

S.Korean, U.S. Top Diplomats Make Phone Call over Korean Peninsula Issue

SEOUL - Top diplomats of South Korea and the United States made a phone call to discuss issues on the Korean Peninsula, Seoul's foreign ministry said Wednesday.

South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha had a telephone conversation earlier in the day with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to discuss measures to deal with the nuclear issue and recent situations on the Korean Peninsula.

Kang and Tillerson shared their views over top DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) leader Kim Jong Un's New Year address, agreeing to continue



efforts to peacefully resolve the DPRK's nuclear issue through close cooperation between the two allies.

Kim said in his New Year speech Monday that the DPRK was willing to participate in the South Korea-hosted winter sports event scheduled for February and to talk with Seoul about it.

South Korea proposed Tuesday to the DPRK holding a senior-level, inter-governmental dialogue on Jan. 9 to discuss issues of mutual concern, including the DPRK's dispatch of its delegation to the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. (Xinhua)

Neighbor News

Senior CPC Official Requires Better Publicity of Xi Thought

BEIJING - A senior official of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on Wednesday called for better dissemination of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.

Wang Huning, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, made the remarks at a national conference on communication and publicity.

Wang told the Party's publicity officials to take Xi Jinping thought as the guide of their work and focus on the study, promotion and implementation of the spirit of the 19th CPC National Congress.

He attributed the "historic achievements" made in the Party's publicity sector since the 18th CPC National Congress to the "strong leadership" of the CPC Central Committee with Xi at the core and the guidance of Xi Jinping thought.

Publicity work should guide the people to safeguard Xi's core status and uphold the authority and the centralized, unified leadership of the CPC Central Committee in a more committed manner, Wang said. (Xinhua)

EU "Closely Following" Protests in Iran: Mogherini

BRUSSELS - The European Union (EU) is "closely following" the situation in Iran, the bloc's foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said in a statement Tuesday.

The EU top diplomat said the EU "is closely following the ongoing demonstrations in Iran, the increase of violence and the unacceptable loss of human lives."

"We expect all concerned to refrain from violence and the right of expression to be guaranteed, also in light of the statements made by the Iranian Government," she added.

According to unofficial reports, at least 20 people, including civilians and security policemen, were killed and dozens of others injured, as protests against the government's economic and social policies continued in major cities across Iran over the past few days.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Tuesday warned of what he calls the enemies' all-out efforts, including inciting unrest, to harm the Islamic republic.

Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani also said certain countries are waging a "proxy war" against the Islamic republic via social media and the internet.

The United States, Britain and Saudi Arabia are behind the recent riots in Iran, he said.

Inflation, unemployment and economic inequality are the major challenges for Rouhani's economic reforms. (Xinhua)

Pakistan Attaches Great Importance to its Ties with Iraq, Netherlands: President

ISLAMABAD - President Mamnoon Hussain on Wednesday said that Pakistan attached great importance to its relations with Iraq and the Netherlands, and was keen to expand ties with both the countries in all fields, including economic, culture and education.

He was talking to the outgoing Ambassador of Iraq Dr Ali Al-Rahmani and Ambassador-designate to Netherlands Shujat Ali Rathore, who called on him separately here at the Aiwan-e-Sadr.

The President emphasized that resumption of air links with Iraq was a priority for Pakistan, which would benefit the people of both countries. It would bring the people of two countries closer and also give them an opportunity to have better understanding of each other, he added.

He underlined that Pakistan desired to enhance cooperation with Iraq in several sectors, including trade, education and culture. He highlighted that Iraq and Baghdad had extraordinary importance in the Islamic History as besides Medina, Baghdad was the other city where Muslims used to travel for education.

The President underscored that Pakistan was making all possible efforts to eradicate extremism from the region and had also made historic achievements in that regard.

