

NATO Allies must Keep up Momentum on Defense Spending: NATO Chief

BRUSSELS - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on Friday called on NATO allies to "keep up momentum on defense spending" at a press conference following a meeting of NATO foreign ministers. Fairer burden-sharing was top of the agenda of NATO foreign ministers' discussion.

Highlighting the progress made by the alliance in this area, Stoltenberg said NATO European Allies and Canada increased 10 billion U.S. dollars in defense spending last year. He said ministers talked about the idea of developing national plans for NATO allies to reach the NATO goal of spending 2 percent of GDP



on defense. "This is about cash, capabilities and commitment to deployments -- all three are important," he added. Another topic of the meeting was NATO's response to terrorism. "One of our best tools in the fight against terrorism is training local forces," Stoltenberg said. According to him, NATO is helping local forces in Iraq to better counter Islamic State (IS), including the training to counter improvised explosive devices. NATO foreign ministers also discussed relations with Russia, in presence of Federica Mogherini, the European Union's foreign policy chief, as well as ministers from Finland and Sweden. (Xinhua)

Trump Urges Former Adviser Flynn to Cut Immunity Deal

WASHINGTON - President Donald Trump urged his former national security adviser to strike an immunity deal Friday, even as congressional investigators rebuffed Michael Flynn's offer of cooperation in exchange for protection from prosecution. Trump tweeted that Flynn, the adviser he fired in February, should ask for immunity because he's facing "a witch hunt." The White House also tried to quell a firestorm over its role in helping a top Republican lawmaker

see secret intelligence reports. Rep. Adam Schiff went to the White House to view materials that he said were "precisely the same" as what House intelligence committee chairman Devin Nunes viewed there last week. "The White House has yet to explain why senior White House staff apparently shared these materials with but one member," said Schiff, who met with Trump for about 10 minutes while he was at the White House. ...*(More on P4)...(17)*

UN, Partners Warn 108 Mln People Face Severe Food Insecurity Worldwide

UNITED NATIONS - Some 108 million people worldwide were severely food insecure in 2016, a dramatic increase compared with 80 million in 2015, according to a UN-backed report on food crises released Friday. "The cost in human and resource terms only increases if we let situations deteriorate," said UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director-General Jose Graziano da Silva, in a news release on the Global Report on Food Crises 2017.

"We can prevent people dying from famine but if we do not scale up our efforts to save, protect and invest in rural livelihoods, tens of millions will remain severely food insecure," he added. Civil conflict is the driving factor in nine of the 10 worst humanitarian crises, underscoring the strong linkage between peace and food security, said the report. "Hunger exacerbates crisis, creating ever greater



instability and insecurity. What is a food security challenge today becomes tomorrow's security challenge," said WFP Executive Director Ertharin Cousin. "It is a race against time - the world must act now to save the lives and livelihoods of the millions at the brink ...*(More on P4)...(18)*

Latest Round of Syria Peace Talks Ends, Some Progress Made

GENEVA - The fifth and latest round of Syria peace talks wrapped up on Friday, with the UN special envoy for Syria commending the engagement of delegations in negotiations seeking to broker a political end to the six-year conflict. "After the fourth round, you probably remember, I said we have finally a clear agenda and a method, the four baskets, to advance UN Security Council resolution 2254," Staffan de Mistura told press. "After this round, I think



I can say with caution that all the invitees have gone into considerable detail on the substance of that agenda with us, using exactly the methodology that we established," he added. The UN envoy noted that rival delegations were both "serious" and "engaged" in talks seeking

to end the Syrian conflict which has killed over 310,000 people since it kicked off in 2011. According to de Mistura, ...*(More on P4)...(19)*

