

North Korea, South Korea Hold Groundbreaking Ceremony for Railway Project

SEOUL - South Korean officials attended a groundbreaking ceremony Wednesday on a project meant to modernize North Korea's railways and roads to connect them with the South. The event at the North Korean border town of Kaesong is one of a number of peace gestures agreed between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and liberal South Korean President Moon Jae-in as they push ahead with engagement amid a stalemate in larger nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang. However, the ceremony is largely symbolic, since the project cannot make major strides without the removal of U.S.-led sanctions against North Korea. The two Koreas conducted a joint survey of the northern railway sections they hope to link with the South weeks



ago. During his three summits with Moon and a meeting with President Donald Trump in June, Kim signed vague statements pledging a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula without describing how and when it would occur. But followup nuclear

talks between Washington and Pyongyang have stalled for months over the sequencing of the denuclearization that Washington wants and the removal of international sanctions desired by Pyongyang.

South Korea's Unification Ministry, which handles inter-Korean affairs, said the Seoul government plans to conduct further surveys on North Korean railways and roads before drawing up a detailed blueprint for the project. "Actual construction will be pursued in accordance with progress in the North's denuclearization and the state of sanctions against the North," the ministry said in a statement. Even if the North takes concrete steps toward denuclearization and gains sanctions relief, some experts say updating North Korean rail networks and trains, which creak slowly along the rails that were first built in the early 20th century, could take decades and massive investment. (Fox News)

Pope Urges 'Fraternity' in Christmas Message

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis called for peace and "fraternity" and Queen Elizabeth II warned against "tribalism", as millions across the world celebrated Christmas on Tuesday - after US President Donald Trump caused a festive furore by raising doubts about Santa Claus's existence during a call with a child. Some 50,000 worshippers gathered at the Vatican to hear the pontiff's sixth "Urbi et Orbi" (To the City and the World) message appealing for peace in conflict zones such as Syria and Yemen, which face

humanitarian crises. "My wish for a happy Christmas is a wish for fraternity," he told pilgrims in Saint Peter's Square on Tuesday, when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. "Fraternity among individuals of every nation and culture. Fraternity among people with different ideas... Fraternity among persons of different religions." Francis, the head of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, had used his mass on Monday night to urge people to curb "insatiable greed". (AFP)

Indonesian Rescuers Struggle Against Heavy Rain to Reach Tsunami-Hit Villages

SUMUR, Indonesia - Indonesian rescue teams on Wednesday struggled to reach remote areas on the western coast of Java amid an "extreme weather" rain warning after a tsunami killed more than 400 people last week. Heavy rain lashed fishing villages along the coast, muddying roads and holding up convoys delivering heavy machinery and aid to isolated areas while authorities urged residents to stay away from the shore in case of further waves.

Clouds of ash spewed from the nearby Anak Krakatau, or child of Krakatau, almost obscuring the volcanic island where a crater collapse at high tide on Saturday sent waves up to 5 meters (16 feet) high smashing into the coast on the Sunda Strait, between Java and Sumatra islands. Indonesia's meteorology agency (BMKG) said the rough weather could make the volcano's crater more fragile. "We have developed a monitoring system fo-



cus specifically on the volcanic tremors at Anak Krakatau so that we can issue early warnings," said BMKG head Dwikorita Karnawati, adding that a two-kilometer exclusion zone had been imposed. The confirmed death toll is 430, with at least 159 people missing. Nearly 1,500 people were injured and over 21,000 people have evacuated to higher ground. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Pakistan's Journalists Complain of Increasing Censorship

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani journalists, who have taken on military dictators and been beaten and jailed in the pursuit of a free press, say they now face a form of censorship that is more subtle but no less chilling, one spearheaded by the security services. Journalists and press freedom advocates say the military and the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI, are pressuring media outlets to quash critical coverage. The newly elected government is meanwhile slashing its advertising budget, squeezing a key source of revenue for private newspapers and TV stations. Qazi Salauddin, a veteran Pakistani journalist who has witnessed successive periods of direct military rule, said today's censorship is the worst it's ever been. "Today we don't know what will annoy them," he said of the military. "Today we have to do self-censorship and that is the worst kind of censorship, because it is done out of fear." Websites have been shut down, including the Urdu website of the U.S. State Department's Voice of America, after it reported on a tribal movement critical of military operations in regions bordering Afghanistan. Mashaal Radio, affiliated with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, has also been shut down. (Fox News)

