

Kuwait Holds Donor Conference for Syrian Crisis

KUWAIT CITY - The third edition of international donors' conference for Syria opened Tuesday in Kuwait City, with the UN appealing for 8.4 billion U.S. dollars to fund aid programs in 2015.

Speaking at the conference, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said the Syrian crisis is the "worst humanitarian crisis of our time. The Syrians are not asking for sympathy, they are asking for help."

On behalf of the host country, Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah pledged 500 million U.S. dollars to Syrian refugees. He also called the Syrian

crisis "the biggest humanitarian catastrophe in the modern history of mankind."

Representatives from 78 countries and 40 international organizations came to the gulf state to try to meet the UN's appeal, which was significantly higher than the 3.9 billion U.S. dollars raised in the previous two conferences. In a non-government organization fundraiser held Monday, 506 million U.S. dollars were contributed by Kuwaiti and international NGOs.

The Syrian crisis have raged on for more than four years, during which



it killed more than 220,000 people and left 12 million homeless, among which

3.7 million were driven out of the country. A delegate of the Iranian

nuclear negotiations team said there is the possibility of working out an agree-

ment on basic issues, Iranian media reported Tuesday. (Xinhua)

Nieghbor News

Azerbaijan, Pakistan Intend to Develop Military Cooperation

BAKU, Azerbaijan - Azerbaijan and Pakistan have signed a protocol on bilateral military cooperation, the defense ministry of Azerbaijan said March 31.

The meeting of the Azerbaijani-Pakistani working group continued at the training center of the Azerbaijani armed forces. Director of the Main Department of Foreign Military Cooperation Joint Staff of Pakistan, Major General Iftikhar Vine expressed satisfaction in connection with the visit to Azerbaijan.

He said that historical, religious and cultural ties

play an important role in the fraternal relations between Azerbaijan and Pakistan. The position of Pakistan to strengthen bilateral military cooperation with Azerbaijan remains unchanged, according to Vine.

During the meeting, the state of affairs in connection with the implementation of the decisions was reviewed, new topics discussed, which were then added into the plan of bilateral military cooperation for 2015.

At the end of the meeting, a protocol on military cooperation was signed. (Agencies)

China Accelerates Westward Opening for Silk Road Economic Belt

CHONGQING - The Alataw Pass, a remotely located port in the Gobi desert of Xinjiang, is becoming an increasingly important trade gateway connecting China's inland cities to Central Asia and Europe.

Dozens of international trains are running to and from the port everyday with a total freight volume of 74,000 tons and foreign trade volume of nearly \$50 million. The Alataw Pass has become a key entrance for energy resources of strategic importance such as crude oil, metal ores and steel.

The prosperity of the port is a reflection of China's effort in opening up westward, as part of a strategy to develop the Silk Road Economic Belt that spans the Eurasian continent.

Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the idea of the economic belt during his visit to Central Asia in September 2013, eyeing a cultural revival of the Silk

Road, which historically linked China with Central Asia and Europe, as a way of developing political and economic ties.

After the Silk Road Economic Belt agreement was signed in November 2013 by 24 cities in eight countries along the Silk Road, a series of Chinese inland cities including Chongqing, Chengdu, Zhengzhou and Xi'an have successively opened international shuttle trains to the Eurasian continent.

Northwest China's Shaanxi Province, the starting point of the ancient silk road, has been carrying out economic and technological cooperation with countries along the Silk Road Economic Belt.

Fang Weifeng, director of Shaanxi development and reform commission, said, the Shaanxi Coal and Chemical Industry Group has set up an oil refining program in Kyrgyzstan with an annual capacity of 800,000 tons. (Xinhua)

Turkmenistan, S.Korea to Mull Prospects for Co-Op in Various Spheres

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan - Turkmenistan and South Korea are preparing for the fifth meeting of the joint intergovernmental commission on trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation, the message from Turkmen government said on Mar.30. It is planned to hold the mentioned meeting in Seoul, South Korea on April 10. It should be noted that during the last meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhhammadov stressed the great importance of the comprehensive development of cooperation with the countries of the Asian-Pacific region, including South Korea. The head of state

said that there are great opportunities to boost the cooperation in the trade and economic sphere, energy sector, construction and in the sphere of high technologies.

The total trade turnover between the two countries has increased from \$200 million to 1.9 billion over the recent years.

A number of South Korean companies successfully operate in Turkmenistan. LG International and Hundai Engineering Co.LTD implemented the project for development of the Galkynsh field for \$1.2 billion on service conditions.

It should be noted that Galkynsh field has the largest gas reserve in the country. (Agencies)

Iran Plans to Boost Caspian Sea Exploration Activities

TEHRAN - Iran said it will expand exploration activities in the Caspian Sea as part of plans to discover new oil and gas fields.

