

China's Leader Urges Action on Unification with Taiwan

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping, declaring that independence is not an option for Taiwan, urged both sides to reach an early consensus on unification and not leave the issue for future generations.

No one or no party can stop the trend toward unification, the Chinese leader said Wednesday in a policy speech devoted to Taiwan. He called independence for the self-governing island against history and a dead end.

"We are willing to create a vast space for peaceful unification, but we will never leave any room for any sort of Taiwan independence separatist activities," he said.

Taiwan and China split in a civil war that brought the Communist Party to power in



China in 1949. The rival Nationalists set up their own government on the island about 160 kilometers (100 miles) off the Chinese mainland. Xi proposed talks between the two sides to work out "a systematic arrangement

for the peaceful development of the cross-strait relationship."

It's unclear how his message will be received by the 23 million people on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan's president, Tsai Ing-wen, said Tuesday that the Taiwanese want to retain their self-rule and autonomy. She has irked Beijing by refusing to endorse the "one China" principle that designates Taiwan as a part of China.

"Deviating from the one China principle will result in tension and turbulence in cross-strait relations, harming the interests of the Taiwanese compatriots," Xi said.

He pledged that unification would be under a one-country, two-system framework that would respect the Taiwanese social system and way of life and guarantee their property rights, religious beliefs and other rights. (Fox News)

Neighbor News

Deputy Minister of Hajj and Umrah Receives Tajikistani Pilgrims Affairs Office Delegation Head

MAKKAH - Deputy Minister of Hajj and Umrah, Dr. Abdul Fattah bin Sulaiman Mashat received here today Chairman of the Committee of Religious Affairs and Head of the delegation of Pilgrims' Affairs Office of the Republic of Tajikistan Suleiman Dawlat Zadie and his accompanying delegation.

The visit comes within the program to receive the heads of delegations

of Hajj affairs' offices to discuss arrangements for this year's season of Hajj 1440H.

During the meeting, they discussed a number of issues of common interest in the areas of Hajj and Umrah and highlighted the services being made by the government of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and HRH Crown Prince. (SPA)

Turkmenistan Enacts Strict Law on Alcohol Sales

ASHGABAT - A new law has gone into effect in Turkmenistan that will sharply limit alcohol sales in the tightly controlled Central Asian country.

As of January 1, alcohol in the predominantly Muslim country will be forbidden on trains, airplanes, and ferry boats as well as at sports facilities.

The country of some 5.6 million people will also prohibit the sale of alcohol on national holidays. Alcoholic drinks are further set to be banned on Saturdays and Sundays in all places except bars

and restaurants as of 2021.

Currently in the throes of a severe economic crisis with high unemployment and inflation as well as rampant shortages of food items, Turkmenistan is ruled by authoritarian President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, who fashions himself an athlete who excels at many different sports.

Berdimukhammedov frequently exhorts Turkmen citizens to engage in sports and has pledged to make the country tobacco-free by 2025. (Monitoring Desk)

Netflix Drops Satire Episode Critical of Saudi Arabia

WASHINGTON - Netflix confirmed Tuesday that it removed an episode of a satirical comedy show that criticizes Saudi Arabia, after officials in the kingdom reportedly complained.

The move raises new questions about the limits of free online expression. In the episode of "Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj," the American-born Muslim lashed Saudi Arabia after the killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. He specifically criticized Crown Prince Moham-

med bin Salman, and was also critical of the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen.

"We strongly support artistic freedom worldwide and removed this episode only in Saudi Arabia after we had received a valid legal request -- and to comply with local law," a Netflix spokeswoman said in a statement.

British newspaper the Financial Times said Netflix's action came after the kingdom's Communications and Information Technology Commission said the episode violated the cybercrime law. (AFP)

Macron Govt on Tenterhooks as New Tax Regime Takes Effect

PARIS - The French government sought on Wednesday to downplay fears that working-class will be left out of pocket as the country transitions to a pay-as-you-earn tax system that could fan the flames of a revolt over spending power.

