

Trump Says "Very Early" to Consider Lifting Sanctions on Russia

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Donald Trump said Friday that it is "very early" to talk about lifting sanctions on Russia in relation to the Ukraine crisis.

"I hear a call was set up. We'll see what happens," Trump said at a joint news conference with British Prime Minister Theresa May. "As far as sanctions, it's very early to be talking about that."

Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold a telephone conversation on Saturday, according to U.S. officials and the Kremlin.

Trump has hinted that he could lift the sanctions against Russia if Moscow proved helpful in battling terrorists



and reaching other goals important to the United States.

Trump's openly pro-Russia stance has been scrutinized recently amid U.S. intelligence's conclusion that Russia helped him win the presidential election through hacking activities.

Russia has denied being behind the cyber-intrusions, which targeted the Democratic National Committee and the private emails of Hillary Clinton's campaign Chairman John Podesta. Trump has repeatedly said he doubts the veracity of U.S. intelligence blaming Moscow for the hacks. At the press conference on Friday, May said the sanctions... (More on P4)...(19)

Oil Prices Fall on Rising U.S. Output Speculation

NEW YORK - Oil prices fell Friday after data suggested drilling is further recovering in the United States and an increasing U.S. output may follow. The number of U.S. rigs classified as drilling for oil is up 15 to 566 this week, the highest since November 2015, according to data released by oilfield service firm Baker Hughes on Friday.

Analysts said there is widespread speculation that drilling recovery will

drive U.S. crude output up, which will offset cuts made by The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and other major producers. The West Texas Intermediate for March Delivery erased 0.61 dollars to settle at 53.17 dollars a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange, while Brent crude for March delivery decreased 0.72 dollars to close at 55.52 dollars a barrel on the London ICE Futures Exchange. (Xinhua)

OSCE Reports Sharp Rise in Civilian Deaths in Ukraine's Lugansk

KIEV - The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which monitors the situation in the conflict-hit eastern Ukraine, said on Friday it has recorded a sharp spike in the number of civilian deaths in Lugansk region. "Over the past two weeks, we have confirmed at least five civilian fatalities compared to 19 for all of 2016," Alexander Hug, the deputy chief monitor of the OSCE special monitoring mission to Ukraine, told reporters.

Particularly, he noted that a 30-year-old man was hit by shrapnel from artillery rounds as he went to work in Golubivka village, while

another victim was shot in the back in Zolotoe town. According to the international monitors, at least four civilians were wounded in the neighbouring Donetsk region over the past two weeks, but there were no fatalities.

Last year, at least 83 civilians were killed and 305 were wounded in eastern Ukraine, with three-fourth of the casualties occurring in Donetsk region, which had been the epicentre of the fighting. Overall, the almost three-year-old conflict has claimed the lives of some 10,000 people, including civilians and combatants. (Xinhua)

Syrian Forces Reach Main Water Spring Feeding Damascus

DAMASCUS - The Syrian army reached the Ain Fijeh spring northwest of the capital Damascus on Saturday, hoisting the Syrian flag over that area following a month of battles with rebels there to capture that area and restore drinking water to Damascus, a military source told Xinhua.

The Syrian army entered Ain Fijeh, after reaching an "initial" agreement with the rebels there for their evacuation from that area, possibly toward the northwestern province of Idlib, the source said, on



condition of anonymity. He added that maintenance workers are bracing to enter the village to fix the Ain Fijeh spring, the main water source feeding the capital's over five mil-

Brexit and Trump Top Southern EU Nations Summit

LISBON - Leaders of seven southern European Union nations met in Lisbon on Saturday, seeking a united front against Brexit and the new protectionist administration of US President Donald Trump.

The mostly centre-left leaders taking part -- the second summit of southern EU leaders in four months -- are also expected to renew action to boost flagging growth and tackle the migrant crisis.

Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa shook hands and embraced Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, French President Francois Hollande and the other leaders as they arrived. Faced with the rise of "protectionism and populism", the EU needs urgent reforms to "surpass the economic, social and political legitimacy crisis which is weakening it," Costa said ahead of the event.

