

Russian Military Presence in Ukraine Irrefutable: US General

VIENNA - The commander of U.S. troops in Europe has dismissed claims by Russia that it is staying out of the Ukraine conflict, speaking of "clear and irrefutable evidence" to the contrary.

Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges spoke of both direct and indirect military help by Moscow to Russian separatists, in comments released Wednesday from a briefing to a closed session of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. "Russia is actively and massively fueling this conflict," he declared during the briefing Tuesday.



He spoke to the OSCE as the foreign ministers of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany met to discuss the conflict amid escalating fighting that is throwing doubts on a shaky peace accord. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said afterward that the four agreed to "not allow a breakdown" of a peace deal reached in February. "There is a sense that there are powers who would like to destroy this process," Lavrov told reporters in Paris. "I won't name them. But such forces exist." (AP)

NATO to Strengthen Collective Defense: Stoltenberg

BRUSSELS - NATO will take decisions to strengthen collective defense to deal with a new and more challenging security environment, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said here at the start of the bloc's defense ministers meeting Wednesday. Nato defense ministers are expected to take decisions to increase the strength and capability of the NATO Response Force, which will amount to up to 40,000 troops, during the two-day meeting. They are also ex-

pected to further improve the Alliance's advance planning, speed up political and military decision-making, and review defense investment figures. The defense ministers are expected to endorse a defense capacity building package for Moldova as well. On Thursday, Nato defense ministers will meet with their Ukrainian and Afghan counterparts to discuss NATO's ongoing support for both nations, according to a NATO press release. (Xinhua)

18 Killed in Air Strikes, Clashes with IS Militants in Iraq

BAGHDAD - At least 18 people were killed and 36 wounded on Wednesday in battles with the Islamic State (IS) militants in Salahudin province and air strikes on suspected IS positions in the western province of Anbar, security sources said. In the northern central province of Salahudin, the security forces and allied militias known as Hashd Shaabi, or popular mobilization, repelled multiple attacks by dozens of IS militants, mortar barrage and three suicide car bombers in Fa'ha area, just north of the battleground town of

Baiji, which itself located some 200 km north of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, a provincial security source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity. The several-hour battles started after midnight when the three suicide bombers blew up their explosive-laden cars into the defensive lines of the troops under heavy mortar barrage and gunfire from dozens of the extremist militants, leaving at least five federal policemen and three suicide bombers killed and the eight security members wounded, the source said. (Xinhua)

Saudi-Led Warplanes Strike Key Targets of Houthis Across Yemen

SANAA - The Saudi-led Arab coalition launched air strikes on targets controlled by the Houthi group in several provinces in Yemen overnight, officials and residents said Wednesday. The campaign led by Saudi Arabia is against the Houthi group and forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh since late March at the request of the exiled Yemeni government.

The fresh air raids hit the runway of civilian and military airports of al-Hodayda city in western Yemen. In northwestern province of Hajja, warplanes

pounded the headquarters of Brigade 25 Mika, which is under control of Saleh's forces in Abbs district near the border with Saudi Arabia, after Houthi fired missiles toward Saudi military sites, local officials said. In provinces of Aden, Taib, Lahj and Marib, Houthi-controlled military camps were also targeted, according to local officials. Residents in southern province of al-Bayda said at least ten Houthi fighters were killed in the air strike while they gathered after seizing the governmental complex in Mukairas district on Tuesday night. (Xinhua)

France Summons U.S. Ambassador over Spying Report

PARIS - French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius summoned the U.S. ambassador to France Wednesday to explain a WikiLeaks document concerning the United States' spying on three French leaders, including President Francois Hollande, news channel BFMTV reported. Fabius is scheduled to meet Jane Hartley later in the day to ask for an explanation on "Espionage Elysee," a collection of top-secret intelligence reports and technical documents from the

NSA concerning intelligence interceptions of the communications of high-level officials, including Hollande, ex-presidents Nicolas Sarkozy and Jacques Chirac, between at least 2006 and 2012. The documents are intelligence summaries of conversations between French government officials on some of the most pressing issues facing France and the international community, including a dispute between the French and U.S. governments over U.S. spying on France. (Xinhua)

