

U.S. and Iran Make 'Some Progress' on Nuclear Talks

MONTREUX - The U.S. and Iranian foreign ministers wrapped up three days of talks over Iran's nuclear programme on Wednesday, a day after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the deal being negotiated was a serious mistake.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran's Mohammad Javad Zarif have negotiated for more than 10 hours since Monday in the Swiss lakeside town of Montreux, hoping to work out a framework deal by late March. "We have made some progress but have a lot of challenges yet ahead," a senior U.S. State Department official told reporters traveling with Kerry.

"The bottom line here is that (there is) no deal to announce to anybody today, but very intense, hard work, some progress, but tough challenges yet to be resolved," the official said. "We expect that we (and the Iranians) will regroup bilaterally, with the European Union present as well, on the 15th of March, location to be confirmed but most likely Geneva." Asked if he thought they had made progress, Zarif told reporters:



"We have, but a lot of work remains." However, Netanyahu's controversial speech to the U.S. Congress on Tuesday, where he harshly criticised the diplomatic efforts to resolve the dispute, may make it harder for the Obama administration to sell the potential deal back home. U.S. negotiator Wendy Sherman will brief Israel soon on the talks and Kerry will meet the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany in Paris on Saturday, the senior U.S. official said.

Netanyahu argued that rather than preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear arms, a deal would "all but guarantee" that it would one day get the atomic bomb, putting Israel, the wider region and U.S. interests at risk.

U.S. President Barack Obama responded within hours saying that Netanyahu had offered no "viable alternatives" to the current course of negotiations.

Iran and world powers are trying to put a framework agreement in place by the end of the month, despite the misgivings of Israel, U.S. congressional Republicans and some Gulf Arab states. Such an accord would be followed by a comprehensive agreement to be completed by the end of June. 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 exporter's economy.

The United States and some of its allies, notably Israel, suspect Iran of using its civil nuclear program as a cover to develop a nuclear weapons capability. Iran denies this, saying it is for peaceful purposes such as generating electricity. (Reuters)

Russian PM Calls for More Economic Self-Sufficiency

MOSCOW - Russia should decrease its dependence on outside factors while avoiding total self-isolation, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday.

"Under current conditions we need to decrease dependence on outer factors and rely more on internal resources," the Interfax news agency quoted him as saying.

Speaking at a meeting with Russian entrepreneurs, Medvedev said the Russian government would allocate financial means to help particular key enterprises survive the ongoing crisis and continue their development.

Meanwhile, he stressed that it would be a mistake to drift toward a total self-isolation of the



country, adding that the government would revise the existing anti-crisis plan when circumstances change. Earlier in the day, the Russian Ministry of Economic Development published a report which attributes the recent "unprecedented" hike of inflation to the government's decision last August to ban the import of a range of foods from

Western countries. According to the report, the largest price hike is seen on the vegetable and fruit market as the domestic production cannot substitute the imports. In January, prices in that sector skyrocketed by 40.7 percent year-on-year. In the same month, food prices in general grew by 20.7 percent year-on-year, the highest growth in 15 years. (Xinhua)

Algeria to Host Libya Crisis Talks: UN

TRIPOLI - The United Nations said Wednesday that representatives of Libyan leaders had been invited for talks next week in Algeria as part of efforts to resolve their country's conflict.

"The United Nations Support Mission in Libya announces that a meeting of representatives of Libyan political leaders and activists will convene early next week in Algeria," UNSMIL said.

"The mission continues to reach out to leaders of armed groups to work on reaching a ceasefire, and urges all groups to constructively engage with its efforts in this regard," it said in a statement. An Algerian minister, meanwhile, said his country had already hosted secret meetings in recent months between 200 Libyan figures.

"Some of them (the meetings) have resulted in signatures," said Abdelader Messahel, minister for African and Maghreb affairs.

Ahead of next week's meeting in Algiers, Libya's rival parliaments are due to hold talks in Morocco on Thursday, according to UNSMIL and deputies.

Also, UNSMIL said it will convene in Brussels next week a second meeting of municipal representatives from across Libya to work on confidence-building measures.

Opposing militias in Libya, awash with weapons since its 2011 revolution that toppled longtime leader Moamer Kadhafi, are battling for control of its cities and oil wealth. Libya has rival governments and parliaments, those recognised by the international community sitting in the far east of the country and the others with ties to Islamists in the capital Tripoli.

