

Kerry, Lavrov in 'Hopeful' Talks As Ukraine Toll Tops 6,000

GENEVA - The US and Russian foreign ministers held "hopeful" talks in Geneva Monday to end fighting in Ukraine, where the UN says more than 6,000 people have died in less than a year. The meeting between John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov in Geneva was just one of several attempts at mediation on the conflict Monday, as high-stakes talks to resolve a bitter gas dispute between Kiev and Moscow were also due in Brussels. Speaking separately after their 80-minute meeting, Kerry and Lavrov both cautiously said that a February 15 ceasefire was on the right track, despite repeated breaches of the peace deal that have left hundreds dead.

The Russian foreign minister welcomed "tangible progress" in the implementation of the agreement reached in Minsk last month, saying "the ceasefire is being consolidated, heavy weapons are withdrawn." Kerry, meanwhile, said he was "very hopeful" that his talks with Lavrov would help bring about the change needed to end fighting.

"Our hope is that within the next hours, and certainly not more than days, this



(ceasefire) will be fully implemented," he said. But he said that there so far had been "a kind of cherry-picking, a piecemeal selectivity to the application of the Minsk agreements," underlining that the violence had not stopped.

While fighting has broadly halted along much of Ukraine's frontline, several incidents took place over the weekend, with photographer Sergiy Nikolayev killed by a mortar shell and eight soldiers injured by rebel fire. Ukraine's army said Monday that one soldier had been killed, but the ceasefire was still largely holding despite sporadic clashes. Both sides have begun to pull back some heavy weaponry from the frontline, but monitors from the Organization for Security

and Cooperation in Europe have said it is too early to confirm a full pullback. The United Nations, meanwhile, cast a cloud on hopes raised by the talks with a report that painted a bleak picture of developments in the country. "More than 6,000 lives have now been lost in less than a year due to the fighting in eastern Ukraine," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein said in a statement. The report detailed how the conflict was affecting civilians, pointing to arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearances committed mainly by armed groups but also in some cases by Ukrainian law enforcement agencies. The swelling violence and dire living conditions have forced increasing numbers of people to flee, and by mid-February, at least one million people had been registered as internally displaced inside Ukraine.

"Many have been trapped in conflict zones, forced to shelter in basements, with hardly any drinking water, food, heating, electricity or basic medical supplies," Zeid said.

Speaking in Geneva for the launch of the report, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ivan Simonovic said "the deliberate targeting of ... (More on P4)...(24)

Netanyahu Brings His Iran Nuclear Fight to Washington

WASHINGTON - John Kerry warned Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday not to endanger US nuclear talks with Iran by revealing details of the discussions, as the Israeli premier lobbied in Washington to thwart the deal.

The US Secretary of State issued his warning from the scene of the talks in Geneva, as the Israeli prime minister prepared to make a speech to the powerful pro-Israel AIPAC lobby.

Netanyahu has infuriated the White House and Democratic lawmakers by accepting an invitation by President Barack Obama's Republican foes to speak on Capitol Hill Tuesday.

Kerry intervened in the row after becoming "concerned by reports" that "selective details" of the deal aimed at curbing Tehran's nuclear program would be revealed in the coming days.

He did not mention Netanyahu by name, but attempted once again to defend his talks in Switzerland with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif.

"The best way to deal with the question surrounding



this nuclear program is to find a comprehensive deal, but not a deal which comes at any costs," he told reporters.

"We have made some progress, but we still have a long way to go, and the clock is ticking."

Obama's administration has mobilized to counter Netanyahu's diplomatic offensive. Washington's United Nations envoy Samantha Power and National Security Advisor Susan Rice, will also address the 16,000 AIPAC delegates.

A member of Netanyahu's entourage told journalists traveling with him on Sunday that the Israeli leader had not intended to offend Obama.

"We are trying to explain to

the Americans what is causing us concern," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"We know a great deal about the emerging agreement... In our view, it is a bad agreement."

The official would not indicate the source of the "excellent information" Israelis have about the deal between the Islamic republic and the so-called P5+1 group that would prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear bomb. But he said Netanyahu would elaborate in his congressional address.

Israel worries that Iran and world powers will likely clinch a deal that eases sanctions without applying sufficiently stringent safeguards.

In ... (More on P4)...(25)

Proshenko Allows Deployment of Peacekeepers in E. Ukraine

KIEV - Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko on Monday approved a decision of the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) to call for international peacekeepers to monitor ceasefire in eastern Ukraine, the presidential press service said.

Kiev will appeal to the United Nations (U.N.) and the European Union (EU) to deploy a peacekeeping and security operation in Lugansk and Donetsk regions to

ensure effective implementation of the Minsk peace agreement, the press service said in a statement posted on the presidential website. To come into force, the NSDC decision should be also approved by the Ukrainian parliament, which is scheduled to vote on the issue on Tuesday.

Ukraine's intention to call for the deployment of an international peacekeeping mission has triggered

skepticism from the pro-independence insurgents, who said that the presence of any peacekeepers would violate the Minsk agreement reached on Feb. 12.

Since the peace deal came into force on Feb. 15, the ceasefire has been generally observed in eastern regions despite sporadic violations and the warring sides have started the withdrawal of their heavy weapons from the frontline. (Xinhua)

Iraq Forces Take on Tikrit in Biggest Operation Yet

KIRKUK - Some 30,000 Iraqi troops and militia backed by aircraft pounded jihadist positions in and around Tikrit on Monday in the biggest offensive yet to retake one of the Islamic State group's main strongholds.

