

Japan's Abe Seeks to Burnish Legacy Ahead of Election

TOKYO - Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, stymied by a still sputtering economy, is seeking to burnish his legacy and shore up support ahead of an election in the summer. "Challenges, challenges and still more challenges," Abe said in summing up the coming year in a nationally televised news conference Monday. Abe said he expects to make progress on sweeping reforms he has promised, likening himself to the 18th-century "Abarenbo Shogun," or "Rogue General" Tokugawa Yoshimune, a national leader



renowned for his efforts to reduce waste, clean up corruption and instill sam-

urai values of discipline and leadership. Until July, Abe's focus is bound to

be on ensuring victory in the election for the Upper House of parliament in

July, said Michael Cucek, an expert on Japanese politics who teaches at To-

kyo's Waseda University. Abe's position is strong, with backing by the coalition partner Komeito, and the opposition has failed to regain much traction after a resounding loss of power to Abe's conservative Liberal Democrats in December 2012. But local political superstition holds that every nine years a setback in Upper House elections forces the prime minister to step down. "Observers will be watching closely to see whether he is able to break the jinx," the Jiji news agency said in a commentary Monday. (AP)

IS Jihadists Attack Key Libya Oil Facility: Military

BENGHAZI - The Islamic State jihadist group launched attacks near key oil facilities in northern Libya on Monday but were pushed back, an army official said. The jihadists first carried out a suicide car bomb attack on a military checkpoint at the entrance to the town of Al-Sidra, killing two soldiers, said a colonel in the army loyal to the internationally recognised government. "We were attacked by a convoy of a dozen vehicles belonging to IS,"

Bashir Boudhifra said. "They then launched an attack on the town of Ras-Lanouf via the south but did not manage to enter." IS has been trying to push east from Sirte for several weeks to reach the country's "oil crescent" where its main oil terminals such as Al-Sidra and Ras-Lanouf are based. A Libyan oil official told AFP that a 420,000-barrel oil tank in Ras-Lanouf caught fire during the clashes. IS on Twitter announced that its fighters had led



an "attack on the Al-Sidra area followed by violent clashes with the enemies of God." The group said that the attack came after it took

control of Ben Jawad town, 150 kilometres (90 miles) east of the central coastal city Sirte, which has been under IS control since June 2015. (AFP)

British Security Authorities Examining New IS Execution Video

LONDON - British security and intelligence authorities are examining a new video released by Islamic State (IS) threatening to invade the UK, local media reported Monday.

In the video released on Sunday, a masked IS executioner with British accent called British Prime Minister David Cameron an "imbecile" before executing five men who appeared shackled and dressed in orange boiler suits. They were accused of spying against the IS

for the UK. The video was allegedly filmed in Raqqa, the de facto "capital" of the terrorist group in northern Syria. British authorities are working to identify the masked man, who described the British prime minister as a "slave of the White House." "One would have thought you would have learnt the lessons from your pathetic master in Washington and his failed campaign against ... (More on P4)... (15)

Philippines Issues 25,000 Non-Tourist Visas in 2015: Immigration

MANILA - The Philippine Bureau of Immigration (BI) has issued around 25,000 visas to non-tourist foreign nationals in the country for 2015, a senior government official said Monday. Immigration Commissioner Siegfred Mison attributed the high, positive turnout for visa issuance on the reforms introduced in the system that led to more efficient processes and less bureaucracy. "The figures only show that the Philippines is

fast becoming a preferred venue for foreigners not just for tourism, but also as their second home," he said. Application fees for tourist visa applications exceeded the one billion peso (21.22 million U.S. dollars) mark for the first time last year, he added. Mison said the agency ensured that applications were acted upon expeditiously. "We streamlined the processes and introduced less stringent policies to make sure that foreign ... (More on P4)... (16)

Yemen Declares Nighttime Curfew in Port City of Aden

SANAA - Yemen's internationally recognized government has declared a nighttime curfew, starting Monday, in the key southern port city of Aden in a bid to push back against recent incursions by al-Qaida and other Islamic militant groups, the city's governor said. According to the Aden governor, Aidarus al-Zubaidi, the curfew will be in place every night from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. for an unspecified period. The measure came after government forces retook



