

Turkish President Calls Syria's Assad a 'Terrorist'

TUNIS, Tunisia — Syria's peace efforts cannot include President Bashar Assad, Turkey's leader said Wednesday, calling him a "terrorist." President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke during a visit to Tunisia at the end of a four-day Africa trip focusing on economic issues. At a joint news conference with Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi, Erdogan called Assad a "terrorist who engaged in state terrorism" and should not be part of Syria's post-conflict future. "How can we embrace a future with a Syrian leader who has killed close to a million of his citizens?" said the Turkish leader, whose



country has seen a flood of refugees from neighboring Syria during the fighting. Turning to another highly sensitive Middle East issue, Erdogan and Essebsi said their nations would never accept changes to Jerusalem's historic status after President Donald Trump's recognition of the city as Israel's capital. "Jerusalem is our red line. Any steps against Jerusalem's historic status and holiness are unacceptable," Erdogan said, adding that his country will work toward international recognition of the Palestinian state and seek the support of the European Union. (AP)

Neighbor News

China to Become World's Biggest Economy by 2032

BEIJING - Experts say the United States is set to lose its global economic dominance and will be replaced by China that will establish itself as the world's biggest economy before 2032. A report released by the London-based Center for Economics and Business Research emphasized that China was already successfully moving ahead based on an economic growth that emerged in 2007. The report added that four other Asian nations - India, Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia - would also join China in the top 10 global economies. The 10 largest economies in the world in the year 2032 would be China at the top, followed by the US, India, Japan, Germany, Brazil, the UK, South Korea, France and Indonesia, the report added as cited by was quoted as saying by Russia's Sputnik news agency. "China has maintained its growth resilience and gained reform momentum," said John Litwack, World Bank lead economist for China, in reference to China's 6.8 percent gross domestic product growth in 2017. "The authorities have undertaken a host of policy and regulatory measures aimed at reducing macroeconomic imbalances and limiting financial risks without notable impact on growth," Litwack was quoted as saying by Sputnik news agency. (Presstv)

Spain to Hike Military Spending over Next 6 Years

MADRID - Spain will increase its military spending by more than 80 percent over the next six years, local media reported Wednesday. This is in keeping with NATO's 2014 Wales Summit agreement in which the participating countries agreed to reverse the trend of declining defence budgets in a "dangerous world" and raise their defense spending to 2 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) by 2024. In the next six years, Spain

will spend 18,000 million euros (21,396 million U.S. dollars) annually, accounting for between 1.5 and 1.6 percent of its GDP, El Pais newspaper reported. It aims to reach the 2-percent target by approximately 2028. However, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's government will face challenges when it attempts to increase military spending in the 2018 budget as his People's Party does not enjoy a majority in the Congress. (Xinhua)

Russia Accuses U.S. of Training Former Islamic State Fighters in Syria

MOSCOW - The chief of the Russian General Staff has accused the United States of training former Islamic State fighters in Syria to try to destabilize the country. General Valery Gerasimov's allegations, made in a newspaper interview, center on a U.S. military base at Tanf, a strategic Syrian highway border crossing with Iraq in the south of the country. Russia says the U.S. base is illegal and that it and the area around it have become "a black hole" where militants operate

unhindered. Islamic State has this year lost almost all the territory it held in Syria and Iraq. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Wednesday the main part of the battle with Islamic State in Syria was over, according to the state-run RIA news agency. The United States says the Tanf facility is a temporary base used to train partner forces to fight Islamic State. It has rejected similar Russian allegations in the past, saying Washington remains committed to killing off



Islamic State and denying it safe havens. But Gerasimov told the daily Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper on Wednesday that the United States was training up fighters who were former Islamic State militants but who now call themselves the New Syrian Army or use other names. He said Russia satellites and drones had spotted militant brigades at the U.S. base. (Reuters)

Political Stability to Ensure Progress; Govt to Foil Attempts to Sabotage Democratic Process: PM

