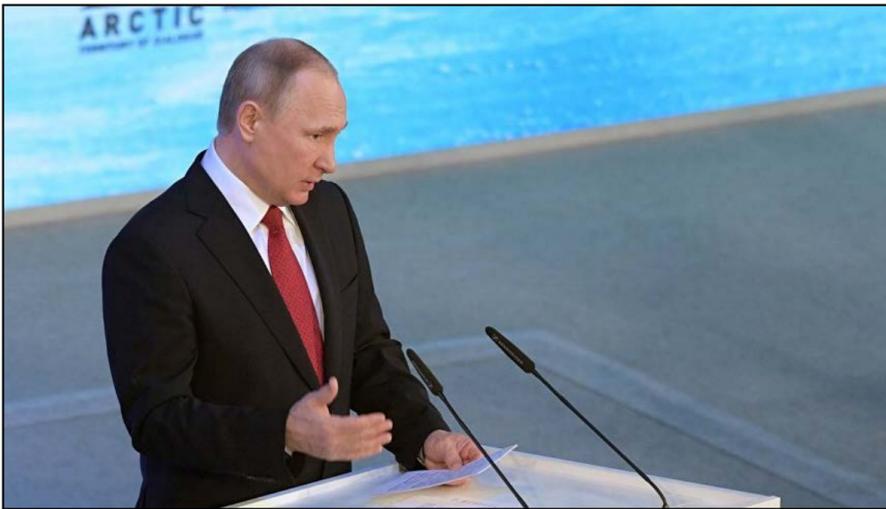


Russia Seeks Good Partnership with US: Putin

ARKHANGELSK, Russia - Russia hopes to build good relations with the United States, and attempts to damage bilateral diplomatic relations are a mistake, Russian President Vladimir Putin said here Thursday.

"We perceive and treat the United States as a great power, with which we want to establish very good, partnership relations. Everything else is lies and fabrications about and provocations towards Russia." Putin said in response to a questions on Russian-U.S. ties at the 4th International Arctic Forum (IAF) which is to close on Thursday.

Putin called attempts to drive



a wedge in diplomatic relations between Moscow and Washington "a mistake".

"Do we want to completely break up the diplomatic relations? And then what? People who behave like this are irresponsible... I think this is a big mistake. I very much hope that someday the situation will return to normal," Putin said.

Speaking about cooperation on international and regional affairs, Putin said the two countries are progressing in working together on the Syrian issue, and hopefully, things will also work out on resolving other regional problems including the conflict in Ukraine. (Xinhua)

Number of Syrian Refugees Surpasses 5 Mln Mark: UNHCR

GENEVA - The number of Syrians who have fled to Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon because of protracted fighting in the middle-eastern country has surpassed the 5 million mark, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) said Thursday. According to latest data collected by UNHCR and the government of Turkey, 5,018,168 Syrians have left their country to seek refuge in the region since Syria's conflict kicked off in March 2011. Despite a high-level meeting on Syria last year that aimed to resettle 10 percent of all

refugees by 2018, UNHCR warned that only 250,000 places for refugees have been made available to date.

"We still have a long road to travel in expanding resettlement and the number and range of complementary pathways available for refugees," said the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi in a statement. "To meet this challenge, we not only need additional places, but also need to accelerate the implementation of existing pledges," he added. (Xinhua)

NATO, Russia have "Substantial Meeting on Topics of Common Concern": NATO Chief

BRUSSELS - NATO allies and Russia on Thursday had a "substantial meeting on topics of common concern," NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said at a press conference. "It was a long meeting. It was a frank meeting, and the meeting was constructive," he told media after this year's first NATO-Russia Council meeting at the ambassadorial level which he chaired. Ukraine crisis was the first topic the two sides addressed. Stoltenberg noted, "NATO Allies and Russia continue to have clear disagreements on the crisis

in and around Ukraine." He voiced deep concern over the security situation in eastern Ukraine, saying that "ceasefire violations in eastern Ukraine have reached record levels." According to him, during the meeting, NATO Allies urged Russia to "use its significant influence" to ensure all signatories fully implement the Minsk Agreements. Regarding military transparency and risk reduction, Stoltenberg said both sides exchanged the information about their respective military postures. (Xinhua)

U.S., Turkey in Tricky Discussions, Fighting IS Still Crucial

ANKARA - Top U.S. diplomat Rex Tillerson had challenging yet unfruitful discussions Thursday with Turkey's leadership in Ankara on joint efforts for a decisive push against Islamic State (IS) in Syria's Raqqa stronghold amid frictions on the future role of the Kurdish militias there.

