

Obama, European Leaders to Discuss Ukraine, Global Security: WH

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Barack Obama will hold talks on Tuesday with European leaders to discuss the Ukraine crisis and global security issues, the White House (WH) said.

Obama and the leaders of Britain, France, Germany and Italy, as well as the head of the European Commission, will speak by video conference at 11:30 a.m. EST (1630 GMT), it said in a statement.

The meeting comes amid ongoing violence in Ukraine following a fragile 2-week-old ceasefire agreement.

Ukraine and Western governments have accused Russia of sending troops and weapons to support separatists in eastern Ukraine, despite the peace deal agreed to



on Feb. 12. Moscow has denied providing such support. On Tuesday, Kiev announced its highest casualty toll in several days with three Ukrainian servicemen dead and nine wounded amid pro-Russian shelling despite a ceasefire deal.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi will hold the call with Obama anchored in the White House Situation Room. European Commission President Donald Tusk will also participate, the White House said.

On Monday, European leaders said they agreed that the OSCE European rights and security watchdog needed a broader role as observers of the ceasefire agreement and the removal of weapons. (Reuters)

OSCE to Monitor Truce Violation Areas: Kiev

KIEV - The leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany have agreed to send observers to flashpoint sites in eastern Ukraine as sporadic deadly attacks continue to rattle a shaky truce, Kiev said Tuesday.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin described the situation on the ground as "very difficult and tense", three weeks after a peace roadmap was hammered out in Minsk. Kiev's military spokesman Andriy Lysenko said three soldiers had been killed and nine injured in the past 24 hours, but did not say where. Since the February 12 truce, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande have spoken a number of times on shoring up the ceasefire, including implementation of one of the key conditions -- the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front-line. In a readout of their



latest conversation issued by the Ukrainian presidency, the four leaders behind the ceasefire "supported Ukraine's suggestion to send monitors to all locations of ceasefire violations".

The intensified monitoring by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe would start with 10 flashpoints, including the Donetsk airport area which fell to the pro-Russian separatists in January after months of deadly combat. The offices of Hollande, Merkel, and Putin called for greater OSCE involvement and suggested that the monitoring mission publish a

daily report on its observations. Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said the leaders "agreed that the OSCE should play a more important role in monitoring the ceasefire and the withdrawal of weapons."

The French presidency noted "progress" in the implementation of the ceasefire but said that the situation in eastern Ukraine -- where more than 6,000 people have died since April -- needed to be improved. The Kremlin also backed "rigorous adherence to the ceasefire and a continuation of the pullback of heavy weapons". (AFP)

Russia, Ukraine Agree on Gas Delivery: EU

BRUSSELS - Moscow and Kiev have agreed on a gas delivery deal to ensure Ukrainian gas consumption until the end of March, with Ukraine guaranteeing an undisputed transit of gas to the EU, after an EU-brokered trilateral gas talks in Brussels.

"I am satisfied that we managed to safeguard the full application of the Winter Package for the supply needs in Ukraine," European Commission Vice President responsible for energy Maros Sefcovic, who chaired the trilateral talks, said in a statement late Monday.

Russia asked Ukraine on Friday to complete payment for Russian gas on the day to guarantee gas supplies in March, warning that in line with last October's agreements reached in Brussels, sup-

plies will stop as from Tuesday if no money is received.

"We also agreed to take up trilateral negotiations on the follow-up to the Winter Package. I am reassured that the supply of gas to the EU markets remains secure," said Sefcovic.

According to the gas delivery deal, Ukraine's national oil and gas company Naftogaz will pre-pay and order from Russia's Gazprom sufficient quantities of gas to ensure covering all domestic consumption by Ukraine in March, and Naftogaz continues to guarantee an undisrupted transit of gas to the EU. Russia and Ukraine also agreed to hold further talks in order to agree on the follow-up to the gas delivery, he said. On the issue of supplies to certain areas of

Donetsk and Lugansk regions, the statement said the two parties acknowledged that further discussion are needed, as it is "highly complex in legal, technical and political terms."

Sefcovic said the European Commission will propose a draft agenda and invite the parties to a meeting before the end of March. Gas deliveries between Russia and Ukraine resumed last December according to the Winter Package deal reached after lengthy negotiations and bargaining. The package allowed the resumption of Russian gas supply to Ukraine till March 2015 on the condition that by the end of 2014 Ukraine repay in two tranches 3.1 billion dollars of its outstanding debt of over 5 billion U.S. dollars. (Xinhua)

Egypt Court Formally Delays Parliamentary Election

CAIRO - Egypt's administrative court formally delayed Tuesday this month's parliamentary election, after the electoral commission announced it would not be held on time due to legal obstacles. The constitutional court ruled Sunday that part of the electoral law was unconstitutional, prompting the electoral commission to begin preparing a new timetable for the vote, which had been due to start on March 21.

