

NATO Chief says Talks with Russia "Frank and Serious"

BRUSSELS - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg here on Wednesday said that NATO allies and Russia held a "frank and serious" discussion.

Stoltenberg made the remarks after a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, which had been suspended for almost two years.

"I have just chaired a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council. And we all agree that it is in all our interest to keep political channels for political dialogue open," said Stoltenberg. Both sides discussed three



topics, including the crisis in and around Ukraine, issues related to military

activities, transparency and risk reduction, and an assessment of the security

situation in Afghanistan, including regional terrorist threats, according to

the NATO chief. "Political dialogue among nations that share the

same Euro-Atlantic area is both necessary and useful, especially in times of tensions as we experience now," he said. "However, this does not mean that we are back to business as usual," he said.

"We had a frank and serious discussion. NATO Allies and Russia hold very different views. But we have listened to what each of us have to say," said Stoltenberg.

Stoltenberg noted that NATO and Russia have "profound and persistent disagreements" and ...*(More on P4)...(23)*

Houthi, Saleh Agree to Join UN-Sponsored Peace Talks

SANAA - Yemen's Houthi group and its allies loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh have agreed to take part in the delayed peace talks sponsored by the United Nations, the group said on Wednesday.

In a letter to the UN envoy to Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed on Tuesday, the Houthi group and its allies confirmed that their delegates will travel to Kuwait for the talks, Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam said

in a statement. "We also told Ould Cheikh Ahmed that we will preserve all rights to take any position if the other side failed to commit to halting military actions during the period of talks or sought to impose any agenda that we do not agree upon," Abdulsalam said.

The talks, aimed at ending a year of deadly war, were originally planned to start with negotiators from the internationally recognized government of President ...*(More on P4)...(24)*

Ukraine Puts End to its Political Crisis: President

KIEV - Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said that the appointment of a new government and formation of a new parliamentary coalition marked an end to the political crisis in his country, local media reported Wednesday.

"We drew a line under the long-lasting parliamentary-governmental crisis," Poroshenko was quoted as saying during a meeting of the National Reform Council on late Tuesday. Hail-

ing the newly-appointed government and parliamentary coalition as professional and politically responsible, Poroshenko said that they both have much work ahead as the economic crisis in the country is not over.

As the priority tasks for the new authorities, he listed the fight against corruption, improvement of the business environment and the implementation of economic reforms. Reforms of the public



procurement system, financial sector, energy, health care, education and agriculture are essential to boost the

Ukrainian economy, Poroshenko said. Last week, the Ukrainian parliament approved ...*(More on P4)...(25)*

EU Hails Progress in Implementing Refugee Deal with Turkey

BRUSSELS - The European Union (EU) on Wednesday hailed "good progress" that has been made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Agreement on managing the refugee crisis.

On March 18, EU Heads of state or government and Turkey agreed to end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU and replace it instead with legal channels of resettlement of refugees to the EU. "This new approach has started to deliver results, with a sharp decrease seen

in the number of people irregularly crossing the Aegean from Turkey into Greece," the European Commission, or the EU executive body, said in a statement, while presenting a report on the implementation of the EU-Turkey Agreement.

The return of irregular migrants to Turkey started on April 4. So far, 325 irregular migrants arriving in Greece via Turkey after March 20 have been returned to Turkey in accordance with the agree ...*(More on P4)...(26)*

Refugee Crossings to Europe in Decline: Turkish FM

ANKARA - Number of illegal refugee crossings from Turkey to Europe is shrinking after a deal sealed with the European Union (EU), Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Wednesday.

"Number of refugees illegally crossing from Turkey to five Greek islands, which was nearly six thousand per month, has decreased below 100," Cavusoglu said at a joint press conference with his visiting Polish counterpart Witold Waszczykowski.



But there is a problem with payment of three billion euros (3.4 billion U.S. dollars) due to red tape that the EU has pledged to give Turkey, the minister said

citing to the bloc's promise to help Ankara stop the flow of refugees to Europe. Cavusoglu recalled that his country gives shelter to nearly three million Syrian

refugees, saying that Ankara has spent 10 billion U.S. dollars. Turkey is a major transit country for refugees and ...*(More on P4)...(27)*

Rebels Fire At SARC Near Damascus

DAMASCUS - Several vehicles of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) came under rebel fire inside Madaya, as around 250 people were set to be evacuated from rebel-held town north of Damascus, a military source told Xinhua. The SARC team survived the shooting, as their convoy withdrew from the vicinity of Madaya, the source added on condition of anonymity.

