

# NATO Flexes Muscles in Baltics, Poland

VILNIUS - US-led NATO drills began Monday in the Baltic states and Poland, a move intended to reassure Russia's nervous neighbours amid tensions over Ukraine. Russia's increased military presence in the Baltic Sea and regional airspace since its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine last year has jangled nerves in the area, which lay behind the Iron Curtain 25 years ago. More than 6,000 troops from 13 NATO countries are participating in the Saber Strike 2015 drills in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, all EU and NATO members. "This is one of the biggest exercises in Lithuania since we joined NATO" in 2004, Major General Almantas Leika, commander of Lithuania's land forces,



told reporters in Vilnius. "The huge allied presence demonstrates solidarity with the countries of this region," he said, adding that Lithuania is hosting the command centre for the drills. NATO has been guarding the skies over the three small Baltic states since 2004, when they joined the defence alliance but lacked the air power to monitor their own airspace. Last month, the Baltic trio formally asked NATO to permanently deploy several thousand troops in their region as a deterrent to Russia. NATO has not yet replied to the request, military spokesman Lithuanian Captain Mindaugas Neimontas told AFP. The exercises, organised by the US Army in Europe, will run until ...*(More on P4)...(25)*

## Russian FM Dimisses 'Absurdity' of EU Anger over Entry Bans

MOSCOW - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Monday dismissed the "absurdity" of EU complaints over a travel ban imposed by Moscow on 89 Europeans over the Ukraine crisis. "It is even quite embarrassing to explain the absurdity and awkwardness of such logic as it's an attempt to substitute international law with one's own political biases," Lavrov told re-

porters in Moscow amid a new spike in tensions with Brussels. Moscow last week released a list of 89 European nationals who had been banned from travelling to Russia. The European Union on Saturday called the blacklist "totally arbitrary and unjustified" and pointed to a lack of transparency over those targeted. President Vladimir Pu-



tin's spokesman for his part told reporters that "we are having a hard time understanding this reaction." The list includes past and serving parliamentarians and ministers who have openly criticised Putin and the war in Ukraine. Military figures and se ...*(More on P4)...(26)*

## Yemen Hostage Video is Genuine: France

PARIS - France authenticated on Monday a video that shows a Frenchwoman taken hostage in Yemen appealing to President Francois Hollande and Yemen's exiled leader to help her and it said it was doing all it could to secure her release. The video, seen by Reuters, shows Isabelle Prime, a consultant for Yemen's Social Fund for Development, crouching on sand and in distress. Dressed in black, she makes her appeal to Hollande and Yemen's Abd Rabo Mansour Hadi in English.

"Mr Hollande and Mr Hadi, my name is Isabelle, I've been kidnapped 10 weeks ago in Yemen, in Sanaa. Please bring me to France fast because I'm really, really tired. "I tried to kill myself several times because I know you will not cooperate and I totally understand." Prime and her Yemeni translator Shereen Makawi were abducted by gunmen in the capital Sanaa in February while the pair were on their way to work. Yemeni tribal sources said in March that Prime would be released, but only

Makawi was freed. There has been no public claim of responsibility for her abduction so far. The video first appeared on YouTube on May 4. "It is a video in which Isabelle Prime appears. All the relevant state services are mobilized to free our compatriot," the French foreign ministry said on Monday without elaborating. In recent years tribesmen have taken foreigners hostage to press the government to provide them with services or to free jailed relatives. (Reuters)

## Open Gaza Border Hinges on End to Rocket Fire: German FM

GAZA - Germany's foreign minister said during a visit to Gaza on Monday that any opening of the enclave's borders and economic recovery from last year's devastating war hinged mainly on ensuring no more rockets are fired at Israel. "We need local investments, and from abroad. Hence we also need the possibility to export the goods, which are being produced here (in Gaza). This can happen only by opening the borders," Frank-Walter

Steinmeier told reporters. "But the whole truth is: all this will, under most difficult circumstances, happen only when there is real certainty ... that (Gaza) is no longer a launching pad for rockets." The region has been largely quiet since an August ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, although a rocket from Gaza struck a vacant area near the Israeli port city of Ashdod on May 26, and Israel replied with air strikes that also caused no casualties. Citing security concerns, Israel

and Egypt tightly restrict the movement of people and goods through their borders with the Gaza Strip, a densely populated territory of 1.8 million Palestinians dominated by the Islamist Hamas movement. Israel, the United States and European Union shun Hamas over its hostility towards Israel. Steinmeier did not meet officials of Hamas during his tour, which included a visit to a U.N. school for girls constructed with German aid. (Reuters)

## IS Revamps Recruitment, with Savvy, Professional Broadcasts

PARIS - After a selection of tunes, the presenter with an American accent offers "a glimpse at our main headlines." IS militants have just seized three Iraqi cities. A bomb blows up a factory, killing everyone inside. Militants destroy four enemy Hummers and an armored vehicle.



