

# U.S. Troop Reduction in Exercise not Due to North Korea Concerns: Mattis

AMMAN - A reduction in U.S. troops taking part in a joint exercise with South Korean forces this year simply reflects a need for fewer personnel and is not because of tensions with North Korea, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said on Sunday.

About 17,500 U.S. service members are participating in the exercise this month, down from 25,000 last year, according to the Pentagon.

With tensions high on the Korean peninsula, China - Pyongyang's main ally and trading partner - has urged the United States and South Korea to scrap the drills, as has Russia.

Called Ulchi Freedom Guard-



ian, the joint drills will take place from Aug. 21 to Aug. 31 and involve computer simulations designed to prepare for the unthinkable: war with nuclear-capable North Korea.

Mattis told reporters while traveling to Jordan that the exercise had been planned months in advance and the focus this year was on integration operations.

"The numbers are by design to achieve the exercise objectives and you always pick what you want to emphasize," he said.

"Right now there is a heavy emphasis on command post operations, so the integration of all the different efforts," Mattis said. (Reuters)

## Neighbor News

### Pakistan Must Not Allow Its Soil to be Used for Terror Activities: US

WASHINGTON - Pakistan must ensure that its soil is not used for any terrorist attack against the neighbors, a top American General has said.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Joseph Votel conveyed this to Islamabad during a visit this week. This was his third visit to Pakistan as commander.

During the visit, he called on Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Defence Minister Khuram Dastgir, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Zubair Hayat and Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa.

"In his discussions with Pakistani leaders, he emphasized that all parties must work to ensure that Pakistani soil is not used to plan or conduct terrorist attacks against

its neighbours," the US Embassy here said in a statement.

General Votel also underlined the need to further strengthen US and Pakistani military-to-military relations as the two nations work together to ensure greater regional security and stability.

"This visit allowed the General to gain an increased understanding of the counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts the Pakistani government has made over the years to achieve our shared objectives," the statement said.

Votel called on Prime Minister Abbasi yesterday during which the premier underscored that Pakistan had an important stake in peace and stability in Afghanistan as Pakistan has suffered the most due to conflict in that country. (Monitoring Desk)

### Merkel Ally Drops Call for Cap on Refugees Entering Germany

BERLIN - A key ally of German Chancellor Angela Merkel says he's no longer making a cap on refugees a condition for coalition talks after next month's election.

Horst Seehofer, who leads the Christian Social Union that dominates politics in the southern state of Bavaria, called for an upper limit on the number of refugees Germany takes following the massive influx in 2015.

Seehofer's party traditionally forms a conserv-

ative bloc with Merkel's Christian Democratic Union and the two are projected to take about 39 percent of the vote in the Sept. 24 election.

The 68-year-old told public broadcaster ARD on Sunday that "the situation has changed, Berlin has changed course."

Seehofer said he would aim to ensure the measures already taken to reduce refugee arrivals are protected by a future government. (AP)

### Britain to Unveil 5 New Position Papers on Brexit Talks

LONDON - The British Brexit department said Sunday that it will release a patch of new papers in the coming days over negotiating positions regarding its withdrawal talks with the European Union (EU).

"This week we set out more detail of the future relationship we want with the European Union, putting forward imaginative and creative solutions to build a deep and special partnership with our closest neighbors and allies," British Brexit Secretary David Davis

said in a statement. "In the coming days we will demonstrate our thinking even further, with five new papers - all part of our work to drive the talks forward, and make sure we can show beyond doubt that we have made sufficient progress on withdrawal issues by October so that we can move on to discuss our future relationship," he said.

The fresh five papers will outline Britain's negotiating strategy on key issues related to Brexit and Britain's future relationship with the



27 other EU nations. The next round of negotiations is due to start on Aug. 29 in Brussels. Two formal position papers on "the continuity in the availability of

### Iran's Top Priority to Protect Nuclear Deal from US: Rouhani

TEHRAN - Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said on Sunday the top foreign policy priority for his new government was to protect the nuclear deal from being torn up by the United States.

"The most important job of our foreign minister is first to stand behind the JCPOA, and not to allow the US and other enemies to succeed," Rouhani told parliament, using the technical name for the 2015 deal that eased sanctions in exchange for curbs to Iran's nuclear program.

