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Arab League Calls for Multinational Force to Fight Militants

CAIRO - The Arab League called for the creation of a regional force to combat militants as countries face a growing threat from Islamic State and other groups.

The ultra-radical group has taken over swathes of Iraq and Syria and splinter groups in other countries like Egypt and Libya have pledged allegiance to it. Yemen's al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is also very active.

The United States leads a coalition that is fighting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Washington says Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and Bahrain have participated in or supported air strikes in Syria. Iran is also playing a major role in fighting Islamic State in Iraq.

Egypt, the most populous Arab state, struck Islamic State targets in Libya last month after the militants beheaded 21 Egyptians. But there has been no compre-



hensive Arab force to fight militants. Previous calls for a unified force have failed to produce results.

Speaking at the opening session of an Arab League meeting of foreign ministers, Secretary General Nabil el-Araby called for action.

"What is required now and urgently is to look into creating a...multi-national force that is able to look at what unites them in terms of responsibilities in the areas of quick intervention to fight terrorism, the activities of terrorist groups, helping in peacekeeping operations and securing humanitarian operations," he said.

It was not immediately clear which countries would join such a force or where or when it would be created.

The Arab League is due to hold a summit of Arab leaders later this month in Sharm el-Sheikh. (Reuters)

Putin Says Plan to Take Crimea Hatched Before Referendum



- Russian President Vladimir Putin has said he ordered officials to start work on taking control of Crimea weeks before a referendum which, the Kremlin has asserted until now, prompted the region's annexation from Ukraine.

Russian state television channel Rossiya-1 aired a brief extract of an interview in which Putin said he had called an emergency meeting in February last year to discuss the overthrow of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich hours earlier.

Yanukovich, a Russian ally, had fled to the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk after being forced out by anti-government protests.

"He would have been just annihilated... We got ready to get him out of Donetsk by land, by sea and by air," Putin said about his meeting in the Kremlin with commanders of special forces and defense ministry officials.

"This was on the night of Feb. 22 through to Feb. 23. We finished around 7 in the morning. And, while saying goodbye, I told all the colleagues: 'We have to start the work on Crimea's return into Russia'.'

This account, broadcast on Sunday, appeared to be at odds with previous assertions from Russian officials that the annexation decision was taken only after the referendum on March 16, when Crimeans voted to become

NATO Seeks

Deeper Cooperation

with Jordan

part of the Russian Federation.

The virtually bloodless seizure of Crimea - a Black Sea peninsula with an ethnic Russian majority and where Moscow has a naval base - was followed by a pro-Moscow insurgency in the east of

About 6,000 people have been killed in the fighting in eastern Ukraine. A fragile ceasefire, agreed last month in Minsk, has largely held so far.

Western governments have condemned Russia's intervention in Crimea as illegal, with the European Union and United States imposing sanctions on Moscow.

In the months since, Putin has adjusted his account of what happened. He initially denied Russian troops were providing security for the referendum, but later acknowledged special forces had been deployed.

Russian soldiers who took part have been given state medals with the citation "For returning Crimea", which give the starting date of the operation as Feb. before Yanukovich was ousted.

Novaya Gazeta, a newspaper often critical of Putin, published details last month of what it said was a document presented to the presidential administration some time between Feb. 4 and Feb. 12 last year. It said the document described a plan to annex Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin called the newspaper's report nonsense. (Reuters)

Australians Sick of Being Lectured By UN: Abbott

SYDNEY - Australia fires back at the UN over a report saying that the country's policies vis-à-vis asylum seekers are in contravention of the international convention against torture.The independent report by the UN's special rapporteur on torture, Juan Mendez, due to be submitted to the UN Human Rights Council on Monday, states that Canberra has failed to facilitate adequate detention conditions, and demands a halt to the detention of

In reaction, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said on Monday, "I really think Australians are sick of being lectured to by the United Nations, particularly, given that we have stopped the boats, and by stopping the boats, we have ended the deaths at sea.

"The UN report also calls on the Australian government to put an end to the escalating violence in its Manus Island detention facility, which has been the focus of persisting acts of protest, including hunger strikes and violence by inmates, many of whom reportedly face indefinite detention.

