

Intra-Syrian Negotiations Discuss Talk Format in Geneva

GENEVA - The UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan De Mistura on Friday held separate meetings with Syrian government and opposition delegations to set up the format of talks, as UN mediated negotiations continue.

After both sides kicked off the fourth round of Syria peace talks here on Thursday, De Mistura convened a bilateral meeting Friday morning with Syrian government delegation led by UN Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar Jaafari. Jaafari later told reporters that the bilateral meeting focused on discussion of the format of upcoming



negotiations.

"At the end of the meeting, De Mistura gave us a paper and we agreed to study this paper," he said.

The special envoy held a meeting with Syrian opposition delegation Friday afternoon.

The UN said Syrian negotiations will be guided by UN Security Council resolution 2254 (2015), focusing on matters of governance, including a new constitution for Syria and the holding of elections.

Since the Syria conflict began in March 2011, an estimated 400,000 people have lost their lives, with millions more forced to flee their homes. (Xinhua)

UNSC to Vote on Syria Sanctions over Chemical Weapons: Diplomats

UNITED NATIONS - The United Nations Security Council will likely vote on a resolution to blacklist 11 Syrian military commanders and officials over chemical weapons attacks as early as next week, diplomats said on Thursday. The draft resolution also seeks to ban the sale or supply of helicopters to the Syrian government and to blacklist 10 government and related entities involved in the development and production of chemical weapons and the missiles to deliver them.

It calls for an asset freeze and travel ban for the individuals and entities across all U.N. member states. A joint inquiry by the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, or OPCW, found that Syrian government forces were responsible for three chlorine gas attacks and that Islamic State militants had used mustard gas, according to reports seen by Reuters in August and October. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government... (More on P4)... (21)

Trump Adviser Asked FBI to Dispute Russia Reports

WASHINGTON - White House chief of staff Reince Priebus asked top FBI officials to dispute media reports that President Donald Trump's campaign advisers were frequently in touch with Russian intelligence agents during the election, according to three White House officials. Democrats accused Priebus of interfering in a pending investigation.

The officials said that Priebus' Feb. 15 request to FBI Director James Comey and deputy director Andrew McCabe came as the White

House sought to discredit a New York Times report about contacts between Russian intelligence officials and members of Trump's 2016 campaign team.

As of Thursday, the FBI had not commented publicly on the veracity of the report and there was no indication it planned to, despite the White House's request.

White House officials said it was the FBI that first raised concerns about the reporting, but told Priebus the bureau could not



weigh in publicly on the matter. The officials said McCabe and Comey instead gave Priebus the go-ahead to discredit the story publicly, something the FBI had not confirmed as of Friday morning. CNN first reported that Priebus had asked the FBI for help and a White House... (More on P4)... (22)

China Finds India Talks of Positive Significance

NEW DELHI - China said on Thursday that the strategic dialogue with India was of positive significance to ties and that extensive agreements were reached. It however, skirted any reference to the persisting differences over issues like India's Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) bid and efforts to get Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief Masood Azhar banned by the UN. "The dialogue has reached the goal as expected and is of positive significance to the bilateral relations," Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang

told a media briefing in Beijing, according to reports in New Delhi. The reports centred on China's assessment of Indian Foreign Secretary S Jaishankar's talks with Chinese officials, which included the first round of the upgraded strategic dialogue on Wednesday. "Our overall impression is that this strategic dialogue was held in a friendly atmosphere. The two sides held [an] in-depth and comprehensive exchange of views and reached extensive agreements," he said, ... (More on P4)... (23)

Merkel's Party Slips Behind Center-Left SPD in Poll

BERLIN - Germany's Social Democrats nudged past Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative bloc for the first time in more than a decade according to a poll released Friday, as the center-left party rides a wave of enthusiasm from their surprise nomination of a new leader.