"Standing up for the JCPOA means standing up to Iran's enemies," he said on the last day of debates over his cabinet selections.

Rouhani indicated a week ago that Iran was ready to walk out on the nuclear deal if the United States continued to apply fresh sanctions. It has come under mounting pressure after Tehran carried out missile tests and Washington imposed new

sanctions - with each accusing the other of violating the spirit of the agreement.

But Rouhani has insisted the deal remains the preferred way forward, not least to help rebuild Iran's struggling economy and create jobs.

"The second responsibility of the foreign ministry... is to get involved in economic activities. It should help attract foreign investment and technology," Rouhani said.

He was addressing lawmakers ahead of votes of confidence on his ministerial choices.

Rouhani, a political moderate, began his second term earlier this month after winning a resounding victory over a hardline challenger in May.

He has vowed to continue his outreach to the world, and to improve civil liberties at home, but has been criticised by reformists for again failing to select a single female minister. (AFP)

### Most Americans Say U.S. Should not Threaten DPRK with Military Action: Poll



WASHINGTON - A majority of Americans say that the United States should not threaten the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) with military action, ac-

ording to a new poll.

Nearly six in ten Americans say that the United States should not threaten the DPRK with military action, while 33 percent say that military threats

should be issued toward the DPRK, said the CBS News poll released early this week.

Opinions differ largely by party, the poll also found, with 82 percent of Democrats saying the United States should not and 63 percent of Republicans saying the United States should threaten with military action.

However, if the United States fails in its effort to solve the DPRK nuclear issue diplomatically, 58 percent of Americans say that they would approve of military action against

the DPRK.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reaffirmed on Thursday that diplomatic effort was "first and foremost" choice in solving the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue.

"In cooperation with other nations, we will continue to employ diplomatic and economic pressure to convince North Korea (DPRK) to end its illegal nuclear and ballistic missile program," said Tillerson here at a joint press conference with visiting Japanese officials. (Xinhua)

### Russian Court Rejects Siemens' Plea to Seize its Turbines in Crimea

MOSCOW - A Moscow court has rejected a request by Siemens to seize its gas turbines, which have turned up in Crimea contrary to EU sanctions, and to ban their installation ahead of preliminary hearings next month, the court's ruling showed on Sunday.

The ruling by Moscow's Arbitration Court responded to a lawsuit filed by the German engineering firm Siemens against a Russian state firm in July after four turbines which it had sold for use in Russia turned

up in the Moscow-annexed region. The court's report showed it had rejected Siemens' request to take possession of the turbines in an injunction ahead of preliminary court hearings into the dispute set for September 18. Reuters was the first to report this year that Russian firms had shipped the Siemens turbines to Crimea, which has been subject to EU sanctions on energy technology since Russia unilaterally annexed the region from Ukraine early in 2014. (Reuters)

### North Korea Slams Upcoming Joint US-South Military Exercises

SEOUL - North Korea warned Sunday that the United States will be "pouring gasoline on fire" by conducting an annual war game in the South next week amid heightened tensions between Pyongyang and Washington.

Combative rhetoric between the nations spiked after Pyongyang tested two intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) last month that appeared to bring much of the US within range, sparking an intense warning by President Donald Trump that Washington could rain "fire and fury" on the North.

Pyongyang then threatened to fire a salvo of missiles towards the US territory of Guam - a plan that leader Kim Jong-Un last week delayed, but warned could go ahead depending on Washington's next move.

Amid the fiery volley of threats, Seoul and Washington will begin Monday the "Ulchi Freedom Guardian" (UFG) joint military exercises involving tens of thousands of troops that Pyongyang views as a highly provocative rehearsal for invasion.

"The joint exercise is the most explicit expression of hostility against us, and no one can guarantee that the exercise won't evolve into actual fighting," said an editorial carried by the North's official Rodong Sinmun newspaper.

"The Ulchi Freedom Guardian joint military exercises will be like pouring gasoline on fire and worsen the state of the peninsula," the paper said. Warning of an "uncontrollable phase of a nuclear war" on the peninsula, it added: "If the United States is lost in a fantasy that war on the peninsula is at somebody else's doorstep far away from them across the Pacific, it is far more mistaken than ever." (AFP)

### Assad Won't Allow Opponents to Win Politically

DAMASCUS - Syria's President Bashar al-Assad said Sunday that his government will not allow the enemies and opponents of Syria to achieve in politics what they had failed to gain in battles.