Aden's strategic port after heavy clashes with militants who had seized it earlier over the weekend. Al-Qaida and other mili-

tants have been using the port for lucrative smuggling operations. However, it remained unclear how well the curfew

can be enforced since the Yemeni forces, backed by a Saudi-led coalition of mostly Arab states that is ... (More on P4)... (17)

Quake Strikes Northeast India, Bangladesh; 11 Dead, Nearly 200 Hurt

IMPHAL - A powerful earthquake struck northeast India and Bangladesh on Monday, killing at least 11 people and injuring nearly 200, with efforts to reach remote areas where people may be trapped hampered by severed power lines and telecommunication links.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the 6.8 magnitude quake was 57 km (35 miles) deep and struck 29 km (18 miles) west of Imphal, capital of India's Manipur state, which borders Myanmar. The pre-dawn quake killed six people in India and five in neighboring Bangladesh, officials said, while ... (More on P4)... (18)

Poland's FM Disturbed by EU Steps toward Poland

WARSAW - Poland's foreign minister says he is disturbed by comments by various European Union commissioners concerning the changes taking place in Poland under the new government. Witold Waszczykowski said Monday the comments were made without proper knowledge of the situation. He was reacting in particular to EU Commissioner Guenther Oettinger's call for Poland to be put under a monitoring mechanism, due to recent changes in the media law that give the government control of state broadcasters. Next week, the European Commission is to discuss the rule of law in Poland. Waszczykowski said: "I want to say that I am disturbed by the comments of this or that EU commissioner who expresses his concern without properly knowing the situation or the documents. This is not the way to do politics." (AP)

Italian Diplomat Takes Helm of UNHCR Amid Record Refugee Crisis

GENEVA - Italian diplomat Filippo Grandi began work on Monday as the new head of the UN refugee agency, facing the mammoth task of leading efforts to deal with record levels of displacement worldwide. "UNHCR is navigating extraordinarily difficult waters," Grandi said in a statement Monday.

"The combination of multiple conflicts and resulting mass displacement, fresh challenges to asylum, the funding gap between humanitarian needs and resources and growing xenophobia is



very dangerous," he said. The 58-year-old diplomat officially replaced Antonio Guterres on January 1, when the former Portuguese prime minister stepped down after a decade at the helm of the refugee agency. But Grandi

arrived for his first day of work at the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva on Monday morning, the agency said, adding that he was taking the wheel "at a time of unprecedented displacement ... (More on P4)... (19)

Iraq Official Blames IS for Bombing Mosques

BAGHDAD - An Iraqi official blamed the Islamic State group on Monday for the bombing of two Sunni mosques in a predominantly Shiite city in southern Iraq the previous night, saying the militant group seeks to stoke sectarian tensions. Provincial security official Falah al-Khafaji told The Associated Press that IS, "did this to inflame sectarian strife in the country." The bombing in the city of Hilla late on Sunday damaged both mosques but caused no casualties, according to the government.

The attacks come amid an escalating Saudi-Iranian spat over the kingdom's execution of prominent Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, which sparked outrage among Shiites across the region over the weekend. In Baghdad Monday, supporters of influential Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr gathered outside the heavily fortified Green Zone to protest the Nimr ... (More on P4)... (20)

ASEAN Community to Enhance Bloc's Prestige, Role on Int'l Arena: Cambodian FM

PHNOM PENH - Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong said on Monday that the ASEAN Community, which was officially launched last week, will enhance the bloc's prestige and pioneer role on regional and international arenas. "The ASEAN Community will contribute to strengthening regional stability, peace and security and increas-

ing the efficiency of ASEAN's core role in the region," he said during a meeting with some 120 university students here. "Nowadays, ASEAN is recognized as the most successful regional organization." The ASEAN Community's opportunities are focused on a single market and production base with a free flow of goods, ... (More on P4)... (21)

