

Main Syrian Opposition Team Heads to Geneva as Peace Talks Open

AMMAN/GENEVA - A delegation from Syria's main opposition group flew to Geneva on Saturday to assess whether to join Damascus government officials in United Nations-brokered peace talks, an opposition representative said.

The 17-strong team included the head of the Saudi-backed Higher Negotiation Committee (HNC), which includes political and militant opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the country's five-year civil war.

The HNC has said it wants to discuss humanitarian issues including a stop to Russian and Syrian gov-



ernment bombing before engaging in the peace talks that started on Friday in Geneva.

Russian air strikes on Syria have killed nearly 1,400 civilians since Moscow started its aerial campaign nearly four months ago, monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said on Saturday.

"We are going to Geneva to put to the test the seriousness of the international community in its promises to the Syrian people and to also test the seriousness of the regime in implementing its humanitarian obligations," Riyadh Naasan Agha said. (Reuters)

Syrian Kurds Leave Geneva after not Being Invited to Talks

GENEVA - An official with Syria's largest Kurdish group says senior members of their party have left Geneva after not being invited to take part in indirect negotiations aiming to end Syria's civil war.

The talks began here Friday with a meeting between the U.N. envoy and the Syrian government delegation.

Kurdish official Nawaf Khalil says Saleh Muslim, the co-president of the Democratic Union Party

or PYD, left Geneva Saturday. Turkey considers the PYD a terrorist organization and the main opposition group known as the Higher Negotiations Committee claims they are close to the Syrian government.

The PYD departure came as the HNC team left Saudi Arabia for Geneva where they will work with the U.N. on ending the bombardment of civilians and lifting blockades in rebel-held areas. (AP)

European Countries Tighten Asylum Rules as Refugee Waves Continue

BEIJING - European countries led by Germany have tightened asylum rules amid continuing refugee waves in the new year that are having an impact on the local societies. GERMAN DEAL Leaders of Germany's ruling coalition struck a compromise on changes to asylum laws on Thursday, said German Deputy Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel. According to the deal, refugees who are not facing "immediate personal persecution" will not be allowed to bring relatives to join them for two years. The coalition also plans to declare Morocco, Algeria



and Tunisia safe countries of origin, making it easier to send migrants back to those countries, Gabriel said. The package of measures was first tentatively agreed in early Novem-

ber but has been held up since then as German Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives and Gabriel's center-left Social Democrats squabbled over who should initially

be blocked from bringing relatives to Germany. Merkel has come under increased pressure in recent months to reverse her open-arms policy ... (More on P4)...(17)

UN Chief, African Leaders Pledge Action on Terrorism, Civil Strife

ADDIS ABABA - The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon and dozens of African leaders on Friday declared total support towards efforts to combat terrorism and violent conflicts on the continent.

Speaking during the AU peace and Security Council meeting in Addis Ababa, Ban said the international community will support the war against terrorism alongside cessation of conflicts in Africa. "Terrorism and violent extremism that have engulfed this conti-

nent are a drawback to economic progress, peace and unity. The menace of terrorism is also hampering peace operations in Mali and Somalia," Ban said. He decried alarming radicalization of African youth, and urged governments to prioritize inclusive development, good governance and human rights in order to shield vulnerable groups from joining militant groups. "African governments must be at the forefront in a bid to combat violent extremism.



To win the war against terrorism, we must focus less on military interventions, but invest more in education for the youth, development and good govern-

ance," Ban remarked. He also urged African leaders to support peace and reconciliation in trouble spots like South Sudan and Burundi. (Xinhua)

Russia Says only 'Proxy' Talks on Syria Planned in Geneva

MOSCOW - Syrian peace negotiations between the main opposition and Syrian government delegates were only expected to involve "proxy" talks, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov was quoted as saying by Interfax news agency on Saturday. He also said that there were no preconditions for the Syrian talks and that Moscow welcomed

the decision by Syrian opposition coordinator, Riad Hijab, to take part in talks in Geneva. "(United Nations Syria envoy Staffan) de Mistura "has always planned to carry out proxy talks, that is to talk in turns with each delegations: the government and the opposition figures," Gatilov, who is heading to Geneva for talks, said in an interview with Interfax. (Reuters)

S. Korea, Japan, China Education Ministers Meet for 1st Time

SEOUL - The education ministers of South Korea, Japan and China on Saturday held the first three-way meeting among the countries that often spar over how their wartime past is described in textbooks.

