

See Differences as Asset, Not Danger, Pope Says in Christmas Message

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis, in his Christmas message to the world, urged people on Tuesday to see differences as a source of richness instead of danger and called for reconciliation in places torn apart by conflict. Francis delivered the traditional papal "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) message to tens of thousands of people in a sunny St. Peter's Square from the same basilica balcony where he first appeared as pontiff shortly after his election on March 13, 2013.

Security has been tight around the Vatican for the Christmas season, with military jeeps stationed at key access routes and tourists undergoing metal detector and



bag searches. Last week police in southern Italy arrested a Somali man suspected of having been a member of Islamic State and who had

threatened to bomb churches in Italy, including St. Peter's. In his address, in what appeared to be a reference to the shrill political climate in a number of countries, Francis called for "fraternity among people with different ideas, yet capable of respecting and listening to one another". Francis, the first pope from Latin America, alluded to polarisation over migration, saying God wanted "love, acceptance, respect for this poor humanity of ours, which we all share in a great variety of races, languages, and cultures". "Our differences, then, are not a detriment or a danger; they are a source of richness," he said. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Iran Submits First Budget Since US Sanctions Were Restored

TEHRAN, Iran - Iran's president submitted next year's budget to parliament on Tuesday, the first since the United States restored sanctions that had been lifted under the nuclear deal. The \$47.5 billion budget is less than half the size of last year's, mainly due to the severe depreciation of the local currency following President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. The Iranian rial has fallen from around 42,000 to the dollar a year ago to around 100,000 today.

The government plans to fund 35 percent of the budget with oil revenues, projecting exports of up to 1.5 million barrels a

day at a maximum of \$54 a barrel.

The opaque budget bill did not include a projected deficit or a reference to military expenditures. Earlier this month, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Iran spends less than \$16 billion on its armed forces.

The U.S. restored tough sanctions on Iran's vital oil industry in November, but granted waivers to a number of nations allowing them to continue imports in exchange for commitments to reduce them over time.

President Hassan Rouhani said the sanctions have hurt Iran but will not bring the Islamic Republic "to its knees." (AP)

Uzbek Commodity Exchange's Trade Volume Drops Again

TASHKENT - At the Dec. 17-23 trade week at the Uzbek Commodity Exchange (UZEX), transactions worth 791.8 billion soums were carried out, Trend reports on Dec. 25 referring to the press service of the exchange.

The exchange trading dropped from 686.3 billion soums to 656.9 billion soums. In the sales, chemical products held the first place with a share of 18 percent. Construction materials ranked

second with a share of 16.3 percent, followed by fodder with 14.8 percent, as well as oil products with 11.9 percent.

The currency trading site of the exchange sold only one local good worth almost \$50,000 - membranous polyethylene. Over the past period, 813 car plates were sold through online auctions. The total amount of sold license plates reached almost 5.2 billion soums. (Trend)

Pakistan: President Questions US Military Interventions

KARACHI - In a rare move, Pakistan's president took to Twitter to publicly question the U.S. military interventions in such countries as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Commenting on U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw American troops from civil war-ravaged Syria, Arif Alvi criticized the destruction caused by the worldwide U.S. military presence.

"The countries who were the testing platforms for such policies have suffered tremendously. After this admission the next step obviously could be humanitarian reparations for the damage and suffering caused by these wars," Alvi tweeted.

Alvi was responding to a Trump tweet quoting Rand Paul, a Republican senator wary

of U.S. interventions, saying: "It should not be the job of America to replace regimes around the world. This is what President Trump recognized in Iraq, that it was the biggest foreign policy disaster of the last several decades, and he's right...The generals still don't get the mistake."

Following his withdrawal decision last week, Trump lauded the presence of Turkish troops in the region ordered there by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"President @RT_Erdogan of Turkey has very strongly informed me that he will eradicate whatever is left of ISIS [Daesh] in Syria and he is a man who can do it plus, Turkey is right 'next door.' Our troops are coming home!" Trump tweeted. (Monitoring Desk)

Minister: Pakistan Eyeing to Widen Trade Ties with Iran

TEHRAN - Pakistani Finance Minister Asad Umar underlined that efforts are underway to forge strong trade relations with Iran, specially in the banking and financial sectors.

"Economic and trade policies are being formulated to ensure development of agriculture and industrial sectors in the country, aiming at provide maximum job opportunities for the youth," Umar said. Umar said that Balochistan is the largest province of the country where central and provincial governments would work together for uplifting the agriculture sector.