Spain, Greece, Cyprus and Malta are the other countries present. Hollande warned Friday after talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin that Trump's

administration poses "challenges" to "our trade rules, as well as to our ability to resolve conflicts around the world". Trump has rattled America's traditional European

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Britain's May in Turkey for Talks with Erdogan

ANKARA, Turkey - British Prime Minister Theresa May on Saturday urged Turkey to sustain its democracy and abide by human rights standards during her meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that also drew promises of closer defense cooperation between the two NATO allies. The visit aimed to boost trade between Turkey and Britain once the U.K. leaves the European Union, and focused on increasing cooperation over security and counterterrorism. May flew overnight to Ankara by RAF Voyager jet from the U.S., where she and U.S. President Donald Trump proclaimed a new chapter in the trans-Atlantic "special relationship." The visit to Turkey, an... (More on P4)...(24)

US, Mexican Presidents Speak By Phone Amid Row over Wall

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Donald Trump and Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto on Friday held an hour-long telephone talk amid the dispute over a border wall.

"With respect to the payment for the border wall, both presidents recognized their clear and very public difference between their stances on this very sensitive issue," the Mexican president's office said in a statement.

"The presidents also agreed for now to not speak publicly about this controversial issue," it added.

"We had a very good call," Trump said in a news conference in Washington. "The

border is soft and weak, drugs are pouring in, and I'm not going to let that happen." "I have great respect for the Mexico. I love the Mexican people," Trump said, while adding that Mexico "has out-negotiated us and beat us to a pulp through our past leaders." The call came after Pena Nieto cancelled a visit to the U.S. after Trump tweeted that the meeting should be cancelled if Mexico won't pay for a border wall. On Wednesday, Trump signed an executive order on the "immediate construction of a physical wall on the southern border" and has maintained that Mexico would ultimately bear the cost of building the wall. (Xinhua)

Security Council Renews UN Sanctions Against CAR

UNITED NATIONS - The UN Security Council on Friday unanimously adopted a resolution to renew sanctions against the Central African Republic (CAR) for another year until Jan. 31, 2018.

The 15-nation UN body "decides that until Jan. 31, 2018, all member states shall continue to take the necessary measures to prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to the CAR ... of arms and related material of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment," the resolution said.

The new council resolution also renewed the travel ban and asset freeze on the target persons in the war-torn country.

The Security Council emphasized that "any sustainable solution to the crisis in the CAR should be CAR-owned, including the political... (More on P4)...(23)



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the new U.S. President. At the press conference on Friday, May said she will ensure that other European leaders follow through on their commitments to NATO.

"We're also discussing the importance of NATO continuing to ensure it is as equipped to fight terrorism... (More on P4)...(21)

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia - Over 2,000 people rallied in St. Petersburg on Saturday to protest plans by the city authorities to give a landmark cathedral to the Russian Orthodox Church amid an increasingly passionate debate over the relationship between the church and state.

"We won't give St. Isaac's to the church. We want to save it as a museum," Boris Vishnevsky, a local lawmaker, told protesters in central St. Petersburg.

"St. Isaac's Cathedral is part of our cultural heritage. There are so many valuable exhibits that require the work of museum specialists. The Russian Orthodox Church does not have those specialists," said Irina Azbel, 43, a doctor, who was among those protesting.

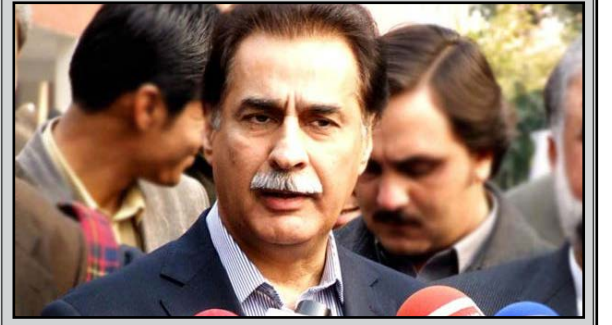
The rally was significantly larger than a similar demonstration attended by several hundred people earlier this month.

A few dozen counter-protesters gathered in the same place to support the plans. "The return of the cathedral to the church is a return to our national roots," said Yelena Semyonova, 52, a professor.