The newscast's tone sounds much like National Public Radio in the United States. But this is Al-Bayan, the Islamic State radio targeting European recruits - touting recent triumphs in the campaign to carve out a Caliphate. All news is good news for Al-Bayan's "soldiers of the Caliphate." In this narrative, the enemy always flees in disgrace

or is killed. The broadcasts end with a swell of music and a gentle English message: "We thank our listeners for tuning in." The tension between the smooth, Western-style production and the extremist content shows how far the hardcore Islamic propaganda machine has come since 2012, when an aging Frenchman posed in front of a jihadi flag and threatened France in the name of

### Erdogan Vows to Punish Journalist Behind Syria Trucks Video

ISTANBUL - Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has vowed to punish the editor of a newspaper which published video footage it said showed the MIT state intelligence agency helping send weapons to Syria.

The Cumhuriyet newspaper published footage on its website on Friday which it said showed gendarmes and police officers opening crates of what it described as weapons and ammunition on the back of three trucks belonging to MIT. "The individual who has reported this as an exclusive story will pay a high price for this," Erdogan said in a television interview with state broadcaster TRT late on Sunday. "I will not let this go." Reuters ...*(More on P4)...(28)*

## S. Korea, US Stage Major Joint Anti-Submarine Exercise

SEOUL - South Korea and the United States kicked off a major anti-submarine drill on Monday, weeks after North Korea claimed it had successfully tested a submarine-launched ballistic missile. The three-day exercise, aimed at tackling provocations by North Korean submarines, is being conducted off the southern island of Jeju, the South's defence ministry said. "This is the largest joint anti-submarine exercise the allies have ever staged, in terms of its scale and the number of vessels involved," a ministry

spokesman told AFP. The exercise involves more than 10 ships, including a South Korean Aegis destroyer, as well as submarines, surveillance planes and helicopters, he said. Separately, South Korean artillery units, naval ships and jet fighters conducted a joint live-fire drill off the east coast of Goseong county, just south of the border with North Korea, the ministry said. The drills come amid growing concern over the expansion of North's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes. (AFP)

## China to Hold Fire Drills Along Myanmar Border

BEIJING - China's military will hold land and air live fire drills along a part of the border with Myanmar where shells have fallen during fighting between the Myanmar government and ethnic Chinese rebels, the Defence Ministry said on Monday. China has been angered by repeated incidents of shells or bombs from the fighting falling in Chinese territory, in which at least five Chinese have died, and thousands of refugees have crossed into China's southwestern province of Yunnan to es-

cape the clashes. The Chinese military's drills will begin on Tuesday, the Defence Ministry said, and take place in two Yunnan counties which lie right next to Myanmar's Kokang region. China had informed Myanmar about the drills, it said. The drills will not affect the normal lives of residents, though they will have to follow instructions on which parts of the county will be off limits, the ministry said, adding that the end of the exercises would be announced later. (Reuters)

## Iraq Suicide Attack 'Kills at Least 37'

BAGHDAD - A suicide attack using an armoured vehicle packed with explosives against an Iraqi police base northwest of Baghdad killed at least 37 people on Monday, officers said. They said the attack was against a federal police base between Samarra and the Tharthar lake. A doctor said the bodies of at least 37 people were brought to Samarra hospital. "They are mostly policemen," he told AFP. He said at least 33 people were also wounded in the attack, which some police offi-

cers said was carried out with a tank. The area is being used in a military operation aimed at cutting off the Islamic State jihadist group's supply lines in Anbar province of western Iraq. IS fighters have over the past year seized a formidable arsenal of military vehicles, weapons and ammunition from retreating Iraqi forces. "The attack was carried out with a tank and left more than 70 killed and wounded," a senior police officer for Salaheddin province said. (AFP)

## Russia Wants Precise Wording for U.N. Resolution on Libya Human Smugglers

MOSCOW - Russia said on Monday any U.N. Security Council resolution allowing for the use of force in the Mediterranean to stop gangs smuggling migrants must define the powers of an EU naval mission precisely to win Moscow's backing. The European Union has agreed a mission to target gangs bringing people from Libya as part of a plan to deal with the influx of migrants to the bloc, but requires a U.N. mandate to be able to intervene in Libyan territorial waters. Speaking alongside Italian Foreign

