

# UN Syria Mediator: Peace Talks to Convene Jan. 25

UNITED NATIONS - The United Nations said on Saturday it aims to bring together Syria's warring parties on Jan. 25 in Geneva to begin talks to try to end nearly five years of civil war.

U.N. Syria mediator Staffan de Mistura plans to convene representatives of the Syrian government and "the broadest possible spectrum of the Syrian opposition and others," his spokesman said in a statement. "He counts on full cooperation of all the relevant Syrian parties in this process. Continuing developments on the ground should not be allowed to



derail it," said the statement, which was issued a day after Zahran Al-

loush, a top Syrian rebel leader, was killed in an air strike on the edge of

Damascus. The U.N. Security Council unanimously approved a resolution on

Dec. 18 endorsing an international road map for a Syria peace process, in a

rare show of unity among major powers.

It gave U.N. blessing to a plan negotiated previously by world powers in Vienna that calls for a ceasefire, talks between the Syrian government and opposition and a roughly two-year timeline to create a unity government and hold elections.

The resolution asked the United Nations to convene the peace talks with a target start date of early January. Peace talks in Geneva Syria is ready to take part in peace talks in Geneva and hopes that the dialogue will help it form a... (More on P4)...(16)

## Ukraine Parish Turns into Battlefield Amid Conflict with Russia

PTYCHA - The quiet village of Ptycha has become an unlikely battleground for the Orthodox faithful in western Ukraine, where the divide between pro- and anti-Moscow factions plays out far from the eastern front of the war-torn country.

Armed with sticks, spades and Molotov cocktails, the Orthodox faithful in the Ukrainian-speaking village this month moved against each other, leaving at least one cleric with a bloodied head, accord-

ing to video footage that went viral across Ukraine.

Since the outbreak of the separatist conflict in April 2014, passions have steadily risen in the ex-Soviet nation, with tensions crossing political and even religious faultlines.

After Ukraine gained independence in 1991 a conflict erupted between the Ukrainian Orthodox Church backed by Moscow and a breakaway Kiev-based Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Now the war pitting



the Ukrainian army against pro-Russian separatists in the east has sharply exacerbated those strains, leading to a schism among churchgoers. In Ptycha, a village of around 1,000 residents some 350 kilometers (220 miles) west of Kiev, parishioners are... (More on P4)...(17)

## India May Ink Defense Deal with France to Acquire 36 Combat Jets

NEW DELHI - India may sign a major defense pact with France during French President Francois Hollande's visit in January next year, sources said Sunday.

"A defense deal between the two countries could be inked for 36 Rafale fighter jets," the sources said, adding though the Defense Ministry is yet to spell out the nitty gritty.

India has already expressed its intention to buy the jets from France

during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Paris in April this year.

Even Indian Air Force head Air Chief Marshal Arup Raha said in October he was optimistic that the deal would be finalized by this yearend.

According to sources, the French president will be in India as the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in the national capital on Jan. 26. (Xinhua)

## Israel Rejects Attempt to Restart talks with Palestinians: Report

JERUSALEM - Israel rejected a Palestinian proposal in July to hold secret peace talks in which the issue of the Palestinian state borders would be established first, Israel Radio reported on Sunday.

The report stated that the former Israeli chief negotiator, Silvan Shalom, who resigned from his post as Interior Minister last week amid sexual harassment allegations, met with Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat in several loca-

tions in Europe and the Middle East in July.

The Palestinian Authority proposed holding the talks secret and announcing them only once a treaty is in order, the public radio station reported, while deciding on the issue of the borders of a future Palestinian state at the beginning of the talks.

However, the report cited Shalom as charging that Israel opposes this proposal, fearing the Palestinians would not be... (More on P4)...(18)

## Russia Says Air Force has not Hit Civilian Targets in Syria

MOSCOW - Russian air forces have not hit civilian targets since they started a bombing campaign in Syria nearly three months ago, a senior Russian officer said in an interview with Rossiya 24 television.

London-based rights group Amnesty International said this week that Russia's bombing of Syria had killed many civilians and could amount to a war crime. Russia's Defense Ministry strongly rejected the allegations.

