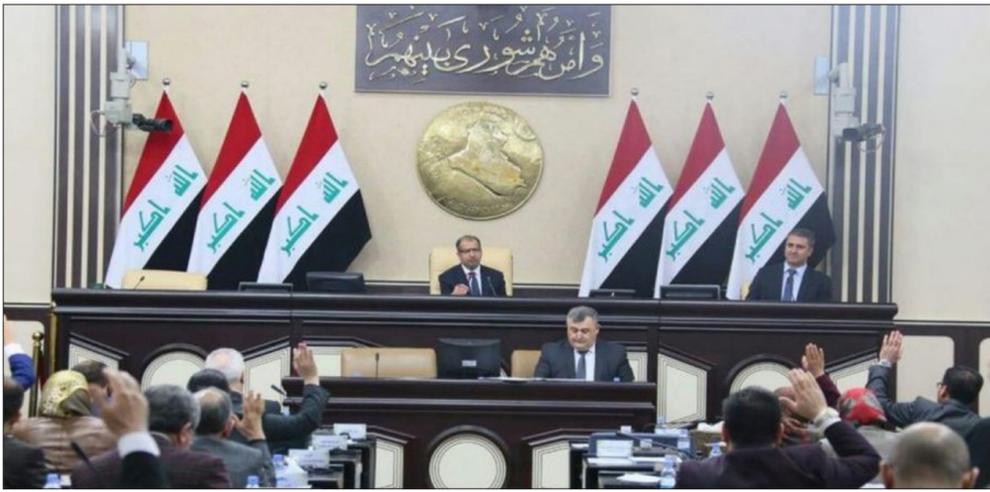


Iraqi Parliament Approves Date for General Elections

BAGHDAD - The Iraqi parliament Monday approved the general elections to be held on May 12, the official television reported.

The decision came after Iraq's federal court ruled that it is not possible for the elections to be delayed.

"The Council of Representatives (the parliament) has voted unanimously to hold the elections on May 12 as set before by the Council of Ministers (the cabinet) and the electoral commission," the state-run Iraqiya channel quoted Abbas al-Baiyati, a lawmaker from the Iraqi National Alliance, as saying. Iraq's previous general election was held on April 30, 2014, when the Iraqis elected 328 lawmakers for the parliament, which in turn elected Abadi to form an inclusive government from the Shiite alliance, Kurds and Sunnis. (Xinhua)



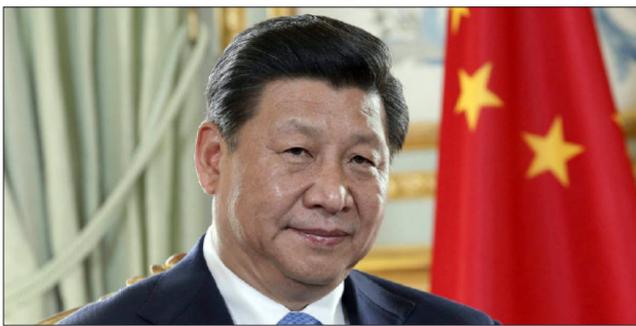
U.S. Embassy in Israel to Move to Jerusalem by End of 2019: Pence

JERUSALEM - The U.S. Embassy in Israel will move to Jerusalem by the end of 2019, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said in a speech to the Israeli parliament on Monday that highlighted a policy shift that has stoked Palestinian anger and international concern. President Donald Trump last month recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and said he would move the U.S. Embassy there - dismaying Palestinians who claim the eastern part of the city and angering Arab states across the region. "In the weeks ahead, our administration

will advance its plan to open the United States Embassy in Jerusalem - and that United States Embassy will open before the end of next year," Pence said. The speech was briefly disrupted, at the outset, by Israeli Arab parliament members who held up protest signs in Arabic and English, reading "Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine", and were ejected by ushers. Pence responded to the fracas by saying with a smile: "It is deeply humbling for me to stand before this vibrant democracy." (Reuters)

BEIJING - President Xi Jinping said Monday that China's private sector has played an important role in bolstering economic growth, promoting innovation, creating jobs, and improving people's well-being over the past four decades. He made the remarks in a congratulatory letter to the fifth national congress of self-employed individuals. China's private sector has witnessed a boom in growth since the policy of reform and opening up was implemented 40 years ago and has become an important part of

Private Sector Significant to Economic Growth: Xi



the economy. At the end of 2017, there were 65.79 million individually-owned businesses and more than 27.26 million private en-

terprises, which employed 341 million people. Private enterprises and the individually-owned businesses should carry forward entrepreneurship, stick to the real economy, and carry out high-quality development, Xi said. (Xinhua)

