

Trump Receives Letter from Putin

WASHINGTON - U.S. President-elect Donald Trump said Friday he has received a Christmas letter from Russian President Vladimir Putin and his thoughts on promoting bilateral ties were "so correct."

"A very nice letter from Vladimir Putin, his thoughts are so correct," Trump said in a statement. "I hope both sides are able to live up to these thoughts, and we do not have to travel an alternate path."

In the Dec. 15 letter provided by Trump's transition team, Putin wrote that "serious global and regional challenges, which our countries have to face in recent years, show that the relations



between Russia and the U.S. remain an important factor in ensuring stability and security in the modern world."

Putin also urged the two sides to act "in a constructive and pragmatic manner to take real steps to restore the framework of bilateral cooperation in different areas as well as bring our level of collaboration on the international scene to a qualitatively new level."

The release of the letter, which was confirmed as authentic by the Kremlin, comes a day after Putin said Russia and the United States need to find ways to normalize relations at his annual year-end news conference. (Xinhua)

Trump Suggests Openness to Arms Race

WASHINGTON - One day after his nuclear weapons tweet sent jitters across the world, U.S. President-elect Donald Trump on Friday further suggested that he was open to arms race.

"Let it be an arms race... we will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all," Trump reportedly told MSNBC in an off-air conversation.

Less than one month before taking office, Trump caused alarm on Thursday by writing on Twitter in ambiguous language and just 118 letters that the United States must boost its nuclear capability.

"The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes," Trump wrote.

It remained unclear what caused Trump to weigh in on the issue. However, hours before what appeared to be the New York billionaire developer's impromptu statement on unclear weapons, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in a speech that Russia needed to "strengthen" its nuclear forces. Speaking in an interview... (More on P4)...(20)

Putin Sees Rosy Signs in Russian Economy, Ready to Mend Stranded Ties

MOSCOW - President Vladimir Putin Friday voiced his confidence in bringing his country out of the years-long economic plight, while showing Moscow's readiness to mend or improve years of stranded ties with some countries. At his annual year-end press conference held Friday in Moscow, Putin said that Russia's economy has been recovering from a decline caused by adverse global situation and Western sanctions since 2014. The country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was expected to slow down to

0.5 percent to 0.6 percent this year from 3.7 percent in 2015, while inflation for the year was likely to reach a record low of 5.5 percent, he said. Industrial output in 2016 was expected to rise by 0.7 percent to 0.9 percent, mainly due to an increase in certain industries, Putin said, compared with a 3.4 percent decline in 2015.

The country's budget deficit this year was expected to 3.7 percent, up from 2.6 percent in 2015, which Putin said is "acceptable" as Russia has a trade surplus of... (More on P4)...(21)

Merkel Says Germany Wants to Deport More Failed Asylum Seekers

BERLIN - German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Friday that Germany wanted to increase deportation of failed asylum seekers to ensure better safety in the country.

The chancellor made the remarks in a statement issued after the confirmation that Anis Amri, a Tunisian national suspected of carrying out a truck attack on a Christmas market in downtown Berlin, was shot and killed by Italian police officers in a routine patrol in Milan early Friday morning.

Merkel mentioned specifically asylum seekers from Tunisia, saying that she had told Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi in a phone conversation that Germany wanted quicker deportation of Tunisian asylum seekers whose applications had been rejected.

"I told the Tunisian president that we have to significantly speed up the deportation process and increased the number of



people expelled," the chancellor was quoted as saying in the statement. The truck attack on the Christmas market raised many ques-

tions, she said, vowing that her government would take necessary measures to make the country better secured. (Xinhua)

Obama Signs Annual Defense Policy Bill into Law with Disappointment

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Barack Obama has signed an annual defense policy bill into law though he said he was disappointed in many aspects, the White House announced Friday.

The wide-ranging National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which was passed by both the House and the Senate with veto-proof majorities earlier this month, lays restrictions on transferring detainees out of the Guantanamo Bay facility, ensuring that Obama will not be able to fulfill his goal of closing it before

he leaves office. It authorizes a total of 618.7 billion US dollars in spending, including a troop pay raise of 2.1 percent, though Obama has only requested for a 1.6 percent pay raise.