Russia Pressured to Enter Confrontation with NATO: FM

MOSCOW - Moscow is being pressured to take a confrontational stance in relations with NATO based on the logic of a military standoff, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Friday. "What kind of 'constructive' relationship can be expected between Russian and NATO when the U.S. and its allies continue to act on old patterns and have been obsessed with building up their military presence on our borders, justifying this with the need to 'contain Russia'?" The ministry said in a statement commenting on



the results of the latest Russia-NATO Council meeting at the ambassadorial level in Brussels. Noting that NATO is not ready to return to practical cooperation with Russia in resolv-

ing real security challenges regionally and globally, the ministry called for a radical change in the nature of the alliance so as to better ensure European security. ...*(More on P4)...(20)*

Oil Prices Mixed on Output Cut Extension, U.S. Rig Count

NEW YORK - Oil prices settled mixed Friday on latest U.S. rig count data and expectations that producers may extend an output cut deal to ease global glut. The U.S. rigs classified as drilling for oil are up 10 to 662 this week, according to statistics released by oilfield service firm Baker Hughes on Friday. Media reports said Thursday that Kuwait was among several nations supporting the extension of a deal between the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and other producers to limit output. The West Texas Intermediate for May Delivery added 0.25 U.S. dollar to settle at 50.60 dollars a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange, while Brent crude for May delivery decreased 0.13 dollar to close at 52.83 dollars a barrel on the London ICE Futures Exchange. (Xinhua)

Austria to Take Germany to EU Court over Highway Tolls

BERLIN - Following the German Federal Council's approval of a law enabling highway tolls to be introduced, Austria responded by saying it would challenge the decision in the European Court of Justice. The new law to introduce an "infrastructure fee" took nearly four years to pass in the face of considerable opposition from Germany's neighbors who argued it is discriminatory. This is because German motorists will receive a corresponding reduction in their annual vehicle tax bill. Austria's legal challenge is that motorists will pay a charge for using German highways, ranging from 2.50 euros for 10 days up to 130 euros per year. And vehicles will pay more or less depending on factors such as size, environmental efficiency, whether they have diesel engines or meet the Euro 6 emissions standards. Horst Seehofer, Bavarian prime minister and chairman of Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian sister party to Chancellor Merkel's CDU, in 2013 refused to sign the coalition agreement unless the government committed to introducing a toll for "foreign car drivers". The law has been pushed through by the Federal Minister for Transport Alexander Dobrindt. The European Commission had claimed the toll breached European law, but an accommodation was subsequently reached between Dobrindt and the president of the European Commission Jean-Claude ...*(More on P4)...(23)*

2,200 Rebels Killed by Army Military Campaign in Central Syria

DAMASCUS - As many as 2,200 rebels have been killed since the Syrian army unleashed a counter offensive in the northern countryside of Hama province in central Syria on March 23, state news agency SANA reported on Friday. The army regained tens of towns and villages lost to the rebels during a massive offensive the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front unleashed earlier this month in tandem with another offensive the rebels unleashed on the eastern rim of the capital Damascus. The army foiled the week-long attack on Damascus, but the one in Hama was on a larger scale and the rebels of the Nusra Front and likeminded groups ...*(More on P4)...(21)*

French Election Race Tightens as Rivals Campaign in South

MARSEILLE/BIGUGLIA, France - France's presidential election race is looking tighter than it was seven days ago, an opinion poll showed on Saturday as the main candidates took their campaigns to the south of the country. Voting intentions in the April 23 first round for the frontrunners, centrist Emmanuel Macron and far-right leader Marine Le Pen, showed both slipping one percentage point to 25 and 24 percent respectively. Third-placed conservative Francois Fillon gained two points to 19 percent, and the far left's Jean-Luc Melenchon one point to 15 percent, the BVA poll said.

