

India, France Finalizes Deal to Purchase 36 Rafale Fighter Jets

NEW DELHI - India and France Monday signed an MoU on purchase of Rafale fighter jets, a delayed multi-billion U.S. dollar arms deal between the two countries, said Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and visiting French President Francois Hollande here.

"We are very happy that we have formed an agreement for purchasing 36 Rafale aircraft with France," Modi said after meeting with Hollande, who is on a three-day visit here beginning on Sunday.

India and France had agreed upon the deal, the



biggest for India in decades in arms purchase, at the end of 2012, but the two sides failed to implement it due to price differences and terms of transfer of technology and production.

Speaking to press following meeting with the French president, Modi on Monday said only the financial details needed to be worked out very soon in finalizing the purchase of the fighter jets from France.

Under the deal, India would purchase 36 Rafale medium multi-role combat aircraft of French aerospace major Dassault, valued at around 8.8 billion U.S. dollars.

"Only financial aspect of the Rafale deal is left. The inter-governmental agreement has been finalized. It will be done soon," said Modi. (Xinhua)

Nieghbor News

Rouhani Flies to Europe, Mega Business Deals Readied

ROME/PARIS - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani flew to Italy on Monday at the start of his first official visit to Europe, looking to sign multi-billion dollar contracts to help to modernize Iran's economy after years of crippling financial sanctions.

Heading a 120-strong delegation of Iranian business leaders and ministers, Rouhani will spend two days in Rome before flying to France on Wednesday, hoping to burnish Tehran's international credentials at a time of turmoil across the Middle East. While diplomacy will

figure high on his agenda, trade ties are likely to dominate the headlines, with Iran announcing plans to buy more than 160 European planes, mainly from Airbus, on the eve of Rouhani's departure.

Officials in Rome said Italian companies were poised to sign deals worth up to 17 billion euros (\$18.4 billion) over the next two days, including in the energy and steel sectors. The deals will give a boost to Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who is struggling to revive Italy's underperforming economy. (Reuters)

U.S. Envoy to Israel Apologizes for Timing of Criticism on West Bank Policies

JERUSALEM - U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro apologized for the timing of his criticism of Israel's policies in the occupied territories in the West Bank on Monday, delivered a day after a stabbing attack killed a mother of six in a Jewish settlement. Shapiro, who spoke with Army Radio and Israel Radio on Monday morning, said he stood behind the message he delivered on Jan. 18 during a security-related conference in Tel Aviv. However, Shapiro stressed he

said in his speech that first and foremost, terrorism must end. "I emphasized in my speech that the first thing that needed to be done is to put an end to terrorism," he told Israel Radio, adding that Israel will not see Palestinians as potential peace partners as long as the lone-wolf stabbing, shooting and vehicular attacks, which claimed the lives of 24 Israelis since October, continues. More than 150 Palestinians were killed during this ... (More on P4)...(24)

Hollande Plays Down Terror Threat on France

NEW DELHI - French President Francois Hollande Monday played down terror threats on his country, saying France will not be deterred by any kinds of such threats.

"France will not be deterred by any kinds of terror threats," Hollande told the media.

The visiting French president was addressing the media at the iconic Rashtrapati Bhawan (Indian President's official residence) in Delhi, where he was accorded a ceremonial welcome. "I am honored to



be the chief guest at India's Republic Day function," Hollande said, after inspecting a guard of honor this morning. The French

president arrived in India Sunday on a three-day tour to be the chief guest at this country's Republic Day parade. His first stop

was Chandigarh, where he met Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and later jointly addressed business leaders. (Xinhua)

Syrian Army Advances in Strategic City in Southern Region

DAMASCUS - The Syrian army continues to advance in a strategic city in the southern province of Daraa, as part of the wide-scale offensive the government forces backed by allied troops have recently been achieving on several fronts.

A military source told Xinhua on Monday that the military forces stormed the key city of Sheikh Miskeen in the country's southern province of Daraa, capturing many buildings in

the central part of the city while dealing heavy blows to an array of jihadist groups there.

Amid the ongoing intense battles, many militants started withdrawing toward nearby rebel-held towns, mainly Ibt' and Nawa, the source said on condition of anonymity.

The 15th Brigade of the 5th Armored Division of the Syrian army backed by the National Defense Forces (NDF), a pro-government paramilitary force, as well as the 7th



Mechanized Division are leading the offensive against Sheikh Miskeen amid confirmations from military sources on ground that the city could be considered fallen. Backed by the Russian air cover, the army forces ... (More on P4)...(25)

EU Security Chiefs Brace for more Islamist Attacks

AMSTERDAM - Islamic State and other militants are very likely to attempt big new attacks in Europe following those in Paris, the EU's police agency said on Monday, echoing previous warnings by senior security officials.

The assessment was based on discussions concluded eight weeks ago by security agencies from EU states. The 8-page public report said further attacks could even take place quite soon.

The events in Paris "appear to indicate a shift toward a broader strategy of IS going global, of them specifi-

cally attacking France, but also the possibility of attacks against other member states of the EU in the near future", it said.