It also calls for 3.2 billion dollars more in base defense funding than Obama has requested, plus an additional 5.8 billion dollars in White House-requested war dollars.



Obama said despite his disappointments, he signed the bill because it "authorizes fiscal year 2017 appropriations principally for the Department of De-

fense and for Department of Energy national security programs, provides vital benefits for military personnel and their families, and includes authorities to... (More on P4)...(22)

Erdogan Says No New State Allowed in Northern Syria

ISTANBUL - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed on Saturday not to allow a new state to be established in northern Syria.

"We will never allow the founding of this kind of state," the president was quoted by Turkish press as saying to Turkey's Foreign Economic Relations Board in Istanbul.

Erdogan also reiterated a call for the establishment of a "terror-free safe zone" in northern Syria for the safety of Turkey's southeastern border provinces. Ankara launched a mili-



tary operation on Aug. 24 in northern Syria mainly to prevent the Syrian Kurds from uniting their cantons for an autonomous region, or worse, an independent state, which Turkey fears

might set a precedent for its own Kurds.

Turkish forces and Ankara-backed Syrian rebels have been fighting lately to take the northern Syrian... (More on P4)...(23)

British PM Urges Post-Brexit Vote Unity in 2017

LONDON - British Prime Minister Theresa May urged the country to come together in 2017 after a year of bitter divisions exposed by the Brexit referendum, in her first Christmas message released Saturday.

She said Britain needed to unite and seize the opportunity to forge a new role in the world as it leaves the European Union. In the June referendum, 52 percent voted for Britain to leave the EU and wrangling over the issue dominated the rest of the year. May says she wants to begin the formal process of withdrawing from the EU, which can take up to two years, by the end of March.

As families gathered for Christmas, May said "coming together is also important for us as a country". "As we leave the European Union we... (More on P4)...(24)

US Forces Embedding More to Help Iraqis Retake Mosul: Commander

MAKHMOUR, Iraq - U.S. forces assisting Iraqi troops to retake Mosul from Islamic State are embedding more extensively, a senior commander said on Friday, a move that could accelerate a two month-old campaign which has slackened after quick initial advances.

More than 5,000 American service members are currently deployed in Iraq as part of an international coalition that is advising local forces in a bid to recapture the third of the country the jihadists seized in 2014 when Iraq's army and police dropped their weapons and fled.

Coalition advisors were initially concentrated at a high-level headquarters in Baghdad but have fanned out over the past two years to multiple locations to stay near advancing troops.

Now, as Iraqi forces controlling around a quarter of Mosul - Islamic State's last major stronghold in Iraq - proceed deeper into the northern city and encounter fierce counter-attacks that render progress slow and punishing, U.S. troops are stepping up their involvement.

"We are deepening our integration with them," said U.S. Army Colonel Brett G. Sylvia. "We are now pushing that into more of the Iraqi formations pushing forward, some formations that we haven't partnered with in the past where we are now partnering with them." (Reuters)

UNSC Adopts Resolution Urging End to Israeli Settlement Activities

UNITED NATIONS - The UN Security Council on Friday adopted a resolution urging Israel to cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory. The 15-nation council reaffirms the Israeli settlement activities have "no legal validity" and constitute a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the achievement of a two-state solution between Palestine and Israel.

Fourteen council members voted in favor and the United States abstained. The resolution demands that "Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the... (More on P4)...(25)

After Berlin Attack, Europe Weighs Freedom Against Security

PARIS - Europe's open borders may symbolize liberty and forward thinking for some - but they increasingly look like the continent's Achilles' heel.

Europe's No. 1 terrorism suspect crossed at least two borders this week despite an international manhunt, and was felled only by chance, in a random ID check. The bungled chase for Berlin attack suspect Anis Amri is just one example of recent cross-border security failures that are emboldening nationalists fed up with European unity. Extremist violence, they argue, is too high a price to pay for the freedom to travel.

