

IS is 'Russia's Greatest Enemy', Not US: Lavrov

MOSCOW - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Wednesday that the Islamic State group was Moscow's greatest enemy, notwithstanding the strained relations with the United States over the Ukraine conflict.

"I believe IS is our greatest enemy right now," Lavrov said in an interview with Russian radio stations when asked whether he considers China, IS or NATO Russia's greatest threat.

Lavrov said "hundreds of Russian citizens, hundreds of Europeans, hundreds of Americans are fighting for IS, along



with CIS (former Soviet) countries." "They are already returning home. They come here to rest after fighting and can get up to dirty tricks at home," he said. "As far as (relations with the) United States are concerned, these are state issues, these are issues of the world order, which have to be resolved through talks." "Russia's relations with the West, particularly with the United States, have plummeted to a post-Cold War low over the war in Ukraine and sanctions imposed over Moscow's role in supporting pro-Russian militants. (AFP)

'Dozens Killed' in Rebel-IS Clashes near Damascus

BEIRUT - At least 42 fighters were killed in 24 hours of fierce fighting between Islamist rebels and the Islamic State group in Syria's Damascus province, a monitoring group said Wednesday.

"At least 30 Islamist rebels and 12 fighters from IS were killed in fighting since Tuesday" in the hilly region of Qalamun, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Qalamun is divided into a western portion, which borders Lebanon and is mostly controlled by the regime and its ally, the Leba-

nese Shiite movement Hezbollah.

The eastern sector has seen intense clashes between rebels and IS, and is strategic because it borders the "badiya," the Syrian steppe. These plains are used by rebels to transport weapons from the Turkish border to the north and the Jordanian frontier in the south. According to the Britain-based Observatory, IS has already cut off one of these routes and aims to take more to "suffocate" the rebels. Meanwhile, 13 civilians, (AFP)

Iranian Flotilla a 'Factor' in Warship Deployment off Yemen: Pentagon

WASHINGTON - The Pentagon said on Tuesday the presence of a large convoy of Iranian cargo ships in the Arabian Sea was one factor in the U.S. decision to deploy additional warships in the waters off war-torn Yemen but was not the primary reason for the move. Army Colonel Steve Warren, a Pentagon spokesman, also said he did not believe Navy warships patrolling the region had been in direct contact with the Iranian flotilla of nine cargo ships. Warren dismissed reports the carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and cruiser USS Normandy had been deployed to the region to intercept Iranian ships carrying arms to Iranian-backed Houthi



rebels fighting forces loyal to the U.S.-backed Yemeni president. "Many have asked me whether or not they (the U.S. warships) are there because of the Iranian ship convoy or flotilla

that is also in the area," Warren said. "That is certainly one of the factors.

That is not the reason they are there." He said the United States did not know what the Iranian

cargo ships were carrying and declined to say whether the U.S. warships would stop and board Iranian vessels if they attempted to enter Yemeni territorial waters. (Reuters)

Israel Grapples with Whether to Recognize Armenian Genocide

JERUSALEM - The Nazi genocide of European Jews is widely commemorated in Israel and etched deeply into the psyche of a country founded in the Holocaust's aftermath. But when it comes to the 1915 Armenian genocide, Israel has largely stayed silent.

Fearing repercussions from its former ally Turkey and wary of breaking ranks with American policy, Israel has refrained from calling the mass killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks during World War I a genocide. Now, days before Armenia holds centenary commemorations, and with ties to Turkey frayed, there are growing calls from within Israel to finally do so.

In a first of its kind gesture, Israel is dispatching a pair of lawmakers to the ceremony in Yerevan on Friday. However, the low-level delegation is under strict instructions to refer to the killings as a "national tragedy" rather than "genocide." One of those backbench-

ers, Nachman Shai of the centrist Zionist Union party, said it was time for Israel to acknowledge that genocide took place.

"In foreign policy, there are interests and there are values," he told The Associated Press. "In this case I think values should trump interests. As Jews, we must recognize it."

Historians estimate that up to 1.5 million Armenians were killed by Ottoman Turks around the time of World War I, an event widely viewed by scholars as the first genocide of the 20th century. Turkey denies that the deaths constituted genocide, saying the toll has been inflated and that those killed were victims of civil war and unrest.

