

Obama Spokesman Says Trump's Wire-Tapping Claims "Simply False"

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Donald Trump's accusation that his predecessor Barack Obama had his "wires tapped" in Trump Tower before Election Day is "simply false," Obama spokesman Kevin Lewis said Saturday. "A cardinal rule of the Obama Administration was that no White House official ever interfered with any independent investigation led by the Department of Justice," Lewis said in a statement. "As part of that practice, neither President Obama nor any White House official ever ordered surveillance on any U.S. citizen. Any suggestion otherwise is simply false," said Lewis.



Ben Rhodes, former deputy national security adviser to Obama, tweeted that presidents can't simply order wiretaps as Trump suggests. Earlier Saturday, Trump claimed in a tweet storm that Obama had wiretapped Trump Tower before his election victory. It remains unclear whether Trump had any proof or was referencing a report. "Terrible! Just found out that Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower just before the victory. Nothing found. This is McCarthyism!" Trump tweeted in a series of five tweets on Saturday morning. "Is it legal for a sitting President ... (More on P4)...(19)

BiH Makes Impressive Progress towards EU: Mogherini

SARAJEVO - Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has made impressive progress towards the European Union (EU), visiting EU foreign policy chief said here on Saturday. Federica Mogherini, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, made the comment at a press conference following her meeting with BiH Chairman of Council of Ministers Denis Zvizdic. Recalling the skepticism occurred two years ago in terms of BiH's progress to-

wards the EU, Mogherini said, but two years later, the country has made impressive strides towards the EU. For his part, Zvizdic said that BiH made very noticeable steps forward in the last 20 months, but stressed that further integration process would depend solely on BiH. According to the latest polls, more than 78 percent of BiH citizens committed to the EU path, added Zvizdic. During her visit, Mogherini... (More on P4)...(20)

UK Needs Financial Reserves in the Tank for Brexit: Hammond

LONDON - Britain's finance minister Philip Hammond said he would keep "reserves in the tank" to see the economy through its looming Brexit challenge, signaling little room for extra spending in this week's budget despite better news on borrowing. He also said tensions were now easing with other European Union countries after Prime Minister Theresa May shocked her peers by saying no deal was better than a bad deal. Hammond is due to deliver a budget plan on

Wednesday which will be overshadowed by the triggering of the two-year Brexit process which is expected this month. Britain's economy coped surprisingly well with the initial shock of June's referendum, meaning official growth forecasts for 2017 will probably be raised sharply in the budget. It also means Hammond will probably announce a modest fall in the amount



of money that Britain needs to borrow over the next five years. But he said on Sunday that he will not be relaxing his strategy of fixing what remains one of the biggest budget deficits among the world's big rich economies. (Reuters)

Syrian War Jet Lost Near Turkish Borders: State TV

DAMASCUS - Communication with Syrian war jet was lost while the warplane was on a reconnaissance mission near the Turkish borders on Saturday, state TV reported. The report said the search for the pilot is ongoing, spelling no further details. Meanwhile, the Turkish-backed Ahrar al-Sham movement said its rebels fired at a Syrian MiG-21 in the northern countryside of Idlib near the Turkish borders. A video posted online also purported to show

the warplane while being shot at by Ahrar al-Sham. Activists said that after being shot, the warplane continued to fly toward the Syrian-Turkish borders, adding that the plane may have crashed over the Turkmen Mountains in Syria's Latakia province. However, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said earlier that a Syrian military jet has crashed near the Turkish-Syrian border. "There is information that a MiG modeled ... (More on P4)...(21)

French Election: Fillon's Fate Hinges on Paris Rally

PARIS - France's presidential campaign is facing a potential turning point as conservative candidate Francois Fillon, facing corruption charges, holds a rally Sunday that could determine whether he stays in the race. The rally across from the Eiffel Tower is meant to gauge Fillon's remaining support after numerous defections by conservative allies just seven weeks before the first round of the April-May election. They're disillusioned by how he has handled the investigation into allega-

tions he arranged parliamentary jobs for his wife and children that they never performed. Protesters plan two counter-demonstrations in Paris during his rally. Fillon is expected to speak on national television Sunday night, though canceled a radio interview scheduled Monday morning. Fillon's party, The Republicans, is holding a meeting of its political committee on Monday evening to evaluate the situation after Sunday's



rally. Fillon's wife Penelope urged her husband to stay in the race, in her first interview since the scandal broke in January. "Unlike the others, I will not abandon him," Penelope Fillon was quoted as saying in the Journal du dimanche newspaper. (AP)

