

# Syrian Army Closes in on Last IS Stronghold in Homs

DAMASCUS - The Syrian government forces backed by Russian Air Force have reached the outskirts of the Sukhneh town, the last Islamic State (IS) stronghold in the central province of Homs, a military source told Xinhua on Friday.

The Syrian army has reached the outskirts of Sukhneh in the eastern countryside of Homs, as part of a wide-scale military offensive to drive out IS from the Syrian Desert, the source said on condition of anonymity.

Capturing Sukhneh would enable the Syrian army to break the IS siege to the eastern province of Deir al-Zour near Iraq, the source said. Sukhneh lies on the road between Palmyra and Deir al-Zour, and is the last IS stronghold in eastern Homs, where the Syrian army has been carrying out a crushing offensive over the past few months to end the presence of IS there. The Russian warplanes have been also supporting the ground Syrian troops and allied fighters in their push to clear the desert of IS. (Xinhua)



## FMs of Arab Countries Boycotting Qatar to Meet in Bahrain

CAIRO - Led by Saudi Arabia, the four Arab countries that cut ties with Qatar over alleged backing of terrorism will meet in Bahrain on Saturday "to watch Doha's seriousness in combating terrorism," Egyptian foreign ministry said in a statement.

"Foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt will hold a two-day meeting in Manama to evaluate the recent developments of Doha situation," Ahmad Abu



Zeid, spokesperson of the foreign ministry said on Friday. The recurrent meetings of foreign ministers signaled the interest of the four countries for coordinating their stands and to watch Qa-

tar's commitment for stopping support for terrorism, and negative intervention in other Arab countries' internal affairs, the statement added. The four Arab countries have severed

diplomatic ties with Qatar early last month accusing Doha of supporting terrorism, interfering in their internal affairs and seeking closer ties with Iran, a Saudi rival. (Xinhua)

## Israel Says Friday's Prayer at Jerusalem's Shrine Ends Peacefully

JERUSALEM - Israeli authorities said Friday's prayer at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque ended peacefully. Police came out in force in case of mass demonstrations but prayers ended without incident, the Times of Israel reported, citing Police Spokesman Micky Rosenfeld as saying. Israeli police was already on high alert before Friday's prayer when thousands of Muslim worshippers went to the mosque in East Jerusalem. The police have adopted several security measures against violence,

including prohibiting men under 50 from entering the holy site, closing a number of roads and deploying extra police personnel in East Jerusalem. After Israel removed metal detectors and surveillance cameras installed after the July 14 shooting, Muslims renewed prayer at the holy site on Thursday. On July 14, three Arab-Israeli gunmen opened fire at two Israeli policemen and shot them dead at the yard of the mosque, while police forces fired back and killed them. (Xinhua)

## At Least 59 Civilians Killed in E. Ukraine in 2017

KIEV - The violence in eastern Ukraine has claimed at least 59 lives of civilians since the beginning of 2017, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said Friday. Besides, at least 271 non-combatants were wounded in the conflict between government troops and independence-seeking insurgents this year, the OSCE special monitoring mission to Ukraine said in a report.

Between July 10 and July 25, the international monitors have registered

21 conflict-related casualties, including three fatalities, in Donetsk and Lugansk regions, the report said.

The conflict has been spreading in Ukraine's east since April 2014, when the government troops launched offensives to regain control over the cities and towns seized by insurgents. The confrontation has claimed the lives of more than 10,000 people, including civilians and combatants on both sides, and left about 24,000 others wounded. (Xinhua)

## Saudi-Led Coalition Kills 40 Houthi Militants in Yemen: Report

RIYADH - Forces of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition on Friday killed at least 40 Houthi militants in a Yemeni region near the Saudi border, the Al Arabiya TV reported.

The Saudi-led forces, supported by Apache attack helicopters and artillery, killed the Houthi militants in an area near the Saudi border city Jazan, after managing to lure them into a place within their target range, the report said.

The coalition forces set up the ambush after getting intelligence that the

Houthi militants and forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh were mobilizing in the region near the Saudi border, it said.

The four-hour operations were carried out opposite the Al-Khashl, Al-Fadna and Al-Malhama mountains.

Saudi forces also fired rockets at strongholds held by Houthi militants near the border of Saada province in Yemen, it added. Yemen has been suffering from a civil war, which began in 2015 after the Houthi militants, with



support from forces loyal to Saleh, ousted the UN-backed transitional government and occupied capital Sanaa.

