

US and Allies Discuss New Sanctions on Russia over Ukraine: Kerry

LONDON - The United States and its allies are discussing imposing more sanctions against Russia for undermining a European-brokered truce in eastern Ukraine, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said on Saturday.

Kerry made the comments as he began talks with his British counterpart Philip Hammond in London, accusing Moscow of "extraordinarily craven behaviour at the expense of the sovereignty and integrity of a nation".

The Kiev military accused Russia on Friday of sending tanks and troops into eastern Ukraine despite a ceasefire that went into force last Sunday, brokered by France and Germany in a bid to end a conflict that has killed more than 5,000 people. The Kremlin did not immediately respond to the allegation but has always denied accusations in the past that its forces are fighting in Ukraine.

Kerry, however, said the United States "knows to a certainty" of Russia's involvement in the conflict and support it was giving to the separatists.

"Russia has engaged in an absolutely brazen and cynical process over these last days," the Secretary of State said.

"We are talking about additional sanctions, about additional efforts, and I'm confident over the next days people will make it clear that we are not going to play this game," he added.



"We're not going sit there and be part of this kind of extraordinarily craven behaviour at the expense of the sovereignty and integrity of a nation."

Pro-Russian separatists are building up forces and weapons in Ukraine's south east and the Ukrainian military said on Saturday it was braced for the possibility of a rebel attack on the port city of Mariupol.

A rebel attack on Mariupol, a city of half a million people and potentially a gateway to Crimea, which Russia annexed last March, would almost certainly kill off the ceasefire that aimed to end the 10-month-old conflict. The ceasefire has already been badly shaken by the rebel capture on Wednesday of Debaltsevo, a railway junction in eastern Ukraine, forcing a retreat by thousands of Ukrainian troops in which at least 20 Ukrainian soldiers were killed. British Foreign Secretary Hammond said the ceasefire had been "systematically breached" and he would discuss with Kerry how Europe and the United States could remain united in tackling the challenge in Ukraine. U.S. President Barack Obama's administration has previously said it is considering deepening

sanctions against Moscow and is also weighing the possibility of providing weapons to Ukraine's military, although officials stress the priority is to find a political solution. While Ukraine is expected to dominate the talks in London, Kerry and Hammond said they would also discuss the threat from Islamist militants in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Hammond repeated Britain's view that a unity government was urgently needed in Libya "so that the international community can put its weight behind that government in order to squeeze the terrorists out." A U.S. official said Kerry would also discuss Nigeria's upcoming election and the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

The Secretary of State travels to Geneva on Sunday for two days of talks with senior Iranian officials on Tehran's disputed nuclear programme as the sides try to resolve differences before a March 31 deadline for a basic framework agreement.

U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz will also attend the talks, the first time he has participated in the Iran negotiations, the U.S. official said.

Negotiations between the United States, Russia, China, France, Germany, Britain and Iran have reached a critical stage. The U.S. official said Moniz's involvement was due to the technical nature of the current talks. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Rouhani's Brother, Zarif in Geneva for N. Talks with US

TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif along with the country's nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi and President Rouhani's brother and special aide Hassan Fereidoun arrived in Geneva on Saturday to take part in another round of nuclear talks with their US counterparts.

The Iranian and US negotiators have had several rounds of talks in Geneva on Friday and Saturday, and Zarif and his US counterpart John Kerry are slated to join the negotiations at Geneva's Wilson Hotel on Sunday and Monday. Salehi is also scheduled to hold talks with US Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz on Tehran's nuclear program and meet his Swiss

counterpart on bilateral ties.

Fereidoun who is also President Hassan Rouhani's brother will accompany Zarif during his meetings "to make the necessary coordination".

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (R) & Iranian president's brother Hassan Fereidoun (L) Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister and senior negotiator Seyed Abbas Araqchi and another deputy foreign minister Majid Takht Ravanchi held 7 and a half hours of talks with their US counterpart Wendy Sherman on Friday. Speaking after the talks, Araqchi reiterated Iran's opposition to clinching a two-phased nuclear agreement with the ... (More on P4)... (16)

U.S. Experts Upbeat on Sustained China-U.S. Dialogue, Cooperation

WASHINGTON - As the Chinese Lunar New Year of the Goat was ushered in on Thursday, experts in the United States cautiously predicted a year of sustained dialogue and substantial cooperation between China and the U.S. in 2015.

Optimism about a more amicable year for China-U.S. ties was generated in early February when the two sides announced a state visit to the U.S. by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September. This will be the first state visit to the U.S. by Xi, who already held an informal summit with U.S. President Barack Obama at the Sunnylands estate in California in 2013 and another summit in Beijing last November.

The early announcement of this visit was interpreted by many as a desire by both sides to set the tone for a more smooth and fruitful year for the China-U.S. relationship, which is often set back by recurrent tensions and disputes despite increasingly intertwined economic and trade ties and deepening

cooperation on many international issues.

