

Turkey, KSA Could Launch Ground Operation in Syria: Turkish FM

ISTANBUL - Turkey and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) could launch a ground operation in Syria against the Islamic State (IS) militant group, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu was quoted as saying on Saturday.

"If there will be a comprehensive strategy within the scope of fight against IS, we all said that Turkey and Saudi Arabia could launch a ground operation," the minister was quoted by Turkey's Haberturk daily as saying after attending the Munich Security Conference.

He also said that Riyadh will send warplanes to the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey's southern province of Adana.

Currently, the U.S., Britain and France are using the base to car-



ry out airstrikes on IS targets in Syria.

"They did a reconnaissance of the base," Cavusoglu said. "The planes will arrive at Incirlik. At the moment it is not clear how many planes will come."

Saudi officials also said that Riyadh could send troops "if necessary time comes for a ground operation," Cavusoglu said, adding that Turkey and Saudi Arabia have been backing a ground operation in Syria "from the very beginning." As Syrian government forces are making gains lately on the battlegrounds, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and others have voiced readiness to deepen their military intervention in the war-torn country. (Xinhua)

Russian PM Warns of Catastrophic Consequence of Lingering Syria Conflict

MUNICH - Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on Saturday warned here of catastrophic consequences in case that the conflict in Syria dragged on.

Speaking to top diplomats at a session of the ongoing Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Munich, Medvedev said it was important to prevent Syria from disintegrating. "The consequence of this scenario will be catastrophic to the Middle East as a whole," he said. He went on to explain

that terrorists would take advantage of the situation and the whole world would have to face up to terror if the situation in Syria and other hot spots were not normalized.

According to Medvedev, the work of International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which produced a statement early Friday morning, was inspiring. He called for all sides to come to the negotiating table instead of just monitoring the situation in Syria. He said "a civil war is raging there. We have



to work together to address this issue. We have to work efficiently, not just to monitor how the situation is developing there." Medvedev refuted

the accusation that Russia was bombing civilian targets in Syria. "That is not true," he said and added there is no evidence. (Xinhua)

Syrian Army Braces to Approach IS De Facto Capital

DAMASCUS - The Syrian army is preparing to advance toward the northern city of al-Raqqa, the de facto capital of the Islamic State (IS) group in Syria, a monitor group said on Saturday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the Syrian army is a few kilometers from the provincial borders of al-Raqqa, following the rapid progress it has recently achieved on the desert high way near the town of Athraya, on the

road between al-Raqqa and the northern province of Aleppo. Advancing toward al-Raqqa will grant the Syrian army a foothold in that city for the first time since the IS terror group captured the al-Tabaqa airbase in 2014, the last government stronghold in the city. In Aleppo, where the Syrian army is making strides against the foreign-backed militants, the Syrian state TV said the military forces captured... (More on P4)... (20)

Sadr Calls for Government Reforms in Iraq

BAGHDAD - Iraq's firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr on Saturday called for government reforms, stressing on the need for technocrat government and other demands within his proposal.

Sadr comments came following similar demands from Iraqi political and religious elite after the failure of previous reform packages announced last summer by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, which aimed at enabling his cabinet to confront the country's economic crisis due to the sharp decrease in oil prices in the world markets.

Among his several economic and political reforms, Sadr called in his televised speech for "forming a technocrat government away from partisanship to powerful leading parties, or their influence."

Sadr also called for the country's powerful Shiite militias to be formally incorporated into Iraqi security forces, including his own Saraya al-Salam militia, which was formed following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State (IS) group in June 2014. He said that the arms "must be in the hand of the state exclusively," and that all kinds of arms must be delivered to... (More on P4)... (21)

NATO Chief Calls for "Constructive" Dialogue with Russia

MUNICH - NATO needs "constructive dialogue" with Russia to ensure long-term stability in Europe, NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg said on Saturday.

The NATO chief addressed the Munich Security Conference on the second day. He accused Russia for destabilizing European security order but reaffirmed that NATO does not seek confrontations nor a cold war.