HARIPUR - Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi Wednesday said a country can only progress when there was political stability and reiterated that the PML-N government, despite numerous challenges would complete its constitutional term and foil attempts of those who wish to sabotage the democratic process. Addressing a gathering after inaugurating the 47-km long section of the Burhan-Shah Maqsood interchange of the six-lane Hazara Motorway, he said the people of Pakistan know perfectly well who has served them sincerely and they would again vote the PML-N to power in the next general election. He said political decisions were not taken at courts and through sit-

ins and regretted that had there been no instability due to the sit-ins, the government could have done much more for the people. Prime Minister Abbasi said the PML-N faced grave challenges and boldly confronted terrorism, economic meltdown and dirty politics of sit-ins. He said only political stability and continuity can ensure progress of country and said those wishing to topple the government, would be sadly disappointed. He termed July 28 a difficult day for the government; the day when former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was disqualified, and said the PML-N handled it well and those getting ready their 'sherwanis' will not gain anything. (Monitoring Desk)

Support Slides for Merkel Serving Full Term as Coalition Talks Beckon



BERLIN - If Angela Merkel becomes German chancellor again, nearly half of voters would want her to quit her term early, according to a poll offering a rare sign that domestic support for Europe's

most influential leader may be waning. Merkel's conservatives won a national election in September, setting her up for a fourth stint in office. But they bled support to the far right, and talks on

a three-way coalition with the Greens and the pro-business Free Democrats collapsed in November. Merkel is now pinning her hopes on cutting a deal with the center-left Social Democrats (SPD), who finished second in the election but have so far given a lukewarm response to the idea of renewing the 'grand coalition' that governed Germany between 2013 and 2017. The YouGov survey, commissioned by Germany's DPA agency and published in Wednesday's Die Welt newspaper, showed

47 percent of respondents wanted Merkel to step aside before 2021, when her fourth term would end - up from 36 percent in a poll taken at the beginning of October. By contrast, 36 percent want her to serve a full four years, compared to 44 percent three months ago. The SPD, which lost ground among voters after the coalition with Merkel, has been reluctant to commit to a return as it looks to keep a skeptical rank and file on board. (Reuters)

Russia's Putin Registers Re-Election Bid

MOSCOW - President Vladimir Putin formally registered his re-election bid on Wednesday, submitting the necessary documents to Russia's central election commission in person ahead of a March 18 vote. Polls show that Putin, who has dominated Russia's political landscape for the last 17 years as either president or prime minister, is on course to comfortably win another six-year term. That would allow him to rule until 2024, when he'll turn 72. The former KGB officer is running as an independent, a move seen

as a way of strengthening his image as a "father of the nation" rather than as a party political figure. The ruling United Russia party and the Just Russia party have both said they will support him. But opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who has been barred from the election over a suspended prison sentence he says was fabricated, says Putin has been in power too long and that his support is artificially maintained by a biased state media and an unfair system which excludes genuine opponents. (Reuters)

Middle East Power Struggle Threatens Shaky Peace in Post-IS Phase

BEIJING - After three years of fighting, the ground war against the Islamic State (IS) is coming to an end. However, the long-simmering rivalry between global and regional powers in the Middle East now threatens to spill over from war-torn countries and further divide the region. By recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the United States earlier this month sparked a new wave of hostility in the region, which is already witness to clashes between the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam. Regional and global rivals are exploiting every opportunity to enhance their standing across the Middle East in the post-IS era and dislodge those endangering their interests, which makes it difficult to achieve a win-win result. SHAKY PEACE

Russia, Turkey and Iran, key stakeholders and power brokers in the region, this month agreed on holding Syrian peace talks in Russia's Black Sea resort Sochi in late January after previous attempts to hold such a conference bringing together both the Syrian government and the opposition parties collapsed. Osama Danura, a Syrian political expert, said toppling any regime due to foreign interests will not produce peace on the ground but negotiations can. "Cooperation between Russia, Turkey and Iran has proven to be influential in terms of linking politics with the military situation on the ground," Danura said. "They have succeeded (in establishing a) ceasefire and de-escalation zones in Syria because (they) are directly involved in the Syrian crisis." (Xinhua)

Russia's Lavrov Tells Tillerson U.S. Tension-Raising on Korean Peninsula "Inadmissible"

