

Syria Says to Discuss Russia Peace Plan Talks, Opposition Rejects

BEIRUT/CAIRO - Syria said on Saturday it is willing to participate in "preliminary consultations" in Moscow aimed at restarting peace talks next year to end its civil war. But members of the Western-backed Syrian opposition dismissed the Russian plan on Saturday, saying there was "no initiative."

Syrian state television quoted a source at the foreign ministry saying "Syria is ready to participate in preliminary consultations in Moscow in order to meet the aspira-



tions of Syrians to find a way out of crisis." Moscow, an ally of Syrian President Bashar al-

Assad, has pushed to restart talks that collapsed in Geneva in February. Russian Foreign Minister

Sergei Lavrov said this month that he wanted Syrian opposition groups to agree among them-

selves on a common approach before setting up direct talks with the Damascus government. But Lavrov did not specify which opposition groups should take part. Some opposition groups are tolerated by Damascus but shunned by the opposition in exile. Hadi al-Bahra, head of the Turkey-based opposition National Coalition, met with Arab League Chief Nabil Elaraby in Cairo on Saturday and told a news conference that "there is no initiative as rumoured." Russia

does not have a clear initiative, and what is called for by Russia is just a meeting and dialogue in Moscow, with no specific paper or initiative," he was quoted by Egyptian state news agency MENA as saying. Russia has long backed Assad, including with arms supplies for Syria, but he has become a more important ally for Moscow since the 2011 Arab Spring protests toppled several autocrats in the Middle East, some of whom had close ties with Moscow. (Reuters)

Nieghbor News

Iran Ready to Support Iraq's War on Terrorism: Speaker



TEHRAN - Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani underlined Tehran's preparedness to provide Baghdad with logistical support to help Iraq defeat ISIL terrorists in a shorter time.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to help Iraq and supply that country with logistical and military aid in its campaign against terrorism," Larijani told FNA at the end of his regional tour of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq on Saturday.

He reiterated that the Iraqi military commanders are capable of suppressing terrorism in all parts of their country, and said, "The Iraqi military forces have commanders that

are quite capable of training their units without seeking help from other countries' military experts."

On Wednesday, Iraqi President Fouad Masoum thanked Tehran for its continued support for Baghdad in the ongoing war on the Takfiri terrorists, saying that Iran was the first country to rush to Baghdad's aid when ISIL attacked the Muslim nation.

"Iran was the first country that backed up Iraq against the terrorists' invasion at a time when we needed possibilities to fight the terrorists," President Masoum said in a meeting with Larijani in the Iraqi capital. (FNA)

Iraqi Forces Advance Against IS Militants

TIKRIT - Iraqi security forces on Saturday made some gains on the ground against the Islamic State (IS) militant group, advancing to break the siege of the town of Dhuliyah in Iraq's northern central province of Salahudin, a provincial security source said.

The security forces, backed by Shiite militias and aircraft, advanced from several directions toward the town of Dhuliyah, some 90 km north of the Iraqi capital Baghdad, the source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity. The troops seized town of Yathrib, just south of Dhuliyah, and the nearby areas of Aziz Balad and Tal al-Dahab, while other troops moved toward Dhuliyah from the north after they cleared the rural ar-



reas from IS militants and seized the small town of Banat al-Hassan, the source said. More troops and Shiite militias advanced from the east and seized al-Dhuliyah airport, just east of the town, and are heading to the edge of the town, the source added. Dhuliyah is home to the Sunni tribe of al-Jubour, who have been fighting IS militants for several months. The extremist militants seized the town in mid-

June, but were driven away from the southern part of the town, where the tribesmen homes are located. The IS militants are only seizing the northern part of the town and imposing a siege on it. Saturday's operations were part of a series of offensives by the Iraqi forces to retake control of the town of Dhuliyah and the nearby areas. Salahudin is a predominantly Sunni province and its capital Tikrit,

some 170 km north of Baghdad, is the hometown of former President Saddam Hussein. The security in Iraq has drastically deteriorated since June 10, when bloody clashes broke out between Iraqi security forces and Sunni militants. The latter later took control of the country's northern city of Mosul and seized swathes of territories in Nineveh and other predominantly Sunni provinces. (Xinhua)