Iran Plans 3 Million Barrels of Oil Sale to Private Exporters

TEHRAN - Iran plans to sell 3 million barrels of crude oil to private companies in the third round of sales aimed at bypassing US sanctions, Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh says. "The license required has been procured from the three branches of power for three million barrels of oil to be sold on Iran's energy bourse, 100 percent in rials," Zangeneh said on Wednesday. However, payment in foreign currencies is also possible for those who want to buy oil in non-rial currencies, he added. "If a person wants to buy oil on the bourse in foreign currencies, oil will be provided in foreign exchange and if a person wants rial-based purchase, the supply will be carried out in rials." According to the Ministry of Petroleum's Shana news agency, three private companies paid \$64.97 per barrel for two crude shipments of 245,000 barrels each and one shipment of 210,000 barrels. "Oil buyers on the bourse have been able to export their 'black gold' and there has been no problem in this regard," Zangeneh said on Wednesday. (Press TV)

Turkmenistan Sends Big Cargo of Mineral Fertilizers to Europe

ASHGABAT - A big cargo of mineral fertilizers was purchased from Turkmenistan by consumers in Spain and Italy, Trend reports citing the "Neutral Turkmenistan" newspaper. The cargo has already been loaded onto a ship at the modernized Garabogaz marine terminal. More than 12,000 tons of nitrogen fertilizers were exported from the Garabogazarkarabamid plant, commissioned in September this year. Another 7,000 tons of carbamide are being prepared for shipment abroad. In December, more than 200,000 tons of mineral fertilizers were contracted to be sent for export. The project to construct the Garabogazarkarabamid plant in the city of Garabogaz, Balkan Region, was undertaken by a consortium of Japan's Mitsubishi Corporation and Turkey's Gap Insaat. The plant is designed to produce 1.155 million tons of carbamide per year. Technology from Haldr Topsoe, UOP, Saipem and Uhde Fertilizer is used in the plant. About a third of the plant's output is supplied to the domestic market, the rest is exported. (Trend)

UAE Company to Buy Securities of Uzbekistan's 2nd Largest Bank

TASHKENT - UAE-based investment company Frontera Capital will acquire securities of O'zsanoatqurilishbank, Trend reports on Dec. 25 referring to the press service of the bank. The delegation of O'zsanoatqurilishbank visited the United Arab Emirates, where the parties signed the agreement on development of cooperation. The document provides for raising \$50 million using investment and credit instruments. The agreement also provides for the sale of securities of the Uzbek bank to the UAE company, which will expand the bank's ability to attract resources and finance investment projects on a long-term basis. The parties also intend to establish co-operation in the credit market of Uzbekistan. It should be noted that O'zsanoatqurilishbank ranks second in the country in terms of assets with 29.3 trillion soums (14.1 percent of the total volume). (Trend)

Persecution Against Christians to be Subject of British Government Review



LONDON - With violence against the world's Christians reportedly on the rise, Britain's government announced Wednesday that it has commissioned an independent review into the persecution. The goal of the British plan is to develop practical steps for support-

ing Christians around the globe, particularly women and children, who are often subjected to sexual violence, Reuters reported. Some 215 million Christians worldwide faced persecution last year, a British statement said, with about 250 Christians killed every month. "So often the persecution of Christians is a telling early warning sign of the persecution of every minority," British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said in the statement. (Fox News)

Doubts Over Turkey Ability to 'Eradicate' IS after US Pull-Out

ISTANBUL - A withdrawal of American ground forces in Syria will give Turkey freer rein to target Washington's Kurdish partners in the fight against jihadists but analysts doubt Ankara's capacity to "eradicate" the Islamic State extremist group. Turkish officials have said that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan heavily weighed in the decision by his US counterpart Donald Trump to pull all 2,000 American troops from Syria. Trump's shock order came after Erdogan convinced him that Turkey could eliminate the last remaining pockets of IS after the jihadists suffered a series of military defeats. "We have the strength to neutralise (IS) by ourselves," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu insisted on Tuesday. But Erdogan's main objective in Syria is actually to target the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, which the US has trained to spearhead the fight against IS. (AFP)

