

France Conducts Nuclear Strike Simulation, Seen as Message to Moscow amid Tensions

PARIS - The French Air Force on Tuesday said it conducted a rare simulation test launch of a nuclear cruise missile just days after the United States announced it will withdraw from a Cold War-era arms control treaty with Russia. The French nuclear missile strike mission— that included a Rafale warplane— lasted 11 hours and included aerial refueling. The mission comes as France looks to double down on its own nuclear dissuasion program. French air force officials did not say when the test was carried out. "These real strikes are scheduled in the life of the weapon's system," a French official said. "They are carried out at fairly regular intervals, but remain rare because the real missile, without its warhead, is fired."

The announcement comes days



after the U.S. pulled out a 1987 pact known as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces. Tensions between Washington and Moscow have led to

growing concerns from Europe over its own security. "We Europeans cannot remain spectators of our own security," French Defense Minister

Florence Parly said at a conference in Portugal, according to Reuters. (Fox News)

Ukraine Completes 30 Pct of "Wall" Along Border with Russia

KIEV - Ukraine has completed 30 percent of its "Wall" project along the border with Russia, local media reported Wednesday, citing a government spokesman. Oleg Slobodyan, spokesman for the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, told local 5 TV-channel that the project is scheduled to be completed in 2021. In October 2014, the Ukrainian government launched the project, which envisages installing fortifications and barriers, such as barbed

wire and fences with motion sensors and infrared cameras, along about 2,000-km-long border with Russia. The project was designed to "cut off Russian support" for armed groups in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions, which have been involved in a conflict with the government since April 2014. Kiev has long accused Russia of aiding the insurgents in eastern Ukraine and sending troops to combat areas there. (Xinhua)

Venezuela Seizes 'US Weapons Shipment' as Trump Vows to Support 'Noble Quest for Freedom'

CARACAS - Donald Trump has expressed full support for the Venezuelan opposition to oust President Nicolas Maduro from power, just as the country's authorities announced they'd seized a cache of weapons, allegedly delivered from the US. The US-made weapons were discovered at the storage yard of Arturo Michelena International Airport in the Venezuelan city of Valencia, the Interior Ministry said Tuesday. The stash included at least 19 rifles

and 118 magazines, high-caliber ammunition, as well as 90 radios and six mobile phones — and was likely sent from Miami, Florida on Sunday, authorities believe. An investigation to determine the intended recipient of the shipment has been launched. While the US never ruled out a military option to support Juan Guaidó's claim to power, so far Washington has called for a peaceful transition of power in the Latin American country. "We stand with the Ven-



ezuelan people in their noble quest for freedom," Donald Trump reiterated during his State of the Union Address on Tuesday, offering full support for the Venezuelan opposition and the leader of the National Assembly. (RT)

Former President of Costa Rica and Nobel Prize Winner Óscar Arias Sánchez Accused of Sexual Assault



SAN JOSÉ - Óscar Arias Sánchez, former president of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace Prize winner, has been accused of sexual assault.

The shocking claims against one of the most prominent figures in Costa Rica have been levied by psychiatrist and anti-nuclear activist Dr. Alex-

andra Arce von Herold, who sat with federal prosecutors for nearly three hours to file a criminal complaint on Monday, the New York Times reports. Von Herold claims that Arias, now 78, assaulted her in his home in 2014 while she was there to discuss an important upcoming event in Vienna related to her activism in nuclear disarmament. While there, she alleges he approached her from behind, touched her breasts, put his hands up her skirt and penetrated her vagi-

nally with his fingers. "I just froze, and I didn't know what to do," she said in an interview. "I was so much in shock. That had never happened to me before." Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 for designing a plan to end civil war in Central America. He served two terms as President of Costa Rica from 1986 to 1990 and 2006 to 2010. Through his lawyer, Rodolfo Brenes, Arias issued a short statement proclaiming his innocence. (Fox News)

