

Syrian Opposition Groups Divided Over Moscow Peace Talks

BEIRUT - A Syrian opposition group says it will attend a proposed peace conference in Moscow later this month, saying the conference offers "a glimpse of hope" to end Syria's civil war. Saturday's announcement by the Popular Front of Change and Liberation of former Deputy Prime Minister Qadri Jamil came a day after leading opposition politician Mouaz al-Khatib declined to go to Moscow. Russia's

Foreign Ministry said last month that it hoped to host peace talks after Jan. 20 between the Syrian government and the fractured opposition. Syria's government, headed by embattled President Bashar Assad, had said it is prepared to participate. Syria's nearly four-year conflict has killed over 200,000 people. It also gave birth to the Islamic State group, which now controls a third of Syria and neighboring Iraq. (AP)



Ukraine Has Violated Loan Terms: Russia

MOSCOW - Ukraine has violated the terms of a \$3 billion Russian loan but Moscow has not yet decided whether to demand early repayment, Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov was quoted on Saturday as saying. Russia lent the money in December 2013 by buying Ukrainian Eurobonds, two months before Ukraine's then-president, the pro-Moscow Viktor Yanukovich, fled the country amid mass protests against his rule. The terms of the loan deal included a condition that Ukraine's total state debt should not exceed 60 percent of its annual gross domestic product (GDP). Last month, rating agency Moody's estimated that Ukraine's debt amounted to 72 percent of GDP in 2014 and would rise to 83 percent in 2015. It also said "the risk of default is rising". "Ukraine has definitely



violated the terms of the loan, and in particular (the condition) not to increase its state debt above 60 percent of GDP," Russia's Siluanov said, according to Interfax news agency. "So Russia definitely has the right to demand early return of this loan. At the same time, at present this decision has not yet been taken." Siluanov was commenting on earlier remarks by an anonymous government official saying that Russia was likely to demand early repayment as Ukraine had violated

many of the loan terms. Last November, President Vladimir Putin told German media that Russia did not intend to demand early repayment of Ukraine's debt as this would trigger the financial collapse of the former Soviet republic. The Russian finance ministry was not immediately available on Saturday to comment on the reports. The Russian remarks on the debt come ahead of key peace talks to resolve the conflict in eastern Ukraine and may be intended to increase economic pressure on Kiev

with a view to influencing those talks. More than 4,700 people have been killed in fighting between Kiev's forces and pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine since last April. The foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France will meet in Berlin on Monday to discuss the conflict, with a summit between the four countries' leaders in Kazakhstan provisionally scheduled for Jan. 15. The comments on Ukraine's debt also followed a downgrade overnight of Russia's credit rating by Fitch, underscoring Moscow's own deteriorating finances. Russian agencies cited an anonymous government official on Saturday as branding the Fitch downgrade "politically biased, not partner-like and economically absolutely unfounded". (Reuters)

Jordan Urges Global Efforts against Terrorism

AMMAN - King Abdullah II of Jordan on Saturday called for unifying efforts among all countries against terrorism. At a meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri, the Jordanian leader voiced his country's full support for Egypt, which plays a pivotal role in the region. The talks took up ways of enhancing the joint Arab actions regarding different issues and countering terrorism to ensure security and stability in the Middle East. The two sides also urged more efforts by all influential parties to create the conducive environment for resuming peace talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis based on the two-state solution. They also discussed the situation in Syria and Iraq, voicing support for a political solution in Syria and for the Iraqi government in combating terrorist groups. (Xinhua)

All European Countries Could Be Potential Targets of Terrorist Attacks: Finnish FM

HELSINKI - Finnish Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja said that all European countries could be targets of terrorist attacks, reported Finnish national broadcaster YLE on Saturday. When interviewed with YLE on Saturday morning, Tuomioja made the comment on the recent terrorist attacks in France this week. Tuomioja said that terrorism knows no borders, adding that there are extremely serious situations everywhere in the world at any time, as the world today is in a state of interdependence. France is an active participant in the coalition against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and

France Pursues Female Suspect after Deadly Siege

PARIS - French police searched for a female accomplice to militant Islamists behind deadly attacks on a satirical newspaper and Jewish deli and maintained a top-level anti-terrorist alert ahead of a Paris gathering with European leaders set for Sunday. In the worst assault on France's homeland security for decades, 17 victims lost their lives in three days of violence that began with an attack on the Charlie Hebdo weekly on Wednesday and ended with Friday's dual hostage-taking at a print works outside Paris and kosher supermarket in the city. French security forces shot dead the two brothers behind the Hebdo killings after they took refuge in the print works, and a Kalashnikov-armed associate who had planted explosives at the Paris deli in a siege that claimed the lives of four hostages. On Saturday morning, there was still a visible police presence around the French capital, with patrols at sensitive sites including media offices. There was a false bomb alert at the Eurodisney fairground to the east of the capital. "It's no longer like before," said Maria Pinto, on a street in central Paris. "You work a whole life through and because of these madmen, you leave your house to go shopping, go to work, and you don't know if you'll come home." The attack on Charlie Hebdo, a journal that satirized Islam as well as other religions and politicians, raised sensitive questions about freedom of speech, religion and security in a country struggling to integrate a five-million Muslim minority. (Reuters)

