

Different Experiences of Trump's Cabinet Nominees at Senate Hearings

WASHINGTON - In Thursday's confirmation hearings, President-elect Donald Trump's cabinet nominees had very different treatments, from James Mattis' easy sailing to Ben Carson's tough grilling. The Senate Armed Services Committee voted 24-3 to approve Mattis' nomination, moving the vote onto the Senate floor. The committee also easily passed a waiver exempting Mattis from a law that requires a defense secretary to be retired from service for at least seven years. Mattis took a clear anti-Russia stance during the hearing, naming the country as "principle threat" to U.S.



security. The stance differs notably from Trump's, who had expressed on multiple occasions the willingness to mend fences with Moscow. "I have very modest expectations about areas of cooperation with Mr. Putin," Mattis said, referring to the Russian president. He also said the United States should check Russia's growing influence in the Arctic region. The stance was well received by members of both parties on the committee, as recent allegations of Russian hacking have sparked particularly strong anti-Russian sentiments among U.S. lawmakers. (Xinhua)

Migrants, Refugees Face Harsh Winter Conditions in SE Europe: UNHCR



GENEVA - Thousands of migrants and refugees in Greece and Serbia are facing high risks as extreme weather conditions continue to affect large swaths of south eastern Europe, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) warned Friday. "We are deeply worried at the situation of some 1,000 people, including families with young children, who continue to live under unheated tents and dormitories in Samos," UNHCR spokesperson Cecile Pouilly told reporters. "We are concerned at the situation of some 1,200 males who still stay rough in inadequate informal cities in Belgrade city center, including up to 300 unaccompanied or separated boys," she added. The UN agency said reports indicating that a number of refugees and migrants have already lost their lives trying to enter or move across Europe were "extremely concerning."

According to media reports, 5 individuals have died since the beginning of the year due to plummeting temperatures. In light of extreme conditions, UNHCR said that it has stepped up assistance in Greece, where hundreds of people have been transferred to better lodgings on the islands of Lesbos and Chios over the last few days. In Serbia, the agency said that 82 percent of the 7,300 refugees, asylum-seeker and migrants are now able to stay in heated shelters provided by the government. Heaters, blankets and winter clothes have also been distributed "as a life saving measure." "We urge the authorities to continue their efforts to expand emergency shelter capacities, with particular consideration to the specific needs of unaccompanied children," Pouilly said. (Xinhua)

Major Syrian Opposition Groups Likely to Attend Talks in Kazakhstan: Report

MOSCOW - Major Syrian opposition groups, including the largest one, the High Negotiations Committee (HNC), are likely to attend the upcoming talks on the Syrian settlement in Astana, Kazakhstan, Russian media reported Friday. "We are in touch with the political opposition. With all of them, including the HNC," Mahmoud Afandi, member of the Syrian opposition delegation and secretary of the Syrian Popular Diplomacy Movement, was quoted

as saying by the RIA-Novosti News agency. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, a Syrian opposition delegation arrived in Moscow on Tuesday to discuss the Russia-Turkey brokered talks between warring sides in the Middle East country. Mustafa Sheikh, the delegation leader, said that the opposition members could meet Syrian gov-



ernment representatives in Kazakhstan's capital of Astana. "There will be military personnel at the meeting, let the military

Erdogan Urges Respect to People's Decision on Reform Package

ISTANBUL - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Friday that an early election would be considered if the parliament that is debating on a presidential system proves unable to perform its duty. "We never consider early election would ever be appropriate," the president told reporters following Friday prayers in Istanbul. "But if they make the parliament dysfunctional, it wouldn't be something out of the question." Turkish lawmakers have approved eight articles

out of an 18-article constitutional reform package granting extensive powers to the presidency amid a fierce brawl in parliament, in which several deputies were injured. Erdogan urged the lawmakers to speak out their thoughts in a democratic way, saying he believes the debate would be completed this week. "Whatever our people will decide, we will ap-



prove and respect this decision", he added. Both the ruling Justice and Development Party and the opposition Nationalist Movement Party said they endorse an early election... (More on P4)... (28)

Incoming U.S. Administration to Enhance Ties with Asia-Pacific: Kerry

HANOI - Visiting U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said on Friday that he believed the incoming U.S. administration will continue to enhance ties with the Asia-Pacific. Kerry made the remark at talks with Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son in Vietnam's capital Hanoi, reported the state-run news agency VNA. The top U.S. diplomat said his country will support Vietnam in successfully hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings this year. The United States is also willing to support Viet-



nam in response to climate change, especially in clean energy development, he said. Authorized by Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh at the talks, Son urged Wash-

ington to recognize the market economy status for Hanoi and continue to prioritize cooperation in overcoming war consequences among others. Kerry is visiting Vietnam from Thursday to Saturday. (Xinhua)

Syrian Troops Capture Rebel-Held Village near Damascus

BEIRUT - The Syrian army and an opposition activist group say government forces have captured a village near the capital Damascus that has witnessed intense clashes for weeks. The Syrian army's Military Media says troops are now in full control of Basima after gunmen fled to two nearby villages in the Barada Valley region. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said troops backed by Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters captured Basima on Friday after heavy airstrikes and artillery shelling. Syrian troops have been on the offensive in the Barada Valley region since Dec. 22, leading to major water cuts in Damascus. The Barada Valley is the capital's main water source. The fighting has been ongoing in the Barada Valley region despite a ceasefire brokered by Russia and Turkey on Dec. 30. (AP)