U.S. Senate to Vote Monday on Bill to End Gov't Shutdown



WASHINGTON - The U.S. Senate will vote on a bill to end the federal government shutdown on Monday, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell

said Sunday night. McConnell said the Senate will vote on a bill to reopen the government through Feb. 8 at noon Monday, canceling a

planned vote at 1 a.m. EST (0600 GMT) Monday. If the government is open, "it would be my intention to proceed to legislation that would address DACA, border security, and related issues," McConnell said on the Senate floor, referring to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that prevents the deportation of young immigrants, a key demand of Democrats. "Importantly, when I proceed to the immigration debate, it will have an amendment process that is fair to all

sides," he said. But Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said on the Senate floor that "we have yet to reach an agreement" on reopening the government and immigration. It remains unclear whether the three-week stopgap spending bill has enough votes to pass the Senate. The effects of government shutdown will be more visible on Monday, when federal agencies and financial markets open, and thousands of non-essential federal employees are expected to be furloughed. (Xinhua)

Bulgaria, Czech Republic Calls for EU Reforms on Migrants

SOFIA, Bulgaria - The prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Bulgaria are calling for swift reform of the European Union's asylum system. Czech Premier Andrej Babis and Bulgarian counterpart Boyko Borissov agreed that a reasonable compromise on migrant issues has to be found in the EU. Babis told a news conference Monday in Bulgaria's capital that "the mandatory redistribution of migrants is unacceptable and divisive."

He said that the issue of migrant quotas should be resolved in a way acceptable for all EU member states. Borissov, whose country took up the rotating presidency of the European Council at the beginning of the year, insisted that asylum-seekers should enter the EU only through official border checkpoints. He also proposed safe areas for asylum-seekers to be set up outside the EU. (AP)

Britain's Pro-Brexit Party UKIP Passes No Confidence Vote in Leader

LONDON - The national executive committee of UKIP, the anti-EU party, agreed a vote of no confidence Sunday in its leader Henry Bolton.

Ahead of the vote Bolton said he would not quit the job even if the no confidence vote was passed. Bolton said in a round of Sunday media interviews the committee had no right to pass moral judgment on his private life.

He has faced calls to resign over a number of anti-racist remarks his former girlfriend posted on social media, including messages critical of Meghan Markle, bride-to-be of Queen Elizabeth's grandson, Prince Harry.

Last week Bolton ended the romantic relationship with girlfriend Jo Marney who texted messages saying Markle would taint the British Royal Family, though he has said he would support Marney rebuild her life.

UKIP, the United Kingdom Independence Party, was formed 30 years ago tasked with ending Britain's membership of the EU.

UKIP chairman Paul Oakden said Bolton was offered the opportunity to resign but said he had made it clear that he feels he is the right man to lead the party forward. Following a three-hour emergency meeting, called to discuss Bolton's future, the vote of no confidence in him was passed. There will now be a vote among the entire UKIP membership.

The executive committee does not have the power under UKIP rules to remove Bolton, only a vote of the party's membership can do that. (Xinhua)

Moscow Sees U.S. Anti-Russia Sanctions "Unpromising": Russian FM

MOSCOW - The sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States are groundless and will not affect Moscow's foreign policy, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Sunday. "We consider that the sanctions are imposed absolutely without any grounds as for the reasons behind them... Russia's honest, open and constructive policy cannot be changed by them," Lavrov said in an interview with a local newspaper. Lavrov's remarks are in response to the upcoming release of two reports

by the U.S. presidential administration, concerning backgrounds of high-ranking Russian officials and the feasibility of imposing new economic sanctions on Moscow. The minister said that Russia's foreign policy is based on the country's national interests and will not submit to foreign pressure. "The fact that our foreign policy enjoys a broad support in society is the best evidence that the attempt to change our foreign policy by putting pressure on our elites and certain companies is unpromising,"

he said. In August 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump signed into law a new package of sanctions against Russia. Unlike previous sanctions bills, the new legislation grants U.S. lawmakers power to block Trump from unilaterally lifting the sanctions. Washington's relationship with Moscow has been sour for some time, amid disagreements involving the war in Syria, the conflict in Ukraine and the Kremlin's alleged meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, among others. (Xinhua)

U.S. President Trump Forced into Making Anti-Russian Decisions: Russian FM

national political opponents, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Monday in an interview with local media. "Judging by the personal meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump in the White House, or his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Hamburg and their telephone conversations, I did not see Trump undermine his election campaign pledges to restore relations with Moscow," Russia's Tass news agency quoted Lavrov as saying. Lavrov also said that Washington

would gradually understand the incorrectness of its course toward Moscow, and he noticed that recently some members of the Congress and political circles in the United States, as well as diplomats, acknowledged quietly the absolute abnormality of such a situation and the need to improve it. U.S.-Russia ties have been sour for some time, amid disagreements involving the war in Syria, the conflict in Ukraine and the Kremlin's alleged meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, among others. (Xinhua)

German SPD Gives Greenlight to Formal Coalition Talks with Merkel

BONN - Delegates from Germany's center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) on Sunday voted in favor of formal coalition talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel-led Conservatives Union. Among over 600 delegates attending the special congress in Bonn, 362 voted "yes" to further coalition talks with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU), while a total of 279 voted against it.

