

Germany and France Cast Doubt on Jan. 15 Ukraine Summit

PARIS - Germany cast doubt on whether a four-way summit on the Ukraine crisis in Kazakhstan's capital Astana on Jan. 15 would take place on Monday and France's president said the meeting would depend on the likelihood of "new progress" being made.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said on Dec. 29 he had invited the leaders of Russia, France and Germany to talks in an attempt to restore peace to Kiev's eastern territories.

But, asked about the planned summit, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman, Steffen Seibert, said, "I can't say yet if and when

such a meeting will take place. Such a meeting only makes sense if we can make real progress." "We have a very clear idea of what constitutes real progress. This would be first and foremost achieving the full implementation of the Minsk peace accord and a genuine and lasting ceasefire, a contact line between areas controlled by Ukraine and rebels, and a withdrawal of heavy weaponry. Such things must be prepared in advance," he said.

In an interview with France Inter radio, French President Francois Hollande struck a more optimistic note: "I will go to Astana on the



15th of January on one condition, which is that there should be a possibility of making new progress. If it's just to meet and talk without making any actual advances then there's no point. But I think there will be progress."

Top-ranking diplomats from Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France are meeting in Berlin on Monday, and their foreign ministers held a telephone conference on Friday. Merkel is due to meet Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk in Berlin on Thursday, and the German and Ukrainian finance ministers are also due to hold talks that day. (Reuters)

Western-Backed Syrian Opposition Body Elects New Leadership

ISTANBUL - Syria's Western-backed political opposition group, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, has elected a new presidential committee and a president widely seen as not tied to any of the body's international sponsors.

Despite having tenuous links with fighters on the ground and seen as out of touch with ordinary Syrians, the National Coalition remains one of the main parties in international discussions to find solutions to the almost



four-year civil war. Khaled Khoja takes over as president from Hadi

al Bahra, who is considered to have close links with Saudi Arabia. Bahra

served for one term and did not run for a second but will be in the political committee. Khoja, a 49-year old Damascus-born doctor and businessman, won 56 votes out of 106 votes cast at a closed meeting in Istanbul on Sunday. The 111-member body also elected a new secretary general and vice presidents. The role of the vice president reserved for a Kurdish member had not yet been filled, as the Kurdish bloc had not yet presented a new nominee, the National Coalition said. (Reuters)

Sanctions on Russia Should Be Lifted If Progress Noted: France

PARIS - French President Francois Hollande on Monday believed that economic sanctions imposed on Russia over tensions of Ukrainian crisis should be lifted if Moscow would make progress in restoring stability in the region.

Speaking to the local radio France Inter, Hollande,

who brokered the first ice-breaking meeting between Kiev and Moscow leaders last June, pledged to push ahead diplomatic efforts to promote dialogue and reach a lasting compromise to the crisis during the Astana gathering on Ukraine set for Jan. 15. "Valdimir Putin has already paid a quite

heavy price for the annexation of the Crimea," Hollande said referring to Russia's worsening economy and falling Rouble currency aggravated by falling oil prices and Western sanctions over its policies toward Ukraine. As part of pressure to force Moscow to dialogue and forge a peace deal

with Kiev, Hollande decided, last November, to postpone "until further notice" delivery of the first of two Mistral helicopter carriers to Russia. The decision was based on a worsening situation in Ukraine despite diplomatic efforts to end peacefully the month-long crisis. (Xinhua)

Islamic Leader Urges Muslims to Visit Jerusalem Holy Site

JERUSALEM - The head of the world's largest Islamic organization on Monday paid a rare visit to Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, urging Muslims to follow suit and come to the city in a bid to strengthen Palestinian claims to the holy site.

The visit by Iyad Madani, secretary-general of the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation, came at a sensitive time following months of tensions and violence surrounding the holy site in Jerusalem's Old City. The hilltop compound is revered by both Jews and Muslims and is a frequent flashpoint of violence.