The legitimate government controls the south and some eastern parts, while the Houthi/Saleh alliance controls other

parts. The Saudi-led coalition, which includes nine African and Middle East countries, launched a military intervention in Yemen since March 2015 to support the government led by President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. (Xinhua)

## Russian Authorities Detain 7 Foreigners For Plotting Attacks In St. Petersburg

MOSCOW - Seven people from Central Asian countries were detained Friday on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks on the rail transport system and crowded places in Russia's second-largest city of St. Petersburg, the Federal Security Service said.

"The identity of the detainees is not disclosed in the interests of the investigation," it said in a brief statement providing no other details.

On April 3, several Central Asian nationals launched a bomb attack in St. Petersburg's metro system, killing 14 people and injuring more than 50 others. (Xinhua)

## Turkish Army Kills 55 PKK Militants in 8 Days

ANKARA - The Turkish troops killed 55 militants of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in operations carried out in the country's southeastern and eastern regions from July 20 to 27, local media reported Friday.

Weapons in quantity were seized and 45 Improvised Explosive Devices were destroyed by explosive ordnance teams, the Daily Sabah reported, citing a statement of Turkish Armed Force. A total of 18 shelters, caves and depots used by the PKK were destroyed, the statement said. A Turkish soldier was killed and six others injured during clashes, it added. The PKK, listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States and the EU, has resumed its armed campaign against the Turkish government since July 2015. (Xinhua)

## Nearly 840,000 Remain Displaced Outside Mosul: IOM

GENEVA - The UN migration agency said Friday it estimates that 839,118 individuals (139,853 families) remain displaced following heavy fighting to retake the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.

IOM staff working around Mosul said "thousands of people remain buried under the rubble," following the liberation of the northern Iraq city from Islamic State (IS)

forces by the country's government forces, said the agency senior press officer Joel Millman in Geneva at a UN media briefing. Mosul, lies 400 km north of Iraq's capital Baghdad, and until this month had been under IS control since June 2014, when government forces abandoned their weapons and fled, enabling IS militants to take control.

IOM said much of what was once a bustling city of

more than 1.4 million people, whose history dates back to at least 401 BC, is just stones and rubble after Iraqi forces seized it back earlier this month.

The liberation of Mosul has shifted the fight across the border to Syria about 470 km westward towards Raqqa where IS has its headquarters in northern Syria and where UN agencies are battling to help the displaced people. (Xinhua)

## Chinese Language, Culture Growing Increasingly Popular Worldwide

BEIJING - In the past five years, the world has embraced the Chinese culture as a result of China's growing global influence.

More and more people are starting to learn the Chinese language and culture, building bridges connecting China with the world.

In 2006, Walter Payton College Preparatory High School joined forces with East China Normal University (ECNU) in Shanghai to co-found the Confucius Institute in the U.S. city of Chicago.

"Many American children now study Chinese. Some parents even employ babysitters who can speak Chinese to take care of their kids," said Xu Qun, a Chinese teacher at the school. In recent years, "Mandarin fever" has

increased across the world with more and more young people being attracted to the Chinese language and culture.

By the end of 2016, 1,073 courses have been offered by 512 Confucius Institutes across 140 countries and regions to foreigners who are fond of the Chinese culture. The Chinese proficiency competition, Chinese Bridge, has aroused enthusiasm among foreign college and high school students eager to learn Mandarin and participate in the competition. Alice, a 27-year-old Kenyan woman, sees Chinese as the stepping stone to her career. After studying the Chinese language in China for several years, she got a job as an interpreter at a railway construction project in Kenya, sponsored by a Chinese enterprise. (Xinhua)

## Britain may Never Actually Leave EU: Political Expert

LONDON - Britain could remain for years in a transitional arrangement with the European Union, a leading academic expert in politics has predicted. It could even lead to Britain never actually leaving the EU as negotiators come to terms with the complications of striking a "Brexit" deal, said Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg, head of politics at the University of Liverpool.

In an interview with Xinhua, Wilks-Heeg also said the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the party set up to champion Brexit, could virtually disappear from Britain's political landscape. David Davis, the government Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, is currently heading negotiations with Brussels about Britain's withdrawal as a member state in March 2019, two years after triggering the article 50 exit mechanism.

Former prime minister David Cameron called the national referendum in June 2016 after he had led unsuccessful talks with Brussels in a bid to tackle growing issues in Britain, particularly high levels of immigration.

