

Russia's Lavrov Calls on U.S. and North Korea to Start Talks

MOSCOW - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called on Monday for the United States and North Korea to start negotiations, the RIA news agency reported.

Lavrov was cited as saying that Russia was ready to facilitate such negotiations.

Moscow has long called for Washington and Pyongyang to hold talks aimed at de-escalating tensions around North Korea's nuclear and missile program.

North Korea's foreign ministry said on Sunday that the latest U.N. sanctions against North Korea were an act of war and tantamount to a complete economic blockade against it. (Reuters)



Pope, on Christmas Eve, Says Faith Demands Respect of Immigrants

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis strongly defended immigrants at his Christmas Eve Mass on Sunday, comparing them to Mary and Joseph finding no place to stay in Bethlehem and saying faith demands that foreigners be welcomed.

Francis, celebrating his fifth Christmas as leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, led a solemn Mass for about 10,000 people in St. Peter's Basilica while many others followed the service from the square outside.

Security was stepped up, with participants checked as they approached St. Peter's Square even before going through metal detectors to enter the basilica. The square had been cleared out hours earlier so security procedures could be put in place.

The Gospel reading at the Mass in Christendom's largest church recounted the Biblical story of how Mary and Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered for a census ordered by Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus. (Reuters)

Mideast Needs Two-State Solution, Pope Says in Christmas Message

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis used his Christmas message on Monday to call for a negotiated two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, after U.S. President Donald Trump stoked regional tensions with his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Francis spoke of the Middle East conflict and other world flashpoints in his "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) address, four days after more than 120 countries backed a U.N. resolution urging the United States

to reverse its decision on Jerusalem.

"Let us pray that the will to resume dialogue may prevail between the parties and that a negotiated solution can finally be reached, one that would allow the peaceful co-existence of two states within mutually agreed and internationally recognized borders," he said, referring to the Israelis and Palestinians.

"We see Jesus in the children of the Middle East who continue to suffer because of growing tensions between Israelis



and Palestinians," he said in his address, delivered from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to tens of thousands of people.

It was the second time that the pope has spoken out publicly about Jeru-

salem since Trump's decision on Dec. 6. On that day, Francis called for the city's "status quo" to be respected, lest new tensions in the Middle East further inflame world conflicts. (Reuters)

N. Korea Says It's a 'Pipe Dream' that it Will Give up Nukes



SEOUL, South Korea - North Korea said it is a "pipe dream" for the United States to think it will give up its nuclear weapons, and called the latest U.N. sanctions to target the country "an act of

war" that violates its sovereignty.

The U.N. Security Council unanimously approved tough new sanctions against North Korea on Friday in response to its latest launch of a ballistic

missile that Pyongyang says can reach anywhere on the U.S. mainland. The resolution was drafted by the United States and negotiated with the North's closest ally, China.

"We define this 'sanctions resolution' rigged up by the U.S. and its followers as a grave infringement upon the sovereignty of our Republic, as an act of war violating peace and stability in the Korean peninsula and the region and categorically reject the 'resolution,'" North Korea's foreign ministry said in a statement on Sunday. The ministry said

the sanctions are tantamount to a "complete economic blockade" of North Korea.

"If the U.S. wishes to live safely, it must abandon its hostile policy towards the DPRK and learn to co-exist with the country that has nuclear weapons and should wake up from its pipe dream of our country giving up nuclear weapons which we have developed and completed through all kinds of hardships," said the statement, carried by the North's official Korean Central News Agency. (AP)

Queen Elizabeth II to Praise UK's Response to Extremism

LONDON - Queen Elizabeth II plans to use her Christmas message to praise London and Manchester for pulling together after extremist attacks this year.

Remarks pre-recorded by the monarch will be televised on Christmas Day in the United Kingdom and 51 other Commonwealth countries.

Excerpts released by Buckingham Palace indicate Elizabeth hails the "powerful identities" of Manchester and London. The queen, her husband

Prince Philip and family members plan to attend a church service Monday near Elizabeth's country estate in Sandringham. They typically mingle with locals who come to watch them arrive.