He stated that Pakistan and Iraq were connected through great historical and religious links, which further deepened the relations between the two countries. (Monitoring Desk)

Iran, Tajikistan to Broaden Cooperation in Fight against Terrorists

DUSHANBE - Special Advisor to Majlis Speaker for International Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said on Wednesday that the Islamic Republic of Iran and Tajikistan are to broaden exchange of security information in fight against Takfiri terrorist groups in the region in line with broadening political and parliamentary cooperation between the two countries.

Amir Abdollahian said in a meeting with Tajik Ambassador to Tehran Nematollah Imamzadeh in Tehran on Wednesday.

Formation of parliamentary friendship groups and exchange of visits between the two sides parliamentary expert committees can ease expansion of cooperation between the two countries, he said. Enemies have always tried to distance the two countries, but through exchange of visits and negotiations between the two sides' high-ranking officials, it will be possible to prevent materialization of ill-wishers' ploys, Abdollahian said. (IRNA)

Inter-Korean Hotline Reopens after Seoul Proposed Talks

SEOUL - North and South Korea on Wednesday reopened a cross-border hotline which had been shut down since 2016, forging ahead with peace overtures despite taunts from US President Donald Trump who said he has a "much bigger" nuclear button than Kim Jong-Un.

The hotline was restored at 0630 GMT after Seoul proposed high-level talks in response to an olive branch from the North's leader, who has offered to send a team to next month's Winter Olympics in the South.

"The phone conversation lasted 20 minutes," a South Korean Unification

Ministry official told AFP, adding details were not known immediately.

Kim's overtures to the South marked a rare softening in tone. Tensions have surged in recent months following a flurry of North Korean missile launches and its most powerful nuclear test yet.

But Kim's New Year address also included a warning to the US that he has a "nuclear button" on his table, prompting a furious response from Trump via Twitter. "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the 'Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.'" (AFP)

EU's Brexit Negotiators Can't Cherry-Pick: UK Minister

LONDON - Brexit minister David Davis said Tuesday negotiators in Brussels cannot cherry pick terms of a new trade deal with Britain.

Looking ahead to developments in 2018, Davis said his objective is that services can be traded across borders, from highly regulated sectors like financial services to modern ones such as artificial intelligence.

"Given the strength and breadth of our links, a deal which took in some areas of our economic relationship but not others would

be, in the favored phrase of EU diplomats, cherry picking," Davis wrote in the Daily Telegraph.

In terms of scope, the final deal should, amongst other things, cover goods, agriculture and services, including financial services, and be supported by continued intelligent cooperation in highly-regulated areas such as transportation, energy and data, he wrote.

But Davis admitted that negotiations between both sides will continue this year to generate the "thunder and lightning" seen in



2017. In his new year message Davis spelled out what the coming months will bring as Westminster and Brussels start talks on a new relationship between the UK and the EU.

Davis said he understood people saying that the first responsibility for proposing solutions to the conundrums presented by Brexit lie on the British side.

"But that does not mean that the process should be all one way. (Xinhua)

Hungary, Poland See Anti-Migration Stance Spreading in EU



BUDAPEST, Hungary - The prime ministers of Hungary and Poland say their countries' anti-immigration policies are gaining strength within the 28-nation European Union.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, making his first bilateral visit since assuming office in December, and his

and Orban restated their rejection of EU efforts to resettle refugees among members of the bloc.

Poland is facing possible sanctions from the EU because of its perceived erosion of democratic principles, including recent steps increasing government control of the judiciary.

While Orban has vowed to block any punitive measures against Poland by the EU, neither leader mentioned the issue during Wednesday's news conference in the Hungarian parliament. (AP)

France's Macron Sets Course for Rapid Changes this Year

PARIS - French President Emmanuel Macron has urged his ministers to rapidly push on with measures to reform the country's economy, security apparatus and immigration framework.

Following the first meeting of Macron's cabinet this year, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said the government has "a lot on our plate."

Top of the agenda in the first half of the year is a bill to address France's high unemployment through better training of jobless workers and sanctions.