Since launching efforts at dialogue in September, UN envoy Bernardino Leon has been unable to bring together leading players from the rival camps. (AFP)

IS Targeted in 12 Air Strikes by U.S., Coalition: Statement



WASHINGTON - The United States and its allies staged 12 air strikes on Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria in a 24-hour period, the Combined Joint Task Force said in a statement on Wednesday. Three strikes near Kob-

ani, Syria, hit a tactical unit and destroyed five fighting positions while in Iraq, five air strikes hit Islamic State bomb-making facilities, a weapons storage site and vehicles. Four raids also were carried out near Ramadi and Sinjar. (Reuters)

Iraqi Forces Advance to Free Salahudin Province from IS Militants

TIKRIT - Iraqi security forces on Wednesday continued their biggest offensive for the third day in Salahudin province to free the northern parts of the province from the Islamic State (IS) militants, security sources said.

The troops and allied Sunni and Shiite militias, covered by Iraqi air support, attacked Ajil oilfield area in east of the provincial capital city of Tikrit, some 170 km north of Baghdad, sparking heavy clashes with the IS militants, a provincial security source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity. The troops continue their fight during the day to free the oilfield within the coming few hours of the day, the source said. Late on Tuesday, the troops recaptured the

nearby oilfield of Allas, after they drove away the extremist militants, he said, adding that both the small oilfields apparently were used to fund the extremist militants' activities.

Meanwhile, the security forces are still progressing slowly and cautiously from their positions around the towns of Dour in south of Tikrit and Alam in east of the city, because the militants planted dozens of bombs in the roads leading to the towns, while sporadic clashes and sniper shots were also behind the slow advance of the troops who sustained some casualties.

Among the casualties was Nouri Abu Mahdi, a prominent leader of a Shiite militia known as "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq",

who was killed when a roadside bomb struck his vehicle near the town of Dour, the source said.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, or League of the Righteous, is said to be a splintered group from the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army.

They are part of what the U.S. and Iraqi officials earlier named Special Groups, who are allegedly funded, trained and armed by Iran's Quds Force during the U.S. occupation of Iraq and later became allied to the Shiite-led government in Baghdad.

The Iraqi security forces began their operation before Sunday dawn via five paths; two from Mkesheifa and Sur Shnas, south of Tikrit, two others from Udheim and Tuz... (More on P4)... (27)

EU Ready with Sanctions if Ukraine Ceasefire Violated: Merkel

BRUSSELS - German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned Russia on Wednesday that any serious violation of the current ceasefire in east Ukraine - which she described as "fragile" - would prompt Europe to impose further sanctions on Moscow for supporting the separatists. "So far we've got a fragile ceasefire which needs to be stabilized," Merkel told reporters in Brussels. "But



if the Minsk agreement is seriously violated, European leaders and the (European) Commission stand ready to prepare and

impose further sanctions," she said at a news conference with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. (Reuters)

Politically Motivated Crimes Must Stop: Putin

MOSCOW - Russian President Vladimir Putin said Wednesday that politically motivated crimes such as the killing of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov must be stopped. "Russia should get rid of the tragedies like what we have witnessed recently. I mean the daring murder of Boris Nemtsov happened right in the center of the capital," Putin told the Russian Interior Ministry. Nemtsov, who was

a former deputy prime minister, was shot dead at about midnight last Saturday near the Kremlin when he was strolling with Ukrainian model Anna Duritskaya.

Putin blamed "extremists" for the crime and said their aim is to provoke civil unrest in Russia. "Actions of the extremists have become more and more sophisticated. We see attempts from organizing illegal street actions to open ha-

tred propaganda in the social networks," the Interfax news agency quoted him as saying. The extremists attempt to eventually undermine Russia's sovereignty by inciting nationalism, intolerance and aggression, the president stressed, citing Ukraine as an example of their success.

Law enforcement agencies must pay special attention to politically motivated crimes, Putin said. (Xinhua)

Saudi Arabia, South Korea Ink Nuclear Power Deal

RIYADH - Saudi Arabia and South Korea have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to cooperate on the development of nuclear energy in the oil-rich Persian Gulf kingdom. The MoU was struck between Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and visiting South

Korean President Park Geun-hye in Riyadh on Wednesday.