Complicating predictions, 38 percent of people either could not say how they would vote, or may yet change their minds. That was down two percentage points from a week earlier, but showed that the race remains wide open. The poll showed independent Macron had solidified his voter base, with 63 percent of those opting for him sure of their decision, up 8 points from a week ago and his highest certainty score since campaigning began in earnest in February. However, Le Pen still had by far the most solid voter base, with an unchanged 81 percent of her voters certain to pick her. ...*(More on P4)...(22)*

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Pakistan, China Sign Accord for Joint Audit of CPEC Projects

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan and China have signed an agreement for holding joint audit of selected projects under the \$51 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in order to ensure transparency. "We have signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Chinese counterpart for undertaking joint audit of selected projects under CPEC," Auditor General of Pakistan (AGP) Rana Assad Amin told The News in an exclusive talk last week. Recently, an MoU was signed between the Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) of Pakistan and China by Rana Assad Amin and Liu Jiyai, Auditor General of National Audit Office of People's Republic of China (CNAO). Pakistan and China had struck agreements to execute \$51.5 billion projects related to energy, infrastructure and upgrading rail networks. Joint audit is believed to help in improving transparency and accountability in

executing of such mega projects. Assad Amin, who is going to complete his on April 7, said that he had given international fact to Pakistan's audit outfit as they had so far signed MoU for conducting joint audit with Turkey, Iran, Vietnam and China. Citing example, he said that such MoU would enable Pakistani auditors to exchange their experiences with counterparts and would also pave the way for conducting joint audits. For example, he said, they could undertake joint audit of upcoming Pak-Iran Gas Pipeline. "We have also agreed with China to undertake joint audit of selected projects under CPEC," he said, and added that it was welcomed by the Chinese counterparts. The AGP further said that they forwarded summary to the federal cabinet for seeking approval of the prime minister for signing MoU with different countries for conducting joint audit and ...*(More on P4)...(24)*

Iran Rejects U.S. Terror Claim by Mattis, Blames Saudi

DUBAI - Iran rejected an allegation by U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis that it was "the primary exporter of terrorism" and said on Saturday that the main source was U.S. ally Saudi Arabia. "Some countries led by America are determined to ignore the main source of Takfiri-Wahhabi terrorism and extremism," foreign ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi was quoted by Iran's state news agency IRNA as saying. He was referring to hardline Sunni Muslim groups and Saudi Arabia's official Wahhabi school of Islam. Saudi Arabia denies backing terrorism and has cracked down on jihadists at home, jailing thousands, stopping hundreds from traveling to fight abroad and cut-

ting militant finances. Shi'ite Muslim power Iran and Saudi Arabia, bastion of Sunni Islam and a close U.S. ally, are longstanding religious and political arch rivals and often accused each other of backing terrorism. Relations are fraught as they back each other's foes in regional wars such as in Yemen, Iraq and Syria. "Giving a wrong address when referring to the roots and the financial and intellectual resources of terrorism is a main reason for a lack of success by international anti-terror efforts," Ghasemi added. Ghasemi was reacting to remarks by Mattis on Friday when he was asked about comments he made in 2012 that the three main threats the United States faced were "Iran, Iran, Iran". (Reuters)

Turkmenistan, Belarus Launch Major Potash Fertilizer Plant

GARLYK, Turkmenistan - Leaders of ex-Soviet nations Turkmenistan and Belarus have attended the launch of a huge potash fertilizer plant worth more than \$1 billion. The plant in Garlyk, built near huge potash deposits, is capable of producing 1.4 million tons of the fertilizer. It is set to export its products to China and India among other countries.

Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov said Friday the new plant will help feed high domestic and export demand for the fertilizer. The plant was built by Belarus, one of the world's leading producers of potash. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko hailed it as the biggest such plant in the region. (AP)

Russian Long-Range Bombers Used in War Games in Tajikistan

MOSCOW - The Russian military says its long-range bombers have practiced hitting targets in Tajikistan during joint drills with the Central Asian nations. Russia's Defense Ministry said Tu-95 and Tu-22M3 bombers have flown missions to strike a "terrorist camp" in Tajik mountains as part of the four-day war games that ended Thursday. Tajikistan, an impover-

ished ex-Soviet nation that borders Afghanistan, hosts a Russian military base and relies on Moscow's economic assistance. While Russian and Tajik soldiers have conducted joint maneuvers in the past, the drills this week for the first time involved the long-range bombers in an apparent reflection of Moscow's concern about possible spread of instability from Afghanistan. (AP)