There was "every reason to expect" an attack, by Islamic State or "IS-inspired terrorists or another religiously inspired terrorist group". "This is in addition to the threat of lone actor attacks, which has not diminished," it said.

At a news conference to mark the launch of a new European Counter Terrorism Centre within Europol, based in The Hague, its ... (More on P4)...(26)

I Don't Believe in Extension, will Retire on Due Date: Gen. Raheel

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan's Director-General Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Lieutenant-General Asim Bajwa on Monday rubbished rumours regarding an extension in General Raheel Sharif's tenure as Chief of Army Staff, quoting the Army chief as saying he will "retire on the due date" in November this year.

Speculation had been rife regarding an extension in the COAS' term after former military ruler Musharraf called for an extension

in his tenure, warning against a change in the military leadership.

"What he is doing right now, it needs continuity and if there is any change in the leadership amidst this all, all good work which has been done so far would go to waste," Musharraf earlier said. Bajwa in a series of tweets quoted the Army Chief as saying, "Pakistan Army is a great institution. I don't believe in extension and will retire on the due date." (Agencies)

Russia Says it has no Plans to Set up Another Base in Syria

MOSCOW - The Russian military has no plans to set up another air base in Syria, the Defense Ministry said Monday. The ministry's statement followed media reports claiming that Russia could be preparing to create another base in Qamishli in north-eastern Syria near the border with Turkey. The ministry's spokesman, Maj.-Gen. Igor Konashenkov, said that the military has no intention to set up any additional air base in Qamishli or advance airfields in Syria. Russian warplanes have flown nearly 6,000 combat missions since Moscow launched its air campaign in Syria on Sept. 30. The Russian warplanes are based at Hemeimeem air base in Syria's coastal province of Latakia. Konashenkov emphasized that Russian warplanes based at Hemeimeem can reach any location in Syria in half an hour, so there is no need for any additional base. ... (More on P4)...(27)

British Gov't, Bill Gates Announce \$4.3 Bln to Fight Malaria

LONDON - British Chancellor George Osborne and Microsoft founder Bill Gates announced in Liverpool 3 billion pounds (4.27 billion U.S. dollars) in funding over the next five years for research and efforts to eliminate Malaria. The fund would be made up of 500 million pounds a year from Britain's overseas aid budget for the next five years, as well as 200 million U.S. dollars this year from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, of which Bill Gates is the co-chair. The Gates Foundation will continue its support with a similar amount over each of the following four years. Speaking at the world



famous Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), Osborne, Gates and government International Development Secretary, Justine Greening, revealed a significant funding package to ramp

up efforts to fight malaria. They said the path to a malaria free world will be centered on a three billion pounds commitment over five years and a mission to support the World Health ... (More on P4)...(28)

Yemen's PM Returns to Aden; Saudi Airstrikes Kill Civilians

SANAA - The Yemeni prime minister and his Cabinet returned on Monday to the volatile southern port city of Aden, months after he was targeted in a suicide bombing that forced them to leave the country.

Khaled Bahah's return is aimed at establishing a permanent government presence in Aden, officials in his office said, even as the country is torn apart by civil war. The officials didn't provide more information.

Yemen has been torn by conflict since 2014, when Shiite rebels known as Houthis and allied with a former president captured large swaths of the country, including the capital, Sanaa, which they took in September that year.

In March 2015, a coalition of mainly Gulf Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes against the Houthis and later, a ground operation to retake back ground from the rebels. More than 5,800 people have been killed and over 80 percent of Yemen's population is in dire need of food, water and other aid, according to the United Nations.

Also Monday, a missile fired by the Saudi-led coalition killed a judge and his entire family - eight people in all - in Sanaa's neighborhood of Nahda, security officials said. The judge was a known Houthi supporter.

And in the northern Jawf province, more than 20 fighters on both sides of the Yemeni conflict died in fierce clashes, security and tribal officials said. All officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they aren't authorized to speak to reporters. (AP)

Thailand Seek Chances in Asia, Africa for Investment Ventures

BANGKOK - Thailand's Board of Investment plans (BoI) to send Special Task Force teams to a number of Asian and African countries where they will seek opportunities for Thai investment ventures. Deputy BoI secretary general Chokdee Kaewsang said on Monday the Spe-

cial Task Force teams will take separate overseas tours and perform under guidance of the BoI in bid to look for business opportunities which may open abroad for Thai investors. The foreign countries in which the Thai investors' ventures might open ... (More on P4)...(29)

Russian Economy has Worst Year Since Global Financial Crisis

MOSCOW - Russia's economy shrank 3.7 percent in 2015, the worst drop since the depths of the global financial crisis, as the country struggled with a drop in the price of its oil exports and international sanctions, the state statistics service said Monday.

The decline is the sharpest for Russia since 2009, when the world economy was suffering from the effects of a credit crunch and financial crisis. It

matched the most recent prediction from the IMF, which forecasts another fall of 1 percent in 2016 before a return to 1 percent growth next year.

The state statistics service also said Monday that last year saw a 10 percent drop in retail sales - including a 15.3 percent plunge in December against a year before - and a one-third drop in foreign trade. Oil and gas ... (More on P4)...(30)