naturally, suffers the same fate as the human rights activists. For Syrians in search of free news, the Web represents, today, the only breath of fresh air, but this practice is not without danger. When it's a matter of politics, Syrians prefer to surf on Champress (www.champress.net), Syria News (www.syria-news.com) or All4Syria (all4stria.org). This last site, which is by far the freest, offers real

press reviews and articles in English and is run by Ayman Abdelnur, himself a member of the party. Despite his virulent attacks on the regime, Mr. Abdelnur, who boasts of having 16,000 subscribers, has never suffered the anathema of the authorities, perhaps thanks to his personal relations with Syrian President Bachar al-Assad. Others were less lucky. Massud Hamid, a 29-year old Kurdish Syrian journalist, was arrested in July 2004 and sentenced to three years jail for "membership of a secret organisation", according to the press freedom defence organisation *Reporters sans Frontières* (Reporters without Borders), who awarded him a prize for his courage. He has published on his Internet site based outside the country, photos of a Kurdish demonstration in Syria. Amongst the most frequently visited sites can be found Al-Hiwar Al-Mutamaden (www.rezgar.com), founded by a coalition of Left parties and Akhbar al-Sharq (www.thisissyria.net), close to the Moslem Brothers, a banned organisation. The feminist site *Syrian Women* (www.nesasy.com), tackles sensitive subjects in a traditionalist society and challenges laws it considers discriminatory. Like the others, they are sometimes jammed then reopened depending on the moods of the Syrian censors. Apart from the whole problem of censorship on the Web, another problem makes access to these alternative media very difficult – only 4.1% of Syrians have any access to Internet, according to a report published last October by the Arab Advisors Group, based in Amman. Otherwise, despite regional and international pressures, the country marked up a 4.5% rate of economic growth in 2005 – the highest for over ten years, according to a specialist review, the Oxford

Business Group. Last year was marked by a 30% leap in direct foreign investments, particularly American (Coca Cola, Pepsi Cola, Kentucky Fried Chicken) and French (Bel cheeses, Legrand electrical). The Gulf Arab states were also involved in a number of building projects valued at about \$6 billion (the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait). Chinese, Russian and Indian oil companies are preparing to invest in this sector, despite the drop in Syrian oil production. However, the real

problem remains that of unemployment, which has become steady at about 20% of the active population, while the rate of inflation has risen to 10%, according to official figures. Moreover, on 9 March, the US Treasury Department forbade US financial institutions from opening or maintaining accounts for the Commercial Bank of Syria (CBS) since this bank *"has been used by terrorists to transfer funds and to launder money obtained from the illicit sale of Iraqi oil"*.

amnesty" for the fighters. *"I do not want war"*, he stated in particular. Many public figures have signed a petition in favour of his release – he has been serving a life sentence since 1999.

Festivities were organised all over Kurdistan, but also in major Turkish cities. Several tens of thousands of people met on an esplanade on the edge of Istanbul to light the traditional Newroz bonfires. Apart from sporadic stone throwing at the police, no outburst was recorded. Some 4,500 police, backed by tanks, kept an eye on the demonstration, as well as 500 gendarmes and a thousand army soldiers who were held in reserve nearby. However, police anti-riot squads went into action during the night of 19 March to disperse some illegal Kurdish demonstrations in working class quarters of Istanbul. In Izmir, (Western Turkey) where some 5,000 people had met on 19 March, the police went into action when some demonstrators displayed posters showing Abdullah Ocalan – the latter retaliating by throwing stones. In Mersin (Southern Turkey), which was the scene of violence confrontations with the police the year before, the security forces (1,000 strong) searched the thousands of those taking part in the festivities – which went off without any incidents – to confiscate flags and banners.

Newroz was celebrated in a festive and family-friendly manner throughout Iraqi Kurdistan, where it is a national holiday, as well as in Iranian Kurdistan. In Syria the authorities tolerated the holding of celebratory gatherings but there were several incidents. In the Kurdish diaspora, Newroz concerts and celebrations were often spread over several weeks to enable Kurds and their friends to meet and enjoy their music and dances.

