

U.S. Forces Begin Reducing Numbers in Iraq: Iraqi Spokesman

BAGHDAD - U.S. forces have begun reducing their numbers in Iraq after Iraqi authorities declared "victory" over Islamic State, an Iraqi government spokesman said on Monday. Iraqi forces backed by a U.S.-led international coalition last year captured all the territory that fell under Islamic State control in 2014 and 2015, including the northern city of Mosul, which served as the militants' de facto capital. "The American forces have begun reducing their numbers as victory has been achieved over Daesh," the spokesman told Reuters. "Coordination continues, to maintain (U.S.) assistance to the Iraqi forces in accordance with their requirements." The



United States had more than 5,500 troops in Iraq at the height of the battle of Mosul in July 2017, making up about half the total force deployed by the coalition in the country. A coalition spokesman declined to confirm or deny that the drawdown had begun. "It is our intent to publish a release whenever we have forces moving out of the theater," the spokesman, U.S. Army Col. Ryan Dillon, told Reuters. "Continued coalition presence will be conditions-based, proportional to the need and in coordination with the government of Iraq," he said. (Reuters)

German Parties Make Final Push for Coalition Deal

BERLIN - Negotiators for German Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives and the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) reconvened on Monday to hammer out compromises on healthcare and labor policy, the stumbling blocks in the way of another "grand coalition". The parties missed a self-imposed Sunday deadline to clinch a deal on renewing the coalition that has governed Europe's largest economy since 2013. But both sides cited progress and said the remaining differences did not appear insurmount-

able. "It's going to work out," the SPD's Andrea Nahles said on arrival for Monday's negotiations at her party headquarters. Another SPD negotiator, Karl Lauterbach, put the chances of the parties striking a deal on Monday at 50-50. The Rheinische Post newspaper, citing an internal SPD schedule, reported that Merkel, the leader of her Bavarian allies Horst Seehofer and SPD chief Martin Schulz wanted to present a final coalition agreement on Tuesday. (Reuters)

MOSCOW - Russia still has counter measures it can take against the United States in a tit-for-tat sanctions battle, but is keeping its powder dry for now, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told the Izvestia newspaper in an interview published on Monday. With relations strained over Syria, Ukraine and U.S. allegations that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, something Moscow denies, ties between the two countries have slid

Russia Says it Has Measures that Can Take against the U.S

to a post-Cold War low. The U.S. Treasury Department last week named 210 people, including 96 "oligarchs" with wealth of \$1 billion or more, on a list of people deemed to be close to the Kremlin as part of a sanctions package signed into law in August last year. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said that unspecified sanctions would "come out" of the report. Ryabkov told Izvestia that Moscow had pre-



viously hit back at the United States by suspending agreements in the nuclear sphere, expanding its list of U.S. politicians it deems anti-Russian, and by ordering half the staff at the U.S. embassy in Russia to leave. (Reuters)

UK Judges Block US Extradition of Alleged Hacker Lauri Love



LONDON - British judges on Monday rejected a US request for the extradition of a man accused of hacking into thousands of US gov-

ernment computers in a ruling that could set a precedent for similar pending cases. Lauri Love, 33, faces charges in the United

States for allegedly hacking into the networks of the US Federal Reserve, US Army and NASA, among others, in 2012 and 2013. "The reason I've gone through this ordeal is not just to save myself from being kidnapped and locked up for 99 years in a country I've never visited, said Love, who has dual British and Finnish citizenship.

Love suffers from Asperger's syndrome and has also been diagnosed with depression. He was arrested at his home in Britain in October 2013. "But it's to set a precedent whereby this will not happen to other people in the future," Love told reporters outside High Court in London. "If there is suspected criminality then it will be tried here in the UK and America will not try to exercise exorbitant extra-territorial jurisdiction." (AFP)