Kurds aren't the only source of friction in the U.S.-Turkey relations. Ankara insists on his NATO ally to hand over the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, accused of orchestrating a coup attempt last summer. Furthermore, this week,



U.S. officials arrested the deputy CEO of a public Turkish bank, Halkbank, closely allied to the country's elites for violating sanctions against Iran.

And a day before Till-

U.S. Signals Policy Decision Soon on Russian Arms Treaty Allegations

LONDON - U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis signaled on Friday Washington might soon decide how to respond to what it says are Russian violations of a Cold War-era arms control agreement, saying the United States was conferring with allies. Washington and Moscow have long questioned each other's commitment to the INF treaty, which banned nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 500-5,500 km (300-3,400 miles). The United States has accused Moscow of developing and fielding a ground-launched cruise missile, in violation of its INF Treaty obligations. (Reuters)

UN Chief Meets Iraqi Leaders to Support Fight against IS

BAGHDAD - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday visited Baghdad and met with top Iraqi officials to show support for the Iraq's fight against the Islamic State (IS) militant group, as the country is facing a growing humanitarian crisis following fierce battles in Mosul. During his visit, Guterres held a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

The two reviewed the humanitarian situation and the protection of civilians as the Iraqi forces are fighting to retake control of the western side of Mosul. "The Iraqi people have proved their ability to defeat terrorism and to expel

EU Won't Pursue Punitive Approach in Brexit Talks: Tusk

BRUSSELS - European Council President Donald Tusk said Friday that the remaining 27 members of the European Union (EU) will not pursue a punitive approach over the forthcoming Brexit talks.

"EU27 does not, will not pursue punitive approach. Brexit in itself is already punitive enough," he tweeted minutes before a joint press conference with Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat in Valletta, the capital city of the Mediterranean nation. Malta holds the rotating



EU presidency from January to June this year. "Only once we have achieved sufficient progress on the withdrawal, can we dis-

cuss the framework for our future relationship," Tusk said. He reiterated that the EU's duty "is to minimize uncertainty, disruption caused by Brexit for citizens, businesses and Member States. It's about damage control." (Xinhua)

China Hopes Xi-Trump Meeting to Direct Ties in new Era

BEIJING - China hopes the upcoming meeting between President Xi Jinping and his U.S. counterpart Donald Trump will set the direction for the development of bilateral ties, an official said Friday.

"It will be the first meeting between the heads of state of China and the United States since the new U.S. administration took office," Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zheng Zuguang told a press briefing. From April 6 to 7, Xi will meet with Trump at Mar-a-Lago, Florida, the United States.

"As the international situation continues undergoing profound and complicated changes, the meeting will be of great significance to charting China-U.S. relationship in a new era, advancing the development of bilateral ties in a healthy and stable way from a new starting point, and promoting peace, stability and prosperity in Asia and the Pacific and the world at large," Zheng said. According to Zheng, Xi will hold talks with Trump, during which they will exchange in-depth views on



China-U.S. ties and major international and regional affairs of common concern with a view to enhancing mutual understanding and expanding bilateral coop-

eration. President Xi and his wife Peng Liyuan will attend a welcome banquet hosted by President Trump and his wife Melania, according to Zheng. (Xinhua)

Merkel, Tusk, Juncker on Migration, Brexit at EPP Malta Conference

VALLETTA - German Chancellor Angela Merkel, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and European Council President Donald Tusk attended the European People's Party (EPP) Congress in Malta on Thursday, where they touched on the issues of migration and Brexit in their speeches, local media reported.

Merkel said while free movement is important, it is important not to ignore European borders. "We don't want to isolate ourselves while looking at possible answers for territorial integrity, a principle we have guarded since the Second World War," she said.

She also mentioned there was need for a joint police force if the European Union (EU) is to protect its borders. "Syria is not part of Europe, but this does not mean that we don't have to act." (Xinhua)

U.N. Chief Alarmed by Israel's Approval of new Settlement

UNITED NATIONS - United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is disappointed and alarmed by Israel's decision to build a new settlement on land the Palestinians seek for a state, his spokesman said on Friday.

Israel's security cabinet on Thursday approved the building of the first new settlement in the occupied West Bank in two decades, even as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu negotiates with Washington on a possible curb of settlement activity.

"The Secretary-General has consistently stressed that there is no Plan B for Israelis and Palestinians to live together in peace and security," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in a statement. "He condemns all unilateral actions that, like the present one, threaten peace and undermine the two-state solution," he said.