History education wasn't on the agenda of the meeting where the ministers agreed to hold their gatherings annually and expand student exchanges and partnership programs between universities as well as elementary, middle and high schools. The second trilateral meeting will be held in Japan next year and the third in China in 2018, according to South Korea's Education Ministry. Further discussions are needed for history issues to be taken up in future meetings, said Yoojiwan, a South Korean ministry official. South Korean Education Minister JoonSik Lee said the beginning of the trilateral meetings would "plant ... (More on P4)...(18)

Erdogan Eyes Expanding Turkey Influence on Latin America Tour

ANKARA - Turkish President RecepTayyipErdogan on Saturday embarks on a major tour of Latin American countries in a bid to expand Ankara's ties outside its traditional sphere of influence. His visits to Peru and Ecuador are the first-ever by a Turkish president and the stop in Chile is the first since late president SuleymanDemirel travelled there back in 1995. Regional and international issues will be on the agenda during talks with the leaders of South America, where Erdogan is also expected to attend business forums to inten-



sify economic links. Erdogan had already in February 2015 visited Cuba, Colombia and Mexico. The Turkish president's itinerary will take him to Chile and then Peru before wrapping up his visit in Ecuador, the presidency said, adding that

the trip "shows the importance we attach to the countries of Latin America." - 'Long-term ambition' - Turkey is seeking to diversify its partners beyond its traditional sphere of influence within the bounds of the former ... (More on P4)...(19)

Syria Peace Talks Face Formidable Challenge

GENEVA - Divisions among Syria's opposition and anger over regime blockades almost sank new peace talks in Geneva before they began, and analysts say prospects of a breakthrough at the negotiations remain slim. On Friday, after four days of suspense, Syria's main opposition umbrella group finally announced it would send representatives to Geneva.

But formidable obstacles remain, including differences over the fate of President Bashar al-Assad, emboldened by recent territorial gains with support from Russian air strikes. In a sign of the challenges ahead, the Saudi-backed High Negotiations Committee (HNC) said it was sending a delegation "to participate in discussions with the UN, not for negotiations."

The complexities of the conflict, involving a tangled web of moderate rebels, Islamist fighters, Kurds, jihadists and regime forces backed by Moscow and Iran, pose a huge challenge, experts say.

"There is every reason to be pessimistic, and there is no realistic scenario in which a breakthrough would be reached," said KarimBitar, an analyst at the Paris-based Institute of International and Strategic Relations. "For the time being, the disconnect between the Geneva process and the realities on the ground has never been bigger."

The conflict began in March 2011 with anti-government protests and has evolved into a multi-sided war that has killed over 260,000 people and displaced more than half the population.

In recent months, world powers have redoubled diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis, fuelled by fear of the Islamic State group's growing power, as well as the pressure of a wave of refugees fleeing to Europe. (AFP)

Almost 40 Dead after Migrant Boat Sinks off Turkey

ANKARA - Almost 40 people drowned and 75 were rescued after a boat carrying migrants to Greece sank off Turkey's western coast on Saturday, according to local officials and the Turkish Dogan news agency. More than one million refugees and migrants arrived in the European Union last year and some 3,600 died or went

missing, forcing the EU to mull suspending its Schengen open-borders area for up to two years. The Turkish coast guard was continuing search and rescue efforts where the 17-metre boat carrying at least 120 people sank off the coast of Ayvacik, a town across from the Greek island of Lesbos, the Dogan news ... (More on P4)...(20)

