

China's Xi Calls on Army to be Battle-Ready

SHANGHAI - China's armed forces must strengthen their sense of urgency and do everything they can to prepare for battle, President Xi Jinping told a meeting of top brass on Friday.

China is keen to beef up its armed forces amid territorial disputes in the South China Sea and escalating tension with the United States over issues ranging from trade to the status of Taiwan.

The official Xinhua news agency said Xi told a meeting of the top military authority that China faced increasing risks and challenges, and the armed forces must work to secure its security and development needs.

Xi, who is also chairman of the Central Military Commission,



said the armed forces must devise strategies for the new era and take on responsibilities for preparing and waging war.

"The world is facing a period of major changes never seen in a century, and China is still in an important period of strategic opportunity for development," he was quoted as saying. (Reuters)

CBS: El-Sissi Says Egypt, Israel Cooperate against Militants

CAIRO - Egypt's president has told CBS that his country and Israel, with whom it fought four wars, are cooperating against Islamic militants in the Sinai Peninsula, a startling and potentially damaging acknowledgment that could explain the Egyptian government's request that the network not air the interview.

Excerpts from the interview released by CBS over the weekend also quoted President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi as denying there are political prisoners in Egypt, where he has overseen one of the largest

crackdowns on dissent in the country's modern history since the ouster by the military, then led by him, of an Islamist but divisive president. CBS, which is due to air the full interview Sunday on its show "60 Minutes," said it has rejected a request by the Egyptian government not to show it. It did not say which part of the president's comments the Cairo government objected to, but the cooperation with Israel, with whom Egypt has a 1979 peace treaty, appears to be the most contentious part. (AP)

UN Security Council Meets on DR Congo Vote

United Nations (United States) - The UN Security Council met behind closed doors on Friday to discuss the elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo as world powers awaited results. France requested the meeting as the European Union and the African Union urged DR Congo authorities to respect the outcome of the December 30 vote. Election results were initially scheduled to be released on Sunday but could be delayed.

During a nearly two-hour meeting, the council failed to agree on a press statement on the elections. Several countries including African nations said such a move was premature, diplomats said. French Ambassador Francois Delattre said following the meeting that "the consolidation of the results must continue with transparency" and that the results to be announced "must be consistent with the vote of the Congolese



people." The council will hold a public meeting on Tuesday to again discuss the elections. Western powers hope sub-Saharan Africa's biggest country will see its first peaceful change of the presidency since independence in 1960. (AFP)

'Hunt for Our People Goes On': Moscow Warns There's No 'Safe Place' after US Nabs Russian National



MOSCOW - The Russian Foreign Ministry has issued a warning about what it describes as a "hunt on our citizens," urging travelers to be cautious. The message follows the detention of a Russian citizen by the FBI in Saipan.

Russians should take every precaution when traveling abroad and ensure there's nothing in their records that might interest the US, the Foreign Ministry warned after the 39-year-old citizen was arrested. "US law enforcement officials are continuing their hunt on Russian citizens," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told TASS on Saturday. The statement was issued just after Dmitry Makarenko was detained by FBI in the Pacific island of Saipan. The diplomat said any

Russian who has reason to believe that he or she could be of interest to the Americans "should assess the consequences of traveling abroad" because "there is, in fact, no safe place, no guarantee [that they will not be arrested]." The indictment put forward against Makarenko alleges that he and his associate Vladimir Nevidomy, a resident of Florida, tried to transfer military-grade equipment, such as night-vision rifle scopes and ammunition primers, to Russia between April and November 2013. (RT)

Stocks Soar, Erasing Thursday's Plunge

NEW YORK - Wall Street roared back, wiping out all of the market's losses from the previous day, as a barrage of positive news eased concerns about the global economy and interest rates. Major indexes closed up more than 3 percent Friday. Traders were encouraged by news that employers ramped up hiring in December, which could allay fears about an economic slowdown. Those worries, along with a weak revenue forecast from Apple, contributed to steep losses Thursday. China said trade talks would resume next week, and Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said the central bank will be flexible with rates. The S&P 500 rose 84 points, or 3.4 percent, to 2,531. The Dow Jones Industrial Average jumped 746 points, or 3.3 percent, to 23,433. The Nasdaq rose 275 points, or 4.3 percent, to 6,738. Stocks are rocketing higher Friday and wiping out much of the previous day's losses after a string of developments eased investors' concerns about the global economy and interest rates. (AP)

Neighbor News

Iran FM to Visit India, Iraq to Boost Ties with Neighboring, Regional States

TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif will travel to India and Iraq in "the near future" as part of efforts to enhance relations with neighboring and regional countries.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said on Friday consultations are currently underway over the agenda of the trips that would take Zarif first to India and later to Iraq. "Zarif will visit neighboring countries in the near future in line with Iran's permanent and unchangeable policy towards neighbors meant to develop all-out cooperation and deepen economic-trade ties as well as political consultations," he said.

Heading a high-ranking delegation, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid an official two-day visit to Iran last May. Iraq's President Barham Salih also held talks with senior Iranian officials in Tehran last November. "Iran's attitude toward neighboring and regional states have always been positive, seeking peaceful coexistence, better ties along with collective efforts for sustainable peace, stability and security in the region and further expansion of economic cooperation," Qassemi said. He also stressed Tehran's readiness to cooperate with all the regional states to resolve differences among certain countries in the region. (Press TV)

Pakistan Hopes to Secure \$3.2b Oil Credit Facility

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan is hopeful that Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan will announce \$3.2 billion oil credit facility during his upcoming visit to help address the balance of payments crisis.