Managing Director of Khazar Exploration and Production Company (KEPCO) Ali Osooli said expansion of exploration activities as well as attracting new investments are among the most important priorities of the company in the new Iranian year (starting March 21).

"Attracting new investments especially by companies specializing in deep water exploitation can lead to boost in exploration activities in the Caspian Sea and the littoral provinces,"

KEPCO director reiterated. Earlier this month, Iranian Deputy Petroleum Minister Rokneddin Javadi said Iran plans to conduct deepwater drilling in the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Oman in the coming years in order to raise its oil and gas production.

The Caspian Sea is rich in hydrocarbon resources and the littoral states of the sea have made great investment in developing oil fields in the region over the past years.

Iran's Petroleum Ministry has in recent years attached special significance to the development of oil fields in the Caspian Sea. (Monitoring Desk)

India, Japan Vow to Build Strong Defense Ties

BEIJING - Japan and India have agreed to deepen their ties in defense and safety on Monday. Japanese Defence Minister Gen Nakatani held a talk with his visiting counterpart Manohar Parrikar. The two discussed the sale of Japanese US-2 amphibious planes to India.

"In the defence and security fields, I am happy to see that we have been able to build significant momentum. The signing of memorandums of defence cooperation and exchanges gives further thrust to bilateral defence relations," Parrikar said.

"It is important that the two countries develop their cooperation further, both in terms of quality and quantity, in the areas of maritime security and defense, to be able to maintain maritime security in the region under the rule of law and not by force," Nakatani said.

Both sides also decided to continue to conduct joint bilateral exercises between the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy. The two sides have been discussing the potential for Japan to supply India with aircraft and other military hardware. Parrikar is expected to visit Japan's biggest warship, the "Izumo", which just entered service a week back. It is Parrikar's first overseas visit as defence minister. Moreover, Japan's Defense Minister Nakatani will visit India in 2016 to further strengthen ties between the two countries. (Xinhua)

Iraqi Forces Recapture Government HQ in Tikrit

TIKRIT - Iraqi security forces on Tuesday retook control of Salahudin's provincial government compound and several presidential palaces from the Islamic State (IS) militants in the provincial capital city of Tikrit, a provincial security source said.

The troops backed by allied Shiite and Sunni militias and covered by U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi aircraft made significant advance during the past 24 hours, after they seized government compound, which includes the provincial government building, in the southern part of Tikrit, some 170 km north of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, the source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity.

The troops later pushed to the north on the western bank of the Tigris River and seized several presidential palaces of the former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, the source said.

There are a total of 76 palaces, smaller villas and artificial lakes and date orchards, most of them were built near the Tigris River, stretching from northern Tikrit to Saddam's village of Awja, some 12 km south of the city.

The troops continued their slow advance and became closer to the central part of the city, he said.

The security forces also made progress in albu-Obeid district in southwestern Tikrit and are expected to reach the IS-held western city of al-Zuhour district, he added.

"At least nine security members and Hashid Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization, have been killed and 18 others wounded by the battles in Tikrit," the source said citing initial medical reports.

On Monday, the troops reportedly retook control of the main hospital building, which is part of the government compound, and took new positions in the surrounding area as they are heading toward the central part of Tikrit. (Xinhua)

Iran Nuclear Talks in Home Stretch

LAUSANNE, Switzerland - Foreign ministers from major world powers and Iran Tuesday morning resumed nuclear talks to further narrow gaps on the remaining disagreements, as the lengthy negotiations entered the final day of deadline.

Under the extension of the Geneva 2013 Joint Plan of Action, P5+1 countries, namely the United States, China, Russia, France and Britain plus Germany, and Iran are committed to reaching a political agreement by March 31, and then taking an additional three

months to complete any technical annexes by June 30.

With the self-posing deadline being only hours away, top diplomats of P5+1 and Iran kicked off a ministerial meeting in early Tuesday morning after all sides quickened up negotiations throughout Monday.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was back to Moscow and absent since Monday's ministerial-level talks. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov joined the talks and Lavrov was expected to return to Lausanne Tuesday

afternoon.

"All of us said that the goal was to reach a political understanding by the end of March and use the last three months to finish the annexes and all the technical work," U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said Monday. However, she said the United States and Iran have not reached any agreement on the stockpile, one of the outstanding issues that remain to be solved, adding efforts have been made for some breakthrough before the deadline. (Xinhua)

Britain Election Campaign Season Begins; Vote Set for May 7

BEIJING - Britain officially kicked off its general election campaign after the Parliament was dissolved on Monday.

Both the Conservatives and the Labor party, the country's two main political parties, made further pledges on Monday in a bid to win the battle to No. 10.

