

U.N. Reviews War on Drugs Amid Global Push for Liberalization

UNITED NATIONS - The U.N. General Assembly gathered on Tuesday to rethink global strategy in the war on narcotics for the first time in two decades as activists, U.N. officials and world leaders cited an international trend towards more liberal drug laws. Despite broad agreement on the need to deal with the global drug problem, there are deep divisions among the 193 U.N. member states, with some favouring a shift towards decriminalisation and a greater focus on reducing the

harm caused both by narcotics abuse and the war on drugs. A number of Latin American leaders say decades of aggressive war on drugs has failed, having killed or destroyed thousands of lives worldwide. They say there is an irreversible trend towards legalizing "soft drugs" such as marijuana and that it is time for U.N. bodies to support that trend. But some major powers like Russia, delegates say, remain wary of the trend towards legalization and frown upon moves by U.S. states to regulate access to marijuana.

No major decisions are expected this week. But European and Latin American delegations and activists hope this week's special U.N. session taking stock of what many describe as the failed war on drugs can contribute to pushing the world a few steps closer towards a more liberal drug strategy that puts human rights and public health, not repression, at the centre. "Evidence shows that prohibitionist approaches have not worked: from 1998 to 2008 the number of people using illicit drugs did not change significantly and nei-

ther did the area used for opium poppy cultivation," U.N. Assistant Secretary-General Magdy Martinez-Soliman wrote in the Guardian newspaper. "Conventional policies have failed in reducing addiction and production," he said. The General Assembly was set to adopt a declaration on Tuesday that activists supporting more liberal drug laws found disappointing. They said it focused on the traditional approach of cutting off supply, not reducing ...*(More on P4)...(13)*

EU-Turkey Tensions Grow Over Promises for Visa Liberalization

ANKARA - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned the European Union Tuesday it needs Turkey more than Ankara needs the bloc, as tensions grew over promises for visa liberalisation in a crucial deal on stemming the flow of migrants to Europe. Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had earlier bluntly told the EU that Ankara would no longer abide by the March migrant accord if Brussels fails to implement the pledge to grant Turks visa-free travel by June.

Tensions have also been fuelled by a European Parliament report published last week that accused Turkey of backsliding on democracy and pressure from Ankara on Berlin to prosecute a German comic over a poem satirising Erdogan. The issues are coming to a head as Chancellor Angela Merkel and top EU officials prepare to travel Saturday to the Turkish city of Gaziantep close to the Syrian border to discuss implementation of the migrant deal. "The ...*(More on P4)...(14)*

Syrian Peace Talks Reach Critical Phase

GENEVA - The latest round of Syria peace talks, aiming to broker a political end to the five-year crisis, has reached a critical phase, main Syrian opposition group High Negotiations Committee (HNC) said Tuesday. "We are here in Geneva because we want to have a real political transition in Syria to end this crisis," HNC head Riad Hijab said in a press conference, adding "it's unfortunate that our responsiveness and cooperation has been misunderstood."



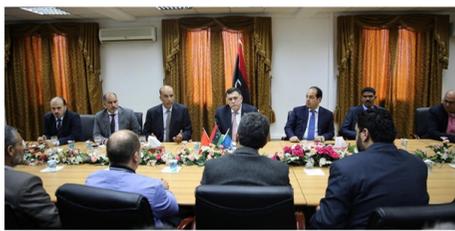
The HNC accused the government of avoiding concrete discussions on the issue of political transition, while also deploring the dire humanitarian and security situation on the ground. "This is why the HNC has

made the decision yesterday to postpone our participation in negotiations, and will not be in UN Palais while our people are still suffering," Hijab said. He added a small team would remain in Geneva

to continue with technical discussions, though the bulk of the delegation have already or are set to leave shortly. With little progress made to date, the likelihood of reaching a common understanding between warring factions is becoming slimmer and slimmer. The Syrian government delegation has defended the legitimacy of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's rule, labeling some of the groups included in the Saudi-backed HNC as ...*(More on P4)...(15)*

Libya's Parliament Postpones Confidence Vote

TRIPOLI - Libya's parliament postponed a vote of confidence expected to be held Monday on a new UN-backed unity government even as it asserted its authority by assuming control of two ministries. Deputies said a special session of the internationally-recognised parliament, to be held in the eastern city of Tobruk, failed to take place because of "big differences". "We couldn't hold a session today. There are big



differences on what should we vote on first: the confidence or amendment of the constitution," MP Abu Bakr Beira said. "The session was postponed till tomorrow, and hopefully

it will happen." Another MP, Khalifa Daghari, said a committee was formed of supporters and opponents of the unity government to try to reach a deal. "If we reach it, we will

hold a session tomorrow. If we don't, we will keep trying," said Daghari. In contrast to the reservations on the domestic front over prime minister-designate Fayeze al-Sarraf's cabinet, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond flew into Tripoli on Monday, hot on the heels of visits last week by the foreign ministers of Italy, France and Germany for talks on shoring up the new administration. The international community...*(More on P4)...(16)*