The royal family has a private lunch scheduled afterward. This is the first Christmas the family will be joined by Prince Harry's fiancée, American actress Meghan Markle.

Elizabeth and Philip missed last year's service with the flu. (AP)

'We Want a Deep Partnership' Finland Wants Even Closer Relationship with UK after Brexit

HELSINKI - Finland want to reach an ever closer relationship with the United Kingdom once it has cut ties with Brussels.

A Finnish Minister has said that he wants the close relationship between Britain and Finland to continue after Brexit.

The UK will begin trade talks with the European Union in the new year, but fears have been raised that negotiations could be even tougher than the first phase.

Speaking exclusively to Express.co.uk Finnish Deputy Foreign Minister Samuli Virtanen said Finland simply wanted to "cooperate" with Britain.

He said: "For us the UK is a big trading partner, one of the biggest. It is the strongest military power in Europe. We want to cooperate with the British on various levels. Hopefully even deeper than we do now."

"It's up to the British to decide which international organisations they want to belong to or don't want to belong to, that's not our decision."

"We just want to cooperate with you." Mr Virtanen said progress in future negotiations needs flexibility from both sides by highlighted the strong partnership he wants the UK to have with Finland and the European Union after Brexit.

"The UK is a superb ally and a very important one," he said.

"As I said the UK is leaving the EU but we would very much like to keep our relationship as close as possible to them."

Mr Virtanen added that the future relationship between the UK and Finland is dependent on the UK and EU's negotiating team reaching an agreement. (Agencies)

Int'l Coalition Preserves Terrorist Organizations in Syria for Promoting its Own Agenda: Lavrov

MOSCOW - Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, affirmed on Monday that the US-led international coalition does not want to eliminate the terrorist organizations in Syria, but seeks to preserve them for later use in achieving its objectives.

During an interview with RT, Lavrov said that some Western countries have double stances on Jabhat al-Nusra organization as the US-led international coalition does not want to fight the terrorist organization, but to preserve it to be used later to promote



its own agenda in Syria. "Attempts to profit from anti-terrorist objectives - which should be common, unified and without double standards - are disturbing," Lavrov noted. He pointed out that the US military presence in Syria constitutes a clear

and blatant violation of Syrian sovereignty, noting that the Western position on the political settlement of the crisis in Syria is still ambiguous, especially after the elimination of Daesh (ISIS) terrorist organization. (Agencies)

French President to Visit Iran as Planned: Foreign Ministry

TEHRAN - The Iranian Foreign Ministry has dismissed rumors that a state visit by French President Emmanuel Macron to Iran has been "delayed," clarifying that the trip will take place as planned but that no date has yet been scheduled for it.

"Macron's trip is on the agenda of the two countries (Iran and France)... and has certainly not been delayed because a date has not been set for it yet," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi said during a regular weekly press brief-

ing on Monday.

He dismissed reports that "conditions" have been set in order for the trip to take place. "There are no conditions in exchanges of visits and relations by delegations. The two countries enjoy positive relations, there is much interaction between Tehran and Paris, which will continue," Qassemi added.

He said a report that Macron had talked to Saudi King Salman and had made anti-Iran comments "originated" in Saudi Arabia. (Presstv)

Sudan, Turkey Sign 12 Agreements in Economic, Military, Cultural Cooperation

KHARTOUM - Sudan and Turkey signed on Sunday in Khartoum 12 agreements to boost economic, military and cultural cooperation.

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir held talks with his visiting Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Sunday, during which they discussed ways to develop bilateral relations in all fields.

The two sides also agreed to establish a joint Strategic Cooperation Council chaired by the two state leaders.

"This (Erdogan's visit) is a historic visit as it is the first time for a Turkish president to visit Sudan. It is also distinguished given the great accompanying ministerial delegation," said Bashir at a joint press conference with Erdogan following the talks.

He said the visit gives rise to a great leap in the ties between the two countries and unveils a new phase in the relations between Khartoum and Ankara.

Erdogan, for his part, reiterated his country's keenness to enhance the economic ties with Sudan, stressing that Sudan and Turkey expect to increase trade volume from present 500 million U.S. dollars to 10 billion dollars.