Russia to Extend Anti-Sanction Measures for One Year

MOSCOW - Russian President Vladimir Putin announced Wednesday that Russian anti-sanction measures against Western countries would be extended for one year. "We are prolonging our response measures by one year, beginning from today (Wednesday)," Putin said at a government meeting. "The prime minister (Dmitry Medvedev) wrote a letter to me asking to prolong the countermeasures we took to the anti-Russian sanctions imposed by some countries," Putin said. "In accordance with this letter, I have signed a decree today prolonging some special economic measures to ensure Russia's security, and I am asking the government to promptly prepare and issue the decree." Interfax quoted the president as saying. The European Union announced Monday that it has decided to extend economic sanctions against Russia to Jan. 31, 2016, to ensure Mos-



cow's full implementation of the Minsk agreement reached in February on the Ukraine crisis. (Xinhua)

Turkey, Israel Seek Resumption of Reconciliation Talks

NKARA - Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu confirmed on Wednesday it was holding meetings with Israel to resume reconciliation talks to restore the deteriorated bilateral ties, local Hurriyet Daily News reported.

"Talks between Turkey and Israel are very normal for the sake of the normalization of relations. How can reconciliation be achieved without

holding any meetings?" Cavusoglu told reporters in the Turkish capital of Ankara. "The ball is in Israel's court" in regard to the normalization of bilateral ties since Ankara is still waiting for the fulfillment of its conditions for normalization, Cavusoglu said. Cavusoglu's remarks came a day after Israel's media reported that Israeli Foreign Minister Director General Dore Gold and Turkish Foreign

Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioglu had held secret talks in Rome on Monday in a bid to reconcile the two former allies. Ties between the two countries, once close, deteriorated in 2010 when Israeli commandos raided the Turkish-flagged Mavi Marmara, the largest ship in an aid flotilla which tried to break the Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip. (Xinhua)

Ukraine's Opposition Bloc Urges Unilateral Implementation of Minsk Accord

KIEV - Ukraine's Opposition Bloc on Wednesday called on the government to unilaterally fulfill the Minsk peace agreement in an attempt to put an end to the conflict in eastern regions.

"The Opposition Bloc requires the Ukrainian authorities to start implementing those points of the Minsk agreement that Ukraine can do unilaterally, regardless of the preconditions on the cease-fire and the withdrawal of weapons," the Opposition Bloc said in a statement. It asked to grant special status to the areas controlled by pro-independence rebels and give



amnesty to detained insurgents as soon as possible to ease the violence in Lugansk and Donetsk regions.

Besides, the Opposition Bloc stressed the need to ensure ac-

cess of humanitarian aid to the rebel-held areas and resume social welfare payments to people who live in the restive territories so as to improve the humanitarian situation there. (Xinhua)

Lebanon Parliament Fails again to Election New President

BEIRUT - The Lebanese parliament failed Wednesday for the 25th consecutive time to convene and elect a new president due to the missing constitutionally required quorum. Speaker of the House Nabih Berri called for a new electoral session on July 15, a statement issued by his media office said.

Out of the 128-seat parliament, only 50 representatives arrived to the House whereas the quorum stipulates the presence of two thirds of the MPs. According to the power sharing pact, the president must be a Christian Maronite, the Speaker a Muslim Shiite and the Premier a Muslim Sunni. Lebanon has been without a president since May 25 2014, when former President Michel Suleiman's ... (More on P4)... (28)

NATO says Won't Be Dragged into Arms Race with Russia

BRUSSELS - The head of NATO said on Wednesday the alliance would not be forced into a new arms race with Russia but that what he called Moscow's aggression in Ukraine had compelled it to strengthen its defenses. The United States announced plans this week to station tanks and heavy weapons in NATO member states on Russia's border, shortly

after President Vladimir Putin said Moscow would add 40 missiles to its nuclear arsenal. "We will not be dragged into an arms race, but we must keep our countries safe," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told reporters at the start of a meeting of alliance defense ministers. A Russian official last week accused NATO of pushing Russia into an arms race

by stepping up its military activity around its borders, not least in the formerly Soviet Baltic States. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter, attending his first NATO ministerial meeting, said on Tuesday the Baltic states - Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia - as well as Bulgaria, Romania and Poland had agreed to host the U.S. arms and heavy equipment. (Reuters)

