

Netanyahu's Congress Address Destructive to US-Israeli Relations: Rice

WASHINGTON - A top American official has blasted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for deciding to address Congress, saying the planned visit is destructive to relations between the US and Israel.

President Barack Obama's National Security Adviser Susan Rice said the decision has "injected a degree of partisanship, which is not only unfortunate, I think it's destructive of the fabric of the relationship."

She criticized the Israeli leader in an interview with PBS television on

Tuesday. Netanyahu will address a joint meeting of Congress next week in order to put pressure on US officials to stop a comprehensive nuclear agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany.

On Tuesday, Netanyahu once again defended his trip to Washington, saying he would do everything to prevent a nuclear deal with Iran. "It is my obligation as prime minister to do everything that I can to prevent this agreement. Therefore, I will go to Washington... because



the American Congress is likely to be the final brake before the agreement," he said. In a strong public rebuke on Tuesday, US Secretary of State John Kerry criticized those officials who are speaking against a potential nuclear agreement. "Anybody running around right now, jumping in to say well we don't like the deal, or this or that, doesn't know what the deal is," Kerry said. Senator: Netan-

yahu's private meeting refusal 'disappointing' Democratic Senator Richard Durbin said he is disappointed by Netanyahu after he refused to meet with a number of Democrats in a private session. Two high-ranking Senate Democrats invited Netanyahu for a separate closed-door meeting, but he turned down the request. "We offered the prime minister an opportunity to balance the politically divisive invitation from Speaker [John] Boehner with a private meeting with Democrats who are committed to keeping the ... (More on P4)... (24)

Moscow Calls on OSCE to Monitor Ukrainian Insurgents' Weapon Withdrawal

MOSCOW - Russia urged the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) special mission in Ukraine to monitor the weapon withdrawal in eastern Ukraine, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Wednesday. "We are worried a bit that the OSCE observers are not monitoring the withdrawal of heavy hardware, which is being conducted by the militia at least," Lavrov told the visiting President of the French Senate Gerard Larcher. Lavrov said Moscow would prompt the OSCE presidency to instruct the chiefs of the special mission in

Ukraine to monitor and verify the pullback of heavy armaments from the contact line. He said that the monitor process should be carried out impartially to prevent the disruption of the Minsk agreements. "A lot depends now on a honest, impartial and unbiased approach of the monitors, who should record the developments in the battlefields," Interfax news agency quoted Lavrov as saying. Lavrov added that the foreign ministers decided Tuesday at a "Normandy format" meeting that there is no need to establish new monitor missions other than the OSCE



one. A clear agreement was reached in Minsk on Feb. 12 that the OSCE mission should play the role and that the mission should be strengthened with staff, equipment and funds, Lavrov said. Moreover, the minister urged the Kiev administration to show responsible attitudes and

honor the commitments of decentralization and constitutional reform in Ukraine as written in Minsk agreements. Besides the Ukraine peace progress, the two officials discussed situation in the Middle East, calling for joint efforts to eliminate the threats of terrorism and extremism. (Xinhua)

Iraq Says Planning Major Offensive Against IS

TIKRIT - Iraqi security forces are planning an imminent major offensive against Islamic State (IS) militants in the northern central province of Salahuddin, a provincial security source said on Wednesday. Artillery bombardment began late Tuesday night on the militants-seized areas, including the provincial capital city of Tikrit and nearby towns of Alam and Dowr, in addition to areas north of Shiite shrine city of Samarra, some 120 north of Baghdad, the source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity. "The offensive could be launched within the coming 72 hours," the source said. He said that reinforcement troops, allied militias, tanks and armored vehicles arrived on Tuesday from the neighboring province of Diyala

to support government troops' advance from east toward the vital area of al-Fatha north of the refinery town of Baiji, some 200 km north of Baghdad, in order to cut supplies of the IS militants. The offensive is designed to sweep all redoubts of the IS militants across the province in order to prevent the militants from maneuvering with their groups and to surround them, the source added. The latest bombardment forced dozens of families to leave their homes in Tikrit and Albu-Ajil, he said, adding that intelligence reports said that the families included those with sons collaborating with extremist militants during the past few months. However, the source anticipated no "fierce and bloody battles" because many of the extremist militants and



their families have already fled their homes and hideouts in the province and mainly headed to the northern city of Mosul. "In most cases, the IS militants left some small groups and suicide bombers in addition to hundreds of roadside bombs and booby-trapped houses and vehicles in provincial cities and towns with an aim of obstructing the troops' advance and causing heavy casualties among them," he added. Tikrit,

the capital city of the predominantly Sunni province of Salahuddin, is the hometown of former President Saddam Hussein. Security has been worsening in Iraq since June 10, when bloody clashes broke out between Iraqi security forces and Sunni militants, who took control of the country's northern city of Mosul and the later swathes of territories in Nineveh and other predominantly Sunni provinces. (Xinhua)

French FM Warns of More Sanctions against Russia

PARIS - French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said on Wednesday Russia would face more sanctions if pro-Moscow fighters attack Ukraine's government-held port of Mariupol. "We've told the Russians clearly that if there was a separatist attack in the direction of Mariupol, things would be drastically changed, including in terms of sanctions," Fabius told France Info radio. The question of sanctions would be asked again at the European level, the minister said. Asked whether France would send servicemen to Kiev, Fabius said, "We

advocate de-escalation." Fabius met his German, Russian and Ukrainian counterparts, under the so-called Normandy format, on Tuesday to discuss ways to implement the Minsk peace deal and halt fighting in Ukraine's eastern region. The top diplomats also asked for a reinforcement of the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) monitoring mission in Ukraine. Also on Tuesday, more than a week after the latest Minsk ceasefire agreement, separatist insurgents said they had begun pulling back heavy weapons from the front line in east-

ern Ukraine. Ukrainian military sources said the military would start withdrawing heavy arms from the front line no earlier than two days after a complete ceasefire. The Minsk ceasefire deal was brokered by Paris and Berlin on Feb. 12 in the capital of Belarus. It envisaged both sides withdrawing heavy weapons 25-70 km from the front line to create a buffer zone. Under the agreement, both sides were meant to start withdrawing heavy weaponry from the battle area no later than two days after the start of a truce which came into force on Feb. 15. (Xinhua)

Kazakhstan to Hold Early Presidential Election: President

ASTANA - President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has signed a decree on early presidential election on April 26, 2015. He announced this on Wednesday in an address to the nation broadcast by the country's television channels.