Turkey Slams France Over Decision to Mark Armenian Genocide

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey is strongly condemning French President Emmanuel Macron's decision to mark April 24 as a day of "commemoration of the Armenian genocide" in reference to the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million Armenians under the Ottoman Empire a century ago. Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin on Wednesday denounced Macron's move as an attempt to "save the day" and

make political gains as he faces "political problems in his own country." Many historians regard the mass killings of Armenians as the first genocide of the 20th century. Turkey rejects the term genocide, contending that those who died were victims of civil war and unrest. Macron was speaking at a dinner gathering members of the French-Armenian community in Paris on Tuesday evening. (AP)

World Shares Mixed Following Trump's State of Union Speech

BANGKOK — Stocks fell in European trading Wednesday, after gains in much of Asia, as investors digested U.S. President Donald Trump's State of the Union address to Congress. While the address raised no new concerns, Trump reiterated his determination to protect American jobs and get China to make structural changes to its economy to help curb its trade surplus with the U.S. British Prime Minister Theresa May was due to meet with major political parties in Northern Ireland in a bid to end an impasse over her proposal for Britain's departure from the European Union. Germany's DAX dropped 0.3 percent to 11,330 and the FTSE 100 in Britain lost 0.2 percent to 7,162. (AP)

Egypt Opposition Rejects Move to Extend El-Sissi's Rule

CAIRO — Egyptian opposition parties have formed a coalition against proposed changes to the constitution that would allow President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi to stay in office well beyond the end of his current term in 2022, two opposition leaders said on Wednesday. Egypt's parliament has given its preliminary approval to the changes, after two-thirds of the general committee endorsed the proposed amendments on Tuesday. The 596-seat assembly — which is packed with el-Sissi supporters — will take a final vote on Feb. 17, but the amendments would also need to be put to a national referendum. Abdel-Aziz el-Husseini, a senior leader in the Karama, or Dignity party, said that 11 parties met the previous day and declared their opposition to the proposed changes. (AP)

'Special Place in Hell' for Those Who Promoted Brexit with No Plan - EU's Tusk

BRUSSELS - Donald Tusk, the President of the EU Council, has lashed out at the UK, saying he wonders what the "special place in hell" looks like for those who pushed for Brexit without coming up with a clear plan to deliver it. Addressing reporters in Brussels, Tusk reiterated the EU's position on the Withdrawal Agreement, stating that the Brexit deal agreed with Theresa May's Tory government in November last year, was not open to renegotiation. "I've been wondering what that special place in hell looks like, for those who promoted #Brexit, with-



out even a sketch of a plan how to carry it out safely. May arrives for talks with EU officials on Thursday in an attempt to formulate "alternative arrangements" on the contentious Irish backstop. Tusk declared that he hoped the UK PM

U.S. President Set to Visit Britain for NATO Summit

LONDON - The President of the United States Donald Trump is expected to visit Britain in December for a NATO summit, over a year after his first trip to the country was widely protested. NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said in a statement published Wednesday that "the Allies have agreed" to meet to discuss security challenges and how NATO can adapt to keep people safe. In a statement published by the

Prime Minister's Office on Wednesday, Theresa May said it would be an "important opportunity" to modernize. "December's meeting is an important opportunity to determine the steps we must now take to modernize the Alliance and ensure its continued success," May said. The UK has played a central role throughout NATO's history as it has adapted to deal with new and complex threats to our security, the statement said. (Xinhua)

Macedonia Signs Accord to Join NATO Despite Russian Misgivings

BRUSSELS - NATO members signed an accord with Macedonia on Wednesday allowing the tiny ex-Yugoslav republic to become the 30th member of the U.S.-led alliance after a deal with Greece ended a 27-year-old dispute over its name. At a formal signing of the NATO accession protocol, which must now be ratified by allied governments, Macedonia's Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov hailed the moment as showing that the country "will never walk alone" once in the alliance. "We stand beside these 29 allies... able and ready to assume the obligations arising from our full membership in NATO," Dimitrov told a news conference after NATO ambassadors signed the protocol.