After years of delays, France on January 1 ditched a system whereby residents file income tax returns based on the previous year's earnings, replacing it with a system where the state deducts the taxes direct-

ly from people's salaries or pensions each month. Opinion polls show the French broadly supporting the change but the shift presents risks for President Emmanuel Macron, not least that workers may feel poorer when they receive their new net pay -- even if they will no longer have to save up to pay their taxes three times a year. Any glitches in the new system which could see taxpayers pay more than they bargained for could further infuriate the "yellow vest" anti-



government protesters who have been demonstrating around the country since mid-November over Macron's fiscal policies, which they see as skewed towards the rich. Visiting a tax query call centre in the northern city of Amiens, Budget Minister Gerald Darmanin attempted to assure the French that the change would be painless. (AFP)

Japan Emperor Greets Public in Final New Year's Appearance



TOKYO - Japanese Emperor Akihito waved on Wednesday to throngs of well-wishers eager to see his final New Year's ap-

pearance before abdicating in several months.

"I am truly happy to celebrate the New Year with all of you under

such cloudless skies," the 85-year-old emperor told the crowd from a balcony at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo.

Akihito has made annual New Year's appearances with his wife, Empress Michiko, and other family members to wish peace for the nation.

Japanese media reported that more than 150,000 people attended on Wednesday, a record under Akihito's reign. Many waited from early in the morning and waved Japanese flags when Akihito appeared.

Akihito succeeded his father, wartime Emperor Hirohito, in 1989, and will abdicate on April 30, with his elder son, Naruhito, ascending to the Chrysanthemum Throne.

Japan's imperial family is far more cloistered than its Western counterparts, and Hirohito was once viewed as a god. Akihito strove to become a more accessible emperor. He was the first in modern history to marry a commoner, courting Michiko on the tennis courts. Both of his sons have married commoners. (AP)

Somalia Declares UN Envoy Persona Non Grata

NAIROBI, Kenya - Somalia's government has ordered the United Nations envoy to the country to leave, amid questions over the arrest of the al-Shabab extremist group's former deputy leader who had run for a regional presidency. A foreign ministry statement late Tuesday accuses Nicholas Haysom of diplomatic overreach that violated the Horn of Africa nation's sovereignty, declaring him "persona non grata." He arrived as envoy a few months ago. Haysom had questioned

the legal basis used in the arrest last month of Mukhtar Robow, a former al-Shabab spokesman who defected from the group in 2017, and whether U.N.-funded regional police in the Southwest were involved.

Ethiopian troops who are part of the African Union force in Somalia and Somali police arrested Robow days before the regional election in which Robow had been a leading candidate. Deadly protests followed. Ethiopia has not commented. (AP)

Indian Gov't Approves Merger of 3 Banks

NEW DELHI - The Indian government Wednesday approved the merger of three state-owned banks - Vijaya Bank, Bank of Baroda and Dena Bank, officials said. "The Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has approved the scheme of amalgamation for amalgamating Bank of Baroda, Vijaya Bank and Dena Bank, with Bank of Baroda as the transferee bank and Vijaya Bank and Dena Bank as transferor banks," a statement issued by government said. This marks the first-ever three way merger in India's banking sector and will create the country's second largest public sector lender. "The amalgamation will help create a strong globally competitive bank with economies of scale and enable realisation of wide-ranging synergies," the statement said. (Reuters)

Pompeo Discusses Venezuela with Brazil's New Right-Wing Government

BRASILIA - U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discussed Venezuela with Brazil's new right-wing government on Wednesday in the context of what he termed a joint-front against authoritarian regimes in Latin America. Speaking to reporters after meeting with Brazil's new Foreign Minister Ernesto Araujo, Pompeo named Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua as countries that do not have shared democratic values. "We have an opportunity to work alongside each other against authoritarian regimes," he said of U.S.-Brazil relations, a day after the inauguration of far-right Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. (Reuters)

Trump Says Looks Forward to New Meeting with N.Korea's Kim

WASHINGTON - President Donald Trump said Tuesday he looked forward to another summit with Kim Jong Un, a day after the North Korean leader warned Pyongyang could take a different approach to nuclear talks if US economic sanctions persist.