IS Suicide Bombers Kill 10 Syria Soldiers: Monitor

BEIRUT - Two suicide bombers from the Islamic State group have killed 10 Syrian soldiers in the northeastern city of Hasakeh, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Wednesday. Separately, at least 13 civilians were killed in a car bomb attack against a mosque in a village near the capital

Damascus, the monitor said. All three incidents occurred Tuesday night. "Ten soldiers were killed and 16 others injured in two suicide attacks carried out by IS against army positions in Hasakeh," the Britain-based Observatory said. "The first attack was carried out by three jihadists against

a military barracks in the centre of town, while the second was carried out by one suicide bomber against a checkpoint near a children's hospital." A third suicide bomber hit a post manned by the Kurdish security forces in the city, causing serious damage to buildings in the area but no deaths. (AFP)

Neighbour News

Iran Reiterates Political Solution to Yemen Crisis

TEHRAN - Iran supports the UN-sponsored peace talks among Yemeni groups to end the crisis in the Arab state, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham said here on Wednesday. "As we have reiterated, the crisis in Yemen should be settled politically and all the efforts should be focused on political solution," Afkham said in her weekly press conference.

"The initiative of dialogue should be encouraged, and we should not get disappointed even if the talks do not end in results temporarily," she said in a reference

to the recent UN-sponsored talks in Geneva between all Yemeni factions which ended without any deal to end the conflict or a cease-fire for humanitarian aid.

Afkham expressed regret about the failure of attempts to establish ceasefire in the country, saying that continuing the raids on the Yemeni people by the Saudi-led coalition is not accepted, particularly in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

The ongoing conflict in Yemen has left 80 percent of Yemen's population in need of emergency aid as the people have limited access to electricity, fuel, food, water and medicine. (Xinhua)

Xi Satisfied with Development of China-Belgium Ties

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping on Wednesday voiced his satisfaction with the development of the relationship between China and Belgium.

Xi made the remarks during a meeting with King Philippe of Belgium on Wednesday afternoon at Yingtai in the Zhongnanhai leadership compound in Beijing.

This was the second meeting between Xi and Philippe during the latter's state visit to China. On Tuesday, Xi held talks with the king at the Great Hall of the People.

During Wednesday's meeting, Xi spoke highly of the contribution the royal family

has made to the bilateral relations.

Hailing Philippe's visit, Xi said the two nations are developing steadily toward all-round friendship.

"I'm satisfied with the China-Belgium relationship," Xi said, highlighting political trust, two-way trade and people-to-people exchanges.

Briefing Philippe on modern China, Xi said China's history, culture, traditions, and national conditions determine that it must follow a path suitable for itself. Xi said China has developed socialism with Chinese characteristics over decades of reform and opening up. (Xinhua)

Sharif, Newly-Appointed DG SPD Discuss Nuclear Programmes

ISLAMABAD - Newly-appointed Director General Strategic Plans Division (SPD) Lt-Gen Mazhar Jamil called on Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at Prime Minister House on Wednesday. PM Nawaz and Lt Gen Mazhar Jamil discussed Pakistan's nuclear, missile and space programmes. The premier appreciated security and safety mechanisms and said the SPD has played an important role in strengthening Pakistan's defence capabilities. Lt-Gen Mazhar Jamil

thanked the government for reposing confidence in his abilities for the assignment and assured the PM he would perform his duties to the best of his abilities. PM Nawaz expressed confidence that the SPD would continue to work towards this end under his command. The SPD is an important component of National Command Authority which is headed by PM Nawaz and exercises complete control over the country's nuclear and strategic capability structure. (Agencies)

Tashkent Hosts Presentation of the Second National Report on MDGs

TASHKENT - Tashkent hosted a presentation of the Second National Report on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Uzbekistan. The event was attended by representatives of ministries and departments, international organizations, diplomatic corps, experts and civil society. The goal was the official presentation of the report on the MDGs and information on the ongoing global consultations on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The report provides an assessment of progress towards the MDGs in the country, consisting of 8 points - Uzbekistan and global partnership, to improve the quality of educa-

tion in primary and secondary schools, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, ensuring environmental sustainability. Opening the event, Minister of Economy of Uzbekistan G.Saidova said that by signing the Millennium Declaration in 2000, Uzbekistan has pledged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. - Submits a report is a joint initiative of the Government of our country and the UN agencies in Uzbekistan and aims to carry out an objective analysis and evaluation of the country's progress ... (More on P4)... (29)