Syrian Army Kills Tens of ISIL Terrorists near Turkish Border

TEHRAN - The Syrian army killed tens of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants in fierce clashes in the Northern parts of the country. At least 70 ISIL terrorists were killed in two days of heavy clashes between the Syrian army and the ISIL terrorists in the Qamishli region which is 48 kilometers from the Turkish borders. The majority of the terrorists killed in Qamishli were non-Syrian nationals who were trying to enter Syria from Turkey. Syrian government troops and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) have recently been engaged in clashes with

the ISIL in the predominantly Kurdish city of al-Qamishli as part of a broader conflict that has gripped Syria for about four years.

On Monday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that Kurdish Pishmarga forces killed around 30 members of the ISIL terrorist group in Qamishli. The YPG succeeded in recapturing the village of Abu Qasayeb in the Tal Hamis area in Southeast of Qamishli. The observatory said three YPG fighters also were killed in the operation to recapture the village, which was seized by the ISIL on Tuesday. (FNA)

Sharif Wants Functional Nacta in Anti-Terror Effort



ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Saturday directed that the National Counter Terrorism Authority Pakistan (NACTA) be made functional with immediate effect.

The prime minister chaired a meeting of the committee to oversee the implementation of the National Action Plan, which was worked out two days ago with the consensus of all political parties represented in parliament to tackle terrorism and militancy. Following the premier's directive, an administra-

tive meeting of the Nacta has been summoned for Wednesday. The meeting will be chaired by Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan and it will review anti-terrorism measures adopted by the government.

The anti-terror body has largely remained dormant resulting in an absence of coordination among various intelligence and law-enforcement agencies which is critical to monitoring activities of extremist groups operating in different parts of the country. (Monitoring Desk)

Japan's Abe Unleashes Stimulus Plan to Spur Growth

TOKYO - Japan's Cabinet approved 3.5 trillion yen (\$29 billion) in fresh stimulus Saturday for the ailing economy, pledging to get growth back on track and restore the country's precarious public finances.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is wrapping up his second year in office hard-pressed to salvage a recovery that fizzled into recession after a sales tax hike in April.

The stimulus plan endorsed by the Cabinet includes 600 billion yen (\$5 billion) earmarked for stagnant regional economies. It also lays out Abe's vision for countering longer term trends such as Japan's surging public debt and a declining and aging population.

"A strong economy is the wellspring of Japan's national strength," said



a summary of the plan released by the government.

It pledged to restore vitality to local regions to enable young Japanese "to have dreams and hopes for the future."

But the document also acknowledged the narrow policy options open to Japan's leaders given the country's massive public debt, which is twice the size of the economy. The

government is sticking to its pledge to balance its budget by 2020, despite a recent decision by Abe to defer a tax hike due for next year until April 2017. Abe has sought to spur growth and end a long spell of deflation through aggressive monetary easing and increased public spending.

He also promised to undertake bold steps to break through the "bed-

rock" of Japan's vested interests and bureaucracy, but has made little headway in areas such as labor and farm sector reforms.

After taking office for a third term following a snap election earlier this month, the prime minister faces growing pressure to show that his "Abenomics" strategy for nurturing growth through inflation can succeed.

The Democratic Party of Japan, the leading opposition party, issued a statement Saturday expressing its disappointment with the stimulus plan, which it said relied on old pork barrel tactics that have failed in the past.

It said DPJ lawmakers would push for policies "investing in people," to help improve incomes and boost growth. (AP)

More Than 160,000 Displaced By Worst-Ever Floods in Malaysia



The number of the people displaced in Malaysia due to the worst-ever flooding in the country has risen to over 160,000. The new number was announced on Saturday, indicating a sharp increase from 100,000 a day before, according to a report by New Straits Times newspaper.

Severe flooding inundated the northeastern states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang over the past week. Rising flood waters have blocked several roads and left train services suspended in some of the worst-affected areas. The death toll from the flood currently stands at five, according to Malaysian authorities.

Meanwhile, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak visited the northeastern state of Kelantan, which faces serious problems among eight affected states, on Saturday. He ended his vacation with US President Barack Obama in Hawaii on Friday.