"The Military Space Forces have never hit civilian



targets in Syria," said Viktor Bondarev, Colonel General and commander-in-chief of Russia's Aerospace Forces. Pilots are

well-trained and "have never missed their targets, have never hit ... so-called sensitive places: schools, hospitals, mosques," he

said. The Kremlin began its campaign of air strikes in Syria on Sept. 30, saying it wanted to help... (More on P4)...(19)

## Iran Following US Plan to Seize Frozen Assets

TEHRAN - Iran is following US plans to appropriate some \$2 billion of its assets frozen in Citibank accounts in New York, Central Bank Governor Valiollah Seif says. US Congress has approved allowing the Americans to claim Iranian funds in a case which is currently before the American Supreme Court, with the Obama administration urging the tribunal to rubber-stamp it. Over 1,300 Americans are reportedly pressing to receive billions of dollars of the Iranian money in awarded damages over two bombings in Beirut and Saudi Arabia in 1983 and 1996. On Sunday, Seif said Bank Markazi, the Central Bank of Iran, has a total of \$2.5 billion frozen in the US, including the interest on top of... (More on P4)...(20)

## Saudi Air Force Says it Intercepts Rebel Missile from Yemen

RIYADH - The Saudi-led coalition battling rebels in Yemen says Saudi Arabia's Air Force has shot down a ballistic missile directed at the kingdom's southern border. The coalition statement said Sunday that Shiite rebels, known as Houthis, fired the missile overnight from Yemen's capital city of Sanaa toward Saudi Arabia's southwestern border city of Najran. The coalition said the Saudi Air Force reacted immediately and destroyed the launching pad inside Yemen. It was the second time in under a week that Saudi Arabia says Houthis have fired scud missiles toward its territory. Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies in the Gulf have been bombing the Houthis since late March after the rebels overran the capital and other major Yemeni cities, forcing the internationally-backed government to temporarily flee the country. (AP)

## More than 160,000 People Affected by Flooding in South America

RIO DE JANEIRO - Severe flooding across four countries in South America has driven more than 160,000 people from their homes, media reported Saturday. Heavy rains in Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay have led officials to evacuate tens of thousands of residents, and claimed the lives of at least six people. The downpours sparked by the El Nino weather phenomenon have affected mostly Paraguay, where some 130,000 people have been relocated to shelters, and President Horacio Cartes



has declared a state of emergency. Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff Saturday announced 6.6 million reais (1.8 million U.S. dollars) in emergency aid for flood-ravaged communities in southern Brazil. Rousseff flew over

the state of Rio Grande do Sul, which borders Argentina and Uruguay, and where some 8,000 people have been displaced by rising waters. In Argentina, nearly 20,000 people have been... (More on P4)...(21)

## Iraqi Forces Fight IS Militants Around Gov't Complex in Central Ramadi

RAMADI - Iraqi security forces on Sunday continued their advance and surrounded the government complex in the heart of the city of Ramadi, where they have been engaged for the sixth consecutive day in fierce clashes against the Islamic State (IS) militants, security sources said. The security forces with paramilitary Sunni tribal fighters, backed by Iraqi and U.S.-led coalition aircraft, fought heavy clashes with IS militants and retook control of the build-

ing of Anbar's provincial health department and surrounded the government complex in central Ramadi, some 110 km north of Iraqi capital Baghdad, a provincial security source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity. The troops started clearing the buildings around the complex from IS militants, landmines and booby-trapped buildings, and preparing for the final attack on the provincial government buildings, the source said. The troops also... (More on P4)...(22)

## 14 Killed in Boko Haram Attack in NE Nigeria

ABUJA - At least 14 people were killed, dozens injured and an entire village burned down in the latest attack perpetrated by Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria's northeastern state of Borno, local sources said Sunday. The insurgents rode on bicycles late Friday, shooting sporadically and setting ablaze houses in Kimba village, located in Bui district of Borno State, said Musa Illiya, a survivor. "People ran in different directions as they heard sounds of gun and the attackers sprayed their bullets, carting away their food and burned down our homes. It was hellish and a gory sight," said the witness. Local authorities said residents who fled the village were relocated to a camp of internally displaced persons in Bui district of the province on Saturday. "We appeal to government to send in more relief materials and food to assist these victims because it was almost an entire village taken into this refugee camp," said Mohammed Bui, a coordinator at the camp.