Macron's government is also planning a strategic review of the French military, a bill to get a better handle on what's going on with immigration into the country and measures to combat violence against women.

Macron is set to give a speech to journalists later that day outlining his government's agenda. (AP)



Syrian Army Sends Backup Forces to Hotspot Near Damascus

DAMASCUS - The Syrian army sent reinforcements on Wednesday to launch a major counter-offensive against the rebels in the Eastern Ghouta countryside of the capital Damascus, a military source told Xinhua.

The military backup forces are amassing near the city of Harasta to unleash a counter-attack against the al-Qaida-linked groups of the Levant Liberation Committee (LLC) and the allied Failaq al-Rahman and push them back from the military-run Vehicle Base in Harasta, the source said on condition of anonymity.

Tanks were seen Wednesday heading toward Harasta from Damascus.

The aim behind the counter-offensive is to defeat the al-Qaida affiliates and secure the surrounding of the base, which was attacked by the rebels late last month.

The Syrian warplanes are heavily striking the rebel positions near the facility to pave the way for the ground forces to storm the area. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 15 airstrikes targeted areas in Harasta and its surrounding on Wednesday amid intense battles between the government forces and the ultra-radical rebels.

The UK-based watchdog group said 44 government soldiers, including six officers, have been killed in the battles as well as 47 militants.

During the offensive, the militants besieged the base and captured parts of it, according to activists' reports.

The rebels have also captured areas between Harasta and Arbeen neighborhood, cutting the government forces' supply routes to the base. (Xinhua)

Erdogan Heads to France Seeking EU Thaw

ANKARA - Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Friday visits Paris for talks with French counterpart Emmanuel Macron, seeking to start the New Year by warming relations with the European Union after a torrid 2017.

Macron will host Erdogan at the Elysee Palace with talks expected to range from Syria to trade ties, and the French side is also expected to sound concern over the human rights situation in Turkey. But high on the agenda will be Turkey's relations with the EU, which Ankara has sought to join for



the last 50 years in an epic membership saga that appeared to hit the buffers amid bitter rows in 2017.

"By getting closer to France, Turkey is seeking to give a new boost to its EU membership bid," said Jana Jabbar, professor of Political Science at Sciences

Palestinians Say Jerusalem 'Not for Sale' after Trump Aid Threat

RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories - Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's office said Wednesday Jerusalem is "not for sale" after US President Donald Trump threatened to cut annual aid of more than \$300 million to force them to the negotiating table.

"Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the state of Palestine and it is not for sale for gold or billions," Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP, referring to Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The December 6 declaration led Abbas to say the United States could no longer play any role in the Middle East peace process. "We are not against going back to negotiations, but (these should be) based on international laws and resolutions that have recognised an independent Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital," Abu Rudeina said.

Trump made the funding threat in a tweet on Tuesday, saying: "We pay the Palestinians HUNDRED OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect."

"With the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?" It was not immediately clear whether Trump was threatening all of the budget, worth \$319 million in 2016, according to US government figures.

The United States has long provided the Palestinian Authority with much-needed budgetary support and security assistance, as well as an additional \$304 million for UN programmes in the West Bank and Gaza. (AFP)

U.S. Warns North Korea against New Missile Test, Plays Down Talks

UNITED NATIONS/SEOUL - The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, warned North Korea on Tuesday against staging another missile test and said Washington would not take any talks between North and South Korea seriously if they did not do something to get Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons.

Haley told reporters the United States was hearing reports that North Korea might be preparing to fire another missile.

"I hope that doesn't happen. But if it does, we must bring even tougher measures to bear against the North Korean regime," Haley said.

South Korea on Tuesday offered talks with North Korea next week, amid a tense standoff over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said in a New Year's Day speech that he was "open to dialogue" with Seoul.

Kim also said he was open to the possibility of North Korean athletes taking part in Winter Olympics South Korea hosts next month. (Reuters)