"NATO will strive for a more constructive, more cooperative relationship

with Russia," he said.

"We are in a new reality with Russia... We do need a constructive dialogue," Stoltenberg said.

Stoltenberg said dialogue is needed for a number of reasons, including promoting strategic stability, increasing transparency and reducing risks of incidents and accidents. Stoltenberg said he met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Friday, and that both agreed to explore the possibilities of convening a meeting of the NATO-Russia council.



Talking about NATO's missile defense, Stoltenberg reiterated it is purely defensive. "It is neither designed nor

directed against Russia. It does not and cannot undermine Russian strategic deterrence," he said. (Xinhua)

UK Needs Nuclear Weapons for 'Outsized' World Role: Carter

LONDON - Britain must renew its submarine-borne Trident nuclear weapons system if it is to maintain its "outsized" role in world affairs, U.S. Defence Secretary Ash Carter said in comments published on Saturday.

A decision on replacing the ageing fleet of four submarines which carry nuclear warheads is due to be made this year and while Prime Minister David Cameron is committed to renewal, the issue has caused deep divisions in the opposition Labour Party. The government



has said replacing the submarines will cost 31 billion pounds while Reuters has puts the overall cost of renewing and maintaining a successor to Trident at more than 167 billion pounds (\$234 billion) over

32 years. Carter said the submarine fleet helped the "special relationship" between Britain and the United States, the BBC said on its website. The deterrent allowed Britain... (More on P4)... (22)

India, UAE Vow to Strengthen Anti-Terror Cooperation

NEW DELHI - India and the United Arab Emirates have agreed to strengthen anti-terror cooperation both at "the bilateral level" and within "the multilateral system." According to a joint statement issued Friday on the concluding day of Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Commander of the UAE Armed Forces Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's three-day visit to India, the two sides "strongly condemned extremism and terrorism in all of their forms and manifestations." They also slammed the "use of double standards" in fighting terrorism and "reiterated that any justification for terrorism and any link between extremism or terrorism and religion should be strongly rejected by the international community," the statement said. It also said, "They reiterated their condemnation for efforts, including... (More on P4)... (23)

French PM Calls for Sustainable Transition in Syria at MSC

MUNICH - French Prime Minister Manuel Valls advocated here on Saturday that a sustainable transition toward peace should be organized in Syria. "The solution cannot only be a military one, we need to organize a sustainable transition toward peace," Valls said, while addressing the Munich Security Conference (MSC) on the second day during a session of prime ministers' debate with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. He also pointed out that this process would be a long one, so a true ceasefire and humanitarian assistance to besieged populations need to be organized without delay. Valls said the newly-reached agreement on Syria negotiated in Munich is an important step... (More on P4)... (24)

German FM Calls at MSC for Unity within EU in Turbulent Times

MUNICH - "We have to work hard in order to ensure in one year's time, the next MSC will still have the same EU as we are now in today," said German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Saturday at the Munich Security Conference (MSC). Steinmeier described it as "turbulence times" when Europe is now experiencing a variety of crisis including extended Right-wing populism, the debate over Brexit, as well as the refugee crisis. In order to overcome external threats and challenges in turbulent times, Steinmeier called for sending out a signal of more unity within EU in Munich and said "we can only weather these storms when we stand united... (More on P4)... (27)

Russia Warns of New Cold War as East Ukraine Violence Surges

MUNICH - Violence in eastern Ukraine is intensifying and Russian-backed rebels have moved heavy weaponry back to the front line, international monitors warned on Saturday as Moscow responded by accusing Kiev of violating a peace deal. In the latest sign that peace efforts

have made scant progress almost two years since Moscow annexed Crimea, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev described East-West relations as having "fallen into a new Cold War" and said NATO was "hostile and closed" towards Russia. ... (More on P4)... (25)