Nieghbor News

US to Help Pakistan Overcome Terror, Security Challenges: Pentagon

WASHINGTON - Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby on Friday said the sanctuary that some terrorist groups enjoy in Pakistan has long been an issue of concern for the United States, adding that the subject has long been a topic of discussion between the American and Pakistani leadership. During a press briefing at the Pentagon on Friday, Kirby added that terrorists hiding in Pakistan and militancy in the region were common challenges facing the two countries. He further said that it was imperative to keep in mind that the Pakistani people are victims of terrorism "just like the people in Paris are this week". Also read: Spat over aid, border firing overshadows Kerry's South Asia trip

Pakistan as well as "putting pressure" on the government on the other hand, the press secretary interjected that terrorism was a shared threat and America would continue to maintain interest in helping Pakistan overcome this threat. "It's not about us putting pressure on the Pakistani government," said Kirby. "It's about the Pakistani government continuing to address this threat in keeping with their best interests and the interests of their people." Kirby also mentioned that cooperation with Pakistan is persistently improving, and the US would continue to help Islamabad in dealing with this challenge. "It's a common threat, a common challenge that we all have to continue to work on together and to look for ways to improve that cooperation," Kirby added. (Monitoring Desk)

Powers Left With No Excuse to Avoid Deal with Iran: Nuclear Chief

TEHRAN - Iran's nuclear chief said Tehran has done its utmost efforts to bring maximum transparency to its nuclear program and remove the alleged concerns of the Western states, stressing that the world powers have been left with no more excuse to avoid a final agreement with Iran. "I assess the negotiations as to be positive and the other side has been left with no other option, but interaction with Iran and we have taken all excuses from them in technical aspects," Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Ali Akbar Salehi said on Friday. He explained that when the Group 5+1 (the

US, Russia, China, Britain and France plus Germany) raised concerns about Arak heavy water reactor in Central Iran, the country announced its readiness to redesign the reactor to decrease the annual plutonium production at the facility from 10 kg to 1kg. Salehi said in other areas of nuclear work like enrichment too Iran has removed the powers' concerns to make a win-win deal possible. "But if they (the powers) want to withdraw from this trend, it will be them who will be the loser in the eyes of the world public opinion," Salehi said. (FNA)

Chinese Bank Predicts 7.2-Percent Growth in 2015

BEIJING - China's Bank of Communications (BOCOM) has predicted 7.2-percent growth for the country's economy in 2015, according to the bank's new outlook report. The report said uncertainties in the domestic and global situation will continue affecting China's economy and result in more exports, less investment and stable consumption. Moderate economic recovery in the United States will help strengthen China's 2015 exports with faster expansion of about 7 percent. It said the surplus in commodity and service trade will hit 420 billion U.S. dollars and 195 billion U.S. dollars, respectively, while the actually utilized foreign capital will stand at 125 billion U.S. dollars. Fixed investment will see slower growth of 14 percent because of overcapacity and stricter supervision of local debt and financing. New consumption

patterns and a booming capital market will ensure a stable growth rate of about 11.8 percent in total retail sales volume by the end of this year. The bank estimated 13.5-percent growth in new loans year on year to 11 trillion yuan (1.79 trillion U.S. dollars), and the capital market will see total social financing of 3.6 trillion yuan through bonds and stocks. BOCOM forecast that China's 2015 GDP growth will slow to around 7.2 percent, but remained cautiously optimistic about development, noting that deepening reforms will improve economic efficiency and bring benefits. The report also predicted that the country's consumer prices will not face sharp surges amid prudent monetary policy, but weak domestic demand and overcapacity will continue to drag down the growth of producer prices. (Xinhua)

Turkmen President Fires Central Bank and Gas Heads

ASHGABAT - Turkmenistan's president has fired the heads of the country's central bank and its natural gas company in the wake of economic troubles that brought the country's currency down 18.5 percent this year. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov's orders at a Cabinet session Saturday were reported by the tightly controlled Central Asian country's state media. The authoritarian leader said "difficult financial and economic cir-

cumstances in certain countries directly affect Turkmenistan." That appeared to be a reference to Russia, where the ruble has lost about 45 percent of its value under pressure from falling oil prices and Western sanctions. Berdimukhamedov ordered the new head of the national gas company to increase exports, which are Turkmenistan's key source of revenue. Turkmenistan on Jan. 1 devalued the manat from 2.85 to the dollar to 3.5. (AP)