"I also look forward to meeting with Chairman Kim who realizes so well that North Korea possesses great economic potential!" Trump said in a brief tweet.

The US leader made his comment after citing news coverage of Kim's New Year remark that the North had declared it would neither make nor test nuclear weap-



ons any longer, or proliferate them. At a summit with Trump in Singapore in June, the two signed a vaguely worded pledge on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. But progress has since stalled with Pyongyang and Washington arguing over what that means. Trump has previously

said that he hoped to have a second meeting with Kim early this year. But the North is demanding relief from the multiple sanctions over its banned nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, and has condemned US insistence on its nuclear disarmament as "gangster-like." (AFP)

Bangladesh Vote Opens Door for an Aggressive Hasina

DHAKA, Bangladesh - While Sheikh Hasina is set to begin her third consecutive term as Bangladesh's prime minister following a landslide election victory, critics say having such an overwhelming majority in parliament could create space for her to become even more authoritarian.

The Hasina-led coalition won 288 seats in the 300-seat parliament in Sunday's election, amid allegations by the opposition that the voting was rigged.

Hasina rejected the accusations at a briefing with foreign journalists a day after the vote.

The new Cabinet is expected to be sworn in by Jan. 10, but members of the opposition alliance, which won only seven seats, said they would not take the oath. In response, the ruling party's general secretary said by-elections would be held for those seats. This would result in a parliament with virtually no opposition. (Fox News)

Honduras in Talks with US, Israel on Moving Embassy to Jerusalem

BRASILIA - Honduras on Tuesday discussed with Israel and the United States moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a controversial initiative that follows similar gestures by Washington, officials said.

In a meeting with Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, "it was agreed to strengthen political relations and coordinate cooperation on development in Honduras," read a joint statement by Honduras, Israel and the US.

"They also agreed to pursue a plan of action, which includes meetings in their three respective capitals, to advance in the process of the decision to open embassies in both Tegucigalpa and Jerusalem."

The meeting took place in Brasilia on the sidelines of the presidential inauguration of new Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. Last year, US President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move its embassy there. Months later, Guatemala followed suit. Bolsonaro said during his presidential campaign that he would switch Brazil's embassy but without offering details.

The Palestinians view east Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state, but Israel asserts that all of Jerusalem is its capital and is keen to see foreign embassies move there to bolster that claim. Most countries, however, back Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to settle Jerusalem's status as part of a wider peace deal. (AFP)

No Foreign Power Can Make Decisions on Legitimate EU-Iran Trade Ties: Mogherini

TEHRAN - European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini says the bloc will not allow any foreign meddling - even from its closest ally - in its legitimate trade ties with other countries amid US attempts to kill Europe's business relations with Iran following its withdrawal from a multilateral nuclear deal. In a recent interview with the Saudi-based Arab News daily, Mogherini stressed the EU's resolve to save the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) despite the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

"We are working, as a union of 28 member states and with the rest of the international community, to preserve a nuclear agreement that has so far been implemented in full, as certified by the Interna-

tional Atomic Energy Agency in 13 consecutive reports. We do this because of our collective security," she said. The top EU diplomat also defended the JCPOA, saying that the accord "is delivering precisely on that purpose." "Part of this work requires us to guarantee that firms wanting to do legitimate business with Iran are allowed to do so. This is what we are working on right now: tools that will assist, protect, and reassure economic actors pursuing legitimate business with Iran," she added. Mogherini further emphasized that the bloc will not accept any foreign interference in its trade relations with other countries. "It is true that this situation has triggered a conversation on European economic sovereignty. (Press TV)