The Infratest dimap poll for ARD television showed the SPD gaining four points compared to three weeks earlier to reach 32 percent support while Merkel's Union bloc fell 3 points to 31 percent. The SPD is enjoying a

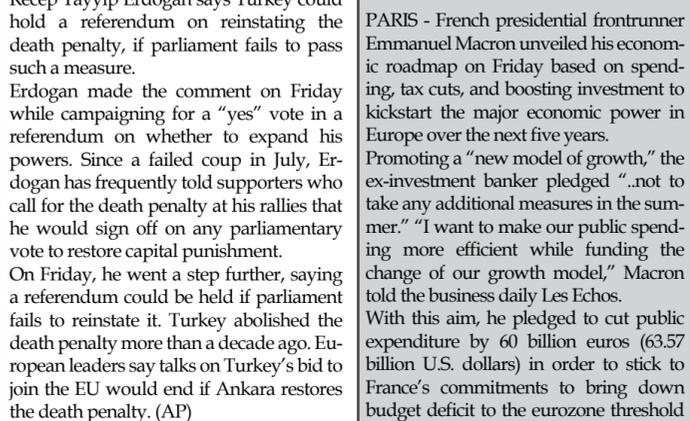


boost from the choice last month of Martin Schulz, the former president of the European Parliament, to challenge Merkel in September elections. Experts caution it's too early to tell

Council of Europe: Social Rights Shield Not Used Enough

NICOSIA, Cyprus - Europe's top human rights body says more of its members need to ratify a legal process that could help protect the social rights of society's most vulnerable groups, including migrants.

Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, the deputy secretary-general of the Council of Europe, told a conference Friday that only 15 of the Council's 47 member states have ratified the Collective Complaints Procedure. The procedure enables bodies such as international NGOs and trade unions to



take cases to the European Committee of Social Rights to defend victims' rights to education, housing and health care. The Council's

top human rights official, Christos Giakoumopoulos, said the committee's decisions aren't directly enforceable, but can pres-

sure national authorities to amend laws. Giakoumopoulos said an "explosion" of such cases is expected in the near future. (AP)

Turkey can Hold Referendum on Death Penalty: Erdogan

ANKARA, Turkey - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan says Turkey could hold a referendum on reinstating the death penalty, if parliament fails to pass such a measure.

Erdogan made the comment on Friday while campaigning for a "yes" vote in a referendum on whether to expand his powers. Since a failed coup in July, Erdogan has frequently told supporters who call for the death penalty at his rallies that he would sign off on any parliamentary vote to restore capital punishment.

On Friday, he went a step further, saying a referendum could be held if parliament fails to reinstate it. Turkey abolished the death penalty more than a decade ago. European leaders say talks on Turkey's bid to join the EU would end if Ankara restores the death penalty. (AP)

French Presidential Frontrunner Macron Promotes "New Growth Model"

PARIS - French presidential frontrunner Emmanuel Macron unveiled his economic roadmap on Friday based on spending, tax cuts, and boosting investment to kickstart the major economic power in Europe over the next five years.

Promoting a "new model of growth," the ex-investment banker pledged "...not to take any additional measures in the summer." "I want to make our public spending more efficient while funding the change of our growth model," Macron told the business daily Les Echos.

With this aim, he pledged to cut public expenditure by 60 billion euros (63.57 billion U.S. dollars) in order to stick to France's commitments to bring down budget deficit to the eurozone threshold of 3.0 percent. He said he would also reduce corporate tax to 25 percent from the current 33.3 percent and to slash jobs in the public sector by 120,000 over the next term. In addition, he proposed a public investment scheme worth 50 billion euros aimed to improve training, financing energy transition and modernizing the country's administrative services.

As for the unemployment issue, the 39-year-old centrist candidate said he wanted to lower the joblessness rate to 7.0 percent by 2022 from its current 9.7 percent.

An Opinway poll released on Friday showed Macron's score had improved by one percentage point to 23 percent of voting intentions. He was followed by Francois Fillon, while far-right candidate Marine Le Pen maintained the lead in the first round with 26 percent. (Xinhua)

Iraqi PM Orders Air Force Strike Against Islamic State inside Syria

BAGHDAD - Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said on Friday he had ordered the Iraqi air force to strike Islamic State positions inside Syria in retaliation for recent bomb attacks in Baghdad.

A source close to Syria's foreign ministry said the Iraqi air raid had been carried out in coordination with the Syrian government. Islamic State, which is on the defensive after losing control of eastern Mosul to a U.S.-backed Iraqi military offensive, has claimed responsibility for several car bombs in Baghdad in the past few weeks. "We are determined to chase terrorism that tries to kill our... (More on P4)... (25)

Trump Wants to Make Sure U.S. Nuclear Arsenal at 'Top of the Pack'

WASHINGTON - President Donald Trump said on Thursday he wants to ensure the U.S. nuclear arsenal is at the "top of the pack," saying the United States has fallen behind in its weapons capacity.