Iraqi Forces Initiate New Progress toward City Center of Western Mosul

MOSUL, Iraq - Iraqi security forces on Sunday launched a new push toward Mosul old city center, on the western bank of Tigris River, amid heavy clashes with Islamic State (IS) militants, the Iraqi military said. Early in the morning, the federal police and interior ministry special forces, known as Rapid Response, initiated a progress from the southern outskirts toward the IS defensive lines in the neighborhoods of Dandan and Dawassa,



which are part of Mosul's old city center, Lt. Gen. Abdul-Amir Yarallah, from the Joint Operations Command said in a statement. The battles in the old

neighborhoods of downtown Mosul bring the troops closer to some main government buildings in Dawassa neighborhood. ... (More on P4)...(22)

UN Says 66,000 Displaced in 5 Months of North Syria Fighting

BEIRUT - A U.N. humanitarian agency says some 66,000 people have been displaced in five months of fighting in Syria's crowded northern battlefield. Turkish, Syrian government, Syrian opposition, and autonomous Kurdish-led forces have all been jostling for territory formerly held by the Islamic State group near the Turkish-Syrian frontier, as preparations are being made to attack the extremists' de facto capital, Raqqa. The U.N.'s OCHA agency said Sunday that the Turkish and Syrian opposition campaign to capture al-Bab from IS militants displaced 40,000 residents. They captured the town on Feb. 23, after starting operations in November. The office said another 26,000 residents have been displaced in fighting around Manbij, held by ... (More on P4)...(23)

Hope Rises as Latest Syria Peace Talks End on Positive Note

GENEVA - With the Syrian conflict entering its sixth-year, the fourth and latest round of intra-Syrian peace talks ended with unusual positivity on Friday, as proximity discussions yielded an agenda for future negotiations seeking to broker a political end to the conflict. While no major breakthrough was achieved in talks mediated by UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura, the diplomat lauded the fact that rival delegations agreed on a credible plan to guide the next round of discussions set to kick off later this month. With expectations set to a minimum from the outset, de Mistura commended the "serious discussions" he and his team were able to have with the Syrian government delegation and officials representing opposition factions seeking to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The fact that all invitees stayed until the end was also considered an improvement from past rounds, and added to what was seen as an auspicious start when opposing delegations sat in the same room in a ceremony marking the start of talks on Feb. 23. This was particularly symbolic since the last time parties met under the auspices of the UN was in April 2016, a month which saw negotiations put on hold amid a humanitarian meltdown and systemic violence in the Middle East country. With delegations unable to see eye-to-eye on a range of issues last year, the envoy's comments offered hope that future negotiations will finally be able to focus on substantive political issues that continue to divide opposing delegations. (Xinhua)

Neighbor News

China to Strengthen Defenses, No Word on Budget

BEIJING - China pledged more support for its military on Sunday including strengthening maritime and air defenses as it takes steps to safeguard its sovereignty, but in a highly unusual move did not give spending figures for 2017 despite promises of transparency. Parliament's spokeswoman, Fu Ying, said on Saturday defense spending for this year would rise about 7 percent, accounting for about 1.3 percent of gross domestic product - the same level as the last few years. However, the actual defense spending target for this year was not included in the country's budget released at the opening of parliament's annual session on Sunday, as it has been in previous years. "We will support efforts to deepen the reform of national defense and the armed forces, with the aim of building a solid defense and strong armed forces that are

commensurate with China's international standing and are suited to our national security and development interests," the government said in a budget report. It did not elaborate. State news agency Xinhua also did not report the figure. The Defence Ministry and parliament's spokeswoman did not immediately respond to requests for comment. China has repeatedly said its defense spending is transparent and it was not clear why defense numbers were not released. Last year, with the economy slowing, the defense budget recorded its lowest increase in six years, at 7.6 percent, the first single-digit rise since 2010, following a nearly unbroken two-decade run of double-digit increases. Military officers attending parliament largely declined to talk to reporters about ... (More on P4)...(26)