Minister Paolo Gentiloni, whose country is one of the migrants' most popular destinations, Lavrov was cautious about any resolution that is proposed under Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter, which allows the use of force to restore international peace and security. "If such a proposal is made, we will have to write down in the most minute detail the mandate of such a mission under Chapter 7," Lavrov told a joint news conference after talks with Gentiloni. "We don't want a repeat ...*(More on P4)...(27)*

## Neighbour News

### Iran Military Adviser Killed Near Iraq's IS-Held Ramadi

TEHRAN - An Iranian officer has been killed near the Iraqi city of Ramadi while advising Iraqi forces on how to recapture it from the Islamic State group, state media reported Monday. Jassem Nouri, who had also served as a military adviser in Syria, was killed on Thursday, Iran's official IRNA news agency reported. Political and military leaders joined family members for a memorial service in Ahvaz

in southwestern Iraq on Sunday ahead of his burial on Monday. "A seasoned (1980-88) Iran-Iraq war commander, Jassem Nouri was there as a military adviser to share his experience with the resistance fighters in Iraq," the city's Friday prayer leader Qassem Khaziravi told mourners. Shiite Iran has provided weapons and military advisers to both Iraq and Syria but denies it has deployed any combat troops. (AFP)

### Bilawal Makes Low-Key Return to Karachi

KARACHI - As reports of rifts within his party thrive, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari returned to Karachi Monday after being away from the country for nearly seven months. Bilawal previously made headlines for making a fiery speech that criticised the authoritative MQM supremo Altaf Hussain last year in October 2014. A PPP insider close to Bilawal said the chairperson's return to Karachi was a "clear message" to disgruntled elements within the party that all was well between

co-chairperson Asif Ali Zardari and his son. "Dr Zulfiqar's Mirza's propaganda and abusive rant against Zardari have united the father and son," he said, requesting anonymity as he was not authorised to speak publicly on the matter. "Zardari was not present at the All Parties Conference (APC) on the China-Pak Economic Corridor (CPEC) last week as he was in Dubai with Bilawal," the senior party source added. "So all rumours that there is friction between Bilawal and his father now stand quelled." (Agencies)

### Turkmenistan May Extend Presidential Term

ASHGABAT - As part of the constitutional reform Turkmenistan may extend the presidential term from five to seven years "for the purpose of successful implementation of large-scale long-term programs", Turkmen state media quoted Akdzhah Nurberdyeva, speaker of the Turkmen parliament, as saying on May 28 at a meeting of the country's Constitutional Commission. It is also proposed to remove the 70-year age limit at which a president can serve, as well as give more powers to the president of Turkmenistan. Such changes would open the door for authoritarian President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, 57, to be president for life, RFE/RL reported. Berdimukhammedov, who came to power in 2006 after the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov, was reelected

in 2012 with some 97 percent of the vote in an election deemed neither free nor fair by international observers. Natural-gas-rich Turkmenistan is considered one of the world's most repressive states and has been listed near the bottom of all freedom and democracy surveys since gaining independence after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. President Berdimukhammedov, who attended the meeting of the Constitutional Commission, said that proposed constitutional changes enjoy nationwide support. He suggested revising the constitutional provisions concerning the rights, freedoms, and duties of Turkmen citizens so as to meet international law norms, as well as defining the rights for private entrepreneurship, private ownership and property. (ICA)

### China, S. Korea Formally Sign Free Trade Pact

SEOUL - China and South Korea on Monday formally signed a free trade agreement (FTA) that would remove most tariffs between Asia's largest and fourth-largest economies, whose trade is already worth more than \$200 billion. The pact -- largely agreed in November and signed by the two nations' trade ministers on Monday -- aims to gradually remove tariffs on more than 90 percent of traded goods within 20 years. China is the South's top trading partner as well as the biggest export market, and two-way trade stood at around \$235.3 billion in 2014, according to state data in Seoul. South Korea is also one of the biggest foreign investors in China, pumping in

some \$1.6 billion in the first quarter of this year. South Korean President Park Geun-Hye, in a letter to Chinese leader Xi Jinping, called the accord a "historic milestone" that would further cement relations. "The Korea-China FTA will ... take the bilateral ties that had been built over the years to a whole new level," Park said in the letter delivered to the visiting Chinese trade minister Gao Hucheng. Pending mandatory parliamentary approval, the FTA will allow small and medium-sized South Korean firms greater access to China's vast consumer market and help create more than 50,000 jobs in the South, Seoul's trade ministry said. (AFP)