IS 'Has Sent More Fighters to Europe'

BRUSSELS - Belgian authorities are investigating information that suggests the Islamic State group has sent more fighters to Europe as Belgium remains on high alert following last month's suicide bombings in Brussels. "Signals appear to suggest that IS has again sent fighters to Europe, to our country," Paul Van Tigchelt, the head of Belgium's security threat analysis centre, said. Belgium has been on at least its second highest alert level for four months

- since the week after the November 13 attacks in Paris - with troops and extra police mobilised. Strategic sites such as airports, major rail stations, nuclear plants and buildings housing radioactive materials remain under close surveillance, while security is high at soft targets such as shopping complexes and cinemas. Federal police spokesman Peter De Waele said surveillance cameras are being monitored full time ...*(More on P4)...(17)*

German City Bans Number Plates Starting with 'IS'

BERLIN - License plates which could be perceived as referring to the so-called Islamic State group have been banned in one German city. Officials in Marburg have stopped releasing those starting with the initials "IS", in apparent reference to the terrorist group. City spokesman Markus Morr told NBC News, "after the Paris attacks in November last year, we decided to no longer issue this letter combination." "About 215 cars in our wider region are still driving around with the abbreviation 'IS'" he said. Owners willing to pay the small fee for personalised vanity plates in the city will also be asked to stay away from the letters. Marburg registers around 4,000 new vehicles each month. German license plates ...*(More on P4)...(18)*

Raul Castro Retains Top Communist Party Post: State Media

HAVANA - Raul Castro will hold the Cuban Communist Party's highest post for another five years alongside his headline second-in-command, state media reported Tuesday, in a resounding message that the island's aging revolutionary leaders will retain control in the face of detente with the United States and widespread popular dissatisfaction with the country's economic performance. Government news sites said Castro, 84, would remain the party's first secretary and Jose Ramon Machado Ventura would hold the post of second secretary for a second term. Castro currently is both president and first secretary. The decision means he will hold a position at least as powerful as the presidency even after stepping down from that post in 2018. Machado Ventura, 85, is known as an enforcer of Communist orthodoxy and voice against some of the country's biggest recent economic reforms. Castro's decision to remain in power alongside a man even he has criticized for rigidity capped a four-day meeting of the Communist Party notable for its secrecy and ...*(More on P4)...(20)*

Germany Cracks Down on Far Right with Arrests and Trial

BERLIN - The German authorities moved against right-wing groups on two fronts on Tuesday, with an early-morning raid that led to the arrest of five people suspected of attacks on refugee shelters and the opening of a trial against the leader of an anti-immigrant group. The raid in the eastern state of Saxony led to the detention of four men and one woman who are under investigation in connection with the attacks on refugee shelters in and around Dresden, where weekly demonstrations against immi-

grants have been held since late 2014. Two hundred police officers, including members of elite anti-terrorist units, conducted searches at several homes and unidentified properties in the state, federal prosecutors said. Later in the morning, Lutz Bachmann, a co-leader of the movement that organized the demonstrations, Pegida, went on trial in Dresden, the capital of Saxony. He faces charges of incitement for calling refugees "cattle," brutes" and "trash." The influx of migrants

in Germany has been accompanied by a rise in the popularity of the far right, notably in Saxony. "With today's operation, the security authorities have dealt a powerful blow to a regional right-wing terrorist group," Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere said in a statement. "This shows that the state is moving decisively and early against far-right terrorist structures and criminals." Residents of Freital, a town of some 40,000 that is also near Mr. Bachmann's home, have been among those often seen

Syria Air Strikes in Market Towns 'Kill 44'

MAARET-AL-NUMAN - Suspected government air strikes on Tuesday killed at least 44 civilians at two markets in a part of northwestern Syria controlled by the war-torn country's Al-Qaeda affiliate, a monitor said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights described as a "massacre" the strikes on a vegetable market in Maaret al-Numan that killed at least 37 civilians and at least another seven at a fish market in nearby Kafanbel. Previously, the Britain-based monitor had put

the toll in Maaret al-Numan at five dead and dozens wounded. The two locations, both in Idlib province, are only about 10 kilometres (six miles) apart. The province is under the control of Al-Qaeda's Syrian offshoot Al-Nusra Front, which like the jihadist Islamic State group is excluded from a ceasefire agreed between mainstream rebels and the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Elsewhere in the province, the Observatory said that three children were ...*(More on P4)...(21)*