Iran in Talks with Japan to Renew Oil Refinery

TEHRAN - Iran and Japan are in talks to sign a deal worth 2.13 billion U.S. dollars to renew Iran's Abadan oil refinery, the refinery company said Saturday, according to semi-official Fars news agency. Japan's JGC Corporation Engineering Company will develop the refinery, said Esfandiar Daemolzeck, managing director of Abadan Oil Refinery Company, adding that the project will reduce fuel oil output to less than 10 percent. The Abadan refinery,

built in 1912, is located in Abadan city near the coast of the Persian Gulf and was one of world's largest oil refineries. It was largely destroyed in 1980s during the Iraq-Iran war. Japan's Inpex Company is also in talks with Iran to sign a deal for the development of Iranian Azadegan oilfield with an in-place reservoir of 42 billion barrels, said Nouredin Shahnazadeh, managing director of Iran's Petroleum Engineering and Development Company. (Xinhua)

Gen. Bajwa Calls for Closer Tehran-Islamabad Defense Ties

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan's Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa said that stronger defense ties between Iran and Pakistan could enhance regional peace and stability. "Enhanced Pak-Iran military-to-military cooperation will have positive impact on regional peace and stability," General Bajwa said on Saturday in a meeting with the Iranian Ambassador to Islamabad, Mehdi Honardoost, the Dawn news website reported. "Pakistan Army greatly values historical relationship between the

two brotherly countries which can never be compromised at any cost," he added. Honardoost, for his part, hailed the Pakistani government's resolve to fight terrorism, saying, "(The Pakistani army) is contributing to regional peace and security." Earlier this week, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Economic Cooperation Organization's summit, reaffirmed their "mutual desire to strengthen bilateral relations". (Tasnim)

Iran Tests Russian-Made Air Defense System

Moscow - State media in Iran says the military has tested a Russian-made air defense system. Moscow suspended delivery of the system back in 2010 after objections from the US and Israel. But Russia ended up handing over the system last year, almost 10 years after the lucrative contract was first signed.

Last year a landmark nuclear deal came into force between Iran and world powers. The Iranian media says the test of the S-300 system came during a recent military exercise and various flying objects including missiles were targeted. The system is said to have a range of up to 200 kilometres. (Agencies)

Mirziyoyev to Visit Turkmenistan

TASHKENT - Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev will pay a state visit to Turkmenistan March 6-7 at invitation of the country's President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Uzbekistan National News Agency (Uza) reported. The sides will discuss the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan relations and ex-

change views on topical issues of the international and regional agenda. Following the talks, the two presidents are expected to sign a joint statement, a strategic partnership agreement and a number of bilateral documents aimed at further development of cooperation in various areas. (Trend)

UK Should Make Unilateral Offer on Post-Brexit Rights of EU Citizens: Lawmakers

LONDON - The British government should make a unilateral decision now to protect the post-Brexit rights of European Union nationals living in Britain, a committee of lawmakers said in a report published on Sunday. Prime Minister Theresa May has said she wants the issue to be dealt with as a priority in upcoming Brexit negotiations but is not prepared to offer a guarantee until other EU states agree to a reciprocal deal for Britons living abroad. "They did not have a vote in the referendum, but the result has left them living under a cloud of uncertainty," Hilary Benn, an opposition ... (More on P4)...(24)

China's Defense Budget Increase "Eclipsed" by U.S.

BEIJING - China's announcement of raising its defense budget by about 7 percent from the previous year has drawn attention from Western media, which called the increase "the lowest since 2010." The Associated Press (AP) reported on China's defense budget rise, saying it continued "a trend of lowered growth... despite regional tensions over the South China Sea and other issues." Calling the increase a "relatively modest spending increase," AP said: "This year's budget could mark the third consecutive year of declines in defense spending growth rates." The budget

grew by 7.6 percent last year and 10.1 percent in 2015. With the growth, China's total defense budget for 2017 would reach about one trillion yuan (145 billion U.S. dollars), yet "it still lags far behind the U.S. President Donald Trump has asked for a 10 percent increase in U.S. defense spending this year, adding 54 million U.S. dollars to the budget that topped 600 billion dollars last year," the AP said. The Cable News Network (CNN) echoed AP by calling the budget rise "the smallest increase in seven years." It said: "China's defense spending is eclipsed by the United States, which in 2015 ... (More on P4)...(25)