Iraqi Forces Enter Mosul University in Battling IS for City



MOSUL, Iraq - Iraqi special forces entered Mosul University on Friday in their latest advance along the eastern front as they battle Islamic State militants for control of the city, according to senior Iraqi officers. The troops entered the university grounds in the morning hours and by afternoon, they had taken control of a neighborhood on the northeastern edge of the university compound and the technical institute within the campus, according to special forces Brig. Gen. Haider Fadhil and Maj. Gen. Sami al-Aridi. "We broke through the terrorists' defenses and we destroyed their lines and their units and their bases," said al-Aridi, who was overseeing the assault Friday. The university is located in the eastern section of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city which is divided by the Tigris River into roughly an eastern and a western half. Sgt. Saad Jabar said that over the past two years since IS seized Mosul in a 2014 blitz that captured much of northern and western Iraq, the militants have had time to prepare for an assault by Iraqi forces, building tunnels and getaways across the city, including on the university grounds. "They had reinforced their positions and had plans. They knew where to come in and where to get out," Jabar said. (AP)

Germany Invites Russian Minister on EU Sanctions List to G20 Meeting

BERLIN/MOSCOW - Russian Agriculture Minister Alexander Tkachev, who is on a European Union list of Russians banned from entering the bloc, will next week attend a meeting in Berlin with his G20 counterparts at Germany's invitation. European Union leaders last July extended economic sanctions against Russia first imposed in 2014 after it annexed

Crimea and went on to support a separatist rebellion in eastern Ukraine. The EU last year also extended travel bans and asset freezes covering about 150 people and 37 entities, including Tkachev. A spokeswoman for the German ministry of agriculture played down the significance of the invitation by Germany, which in January 2015 refused to issue an entry visa to Tkachev.

"Invitations were sent to all G20 members and Russia is a G20 member," Christina Wendt told a regular government news conference in Berlin on Friday. The Russian agriculture ministry confirmed in a statement on Friday that Tkachev will attend the Jan. 22 meeting. It said Tkachev would hold bilateral meetings with G20 counterparts. It provided no further details. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Pak Adviser & SAPM Sign Condolence Book at UAE Embassy

ISLAMABAD - The Adviser to the Pakistani Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Mr. Sartaj Aziz, and the Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Syed Tariq Fatemi, visited the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Islamabad on Friday to express condolences on the martyrdom of five Emirati diplomats in a bomb attack in Kandahar, Afghanistan. The Ambassador of the UAE in Afghanistan was also injured in the attack. The Adviser and the SAPM signed the condolence book placed in the Embassy. While strongly condemning the terrorist attack, they noted that the Government and people of Pakistan have been deeply saddened over the tragic incident.

Sadly, diplomats of a friendly country have been targeted while they were on a humanitarian mission for the benefit of common people. While offering their condolences and prayers for the Maghfirah of the departed souls, they also prayed for the early recovery of Juma Mohammad Abdullah Al Kaabi. They also prayed to Almighty Allah for grant of solace to the bereaved families. Pakistan stands shoulder to shoulder with the leadership and people of the United Arab Emirates in this hour of grief. The UAE has remained at the forefront of humanitarian assistance in the world. Pakistan considers an attack on those seeking to alleviate human suffering... (More on P4)... (29)

Closer Tehran-Ankara Cooperation Secures Middle East Peace, Stability: Rouhani

TEHRAN - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (L) holds talks with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the Turkish capital Ankara on April 16, 2016. (Photo by Anadolu news agency) Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has underlined the need for promotion of cooperation between his country and neighboring Turkey. During a telephone conversation with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Thursday, Rouhani stated that the Islamic Republic of Iran is content with closer cooperation among Ankara, Tehran and Moscow to bring about peace in the region. He expressed satisfaction over the Syrian ceasefire agreement

brokered by Russia and Turkey, stressing that all should endeavor for the truce to withstand. The Iranian president also pointed to the forthcoming negotiations between representatives from the Damascus government and foreign-sponsored opposition groups in the Kazakh capital city of Astana on January 23, saying, "We are all determined to fight all terrorist groups in the region. I hope relative stability prevails in Syria and the region through cooperation between Iran and Turkey." Rouhani then described terrorist groups as the common enemies of regional states and nations, and expressed "hope for the further expansion of bilateral relations and the resolution of major regional issues through mutual cooperation." (Presstv)

Turkmenistan Plans to Launch Second Satellite into Space

ASHGABAT - Turkmenistan has finalized the preparation of the technical assignment for the creation of the next (second) national satellite, the functions of which will include Earth remote sensing, Turkmenistan State News Agency said in a message. TurkmenAlem 52E, Turkmenistan's first telecommunications satellite, was launched Apr. 28, 2015, from Cape Canaveral (Florida, US). It was

brought to the space by Falcon 9 v1.1 carrier rocket. The satellite entered its orbital position on May 17. After the successful completion of all the tests, TurkmenAlem 52E was officially handed over by Thales Alenia Space contractor to Turkmenistan for operation. The satellite has three antennas covering dozens of countries in Europe and Asia, as well as the Middle East and North Africa. (Trend)

Human Rights Situation Deteriorated Sharply in Tajikistan: HRW

DUSHANBEH - Tajikistan's human rights situation deteriorated sharply in 2016, as authorities sentenced the leadership of the country's main opposition party to lengthy prison terms, imprisoned human rights lawyers and other perceived government critics, and predetermined the result of a constitutional referendum that will allow authoritarian President Emomali Rahmon to remain president for life, reports the Human Rights Watch. Authorities organized and led numerous acts of retaliation, including incidents of mob violence,

against relatives of government critics abroad. Activists reported cases of torture and deaths in custody of persons imprisoned on politically motivated charges. The government continued its multi-year campaign to enforce severe restrictions on religious practice. While the government took steps to enforce a 2013 law on the prevention of domestic violence, activists and service providers report that implementation of the law's core legal protections, including prosecutions of those who repeatedly engage in domestic violence, are lacking. (AKI)