

# Syrian Gov't Delegation Calls for Taking Anti-Terrorism as Top Priority in Geneva Talks

GENEVA - A top diplomat from Syrian government delegation Saturday called for taking combating terrorism as a top priority in the ongoing intra-Syrian negotiations. The words came after two suicide attacks took place in Syria's central province of Homs, killing at least 42 people on the same day. "Combating terrorism is a top priority," UN Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar Jaafari, who led the Syrian government delegation, told reporters following a 2.5 hour meeting with UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan De Mistura. "We request Mr. De Mistura to issue a statement



condemning the suicide attacks," he said, adding that they will also request the special envoy to ask all the parties participating into the Geneva process to make the same statement condemning the attacks. He said the attacks aimed to "derail the Geneva talks" and cast a shadow in Geneva, adding that "any party who refuses to condemn the attacks, we will consider that party to be accomplice of terrorism." Mediated by the UN, Syrian government and opposition delegation joined the latest round of talks since Thursday which aimed at bringing Syria's six-year-old crisis to an end. (Xinhua)

## Neighbor News

### Iran's Rouhani to Run for Second Term: Vice-President



TEHRAN - Iran's President Hassan Rouhani has decided to run for re-election in May, the vice-president for parliamentary affairs said on Sunday, according to state news agency IRNA. "In recent weeks, Mr Rouhani has reached a conclusion to take part in the presidential elections," Hosseinali Amiri told reporters. Rouhani, a 68-year-old moderate who has pushed for greater social freedoms and improved ties with the West, has been widely expected to run for a second term but has yet to formally announce his candidature for the May 19 election. He remains popular for stabilising the economy and ending sanctions through a nuclear deal with world powers, although many feel the economic benefits have not trickled down and he has failed in his efforts to release political dissidents from jail. The conservative camp has so far failed to settle on an obvious challenger to Rouhani, who sits atop a relatively unified coalition of moderates and reformists. Iran has no formal political parties, just loose alliances, often making it difficult for politicians to agree on a candidate. The conservatives have sought to address this problem with a new primary-style system. Some 3,000 loyalists gathered last week to create a short list of potential candidates with a view to eventually rallying around a single figure. Meanwhile, the only person to throw their hat in the ring has been Hamid Baghaie, a former deputy to hardline president Mahmud Ahmadinejad who ruled between 2005 and 2013 but fell out of favour with conservatives. (AFP)

### Trump Says Not to Attend Annual WHCA Dinner

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Donald Trump said Saturday he would not be attending the annual White House Correspondents' Association (WHCA) dinner, one day after his press team blocked several mainstream media from attending a press gaggle at the White House. "I will not be attending the White House Correspondents' Association dinner this year. Please wish everyone well and have a great evening!" Trump tweeted. The remark broke away from a long running tradition of the participation of

the president and the first lady at the event where politicians, journalists and celebrities gather to toast one another. In a statement released after Trump's twitter, the WHCA said it had taken note of Trump's position. Trump attended the event in the past, which became the subject of many jokes made by former U.S. President Barack Obama in last year's gala. The Trump administration is locked with an ongoing feud with many major U.S. news outlets. Trump has openly criticized the Cable ... (More on P4)...(20)

### Turkey Completes Half Construction of Turkey-Syria Border Wall

ANKARA - More than half of construction of a concrete wall along the Turkish-Syrian border was completed, state-run Anadolu Agency reported on Sunday. According to Ergun Turan, the president of Turkey's state-owned housing agency (TOKI), 290 km of the wall has finished along the Syrian border. Turkey planned to build 511 km concrete wall along Turkey's border provinces. The construction is ongoing

in cooperation of TOKI and the ministries of defense and finance. Seven tons of mobile blocks, which are 2-meter wide and 3-meter high, have been topped with one-meter high razor wire, the report said. The Defense Minister Fikri Isik said in November that the construction of a concrete wall along the Turkish-Syrian border will be completed in the



first half of 2017. Turkey says the separation wall will help enhance border security against the Kurdish military and other terrorists. (Xinhua)