"What it does indicate is that there is a sustained dialogue between the U.S. and Chinese leaders which is significant in the face of the tensions we've seen over the past year and the areas that both sides see as potential realms for cooperation," said Mark Cozad, senior defense policy analyst at the Rand Corporation.

"I think it's a realistic understanding by both sides that these high-level dialogues are essential for managing tensions and identifying and pursuing areas where cooperation might be possible," Cozad told Xinhua in an interview. He said that despite the contentious issues of human rights, cyber security and territorial disputes in Asia, the leaders of China and the U.S. have cooperated on climate change, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the Iranian nuclear program and economic cooperation, where the "continued dialogue between the two presidents is essential." (Xinhua)

Army Major, Eight Militants Killed in Pakistan

MIRAMSHAH - An army officer and eight suspected militants were killed in clashes in North Waziristan and Kurram tribal region on Friday.

According to a statement by the military's public affairs wing ISPR, five militants were killed when fighting erupted during a cordon-and-search operation in Dattakhel area, some 30km west of the agency's headquarters of Miramshah. An army officer also lost his life in the clash, the statement said. Sources said that security personnel were conducting house-to-house search when militants opened fire on them, killing a major and injuring a soldier. The troops returned fire and killed five militants. Two of the dead militants were foreigners. The injured soldier was taken to Combined Military Hospital, Rawalpindi. Dattakhel was once considered a stronghold of militant leader Gul Bahadar. In Patala area of Kurram Agency, three suspected militants died in a clash with security forces near the Afghan border. Officials said that personnel of the Frontier Corps and Kurram Levies Force were patrolling the area when militants attacked them. Three attackers were killed in retaliatory firing by troops. The exchange of fire continued for some time. The political administration released pictures of militants' bodies to the media. However, their identity could not be ascertained. (Monitoring Desk)

Indian Producers Participate in Exhibition of Indian Goods in Dushanbe

DUSHANBE - The first exhibition of Indian goods kicked off in Dushanbe on Friday.

Organized by Tajikistan's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) and the INDO RUSSIA EXPO Exhibition Company under support of the Government of Tajikistan,

the exhibition is being held at the Kokhi Borbad State Complex. More than 20 Indian producers have put on display their achievements in jewelry, production of consumer goods and souvenirs and relevant industries at the fair that runs through March 1. (Asia-Plus)

Pentagon Officials Throw Doubts on Spring Offensive against ISIL: Report

WASHINGTON - Pentagon officials are throwing doubts on a US military plan to recapture the vital Iraqi city of Mosul from the ISIL terrorists, less than a day after it was revealed, according to a report.

On Thursday, US military officials publicly outlined details of their plans for a spring offensive against ISIL, and retake Iraq's second largest city as early as April.

However, many within the Pentagon privately questioned whether the plan might work, The Daily Beast reports.

"I really doubt it is going to happen that soon," one military officer told the American news reporting website Friday on condition of anonymity. "And if it does, it will take months."

Several other US military officers told The Daily Beast that the Iraqi forces were not ready to take on the ISIL Takfiri terrorists. They claimed that many



of the Iraqi army's largely Shia troops would not risk their lives to win back a Sunni city.

Pentagon officials believe that the planned offensive to retake Mosul would be much harder than the 112-day battle to win back the small northern Syria city of Kobani. While Kobani was almost abandoned when the US-led coalition intensified its airstrikes there to retake the border town, the heavily-populated city of Mosul is arguably the capital of the ISIL group in Iraq, according to the report. "They will fight for Mosul. This is not like Kobani, which was peripheral," one US

military official told the Daily Beast.

"They will fight to the last drop of blood defending Mosul, and for them this battle could define their existence. Losing Mosul means a final defeat for Islamic State in Iraq," a retired army general living in Mosul told Reuters last month. A senior US Central Command official said Thursday the "shaping" for the spring offensive is currently underway. A total force of up to 25,000 Iraqi troops are expected to participate in the battle. Three brigades of Kurdish Peshmerga forces will take part as well. (press TV)

IS Burns Over 40 to Death in Iraq

RAMADI, Iraq - The Islamic State (IS) militants burned up to 43 people alive, in Iraq's western province of Anbar, a provincial security source said Saturday.

Earlier, IS fighters captured those 43 Iraqis from the albu-Obeid Sunni tribe in the battlefield town of al-Baghdadi, some 200 km northwest of the Iraqi capital Baghdad, said the source.