Wilks-Heeg believes had those talks delivered a solution, the referendum may never have happened. Even so, Cameron, like many others, strongly believed British people would vote to stay in the EU. Wilks-Heeg said: "It is clear we are heading for a transitional arrangement with Brussels, and as we end up half-in, half-out, things could just slip down the agenda. That could see us in this transitional stage indefinitely, and possibly almost permanently." (Xinhua)

## Neighbor News

### China Aims to Attract more Foreign Investment

BEIJING - China will roll out a series of policies to attract more foreign investment, the country's cabinet announced Friday.

The "negative list" approach on foreign investment management, which has been adopted in the country's pilot free trade zones, will be expanded to the whole nation, according to a statement released after the State Council executive meeting presided over by Premier Li Keqiang.

A negative list approach identifies sectors and businesses that are off-limits or restricted for investment. There will be preferential taxation policies for foreign investors to use profit shared from local enterprises to invest in projects that are encouraged by the

governments.

China will discuss taking measures to cut or lift the investment share ceiling for foreign enterprises in some fields of manufacturing and services, and encourage local governments to attract multinational companies to set up regional headquarters. Foreign firms will be allowed to set up companies in China via mergers and acquisitions, and their intellectual property rights will enjoy better protection.

The scientific and technological and environmental protection sectors of the national development zones in the western region and northeast industrial bases will enjoy more government financial support to attract foreign investment. (Xinhua)

### Iran Says Iraq Wants Rise in Gas Imports

TEHRAN - Iran says it is looking into a demand by Iraq to increase the exports of natural gas to the country.

The announcement was made by Hamid-Reza Araqi, the managing director of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC).

Araqi, however, did not specify any further details - including the new figure demanded by the Iraqis.

Nevertheless, he said Iran's gas exports to Iraq currently stood at 7 to 8 million cubic meters per day (mcm/d).

The official further emphasized that any increase in Iran's gas exports would depend on whether Iran could launch new projects in its South Pars energy zone. Iran started a much-awaited project to export natural gas to Iraq's capital Baghdad in June.

The exports are expected to reach as high as 35

mcm/d in the near future.

Gas exports to Iraq - which are meant to address the country's acute electricity shortfalls - started after two years of negotiations between Tehran and Baghdad. This was seen by the media as a sign that both sides had overcome disputes over the financial terms of the project - what was so far preventing the project.

Iran and Iraq initially signed an agreement in 2013 based on which the Islamic Republic would export natural gas to power stations around Baghdad through a 270-kilometer pipeline. Although the related pipeline for the project was constructed, the gas did not flow toward Baghdad in what officials said was a result of disputes over certain financial terms as well as the insecurity in Iraq. (Press Tv)

### Uzbekistan Jails Ex-President's Daughter Gulnara Karimova

TASHKENT - Gulnara Karimova, the elder daughter of late Uzbek president Islam Karimov, is in custody following a 2015 conviction for extortion and embezzlement and is being investigated for more crimes, Uzbek Prosecutor General's office said on Friday.

The announcement is the first official word on the whereabouts of Karimova, 45, who disappeared from public view in 2014 after apparently falling out with her father, a strongman who had run the Central Asian nation for 27 years.

State prosecutors said in a statement they were seeking to freeze about \$1.5 billion in assets held

by Karimova, including in Switzerland, Sweden, Britain, France, Latvia, Ireland, Malta, Germany, Spain, Russia, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates.

Karimova could not be contacted for comment. The prosecutor's office did not say who was representing her.

The prosecutor's office said Karimova had been sentenced in 2015 to five years' probation - a measure which may equal house arrest in Uzbek law - for acquiring through extortion or embezzlement stakes in a number of companies, and for tax evasion. The statement was the first word on that conviction. (Reuters)

### Pakistan has Won Today: Imran Khan

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) chief Imran Khan said on Friday that the Supreme Court's (SC) decision to disqualify Nawaz Sharif marks the start of a new era in the history of Pakistan, where justice will be held supreme. "Pakistan has won today," Khan said while congratulating the nation, also thanking the SC and the JIT for upholding the law. He added: "I have no personal agenda against Nawaz Sharif; I have known his family for 40

years, he did not take anything of mine - he had done wrong to the people of this country and that was why we wanted him to be held accountable." "Historically there have always been two kinds of laws prevailing in the country; one for the weak and poor and the other for the rich and powerful," he said, adding that he spent eight days in jail and all he saw there was poor people held on minor charges while the biggest thieves in the country sat in the assembly. (Agencies)