As Armenians have campaigned for greater genocide recognition, Turkey has fiercely lobbied to prevent countries from doing so. For years, Israel did not officially broach the subject for fear of angering Turkey - one of its few allies in a hostile region. (AP)

Ukraine, in Snub to Moscow, to Adopt British War-Time Symbol, Ditch Soviet War Name

KIEV - Ukraine, in a break with tradition that is certain to rile Moscow, is ditching the Soviet name for World War Two and aims to adopt the poppy, a mainly British wartime symbol, to mark the 70th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany.

The moves, signaled by Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk on Wednesday, marked an attempt by Kiev to distance itself from Moscow's Soviet-style celebrations, planned for May 9, as the conflict with Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine drags on. In another break with the Soviet past, Kiev will align its calendar with that of its European allies by adding for the first time May 8 - known in the West as Victory in Europe Day - as a national holiday. A decree signed by President Petro Poroshenko fixed May 8 as a day for reconciliation between those Ukrainians who fought only the Nazis with those who, after the war, went on to fight Soviet rule also. (Reuters)

Russian Attack on Baltics would be Suicidal: Czech President

PRAGUE - Russia is unlikely to launch a military thrust against the Baltics because President Vladimir Putin "is not suicidal," Czech President Milos Zeman said Tuesday.

The Baltic countries - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - were ruled by Moscow for nearly five decades following World War II and have been especially nervous about Russian intentions since fighting broke out in Ukraine. Latvia and Estonia, like eastern Ukraine, have large Russian-speaking communities.

"I don't think Russia could start a war by attacking any of the NATO member states," Zeman said in an interview with The Associated Press. "Because for sure Vladimir Putin is not suicidal and he knows the consequences this would have."

"I'm sure that in such a case, an appropriate military, not just a political and economic, reaction would take place."

Zeman, whose office is largely ceremonial, has opposed western sanctions against Moscow for its actions in Ukraine. He has suggested they should be gradually taken away "if Russia does not enter Ukraine's soil, because I found them as counterproductive as the former sanctions against Cuba."

Zeman also said it wouldn't make economic sense for Russia to annex eastern Ukraine, where it has supported rebels battling Ukrainian troops. (AP)

New Zealand Seeks UN Resolution on Israel-Palestine

WELLINGTON - UN Security Council member New Zealand is working on a draft resolution to revive long-stalled peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

France has begun consultations on a text that would outline the parameters of an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, but Ambassador Jim McLay said Tuesday that New Zealand's friendship with Israel and the Palestinians means it could make a

contribution. "New Zealand wants this Security Council to focus on a practical outcome -- and we have been working on a text that might serve the purpose of getting negotiations started," said McLay.

The ambassador emphasized that the timing was right to move forward, after the Israeli elections and before the United States becomes embroiled in the campaign for the presidency in 2016.

McLay added that New Zealand was open to supporting the French initiative "if it has a chance of succeeding," but he made clear that action was needed soon.

The move from New Zealand, which was elected as one of the 10 non-permanent members last year, reflected growing impatience within the council over the failure to agree on a UN approach for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. (AFP)

Poland to Buy U.S. Patriot Missiles, French Helicopters

WARSAW - Poland said on Tuesday it would buy Raytheon Co's Patriot missiles from the United States and provisionally selected French Airbus Group helicopters as it speeds up the modernization of its military amid tensions with Russia. The choice of suppliers, in deals potentially worth \$8 billion, strikes a trans-Atlantic balance as Eastern Europe's largest economy re-arms itself on NATO's frontline while edging toward a bigger role in Europe's defense industry. "For the armed forces' techni-

cal modernization and the Polish armed forces' resilience to be effective, the so-called anti-missile shield ... had to become the priority of priorities," said Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski. Poland will enter exclusive talks with the U.S. government on the Patriot missile defense system. It plans to buy eight missile batteries by 2025, including two within three years of signing.

A consortium of France's Thales and European group MBDA was also competing for the \$5 billion missile defense con-

tract - the largest in Poland's military history.