THE KURDS CELEBRATED THEIR NEW YEAR, NEWROZ, PEACEFULLY

Over 120,000 people according to the police (500,000 according to the organisers) peacefully celebrated the Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, in Diyarbakir on 21 March. The celebrations went off without any major incidents occurring, despite the fears of the authorities. Some 3,000 police were deployed to ensure order on the Fair Ground Square, about ten miles from the city centre. Turkey's principal pro-Kurdish party, the DTP (Party for a Democratic Society) had decided symbolically to start the celebrations in the little town of Semdinli, on the borders with Iran and Iraq, hit by a terrorist bomb attack in November, that caused one death and six people injured. The Turkish courts have started legal proceedings against two Turkish soldiers and a PKK "repentant", suspected of being the authors of the bomb attack on a bookshop belonging to a former member of the PKK. A senior general is also involved in this case, the charge sheet accusing him of creating an alleged *"clandestine organisation"* and of *"abuses of power"*. A DTP delegation used the

formal reopening of the bookshop to light the first of the traditional Newroz bonfires and to call for a peaceful settlement of the Kurdish question before an audience of some 2,000 people. *"It is not possible to settle this country's problems solely by means of military threats. Come and let us think about this together, let us ensure unity and brotherhood"* declared the DTP's co-President, Ahmet Turk.

Even though the festivities have generally taken place peacefully in recent years, the authorities feared some incidents because of a renewal of violence after a series of bloody bomb attacks attributed to the PKK. The security forces were on the alert since incidents had increased since 2004. On its Internet site, the PKK called on the Kurds to *"rise up"* against the Turkish state at Newroz and to *"intensify"* the armed struggle. Many of those taking part in the festivities waved PKK flags, despite its interdiction by the authorities, and called for the release of Abdullah Ocalan and a general amnesty for PKK members. A. Ocalan's lawyers read a message from their client to the crowd in which he urged the government to declare a *"general*

AS WELL AS ...

• **THE TURKISH AIR FORCE INTENDS TO BUY FIGHTER PLANES FOR ABOUT 10 BILLION DOLLARS.** On 28 March, the semi-official Turkish press agency *Anatolia*, quoting a senior official, reported that the Turkish Air Force intended to buy 100 new planes, representing an order of \$10 billion. The choice is between Lockheed Martin's F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) and the Typhoon Eurofighter, build by the consortium of the same name, formed by BAE Systems, EADS and Alenia Aeronautica, a subsidiary of Finmeccanica. Ankara may, however chose to buy a mixed bag. In any case, the new fighters must replace the existing F-16s and F-4s, declared the Under-Secretary for Industry and Defence, Murat Bayar, as quoted by the news agency. He added that Turkey wanted its own defence industry to carry out at least half of the contract. Mr. Bayar, responsible for Turkish defence public contracts is due to hold discussions with Lockheed Martin executives, with the Pentagon and more generally with the US defence industry during his visit to the United States.

The JSF, in addition to being the Pentagon's most expensive arms project, with a budget that exceeds \$250 billion, is a furtive, supersonic and multi-function fighter plane. The project is being co-financed by the USA and eight other countries, including Turkey. The other countries involved are Great Britain, Australia, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Denmark. However, the project has given rise to a dispute due to Washington's way of balking at any sharing of technology. Turkey, for whom the United States is the official military supplier, has invested \$175 billion in the development phase of the JSF and hopes to land five billion dollars of contracts for its own defence industries, the Turkish media have been given to understand.

• **STRASBOURG: THE EUROPEAN COURT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS HAS AGAIN FOUND TURKEY GUILTY OF VIOLATING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION.** On 21 March, the European Court for Human Rights found Turkey guilty of "violation the freedom of expression" following a petition by the owner

and the editor-in-chief of a monthly review. They had been found guilty, by the Turkish courts, for having published an article on the Kurdish problem and for having criticised the prison policy of the Ministry of Justice. On 24 August 1998, Tayfun Koç, the owner of the monthly review *Revolution for Equality, Freedom and Peace* and Musa Tambas, his Editor-in-chief, were found guilty by the Istanbul State Security Court of publishing propaganda against "*the indivisible unity of the State*". The sentences of fines and of banning publication of the review for a month as well as the confiscation of the offending issues had been suspended then annulled on 6 June 2003.

The Strasbourg Court considered that the articles, despite their somewhat hostile tone, did not encourage violence e, armed resistance or insurrection, nor could they be analysed as a discourse of hatred. The Human Rights judges, moreover, found that "*the suspended sentences imposed on the petitioners had the effect of censoring the very profession of the petitioners, forcing them to abstain from publishing anything that might be judged as contrary to the interests of the State*"