The administrative court ruled to "cancel the call for elections in March," the official MENA news agency reported. That



was a formality in postponing the vote before the law is redrafted and approved by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

Lawyers who appealed against the law said it did not divide districts in a way that would adequately represent voters. The election would be the first for parliament

since then army chief Sisi overthrew Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. After Morsi's ouster, Sisi announced plans for a new constitution, to be followed by presidential and parliamentary elections. A new charter was adopted in January 2014 and Sisi was elected president in May. (AFP)

Assad Accuses Turkish Erdogan of Supporting Extremist Groups

DAMASCUS - Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Tuesday accused Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of supporting extremist groups in Syria, the state-run SANA news agency reported.

Assad charged that Erdogan undertakes "destructive policies that don't serve the peoples" and supports the "takfiri, extremist powers to please his masters and to implement their schemes," the report said.

The remarks by Assad were made during his meeting with a number of visiting Turkish politi-



cians from Turkish opposition parties.

Meanwhile, Assad said fighting terrorism could not only be done by fighting the terrorists, but by heaping pressure on the countries supporting them in order to make such countries change their policies to establish a real cooperation to rid

the region of the rampant terrorism. For its part, the Turkish delegation said the battle against terrorism waged by Syria is the main factor to protect the region from defragmentation, noting that "the majority of Turkish people still believe in the fraternal relations ... (More on P4)...(22)

EU Report Calls for More Effort to Meet Environmental Goals

BRUSSELS - The European Union's environmental body says the 28 member states need to do more to meet long-term environmental goals, including targets for greenhouse gas emissions. The European Environment

Agency said in its five-yearly report released Tuesday that the EU's level of ambition "may be inadequate to achieve Europe's long-term environmental goals." It said planned greenhouse gas emission cuts are "insuf-

ficient to bring the EU onto a pathway towards its 2050 target" of reductions by up to 95 percent. It said that the health impact of climate change on the EU's 500 million citizens is "expected to worsen." (AP)

Neighbor News

Iran Calls Obama's 10-Year Nuclear Demand 'Unacceptable'

MONTREUX - Iran on Tuesday rejected as "unacceptable" U.S. President Barack Obama's demand that it freeze sensitive nuclear activities for at least 10 years, but said it would continue talks aimed at securing a deal, Iran's semi-official Fars news agency reported.

"Iran will not accept excessive and illogical demands," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was quoted as saying by Fars.

"Obama's stance ... is expressed in unacceptable and threatening phrases ...," he reportedly said,

adding that negotiations underway in Switzerland would nonetheless carry on.

Zarif and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry sat down for a second day of meetings hours after Obama had told Reuters that Iran must commit to a verifiable halt of at least 10 years on sensitive nuclear work for a landmark atomic deal to be reached.

The aim of the negotiations is to persuade Iran to restrain its nuclear program in exchange for relief from sanctions that have crippled the oil ex ... (More on P4)...(23)

China Responds to U.S. Concern over Counterterrorism Law

BEIJING - China's drafting of its first counterterrorism law is a domestic issue, China's Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday in response to comments made by the United States. U.S. President Barack Obama on Monday said he was concerned that the law would require technology firms to hand over encryption keys, the passcodes that protect data. The formulation of a counterterrorism law is an important step of rule of law and combating terrorism. The content of the draft law is based on real experiences in the fight against terrorism and has taken into account lessons learned by other countries, spokesperson Hua Chunying said at a daily news briefing.

"The formulation of the counterterrorism law is China's internal affair. We hope the United States can calmly and objectively handle it," she said.

"Every country is taking measures to ensure their information is secure," Hua said.

She said China had always opposed network monitoring and supported the drawing up of cyber space rules within the United Nations framework. In September 2011, China, together with Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, submitted an "International Code of Conduct for Information Security" to the 66th session of the UN General Assembly, which promoted such norms and rules. (Xinhua)

Sharif to Leave for KSA on First Official Visit since Taking Office

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif will be visiting Saudi Arabia between March 4 to March 6 on the invitation of King Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

Foreign Office spokesperson Tasneem Aslam said the premier will be accompanied by a high-level delegation comprising Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif and Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Syed Tariq Fatemi.