MOSCOW - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson Tuesday it is "inadmissible" that Washington heightened tension on the Korean Peninsula with "aggressive rhetoric" and military buildup. Lavrov made the remarks during a phone conversation with Tillerson, according to a press release of the Russian Foreign Ministry. The two sides believe that Pyongyang's nuclear missile development violated the requirements of the United Nations Security Council,



it said, underscoring the need for "an early transition from words of sanctions to a negotiation process." During the phone call, the two top diplomats also considered steps to overcome the conflicts in Syria while maintaining

its territorial integrity, including the plan to hold an inter-Syrian national dialogue in Russia's Sochi. They also agreed to intensify dialogue on issues concerning strategic stability and to remain in close contact. (Xinhua)

U.S. Slaps Sanctions on Two DPRK Individuals

WASHINGTON - The United States on Tuesday issued sanctions on two citizens of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) over the alleged involvement in the country's ballistic missile programs. As a result of the action, any property or interests of the designated persons in the United States will be blocked and transactions by Americans involving these persons are generally prohibited, said a U.S. Treasury Department statement. Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have reached an unprecedented level this year

as the DPRK launched a nuclear test and multiple missile launches and the United States and South Korea have constantly conducted joint military drills. The crisis has also been worsened by the exchange of personal insults and confrontational rhetoric between the leaders of the United States and the DPRK. The U.S. administration, under President Donald Trump, has been sticking to a strategy of "maximum pressure" on the DPRK to force it to abandon its weapons programs, but so far has failed to achieve its goals. (Xinhua)

Former Peruvian President Apologizes Following Pardon

LIMA, Peru - Former President Alberto Fujimori apologized to Peruvians on Tuesday for the wrongs committed under his government in the 1990s, issuing a vaguely worded statement two days after he received a presidential medical pardon that freed him from prison. The 79-year-old Fujimori spoke in a videotaped message from a hospital in the capital. He received the pardon after serving less than half of a 25-year sentence for human rights abuses. "I am aware that the results during my government were well received on one side, but I recognize that I have let down other compatriots," he said. "To them, I ask for forgiveness with all my heart." Fujimori had not previously apologized, asserting even during his sentencing hearing that he was innocent. He led the country in 1990-2000 and was found guilty for the killings of 25 people in a campaign against the leftist Shining Path terrorist group.

"He has to ask forgiveness from his victims, from the families of those who were lost, who can't spend Christmas with their families," Marisa Glave, a member of parliament, said on local television network America. Fujimori, who has been diagnosed with arrhythmia and tongue cancer, also thanked President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski for pardoning him and sparing him from serving another 14 years in prison. The decision, which was announced on Christmas Eve, sparked large protests across the country on Christmas Day. (AP)

Iran Not to Stop Developing Defense Power: Hatami

TEHRAN - Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami underlined that the Islamic Republic will boost its military prowess with full strength and without any halt. "The country has a long-term strategic outlook on its defense issues given the extent of the enemies' plots," Brigadier General Hatami said in a meeting with a number of Iranian lawmakers on Tuesday. The Iranian Defense Minister emphasized that such an approach has helped Iran achieve "strategic defense capabilities." "Today, the enemies' approach is to weaken national strength and defense power of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but we will not allow anyone to undermine our country's defense might," Brigadier General Hatami said. The Iranian Defense Minister vowed that Iran would maintain and strengthen its deterrence and defensive power, saying the country's great strategic defense power can nip any threat against the Islamic Republic in the bud. Iran has managed to attain self-sufficiency in manufacturing necessary military equipment in line with its policy to boost defensive capabilities against potential threats. Tehran maintains that its military power poses no threat to other countries and that its military doctrine is solely based on deterrence. (FNA)

Turkmenistan Preparing for Election to Parliament, Local Governing Bodies

ASHGABAT - Formation of election commissions has started in Turkmenistan within the preparation for the March 25, 2018 election of candidates running for seats in parliament and local governing bodies, the country's Central Election Commission said in a message Dec. 27. As many as 240 electoral districts (40 in each province and Ashgabat city) have been created for the election of MPs in Turkmenistan. For the election of members of the district and city councils, a total of 1,260 electoral districts (20 in each district and city) have been created in Turkmenistan. Political parties, public organizations, as well as initiative groups of citizens organize meetings to nominate their representatives, mainly specialists of various sectors of the national economy, to be included in the election commissions, the message said. (Trend)