France Warns Travelers of Snow and Ice after Serious Floods

PARIS -After the floods, now the cold. France's national weather agency Météo France said Monday about half the country is on alert for dangerous levels of snow and ice. The area includes 45 departments from the Atlantic coast to the German border, and from Paris down toward southern France. Urging people to limit their movement, Météo France is also maintaining its orange alert - the second-highest

warning level - for floods along the Seine River basin. Floodwaters peaked in Paris last week but the decrease in flood level has been very slow. Meanwhile, the French Alps and Pyrenees are under a lower-level alert for avalanches. The weather agency says the snow episode in lower-lying France is not exceptional but serious enough to make roads dangerous. Sporadic snow forecast throughout the week. (AP)

Dutch Government Formally Withdraws Turkish Ambassador Over 2017 Row

AMSTERDAM - The Dutch Foreign Ministry on Monday said it had formally withdrawn its ambassador to Turkey, who has been physically barred from the country for almost a year, over a dispute that began during March 2017. The Netherlands will also not accept the appointment of a new Turkish ambassador to the Netherlands. In a statement, the ministry said it has "paused" talks with Turkey on resolving the matter. The two governments originally fell out over the Netherlands' decision to block visas for Turkish officials to campaign among the Turkish diaspora in the Netherlands in favor of Turkey's constitutional referendum in March - at the exact time the Netherlands was holding its own national elections. (Reuters)

Disorderly Brexit Would Renew Pressure on Britain Credit Rating: S&P Global

LONDON - A disorderly Brexit as a result of Britain misjudging the "self-preservation" instincts of the European Union could lead to a further downgrade of the UK's sovereign credit rating, S&P Global said on Monday. "The U.K. risks further adverse economic, financial, and ratings outcomes if it ignores the EU's rationale of self-preservation," S&P's top sovereign analyst Moritz Kraemer said in a report. S&P cut Britain's previously triple-A rating by two notches to AA with a negative outlook, after the mid-2016 Brexit vote. "The U.K. government at the time misread the electorate's mood when it invited it to vote on EU membership. It is hopefully not also misjudging central convictions held across the Channel." (Reuters)

Swiss President Says Rohingya Return Must be Voluntary

DHAKA, Bangladesh - Swiss President Alain Berset says the return of Rohingya Muslims who have fled violence in Myanmar must be voluntary. Berset, who is on a four-day visit to Bangladesh, said after meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Monday that the situation of Rohingya in Bangladesh refugee camps is of great concern. Berset pledged to provide an additional 12 million francs (\$12.9 million) for Rohingya this year. He is expected to visit Rohingya refugee camps



on Tuesday. More than 680,000 Rohingya Muslims have fled from Buddhist-majority Myanmar since the military launched a crackdown in August. In November, Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed to gradually repatriate them. The returns were scheduled to

begin in January, but were delayed by incomplete preparations and concerns that the Rohingya were being forced back. Human rights groups have expressed concern about the safety and security of the refugees if they are sent back. (AP)

Berlusconi Points Finger at '600,000 Migrants Having No Right to Stay'

The migration issue has become a hot topic for Italian politicians ahead of the March elections as tensions in the country have risen after an Italian radical with extreme right-wing views shot and injured six African immigrants on Saturday. Former Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi said in a TV interview Sunday that immigration was a "social bomb ready to explode in Italy," adding that the recent shooting posed a "security problem." The 81-year-old politician appar-

ently indicated that he would deport 600,000 illegal immigrants from the country in case his center-right coalition gains seats in the government after the parliamentary elections on March 4. "Immigration has become an urgent question, because after years with a leftwing government, there are 600,000 migrants who don't have the right to stay," Berlusconi said. "We consider it to be an absolute priority to regain control over the situation." (Sputnik International)

Senior US Diplomat Pitches Arms Sales in China's Backyard

BEIJING - The top U.S. diplomat overseeing arms sales said Monday she would be promoting American weaponry at the largest air show in Asia, where China's military footprint and political influence are surging. A large U.S. delegation at the Singapore Air Show is doing "everything we can" to encourage Southeast Asian governments to purchase U.S.-made arms like the F-35 fighter jet, Ambassador Tina Kaidanow told reporters in a telephone briefing. She repeatedly sought to dispel the notion that U.S. influence was in retreat. The Trump administration in December outlined a new national security strategy that placed an emphasis on countering China's rise. The strategy calls for reinforcing the U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific region, where Beijing and Washington have accused each other of stoking a dangerous military buildup while vying for influence. Washington has been seeking to woo countries like Vietnam, a former foe, with arms sales and transfers at a time when China has bolstered its territorial claims in the South China Sea with extensive construction projects on man-made islands. Kaidanow said the transfer last year of a coast guard cutter to Vietnam, which often contests China's maritime claims, was an "incredible positive." (AP)