The White House appeared more accommodating to Israel's plans for the new settlement, intended for some 40 families evicted from Amona, a West Bank outpost razed in February because it was built on private Palestinian land. A White House official noted Netanyahu had made a commitment to the Amona settlers before Trump and the Israeli leader had agreed to work on limiting settlement activity.

Trump, who had been widely seen in Israel as sympathetic toward settlements, appeared to surprise Netanyahu during a White House visit last month, when he urged him to "hold back on settlements for a little bit." (Reuters)

Nieghbor News

Iran, Russia to Use National Currencies for Mutual Trade: Official

TEHRAN - Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Valiollah Seif said that Tehran and Moscow will use their currencies in trade exchanges between the two countries, semi-official Fars news agency reported on Thursday.

"Talks have been held with the Central Bank of Russia over linking Mir payment system of Russia and Iran's Shetab (Interbank Information Transfer Network) so that tourists can easily use ATM devices while visiting each country," Seif was quoted as saying. Two major banks of Russia and Iran are pursuing replacement of dollar with national currencies so that the traders will settle transactions in rial and ruble, Seif said. "Gazprombank of Russia and Iran's Bank Mellī have agreed to open

a joint account for using national currencies which will boost trade turnover and increase the volume of imports and exports," he said.

Talks are in final stages and the agreement will be inked in near future and the connection will take place in one month, he added.

Russia and Iran signed Tuesday a string of cooperation agreements in various fields including the energy sector as President Vladimir Putin hosted his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani for his official visit to Moscow. The two leaders discussed during the meeting prospects for expanding bilateral trade, economic and investment ties and agreed to deepen Russian-Iranian cooperation in various areas, primarily the economy. (Xinhua)

Pakistani UN Envoy Says Crucial Chinese Concept in Sync with UN Charter

UNITED NATIONS - The Chinese concept of building "a community of shared future for all mankind" is in sync with the fundamental principles of the United Nations (UN) Charter, the top Pakistani diplomat at the organization has said. Dr. Maleeha Lodhi, permanent representative of Pakistan to the United Nations, said in a recent interview

illustrated the concept on various occasions. In September 2015, Xi proposed the roadmap of building "a community of shared future for all mankind" at a UN summit. In January 2017, he further expounded his concept in a comprehensive, profound and systematic manner at the UN Office in Geneva.

On March 17, the Chinese concept was incorporated into a UN Security Council resolution for the first time. It is a concept "that brings the people together, that sees the development of all the people to be in the interest of our shared humanity, is one that takes forward the fundamental principles that brought us together at the United Nations," said the Pakistani ambassador. (Xinhua)

Russia will Send Strategic Bombers to Tajikistan to Participate in Military Exercises

DUSHANBEH - To participate in joint Russian-Tajik exercises, the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation will send Tu-95MS strategic bombers to Tajikistan. TASS announced the development citing a message from the Ministry of Defense itself.

In addition to the Tu-95MS, the crews of the Tu-22MZ rocket carriers will also fly to Tajikistan. The aircraft will fly for several hours, after which they will hit targets at the Kharbmaydon, Momirac and Moscovian ranges. Command and staff exercises to manage the joint grouping of Russian

and Tajik troops are being held from March 27 to 30. In addition to the bombers, airborne units will also participate in airborne assaults from IL-76 aircraft. Special purpose "Arbalet" parachute systems will be involved in the landing. Arbalet chutes allow servicemen to travel up to 40 km during the jump. The Russian Defense Ministry stated that the exercises will allow the Russian and Tajik military to resolve "issues of planning, command and interaction of troops in joint operations to combat conventional illegal armed groups." (Monitoring Desk)

Turkmenistan Opens Potash Plant, Targets Chinese and Indian Markets

ASHGABAT - Turkmenistan opened a \$1 billion Belarusian-built potash plant on Friday, aiming to export 1.2 million tonnes of fertilisers to China and India per year as part of its drive to diversify away from natural gas exports.

The Central Asian nation has faced foreign-currency shortages after its gas exports were hit by declining prices and volumes, and the government is banking on the start of potash production and other projects to bolster the economy. As a potash exporter,

Turkmenistan will compete with its former Soviet overlord Russia, home to the world's biggest producer Uralkali, and Belarus, also a global player. Belarusian companies built the plant and Minsk has said it will help Turkmenistan market the product. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko attended the opening ceremony in eastern Turkmenistan and said most of the plant's production would go to China and India - the world's biggest potash importers. (Agencies)