However, the operation of evacuating the civilians will continue, the source said.

Under a deal reached with the United Nations and other humanitarian organizations, including the SARC, about 500 Syrian civilians were set to be evacuated on Wednesday from hotspots besieged by both rebels and government forces, according to the same source.

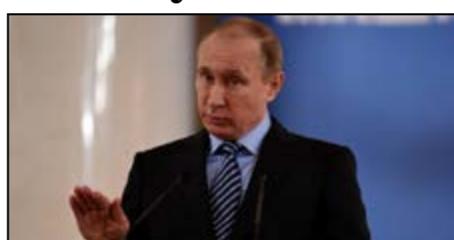
In accordance with the agreement, 250 civilians would be evacuated from the Shiite towns of Kafara and Foa, which are besieged by the rebels in the northwestern province of Idlib, and in return, government forces will allow 250 civilians to leave the rebel-held towns of Zabadani and Madaya in ...*(More on P4)...(29)*

Japanese PM to Visit Russia on May 6: Putin

MOSCOW - Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed Wednesday that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will visit Russia on May 6 in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

Putin made the remarks during the credentials ceremony for new ambassadors of 16 countries, including Japan. Saying that relations with Japan are one of Russia's top foreign policy priorities, Putin voiced the hope to mend ties with Tokyo during Abe's forthcoming visit.

Moscow and Tokyo have a long-held territorial dispute over four Pacific islands, known as the Northern Territories in Japan and the Southern



Kurils in Russia, which has prevented both sides from inking a peace treaty after World War II.

Relations between Russia and Japan have soured after Tokyo slapped sanctions on Russia in 2014, alongside with the United States and the European Union, in response to its takeover of Crimea and the crisis in eastern Ukraine.

On Friday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Japan, where he agreed with his Japanese counterpart Fumio Kishida to continue consultations about the disputed islands, although fundamental differences on the issue still remain. Putin is expected to pay a return visit to Japan later this year, according to Japanese officials. (Xinhua)

UNHCR Fears 500 Dead in Mediterranean Shipwreck

ROME - The UN refugee agency said on Wednesday it feared around 500 migrants from Africa had drowned in the Mediterranean, in what could be one of the worst tragedies since the start of the migrant crisis in Europe.

Survivors who were spotted drifting at sea before being picked up by a passing merchant ship on April 16 told the UNHCR many migrants drowned when human traffickers tried to transfer people to an already overcrowded vessel somewhere ...*(More on P4)...(30)*

Cameron Links London Mayor Hopeful to 'IS Supporter'

LONDON - British Prime Minister David Cameron accused the main opposition Labour party's candidate for London mayor of associating with an alleged supporter of the Islamic State group Wednesday, triggering a furious row.

Cameron's comments were aimed at Sadiq Khan, a Muslim former government minister and human rights lawyer who is leading opinion polls for the May 5 mayoral election. During Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons, ...*(More on P4)...(31)*

Obama in Saudi Arabia to Attend GCC Summit

RIYADH - U.S. President Barack Obama arrived here Wednesday to attend a summit with leaders from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. During the visit, his fourth to the oil-rich kingdom since taking office in 2009, Obama is scheduled to meet with King Salman bin Abdulaziz and the Saudi royal court on Wednesday.

The White House said the U.S.-GCC summit, scheduled for Thursday, will be an opportunity for leaders to discuss issues

such as the fight against the Islamic State terrorist group, regional conflicts, and sectarian tensions. The GCC comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

The summit comes on the heels of Obama's criticism of Saudi Arabia's regional role, which prompted a strong rebuke from the Saudi royal family. In a recent interview with The Atlantic, Obama described Saudi Arabia and other allies as "free riders" on ...*(More on P4)...(28)*

GCC Defense Ministers Meet with Pentagon Chief in Riyadh

RIYADH - Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) defense ministers met here Wednesday with their U.S. counterpart, Ashton Carter, a senior GCC official said. They discussed military cooperation and the latest developments in the Middle East, including what were described as Iran's destabilizing activities and the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group, said GCC Secretary General Abdullah al-Zayani. The GCC countries and the U.S. have agreed to carry out joint patrols to stop any

Iranian arms shipments reaching Yemen, al-Zayani told a press conference. On his part, Carter said the U.S. and GCC nations were "building on the strong partnership" that has lasted for decades.