Striking a victory tone, Assad said the war price in Syria was steep, "but the result was failing the Western scheme in Syria and the world."

"The conspirators have failed, but the war is ongoing and we haven't won yet, but the signs of victory exist," he said in a speech delivered at the opening of the Foreign



and Expatriates Minister Conference on Sunday.

He was referring to the Western scheme to bring down his administration and control Syria via what he described as the "agents" of the West in the region and Syria.

Meanwhile, the president

hailed the support of his allies in enabling the Syrian army to advance on the ground.

He said Iran's support has been "unlimited" since the beginning of the crisis, in terms of the military and economic support. (Xinhua)

### Iraq Starts Offensive to Take Back Tal Afar from Islamic State

BAGHDAD/ERBIL, Iraq - Iraqi security forces launched an offensive to take back the city of Tal Afar on Sunday, their next objective in the U.S.-backed campaign to defeat Islamic State militants, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said.

"You either surrender, or die," Abadi said in a televised speech announcing the offensive, addressing the jihadists.

A longtime stronghold of headline Sunni Muslim insurgents, Tal Afar, 50 miles (80 km) west of Mosul in Iraq's far north, experienced cycles of sectarian violence between Sunnis and

Shi'ite Muslims after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and it has produced some of Islamic State's most senior commanders. The city was cut off from the rest of Islamic State-held territory in June. It is surrounded by Iraqi government troops and Shi'ite volunteers in the south, and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in the north. Hours before Abadi's announcement, the Iraqi air force dropped leaflets over the city advising the population to take precautions.

"Prepare yourself, the battle is imminent and the victory is coming, God willing," the leaflets read. (Reuters)

### Finland Investigates Stabbings as Possible Terror Attacks, Warn Against Polarization

HELSINKI - The Finnish police have started the probe into a violence that left two dead and eight wounded in southwest Finland city of Turku on Friday on basis of assumption that the attack was of terrorism nature.

And to determine whether it is linked to the recent series of terror attacks in Spain would also be one focus of the probe. Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä said on Saturday if the incident turns out to be terrorism-related, it would be the first of its kind in Finland, a Nordic country known for its security and quietness.

WAVE OF ATTACKS IN EUROPE

Turku, the oldest city of Finland, witnessed bloody scenes on Friday afternoon when an 18-year-old man stabbed people with a huge knife from one square to another in the city center. Two Finnish women were killed and eight others were wounded. A Briton, a Swede and an Italian were among the wounded.

The stabber chose his targets randomly, but they were all women, said the police. The main suspect, who was shot in the leg and detained on Friday, was identified as a Moroccan citizen. Overnight, four other Moroccans were also arrested and a fifth was still wanted. The police said the group had probably planned the assault beforehand.

Researcher Leena Malkki, a leading Finnish expert on terrorism, said on national broadcaster Yle that the connection with international terrorism remains open. (Xinhua)

### U.S. State Department Says Tajikistan Continues Violating Religious Freedom

DUSHANBE - The U.S. State Department included Tajikistan in the blacklist of countries violating the religious freedom in 2016 Report on International Religious Freedom.

The government of Tajikistan in 2016 continued to take measures to prevent individuals from joining or participating in what it considered to be "extremist" organizations, arresting or detaining over 100 persons, primarily for membership in banned religious groups, including Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Ansarrullah, Jindullah, ISIS, and Hizb ut-Tahrir, the report says.

An amendment to the constitution, passed in May, bans political parties based on religion. The law restricts Islamic prayer to specific locations, regulates the registration and location of mosques, and prohibits

persons under 18 from participating in public religious activities.

The government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) controls all aspects of religious life, including approving registration of religious associations, construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature.

The government reported it had closed over 1,000 "illegal" prayer rooms and mosques in different parts of the country over the past few years or converted them into cultural and entertainment centers. The government issued warnings (informal rather than legal action) to over 100 mullahs for providing "illegal" religious education to young people. The authors of the report note that more than 90% of the population of Tajikistan are Muslims. (AKI)