Raul Castro on Grand Bridge-Building France Trip

PARIS - Cuba's Communist President Raul Castro will be welcomed under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris during a rare state visit Monday to showcase his island's warming ties with big world powers. The Cuban leader arrived in Paris on Saturday, two days ahead of the start of the official programme, sources at Orly airport south of Paris said. Castro's visit is an

indication of his island's improved ties with major powers following last year's restoration of relations with longtime foe, the United States. On the back of that rapprochement the 84-year-old leader is now paying court to France, one of his most powerful European allies. French officials said when the visit was announced January 19 that it ... (More on P4)...(21)

Nieghbor News

Iran to Buy 40 ATR Planes: Vice Minister

TEHRAN - Iran expects to finalise within days a deal to buy up to 40 planes from ATR, the European manufacturer of turboprop aircraft, a deputy transport minister said Saturday.

"We discussed the deals in Italy and France and ATR officials are expected in Tehran in the coming days to complete the agreement," AsgharFakhriehKashan said.

"There will be 20 firm and 20 optional orders," he added, without specifying the value of the contract.

ATR is co-owned by European aircraft manufacturer Airbus and

Italian aerospace group Finmeccanica.

This week, during President Hassan Rouhani's trip to Italy and France, Iran signed a contract for the purchase of 118 Airbus aircraft, to be delivered in the next four years.

Quoted by Iranian media, Kashan said the Airbus deal was worth \$10 to \$11 billion, while the previously mentioned amount was \$25 billion.

The deal is to purchase 73 long-haul and 45 medium-haul Airbus planes, the French manufacturer detailed in a statement. (AFP)

Xi Urges Grasp of China's Strategic Focuses

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping has ordered officials to have an accurate understanding of the country's strategic focuses for economic and social development in the coming five years. He also demanded concrete actions to turn the blueprint for the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020) into reality, according to a statement released Saturday.

Xi made the remarks during the 30th group study by the Political Bureau members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee on Friday.

"A clear grasp of China's strategic focuses is pivotal to a good start of the 13th Five-Year Plan period and to the completion of a moderately prosperous society in an

all-round way," said Xi, also general secretary of the CPC Central Committee.

"The government work will continue to center on economic development and we should strive for a higher-quality, more efficient, fairer and more sustainable growth," he said.

At the same time, China will push for political, cultural, social and environmental progresses, according to Xi.

The country will follow the "Four Comprehensive" strategy -- comprehensively building a moderately prosperous society; comprehensively deepening reform; comprehensively advancing the rule of law; and comprehensively strictly governing the CPC. (Xinhua)

PIA Privatisation Postponed for Six Months

RAWALPINDI - Pakistan Muslim League (N) Senator Mushahidullah Khan announced on Friday that the government had postponed the privatisation of the national flag carrier for six months and requested the protesting workers to end their strike.

Addressing a press conference at the Aviation Division here, he said

neither the PIA was being privatised nor its employees being sacked or their facilities withdrawn.

The PML-N leader warned the protesting employees that the government would use its authority against all those elements who had locked the airline offices without any reason. (Agencies)

Single Electronic Communications Center Launched in Tajikistan

BISHKEK - Single Electronic Communications Center has been launched in Tajikistan to ensure the country's security, said Deputy Head of the Antimonopoly Agency NazarOdinazoda. "The Single Electronic Communications Center will not restrict activities of entities operating in the electronic communications sphere," noticed Odiazoda. "Its work will be controlled by the Antimonopoly Agency... This center will only control incoming and outgoing calls

for the security purposes." The Tajik government signed a decision on creation of the Single Electronic Communications Center on Saturday in order to watch and regulate incoming and outgoing traffic of international electronic communications and Internet.

From now on, all telecommunications companies and Internet service providers of Tajikistan will route their traffic through the Single Electronic Communications Center. (AKIpress)

Kazakhstan Might Organize Refugee Center on Border with Uzbekistan

BISHKEK - Kazakhstan plans to organize refugee centers in the regions bordering Uzbekistan, local media said Friday quoting a local government official, reports TASS.

"The regional budget

provides establishment of refugee centers under the anti-terrorism article of the defense program," said the acting head of the economy and budget planning department of the ... (More on P4)...(22)