British Professor Returns to UK after Detention in Iran: BBC

LONDON - A British-Iranian academic who had been detained in Iran on security charges has returned to the United Kingdom, the BBC reported on Tuesday. Abbas Edalat, a computer science and mathematics professor at Imperial College London, was detained in Tehran in April. He had been arrested on what Iranian state media said at the time were unidentified security charges. The Foreign Office did not respond to telephone calls seeking comment on Christmas Day, a national holiday in Britain. (Reuters)

India's Anti-Terror Agency Busts Module Planning Attacks

NEW DELHI - India's anti-terror agency - National Investigation Agency (NIA) Wednesday said it busted a module that was planning attacks in the country. The agency have arrested five people and detained another five after conducting raids at around 16 locations across Delhi and neighbouring Uttar Pradesh.

NIA officials said the suspects seem to be highly radicalized.

"This IS inspired motivation comes from ISIS only and they wanted to carry out explosions and target certain persons," NIA Inspector General, Alok Mittal told media in Delhi. "The way they had prepared explosives and from the inputs we had, the group was focusing on triggering improvised explosive device (IED) blasts and carry out suicide attacks." (Xinhua)

German Foreign Minister Doesn't Want American Nukes in His Country

BERLIN - German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas says American nuclear missiles must not be stationed in Germany, or anywhere in Europe, in Washington's arms control debate with Moscow. "The deployment of new medium-range missiles would meet with widespread resistance in Germany," Maas said in an interview with German news agency dpa. The US is set to quit the 30-year-old INF treaty with Russia, which has been preventing Washington from stationing such missiles in Europe. Both countries accuse each other of violating the treaty, and both deny any wrongdoing on their own part. "By no means should Europe become



the scene of a debate on weapons build-up," Maas said. Deploying nuclear weapons in response to supposed treaty violations is Cold War-era logic, the German diplomat believes. "Nuclear armament is certainly the wrong answer," he said. "The policy of the 80s does not help to answer the questions of today." The US is accusing Russia of building missiles prohibited by the INF treaty, while Moscow says American missile defense systems already stationed in Eastern Europe can easily be converted into offensive ballistic missile launchers. In October, the US announced it would withdraw from the treaty unless Russia halts the alleged violations, and in December it gave Russia a 60-day deadline to comply. (Russia Today)

Russia Asks West to Try to Calm Its Kerch Strait Tensions with Ukraine

MOSCOW - Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on Wednesday it hoped Western countries would not take part in any Ukrainian attempt to stage what it called "a provocation" near the Kerch Strait and dissuade Kiev from escalating tensions in the area. Ukraine said last week it planned to send warships to its Azov Sea ports

via the Kerch Strait despite Russia's seizure of three navy vessels and their crews in the area in November. British defense minister Gavin Williamson visited Ukraine last week where he told his Ukrainian counterpart that the Black Sea did not belong to Russia and that Britain had sent a Royal Navy ship there to show Kiev did not stand alone. (Reuters)

China Tries Rights Lawyer in Case Amnesty Denounces as A Sham

TIANJIN, China - The subversion trial of a prominent Chinese human rights lawyer in what Amnesty International called a "sham" hearing ended on Wednesday without a verdict being announced. Wang Quanzhang, who took on sensitive cases such as complaints of police torture and defended followers of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, went missing in August 2015 during a sweeping crackdown on rights activists. Most cases from that summer, known as the 709 cases for the first day of detentions on July 9, 2015, have concluded. Wang, however, was incommunicado for more than 1,000 days and his case has drawn international attention. Investigators said he had "for a long time been influenced by infiltrating anti-China forces" and had been trained by overseas groups and accepted their funding, according to a copy of the indictment seen by Reuters. Police turned non-Chinese journalists and Western diplomats away from the heavily guarded court in the northern port of Tianjin and denied entry to Wang's supporters and family. The court had decided, in accordance with the law, to hold a closed trial as the case involved state secrets, it said in a statement, adding that the verdict would be released at a later date. It gave no other details. (Reuters)