Boko Haram has since 2009 waged a campaign of violence in Nigeria in an effort to establish an Islamic state. It has killed some 13,000 people and kidnapped hundreds, with surrounding countries such as Niger, Chad and Cameroon affected. Nigerian leader Muhammadu Buhari on Friday said efforts are underway to persuade the insurgent group to embrace peace in the interest of the nation. Buhari had earlier given military chiefs a December deadline to end the insurgency of Boko Haram. (Xinhua)

## Nieghbor News

### Turkmenistan to Open Embassy in Italy

ASHGABAT - Turkmenistan will open the embassy in Italy. The relevant document was signed by Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, officials said Monday. Earlier it was reported that the sides call the oil and gas industry, power engineering, construction, textile and chemical industries as the perspective vectors for further mutually beneficial cooperation. The Italian oil company Eni extended its activity in Turkmenistan in November 2014 as part of the Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) for ten more years. The signing ceremony of the document was held in Ashgabat as part of

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's working visit to Turkmenistan.

The activity of Eni, which has invested more than \$1.5 billion in Turkmenistan since 2008, covers the contract territory of more than 1,000 square kilometers in the Balkan region of the country. As it is known, Ashgabat actively invites foreign companies, including those from Europe, for the development of hydrocarbons in the Turkmen part of the Caspian Sea. Some 11 billion metric tons of oil and 5.5 trillion cubic meters of gas of the projected resources, excluding the already contracted blocks, have been concentrated there. (Agencies)

### China Officially ends one Child Policy: State Media

BEIJING - China officially ended its one child policy on Sunday with the signing into law of a bill allowing all married couples to have a second child as it attempts to cope with an ageing population and shrinking workforce.

The change, which was announced in October by the ruling Communist Party, takes effect from January 1, the Xinhua news agency reported.

All married couples will be allowed to have a second child but the legislation maintains limits on additional births.

The "one child poli-

cy", instituted in the late 1970s, restricted most couples to only a single offspring and for years authorities argued that it was a key contributor to China's economic boom and had prevented 400 million births.

It has been enforced by a dedicated national commission with a system of fines for violators and often forced abortions, leading to heartrending tales of loss for would-be parents.

The policy led to sex-selective abortions or infanticide targeting girls, because of a centuries-old social preference for boys. (AFP)

### Iran Dismisses AL Statement on "Intervention" in Arab Affairs

TEHRAN - Iran on Sunday dismissed a recent statement issued by the Arab League (AL) council of foreign ministers over its alleged intervention in the internal affairs of Arab countries, Press TV reported.

The AL statement on Iran is "non-constructive and incorrect" as Tehran has had cordial relations with most of Arab countries based on mutual respect and common interests, Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hossein Jaber Ansari was quoted as saying.

On Dec. 25, the Arab foreign ministers issued a statement at the close of their extraordinary meeting in Cairo, saying that Iran continues its "interfering" policies in Arab countries, which

is a "grave threat" to the regional and international peace and security. Iran plays an active, responsible and stabilizing role in regional developments and will continue with its constructive policies "despite unfriendly and spiteful stances by some countries," the spokesman said. "Unfortunately, some countries, which have been under fire as main suspects in supporting extremism and terrorism, are trying to play blame game on others and proceed with the policy of depicting Iran as a threat," he added. These countries are better to pay more attention to main issues of the region, particularly the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, he further said. (Xinhua)

### India, Pakistan Likely to Hold Foreign Secretary-level Talks in January

NEW DELHI - India and Pakistan are likely to hold foreign secretary-level talks in January next year, highly placed sources said. "The talks may be held in Islamabad on January 15. Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar will go there to represent this country," the sources said. However, there has been no official confirmation on it, just like Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise stopover in Pakistan Friday on his way back home from Afghanistan. Bilateral relations be-

tween the two countries have begun to improve since Modi held talks with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Paris on November 30.

That meeting on the sidelines of the climate change conference was followed by national security adviser-level talks in Bangkok.

Just days after that meeting, Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Pakistan and held talks with her Pakistani counterpart on the sidelines of the Heart of Asia Conference. (Xinhua)