### Syrian Army Captures Key Town from IS

DAMASCUS - Syrian army captured a key town in northern countryside of Aleppo province on Sunday, following battles with Islamic State (IS) group, according to state news agency SANA. Capturing the town of Tadef enables the Syrian army to secure transportation routes in eastern Aleppo, and constitute a base for launching attacks and undermining the presence of the IS militants in that part of the province, a general-command of the Syrian army said in a statement. The town is also located

southeast of city al-Bab, which has recently been captured by Turkish forces and allied rebel fighters. The Syrian army unleashed a wide-scale offensive in the north-eastern countryside of Aleppo, after succeeding to wrest control over the city of Aleppo last December. The offensive enabled the military forces to become in control of 600 km east of Aleppo. Also, the army has laid a siege on the southern rim of al-Bab city, to secure the ... (More on P4)...(21)

### Americans are Equally Divided over NAFTA: Gallup

WASHINGTON - While U.S. President Donald Trump calls the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) a horrible deal, Americans are almost equally split on whether the deal has been good or bad for the country, found a latest Gallup poll. Forty-eight percent of Americans say it has been good for the country, while 46 percent say it has been bad, according to a Gallup poll released on Friday. Only 22 percent of Republicans say NAFTA is a good deal, down from 40

percent in 2004 and 46 percent in 2000. In contrast, 67 percent of Democrats now say NAFTA has been good for the country, up from 39 percent in 2004 and 49 percent in 2000, according to Gallup. The trajectory of independents' views has been similar to Democrats, with their support increasing from 37 percent in 2004 to 53 percent now. The poll comes as Trump is threatening to scrap or tweak the agreement that



has guided U.S.-Canada-Mexico trade for over two decades, and it remains unknown precisely what the outcome will be. NAFTA is a complex trade agreement that many Americans may not understand, and even top economists still disagree on whether it has been effective. (Xinhua)

### Cargo Train Services Launched Between China's Xi'an, Uzbekistan

XI'AN - Cargo train services have begun between Xi'an, capital of northwest China's Shaanxi Province, and Uzbekistan. A train carrying 1,000 tonnes of cotton yarn in 41 carriages arrived on Friday at Xinzhu station in Xi'an from Tashkent, said an official with Xi'an railway bureau. The new route has cut the delivery time from one month to 15 to 18 days. Around 3,000 tonnes of quality cotton yarn will be imported from Uzbekistan every month. After arrival, the yarn will be distributed to eastern and northern parts of China. Xi'an started cargo train services to Central Asia in 2013 and later extended to Europe. As of Thursday, 290 trains had run carrying a total of 454,000 tonnes of cargo to cities like Almaty, Hamburg and Moscow, said the official. (Xinhua)

### No Diplomatic Relations with US Government: Iran

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Ministry says the Islamic Republic has no relations with the new administration in the United States. "Whatever has been done so far [in bilateral contacts] was only related to the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action)," Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi said on Saturday, pointing to the 2015 nuclear agreement signed between Iran and the P5+1 group of countries, including the US. He added that negotiations between Tehran and



Washington were only related to the Iranian nuclear program. With the end of the discussions about the JCPOA, Iran's "political contacts" with the US have also been

### Australian PM Holds Talks with Indonesian President

SYDNEY - Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull held talks with visiting Indonesian President Joko Widodo on Sunday, discussing trade, maritime cooperation and counter-terrorism, among others. The two countries also agreed to re-establish military training exercises. After a rocky relationship between the two countries in the last few years, President Widodo's two-day visit has helped to reaffirm bilateral ties. Indonesia suspended its military exercises with Australia in January after it was reported that culturally offensive material at a special forces base in Perth angered Indonesian troops. "President Widodo and I have agreed to the full restoration of defence cooperation, training exchanges and activities," Turnbull said. ... (More on P4)...(22)