Government forces have been working their way north in recent months, notching up key victories against IS but Tikrit, which has resisted them several times, is their toughest target yet.

The Building on recent successes, commanders voiced hope that the broadest operation since IS overran swathes of the country last June would be a step towards the liberation of Mosul, the jihad-

ists' main hub in Iraq.

"Security forces are advancing on three main fronts towards Tikrit, Ad-Dawr (to the south) and Al-Alam (to the north)," a senior army officer on the ground told AFP by telephone.

The operation began in early morning after being announced by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi the previous evening.

The army officer said the forces involved in the battle were from the army, police, counter-terrorism units, a government-controlled volunteer group known as the Popular Mobilisation units and local Sunni tribes opposed to IS.

"The attack ... (More on P4)...(26)

Iran Fails to Provide Key Information on Nuclear Plan: IAEA

VIENNA - The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is not able to verify some outstanding issues about Iran's nuclear program as Tehran has not provided enough information, the U.N. nuclear watchdog said Monday.

"Iran has yet to provide explanations that enable the agency to clarify two outstanding practical measures," IAEA chief Yukiya Amano said in a statement to a board meeting. "The Agency is not in a position to provide credible assurance about the absence of undeclared nuclear material and activities in Iran, and therefore to conclude that all nuclear

material in Iran is in peaceful activities," he said. He added that his agency remains ready to accelerate the resolution of all outstanding issues, but "this process cannot continue indefinitely." The IAEA has asked Iran to provide information about two outstanding issues of its nuclear plan under a deal agreed between the two sides in November last year. Western nations fear that Iran may have developed nuclear weapons under the cover of civilian nuclear plans, an allegation that Tehran denies.

Under an interim deal inked between Iran and the world's major countries in November 2013, Tehran said it ... (More on P4)...(27)

Elections in Tajikistan Took Place in a Restricted Political Space: OSCE/ODIHR

DUSHANBE - The Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions, which is the result of a common endeavor involving the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) and the European Parliament (EP), in particular, notes that the March 1 parliamentary elections took place in a restricted political

space and failed to provide a level playing field for candidates.

The assessment was made to determine whether the elections complied with OSCE commitments, other international obligations and standards for democratic elections and with national legislation.

Although the government stated its ambition to hold democratic elections, and some improvements were ... (More on P4)...(28)

Neighbor News

President's Party Wins Parliamentary Election in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE - The People's Democratic Party led by Tajikistan President Emomali Rakhmonov, which currently controls 55 of the 63 seats in the Tajik parliament, has won 65 percent of votes in the country's parliamentary election held on March 1. Nearly 300 candidates from eight political parties contested for 63 seats in the lower house of parliament, the Majlisi Namoyandagon. The Central Election Commission of Tajikistan today announced preliminary results of the elec-

tion. The Commission said that more than 3.7 million or 87.7 percent of registered voters had cast a ballot. The People's Democratic Party won 65.2 percent of the votes, the Agrarian Party - 11.8 percent, the Party of Economic Reforms - 7.6 percent, the Socialist Party - 5.5 percent, the Communist Party - 2.3 percent, the Democratic Party - 1.7 percent, the Islamic Revival Party - 1.5 percent, and the Social Democratic Party - 0.5 percent. It means that the ... (More on P4)...(29)

Nuclear Deal Hinges on U.S. Will to Lift Sanctions: Iran

GENEVA - A deal on Iran's nuclear program could be concluded this week if the United States and other Western countries have sufficient political will and agree to remove sanctions on Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Monday. "Our negotiating partners, particularly the Western countries and particularly the United States, must once and for all come to the under-

standing that sanctions and agreement don't go together," he said in Geneva. "If they want an agreement, sanctions must go... We believe all sanctions must be lifted." He told reporters that Iran, whose disagreement with six world powers over how fast sanctions should be dropped is one of the main obstacles to a final nuclear accord, had demonstrated its political will by ... (More on P4)...(30)

Xi Gets Royal Invitation to Visit UK during Meeting Prince William

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping said on Monday he looks forward to visiting Britain this year at the invitation of Queen Elizabeth II as he received Prince William, the first senior British royal to visit the Chinese mainland in a generation. The relationship between

China and Britain is heading for the fast track, Xi said in Beijing, highlighting two-way trade worth \$80 billion and cooperation in sectors including finance, nuclear power and high-speed rail.

The president thanked the contribution of the ... (More on P4)...(31)

Pakistan Wastes \$3.7 Million Worth of Donated Vaccine

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan has wasted \$3.7 million worth of vaccines donated to protect children from deadly diseases because officials failed to store them properly, a senior health official told Reuters on Monday. The scandal is the latest problem to be exposed in Pakistan's poorly run public health services.

"We have suspended the officials concerned and are conducting an inquiry," Saira Afzal Tarrar, minister of state for national health services, told Reuters. The ruined vaccines were pentavalent vaccines, which combine different vaccines in one injection and are supposed to protect children against diphther-

ria, tetanus, whooping cough, hepatitis B and a bacteria that causes meningitis and pneumonia. It must be stored at cold temperatures to remain effective but Pakistan's power sector is chronically mismanaged and the country suffers several hours of power cuts a day. Officials said the vaccines were exposed to fluctuating temperatures, possibly because of faulty generators. "There may have been issue with the generators, but the facts will become clear after the inquiry," said Dr Saqlain Ahmad Gilani, the national programme manager at the Expanded Programme on Immunisation. (Monitoring Desk)

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