"In the interests of the people, taking into account their request to me and the general will, I have made the decision and signed a decree setting the date for the early presidential election on April 26, 2015," the president said. The early presidential election was initiated by the Council of the People's Assembly of Kazakhstan on February



14. Major political parties, including the ruling party Nur Otan, the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan Ak Zhol and Communist People's Party of Kazakhstan that are represented in the parliament, have supported the electoral campaign. Both houses of the national parliament - Senate and Majilis - requested President Nursultan Nazarbayev to call an

early presidential election. The country's Constitutional Council has not found legislative restrictions for setting the date of an early election by the president. In accordance with the country's legislation, early presidential elections are announced by the head of state and held within two months since the date of their announcement. (Agencies)

Neighbor News

India, Pakistan to Resume Talks

ISLAMABAD - India and Pakistan will finally come face to face after a long hiatus on March 3, when Indian foreign secretary S Jaishankar visits Pakistan as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's SAARC Yatra initiative starting on March 1. This will be the first high-level visit from India under the new BJP-led government. Ever since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power, talks between India and Pakistan had taken off on the positive note with their Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif attending Modi's swearing-in ceremony in May last year.

"We are expecting all issues related to SAARC, as well as bilateral issues to be discussed when both the foreign secretaries meet," a top official told Business Standard. According to Pakistan officials, it is expected that during the visit, Prime

Minister Sharif might extend an invitation for PM Modi's early visit to Islamabad.

In last 10 years of UPA rule, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh never visited Pakistan, although former foreign secretary Ranjan Mathai had been there in 2012. "We stand ready to talk with Pakistan in accordance with the Simla Agreement on all issues including Jammu & Kashmir," said Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin. Earlier PM Sharif was quoted as saying that Pakistan is keen to discuss all issues as it wants 'peaceful relations with its neighbours.' Jaishankar is undertaking the 'SAARC Yatra' from March 1 when he will travel to Bhutan followed by Bangladesh in March 2, Pakistan and Afghanistan in March 3 and 4 respectively. (Agencies)

Continued Sanctions Not Acceptable to Iran: Rouhani

TEHRAN - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani underscored the country's firm decision to continue progress and development, and said Tehran doesn't accept continued sanctions. "We have taken important steps in area of foreign policy in relations with the regional states and other world coun-

tries, have continued the path of problem settlement, specially with regard to the nuclear case, mightily and without heading the marginal moves and will continue this path to the end," Rouhani said, addressing a large gathering of Iranian people in the Central city of Qom on Wednesday. (More on P4)... (26)

China Pledges Stronger Fiscal Policy, Widens Tax Breaks

BEIJING - The State Council, China's cabinet, on Wednesday pledged to step up fiscal policy support and strengthen targeted controls to combat downward pressure on the economy. "To ensure the economy operates within a reasonable range, proactive fiscal policy needs to be stronger and more effective," said a statement released after the executive meeting, which was presided over by Premier Li Keqiang. The meeting decided to extend tax break policies to more micro and small businesses. From 2015 to the end of 2017, companies with annual taxable income under 200,000 yuan (32,573 U.S. dollars) will have their corporate tax halved. Previously, the threshold was 100,000 yuan. In an effort to activate private investments, the cabinet said taxes

on investment earnings from non-monetary assets would be levied in stages rather than a one-off collection. In addition, China will reduce the unemployment insurance rate to 2 percent from 3 percent previously, which is estimated to save over 40 billion yuan for businesses and employees annually. The State Council also pledged to speed up construction of major water projects in the less developed central and western regions. Approvals on the new projects will be finished by the end of July and over 90 percent of funds from the central budget will be allocated by the end of June, according to the statement. The set of policy adjustments comes in the wake of the economy growing by 7.4 percent in 2014, its weakest annual expansion in 24 years. (Xinhua)

Tajik Parliament Ratifies Pact with ADB on Funding Power Project

DUSHANBE - Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament ratified Wednesday an agreement between Tajikistan and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) on funding an electric power wholesale metering and transmission reinforcement project in Tajikistan. The project stipulates joint funding by the ADB and the Tajik government for the installation of new modern electricity meters and more than 1,800 electric power transformers as well as the construction of 95 km of new 220kV transmission cables. Once completed, the project would reduce electric power losses and improve power supply in

the city of Panjakent in the northern province of Sughd, said First Deputy Minister of Finance Jamoliddin Nuraliev at the parliamentary session. The total cost of project is 67 million U.S. dollars, including a 54 million U.S. dollar grant provided by the ADB and 13 million U.S. dollars contributed by the Tajik government, Nuraliev said. The Asian Development Bank, whose projects focus on the modernization of transmission and distribution facilities, sector restructuring and reforms, is the largest multilateral development partner in Tajikistan's energy sector, with the total energy approvals reaching 430 million dollars. (Xinhua)