

Sudan President Lands in Syria in 1st Visit by Arab Leader

DAMASCUS, Syria - Sudan's president on Sunday became the first Arab League leader to visit Syria since civil war erupted there nearly eight years ago. Omar al-Bashir was greeted at the Damascus airport by Syrian President Bashar Assad before they both headed to the presidential palace, where they held talks on bilateral relations and the latest developments in Syria and the region, according to the state-run news agency. Syria was expelled from the 22-member Arab League soon after war broke out in 2011. Arab countries have sanctioned Damascus and condemned Assad for using overwhelming military force and failing to negotiate with the opposition. The reason for al-Bashir's visit was not immediately clear. But



with the war in Syria winding down in favor of Assad as his troops recapture key cities and population centers, some Arab officials have expressed interest in exploring the restoration of ties.

In October, Assad told a little-known Kuwaiti newspaper that Syria had reached a "major understanding" with Arab states after years of hostility. He did not name the Arab countries in the interview, which was

his first with a Gulf paper since the war erupted, but he said Arab and Western delegations had begun visiting Syria to prepare for the reopening of diplomatic and other missions.

The interview came on the heels of a surprisingly warm meeting between the Syrian foreign minister and his Bahraini counterpart on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly in September in New York. The meeting turned heads because it featured hugs between the two ministers. The encounter raised questions about whether the Gulf countries, most of them sworn enemies of Assad ally Iran, are reconsidering their relations with Syria. (Fox News)

Neighbor News

Delusions, Strategic Mistake Led Saudis to Invade Yemen: Iran

TEHRAN - Iran says Saudi Arabia's decision to invade Yemen is the result of the Riyadh regime's "delusions" about its military power and the "strategic mistake" it made by undermining Yemeni people's ability to defend themselves. Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said Monday the fact that the Saudi side has agreed to sit down with the Houthis movement for peace talks speaks volumes about the thinking process that led Saudi Arabia and its allies to make their move. "I think the Saudi-led coalition was preoccupied with this delusion that they could fulfill their objectives in Yemen in no time," Qassemi told Iran's Arabic language network Al Alam in an interview published Monday. "They made a strategic mistake and began their operation without having a true understanding

of occupation, invasion and Yemen's history."

The diplomat blasted Riyadh and its regional allies - including the UAE - for steaming ahead with their plans despite advice from "people who knew the region well and knew what awaits occupation and invasion."

He said it was obvious from the get-go that Yemen will endure and will do all it takes to defend itself against aggression.

"That is why we were certain from the beginning that a military solution was always bound to fail in Yemen, no matter the size of Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's arsenal and how much weapons their allies sent them," Qassemi continued.

"And as you can see, today we are at a stage wherein both sides have come to the negotiating table to think of a political solution for future," he added. (Press TV)

Maldives President Calls India 'Our Closest Friend'

NEW DELHI - The new president of the Maldives has called India the island nation's "closest friend," welcome words for New Delhi after years of growing economic influence by Beijing. President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih spoke Sunday in New Delhi, on his first overseas trip since his election. In September he defeated strongman Yameen Abdul Gayoom, who had forged increasingly closer ties to China during his five years in

office. India has long seen the Indian Ocean nation of 400,000 people as part of its sphere of influence. China, though, sees the Maldives as a key cog in its "Belt and Road" infrastructure projects, which follow ancient trade routes through the Indian Ocean and Central Asia. Beijing is investing hundreds of millions of dollars in an airport expansion, housing developments and other projects in the Maldives. (AP)

GENEVA - The United States said on Monday that China's "unfair competitive practices" were harming foreign companies and workers in a way that violates World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, but vowed to lead reform efforts. U.S. trade ambassador Dennis Shea drew fire from Chinese envoy Zhang Xiangchen who said the Trump administration's tariffs on steel and aluminum products allowed protectionism under the guise of dubious national security con-

cerns. The heated words, in texts seen by Reuters, were exchanged at the start of a closed-door review of U.S. trade policies, held every two years at the WTO, which continues on Wednesday. Shea expressed concern about the WTO dispute settlement system having "strayed far from the system agreed to by members" and said that the Appellate Body had overreached in some legal interpretations. Zhang countered that by blocking the selection of



judges, Washington was putting the system into paralysis. To force reform at the WTO, Trump's team has refused to allow new appointments to the Appellate Body, the world's top trade court, a process which requires consensus among member states. As a result, the court is running out of judges, and will be unable to issue binding rulings in disputes. (Reuters)