Denmark Introduces Temporary Controls at Border with Germany

COPENHAGEN - Danish Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen said on Monday that Denmark introduces temporary controls at its border with Germany from noon. The prime minister made the announcement at a press conference on Monday. The Danish govern-

ment's decision was made on the same day when bordering Sweden started implementing border controls from Monday, requiring all trains, buses and ferries on the Danish side to check passengers' photo identification before al ... (More on P4)... (22)

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Pakistan PM Embarks on 3-Day Visit to Sri Lanka

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif embarked on a three-day official visit to Sri Lanka on Monday at the invitation of the President of Sri Lanka, state television said. During the visit, the prime minister will hold official talks with the President of Sri Lanka Maithripala Sirisena on bilateral matters. Both countries are to sign an agreement on countering money laundering and terrorism, the Pakistan High Commission in Colombo has said.

The Pakistan High Commission said that several other bilateral instruments in the areas of health, science and technology, trade, statistics

and culture are envisaged to be signed during the visit.

Parliamentarians, Religious leaders and Businessmen from Sri Lanka will call on the prime minister during the visit, the Foreign Ministry said in Islamabad.

The prime minister will also address a gathering of Ministers, Parliamentarians, Senior Officials, top Business Persons and members of the Diplomatic corps.

Being members of the regional grouping, SAARC, and Commonwealth, Pakistan and Sri Lanka cooperate closely and coordinate with each other on issues of common interest and regional and international concern. (Xinhua)

Iran to Start Production from Joint Field Ahead of Schedule

TEHRAN - An Iranian oil industry official says the country is planning early production from an oil field it shares with neighboring Iraq three months ahead of original schedule. Arash Baqerzadeh, official in charge of North Yaran oil field's development project, was quoted by Iranian media as saying on Monday that the field was originally supposed to come on-stream in April 2016, but Iran is now planning to start early production in March by extracting 15,000 barrels per day (bpd) crude oil from the field. Baqerzadeh noted that development project

of the joint oil field has so far progressed 77.9 percent, adding that is it among few development projects that are expected to be finished ahead of schedule. He said all commodities needed for development of the field have been purchased, adding that drilling well No. 19 has been finished and drilling well No. 20 will reach its end in late February 2016. Baqerzadeh stated that about 52 kilometer of pipeline has been constructed from North Yaran oil field's wells toward cluster zone and the rest of the needed pipeline will be built in the next two months. (PressTV)

Newly-Formed PLA Forces Vow Contributions to Building Strong Military

BEIJING - New People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces have promised to contribute to the Chinese dream of a strong military. Chinese President Xi Jinping conferred military flags on the general command for the Army of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the PLA Rocket Force and the PLA Strategic Support Force at an inauguration ceremony held Thursday in Beijing. Officers and soldiers of the three forces will study Xi's instructions made at the ceremony, saying the move is a major decision by the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and the Central Military Commission (CMC) to deepen reforms in national defense and the military. The troops will fol-

low the direction of the CPC Central Committee, the CMC and Xi, be absolutely "loyal, pure and reliable" to them, and firmly uphold the Party's absolute leadership over the army. Officers and soldiers of the PLA Rocket Force vowed to understand their roles and tasks, and follow the requirement of maintaining both conventional and nuclear weaponry and improve the ability to deter and strike across the entire defense area. The force also pledged to enhance nuclear deterrence and counter-strike capacity which is credible and reliable, medium- and long-range precision strike ability, as well as strategic check-and-balance capacity to build a strong and modern Rocket Force. (Xinhua)

413,834 Foreign Tourists Reportedly Visited Tajikistan Last Year

DUSHANBE - More than 463,700 foreigners visited Tajikistan last year and 413,834 of them visited the country as tourists, according to the Committee for Youth, Sports and Tourism Affairs under the Government of Tajikistan. In 2015, Tajikistan earned 206.917 million U.S. dollars from tourism, an official source at the

Committee for Youth, Sports and Tourism Affairs told Asia-Plus in an interview. The number of foreign tourists visiting the country has increased due to peace and stability in Tajikistan, improvement of tourism service quality, and rise in foreigners' awareness of Tajikistan and its sights, the source added. (Asia-Plus)