

US Navy says it Won't Be Deterred By Chinese-Built Islands

ABOARD USS CARL VINSON, Philippines — A Navy officer aboard a mammoth U.S. aircraft carrier brimming with F18 fighter jets said Saturday that American forces would continue to patrol the South China Sea wherever "international law allows us" when asked if China's newly built islands could restrain them in the disputed waters.

Lt. Cmdr. Tim Hawkins told The Associated Press on board the USS Carl Vinson that the Navy has carried out routine patrols at sea and on air in the strategic waters for 70 years to promote regional security and guarantee the unimpeded flow of trade that's crucial for Asian and U.S. economies.

"International law allows us to operate here, allows us to fly



here, allows us to train here, allows us to sail here, and that's what we're doing and we're going to continue to do that," Hawkins said on the flight deck of the 95,000-ton warship, which anchored at Manila Bay while on a Philippine visit. The U.S. Navy invited journalists on board the 35-year-old carrier, which was packed with 72 aircraft, including F18 Hornets, assault helicopters and surveillance aircraft. President Rodrigo Duterte has tried to back down from what he said was a Philippine foreign policy that was steeply oriented toward the U.S., but has allowed considerable engagements with his country's treaty ally while reviving once-frosty ties with China. (AP)

Russian Foreign Minister Dismisses US Election Indictment

MUNICH — Russia's foreign minister said Saturday that the U.S. indictment of 13 Russians accused of an elaborate plot to disrupt the 2016 presidential election is "just blabber."

The federal indictment brought Friday by special counsel Robert Mueller represents the most detailed allegations to date of illegal Russian meddling during the campaign that sent Donald Trump to the White House.

Asked about the indictment at the Munich Security Conference, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov replied: "I have

no response. You can publish anything, and we see those indictments multiplying, the statements multiplying." He argued that U.S. officials, including Vice President Mike Pence, have said no country influenced the U.S. election results.

"Until we see the facts, everything else is just blabber — I'm sorry for this expression," Lavrov said.

The 13 are charged with running a huge but hidden social media trolling campaign aimed in part at helping Republican Trump defeat Democrat Hillary Clinton. (AP)

Russian Women, Finland Advance to Semifinals with Big Wins

GANGNEUNG, South Korea — The Russian team and Finland have set up a pair of rematches for the women's hockey semifinals with a couple of big wins.

Anna Shokhina had two goals and two assists as the "Olympic Athletes from Russia" advanced with an upset 6-2 win over Switzerland on Saturday. RiikkaValila scored two goals as Finland routed Sweden 7-2 in a little payback for a quarterfinal loss to the Swedes at the 2014 Sochi



Gmes. Now the Russians will play Canada, the defending gold medalist who beat the Russians 5-0 in their opener for the tournament. The Finns will play the United

States in the first semifinal game Monday in a rematch of a 3-1 win by the Americans. The Russians provided the biggest upset of this tournament by beating the 2014 bronze medalists. Switzerland came into the quarterfinals undefeated after winning Group B and had given up only two goals in three games. (AP)

Italian Police Clashes with Anti-Fascists Leaves 7 Injured



MILAN — Italian police have clashed with hundreds of anti-fascist demonstrators in Bologna who were trying to disrupt a planned campaign

appearance by the head of the neo-fascist Forza Nuova. The news agency ANSA said six demonstrators and one police officer were injured. Police used

tear gas, water cannons and batons on demonstrators who tried to breach cordons to reach a square where the far-right campaign appearance was scheduled Friday in the traditionally left-wing city of Bologna. Forza Nuova leader

Roberto Fiore eventually addressed a small crowd behind a banner "Italy for Italians" that ANSA put at several dozen. The protests, organized by trade

As Support Falls, German SPD Sees 'No Plan B' to Merkel Coalition

BERLIN — Support for Germany's Social Democrats (SPD) hit a record low, a poll showed, and the party's leader-in-waiting said she had "no Plan B" should members reject a coalition deal with Angela Merkel's conservatives. The SPD's 464,000 members vote in a postal ballot beginning on Feb. 20 on whether the center-left party should go ahead with the agreement its leaders clinched last week to renew their power-sharing alliance with the chancellor's CDU/CSU bloc. "I am convinced we will get a majority," Andrea Nahles, who senior SPD officials this week endorsed as the party's future leader,

Neighbor News

India, Iran Sign Pact during Rouhani Visit on Leasing Port

NEW DELHI — India and Iran on Saturday signed agreements including Tehran leasing to New Delhi operational control of part of the Iranian east coast port of Chabahar for 18 months.