Australia uses the detention facilities in Papua New Guinea, of which the Manus Island is a part, as well as in the tiny island of Nauru to hold up the refugees who attempt to reach the country illegally. Abbott also claimed that the conditions at the detention facilities on Manus were "reasonable, under all the circumstances.(Press TV)

Nieghbor News

UN Nuclear Experts Hold Talks in Tehran

TEHRAN - Experts from the UN nuclear watchdog held talks in Tehran Monday in their investigation into decade-old allegations of possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme, the ISNA news agency reported.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delegation's visit comes as the United States and other major world powers seek to conclude a comprehensive agreement on Iran's controversial nuclear activities.

While Iran is negotiating limits on its programme with world powers, the IAEA has been pressing leaders in Tehran for years to address allegations that prior to 2003, and possibly since, they conducted research into the technology required to build a nuclear weapon.In 2011, the IAEA expressed concern about Iran's development of "exploding bridge wire detonators" because of their "possible application in a nuclear explo-

It is one of a number of allegations of past weapons research which Tehran denies but which the watchdog says it has yet to satis-

factorily answer. Another technical issue to be discussed during the visit concerns "modelling and calculations" on neutrons, the subatomic particles which trigger the fission of uranium, ISNA reported. After some progress last year, the IAEA investi-

gation stalled. In its latest report on

February 19, the IAEA said Iran had not provided "any explanation regarding the two outstanding practical is-

China's Economy to Bottom Out in 2015: Economist

BEIJING - China will likely emerge the economic downturn in 2015 as the world's second largest economy is regaining some strength to fend off downward risk, a Chinese economist said on Mon-

There is hope that the economy will level out in this year with growth stabilizing at slightly above 7 percent, said Zhang Liqun, a researcher at the State Council's development research center.

China will succeed in "changing gear" to medium-high growth, he said. The government lowered its GDP growth target to 7 percent for 2015 during the ongoing "two sessions", below the 7.5-percent goal that was narrowly missed last year.

The economy expanded 7.4 percent in 2014, the lowest rate for 24 years, as exports became weak and domestic demand remained sluggish. Given the condition of

major industries, the economy will not continue its losing streak and policy makers will be able to emphasize reform and restructuring, Zhang said. He forecast better domes-

tic consumption, foreign trade and investment will help end the downturn this year, particularly recovery in property and infrastructure investment. (Xinhua)

Pakistan Tests Nuclear-Capable Long-Range Missile

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan of this Range milestone on Monday successfully has also been warmly aptested a long-range missile that can carry nuclear war-heads, the military

The Shaheen-III Surface to Surface Ballistic Missile is capable of carrying nuclear and conventional warheads to a range of 2,750 kilometers, an army statement said.

"The test launch was aimed at validating various design and technical parameters of the weapon system at maximum range," it said. Pakistan has several

types of missiles, including ballistic and cruise, which can carry nuclear warheads and can reach India.

successful test launch and achievement

ASHGABAT - In Janu-

preciated by the President and Prime Minister of Pakistan who congratulated the scientists and engineers on their outstanding achievement," the statement said. The successful launch

was witnessed by senior officers from the Strategic Plans Division, which deals with the country's missile system, strategic forces, scientists and engineers of strategic organizations.Director-general of the Strategic Plans Division, Lieutenant General Zubair Mahmood Havat, termed the test of the missile as a major step towards strengthening Pakistan's deterrence capability, the military said. (Xinhua)

Turkmenistan Reports Economic Growth

ary and February 2015, Turkmenistan's GDP grew 10.1 percent and industrial production increased by 10.2 percent. It was announced at last Friday's meeting of the Turkmen Cabinet of Ministers, which reviewed the country's economic results in the first two months of this year, the State News Agency of Turkmenistan reported. In January-February, the volume of retail trade grew 15.4 percent as compared to the same period in 2014. Investments from all sources of funding increased by 5.1 percent on-year. Oil and gas condensate production increased by 9.2 percent, natural and associated

gas production grew 5.2 per cent, and natural gas exports rose by 7.6 percent. The production of petroleum products, including gasoline, polypropylene, and liquefied gas, also increased as compared with the same period in

The volume of drilling operations increased 1.8-fold. According to the country's Ministry of Oil and Gas Industry and Mineral Resources, in 2014 Turkmenistan produced more than 76 billion cubic meters of gas and exported over 45 billion cubic meters. In 2015, Turkmenistan plans to produce more than 80 billion cubic meters. Agencies)

Obama's Pro-Trade Allies Fight Claims about China's Currency



WASHINGTON - Supporters of President Barack Obama's trade agenda are battling opponents' demands to bar China from keeping its currency value artificially low, a way to subsidize ex-

First, they say, it's not clear that China still manipulates its currency. And even if it does, they say, the multinational trade talks now underway are the wrong venues for addressing the matter. China isn't a party to the pending 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership deal that Obama hopes to send Congress this year. Moreover, U.S. trade advocates say, new international crackdowns on currency manipulation could backfire by drawing unwanted attention to Federal Reserve policies. Insisting on confronting China's currency practices could "wreck our trade agenda," said Tony Fratto, a former Republican White House spokesman and Treasury official now working for pro-trade groups.

