

Germany Won't Give Weapons to Ukraine, Favors Talks: Merkel

BUDAPEST, Hungary - Germany will not provide weapons to Ukraine and supports negotiations and a diplomatic solution to the conflict between the government in Kiev and Russian-backed rebels in eastern Ukraine, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Monday.

"It is my firm belief that this conflict cannot be solved militarily," Merkel said after meeting with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in Budapest. She said she prefers economic sanctions as decided by the



European Union and negotiations to "solve or at least mitigate the conflict." Fighting in eastern Ukraine has claimed more than 5,100 lives since April and displaced 900,000 people. Despite a September cease-fire and a period of relative calm

in December, the fighting has intensified in recent weeks. Orban, who has frequently noted the damage to Hungar-

ian exports, especially in the agricultural sector, caused by the sanctions, said Hungary also backs a peaceful solution and will not provide any weapons to Ukraine. He mentioned Hungary's great dependency on Russian energy supplies arriving through Ukraine and said that the 200,000 ethnic Hungarians living in western Ukraine, near the border with Hungary, are also a factor shaping Hungary's policy. During her visit to Budapest, Merkel was also expected to meet with representatives of German

companies operating in Hungary, visit the Dohany Street Synagogue and a nearby Holocaust memorial, and speak at the German-language Andrássy University. Merkel's visit to the synagogue, the largest in Europe, "shows that the situation of Europe's Jews, including the fate of Hungary's Jewish community, is an important issue for the German government," Andras Heisler, head of the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities, said ahead of the visit. (AP)

Merkel to Visit Obama and Canada's Harper to Ready G7 Summit

BERLIN - Chancellor Angela Merkel will visit Washington and Ottawa next week for talks with U.S. President Barack Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper about the G7 summit that Germany will host in June, Merkel's office said on Monday. As well as the G7 summit in Bavaria, Merkel will



discuss the Ukraine crisis, relations with Russia,

the fight against Islamic State, the situation in Afghanistan and Iran and subjects such as economic policy, trade and climate issues, her office said. The chancellor's visit to the United States and Canada will take place between Feb. 8-10, her office said in a statement, without giving any further details. (Reuters)

Australia, UK Reaffirm Close Partnership on Security Issues

CANBERRA - Australia and the United Kingdom reaffirmed at an annual ministerial meeting on Monday that both countries will maintain their close partnership on a range of security and foreign policy issues. A joint statement at the 7th Australia-UK Ministerial Consultations (AUKMIN) in Sydney stressed that both countries agreed to continue to work closely in fighting against international terrorism and foreign fighters.

"Our agenda focused on the Middle East, including responding to the growing threat of Daesh also known as ISIL and foreign fighters, Afghanistan, the evolving security situation in East Asia, and defense planning and inter-operability. Our dialogue on these issues reinforced the value of the strong co-operation between our countries," the statement said.

Both governments promised to continue their consultations on the Australian Defense White Paper and the UK Strategic Defense and

Security Review and exchange views on strategic issues that appear on the UN Security Council agenda, "building on Australia's successful two-year term on the Council." Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond signed a memorandum of understanding on the reciprocal use of diplomatic facilities at times of crisis.

The deal formalizes the practice whereby officials use the other country's diplomatic facilities during a major crisis or incident in locations where one of the countries has a diplomatic mission and the other does not. Australia's Minister for Defense Kevin Andrews and UK Defense Secretary Michael Fallon discussed ways to improve interoperability between the two armed forces, for further cooperation on the Joint Strike Fighter, and for dialogue surrounding maritime capability and emerging defense technologies. (Xinhua)

Nieghbor News

SCO Ready to Welcome Iran: A New Eurasian Order

TEHRAN - The groundwork for a new Eurasian order is being laid in the capitals of Russia, China and Iran.

This year's Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit is set to bring together an assembly of heads of state opposed to American unilateral dominance, from Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping to Iran's President Hassan Rouhani.

In the wake of the ongoing economic downturn in Western Europe and the waning of America's relative power, the SCO is increasingly becoming a relevant regional/global institution. What's more, this emerging alliance is poised to expand - Moscow says it supports Iran's full membership.