U.S. And China Trade Barbs at WTO amid Calls for Reform

Ukrainian Far-Right MP Declares 'Hunt' for Moscow-Loyal Priests after Split



KIEV - A Ukrainian MP called for 'hunting' down and ousting all priests loyal to the Russian Orthodox Church, contrary to promises they won't be

persecuted. It came after Kiev proclaimed its own church to be independent from Moscow. Until last weekend there were three Orthodox

Christian churches in Ukraine. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is an internationally-recognized autonomous part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The two others were self-proclaimed and universally considered schismatic. On Saturday, the latter two unified into an Orthodox Church of Ukraine, an organization purporting to be part of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Priests of the canonical Church were invited to participate and break

ties with Moscow, but only two did. According to Dmitro Yarosh, a far-right Ukrainian MP, the Ukrainian priests who stayed loyal to the Russian Orthodox Church, should now be 'hunted' and ousted from the country. He shared what could be considered a call for violence on Sunday on his Facebook page, which has since been apparently suspended by the social network. The statements however had been cited by many media outlets prior to the suspension. (Russia Today)

World Stocks Mixed ahead of Brexit Address; Fed in Focus

SINGAPORE - World markets were mixed on Monday as British Prime Minister Theresa May prepares to address the House of Commons over a messy exit deal. Most Asian indexes rose on hopes that the Federal Reserve would re-evaluate its hawkish stance at a meeting later this week, following signs of slower global growth. KEEPING SCORE: Germany's DAX was 0.1 percent lower at 10,856.11 and France's CAC 40 fell 0.2 percent to 4,842.54. Britain's FTSE 100 index was down 0.3 percent at 6,825.02. Wall Street was set for a flat open. Dow futures added 0.1 percent to 24,147.00 and the broad S&P 500 futures rose 0.1 percent to 2,606.70. December is usually the best month of the year for stocks, because of a phenomenon known as the "Santa Claus rally" that sees them racking up gains. But all major U.S. indexes have fallen more than 10 percent from their record highs, reaching a mark known on Wall Street as a correction. (AP)

Kremlin Says New Ukrainian Church Being Used for Political Ends

MOSCOW - The Kremlin on Monday accused Ukraine's politicians of using the creation of a new Ukrainian Orthodox church independent of Moscow for political ends.

Ukraine chose the head of a new national Orthodox church on Saturday, marking a historic split from Russia which its leaders see as vital to the country's security and independence.

"In Ukraine, these processes, this schism-creating activity is completely mixed up with politics, which of course is probably not allowed in church canon," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on a conference call. (Reuters)

Madagascar: Three Presidents, Three Crises

ANTANANARIVO - Madagascar's past three presidents all had their terms tarnished by political crises. Two of them - Marc Ravalomanana and Andry Rajoelina - are through to Wednesday's second-round election run-off.

Here is a look back at the turbulent recent history of the Indian Ocean island:

Marc Ravalomanana, a milkman-turned-millionaire dairy mogul is declared winner of the presidential election in 2002 after a crisis lasting nearly seven months against outgoing leader Didier Ratsiraka, who disputed the results. Ravalomanana is reelected in 2006.

In 2009, Andry Rajoelina, a baby-faced ex-party planner and media boss who became mayor of the capital Antananarivo, emerges as an opposition leader. He denounces attacks on freedoms under Ravalomanana. (AFP)

Opposition Lawmakers Ejected from Hungary State TV after Protest

BUDAPEST - Security guards ejected two independent lawmakers from Hungary's state television building after they tried to read out a petition on Monday, a day after police used tear gas against pro-democracy protesters in Budapest.

The two lawmakers were among about a dozen members of parliament (MPs) who spent the night in the state television building, in a continuation of their demonstration against the policies of Hungary's right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

The petition reiterated the demands of Sun-



day's protesters, which included a call for the withdrawal of a new labor law, for independent public media and courts and for Hungary to join the European Union's prosecutors office. Independent lawmaker Bernadett Szel posted video footage on her Facebook page that

showed the security guards tussling with her fellow-MP Akos Hadhazy and throwing him out of the building. Szel said she had also been ejected. "We wanted to have our petition read out," she said in the video. Other lawmakers were continuing their protest at the building. (Reuters)

Saudi Arabia Denounces U.S. Senate Resolutions on Khashoggi, Yemen

RIYADH - Saudi Arabia on Monday denounced U.S. Senate resolutions calling for an end to U.S. military support for the war in Yemen and blaming Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, saying they were based on unsubstantiated claims.