UN to Host Libya Peace Talks in Geneva Next Week

TRIPOLI - The United Nations announced Saturday a new round of peace talks between Libya's warring factions in Geneva next week, as the European Union warned the country was at a "crucial juncture". "This dialogue is an important opportunity for the Libyans to restore stability and prevent the country's slide towards deeper conflict and economic collapse that should not be missed," the UN mission in Libya said in a statement. The announcement came after UN envoy Bernardino Leon met with rival camps and urged them to resume peace talks "before it is too late". Leon has proposed a freeze in military operations for a few days "in

order to create a conducive environment for the dialogue," according to the UN statement. It said the talks were aimed at reaching an agreement on the formation of a unity government and to create "a stable environment" for the adoption of a new permanent constitution. "Discussions will also seek to put in place the necessary security arrangements in order to bring an end to the armed hostilities raging in different parts of the country," it added. It did not give a specific date for the talks. The announcement came after Leon on Thursday held talks for the first time with General Khalifa Haftar, who is spearheading a govern-



ment-backed offensive to recapture the second city of Benghazi from mainly Islamist militia. Leon also met with representatives of Libya's internationally recognised government, which has taken refuge in the remote east, and with rival officials in the militia-held capital Tripoli. More than three years after dictator Moamer Kadhafi was toppled and killed in a Western-backed revolt, the North

African nation is engulfed in chaos with rival governments and parliaments as well as powerful militias fighting for territory. The Islamic State (IS) group that has seized large areas in Iraq and Syria is also thought to have gained a foothold in eastern Libya. The European Union said the Geneva meeting "represents a last chance which must be seized". (AFP)

US-Led Air Strikes Focus on Kobani, Syria: U.S. Military

WASHINGTON - American-led forces launched 12 air strikes against Islamic State militants in Syria since Friday, all but one of them near the contested city of Kobani, the U.S. military said. The strikes near Kobani hit two large Islamic State units and destroyed 15 of its fighting positions, the Combined Joint Task Force said in a statement Saturday. They also destroyed an Islamic State building and one tactical unit, it said. Another strike in Syria, near al Hasakah, destroyed two Islamic State guard facilities, the statement said. U.S. and partner nations also launched three air strikes in Iraq, striking an Islamic State-controlled

bridge near Erbil, destroying two militant vehicles near Ramadi and two Islamic State fighting positions near Mosul, it said. (Reuters)

Indonesia Fails to Confirm Pings, Lift Tail of Crashed Airasia Jet

JAKARTA - Underwater signals detected by Indonesian rescuers was not confirmed in the efforts to find the black boxes of the ill-fated AirAsia flight QZ8501, while efforts to raise the tail failed due to bad weather on Friday. Indonesia Military Commander General Moeldoko said on Friday morning that pings that possibly emitted from the black boxes of the plane, which crashed on Dec. 28 en route from Indonesia's Surabaya to Singapore with 162 people on board, were detected some 300 meters from the location

of tail. Sonar and divers located the tail, where the boxes are usually housed, in the secondary search area 34 meters under the sea. The boxes, which are crucial to determining the cause of the jet crash, can still send signals for two weeks before the battery goes dead. However, Chief of Indonesia's National Search and Rescue Agency (Basarnas) Bambang Soelistyo was unable to confirm that the signals were indeed emitted from the black boxes of the crashed plane. "If any signals were indeed caught, then we need spe-

cial equipment to confirm the finding," Soelistyo told a press conference on Friday. Indonesian rescuers have been struggling to salvage the tail Friday in hope of retrieving the boxes, but bad weather and strong current hindered the effort. "The efforts are yet to succeed due to strong undersea stream and low visibility," Director of Operation and Training of BASARNAS SB Supriyadi told Xinhua, adding that his team will continue trying to use a crane or a floating balloon to pluck the wreckage from the seabed. (Xinhua)

Kerry, Headed to India, Visit Oman's Ailing Ruler in Germany



MUNICH - U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has gone to Germany to see the ailing ruler of Oman, the Mideast country that's served an important intermediary role in negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Kerry is traveling to India for an international conference, but stopped in Munich to visit with Sultan Qaboos bin Said on Saturday. The 74-year-old sultan

has been receiving medical treatment in Germany since November. U.S. officials said the meeting probably would cover several topics, including the Iran talks. They're set to resume next week in Geneva, Switzerland. Oman hosted several secret meetings between U.S. and Iranian officials in the months leading up to an interim nuclear deal in November 2013. (AP)