Pakistan also hopes to secure total annual oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) oil credit facility worth \$7.9 billion from Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi and International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation (IIFC) for the purpose.

The Abu Dhabi crown price will reach Islamabad on January 6 to meet Prime Minister Imran Khan.

During this visit, Pakistani authorities say, "As negotiations with Abu Dhabi have matured, the crown prince will announce \$3.2 billion credit facility for Pakistan following the same model of Saudi Arabia." The United Arab Emirates (UAE) already announced to deposit \$3 billion in Pakistan's foreign currency account to help it successfully overcome international payments crisis and avoid a stringent International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout package. Saudi Arabia had already announced to deposit \$3 billion in the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) and one tranche of \$1 billion had already been deposited. (Agencies)

Tajikistan, Egypt Discuss Cooperation in Tourism

DUSHANBE - The Governor of Egypt's South Sinai, Khalid Fouda, received the Ambassador of Tajikistan to Egypt, Khusrav Noziri, who was accompanying a Tajik tourist delegation on the first tourist trip to Sharm El Sheikh, Trend reports citing Asia-Plus. Welcoming the first charter flight from Dushanbe to Sharm al-Sheikh, the Governor of South Sinai expressed his hope for an increase in the number of these flights in the coming period, said the Tajik MFA information department.

During the meeting, the sides reportedly also discussed issues related to establishment of partnership relations between Khatlon Province of Tajikistan and Egypt's South Sinai Governorate.

At the end of the meeting, the Governor of South Sinai and the Ambassador of Tajikistan gave a joint interview to the satellite television channel CBC Extra News, in which they noted the importance of expansion of tourism cooperation between the two countries. Egyptian media widely covered the news about the first charter flight and the arrival of the first group of Tajik tourists from Dushanbe to Sharm al-Sheikh. (Trend)

Russia, Turkmenistan to Launch Ferry Service in Caspian Sea

ASHGABAT - A ferry service, which will connect Russia's Makhachkala city with the Turkmen port of Turkmenbashi, will be launched in the Caspian Sea in 2019, Trend reports referring to the Russian media.

"This is a regional-scale project," Alexander Elizarov, Russian trade representative in Turkmenistan, told reporters. "First of all, one or two ferries are planned to be used," he said. "In the future, after the effective cargo traffic is confirmed, it is possible to talk about building at least three-four more vessels," he said. The annual capacity of the port will be 17-18 million tons. (Trend)

90 Flights Canceled at Munich Airport Due to Heavy Snowfall

BERLIN - Munich Airport says about 90 flights have been canceled because of heavy snowfall affecting parts of Central Europe.

Southern Germany, Austria and Switzerland saw several inches (centimeters) of fresh snow early Saturday.

According to German news agency dpa, the cancellations in Munich affected about one in 10 flights Saturday at Germany's second-biggest airport. (AP)

Bolton Warns Syria Against Use of Chemical Weapons

TEL AVIV - U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton warned the Syrian government that it should not see the impending U.S. military withdrawal from the country as an invitation to use chemical weapons.

"There is absolutely no change in the U.S. position against the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and absolutely no change in our position that any use of chemical weapons would be met by a very strong response, as we've done twice before," Bolton told reporters on his plane shortly before landing in Tel Aviv, Israel.

"So the regime, the Assad regime should be under no illusions on that question," Bolton added: "As we elaborate how the withdrawal is going to occur and the circumstances, we don't want the Assad regime to see what we do as representing any diminution in our opposition to the use of weapons of mass destruction." (Reuters)

NASA Rescinds Invitation to Russian Space Chief amid Pressure from US Lawmakers

MOSCOW - NASA has indefinitely postponed a visit by Dmitry Rogozin, head of the Russian space agency Roscosmos, which was set for next month. It would have required a sanctions waiver, as Rogozin has been barred from the US since 2014.

"NASA has informed the Russian space agency, Roscosmos, that the proposed visit of Roscosmos Director General, Dr Dmitry Rogozin, currently planned for February 2019, will need to be postponed,"



NASA spokeswoman Megan Powers told Sputnik on Friday. No new date for the visit has yet been set. The about-face from NASA comes just days after Powers told Po-

litico that planning for Rogozin's trip to meet NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine in the US was underway despite a growing outcry from some hard-line lawmakers. (RT)

US Sanctions Relief & 'Bold Action' by North Key to Solve Deadlock - S. Korean President's Aide

SEOUL - Deeds not words are key to ensure a breakthrough in implementing denuclearization, a security adviser to the South Korean President has said, suggesting that the US partially lift sanctions and the North make some "bold action."

"A breakthrough may emerge should the North take bold action and the US partially lift sanctions at the same time," Moon Chung-in was quoted by the Yonhap news agency. It is crucial, he pointed out, that the US and North Korea make sure to "take action rather than just exchanging verbal pledges" to move

forward. However, it is not easy "to demand that one of them give ground first," admitted Moon, who also served as national security adviser for previous administrations as well as the Defense Ministry and the National Intelligence Service. The comment by the high-ranked presidential aide comes as Seoul tries to breathe air into the dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang. Following the milestone Trump-Kim meeting in Singapore last summer, both sides exchanged promising statements but to no avail. (RT)