

South Korea Proposes High-Level Talks with North

SEOUL - South Korea Tuesday proposed high-level talks with Pyongyang on January 9, after the North's leader Kim Jong-Un called for better relations and said his country might attend the Winter Olympics in the South.

Kim used his annual New Year address to warn he has a "nuclear button" on his table, but sweetened his remarks by expressing an interest in dialogue and taking part in the Pyeongchang Games next month.

South Korea's unification minister Cho Myoung-Gyon told a press conference that Seoul was "reiterating our willingness to hold talks with the North at any time"



and place in any form". "The government proposes to hold high-level government talks with North Korea on January 9 at the Peace House in Panmunjom," Cho said, referring to a truce village on the border between the two Koreas. "We hope that the South and North can sit face to face and discuss the participation of the North Korean delegation at the Pyeongchang Games as well as other issues of mutual interest for the improvement of inter-Korean ties."

The Koreas, divided by a Demilitarised Zone since the end of the 1950-53 Korean War, last held high-level talks in 2015 to try to ease tensions. (AFP)

Britain Wants Financial Services Included in EU Trade Deal: Davis

LONDON - Britain wants to include financial services in a trade deal with the European Union which covers a full sweep of economic areas, Brexit minister David Davis said on Tuesday. Davis said that any deal that left finance out would be "cherry picking", after the EU's Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier cast doubt on the inclusion of financial services in a free-trade deal. "We are looking at the full sweep of economic cooperation that currently exists and determining how that can be maintained with the minimum additional barriers or fric-

tion," Davis wrote in the Daily Telegraph, adding that the principles of a trade deal in goods could be applied to services too. "I do not believe the strength of this cooperation needs change because we leaving the European Union, so long as it is understood that this involves working together, not simply rule taking. These principles can be applied to services trade too." Last month, Barnier said he was not aware of any free-trade deal the EU had concluded which included unfettered access for financial services. (Reuters)

BRUSSELS - Bulgaria took over the six-month rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union(EU) on Monday. It's the first time Sofia held the post since it joined the EU in 2007. Sofia chose "United We Stand Strong", the motto of National Assembly and of the Coat of Arms of the Republic of Bulgaria, as the slogan for the presidency. According to the website of the Bulgarian presidency, Sofia prioritizes four key areas in its six-month term: future of Europe and young people, Western

Balkans, security and stability and digital economy. Bulgaria ranks 21st in the 28-state EU in terms of Gross Domestic Product(GDP). It is outside the 19-member Eurozone with its national currency lev pegging to the euro (1 euro equals 1.9558 Bulgarian lev). The country, bordering Turkey, was once a transit-stop for tens of thousands of illegal migrants who fled for Europe at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015. Unlike the European Council which is made up of heads of states, the

Council of the EU consists of one ministerial-level representative from each member state for a given policy area. The Council meets in different configurations depending on the issues under discussion.

The rotating presidency chairs all the configuration other than foreign affairs council, which is chaired by Federica Mogherini, the EU's foreign policy chief. (Xinhua)

Bulgaria Takes over Rotating EU Presidency



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German Parties at Odds Ahead of Coalition Talks



BERLIN - Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives and Social Democrats (SPD) traded barbs about migration and tax cuts on Tuesday amid mounting questions about whether they can agree to

renew the "grand coalition" that ruled Germany for the past four years. Merkel, under pressure after failing to form a government three months after national elections, hopes to secure a fourth

term in office by persuading the center-left SPD to join the government despite punishing losses in September's election. Party leaders will meet for preliminary talks on Jan. 3 ahead of exploratory talks scheduled for Jan. 7 through Jan. 12, but a growing number of politicians now say Merkel might have to rule with a minority government, or face new elections.

SPD deputy leader Thorsten Schaefer-Guembel said recent comments by some conservatives were "counterproductive for

every form of government formation" and said they had sparked doubts about the will of conservatives to govern together. He said a deal on a new coalition was far from certain and it was unclear if the talks could develop sufficient trust.

"A minority government remains an option, even if Chancellor Angela Merkel doesn't want to acknowledge that," he said in an interview published Tuesday in the Passauer Neue Presse newspaper. (Reuters)

State Media Says Syrian President Reshuffles Gov

BEIRUT - Syria's state news agency SANA says President Bashar Assad has reshuffled his government replacing the ministers of defense, information and industry.

SANA did not give a reason for the government reshuffle that comes at a time when Assad's forces have been gaining ground over the past two years under the cover of Russian airstrikes and with the help of Iran-backed fighters.

It said army commander Gen. Ali Ayoub has been named defense minister replacing Fahd Jassem al-Freij who had held the post since 2012.

The agency added that Imad Sarah has been named information minister while Mohammed Youssef was chosen as the new minister of industry.

Syrian opposition activists are reporting heavy clashes between government forces and insurgents east of Damascus, and at least a dozen airstrikes.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Syria-based activist Mazen al-Shami said Monday's fighting was concentrated inside a military installation near the suburb of Harasta, where a government force has been trapped for a day.

The Observatory said the Syrian air force conducted at least a dozen airstrikes on Harasta and nearby suburbs. Al-Shami reported dozens of airstrikes. He said the government brought in reinforcements overnight and is trying to reach the trapped force.

The Observatory said three days of violence in the suburbs of Damascus has killed 35 civilians, as well as 24 government troops and 29 insurgents. (AP)

India's Defense Minister Clears Procurement for Bombs, Missiles



NEW DELHI - India's Defense Minister Nirmala Sitharaman Tuesday cleared two procurement proposals for purchase of 240 bombs and 131 Barak Missiles, officials said.