Under the deal, worth about USD 2 billion, South Korean firms will construct at least two mid-size commercial reactors in Saudi Arabia. According to a statement released by the South Korean presidential office,

during his meeting with the Saudi king, Park told Salman that Saudi Arabia's move to join hands with South Korea in the nuclear cooperation is a "smart choice." Saudi Arabia has already announced that it would invest USD 100 billion in expanding its power... (More on P4)... (28)

Neighbor News

China's Defense Budget Growth Rate Drops to Around 10 Pct

BEIJING - China will raise its defense budget by around 10 percent this year, compared with last year's 12.2 percent, a spokeswoman for the annual session of the country's top legislature said Wednesday.

Speaking to reporters at a press conference a day ahead of the Third Session of the 12th National People's Congress (NPC), Fu Ying said the exact figure will be published in a draft budget report Thursday.

"I can give you a rough idea. The recommended growth rate for national defense in the draft 2015 budget report is about 10 percent," Fu said.

China's defense budget rose by 12.2 percent last year to 808.2 billion yuan (about 131 billion U.S. dollars), riding on a multi-year run of double-digit increases.

A growth rate of about 10

percent could be the lowest in five years.

The figure will put the world's second largest economy's defense spending at some 890 billion yuan (about 145 billion U.S. dollars). The U.S. military spending amounted to 660.4 billion dollars in 2013.

"To tell the truth, there is still a gap between China's armed forces [and foreign counterparts] in terms of overall military equipment. We still need more time," she said, adding that capital support is also needed for the modernization of China's national defense and its army.

"Compared with major countries in the world, the road to China's defense modernization is indeed a difficult one," Fu noted. "We have to rely on ourselves for most of our military equipment ... (More on P4)... (29)

West Must Choose Between N-Deal or Continued Iran Sanctions: Zarif



MONTREUX - Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has told Press TV that the West, especially the United States, must choose between reaching a nuclear deal with Iran or continuation of sanctions, as these two cannot go hand in hand.

In an exclusive interview with Press TV reporter in the Swiss city of Montreux on Wednesday, Zarif said if the West really seeks to reach an agreement with Iran over Tehran's nuclear program, there is no need to continue with sanctions.

The Iranian top diplomat further noted that a serious problem on the way of an agreement is the great deal of pressure exerted by scaremongers, who are trying to create impediments on the way of negotiators.

Referring to the latest round of nuclear talks between Iran and the P5+1 countries - the US, the UK, France, Germany, China and Russia - Zarif said the negotiating sides have made serious headway in this round of talks. The Iranian foreign minister stated that although gaps still remain between negotiating sides by "We're not far from [the final] deal."

The latest round of the nuclear talks ended in

Montreux, Switzerland, on Wednesday. The three-day negotiations were headed by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Representatives of Iran and the United States had also held three rounds of intense negotiations in the Swiss city of Geneva on February 22-23 to bridge their differences ahead of a July 1 deadline for Iran and the P5+1 group - Russia, China, France, Britain, the United States and Germany - to reach a comprehensive nuclear deal.

The talks were attended by head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, Iranian Deputy Foreign Ministers Abbas Araqchi and Majid Takht-e Ravanchi, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, and European Union deputy foreign policy chief, Helga Schmid in addition to Hossein Fereydoun, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's special aide.

An informed source close to Iran's negotiating team told Press TV reporter that the next round of talks at ministerial level has been slated for March 15-20. (Press TV)

Sharif Sharif Arrives in Riyadh

ISLAMABAD - Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif arrived in Riyadh on Wednesday on the invitation of King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud for a three-day visit.

He was received at the airport by the King himself, and was presented with a guard of honour. This is the premier's first official visit to the Kingdom since King Salman bin Abdul Aziz assumed the throne. During his three-day visit, PM Nawaz will also perform Umrah and visit the tomb of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), in addition to meeting members of the Pakistani community in Saudi Arabia. The premier

is accompanied by a high-level delegation which includes Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, Chief Minister Punjab Mr. Shahbaz Sharif, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on National Affairs Irfan Siddiqui and Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Syed Tariq Fatemi. In his pre-departure statement, the PM had said that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are brotherly countries which are tied in bonds of shared faith and values. He added that the relationship between the two countries has grown stronger with the passage of time. (Monitoring Desk)