The United States said it welcomed the announcement from its stalwart NATO ally. The program "is expected to generate at least \$2.5 billion in U.S. export content - that means supporting American jobs at home and growing our manufacturing base," U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said in a statement. Poland, a NATO member since 1999, had accelerated the process to select a supplier for the missile system after Russia's. (Reuters)

Obama again Avoids Calling 1915 Armenian Killings 'Genocide'

WASHINGTON - President Barack Obama will once again stop short of calling the 1915 massacre of Armenians a genocide, prompting anger and disappointment from those who have been pushing him to fulfill a campaign promise and use the po-

litically fraught term on the 100th anniversary of the killings this week. Officials decided against it after opposition from some at the State Department and the Pentagon. After more than a week of internal debate, top administration officials discussed the final de-

cision with Armenian-American leaders Tuesday before making it public. The White House said the officials pledged that the U.S. would use Friday's centennial anniversary "to urge a full, frank and just acknowledgement of the facts." (AP)

Neighbour News

Iran-Pakistan Borders Place for Security, Peace: Jahangiri

TEHRAN - The Pakistani First Vice-President Es-haq Jahangiri said on Wednesday that the Iran-Pakistan borders is known a place for security and peace.

Jahangiri made the remarks in a meeting with Pakistani Minister of Commerce Khurram Dastgir Khan.

Jahangiri said Tehran and Islamabad should ensure border security and their borders should be well known for security, peace and friendship. He referred to Iran and Pakistan as two influential countries in the region and the Muslim World.

"We consider Pakistan our close friend and are ready to have exchange of views with it in all the mutual, regional and international issues."

Jahangiri said Iran considers no limit for expansion of economic cooperation with Pakistan. Referring to cooperation in various sectors, Jahangiri said in the visit of Pakistan Prime Minister to Tehran good talks were held for expansion of economic cooperation and through serious endeavors.

He deplored issues and problems in the region and the world of Islam. (IRNA)

American Corner Re-Opens in Dushanbe

DUSHANBE - The U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan Susan Elliott on April 17 hosted the re-opening ceremony of the Dushanbe American

Corner in its new location at 66 Tolstoy Street. Leaders of prominent NGOs, school and university students, teachers, and other regular American Corner supporters and visitors participated in the event, the U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan said. The original American Corner Dushanbe opened its doors in 2005 and was located in the Academy of Science; it later moved to the National Library.

During the ceremony, Ambassador Elliott welcomed and congratulated the guests to the new expanded American Corner's space and encouraged the youth

to use and benefit from the free available resources, materials, services, programs and activities in order to improve their English, maximize their knowledge, and continue to pursue their education.

The U.S. Embassy now supports seven American Corners in Dushanbe, Kulob, Qurg-honteppa, Khorugh, Khujand, Isfara and Gharm. Each American Corner provides free Internet access for educational purposes, free English language materials, presentations about U.S. Government programs, educational advising, and hosts many clubs. The American Corners are one of the many ways the American people support Tajikistan's youth. (TCA)

Iran Seeks China's Help to Build New Nuclear Plants

BEIJING - The framework nuclear deal between Iran and global powers has opened up new investment possibilities in an economy that has been stunted by international sanctions.

Last week, a top Iranian atomic energy official said in addition to Russia, China will also help it build additional nuclear power plants. China has not commented on the proposal, but Iran says Beijing could help it build at least three nuclear plants in the coastal city Bushehr. The city is home to Iran's first nuclear plant, the construction of which began four decades ago.

Germany started work there in the 1970s, but that effort was halted during Iran's Islamic Revolution. After that, Russia took over in the 1990s, but it was not until 2013 the plant was operating at full capacity.

Oil-rich Iran says it needs nuclear power to meet its energy needs. Uranium fuels nuclear reactors, but can also be used to make nuclear bombs. Iran and world powers are seeking to reach final agreement on a deal by late June. (Agencies)

Talks Begin on Finalising Iran Nuclear Deal

VIENNA - Iran and major powers on Wednesday began the difficult process of finalising by June 30 a historic deal putting an Iranian nuclear bomb out of reach, three weeks after agreeing the main outlines. Following a negotiating marathon in Switzerland, Iran agreed on April 2 to what US President Barack Obama called a "historic understanding... which, if fully implemented, will prevent (Iran) from obtaining a nuclear weapon."

"This will include Iran dramatically scaling back its nuclear activities and submitting those that remain to what Obama described the "most robust and intrusive inspections and transparency regime

ever negotiated". In return, the United States and five other major powers committed to lift certain sanctions that have caused the Islamic republic of 75 million people major economic pain. The accord, if completed and implemented, would draw to a close a crisis that has been raging since Iran's nuclear activities was first revealed some 12 years ago. It denies wanting the bomb. It could even potentially see "axis of evil" Iran and the "Great Satan" United States bury the hatchet after 35 years of bitter acrimony -- and at a particularly volatile time in the Middle East. (AFP)