He further thanked the Sudanese people for backing Turkey in the foiled coup attempt on July 15, 2016.

Erdogan also expressed satisfaction over the lifting of the U.S. economic sanctions on Sudan, noting that Sudan had been treated unfairly, but it has overcome the difficulties. (Xinhua)

Neighbor News

Chinese Foreign Minister Pledges Better Diplomacy for China, World Development

BEIJING - Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has pledged better diplomatic work to serve the development of China and the world.

As the largest developing country, the diplomatic work of China should serve the creation of a better external environment for the country's modernization, Wang said in an interview with journalists of the People's Daily, the flagship newspaper of the Communist Party of China (CPC).

"On the other hand, we also need to take our international responsibilities and make new contributions to the development and progress of humanity," he said in the interview, which was published in the Monday edition of the

newspaper. Wang said China will make every possible effort to host the Boao Forum for Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation and the China International Import Expo next year to "open a new chapter" for win-win cooperation between China and other countries.

He also said China will promote the healthy development of China-U.S. relations, maintain high-level strategic coordination with Russia, consolidate the sound momentum for relations with European countries, and work to build a framework for major-country relations featuring overall stability and balanced development. (Xinhua)

Pak-China Friendship Has No Parallel: NA Speaker

ISLAMABAD - Speaker of National Assembly Sardar Ayaz Sadiq Monday said Pak-China relations had no parallel in international relations.

He said relations between Pakistan and China based on shared geopolitical, economic, historical and strategic interest and both the countries had always stood with each other at difficult times, a news release said.

He expressed these views while talking to the Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) of the People's Republic of China, Zhang Ping in the sideline meeting during Speakers' Conference at Parliament House. Convener Pak-China

Friendship Group Rana Muhammad Afzal and Chairman Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Makhdoom Khuro Bakhtyar were also present on the occasion.

The speaker reiterated that the historic Pak-China relations had entered a new phase of unprecedented cooperation.

"Your visit will provide yet another opportunity to strengthen the existing warm and friendly relations between our two countries", he said.

He said Pakistan was fully committed to the timely completion of all projects under China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was a major and one of the most important components of the initiative. (Monitoring Desk)

Larijani Calls on China, Pakistan to Join Anti-Terror Coalition by Iran, Turkey, Russia

TEHRAN - Iran has called on China and Pakistan to join a counter-terrorism campaign which it is spearheading jointly with Russia and Turkey,

saying the coalition is an alternative to the one led by the US which has caused a "security mess". Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani made the appeal during a two-day conference on terrorism, which began in Islamabad Sunday with the participation of his counterparts from Pakistan, Russia, China, Turkey and Afghanistan.

"We need to strengthen alliances like the one between Iran, Russia and Turkey, because these meetings can play a role in this regard, and if China and Pakistan also

help us in this matter, we will certainly succeed," he said.

Larijani said the US-led coalition was supposed to eliminate terrorism in Afghanistan and stem the production and smuggling of narcotics, but it has not made any headway in either field.

On the contrary, "the fight that Iran, Russia and Turkey have had in Syria has been successful given the blows which it has dealt to Daesh," the speaker added.

Larijani mocked President Donald Trump's claims that the US and its allies "crushed ... (Daesh) terrorists on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq, and will continue pursuing them until they are destroyed." (Presstv)

Uzbekistan, Iran Consider Transit Cargo Transportation

TASHKENT - Uzbekistan and Iran considered transit cargo transportation, as the Uzbek Foreign Trade Ministry

hosted a meeting with Deputy Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade of Iran Mojtaba Khosrotaj. The sides mulled the current state and prospects of trade and economic cooperation, as well as further cooperation in the field of transport and transit cargo transportation.

In addition, the parties agreed to organize a regular meeting of the Intergovernmental Commis-

sion on Trade-Economic and Transport-Communication Cooperation in the first half of 2018 in Tehran.

In October, the Uzbek-Iranian business forum was held in Tehran. Then the parties inked trade agreements worth over \$25 million.

In addition, the parties signed a protocol of intentions for \$7.5 million. Also, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov and his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif signed the Cooperation Program for 2018-2019. (Trend)