Syria Peace Talks Yield Progress as Negotiations End: UN Envoy

GENEVA - The UN Special Envoy for Syria said Friday that progress has been made in the latest round of Syria peace talks, with warring delegations set to reconvene in the Swiss city later this month.

According to Staffan de Mistura, who has mediated proximity talks between delegations since Feb. 23, while no breakthrough has been achieved, negotiations have yielded some tangible progress on the agenda to be adopted for future rounds of talks.

This includes addressing what he labelled the "four baskets", which relate to governance elections, constitution as well as counter-terrorism issues. He also said that more substantive meetings had taken place regarding the main sticking points which continue to divide opposing delegations.

The UN diplomat also said that he is planning to resume the next round of UN-brokered negotiations later this month.

The latest round of Syria peace talks kicked off on Feb. 23, 10 months later since warring parties in the country convened in Geneva last time, which saw talks being put on hold amid a humanitarian meltdown and systemic violence in the Middle East country. (Xinhua)

Syrian Talks 'More Positive' than Previous Round: Opposition

GENEVA - More than a week of UN-sponsored peace talks ended in Geneva on Friday, the main opposition group said, calling the results "more positive" than previous rounds.

"We are closing this round without (a) clear result... but I can say this time was more positive," Nasr al-Hariri, delegation chief for the High Negotiating Committee (HNC), told reporters. "It was first time we discussed in an acceptable depth the issues of the future of Syria and political transition," he added after the talks, the fourth mediated by UN envoy Staffan de Mistura. As in previous rounds, Syrian regime and opposition negotiators did not meet face-to-face, with de Mistura shuttling between the delegations.

The talks were focused on the agenda, rather than getting into the substance of negotiations, with three main "baskets" or areas of discussion: governance, the constitution and elections. The Syrian regime has tried to get counter-terrorism onto the agenda, while the opposition wants more focus on political transition, specifically the fate of President Bashar al-Assad. (AFP)

Integration of Serbia, Balkans, Remains EU's Key Strategic Priority: Mogherini

BELGRADE - Visiting European Union (EU) foreign policy chief said the EU is committed to receiving new member countries and will work together with Serbia to maintain regional stability and create better business environment by stimulating regional cooperation. Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, made the statement at a press conference following her meeting with Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic. Mogherini said she carried the same message to all countries on her ongoing regional tour -- that their integration was the key strategic priority of the EU and that regional stability and cooperation among Balkan countries was integral to their economic development. "From our side, the commitment is full. I am sure this (EU integration) will bring benefits not only to all Serbian people, but also to all EU citizens," she stressed. Mogherini, also a vice-president of the European Commission, said regional stability of the Balkans was the strategic interest of the EU, "not because of geopolitical games, but because peace in the Balkans is peace in Europe." "We have faced, in recent times, and we might face in the times to come, that this has been called into question. The EU is determined to work with all actors, starting from Serbia and all the others in the Western Balkans to guarantee that peace in the region becomes an irreversible achievement for all of us," she said. (Xinhua)

Worrying Signals from US Offering Trade Opportunities for EU: Commissioner

VALLETTA - Due to the protectionist trend that the United States seems to be adopting, it's paving the way for the EU to forge its own trade agreements, European Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmstrom said on Friday. The words came at the informal meeting of EU trade ministers here. Malmstrom added the decisions taken by the U.S. government have sent worrying signals.

The ministers agreed that multilateralism is the way forward in trade policies as it can stimulate economic growth, prosperity and create jobs.

As for the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), Maltese Economy Minister Chris Cardona said that the U.S. quitting brought more opportunities to the EU to make agreements with countries that have been rejected by the Trump administration. On the back of the recently approved Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the EU has been working on deals with countries such as Mexico. (Xinhua)

U.S. Secretary of State to Visit Japan, South Korea, China

TOKYO - U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is due to visit Japan, South Korea and China this month to discuss North Korea on his first trip to the region since he took up his post, Japanese media reported on Saturday.

Tillerson's trip would come as the United States and China try to put relations on an even keel after a rocky start following the election of President Donald Trump, as well as amid heightened tension over North Korea following the killing in Malaysia of the half-brother of its leader.

A U.S. State Department spokesman said: "We don't have any travel to announce at this time." The Japanese and South Korean and foreign ministries could not be reached for comment. China's Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Japan's Kyodo news agency, citing diplomatic sources, said Tillerson was expected in Japan on March 17-18 and would meet Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida.

