

Foreign Ministers Gather in Berlin to Seek Ukraine Progress

BERLIN - Germany's foreign minister is hosting his counterparts from Russia, Ukraine and France to try to calm the Ukrainian crisis and perhaps clear the way for a summit of the countries' leaders.

The Berlin meeting on Monday evening follows a flurry of diplomacy including a brief weekend encounter in Paris between the German, French and Ukrainian leaders.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel also has spoken by phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin and met the president of Kazakhstan, the possible host of a four-

way summit on Ukraine. Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier are pushing for progress on implementing a much-violated peace deal that was drawn up in September. Berlin says a substantial narrowing of differences between Ukraine and Russia is needed for a summit to take place.

The Kremlin also said Monday that prospects for the meeting depend on the outcome of the talks in Berlin.

The two sides have remained wide apart on major conditions of a peace deal. Ukraine and the rebels have failed to agree on a line of di-



vision, and fighting in eastern Ukraine between the government and pro-Russian rebels has escalated in recent days. Speaking in Moscow on

Monday before heading for Berlin, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sternly warned Ukraine against trying to crush the pro-Russian

rebellion by force. He said that Russia expects the West to use its influence with Kiev to discourage it from launching another offen-

sive, adding that "it will be a catastrophe."

The pro-Russian rebellion flared up in Ukraine's mostly Russian-speaking eastern regions following Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in March. More than 4,700 people have died in fighting in the east since April, according to the United Nations.

Lavrov reaffirmed that the rebel-controlled territories should remain part of Ukraine, but stressed that the government in Kiev must implement a constitutional reform that would expand the powers of the regions. (AP)

Ukraine's Yanukovich Now Wanted Person: Interpol

KIEV - Interpol has put ousted Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich on the international wanted list on Ukrainian charges of embezzlement and financial wrongdoing, according to a notice on the international police organization's website on Monday.

Ukrainian authorities said Interpol's publication of a so-called red notice against the 64-year-old Yanukovich, who has been living in Russia since being ousted by street protests almost a year ago, empowered any police force to hand him over to Ukraine if he was detained.

"Today, several months after Ukraine sent a request to Interpol in March 2014 with the arguments and explanations prepared by the

Interior Ministry, the Prosecutor General's Office and the Security Service of Ukraine, an Interpol special commission has come to a decision," Interior Minister Arsen Avakov wrote on his Facebook page.

Yanukovich fled across the border into Russia in February last year after months of street protests in Kiev against his decision to back away from a deal that would take Ukraine towards integration with Europe and tighten economic ties with Russia, Ukraine's old Soviet master.

The pro-western authorities who took over have accused him and a coterie of relatives and close allies known as The Family, of accumulating huge wealth by robbing state coffers and plun-



dering national assets through corrupt deals. Yanukovich has denied that he or members of his family were involved in corruption schemes. After he fled, Russia said Yanukovich had been the victim of a "fascist" coup and went on to annex Ukraine's Crimean pen-

insula. In an intensifying confrontation with Kiev's pro-Western leadership, it has supported separatists in Ukraine's industrialized east in a conflict in which more than 4,700 people have been killed, though Moscow denies its forces have been involved in fighting. (Reuters)

German Intel Chief Urges Turkey to Prevent Extremist Travel

BERLIN - Germany's domestic intelligence chief on Monday urged Turkey to do more to prevent extremists crossing into Syria to join the Islamic State group and other terrorist organizations.

Authorities say that at least 550 people from Germany have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join extremist groups, along with more from several other European countries. Hans-Georg Maassen, the head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency, said Turkey is a "key country" because well over 90 percent of the radicals traveled via Turkey.

While efforts to stop extremists crossing into Syria are partially successful, the number that have arrived remains too high - "so it is all the more necessary that the Turks take further measures," Maassen told ARD television. Turkey says the common-law wife of one of last week's attackers in France arrived in Turkey on Jan. 2

and crossed into Syria on Thursday, the day after the massacre at the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo. Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, speaking after meeting German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin,



later Monday rejected any suggestion that Turkey is doing too little against terrorism. He pointed to the large number of foreigners who travel to Turkey, a popular tourist destination, and said that "we evaluate every tip that

we get and our intelligence services work together." Turkey has issued entry bans against 7,000 people and sent between 1,500 and 2,000 back to their home countries, including people from France and Germany, he said. (AP)

1,400 from France Have Joined Jihadis or 'Want to Go to Syria or Iraq'

PARIS - Some 1,400 people living in France have either joined the jihadist cause in Syria and Iraq or are planning to do so, Prime Minister Manuel Valls said Monday.