"There are vast opportunities for investment in Balochistan and rest

of the country in agriculture, minerals and Halal food in accordance with international demands," he added.

He said this while talking to members of Balochistan Chamber of Commerce regarding difficulties in trade issues during a meeting in south western city of Quetta.

Asad Umar further said directive was issued for the completion of a report within 30 days to promote trade activities between Iran and Pakistan. The minister added economic and trade policies are being formulated to ensure development of agriculture and industrial sectors in the country, aiming to provide maximum job opportunities to the youth. (FNA)

Trump 'Open' to Meeting Erdogan in Turkey Next Year

WASHINGTON - Donald Trump is "open" to the possibility of holding a face to face meeting with the Turkish President, the White House said, after Erdogan invited the US President to visit Ankara next year.

"While nothing definite is being planned, the President is open to a potential meeting in the future," White House spokesman Hogan Gidley said in a statement.

The invitation to visit Turkey as some point in 2019 was issued by Erdogan during what the Ameri-

can leader described as a "long and productive" phone conversation over the weekend, following the US' somewhat abrupt decision to withdraw its forces from Syria.

According to Erdogan's spokesman, Washington's decision was heavily influenced by Ankara's commitment to target Kurdish "terrorists" in Syria. Still, the withdrawal of the some 2,000 US troops currently stationed in Syria will be "slow & highly coordinated," Trump tweeted on Sunday. (Russia Today)

NEW YORK - China's further opening-up of its markets to foreign imports and investment will not only propel growth forward in the country but also boost the global economy, said a renowned U.S. expert.

China's measures for further opening-up will have ramifications that "are as profound as" the country's opening of its trade policy regime and accession to the WTO two decades ago, Sourabh Gupta, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Institute for China-America

China's Further Opening Up to Boost Global Economy: U.S. Expert

Studies, said in a recent interview.

"Foremost, it will promote structural reform domestically and help propel growth forward in China," Gupta said. "And because China is such a huge contributor to global growth and increasingly to global consumption too, the world economy will grow much more prosperous on the back of China's growth."

"In time, it will mean that China becomes a primary pillar of the global economic and monetary system. It will be a provider



of capital, technology and knowhow overseas," he added. As China's Renminbi internationalizes and its own capital markets deepen, the country will "become a provider of safe global financial

assets," he said. "And as one of the world's largest importers, it will become one of the go-to global consumption markets that underpin global economic balance and stability." (Xinhua)

Modi Inaugurates India's Longest Rail-Cum-Road Bridge in Assam



NEW DELHI - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the country's longest rail-cum-road bridge, Bogibeel Bridge, Tues-

day in northeastern state of Assam, officials said.

The bridge has been built over river Brahmaputra in Dibrugarh

district, about 446 km northeast of Dispur, the capital city of Assam.

"The inauguration of Bogibeel Bridge is a historic feat and I am glad to be here in Assam, among you all on this special day," Modi said in his address.

"The Bogibeel Bridge is a lifeline for the people of Assam. It has enhanced connectivity between Assam and other parts of the nation."

Officials said the bridge has a two-line railway track on the lower deck and a three-lane road on

the top deck. The 4.9-km bridge is Asia's second longest rail-cum-road bridge and constructed with around 35,400 metric tonnes of steel.

"Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) has supplied TMT rebars, plates and structural for this bridge, which has composite welded steel truss girders in its structures," a spokesman of the Ministry of Steel said. The bridge, according to officials, has a serviceable period of 120 years. (Xinhua)

Political Pawn? N. Korea Ordered to Pay \$501mn Over US Student's Death as Trump Pushes New Kim Talks

WASHINGTON - A US judge has ordered North Korea to pay damages to the family of a student who died in the US after being released from North Korean custody, yet, behind the scenes, both sides seem to have bigger questions in mind. Beryl Howell, the chief judge of the US District Court for Washington, DC, demanded North Korea pay the imposing sum on Monday, ostensibly as a consequence of 22-year-old Otto Warmbier having been tortured during his

17-month detention in a North Korean work camp in 2016, which allegedly resulted in his coma and eventual death. It comes as little surprise that the judge's order to hand over the money was packaged in all of the US' major political talking points against North Korea, considering that the court-proceedings directly coincide with a diplomatic drive by Donald Trump to lock-down a second meeting with North Korean President Kim Jong Un. (Russia Today)