The abducted were believed to be local police and government-backed Sahwa paramilitary group members, and were later transferred to the nearby militants-seized town of Heet, the source added, adding that the extremist militants put the victims in iron cages and set fire to them. The executions came after the killing of some 70 others during the past ten days when the IS militants carried out major attacks on al-Baghdadi and the nearby air base of Ain al-Asad which is housing hundreds of U.S. Marines. However, their attacks



on the air base were repelled by security forces and U.S. aircraft, while fighting continued in the town after Iraqi troops regained control of large parts of it. Meanwhile, the militants laid a siege to a neighborhood in al-Baghdadi town housing dozens of families of security members and Sahwa fighters, said the source, who confirmed that the residents are facing acute shortage in food and drinking water, as well as in weapons and ammunition.

Ain al-Asad military base is used by Iraqi military forces, as well as roughly 300 U.S. Marines as military trainers and advisers. The IS group has seized around 80

percent of Iraq's largest province of Anbar and tried to advance toward Baghdad, but several counter attacks by security forces and Shiite militias pushed them back from western areas of the capital. Since December of last year, there have been insurgent attacks in the Sunni Arab heartland west of Baghdad which stretches through the Anbar province. Anbar province was the scene of fierce clashes which flared up once Iraqi police disbanded an anti-government protest outside Ramadi city. The security situation in Iraq started drastically deteriorating since June 10 last year, when ... (More on P4)... (14)

Pope, Merkel Discuss Ukraine and Fight Against Poverty

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis and German Chancellor Angela Merkel discussed the conflict in Ukraine and the fight against poverty during a private audience on Saturday.

The meeting was the second between the two since Francis' election as pope. The Vatican described the climate in the meeting as "very cordial" while Merkel told reporters that the discussions were "wide-ranging, as expected," covering Ukraine, poverty, the role of women in developing countries, women's

equality, and other items on Germany's agenda for its G-7 presidency and summit in June.

"I was very happy to meet with the pope," said Merkel, whose father was a Lutheran pastor. "He gave me a lot of encouragement."

The 40-minute meeting was longer than usual for the Vatican, although Merkel and Francis' previous private audience lasted 45 minutes, suggesting a good working relationship. They spoke through translators.

Francis presented Merkel with a medallion depicting

St. Martin giving his coat to the poor, saying it served as a reminder to world leaders that their job is "to protect their poor." Merkel responded: "We try to do our best." He also gave her a copy of his encyclical, *Evangelii gaudium*, (The Joy of the Gospel) translated into German.

Merkel gave the pope an envelope containing a donation to help children fleeing conflicts in the Middle East. She also presented the pontiff with a collection of music by Johann Sebastian Bach. (AP)

Yemen's Former Leader Flees to Aden



SANAA/ADEN - Yemen's former president Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi escaped weeks of house arrest by the Houthi militia at his official residence on Saturday and fled to his home town of Aden, sources close to him said.

He will make a speech later on Saturday on an Aden television station, the sources said. Houthi's official status since quitting last month in protest at the Houthis' overrunning the presidential palace and his private residence remains unclear because his resignation was never formally accepted by the parliament. The Houthis, who said they were taken unaware by his flight from the capital, have now called an

urgent meeting of the cabinet in Sanaa's presidential palace, a government official said. Hadi's flight to Aden follows an agreement between Yemen's rival factions on Friday, brokered by the United Nations, to set up a transitional council that keeps the parliament in place and gives a voice to some other groups.

Hadi fled his residence in disguise, Houthi politburo member Ali al-Qahoum was quoted as saying by the local news website al-Akhbar. But it added that it no longer mattered if the former president remained there or departed. The United Nations denied reports by two senior political sources in Sanaa that it had helped Hadi travel to Aden as false. (Reuters)

Jihadists in Libya 'Direct Threat' to Europe: French PM

MADRID - Jihadists in Libya pose a "direct threat" to Europe, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls said in Madrid on Saturday.

"I would like to cite the question of Libya and the direct threat to our security of the creation -- under our eyes and not far from our borders -- of a new haven for the jihadi terrorist," Valls told a gathering of social democrats, according to a transcript of his speech.

Valls' comments come amid growing concern that the Islamic State group, which has already seized swathes of Iraq and Syria, has also established a foothold in Libya.

The lawless North African country has become fertile ground for jihadists following the ouster of dictator Moamer Kadhafi in 2011.

Analysts have warned that IS is expected to gain more strength in Libya, and said the international community was running out ... (More on P4)... (17)

Poverty Rising in Italy amid Economic Crisis: Study

ROME - A study by an umbrella charity group in Italy shows that poverty is growing in the country as the euro region's third-biggest economy is still in the grip of recession and crisis, Press TV reports. According to the study, recently published by Caritas Europa, one in

four people in Italy is at the risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Caritas Europa, an umbrella group for the national Catholic Caritas charities that run kitchens and shelters for homeless people, added that Italy is one of the seven EU countries that

suffer from the highest risk of poverty, along with Portugal, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Ireland and Romania.

The worsening economic situation has also led to a rise in the unemployment rate among Italians, which now stands at ... (More on P4)... (15)