The votes last Thursday were a rare rebuke to President Donald Trump, but largely symbolic. To become law,

they would need to pass the House of Representatives, whose Republican leaders have blocked any legislation intended to rebuke the Saudis. "The Kingdom categorically rejects any interference in its internal affairs, any and all accusations, in any manner, that disrespect its leadership ... and any attempts to undermine its sovereignty or diminish its stature," a foreign ministry statement said. (Reuters)

Plan to Make Australia Global Power for Military Exports on Track: Government

CANBERRA - The Australian government has declared it is on track to achieve its goal of becoming a top 10 military exporter after Western Australia's Austal won two orders for U.S. Navy ships.

Austal, the leading global producer of aluminum ships, on Monday announced that it would build another two combat ships for the U.S. Navy, adding to the two ships it is currently building and eight it has already delivered.

Australia's Minister for Defence Industry Steven Ciobo hailed the new deal and announced that the government's new export credit agency, the Export Finance and Insurance Corporation (EFIC), would loan CEA technologies, a Canberra-based defence contractor, 90 million Australian dollars (64.5 million U.S. dollars).

It marks the first time that the EFIC has given a loan after it was established in January with the capability to lend 3.8 billion Australian dollars (2.7 billion U.S. dollars) to boost Australia's defence exports.

"The Austal order shows how the Defence Export Facility is helping Australian exporters sell more of their Australian products to the world, helping drive economic growth and create new Australian jobs," Ciobo told reporters.

David Singleton, chief executive of Austal, said the new orders meant the company had a contract for 10 vessels to be built by 2025 and confirmed it was in negotiations with Trinidad and Tobago for two patrol boats. (Xinhua)

Indian Free in Pakistan after Serving 3 Years for Spying

ISLAMABAD - An Indian man convicted of spying in Pakistan is free after serving a three-year prison sentence.

Pakistan's foreign ministry spokesman, Mohammad Faisal, said on Monday that Indian national Hamid Nehal Ansari is being repatriated to New Delhi. He didn't elaborate. Ansari was arrested in 2012 on entering Pakistan from neighboring Afghani-

stan. He was sentenced in 2015 to three years in prison over alleged involvement in crimes against the state and using invalid documents to enter the country.

Pakistan and India have a history of bitter relations and since gaining independence from Britain in 1947, they have fought two of their three wars over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir. (AP)

Documentary About Uzbekistan Gets Record Views in France

TASHKENT - A documentary film about Samarkand and Bukhara, shot by the French film crew at the end of summer in Uzbekistan for the Doc TV series of the ELEPHANT channel, gathered a record TV audience during the broadcast, Trend reports referring to Uzbek media.

The first series of the film "Samarkand - the Uzbek pearl of Amin Maaluf", shown on the TV program "Invitation to the Journey",

tells about the history and art of the Great Silk Road, as well as about the heritage of the Tamerlane period.

Due to the increased interest in the story (over 500,000 views per show), the film will be broadcast on the ARTE online platform until Jan. 12, 2019.

The film is planned to be translated into Uzbek and Russian languages in the near future for broadcast on the TV channels of Uzbekistan. (Trend)

The U.S. Government Supports National Demographic and Health Survey in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE - Chargé d'Affaires of the United States Embassy in Dushanbe Kevin Covert congratulated the Government of Tajikistan on conducting the second Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) at an event in Dushanbe on December 14, Trend reports referring to news.

tj. According to the U.S. Embassy, Chargé Covert was joined at the presentation of the 2017 DHS results by Gulnora Hasanzoda, Director of the Agency for Statistics under the President of Tajikistan. The DHS, a nationwide survey on women's and children's health and domestic violence, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), was carried out by the Agency for Statistics under the President of Ta-

jkistan in coordination with the Tajik Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population.

Close to 11,000 women between the ages of 15 and 49 from almost eight thousand households across the country were reportedly interviewed as part of the survey.

Results from the 2017 DHS will provide decision makers with databases and analyses useful for forming new and updated policies, planning appropriate programs, and monitoring and evaluating existing programs.

The Demographic and Health Survey is one of the many assistance projects made possible by the American people through USAID in collaboration of the Agency for Statistics under the President of Tajikistan and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of the Population of Tajikistan. (Trend)