### Spat with Iran Swayed by U.S. But not Benefiting Turkey: Analysts

ISTANBUL - Turkey has been engaging in a war of words with Iran lately, as the United States and others are hardening their stance on Tehran, in a development that analysts say is not beneficial to Ankara. "It is obvious that is connected with the new Middle East and Syria strategy of the Trump administration," said Cahit Armagan Dilek, director of the Ankara-based 21st Century Turkey Institute. Tension with Tehran arose after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Iran days ago of pursuing Persian nationalism and sectarianism in the region, starting a salvo of accusations by Turkish officials following talks with their U.S. counterparts earlier in the month. During his visit to Bahrain, Erdogan claimed that Iran, without mentioning its name, is trying to disintegrate Syria and Iraq, and that Persian nationalism and sectarianism are at work in the two war-torn countries. "We need to block that," he added. Turkey and Iran, regional powers dominated respectively by Sunnis and Shiites, have conflicting positions on Iraq and Syria. Iran supports the Shiite-led Iraqi government as well as the Syrian regime, while Turkey only gave up last summer pushing for the downfall of the Syrian regime by means of supporting rebel groups. Ankara has also strained its ties with Baghdad which it criticizes for excluding the Sunnis from the government. (Xinhua)

### Musharraf Stresses Pakistan's Role in Eradicating Terrorism

DUBAI - Pakistan can play a crucial role in eradicating terrorism, said former president Pervez Musharraf on Sunday. Addressing South Asia Rising 2017 conference, he said: "The blame on Pakistan for supporting terrorism is wrong." Talking about his tenure as the president, Musharraf said he had reduced the budget for the army, going against wishes of the force. He also spoke about issues in the South Asia, saying countries in the region should improve in the sectors of information technology, banking and foreign exchange. Moreover, he added there is also a need to address the conflict between Pakistan and India. (AP)

### Islamic State Planning Attacks in Britain: Anti-Terrorism Lawyer

LONDON - Islamic State militants are planning "indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians" in Britain on a scale similar to those staged by the Irish Republican Army 40 years ago, the head of the country's new terrorism watchdog said. In an interview with the Sunday Telegraph published on Sunday, Max Hill, the lawyer tasked with overseeing British laws on terrorism, said the militants were targeting cities and posed "an enormous ongoing risk which none of us can ignore". "In terms of the threat that's represented, I think the intensity and the potential frequency of serious ... (More on P4)...(24)

### India's Top Diplomat to Visit Washington for Talks

NEW DELHI - India's top diplomat will visit Washington this week for talks with the new U.S. administration, an Indian foreign ministry official said Sunday. Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar is expected to discuss with American officials India's concerns over proposed U.S. legislation that could make it harder for companies to replace American workers with those from India and other countries. Also expected to be on the agenda during Jaishankar's four-day visit, which begins Tuesday, is safety for foreigners following a Kansas bar shooting that killed an Indian engineer and wounded another. External Affairs Ministry

spokesman Vikas Swarup said only that Jaishankar would be going to the U.S. for talks, without offering details. News reports said Jaishankar would meet with Acting Deputy Secretary of State Tom Shannon and other U.S. officials. President Donald Trump has invited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to visit the United States later this year. U.S.-India relations generally prospered under the Obama administration, but New Delhi will be hoping that Trump takes a tougher line on Pakistan, which receives substantial U.S. aid. India and Pakistan are neighbors and have fought three wars. (AP)

quoted what appeared to be official sources. That same \$2 billion figure also cropped up in an English-language analytical piece on Baku-based Trend news agency on December 19 prophetically titled "Odd gas debt dispute began between Iran, Turkmenistan." The problem with all this is that the Turkmen government never has made any public statement about the size of the alleged debt and has, until recently, avoided mentioning the disagreement at all. (Monitoring Desk)