"There are 1,400 individuals who are involved in the departures for jihad, for terrorism, in Syria and in Iraq," Valls told BFMTV.

"There are close to 70 French citizens or residents in France who have died in Syria and Iraq in the ranks of the terrorists," he added. The latest government figures were a big jump from data in mid-December, when 1,200 people were said to have left or are seeking to leave to battle alongside jihadists. "It is a massive jump in very little time: there were just about 30 cases when I became interior minister (in mid-2012),

and 1,400 today," said Valls.

The two gunmen who slaughtered 12 people at satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, Cherif Kouachi and his brother Said, were likely among those who had left the country to "be trained to kill and to sow terror". The third gunman, Amedy Coulibaly, who stormed a kosher supermarket on Friday, never left for such training, said Valls.

"He was not on the intelligence services' radar," added the prime minister.

French authorities said in December that they have dismantled about a dozen networks that were sending people to fight in Iraq and Syria. France, along with Belgium, has seen the largest numbers of volunteers leaving to join the



Islamic State jihadist group, which has seized large parts of Syria and Iraq. (AFP)

Iraq Car Bomb Explosion Kills 12

BAGHDAD - At least 12 people have been killed in a car bomb explosion targeting Shia volunteers in a town north of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad, authorities say.

The attack took place in the town of Abasiyat, south of Tikrit, on Monday after a bomber rammed his explosive-laden car into a gathering of soldiers and Shia fighters. According

to police and hospital officials, the attack killed 10 militiamen and two soldiers, while wounding 18 others. Immediately after the blast, clashes erupted between Iraqi security forces and ISIL Takfiri militants, police said. No group has claimed responsibility for the bombing, but such incidents are often claimed by ISIL Takfiri terrorists. (Press TV)

Islamic State Hit with 27 Air Strikes: U.S. Military

WASHINGTON - The United States and its allies targeted Islamic State forces in 27 air strikes in Iraq and Syria in a 24-hour period, the Combined Joint Task Force said on Monday.

In Syria, the air raids, which ran from Sunday morning to Monday morning, hit Islamic State units and destroyed fighting positions and buildings near the city of

Kobani while a strike near Dawr az Zawr hit an oil refinery and another near Abu Kamal destroyed an excavator, a task force statement said.

Sixteen strikes in Iraq destroyed fighting positions, vehicles, an artillery system, a rocket launcher and buildings. The targets were near the cities of Baiji, Taji, Al Qaim, Ramadi, Tal Afar, Al Asad, Sinjar and Mosul. (Reuters)

France on Highest Alert After Paris Shootings: PM

PARIS - France's national security alert system "Vigipirat" has been set at the highest level against possible terror attacks since last week's shooting spree in Paris, said French Prime Minister Manuel Valls on Monday.

Noting that terror threats still pose risks to the country's security, Valls said additional thousands of policemen and military servicemen will be deployed to reinforce security units to "an ever reached level" of around 8,500 troops after the three attacks which left 20 people dead in the French capital. The government has pledged "to do anything" to ensure public security, mainly in religious centers, after several mosques were attacked following the deadly shootings at a satirical magazine staff and

a policewoman and in a Jewish supermarket, said the prime minister.

On Monday morning, French Defense Minister Le Drian said that from Tuesday as many as 10,000 soldiers will be deployed to ensure security at "sensitive places" throughout the country. In an interview with the news channel BFMTV, Valls said Hayat Boumeddiene -- the female accomplice of Amedy Coulibaly who killed the policewoman and four hostages in Paris -- "was probably in Turkey or Syria," and that the pursuit of her "will go on."

Media reports say Boumeddiene arrived in Turkey from Madrid on Jan. 2, stayed at a hotel in Istanbul and went to Syria on Jan. 8. She had a return ticket for Istanbul and Madrid, but did not use it. (Xinhua)

Cuba Has Freed All 53 Prisoners As Agreed in U.S. Deal: U.S. Officials

WASHINGTON/HAVANA - Cuba has released all 53 prisoners it had promised to free, senior U.S. officials said, a major step toward détente with Washington.

The release of the remaining prisoners sets a positive tone for historic talks next week aimed at normalizing relations after decades of hostility, the officials said.

They described the Cuban government's release over the weekend of the last detainees on the list as a milestone but said they would keep pressing Havana to free more people the United States considers political prisoners. The officials, speaking to Reuters on condition of anonymity, did not say how many prisoners were released over the weekend or identify them. But the White House will provide the names of all 53 to Congress and expects lawmakers to make them public, the officials added.

There had been questions over whether Havana would release all 53 prisoners as part of the

deal Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro announced on Dec. 17 to restore diplomatic ties that Washington severed more than 50 years ago.