The official assertion came on January 28, in a meeting in Moscow between Russian President Vladimir

Putin and Ali Akbar Velayati, a special envoy for Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and an advisor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Judging by the tone of recent pronouncements in Moscow, it is evident that the SCO is ready to snag Iran in its embrace - where Moscow and Beijing look upon Washington's foreign policy course with concern and do not share its policy of isolating countries, especially Iran, a key player in the resolution of Middle Eastern conflicts.

Iran, which received observer status at the SCO in 2005, eyes the body's September meeting in the Republic of Bashkortostan, where its full membership will be discussed. Draft documents on the procedure of the admission of new members have already been adopted. (FNA)

President Xi Meets Russian FM

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping met Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Monday, with the two sides pledging more cooperation on global affairs this year.

Extending greetings for his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, Xi said he looked forward to communicating with Putin and implementing their agreements. Xi said the two countries should join hands with the international community to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII this year.

They should use it to celebrate the historic contribution the two countries, as main battlefields in the east and west, made in the war, and to maintain postwar peace and security, the president said.

He said China will cooperate with Russia to hold the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in Russia this year to jointly maintain emerging economies' interests and promote global economic governance reform.

Lavrov conveyed Putin's greetings to Xi. He said cooperation between Russia and China is important to the world's peace and stability. Russia will work with China to hold commemorative activities of the 70th anniversary, and to jointly safeguard the principles and purpose of the UN Charter, he added.

Lavrov is in Beijing for a regular trilateral meeting among the foreign ministers of China, Russia and India. (Xinhua)

Insurgents Urge Kiev to Appoint Official Representative for Talks

KIEV - The next round of Minsk negotiations would not take place until Kiev appoints an official representative, Ukrainian insurgent leader Alexander Zakharchenko said Monday. "Until Kiev appoints its official representative, there will be no more talks in the Minsk format. (Former Ukrainian President) Leonid Kuchma is just a private representative," Zakharchenko told reporters. Zakharchenko accused the Kiev government forces of opening fire on residential areas, saying

that this action aimed to force the self-claimed Donetsk and Lugansk republics (DPR and LPR) to sign unfair agreements at the Minsk meetings. The latest round of peace talks on the Ukrainian crisis ended Saturday in the Belarusian capital of Minsk without an agreement. Representatives of the eastern rebels said Saturday that the status of Kiev's negotiator was insufficient for them to sign a final deal, while Kiev's delegate claimed that the government side would not accept any preconditions. Zakharchenko added that a general military mobilization is planned to take place in 10 days, as up to 100,000 people will be mobilized upon a voluntary basis. "The



joint army of the DPR and the LPR will be 100,000 strong... The recruitment of volunteers will begin next week," the Interfax news agency quoted ... (More on P4)... (20)

Greece Rules Out Aid from Russia, Argues Case in Europe

NICOSIA/LONDON - Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras ruled out seeking aid from Russia and said on Monday he would pursue negotiations for a new debt agreement with European partners, but saw little sign of compromise from Germany. Tsipras and his finance minister Yanis Varoufakis are touring European capitals this week in a diplomatic offensive to replace Greece's bailout

accord with the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund "troika". After a tumultuous first week during which his left-leaning government made clear it intends to ditch the tough austerity conditions imposed under its existing bailout, the emphasis this week appears to be on maintaining that a deal is still ... (More on P4)... (21)

Egypt Court Sentences 183 Muslim Brotherhood Supporters to Death

CAIRO - An Egyptian court on Monday confirmed death sentences for 183 Muslim Brotherhood supporters over charges of killing 16 policemen in August, 2013, state-run Nile TV reported.

The defendants were among 188 who received preliminary death sentences in December, 2014. The initial sentences were sent to the grand mufti, Egypt's highest authority for Islamic law, for ratification. In Monday's ver-

dict, the court approved the death sentences for 183 and acquitted two others. The sentence of a minor was reduced to 10 years in prison. The court also dropped the charges against two others who are dead now.