The \$85 million project, just 90 km from the China-sponsored Gwadar port in Pakistan, creates a transit route between India, Iran and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan. India is trying to develop Chabahar as a way to gain access to the markets of central Asia as well as Afghanistan.

But progress is slow because of concern that President Donald Trump's administration in Washington may eventually scrap the Iran nuclear deal. A leasing agreement giving operational control to India of Shahid Beheshti port — phase one of the Chabahar port — was signed in the presence

of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

Later, addressing a joint press conference with the Iranian president, Modi said both countries wanted to expand bilateral ties and cooperation in economic development.

"We will support the construction of the Chabahar-Zahedan rail link so that Chabahar gateway's potential could be fully utilized," Modi said.

"We want to expand connectivity, cooperation in the energy sector and the centuries-old bilateral relationship." Other agreements included a double taxation avoidance treaty, extradition, and cooperation in the farm sector.

Rouhani, who arrived in the southern city of Hyderabad on Thursday, will later address industrialists. (Reuters)

Iranian President Says will Adhere to Nuclear Deal Commitments

NEW DELHI — Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said on Saturday it would adhere to commitments under its 2015 international nuclear agreement, signed with six world powers to limit its disputed nuclear program.

"We will adhere to our commitments made," Rouhani said at an

event in New Delhi. "After signing a contract, haggling with it is ridiculous."

U.S. President Donald Trump has been pushing for changes to the agreement, which cleared the way for sanctions against the Islamic Republic to be lifted. (Reuters)

Uzbekistan Sees Decrease in Volume of Construction Work

TASHKENT — In January 2018, Uzbekistan carried out construction and installation work worth over 1,966 trillion soums, the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan said in a statement.

The indicator fell by 8.2 percentage points compared to the same period of 2017.

Furthermore, the volume of completed construction work by major contractors amounted to 297.3 billion soums, or 64.2 percent of the total figure, and decreased by 27.7 percentage points compared to the same period of last year.

There was recorded a 10 percent decrease in the volume of construction work performed by major contractors in all regions compared to the same period last year.

Bulk of the construction work was carried out in the city of Tashkent, which made up 23.1 percent of the total construction work in the

country, Bukhara region - 8.6 percent, Samarkand region - 8.4 percent, Ferghana region - 8.3 percent and 8.1 percent - Kashkadarya region. A low share of construction work was seen in the Syrdarya region - 1.9 percent. In Djizak and Khorezm regions, this indicator was 4.2 percent, and in the Republic of Karakalpakstan - 4.6 percent.

In January 2018, construction work was carried out by regional construction contractors for the amount of 1,113 trillion soums, and amounted to 56.6 percent of the total figure.

The main part of construction work by types of economic activity was carried out thanks to construction of residential and non-residential buildings and construction of non-residential premises.

The official exchange rate for Feb. 17 is 8188.33 UZS / USD. (Trend)

Envoy of Republic of Cyprus Accredited in Turkmenistan

ASHGABAT — Akja Nurberdiyeva, chairperson of the Turkmen Parliament, has received credentials from Leonidas Markides, extraordinary and plenipotentiary ambassador of the Republic of Cyprus, the Turkmen government said in a message.

As the diplomat stressed, the Republic of Cyprus attaches great

importance to strengthening cooperation with Turkmenistan. During the conversation, the priorities of Turkmenistan's foreign and domestic policy were considered.

Particular emphasis was placed on transformations in science, education, healthcare, culture and sports. (Trend)

UK Prime Minister Seeks Post-Brexit EU Security Alliance

MUNICH — British Prime Minister Theresa May urged her country's European Union partners on Saturday not to let "rigid institutional restrictions" get in the way of a wide-ranging post-Brexit security alliance, warning that there would be "damaging real-world consequences" if none can be agreed.

In a speech to the Munich Security Conference, May sought to reassure foreign and security policy leaders on Britain's future commitment to European security.