Tillerson and Kishida were likely to discuss the timing of a visit to Japan by Trump, Kyodo cited its sources as saying.

In China, Tillerson would meet Foreign Ministry Wang Yi and possibly President Xi Jinping, Kyodo reported, adding that the two sides were expected to arrange a meeting in the United States between Xi and Trump for as early as April. (Reuters)

Some 15,000 Iraqi Children Flee West Mosul over Past Week: UNICEF

UNITED NATIONS - Some 15,000 children have fled the western section of Iraq's Mosul city over the previous week where fighting between the government forces and the Islamic State (IS) terrorists is intensifying, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) said Friday.

"UNICEF is responding to the immediate needs at the Hamam Al Alil camp, 20 km from Mosul, where aid is provided to children upon their arrival," UNICEF Regional Emergency Advisor Bastien Vigneau was quoted as saying over the phone from Iraq. He noted that the children were very scared of the sound of the bombs, which was one of the main reasons their parents had decided to flee. They fled with very little luggage and in most cases with a bare minimum of clothes. The children and their families arrived mostly by buses organized by the military. The main priorities, other than the first emergency response, included health, to ensure that children were immunized, primarily against measles and polio, said Vigneau.

Matthew Sarmash, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said that a significant increase in displacement had been noticed in recent days and the Hamam Al Alil camp was close to reach its maximum capacity.

At the moment, 150,000 places were occupied. He said construction is under way to accommodate up to 250,000 people there.

Vigneau said that more than 100,000 children have been displaced from Mosul since the military operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) began in October 2016. (Xinhua)

Britain's Boris Johnson to Visit Russia for Talks

LONDON - British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson is to travel to Russia in the coming weeks for high-level political talks, his office said Saturday.

It will be the first time a British minister has been to Moscow for an official visit in more than five years and could signal a potential thaw in Anglo-Russian relations after years of antagonism.

A Foreign Office spokeswoman stressed that the visit was not a return to "business as usual", saying Britain's approach to Russia was "engage, but beware".

Relations with Russia soured after Britain sought to prosecute suspects in the killing of Kremlin critic and former spy Alexander Litvinenko, murdered by radiation poisoning in London in 2006. Britain has also been one a fervent supporter of Western sanctions against Moscow over Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis. (AFP)

EU Places Ireland Among High-Performing Digital European Countries

DUBLIN - The European Commission (EC), the executive arm of the European Union (EU), said on Friday that Ireland belongs to a cluster of high-performing EU countries when it comes to digitization of the economy and society.

In the 2017 Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), published on Friday by the EC, Ireland was placed 8th among the EU 28 member states, with a particularly strong performance in the integration of digital technology and in the rollout of e-government services.

The DESI is a composite index that summarizes relevant indicators on Europe's digital performance and tracks the evolution of EU member states in digital competitiveness.

The EC used the index to measure digital progress across the categories of connectivity, human capital, use of the internet, integration of digital technologies and digital public services.

In Ireland, 94 percent of households in the country have access to 4G connectivity, a new indicator in the DESI. The level of subscriptions to fast broadband in Ireland at 60 percent is well ahead of the EU average of 37 percent. Under the government's National Broadband Plan, published in 2012, every premises in Ireland will have access to a high speed broadband of a minimum of 30 megabits per second download speed and 6 megabits per second upload speed. (Xinhua)

Turkey Criticises Merkel Reaction to Cancelled Rallies

ANKARA - Turkey hit back at German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Saturday for not criticising the decision by authorities in Germany to ban rallies in support of expanding President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's powers. Ankara and Berlin have been locked in acrimony over the last few days after German towns blocked events where Turkish ministers sought to address Turks living there about the April 16 referendum. Turkish voters will be asked whether to approve constitutional changes to create an executive presidency giving more power to the head of state. "Mrs Merkel says they (the Germans) respect freedom of expression.(AFP)

Zarif: Iran, Commonwealth Countries Can Establish World Energy Capital

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Saturday that enhancing cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and commonwealth countries mainly in the energy sector can turn the region into the world's capital of energy. Zarif: Iran, commonwealth countries can establish world energy capital Zarif made the remarks in a meeting with ambassadors of the commonwealth countries.