India will not Request Return of Koh-i-Noor Diamond from UK

NEW DELHI - India's government has told the Supreme Court that it will not request the return of the 106-carat Koh-i-Noor diamond, which is now part of the British crown jewels. In a surprise statement, India's solicitor general told the court that Britain should not have to give the diamond back. Ranjit Kumar said the diamond had been given freely to the British in the mid-19th century by the family of Punjab's Maharaja Ranjit Singh, and had been "neither

stolen nor forcibly taken by British rulers". The court was hearing a petition filed by a rights group asking it to order the government to seek the return of the diamond. The two-judge bench said it did not want to issue a ruling that might jeopardise a future attempt to bring back the diamond or other treasures that once belonged to India. It told the government to take six weeks to reconsider its position before the ...*(More on P4)...(22)*

Neighbor News

PM Nawaz Returns to Pakistan After Medical Check-Up

LAHORE - Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif arrived in Islamabad from London on Tuesday night, thus putting an end to the speculations surrounding his return after members of Sharif family were linked to the leaks in the Panama Papers, DawnNews reported. Upon his arrival at the Nur Khan air base in Rawalpindi, the premier was received by his aide Tariq Fatemi and other senior officials. Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif had earlier said that "the prime minister's condition had improved after a medical check-up in London". Nawaz, while speaking to the press in London, had also asserted that he was going to leave for Pakistan soon. The prime minister said now that he is returning to Pakistan, "the media should ask 'conspiracy theorists' about the rumours they spread regarding his visit". Answering a question about the Pakistan

Tehreek-i-Insaf's (PTI) 'Raiwind March', he said the PML-N aims to bring progress to the country and wanted the opposition to do the same. "Dharna politics will only create chaos. Well-wishers of the country should not resort to such tactics which may harm or hinder the country's progress," Nawaz had said. When asked about the opposition's demand of a commission led by the Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) to probe the Panama leaks, Nawaz maintained that his government formed the commission despite not being directly named in the documents and would not flinch if a commission was formed under CJP. "Look, those [opposition parties] who rejected the option of forming such a commission during the anti-rigging sit-in and even after facing defeat in NA-122 elections can do the same over Panama papers," said the prime minister. (Monitoring Desk)

Chinese Consortium to Buy 1% of Australian Land

ADELAID - A Chinese company is all set to buy 1 per cent of Australia's land - an area bigger than Ireland. The land, whose net worth is said to be \$289 million, is owned by S Kidman and Co - Australia's biggest farming estate. The company, a consortium made up of Dakang Australia, is set to buy 80% of the land, while the Australian Rural Capital (ARC) will acquire 20%. The Australian government had previously cancelled the deal as the properties included Anna Creek farm where a military weapons testing range was located.

It would have security risks, according to the government. However, the sale will proceed now since Anna Creek farm has been removed from the deal. The estate currently being negotiated includes 10 cattle stations, stretching across South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland. The Australian treasury might allow the sale before the elections in the country. The deal has already seen a two-day visit to China on April 14-15 by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and other business leaders. (Monitoring Desk)

Iran MPs Vote for \$330bn Budget Plan

TEHRAN - Lawmakers in Iran's Majlis (Parliament) have endorsed the government's proposed budget bill for the current Iranian calendar year (started March 20). Majlis MPs voted by a majority for the 9,980 trillion rial (329.63 billion dollar) budget during Tuesday's parliamentary session. Reports say the new budget allows the government to set the price of oil at \$40 a barrel and to export 2.25 million barrels per day. Iran says it has increased its crude export to 2.1 million barrels per day, almost double the production levels before a nuclear agreement with UN Security Council members and Germany

went into effect in January. The bill will now go to the Guardian Council, the constitutional supervisory body, for ratification before becoming law. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani presented the draft budget to Majlis back on January 17. The budget plan was submitted to the legislature for review and approval with a 42-day delay. Rouhani told lawmakers back then that the plan had been devised on the assumption that Western sanctions would be lifted under the nuclear deal. He added that the government did not want to tender the draft before the sanctions were scrapped. (Press TV)

Turkmenistan Approves Regulations of Foreign Journalists' Activities

BISHKEK - Turkmenistan has approved the Regulations of Activities of Foreign Journalists operating in the country, reports Turkmenistan.ru. President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov has signed a respective

resolution at a government meeting. The document approves the Regulations of Activities and accreditation of foreign journalists and other media outlets of foreign states in the territory of Turkmenistan. (AKI)