Turkey Determined to Cross East of Euphrates as Soon as Possible, Hurriyet Cites Foreign Minister

ISTANBUL - Turkey is determined to cross to the east of the Euphrates river in northern Syria as soon as possible, Ankara's foreign minister was quoted as saying on Tuesday, after the proposed military campaign was delayed by the U.S. withdrawal. Turkey said this month it would launch a new military operation in the area. Last week, the United States announced a full pull-out from northern Syria, prompting Turkey to delay the campaign until the withdrawal is completed.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and U.S. President Donald Trump have agreed to coordinate to prevent a power vacuum from developing, Turkey has said.

Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters at a briefing that Turkey aimed to cross the east of the Euphrates as soon as possible, the Hurriyet said, without giving further details. Turkey and the United States have also agreed to complete their agreement on the Syrian town of Manbij by the time the United States finishes its withdrawal, Cavusoglu also said, according to the state-owned Anadolu news agency. (Reuters)

Russia's Putin Has No Immediate Plan to Meet Turkey's Erdogan: Kremlin

MOSCOW - Russia's President Vladimir Putin does not have immediate plans to meet with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday.

Earlier on Tuesday, Erdogan told reporters he would most probably meet with Putin to discuss the U.S. withdrawal from Syria. (Reuters)

Queen Elizabeth II Celebrates Christmas before Annual Speech

SANDRINGHAM, England - Queen Elizabeth II was cheered by on-lookers when she and other senior royals arrived at a Christmas church service on the grounds of one of her country estates.

The 92-year-old queen arrived by car Tuesday morning while younger royals walked from her grand country house in Sandringham to nearby St. Mary Magdalene Church.

Prince Charles led the way, followed by his sons: Prince William and his wife Catherine and Prince Harry and



his wife Meghan, who is expecting their first child in the spring. Harry and Meghan walked arm in arm next to William and Catherine. Many in the crowd wished the young royals a "Merry Christmas" as they strolled to the

church on a cold wintry day in the English countryside. Later they received flowers from the crowd after the 45-minute service as they headed back to Sandringham House ahead of a traditional Christmas lunch. (Fox News)

Mexican Governor, Senator Killed in Helicopter Crash

MEXICO - The newly elected governor of Mexico's Puebla state and her husband, a federal senator and former governor of the state, were killed Monday in a helicopter crash.

Mexican President Manuel Lopez Obrador has expressed his "deepest condolences" via Twitter to the family of Puebla Gov. Martha Erika Alonso and ex-Gov. Rafael Moreno Valle.

Both victims were members of the conservative National Action Party. Party leader Marko Cortes tweeted: "I deeply regret the fatal accident in which Martha Ericka Alonso, Rafael

Moreno Valle and other people lost their lives. May they rest in peace." Cortes added that the party was "in mourning."

The Agusta 109 helicopter fell about 10 minutes after taking off from a heliport within the city of Puebla on a flight to Mexico City. Two pilots and a third passenger also died.

It crashed in the municipality of Santa Maria Coronango, which is about 3.5 miles north of the city's main airport on the western outskirts, federal Public Security Secretary Alfonso Durazo told a news conference. (Fox News)

Military Santa Tracker Live Despite US Government Shutdown

WASHINGTON - The US government shutdown may have temporarily dimmed Washington's National Christmas Tree but never fear, Santa Claus still came to town - with the military tracking his path across the globe. Just as it has since the 1950s the Canadian and American defense agency NORAD delivered live updates on the man in the red suit's international gift delivery route.

NORAD eased the fears of good little boys and girls concerned the tracker might be down, after US lawmakers failed agree on a budget, triggering a partial shutdown of federal services, including the maintenance of the Christmas tree outside the White House.

"In the event of a government shutdown, NORAD will continue with its 63-year tradition of NORAD Tracks Santa on Dec. 24," the agency tweeted on the tracker, the Pentagon's largest public outreach program.

"Military personnel who conduct NORAD Tracks Santa are supported by approximately 1,500 volunteers who make the program possible each and every year."

Shortly before 1100 GMT, Father Christmas's reindeer-powered sleigh was heading home to the North Pole, having delivered more than 7.2 billion gifts.

In addition to tracking St Nick, volunteers donning military garb and Santa hats also respond to tens of thousands of calls and emails from eager children hoping to probe for details including their Christmas wish lists. (AFP)