The "yes" and "no" votes were so close that a recount was held, as the initial show of hands was too close to be called. The decision, which was made after confrontational and emotional debates among delegates, cleared the way to form a renewed Grand Coalition between the SPD and the Union, almost four months after the federal elections in which both of the two blocs suffered the worst turnovers since 1949.

"We are all relieved... I am glad that we have the mandate to conduct coalition talks," SPD chairman Martin Schulz told TV channel Phoenix after the vote, saying that his next task is to reunite the party. "Exploratory talks are not coalition results," said Schulz, who promised in the speech before the vote that although the SPD had achieved a lot in exploratory talks, they will further negotiate with the Union in a bid to make the party more visible. Merkel responded shortly after the result, saying she "welcomed" that the SPD cleared the way for formal coalition negotiations. (Xinhua)

Neighbor News

China Hopes U.S. Stops Distorting its Defense, Diplomacy

BEIJING - China on Monday expressed the hope that the United States will correctly view bilateral relations and stop distorting China's defense and diplomatic policies. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying made the remarks at a routine press briefing when asked to comment on the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) of the United States. According to reports unveiled Friday, the Pentagon believes competition from China and Russia is a greater risk to the United States than terrorism.

"As China continues its economic and military ascendance, assert-

ing power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future," said the report.

Hua said the report was full of Cold War thinking and obsolete notions of "zero-sum" games.

She said the report made fundamental mistakes by deliberately distorting China's national defense and foreign policy and overblowing the strategic competition among major powers. (Xinhua)

Tillerson Sees Progress in Fixing Iran Deal with Europeans

LONDON - U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said Monday that he sees progress in getting European support for tough new penalties against Iran that could prevent a U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

After meeting with British Prime Minister Theresa May, national security adviser Mark Sedwill and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, Tillerson said they had agreed to set up a working group of experts on fixing flaws in the landmark 2015 agreement that President Donald Trump has warned he will walk away from this spring unless fixes are made to his liking.

"I think there's a common view among the E3 that there are some areas

of the (nuclear deal) or some areas of Iran's behavior that should be addressed," Tillerson told reporters after talks with Johnson. The E3 are Britain, France and Germany, which are all parties to the deal. Tillerson specifically highlighted concerns about Iran's ballistic missile program, which is not covered by the nuclear deal, and provisions in the agreement that allow Iran to gradually resume advanced atomic work.

The working group will begin to meet as early as next week to discuss how to address the flaws "through some type of another side agreement perhaps or a mechanism that would address our concerns," Tillerson said. (AP)

PM Lays Wreath at Monument of Unsung Heroes of Democracy

ISLAMABAD - Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi laid a wreath at the monument of "unsung heroes of democracy" here at the Parliament House on Monday.

The prime minister was accompanied by Senate Chairman Mian Raza Rabbani, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq, Leader of the House in Senate Raja Zafarullah Khan and representatives from almost all the political parties on the occasion.

The wreath laying ceremony is reflective of the strong desire of the prime minister and the parliamentarians for a strong democracy and a pledge to protect and promote democratic traditions in the country. The gathering vowed to work for supremacy of the Constitution, rule of law and strengthening of

the democratic system. The monument, a brainchild of the Senate chairman, was inaugurated in March 2017. The mural constructed at the front lawn of the Parliament House was conceived and designed by artists from the Lok Virsa. The mural depicts struggle of the political workers, intellectuals, journalists, labourers, farmers, writers and people from all walks of life, who remained undeterred and proved to be the real "unsung heroes of democracy."

The event was attended among others by leader of the Jamat-i-Islami Sirajul Haq, Senate Deputy Chairman Maulana Ghafoor Haidri, Senator Nehal Hashmi and Maulana Tanvirul Haq. PM lays wreath at monument of unsung heroes of democracy. (Monitoring Desk)

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China Set to Mull Development of Road Transport

TASHKENT - Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and China will hold a tripartite meeting on the implementation of the agreement on the international road transport, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry reported.

The meeting will be held in Tashkent on Jan. 24-25. Before the trilateral meeting, there will be held bilateral Uzbek-Kyrgyz and Uzbek-Chinese meetings on international road transport issues. Delegations of the Ministry of Transport of the People's Republic of China, the Ministry of Trans-

port and Roads of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Uzbek Agency for Automobile and River Transport will participate in the meeting.

The agreement between the governments of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and China on international road transport was signed on February 19, 1998.

Currently, transportation between Uzbekistan and China is carried out mainly by rail through Kazakh-Chinese checkpoints, which entails significant costs and time lost. (Trend)