Neighbor News

Turkmenistan Opens Visa Center for Tourists in China

ASHGABAT - Beijing hosted the opening of the visa service center "Silk Road" of Turkmenistan, the Turkmen Dowlathabarlary state news service reported Feb. 5. The center is designed to provide visa support to Chinese tourists and companies in the form of consultations, collecting, processing and sending documents for obtaining an entry visa to Turkmenistan. The ceremony was held as part of the Turkmen-Chinese forum on co-

operation in the field of tourism, which was held with the assistance of the State Committee for Tourism Development and Chinese companies. Turkmenistan's Ambassador to China Chinar Rustamova highlighted such key mechanisms for activating tourism links as cross-participation in industry exhibitions and congresses, exchange of delegations, joint events and implementation of investment projects, says the report. (Trend)

Tajikistan Expanding Cotton Fields in A Bid to Raise Output

DUSHANBE - Cotton cultivation area in Tajikistan has increased by 13,500 hectares this year, local news agency TajikTA reported Feb. 5. "Cotton is one of the Tajik export commodities and a raw material for the local light industry. With growth of market demand cotton is now being cultivated in a total area of 187,500 hectares, 13,500 hectares more compared to 2017," Tajik Ministry of Agriculture states. Cotton fields are to be expanded at the expense of grain and fodder crop areas, according to the ministry. Earlier, cotton cultivation areas and, correspondingly, cotton production were decreasing in the country. In 2012, 418,000 tons of cotton was harvested, while the harvest was 393,000 tons in 2013, 372,000 tons in 2014, 335,000 tons in 2015, and 270,000 tons the last year. A consistent decrease in cotton cultivation fields caused the decline as 200,000 hectares were allotted for cotton in 2012, with only 160,000 hectares allotted in 2016. (Trend)

POSCO Daewoo Launches High Tech City Project in Uzbekistan

TASHKENT - South Korea's POSCO Daewoo Corporation has launched a project to build High Tech City complex in Tashkent. A relevant agreement was signed last week between the Korean company, the State Committee for Investments and the Tashkent Authority. The new complex worth \$1.4 billion will be located on the territory of about 50 hectares. Business centers, apartment houses, educational, commercial and industrial establishments, research centers and other facilities will be built here. All of them will be built using "smart" technologies, including energy-saving systems and building automation. Under the terms of the agreement, the parties have launched the first phase of the project that stipulates creation of a joint working group that will coordinate the operational and qualitative implementation of all stages of its implementation, and will also select a site for construction, develop a conceptual plan and a preliminary feasibility study. Korean specialists have already conducted an analysis of urban planning in Tashkent, identified the main problems, studied similar projects being implemented - the business center of Tashkent City and the "smart" city of Nurafshon. (Trend)

Europe Must Be Aware Not To Be Deceived By US: Iran MP

TEHRAN - A senior Iranian lawmaker has warned that the United States is making various efforts to encourage European countries to express their opposition to the 2015 landmark nuclear agreement, urging Europe's vigilance in the face of such efforts. The second vice speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Ali Motahhari, made the comments on Sunday in an exclusive interview with IRNA amid the US lobbying efforts against Iran's peaceful missile activities. The administration of US President Donald Trump has for months been threatening to quit the multilateral nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), if its "distasteful flaws" are not fixed. Trump said on January 12 he wanted America's European allies to use the 120-day period before sanctions relief again came up for renewal to agree to tougher measures and new conditions, otherwise Washington would pull out of the deal. Washington has repeatedly claimed that Iran's missile program is in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorses the JCPOA. (Presstv)