In a Reuters interview, Trump also said China could solve the national security challenge posed by North Korea "very easily if they want to," ratcheting up pressure on Beijing to exert more influence to rein in Pyongyang's increasingly belligerent actions.

Trump also expressed support for the European Union as a governing body, saying "I'm totally in favor of it" and for the first time as president expressed

a preference for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but said he would be satisfied with whatever makes the two sides happy.

Trump also predicted his efforts to pressure NATO allies to pay more for their own defense and ease the burden on the U.S. budget would reap dividends. "They owe a lot of money," he said.

In his first comments about the U.S. nuclear arsenal since taking office on Jan. 20, Trump was asked about a December tweet in which he said the United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capacity "until such time as the world comes to... (More on P4)... (26)

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China Revises Law to Boost Red Cross Credibility

BEIJING - China's top legislature Friday passed a revised law to boost the transparency and credibility of the country's Red Cross societies.

The legislation was adopted after a third reading at the bimonthly session of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), which runs Wednesday to Friday.

Red Cross societies in China are now required to give feedback to donors on the use of their donations, and staff who fail to do so could face civil and criminal charges.

"The revision primarily focuses on strengthening supervision on Red Cross societies and standardizing their activities," Guo

Linmao, an official with the Legislative Affairs Commission of the NPC Standing Committee, told a press conference Friday afternoon.

A previous clause giving Red Cross societies power to "rectify" illegal activities by their subordinate societies and staff was deleted from the new draft.

After several scandals, China's Red Cross has grappled with trust issues in recent years. Revision work for the law began in 2016.

The first reading of the draft suggested that independent third-party agencies should audit donations and that an information disclosure system should be put into place. (Xinhua)

Profit-Taking Clips Wings of High-Flying Pakistan Stocks

ISLAMABAD - The Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) pared intraday gains on Friday as investors resorted to profit-taking in the second half amid last day of futures rollover week.

The Pakistan Stock Exchange's benchmark KSE 100-Index declined by 0.11 percent or 54.26 points to close at 49,008 points on Friday when compared with 49,062.26 points posted on Thursday.

During the week that ended on Feb. 24, the main index lost 367.71 points as three out of five trading sessions ending

in the red zone.

The KSE All-Share Index inched down slightly by 1.64 points to 33,166.31 points, the KSE 30-Index dipped by 0.19 percent or 50.37 points to 26,592.23 points, the KMI 30-Index slipped by 0.1 percent or 82.17 points to 84,327.56 points, whereas the Islamic All-Share Index bucked the negative trend and gained 0.22 percent or 50.68 points to close the weekly trade at 23,355.42 points.

During Friday's trading session, the main index moved in a depressing range of 332.25 points as it... (More on P4)... (27)

Iran Becomes Head of Group of 77

TEHRAN - Islamic Republic of Iran in a Friday ceremony has officially become head of the Group of 77.

The ceremony was held in the United Nations Office at Vienna and with the attendance of heads of international bodies, some ambassadors and the representatives of different countries, Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to United Nations (Vienna) Reza Najafi.

Najafi addressed the meeting, stressing on defending principles, benefits, values and aims. He expounded on pur-

poses and priorities of group of 77 in the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, noting the importance of promoting cooperation technical aid to developing countries.

He also emphasized International cooperation, especially South-South ones. Director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency Yukiyama Amano, Head of UNIDO... (More on P4)... (28)

Nazarbayev Invites Rahmon to Astana Summit in September

DUSHANBEH - President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev invited his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon to participate in the Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which will be held in Astana this year, reports the press service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan.

The invitation was conveyed at the meeting of Ambassador of Kazakhstan Nurlan Seitimov with Foreign Minister of Tajikistan Sirodiddin Aslov on February 22. The Ambassador conveyed invitation of President Nursultan Nazarbayev to President Emomali Rahmon to participate in the Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation that will take place on September 10-11 in Astana, said the press service. (AKI)

Uzbekistan to Participate in ECO Summit in Islamabad

TASHKENT - The Foreign Ministry of Uzbekistan received Ambassador of Pakistan Riaz Husain Bukhari on February 22, reports the press service of the Ministry.

The issues of participation of the Uzbek delegation in the upcoming Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Summit scheduled for March 1, 2017 was on the agenda of the talks.

Participants of the ECO Summit this year will consider the activities of the organization.

The Economic Cooperation Organization is a regional intergovernmental economic organization founded in 1985. The member countries are Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. (AKI)