In August, 2013, the 188 men stormed a police station in Kerdassa, a town on the outskirts of Cairo, killing 16 policemen. The attack came in response to the deadly dispersal of two protest



campus staged by Brotherhood members in Cairo after Islamist president Mohamed Morsi was ousted by the military on July 3, 2013. Hundreds of protesters were killed. Since Morsi's ouster, thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters have been arrested and put on mass trials. (Xinhua)

Syria Keeps Food, Electricity Subsidies Despite War: PM

DAMASCUS - Despite a raging war, Syria has kept in place subsidies for electricity and basic foods, the prime minister said Monday, as the regime tries to drum up support in areas it controls.

"The government continues to subsidize staple food products, as well as the electricity sector," Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi told parliament. He said rice, bread and sugar - key staples subsidized by the government - have cost the state 180 million Syrian pounds (\$900 million) despite soaring, war-induced inflation. Another 418 billion pounds (\$2 billion) go towards funding electricity subsidies, Halqi said. Analysts and officials have



warned that the nearly four-year war and international sanction imposed on Syria have set back the economy by more than 30 years. More than half of the population is unemployed, and gross domestic product has shrunk by nearly 50 percent. Nearly four million people have been forced by war to flee Syria altogether, and millions more are living in misery in areas that have fallen out of government control. Pro-regime daily Al-Watan recently said government subsidies on oil products had shrunk by nearly 80 percent by the end of 2014. In October, the government stopped subsidizing fuel for businesses for the first time in decades. (AFP)

Kurdish Fighters in Iraq Struggle to Hold Gains against IS

SNUNY - Only stray dogs and a dozen armed fighters walk the streets of Snuny, a ghost town at the base of Mount Sinjar where rapid military changes of fortune are written on the walls. "Smoking is banned" has been scribbled in Arabic outside one cafe. A nearby building bears the warning: "Submit to the Islamic State, you infidels."

Those messages don't reflect the views of the new management. Today, flags representing various Kurdish political groups flap furiously in the wind over Snuny, claiming ownership of the town's barren streets. But all along the Kurds' shifting front lines, it's a tenuous hold sustained

only with timely air support from the U.S.-led coalition. Questions remain whether the coalition-backed Kurds can secure strategic crossroads like Snuny and renew an offensive versus the Islamic State group, which controls a broad swath of northern Iraq from its base in Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul. The Kurds retook Snuny from the Sunni militants last month, but a weeks-old battle has reached a point of stalemate on the other side of the mountain for militant-held Sinjar. To the southeast, the oil-rich city of Kirkuk remains at risk of falling to the Islamic State group. While Islamic State fighters have been forced to retreat from Kobani, the

strategic town on Syria's border with Turkey, the battlefield picture suggests they are far from beaten in northern Iraq, where harsh winter weather and thick mud underfoot hampers military moves - and even rear-line positions such as Snuny remain in surprising range of the enemy. Whichever side triumphs will determine whether Islamic State can use the main highway west to funnel weapons and reinforcements to their retreating comrades in Syria. Just after midnight Friday, fighters from a Yazidi militia and an Associated Press crew were startled awake by the whoosh and thud of ... (More on P4)... (22)

German Military to Stay At Termez Air Base in Uzbekistan

TASHKENT - The German military will continue using Uzbekistan's Termez air base, which is located on the border with Afghanistan, despite the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan.

German Ambassador Neithart Hoefer-Wissing said last Friday in Tashkent that Germany's continued use of the air base results from an agreement signed last September with the Uzbek government.

Termez is a small city in the southernmost part of Uzbekistan near the Hairatan border crossing of Afghanistan. The river Amu Darya divides the two countries of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan and the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Friendship Bridge crosses the river to Hairatan

in Afghanistan. Termez is connected by rail with Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan.

German troops use the Termez base for non-combat purposes to resupply troops operating in Afghanistan.

German military have used the Termez air base since the end of 2001, and the rent agreement was officially signed in February 2002. In April 2010 the sides concluded a new agreement on Germany's use of the air base, which expired on 31 October 2014. According to that agreement, around 300 German troops were accommodated at the Termez base. During the years of using the air base, the German side has invested 12 million euros in its modernization, the Fergana information agency reported. (Agencies)