"This will be his first official visit to the kingdom after he assumed the premier's office in 2013," she said. The prime minister is scheduled to hold talks with King Salman, perform Umrah and visit Madinah to offer prayers at Masjid-e-Nabvi during his three-day visit.

The spokesperson said Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are tied in close fraternal bonds of shared faith and values.

"Being the Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, the King of Saudi Arabia has a special place in the hearts of every Pakistani," Aslam said.

"Saudi Arabia also hosts more than 1.7 million Pakistanis whose remittances contribute substantially to the economy of Pakistan. Annual trade volume between the two countries exceeds US\$ 4.5 billion." It is hoped that PM Nawaz's official visit will provide an opportunity for the leadership of the two countries to discuss issues of mutual interest in the global and regional context which will further strengthen their existing bilateral relations. (Monitoring Desk)

IRP Does Not Recognize the Election Results: IRP Leader

DUSHANBE - The Islamic Revival Party (IRP) leader Muhiddin Kabiri says his party does not recognize the election results. "A statement by the Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER) that the Islamic Revival Party allegedly received only 1.5 percent of the votes cast does not correspond to the facts," IRP leader Muhiddin Kabiri told journalists in Dushanbe yesterday. According to him, the IRP Political Council will hold a meeting in the near future to hear opinions of the party activists in the regions. "Only after that we will release our assessment of the election

results published by the CCER," Mr. Kabiri noted. "People have lost from falsification of the election results and this is not to government's credit," IRP leader said, stressing that the IRP has always acted and will continue acting within legal boundaries.

"We knew that there will be pressure and it will not be easy but we did not expect such results," Kabiri noted.

The IRP deputy head, Mahmudali Hayit noted the elections were not transparent as their party was not allowed to be present at the vote counting, which was held behind closed doors. (Asia-Plus)

Iraqi Forces Try to Seal Off IS around Tikrit



BAGHDAD - Thousands of Iraqi soldiers and Shi'ite militiamen sought to seal off Islamic State fighters in Tikrit and nearby towns on Tuesday, the second day of Iraq's biggest offensive yet against a stronghold of the radical Sunni Islamist militants.

Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani, who has helped coordinate Baghdad's counter-attacks against Islamic State since it seized much of northern Iraq in June, was overseeing at least part of the operation, witnesses told Reuters.

His presence on the front-line highlights neighboring Iran's influence over the Shi'ite fighters who have been key to containing the militants in Iraq. In contrast the U.S.-led air coalition which has been attacking Islamic State across Iraq and Syria has not yet played a role in Tikrit, the Pentagon said on Monday, perhaps in part because of the high-level Iranian presence.

Iraqi military officials said security forces backed by the Shi'ite militia known as Hashid Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) units were advancing gradually, their progress slowed by road-

side bombs and snipers. They have yet to enter Tikrit, best known as the hometown of executed former president Saddam Hussein, or the nearby Tigris river town of al-Dour, which officials describe as a major center for the Islamic State fighters.

On the southern flank of the offensive, army and police officials said government forces moving north from the city of Samarra could launch an attack on al-Dour later on Tuesday. Soleimani, head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, was directing operations on the eastern flank from a village about 55 km (35 miles) from Tikrit called Albu Rayash, captured from Islamic State two days ago.

With him were two Iraqi Shi'ite paramilitary leaders: the leader of the Hashid Shaabi, Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, and Hadi al-Amiri who leads the Badr Organisation, a powerful Shi'ite militia.

"(Soleimani) was standing on top of a hill pointing with his hands toward the areas where Islamic State are still operating," said a witness who was accompanying security forces near Albu Rayash. (Reuters)

DPRK FM Denounces U.S.-South Korean Military Exercises

GENEVA - The Foreign Minister of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) on Tuesday warned the joint annual military exercises being staged by the United States and South Korea were "provocative" in nature and could possibly "spark off a war".

Ri Su Yong, Minister of Foreign Affairs of DPRK, said here at the United Nations-backed Conference on Disarmament that "the U.S. has intensified nuclear threats against the DPRK rather than diminishing them", according to a video clip of Ri's speech and the English interpretation provided by the United Nations (UN) TV, which provided media outlets in Geneva with selected live programming of UN events.

"The nuclear threat (of the U.S.) towards the DPRK is, by no means, potential or abstract but rather a practical and physical matter," he added.

As for the U.S.-South Korean military exercises that kicked off on Monday, the top diplomat of DPRK warned it being "unprecedentedly provocative in nature and have an especially high possibility of sparking off a war".

"In case a war breaks out on the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. and its subordinate South Korea will be entirely responsible for all consequences," Ri said. (Xinhua)