Madani is a citizen of Saudi Arabia, an Arab country



that does not have diplomatic relations with Israel and which serves as the guardian of Islam's most important sites. Al-Aqsa is Islam's third-holiest site, after the cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

"Coming to the mosque is a right for me as well as every Muslim," Madani said. "It is our right to come here and to pray

here. No occupation authority should take this right from us." Israel captured east Jerusalem, including the Old City, in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed the area in a move that has not been internationally recognized. The Palestinians claim east Jerusalem as the capital of their future state. Israel says it will not allow the city to be divided. (AP)

The hilltop compound housing Al-Aqsa lies at the heart of the dispute over Jerusalem. Known to Jews as the Temple Mount, it is the most sacred place in Judaism, revered as the home to the ancient Hebrew temples. The conflicting claims to the site have often spilled over into violence, most recently late last year as visits to the compound by nationalist Jews fueled rumors that Israel was plotting to take over the site. Israel angrily denied the claims, but the tensions led to violent protests by Palestinians. Israeli restrictions on Muslim access and a wave of Palestinian attacks that killed 11 people. (AP)

At Least 138 Journalists Killed in 2014: Report Updates

MANAMA - The head of the Bahrain's main Shi'ite Muslim opposition group was re-manded in custody for a further 15 days on Monday in a move that could further inflame sectarian tensions in the Kingdom.

The Sheikh Ali Salman, head of the al-Wafaq Islamic Society, was arrested on Dec. 28 after leading a protest rally against elections in November which his party boycotted. Washington, a close ally of

Bahrain which bases its Fifth Fleet there, has already expressed deep concern over his detention. Late on Sunday, Salman's lawyer, Abdulla al-Shamlawi told Reuters he had been formally charged by the public prosecutor with inciting a change of government by force, inciting hatred of a segment of society, inciting others to break the law and publicly insulting the Interior Ministry. (Reuters)

GENEVA - The year 2014 has become the second deadliest year for journalists over ten years with at least 138 journalists killed by the end of last year, the Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) said on Monday in its updated annual report. The annual report, which first published on December 15, documented 128 journalists killed at that time. However, PEC added four more journalists (1 in Honduras, 1 in

Afghanistan, 1 in Brazil and 1 in DRC) have been killed in two weeks since December 15. In addition, the Geneva-based NGO reviewed its list of journalists killed in Syria, noting the murder of six journalists was missed in the original report. "We have 19 journalists killed in Syria in 2014 and no more 13 as previously reported. Syria is the number one deadliest country as in 2013 and 2012," PEC Secretary-General Blaise Lempem said. (Xinhua)

EU Vows Swift Action against Mediterranean Migrant Smugglers

BRUSSELS - The European Union is promising to act quickly in response to new tactics of smugglers bringing migrants across the Mediterranean to Europe packed aboard huge, decaying cargo ships.

European Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas said Monday that "we have to act and we shall act swiftly." The EU Frontex border agency says about 15 such crossings have been recorded since August. Two came in just three days last week, involving more than 1,000 migrants, many of them fleeing Syria. Schinas said that even though Frontex vessels were involved in last week's rescue efforts the EU could be doing more. (AP)

Bangladeshi Ex-PM Announces Countrywide Mass Protest

DHAKA - Bangladeshi ex-Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has announced countrywide mass protest and urged party men to continue to force government to hold new parliament polls under a non-party caretaker government. She made the announcement on Monday evening while talking to journalists inside her office compound.

Bangladesh Police have locked all the gates of Zia's office in capital Dhaka's diplomatic enclave Gulshan. Khaleda Zia made several attempts to leave her office to join her 20-party alliance's anti-government rally. Khaleda Zia has remained cordoned off inside her office since Saturday night. Hundreds of police personnel have been deployed outside her office. A convoy of trucks laden with sand and bricks that were parked outside her office to cut off the road to

Lebanon Imposes Rules Limiting Entry of Syrians Fleeing War



BEIRUT - Lebanon began imposing unprecedented restrictions Monday on the entry of Syrians, as the tiny country with a fragile sectarian balance struggles to cope with well over a million refugees feeling the civil war next door. Syria's war has displaced nearly half its pre-war population, sending over three million people across borders, mainly to Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. Western countries have only accepted small numbers of refugees, and hundreds of people have drowned attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea on rickety smuggler ships. Lebanese officials say they simply can't absorb any more. They estimate there are about 1.5 million Syrians in Lebanon, about one-quarter of the total population. Some 1.1 million are registered with the U.N.'s refugee agency. "We have enough. There's no capacity anymore to host more displaced," Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk said in a press conference carried on local television. Lebanon has been hosting hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees since Israel's creation in 1948, and their presence was a central factor in the 1975-1990 civil war. The war in Syria has already escalated tensions between Lebanon's Shiites and Sunnis, and many fear the influx of the mainly Sunni refugees could again aggravate the tiny country's delicate multi-sectarian balance. (AP)

Nieghbor News

China Calls for Caution Following New US Sanctions on DPRK

BEIJING - A Chinese spokeswoman called for caution after the United States imposed new sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

U.S. President Barack Obama on Friday signed an executive order, imposing sanctions against the DPRK government in response to what he called Pyongyang's "numerous provocations," particularly the latest cyber-attack on Sony Pictures Entertainment. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said at Monday's news briefing that the "relatively stable" situation on the Korean peninsula was hard-won and that all sides concerned should act cautiously to

avoid an escalation of tensions there.