Najib has announced an aid package of around USD 143.31 million to help the victims of the disaster, following an initial allotment of USD 14.33 million in aid. Although people in Malaysia expect heavy Monsoon rains, the extent of the recent rainfall - the worst in four decades - has surprised officials. (TV)

US Mission in Havana to Become Embassy amid Thaw

HAVANA - A half-century after Washington severed relations with Cuba, the United States' seventy-story mission looms over Havana's seaside Malecon boulevard as the largest diplomatic outpost in the country.

Cuban guards stand at close intervals on the street outside, and islanders line up by the thousands each year for a shot at a coveted visa.

The gleaming U.S. Interests Section suddenly is poised to become an even more important presence in Cuba as the two countries negotiate the first phase of their historic detente - transforming the complex into a full embassy that would reflect the Obama administration's hopes of new influence on the communist island.



Roberta Jacobson, assistant U.S. secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, will be the highest known U.S. administration official to visit in decades when she comes next month for annual talks on migration that will now also focus on the details of re-establishing full diplomatic relations. The discussions are expected to cover expanding staffing in the two countries' interests sections and letting diplomats travel outside their respective capitals without having to ask permission. Also part of the reopening

of the embassy: symbolic measures such as raising the American flag on the Malecon. "Opening an embassy is a symbolic gesture, but symbols are really important," John Caulfield, who was Interests Section chief from 2011 to 2014, said by phone from Jacksonville, Florida, where he retired. "This is a pretty powerful symbol by our president that we want to have a more normal relationship with Cuba despite the fact that we have the obvious differences," he added. (AP)

No Early Elections Next Year: Sweden's PM

HELSINKI - Sweden's prime minister said on Saturday there will be no early elections next year as the left-leaning government has reached an agreement with opposition parties on a budget proposal.

Prime Minister Stefan Lofven said during a press conference in Stockholm that the deal negotiated among six key parties allows his minority government to continue ruling and arranging a new election is not "topical anymore."

"This decision means that Sweden can be governed despite the difficult parliamentary situation," said Lofven. On Dec. 3, he had announced an early election, but he had to wait until at least Dec. 29 to officially call the election,



according to Sweden's constitution. Saturday's pact, which avoids a fresh election, was concluded among Lofven's Social Democratic Party and the Greens, which make up the current government, and four center-right opposition parties. Lofven said the deal - dubbed "The December Agreement" - is valid until 2022 and essentially means that the opposition abstains from voting against the government's budget proposals starting from April 2015 on-

wards. It also coordinates the parties' policies on pensions, defense and energy issues. A government crisis emerged earlier this month as the far-right Sweden Democrats party sided with the opposition to vote against the budget. The arrangement announced Saturday excludes the Sweden Democrats, whose policies have left it isolated as the main parties have refused to cooperate with it. (AP)

Mega Project Brings Water from South to Beijing

BEIJING - The water from a south China river flowed into Beijing on Saturday after a journey of over 1,200 kilometers along the South-to-North Water Diversion Project. It took 15 days for the water to arrive in Beijing from its source -- the Hanjiang River, a tributary of the Yangtze River, China's largest waterway. Saturday's delivery marks the completion of the middle route's first stage, construction of which began exactly 12 years ago.

The project will have significant economic, social

and environmental impacts, said E Jingping, chief of the State Council's South-to-North Water Diversion Project Commission Office.

Next year, about 800 million cubic meters of water will be sent to Beijing from the south.

Beijing, on average, consumes 3.6 billion cubic meters of water annually and the project will eventually deliver 1 billion cubic meters of water to Beijing. The water resource per capita in Beijing is one eightieth of the world average. (Xinhua)

Mahmoudov Appoints to Head Department at Prosecutor-General's Office

DUSHANBE - Manouchehr Mahmoudov, formerly head of the Tajikistan's Consular Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), has been appointed to head the Department for International Cooperation at the Prosecutor-General's Office. Abdulfayz Atoyev, the head of the Tajik MFA Information Department, has confirmed this informa-



tion. According to some sources, Manouchehr Mahmoudov is the son of Mahkamboy Mahmoudov, Chairman of the Constitutional Court of Tajikistan. (Asia-Plus)