The ratification process typically takes about a year, and the United States has said it expects Macedonia - now known officially as North Macedonia under the terms of its name deal with Greece - to formally join the alliance in 2020. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the admittance of a new member highlighted that all European nations who met the entrance criteria could join the regional alliance, a position Moscow rejects. "It shows that NATO's door remains open for countries that meet NATO standards and that adhere to the NATO values of democracy, the rule of law and individual liberty," Stoltenberg said. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Pakistan, Russia Sign Mou for Gas Pipeline Feasibility Study

ISLAMABAD - Interstate Gas Systems (ISGS) and Gazprom on Wednesday signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to conduct a joint feasibility study regarding gas supplies from the Middle East to South Asian countries, according to a press release issued by the Russian energy giant. The MoU was inked by ISGS Managing Director Mubeen Saulat and Gazprom board member Vitaly Markelov during a meeting between a Russian delegation and Petroleum Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan.

The agreement penned today was a follow-up to the one signed by

the two countries in September 2018 for a planned offshore gas pipeline.

"The two countries have concluded various proposals in the energy sector, including construction of North-South Gas Pipeline, import of LNG from Russia, installation of air mix plant and establishing a 600MW combined cycle power plant," Foreign Office (FO) spokesperson Dr Muhammad Faisal had said regarding the MoU when it was finalized in June 2018. The project, which has been under discussion since 2017, would eventually involve four countries — Pakistan, Iran, Russia and India. (Dawn)

Asians Lift More Iran Oil but Europe Refuses Imports

TEHRAN - Asian customers of Iranian oil are steady in taking supplies from the country but the Europeans refuse to buy any, despite having received exemptions from US sanctions.

India's Hindustan Petroleum Corp said Wednesday it plans to buy 0.9 million tonnes of Iranian oil this year. The company imported 0.7 million tonnes of crude oil from Iran during the financial year between April 2018 and February 2019, director of refineries M K Surana said.

Last month, Indian refiners began clearing their oil debt to Iran under a new payment mechanism which they put in place after the US reimposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

China, South Korea and Japan have also started importing oil from Iran but European nations have not responded yet to Tehran's offers to sell them crude oil despite having US waivers, Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh said Tuesday. "No European country is buying oil from Iran except Turkey," he told a news conference in Tehran. "Greece and Italy have been granted exemptions by America, but they don't buy Iranian oil and they don't answer our questions." (Press TV)

Russia, Turkmenistan Exploring Opportunities for Co-Op in Energy Field

ASHGABAT - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Feb. 6 following the talks in Ashgabat with Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov that issues of cooperation between the two countries in the oil and gas sector will be discussed at a meeting of the inter-governmental commission, Trend reports with reference to the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Russian representatives who manage the intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation will be engaged in bilateral interaction in the oil and gas sphere, Lavrov noted. "The dates for holding the meeting of the inter-governmental commission are being agreed upon," he added. He noted that during the talk, the Turkmen president expressed satisfaction with the way the

gas issue is being considered in the current Russia-Turkmenistan dialogue with a view to finding new large-scale agreements.

The Russian Foreign Ministry also published speech by Lavrov at the meeting with the Turkmen president. "There is progress in the energy sector between our countries, and we support it," he said. "We want the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to be understandable for all our partners that aren't part of this structure." He noted that there are plans to link the Central Asian power energy system, where Turkmenistan plays a very important role, and the common power energy market, which will be formed in the EEU by 2025. "This is quite an interesting and large-scale project," said Lavrov. (Trend)

Turkmenistan Increases Cotton Harvest Plan for 2020

ASHGABAT - Cotton production should be increased to 1.250 million tons next year in Turkmenistan, Trend reports with reference to the country's Agriculture Ministry. This year, 550,000 hectares are allocated for cotton in Turkmenistan, and a total of 1.050 million tons of raw cotton is planned to be harvested. It is planned to sow cotton seeds taking into

account the soil and climatic conditions of the regions. Government procurement prices for cotton were increased in Turkmenistan in 2019. The state will buy one ton of fine-fiber cotton varieties from citizens for 2,000 manats, medium-fiber varieties at 1,500 manats. For comparison, the previous prices were 1,650 and 1,144 manats respectively. (RT)