"Europe's security is our security — and that is why I've said, and I say again today, that the United Kingdom is unconditionally committed to main-



taining it," she said. The British government has already called for a wide-ranging security treaty with the EU to ensure that intelligence-sharing and law-enforcement cooperation continue after Brexit, scheduled for March 2019. Such a deal would allow Britain to remain a member of the EU

police body Europol and keep use of the European Arrest Warrant, which allows for the quick extradition of suspects.

But it has been unclear what legal framework would underpin such a treaty, because Britain says it will leave the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. (AP)

Thailand Decorates Myanmar's Army Chief amid Rohingya Crisis

BANGKOK — Thailand awarded Myanmar's army chief a royal decoration on Friday amid allegations of crimes by Myanmar security forces against Rohingya Muslims that have prompted international condemnation. Nearly 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar's Rakhine state and crossed into Bangladesh since last August, when attacks on security posts by insurgents triggered a military crackdown that the United Nations has said amounts to ethnic cleansing, with reports of arson attacks, murder and rape.

Myanmar army commander-in-chief

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was granted the Knight Grand Cross (First Class) of the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant at a ceremony in Bangkok, according to the general's official website. The website also showed a picture of the commander-in-chief shaking hands with his Thai counterpart, General Tammachaiyan Srisuwan. Buddhist-majority Thailand often gives royal decorations to army chiefs of other countries who are supportive of Thailand's army. Thai army spokesman Lieutenant General Nonthapol Boonngam said. (Reuters)

Marit Bjoergen Ties Winter Olympic Record with 13th Medal

PYEONGCHANG, South Korea — Marit Bjoergen crossed the finish line, thrust her ski poles in the air and was promptly mobbed by teammates. She'd done it.

No Winter Olympian in history can say they have more medals than the 37-year-old Norwegian cross-country skier.

Bjoergen helped the Norwegian women win the 4x5-kilometer cross-country relay on Saturday to take home her 13th career medal, tying her with Norwegian biathlete Ole Einar Bjoerndalen for the most Winter Games medals ever.

She can take over sole possession of the lead with a medal in either the final two women's events — the team sprint relay or the 50-kilometer mass start. The 44-year-old Bjoerndalen participated in six Olympics but did not make this year's team, so his medal count won't increase. "She is an absolute legend," American rival Jessica Diggins said. "It's really, really cool to see her race every single time. She just skis with absolute control." Sweden finished a close second in Saturday's race while a team of Russians were third.

Bjoergen said she hasn't given herself time to think about the record.

"I think when you're an athlete and still racing you're looking forward and not thinking about what you've done," Bjoergen said. "You're just looking forward to the next race and focus on that. Like I said before, when I've finished skiing I'll look behind me and see what I will have done."

Bjoergen was 3.4 seconds behind with the Norwegians in third place entering the anchor leg of the race. But she quickly took the lead and never let it go, holding off Stina Nilsson for the gold. (AP)

Big Mexico Quake Cuts Power and Damages Homes; Two Dead in Crash

MEXICO CITY — A prolonged 7.2 magnitude quake that rocked Mexico on Friday left nearly a million homes and businesses without power in the capital and south but the only reported deaths came when a military helicopter crashed after surveying the aftermath.

At least 50 homes suffered damage in the southern state of Oaxaca, which, along with Mexico City, is still reeling from earthquakes that caused widespread damage in September.

The epicenter was about 90 miles (145 km) from Pacific coast surfer resort Puerto Escondido in the southern state of Oaxaca and had a depth of 15.3 miles (24.6 km), according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

At least two people died when a helicopter carrying Mexico's interior minister and the governor of Oaxaca crashed while trying to land after a tour of damage from the earthquake, officials said. The senior officials survived.

The powerful, sustained shaking on Friday gave way to 225 aftershocks, the national seismology service said, and caused widespread panic. (Reuters)

West Balkan States Must Solve Border Disputes before Joining EU: Juncker

MUNICH — European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker on Saturday underscored the importance of offering countries in the West Balkans the prospect of EU membership, but insisted they must resolve all border disputes before joining the bloc.

"There are many border disputes in the West Balkans and they must be resolved before we can go a step further," Juncker told the annual Munich Security Conference.

He said he was frustrated by an ongoing border dispute between Croatia and Slovenia that had not been addressed before they joined the EU, and wanted to prevent a recurrence with other potential EU member states. (Reuters)