Speaking in front of his official residence at Downing Street, Prime Minister David Cameron, also leader of the Conservatives, said his government is "turning the country around" and urged the voters to let him "see this through."

"This election takes place when the world is dangerous and uncertain. We need strong leadership to safeguard our national and our economic security," he said.

"Together we are turning our country round and for your sake, for your family's sake, for the sake of your children and their future, we must see this through together," he noted.

He warned that voting for his opponent Ed Miliband, leader of the Labor Party, could lead to "economic chaos."

"The next Prime Minister walking through that door will be me or Ed Miliband. You can choose an economy that grows ... or you can choose the economic chaos of Ed Miliband's Britain," he said.

"Ed Miliband pays lip service to working people while planning to hike taxes and increase debt. After five years of effort and sacrifice, Britain is on the

right track. This election is about moving forward - and as Prime Minister here at Number 10 that is what I will deliver," the prime minister told the press.

Miliband, meanwhile, outlined the Labor Party's business manifesto in London on Monday. He attacked Cameron's promised referendum on Britain's European Union (EU) membership as a "clear and present danger" to the economy.

He said that the referendum would lead to two years of "uncertainty" and "wasted opportunities."

"It threatens to shut UK businesses out of a market that gives them access to the world's largest trading bloc. It's... (More on P4)... (22)

Heavy Clashes on Saudi-Yemen Border

ADEN - Saudi troops clashed with Yemeni Houthi fighters on Tuesday in the heaviest exchange of cross-border fire since the start of a Saudi-led air offensive last week, while Yemen's foreign minister called for a rapid Arab intervention on the ground.

Saudi Arabia is leading a coalition of Arab states in a six-day-old air campaign against the Shi'ite Houthis, who emerged as the most powerful force in the Arabian Peninsula's poorest country when they seized Yemen's capital last year.

The Saudis say their aim is to restore President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi who left the country last week. The Houthis are allied with Saudi Arabia's regional foe Iran, and backed by army units loyal to long-term ruler Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was toppled three years ago after "Arab Spring" demonstrations.

The conflict has brought civil war to a country already on the verge of chaos and forced Washington to evacuate its personnel from one of the main battlefields in the secret U.S. drone war against al Qaeda.

Residents and tribal sources in north Yemen reported artillery and rocket exchanges along several stretches of the Saudi border. Explosions and heavy gunfire were heard and Saudi helicopters flew overhead, they said.

In the southern port of Aden, Houthi fighters and allied army units pressed an offensive against forces loyal to Hadi, trying to capture the last

... (More on P4)... (24)

Greece Disagrees With Sanctions Against Russia, Tsipras Says

ATHENS, Greece - Greece's new government disagrees with sanctions against Russia, and wants to boost trade ties with the country, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras said before a visit to Moscow next week.

Speaking in an interview with Russia's Tass news agency published Tuesday, Tsipras said he considers sanctions to be a "road to nowhere" and that the reciprocal embargo Russia has imposed on food from the European Union has "seriously damaged" his country's economy.

The U.S. and the EU imposed crippling economic sanctions against Russia over its annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and support for an insurgency in eastern Ukraine. Moscow retaliated by banning most Western food imports - an action that has hurt Greek agricultural exports at a time when the bailed-out country has been struggling through a deep financial crisis.

Since being elected in

January, Tsipras' coalition government between his radical left Syriza party and a small right-wing nationalist party has advocated warmer ties with Russia, and has criticized past Greek governments for following the EU line regarding Moscow too closely.

"Over the past years a blow was dealt to (Greek-Russian) relations as the previous governments in my country had not done what they could have done to avoid this senseless sanctions policy, in my opinion, amid tensions in Ukraine," Tass quoted Tsipras as saying in the interview.

"The result of this is the embargo also on the Greek agricultural goods has seriously damaged the Greek economy," he said.

"We do not agree with sanctions. I believe that this is a road to nowhere. I support the point of view that there is a need for a dialogue and diplomacy," Tsipras added.

Energy Minister Panagiotis Lafazanis visited

Moscow this week, saying Tuesday on his return to Athens that he had met with his Russian counterpart and the head of natural gas company Gazprom.

"We decided that we must and can further develop our energy relations, to lead them to a new level and expand them into the broadest possible sectors," Lafazanis said.

Athens' flirting with Moscow had caused consternation among some of Greece's European allies, particularly after the government, on its first day in office, issued a public rebuke to the EU over a joint statement regarding sanctions on Russia.

France and Germany on Tuesday downplayed Tsipras' upcoming visit to Moscow, where he will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin on April 8.

"European countries can go to Moscow without it posing a problem to Europe," French President Francois Hollande said ... (More on P4)... (25)