"(All sides) should work together to safeguard peace and stability on the peninsula," said the spokeswoman. The United States has accused Pyongyang of hacking Sony Pictures Entertainment over a comedy film, "The Interview," that depicts an assassination attempt on DPRK leader Kim Jong Un. But the DPRK has denied involvement, calling such claims "a wild rumor." At Monday's news briefing, Hua also reiterated that China opposes any form of cyber-attack and will not allow any country or person to launch cyber-attacks using Chinese infrastructure or on Chinese territory. (Xinhua)

Iran Appreciates Iraqi Statesmen for Efforts to Confront Terrorism



TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif appreciated Iraqi statesmen, specially Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, for their efforts to broaden bilateral ties, consolidate national solidarity and confront terrorism as common enemy of the two countries.

Zarif made the remarks in a meeting with Head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq Ammar al-Hakim in Tehran on Monday. The Iranian foreign minister pointed to the vigilant and constructive role of the Iraqi ulema and religious leaders, and thanked senior Baghdad officials, particularly al-Abadi, for trying to reinvigorate their ties with Iran and for their anti-terrorism efforts. Hakim, for his

part, underlined the need for using the two sides' abundant capacities for mutual cooperation in political, economic and trade areas.

The head of Islamic Council of Iraq pointed to the Iran-Iraq strategic relations, and reiterated the need for further cooperation to turn challenges into opportunities for the two nations.

Last month, Abadi lauded Iran for its support and assistance to Baghdad in fighting terrorism, and said he would never be coaxed into destroying or undermining relations with Iran for some short-term benefits.

"I will not spoil my ties with Iran for the sake of certain sides," Abadi said in an interview with al-Mayadeen news channel. (FNA)

Kerry Visit Discussed As US Ambassador Calls on Sharif

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Monday met US Ambassador to Pakistan Richard Olson and expressed hope that all aspects of Pakistan-US ties would be discussed and cooperation would be reviewed during the upcoming strategic dialogue scheduled to take place in Islamabad on Jan 14. The US envoy had called on the premier at the latter's official residence in the federal

capital. During the meeting, matters relating to Pak-US relations with particular reference to the scheduled visit of US Secretary of State John Kerry came under discussion. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar and Special Assistant to PM on Foreign Affairs Tariq Fatemi were also present at the meeting. Both sides finalized policy points and papers to be discussed with Secretary Kerry. (Monitoring Desk)

IRP Nominates Mahmatali Hayit to Run for Parliament

DUSHANBE - The Islamic Revival Party (IRP) has nominated its deputy leader Mahmatali Hayit to run for the Majlisi Namoyandagon (Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament) in the Roudaki single-mandate constituency.

The member of the IRP Political Council, Saidibrom Nazir, will run for parliament in the Kulo single-mandate constituency. Meanwhile, Mahmatali Hayit and Saidibrom Nazir are also included in the IRP party list for the 2015 parliamentary elections. Tajikistan's Parliament (Majlisi Oli) has two chambers: the Assembly of Representatives (Ma-

jlisi Namoyandagon) and the National Assembly (Majlisi Milli). Majlisi Namoyandagon has 63 members, elected for a five-year term in, 22 by proportional representation and 41 in single-seat constituencies. Majlisi Milli has 33 members, 25 elected for a five-year term by local legislature (majlis) members and eight appointed by the president.

Founded in October 1990, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan is the only Islamic party registered in CIS Central Asia. The IRP was registered on December 4, 1991. It was banned by the Supreme Court in June 1993 and legalized in August 1999. (Asia-Plus)

EU Welcomes Re-Opening of U.S. Market for Beef Imports

BRUSSELS - The European Union here on Monday expressed welcome for the re-opening of the U.S. Market for imports of EU beef from January.

"We welcome the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) announcement that the US will progressively re-open its market to exports of beef from the European Union, starting with the Republic of Ireland," said EU Health Commissioner Vytenis Andriukaitis,

Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrom, and Agriculture and Rural Development Commissioner Phil Hogan in a statement. The EU commissioners said the re-opening of the market was a welcome first step to "abolish the disproportionate and unjustified U.S. Ban" that followed the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis of the 1990s, and to re-establish normal trading conditions. (Xinhua)