The announcement earlier this month that the neoclassical St. Isaac's Cathedral, which is currently run as a museum, will be put under Orthodox Church ownership has sparked a backlash from city residents. More than 200,000 people have signed an online petition calling on the city authorities to reconsider. (AP)

Neighbor News

Pakistan Hails Iran's Influence in Muslim World



TEHRAN - The speaker of the lower house of the Pakistani parliament has emphasized the Islamic Republic's influential role in the Muslim world. "Not only do we consider Iran to be a brotherly, important neighbor, but also we view it as an influential country in the Muslim world," said Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan Sardar Ayaz Sadiq in Islamabad on Friday.

He was speaking in a meeting with the visiting Iranian parliament member Alaeddin Boroujerdi. Boroujerdi, who is the chairman of the Iranian Parliament's Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, arrived in the Pakistani capital on Wednesday on a three-day visit, during which he met with senior Pakistani officials and extended the

invitation of Iran's Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani to some senior Pakistani parliamentary officials to visit Iran.

During their meeting, Ayaz Sadiq and Boroujerdi stressed the need for the preservation of unity across the Islamic world and the thwarting of plots aimed at dividing Muslims.

Boroujerdi also called Pakistan "Iran's Islamic brother" and appreciated its role in bringing about unity and convergence among Muslim countries. Also during the trip, the Iranian lawmaker met with Nasser Khan Janjua, who is Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's national security adviser; Sertaj Aziz, who advises Sharif on foreign affairs; and Chairman of the Senate of Pakistan Reza Rabhani. (Presstv)

Iran, Russia Agree to Cooperate in Nuclear Sectors

TEHRAN - Iran and Russia have developed a roadmap to jointly produce nuclear fuel, Behrouz Kamalvandi, the spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said on Friday.

Kamalvandi said that the agreement, signed during his recent visit to Russia, is an important accord "given that what we seek from (uranium) enrichment is to become able to generate fuel," Press TV reported.

He also talked about signing another bilateral agreement during

his Russia visit featuring cooperation in the field of producing stable isotopes, which have applications in medical and industrial fields.

The deal will be implemented at Iran's Fordow nuclear facility, making Iran the fourth place in the world where such isotopes are produced alongside Russia, the United States, and France. During his trip, he also discussed the construction of two power plants in Iran with the help of Russia, Kamalvandi was quoted as saying. (Xinhua)

Turkmenistan Actively Building its TAPI Section

ASHGABAT - Construction of the Turkmen section of the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline is going on at a fast pace, reports the Turkmen online newspaper NEBIT-GAZ.

The Turkmen gas State Concern is the customer of the construction of this section. "The main work on the study and measurement of the gas pipeline has been completed at a section with a length exceeding 208,000 meters," the newspaper said.

"Welding and docking of 1,420-mm pipes in a section with a length exceeding 7,000 meters have also been finished."

Insulation of the pipe connections, trenching, laying and backfilling of the pipes are underway.

TAPI will make it possible to ensure long-term

supplies of gas to the countries of the Southeast Asia, and these supplies will become an incentive for further economic development of the region, NEBIT-GAZ said.

The main document of the TAPI, called the Ashgabat Interstate Agreement, was signed in 2010. A groundbreaking ceremony for TAPI's Turkmen section was held in mid-December 2015.

The annual capacity of the gas pipeline will reach 33 billion cubic meters. It is planned that the total length of the TAPI pipeline will be 1,814 kilometers. Some 214 kilometers of it will go through Turkmenistan, 774 kilometers through Afghanistan, and 826 kilometers through Pakistan.

The project is expected to be completed in late 2019. (Trend)

Uzbekistan Aims to Develop Relations with Neighbors

TASHKENT - Main priorities of the Uzbek foreign policy in the coming years include the development of relations with neighboring countries, Uzbek First Deputy Foreign Minister Javlon Vakhobov said. He made the remarks during discussions on the draft strategy of Uzbekistan's development for 2017-2021. "We have defined the development of relations with our neighbors, the Central Asian countries, as a first priority among the most important areas set by the leadership of Uzbekistan," said Vakhobov. "We will continue our policy of building mutually respectful relations with the Russian Federation and other CIS members," he said. "We also intend to build equal dialogue with our Western partners, as well as partners from Asia." (Trend)