Low-valued currency can boost a country's exports, by making its products more affordable to foreigners. Various groups have accused China, especially, of manipulating its currency over the years. Some now want to inject the issue into the Pacific Rim trade deal debate, even though China isn't covered by the pact being negotiated.

There's widespread debate, however, about how much China benefits, if any, from manipulating its currency.

Last May, economists at the Peterson Institute for International Economics examined The World Bank's latest global pricing estimates and conclud-

ed China's currency was no longer undervalued. "This estimate is of potential historic significance," they wrote.

Jerry Jasinowski, an economist and past president of the National Association of Manufacturers, says the United States should have opposed China's currency policies more aggressively years ago, but not now.

"Whatever advantage China and others gained from currency manipulation is now spent," he wrote in the Huffington Post. U.S. manufacturing jobs are expanding, Jasinowski wrote, and "foreign currencies are losing value against the dollar."

Moving aggressively against China's currency now, he said, "would amount to a cure worse than the disease." The currency debate will grow louder

in coming weeks as pro-trade lawmakers and advocacy groups push two proposals in Congress. One, known as "fast track" or "trade

promotion authority," would give Obama a power that recent presidents have enjoyed: to negotiate trade agreements that Congress can ratify or reject, but not amend. Congress can, however, spell out "negotiating objectives" for

If Congress grants him fast-track powers, Obama is likely to move on the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal involving the United States, Japan, Canada, Mexico, Vietnam and seven other nations. Many labor unions, liberal lawmakers and some environmental groups oppose both trade initiatives. Many business organizations and Republican leaders support them. (AP)

Renegade General Sworn in As Libya's Army Chief

renegade general Khalifa Haftar was sworn in on Monday as the army chief of the war-torn country, according to parliamentary sources. "Khalifa Belgacem Haftar took the legal oath before the parliament and will begin his duties from the moment," Faraj Abu Hashim, a lawmak-

er, told Xinhua. The internationally recognized House of Representatives also promoted Haftar to lieutenant general, the lawmaker added.Haftar was born in 1943 and studied in the Military Academy in Benghazi. Although he had been a trusted general under Muammar Gaddafi, he split with him after the Libyan-Chadian war, also known as Toyota War, started in 1978. He left for the United States and resided there until 2011. He returned to Libya right after an antimovement Gaddafi broke out and played a major role in toppling the

strongman. Haftar's secular-leaning militias, now incorporated into the Libyan national army, are seen as the backbone of Libya's internationally recognized government and parliament, now operating in Tobruk, a port city in northeast Libya, and are now waging a war on Libya's Islamist armed groups since last May. In the eastern part of the country, Hafter has amassed popular support by battling "terrorists" and extremist groups. In the west, his fighters are confronting the local Islamist alliance Libya Dawn, who occupied the capital city of Tripoli and established a rival government and parliament.Libya witnessed a drastic escalation of violence after the 2011 turmoil which toppled Gaddafi. The Islamist militants and pro-secular militia have been vying for cities and towns for months, and fighting still rages near Tripoli, Benghazi and Gharyan. (Xinhua)

BRUSSELS - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg underscored the importance of the Alliance's partnership with Jordan in talks with visiting Jordanian King Abdullah II at NATO headquarters on Monday.Stoltenberg underlined that NATO Allies and Jordan face the same security challenges and threats, including terrorism and extremism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the consequences of failing states, according to a NATO press release. He expressed his sympathy to the people of Jordan for the recent killing of a Jordanian pilot by ISIL, and stressed that "the terrible acts conducted by extremists underlined the need for us to work even closer together". Stoltenberg welcomed Jordan's key role in promoting regional security, calling the country a force for moderation and a special partner for NATO. He said NATO looked forward to even deeper cooperation with Jordan in the future.(Xinhua)