Intense secrecy surrounding the 53, whose names have been withheld by both countries, had fueled skepticism over Cuba's intentions and played to critics who said Washington hasn't pressured Havana enough on human rights in exchange for normalizing ties and loosening economic and travel restrictions. The U.S. exchanged three convicted Cuban spies for an agent who had spied for the U.S. government. The United States also received Alan Gross, a U.S. aid worker jailed in Cuba. The Cuban government informed the Obama administration over the weekend that the last of those on the list of prisoners had been released, and the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, which handles consular affairs and other contacts for Washington, confirmed it, the officials said. (Reuters)

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Iran Demands Russia to Play More Active Role in N. Talks



TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in a meeting with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and senior negotiator in the talks between Tehran and the world powers Sergei Ryabkov called for Moscow's more active role in the nuclear negotiations.

During the meeting in Tehran on Monday, Zarif presented an analysis of the latest developments in the nuclear talks with the Group 5+1 (the US, Russia, China, Britain and France plus Germany), and said Moscow's more active role will help accelerate a final settlement of the issue and attainment of a comprehensive solution.

He also underlined Iran and Russia's high capaci-

ties and capabilities, and called for more efforts to further deepen the bilateral relations in different fields.

Ryabkov, for his part, stressed Russia's readiness for more effective regional and international cooperation with Iran, and said, "The friendly and close relations between Moscow and Tehran necessitate utilization of capacities and assistance to a faster settlement of Iran's nuclear issue."

In relevant remarks last month, Ryabkov said the progressive trend of the nuclear talks between Iran and the G5+1 in the last rounds was so promising that reaching a permanent deal seemed to be possible within the next 4-5 months. (FNA)

John Kerry Visits Pakistan

ISLAMABAD - U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Monday arrived in Islamabad on an unannounced two-day official visit to Pakistan in which he will meet Pakistan's political and military leadership and will discuss bilateral relations and the regional security situation, local media reported.

Senior officials from the Pakistani government and a senior official from the U.S. desk of the Foreign Office along with senior protocol officers and senior U.S. embassy diplomats in Islamabad received Senator Kerry when he arrived after completing his visit to India.

Kerry will meet Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif later in the evening at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad.

On Tuesday, Kerry will lead a U.S. delegation at the Foreign Ministry of Pakistan in Islamabad for

the Pakistan-U.S. strategic dialogue. After the dialogue, he will meet Pakistan Army Chief General Raheel Sharif at the General Headquarters of Pakistan army in garrison city of Rawalpindi to discuss security and defense cooperation between the two countries, the reports said.

Earlier on Thursday, Pakistan's foreign ministry said Pakistan and United States will discuss all aspects of their bilateral relations, regional and international situation during the forthcoming Pak-U.S. Strategic Dialogue process.

"The visit of John Kerry to Pakistan for the strategic dialogue process will open new avenues of cooperation between the two countries," the foreign ministry statement said.

The last session of the dialogue was held in Washington in January last year. (Xinhua)

China Hopes for Early Resolution of Ukraine Crisis

BEIJING - China hopes for an early political resolution of the Ukraine crisis, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said Monday.

Hong told a regular press briefing that China welcomes and supports the active efforts of all relevant parties in seeking political resolution of the Ukraine crisis, including intermediation mechanisms such as the Normandy dialogue and the Minsk agreements.

The foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France will meet in Berlin on Monday to prepare for a leaders' gathering on Ukraine set for Jan. 15 in Astana,

the capital of Kazakhstan. Representatives of the four countries have participated in the Normandy dialogue, an international intermediation framework for the Ukraine crisis.

"China hopes that relevant parties will reach a comprehensive, balanced and sustained political resolution at the earliest possible date," Hong said, adding that the resolution should take care of each party's interests and concerns.

Hong said China hopes for an early realization of peace, security, stability and development in Ukraine and the region as a whole. (Xinhua)

33,500 Ha of Arable Lands Left Out of Agricultural Circulation

DUSHANBE - More than 33,500 hectares of lands were left out of the agricultural circulation last year in Tajikistan, which was 17.9 hectares more than in 2013, Mahmadohir Zokirov, the Tajikistan's head of the State Committee on Land Management and Geodesy, told journalists in Dushanbe on January 12. According to him, one of the main reasons for

that was improper organization of agricultural works.

"In 2014, 24,000 hectares of arable lands were left out of the agricultural circulation in Sughd province, 8,100 hectares in Khatlon province and 1,500 hectares in the districts subordinate to the center," the head of the State Committee on Land Management and Geodesy noted. (Asia-Plus)