Congratulating the 25th independent anniversary of these countries, he said formation of new countries should be regarded as one of the significant developments of the 20th century. 'Expansion of cooperation among countries in the region in energy, transportation, economy, commercial and security in the past 25 years will be to the benefit of regional countries,' Zarif said. Expansion of cooperation among regional countries in the energy sector can turn Asia into the capital of the world energy, he said. Expressing concern on danger of extremism and terrorism in the region, he said extremism and terrorism are borderless. The Islamic Republic of Iran from early days of its independence put all its facilities at the disposal of its neighbors and friends to help their stability, development and security, he said. (IRNA)

Nieghbor News

China, India Should Focus on Cooperation Rather than Disputes: Spokesperson

BEIJING - China and India as the world's two largest developing countries should focus on enhancing mutual understanding and boosting cooperation rather than dwelling on disputes, said a spokesperson for China's top legislature Saturday.

At a press conference a day before the National People's Congress (NPC) convenes its yearly meeting, spokesperson Fu Ying said China and India have over the past decades witnessed rapid development of bilateral trade, which surged from two billion U.S. dollars in the 1990s to last year's more than 70 billion dollars. Air connectivity has improved remarkably, with 40 direct flights between the two countries every week, Fu said.

There have also been frequent exchanges of visits by leaders of the two countries, and the two militaries visit each other every year, the spokesperson said, adding China and India have also established a mechanism to jointly combat cross-border crimes and terrorism.

Fu said the two countries have a lot of consensus on regional and international issues. While some disputes remain, the issues have been discussed properly through diplomatic channels.

She said China and India both face different challenges in development. The two countries should understand each other more and not let disputes stand in the way of bilateral cooperation. Speaking of the China-India strategic dialogue held in Beijing in February, Fu said the dialogue had been extensive and deep. "I felt it was quite positive," she said. (Xinhua)

Pakistan-Iran Brotherly Ties can Never Be Compromised at Any Cost: Gen. Bajwa

ISLAMABAD – Pakistani Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa reiterated that Pakistan Army greatly values historical relationship between the two brotherly countries which 'can never be compromised at any cost'. Pakistan-Iran brotherly ties can never be compromised at any cost: Army Chief According to a statement released by Pakistani Army media wing 'Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR)', General Qamar Javed Bajwa in a meeting with Ambassador of Iran to Pakistan Mehdi Honardoost on Saturday said that enhanced Pak-Iran bilateral military to military cooperation will have positive impact on regional peace and stability. The statement further said that both sides during the meeting at army headquarters discussed regional security and matters of mutual interest. It said that Iran ambassador appreciated Pak Army's contributions towards regional peace and stability. The ambassador also expressed his appreciation for ongoing Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad for elimination of terrorism from Pakistan. Meeting comes few days after a recent visit by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to Islamabad to attend ECO Summit. (IRNA)

Iran Carries out Successful Test of Air Defence System

TEHRAN - The official IRNA news agency said the test of the S-300 system came during a recent military exercise called Damvand, the name of Iran's highest mountain.

It said the test targeted various flying objects including missiles. With a range of up to 125 miles, the S-300 is capable of simultaneously tracking and striking multiple targets. State TV aired footage of the missiles launching from the back of trucks. It said the test was carried out in Iran's central desert. Russia delivered the S-300 system to Iran in 2016, nearly 10 years after the initial contract had been signed.

The deal was agreed in 2007, but Russia suspended delivery three years later because of strong objections from the United States and Israel.

In 2016, a landmark nuclear deal between Iran and world powers went into effect under which Iran limited its nuclear activities in return for the lifting of sanctions. (IRNA)

OSCE Supports Women's Resource Centres in Tajikistan's Remote Areas

DUSHANBEH - The OSCE Office in Tajikistan and the OSCE-supported Women's Resource Centres (WRCs) signed the new implementing partner agreement on March 3 to launch project implementation for 2017. The signing ceremony was held in the premises of the Balkhi Women Resource Centre, Khatlon region.

"The Office is happy to extend its support to the WRCs in 18 locations spread around the country. Through our co-operation we contribute to increasing a sense of security for people," said Ambassador Tuula Yrjölä, Head of the OSCE Office in Tajikistan.

"Since 2011 the Network of WRCs has provided assistance to 93,931 beneficiaries (78,073 women and 15,858 men) in the remotest areas of Tajikistan. The Office in Tajikistan aims to continue its intervention in this specific area to promote women's rights and to raise awareness among vulnerable groups of the society".

"We are happy to continue our co-operation with the OSCE in the area of combating domestic violence and breaking gender-related stereotypes in the regions.

We have been able to gain the trust of the people throughout the years by providing quality services to the survivors of domestic violence and women in difficulties," said Muazama Usmanova, the Director of the Oxana NGO in the Balkhi district of Khatlon region. (AKI)