Defenders of the EU's border-free zone

say the security failures show the need for more cooperation among European governments, even shared militaries - not new barriers. Hidebound habits of hoarding intelligence within centuries-old borders, they contend, are part of the problem. But their arguments are easily drowned out by the likes of far right leader Marine Le Pen, hoping to win France's presidency in May. "The myth of total free movement in Europe, which my rivals are clinging to in this presidential election, should be definitively buried.

Our security depends on it," she said in a statement Friday, calling the free-travel zone a "total security catastrophe." (AP)

Neighbor News

Russia-China Ties beyond "Strategic Partnership": Putin

MOSCOW - Russia and China have established in recent years a relationship that is more than a simple strategic partnership, which will be further promoted, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Friday at his annual year-end press conference.

China is our biggest trade and economic partner, even though there has been some decline caused in part by objective circumstances, primarily lower energy product prices, he said. Moreover, the two sides have made joint efforts to diversify their co-

operation, with major projects launched in the fields of aviation, infrastructure, space and atomic energy.

He congratulate China on its currency yuan joining the International Monetary Fund's basket of reserve currencies, which he said would benefit bilateral economic relations.

As Russia and China share common positions on many issues at the global arena, Putin believed that the two countries will continue to be serious stabilizing elements on all international affairs. (Xinhua)

Pakistan, Turkey FTA Negotiations Make Headway

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan and Turkey held their fifth round of the negotiations on Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and achieved progress on the tariff lines proposed for concessions by the both sides.

Both sides undertook discussions on agreement on goods, agreement on services and agreement on investment, said a press release issued Saturday.

Considerable progress was made during the talks on all these agreements, it claimed. During the talks held in cordial environment, substantial progress was achieved on the tariff lines proposed for concessions by the

both sides. Keeping in view the directives and earnest desire of the highest leadership, both sides agreed to hold next round of talks in Islamabad at the earliest possible date.

In the negotiations held in Ankara from December 21-23, the Pakistani delegation was headed by Additional Secretary, Ministry of Commerce Mian Asad Hayatuddin and included officials of ministries of commerce, Industries and textiles, Federal Board of Revenue and Engineering Development Board.

The sessions were also attended by Ambassador of Pakistan to Turkey Sohail Mahmood. (Monitoring Desk)

Rouhani Highlights Closer Relations with Countries in Region

TEHRAN - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that the current situation in the region necessitates closer relations among regional countries, particularly those of Iran with Central Asian and Caucasian states, Press TV reported on Saturday.

Rouhani noted the importance of Countries in Central Asia and Caucasus as they are "in the same region as Iran, are our neighbors," highlighting one of Iran's principles of foreign policy is "close ties with friends and neighbors."

Amicable relations will make regional states better prepared against crises, Rouhani said as he was home from his tour to Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

"Under the current circumstances in the region, the closer ties and the more consultations with friends... the better we can tackle problems," the Iranian president was quoted as saying.

During his trip, Iran signed a total of 15 cooperation agreements with the three countries in different areas, including visa regimes, banking, technical and engineering services, agriculture, transportation and security issues.

Rouhani said as he was home from his tour to Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, Rouhani said. (Xinhua)

Turkmenistan Keen to Bring Investment in Energy Industry

ASHGABAT - In Turkmenistan's energy industry, main attention should be paid to the attraction of foreign investment in large infrastructure projects, including the projects on the development of oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Sea, diversification of natural gas supplies to world markets and construction of modern gas chemical complexes, the Turkmen government said in a message on Saturday quoting President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov.

The head of state made the remarks addressing a meeting of the cabinet of ministers.

Berdimuhamedov noted the need to introduce scientific achievements and innovative technologies in exploration, drilling and development of hydrocarbon deposits. "Effective use of the enormous hydrocarbon resources of Turkmenistan - one of the world's energy powers - is intended to help realize the country's enormous potential, boost well-being of the Turkmen people, as well as solve the issues of ensuring energy security, which is an important factor of dynamic social and economic development on regional and global scale," Berdimuhamedov said. (Trend)