The first proposal is related to procurement of 240 bombs from a Russian company JSC Rosoboronexport, while as second proposal is related to procurement of 131 Barak Missiles and associated equipment from Israel's Rafeal Advance Defence Systems Limited.

"These bombs, which fall under the category of precision guided munitions (PGM), are used by

Indian Air Force (IAF)," a statement issued by Indian defense ministry said. According to officials the procurement will address the deficiency of PGM in the IAF arsenal, besides enhancing their offensive capabilities. The Barak Missiles are surface to air

missiles designed to be used as a ship-borne anti-missile defence system against anti-ship missiles, officials said.

The bombs would be pro-

U.S., Britain Warn South Sudan Parties over Ceasefire Violations

JUBA - The United States, Britain and Norway have called on parties in the South Sudan conflict and their field commanders to stop violating the ceasefire signed last month, their head of missions in Juba said on Tuesday. There have been at least five violations reported, blamed on both sides in the conflict.

The United States, Britain and Norway form a group that supported the 2005 accord leading to the independence of South Sudan from Sudan. They have threatened to impose individual or group sanctions for those violating the ceasefire.

Signed in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, the ceasefire is the latest attempt to end a four-year civil war, that has killed tens of thousands. It is also designed to allow humanitarian groups access to civilians caught in the fighting. It aims to revive a 2015 peace deal that collapsed in 2016 after heavy fighting erupted in the capital Juba. President Salva Kiir's decision to sack his deputy, Riek Machar, in 2013 triggered the war in the world's youngest country. It has been fought largely along ethnic lines between forces loyal to Kiir, who is Dinka, and Machar, who is Nuer.

The war has forced a third of the population to flee their homes.

"We call on all signatories, and the field commanders who answer to them, to immediately end all military operations," the three Western countries said in a statement. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

China Will Strictly Implement U.N. Resolutions on North Korea: Commerce Ministry

BEIJING - China will continue to fully, accurately and strictly implement United Nations' sanctions on North Korea in accordance to Chinese laws, the commerce ministry said on Tuesday. The latest U.N. sanctions limit a country's refined oil products exports to North Korea at no more than 500,000 barrels per

EU Urges Iran to Guarantee Right to Protest

BRUSSELS - The EU pushed Iran on Monday to guarantee the right to protest as authorities have moved to crack down on days of unrest across the nation. Protests broke out Thursday and have quickly grown to become the biggest test for the regime since mass demonstrations in 2009. "We have been in touch with the Iranian authorities and we expect that the right to peaceful demonstration and freedom of expression will be guaranteed," a spokeswoman for the bloc's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said in a statement. "We will continue to monitor developments."

China Acknowledges Pakistan's 'Outstanding Contributions' to Combat International Terrorism

ISLAMABAD - China on Tuesday threw its weight behind Pakistan and said that its key regional ally has "made outstanding contributions to the international anti-terrorism cause," countering the heavy criticism that Islamabad had copped a day earlier from US President Donald Trump. In a clear disagreement with the American president's scathing assessment - that Pakistan has given Washington "nothing but lies and deceit" - Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said: "Pakistan has made tremendous efforts and sacrifices in combating terrorism and made outstanding contributions to the international anti-terrorism cause. The international community should fully acknowledge it." With Pak-US relations teetering on the verge of a catastrophe, China assured that at least its own alliance with Pakistan will only keep on growing.

"China and Pakistan maintain an all-weather strategic partnership," the spokesperson said. "China is willing to further deepen its cooperation with Pakistan in all fields and further benefit the two peoples."

It was not clear if that remark was a counter-proposal to the American president's regret for having "foolishly given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid over the last 15 years", which has given rise to speculation that aid and reimbursements from the US may not be as forthcoming in the future. (Monitoring Desk)

Uzbek President Strengthening Dialogue with Citizens in Entrepreneurship Issues

TASHKENT - Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev ordered to draft a state program for the implementation of the Strategy of Action in the "Year of support of active entrepreneurship, innovative ideas and technologies" until Jan. 5. A joint working group headed by state adviser Otabek Murodov should carry out a critical analysis of the implementation of the Strategy of Action in 2017, shortcomings, and, taking into account the opinion of the public and experts, prepare a draft of a new program. Further, on Jan. 5-15, a broad public discussion of the document will be organized, in particular through its online publication. Finally, on Jan. 20, experts, taking into account the comments received, will finalize the program and submit it to the head of state for approval. In addition, all the activities included in the program should be based on the results of direct dialogue with the people, as well as provide for the solution of urgent problems that are of concern to the population, practical steps to radically improve the situation in all spheres of public and state life.

One of the program's key directions will be radical improvement and wide development of the system of rendering state services in new conditions, as well as transition to the model of innovative development, support for progressive, modern-minded citizens and entrepreneurs. (Trend)

U.S. Linking Model of Human Behavior, Climate Alters Projected Temperature Rise

SAN FRANCISCO - A U.S. coupled climate and social model predicted a global temperature rise ranging from 3.4-6.2 degrees Celsius by 2100, compared to 4.9 degrees Celsius from the climate model alone. Researchers at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and the University of Maryland established a new model by drawing from both social psychology and climate science, which aims to investigate how human behavioral changes evolve in response to extreme climate events and affect the global temperature change. The study, which was published Mon-

day in the online journal Nature Climate Change, found that long-term, less easily reversed behavioral changes, such as insulating homes or purchasing hybrid cars, have played the most effective role in cutting greenhouse gas emissions that eventually reduced climate change. In contrast, the more short-term adjustments made by people in their daily life such as adjusting thermostats to regulate the temperature in their homes or driving less in their routine activities did not have any significant impact on reversing climate change. (Xinhua)