U.S. Commander Sees Al Qaeda Africa Group Strengthening

DAKAR - Two high-profile strikes in West Africa since November by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) could further strengthen the Islamist militant group, a U.S. commander for North and West Africa said. AQIM, a militant group that emerged from the Algerian civil war in the 1990s and is now mostly north Mali-based, is emerging from a period of near dormancy marked by factional

infighting. The group, linked to veteran jihadist Mokhtar-Belmokhtar, claimed two hotel sieges in the Mali and Burkina Faso capitals in November and January that killed dozens, including many Westerners, proving its ability to strike further south. Some experts say the urban attacks, and a slew of recent propaganda, may be a bid to compete with ultra-hard-line... (More on P4)... (26)

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Iran President Orders Single Forex, Lower Lending Rates

TEHRAN - Iran must unify multi-tiered foreign exchange rate and cut lending interest rates as part of post-sanctions plan to prop up the economy, President Hassan Rouhani says. "Forex rate must be unified next [calendar] year (starting March 21) so that stability in the market will be bolstered and corruption will be stopped," Rouhani told a banking forum on Saturday.

He stressed the necessity of cutting lending interest rates, saying: "After the administration curbs inflation and [cuts it to] a single-digit

rate, high banking interest rate would be incorrect and will harm the economy."

Rouhani said Iranian banks have to step up their efforts in favor of national economy now that international sanctions have been lifted on Iran. Interest rates offered by Iranian banks are set at 20% for long-term deposits and at lower floating rates for short-term accounts. Iran's national currency, the rial, has been traditionally traded at two rates one being traded by CBI and the other one set by money changers. (PressTV)

China Opposes Possible U.S. THAAD Deployment in S. Korea

MUNICH - Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Friday spoke out against the possible deployment of an advanced U.S. missile defence system in South Korea, stressing that it would complicate the regional stability situation.

Meeting with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, Wang made clear China's opposition to the possible deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in South Korea.

The United States and South Korea have begun negotiations on the deployment of THAAD. The Pentagon made the announcement hours after the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

(DPRK) carried out on Sunday what it said was a satellite launch but others believed was a missile test.

Under UN Security Council resolutions, the DPRK is banned from test-firing any rockets based on ballistic missile technology.

As one of the most advanced missile defense systems in the world, THAAD can intercept and destroy ballistic missiles inside or just outside the atmosphere during their final phase of flight. Despite claims by Washington and Seoul that the missile shield would be focused solely on the DPRK, it is widely believed that the deployment would pose considerable threat to neighboring countries. (Xinhua)

Tajikistan Ready to Boost Trade with Pakistan

BISHKEK - Ambassador of the Republic of Tajikistan Sherali S Jononov has assured steps will be taken to strengthen trade by removing barriers that hamper the exchange of goods between Pakistan and Tajikistan. He was speaking to journalists during his visit to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KPCCI) on Friday, Tribune reports. According to Jononov, the current trade volume between the two countries is US\$89 million. "This should be increased to US\$500 million," he said.

The ambassador said they are working on improving bilateral trade. Jononov said Tajikistan is also trying to develop a more relaxed visa regime and begin direct flights to Pakistan for the benefit of both countries. On the occasion, traders asked the ambassador to invest in the province, particularly in the field of power generation as K-P has abundant hydropower resources. The ambassador also invited traders to participate in the trade and cultural festival to be held in Tajikistan on April 10. (AKIpress)

Eight F-16s will be Sold to Pakistan, US Congress told

WASHINGTON - The Obama administration notified the Congress on Friday that it planned to sell eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan.

The proposed deal will now go through a 30-day notification period after which it will be finalized. Earlier this week, the US State Department informed Congress that it was committed to improving Pakistan's precision strike capability, which was seen as a veiled reference to F-16 fighter jets. And on Thursday, a State Department spokesman, Mark Ton-

er, said at a news briefing that US weapon sales to Pakistan contributed to the fight against terrorism and furthered America's foreign policy interests. The remarks followed a move by some US lawmakers and a campaign in the US media to stop the Obama administration from selling eight F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan.

Although Congress has delayed the proposed sale, the administration still seems interested in pushing it through, insisting that it's in vital US interests to do so. (Agencies)