The U.S. defense chief urged the GCC members to be more engaged in helping the Iraqi government fight IS and to rebuild areas where the militants have been pushed out. The GCC comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the ...*(More on P4)...(32)*

Neighbor News

US Should Feel Responsible for Iran Banking Access: Seif



TEHRAN - The head of Central Bank of Iran (CBI) has called on the United States to feel responsible for banking ambiguities impeding Iran's access to European Union (EU) financial institutions.

CBI governor Valiollah Seif told IRNA news agency on Tuesday that Washington should feel more responsible about the removal of European banking ambiguities that hinder cooperation with Iranian banks.

Seif, who traveled to the US last week to participate in the spring convention of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), told IRNA that

the US needed to act in lockstep with the Last July nuclear agreement which envisaged Iran's access to international financial transaction.

The Americans can play a more serious and tangible role in helping lift such restrictions, he said, adding that during sanctions the US threatened every financial institute with hefty fines if they carried out business with Iran.

Now that sanctions are lifted, the Americans have not made any effective move to allay the concerns of European banks in restoring business with Iran, said the CBI chief. (PressTV)

Xi Stresses Joint Battle Command for Military Reform

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping inspected the Central Military Commission (CMC) joint battle command center on Wednesday, calling for building a joint battle command system with Chinese characteristics.

Xi visited the center Wednesday morning, where he serves as the Commander in Chief, calling on the center to implement the military strategies under the new situation and focus on its core key functions of studying and commanding wars. Xi, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and CMC chairman, also asked officers to change their ideas, innovate and tackle difficulties, in a bid to build a joint battle command system that was "absolutely loyal,

resourceful in fighting, efficient in commanding and courageous and capable of winning wars."

The strategic and operational command system should be efficient and active in both peace and war, Xi said. According to Xi, improving the center is a significant part of deepening the reform on national defense and military as well as a key measure to strengthen the CMC's function of strategic command.

"The current situation requires battle command to be highly strategic, coordinated, timely, professional and accurate," Xi said, urging staff at joint battle command centers at both CMC and theater command levels to bear in mind a sense of crisis and adapt to the strategic demands of national security. (Xinhua)

Sri Lanka, Pakistan Enjoy Exceptionally Good Relations: Punjab Governor

LAHORE - The Governor Punjab Malik Muhammad Rafiq Rajwana said Sri Lanka and Pakistan enjoy exceptionally good relations which are firmly standing on the pillars of mutual trust and respect. Governor Punjab said this during

a meeting with the high level Sri Lankan delegation comprising Speaker Sri Lankan Parliament Karu Jayasuriya, senior Buddhist priests, politicians, academicians and officials at the Governor House, Lahore, last evening. (Agencies)

Belarus-Tajikistan Intergovernmental Commission to Review Prospects for Cooperation

MINSK - The tenth session of the Belarusian-Tajik intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation will be held in Dushanbe on April 25-26, spokesperson for the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dmitry Mironchik told a press briefing on Wednesday. The Belarusian part of the commission is headed by Agriculture and Food Minister Leonid Zayats, the Tajik one by Agriculture Minister Izatullo Sattori. The parties plan to outline the prospects for trade and economic cooperation, to discuss the progress in the im-

plementation of joint projects in industrial cooperation, agriculture, and will pay attention to the development of relations in science and technology. Industrial cooperation will be on the agenda too. Tajikistan is implementing a project to set up the facility to assemble mounted and trailed equipment. The countries are discussing the possibility of assembling Belarus tractors in Tajikistan. The commission has been suggested to consider power generation and provision of gas supply as promising new areas of cooperation. (Agencies)