

Substantive Syria Talks to Start March 14 Following Staggered Beginning

GENEVA - UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura said Wednesday that Syria talks scheduled to start today will take place on a staggered basis, with people involved in UN-backed discussions arriving up until the end of the week so as to start substantive talks by March 14. "The good thing about proximity talks is that I am in a position of staggering the talks, the dates, the days, the meeting rooms based on where and how they will be most fruitful. Any type of delay that I may decide to take will be based on how to make them more successful," he explained. "We plan



to start having informal talks already in hotels or here with whoever is arriving but the substantive, deeper part of it after the first preparation will be on Monday, god willing, the fourteenth," the special envoy added.

De Mistura also said that the first stage of talks will not last beyond March 24, after which a short recess will take place before discussions aiming to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis resume. UN-led talks involving Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government and opposition forces came to a premature standstill on Feb. 3 after parties failed to see eye to eye on a number of issues. Since then, much progress has been made on both the humanitarian and cessation of hostilities front in the country at war since 2011. (Xinhua)

British Queen Remains "Politically Neutral" in EU Referendum

LONDON - Buckingham Palace complained Wednesday to the press watchdog after local newspaper the Sun reported that the Queen backed Brexit. The Sun's front page story said that the Queen "let rip" at the then Deputy PM Nick Clegg during a lunch at Windsor Castle in 2011, saying that "she believed the EU was heading in the wrong direction." The Sun said the information was given by a "highly reliable source", and the conversation dur-

ing the lunch also stunned other guests. The senior source told the Sun that "People who heard their conversation were left in no doubt at all about the Queen's views on European integration" and "The EU is clearly something Her Majesty feels passionately about." "We can confirm that we have this morning written to the chairman of the Independent Press Standards Organization to register a complaint about ... (More on P4)... (25)

Turkey, Belgium Vow to Tackle Syrian Refugee Crisis

ANKARA - Turkey and Belgium Wednesday vowed to jointly tackle Syria's refugee crisis. Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, and visiting Belgian Deputy Prime Minister, Didier Reynders, both consider the regional refugee crisis a growing challenge running parallel with the continued Syrian conflict. They believe it can only be overcome through genuine cooperation, they both said, during a joint press statement following



their meeting in Ankara. Reynders commended Turkey's outstanding efforts so far in accommodating over 2.7 million Syrians, said the statement.

Turkish and Belgian ministers both strongly condemned the terrorist acts recently perpetrated in Ankara and Istanbul, as well as other terrorism attacks claiming lives worldwide, added the statement. They reasserted their respective governments' determination to fight this ... (More on P4)... (26)

Saudi-Led Coalition Reaches Truce Deal with Yemen's Rebel Houthis

SANAA - Yemen's foreign minister said on Wednesday that the Saudi-led coalition has reached a truce deal with Yemen's Shiite Houthi rebels along borders between the two countries. "The Saudi-led coalition has notified the Yemeni government of a truce deal with Houthi group to secure the shared borders between the two countries and to secure delivering aids to the damaged areas near the Yemeni-Saudi border," Foreign Minister Abdulmalik al-Mekhlafi said in a statement. "The coalition has

also exchanged an officer detained by Houthis for seven Yemenis," he said. On Monday, Houthis in Yemen sent a delegation to Saudi Arabia to negotiate a truce and exchange of prisoners, sources close to Houthi group said, adding that the move was mediated by Oman. More than 6,000 Yemenis have been killed in ground battles and airstrikes, half of them civilians since the Saudi-led coalition started daily air bombing on the Shiite Houthi rebels and their allied forces in March 2015. (Xinhua)

S. Korea Refutes DPRK's Claim to have Miniaturized Nuke Warheads

SEOUL - South Korea's defense ministry on Wednesday refuted claims by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) that it has successfully miniaturized nuclear warheads small enough to mount on ballistic missiles. Seoul's defense ministry said in a statement that Pyongyang hasn't secured operational capability for miniaturized nuclear warheads and KN-08 intercontinental ballistic missiles to deliver the warheads, adding that Seoul and Washington are jointly trailing this issue in a precise man-

ner. The statement came after top DPRK leader Kim Jong Un said his country's nuclear warheads "have been standardized to be fit for ballistic missiles" through miniaturization, during his field guidance on nuclear scientists and technicians, according to the DPRK's official KCNA news agency. Pyongyang tested what it claimed was its first hydrogen bomb on Jan. 6, the fourth of its nuclear detonations. The DPRK launched a long-range rocket, which was condemned by outsiders as



a disguised test of ballistic missile technology, on Feb. 7. Many of South Korean experts estimated that Pyongyang may have advanced its technology of miniaturizing nuclear warheads given that the United States took seven years to secure it. Seoul's defense ministry also evaluated the DPRK's significant level of such technology in its Defense White Paper published in late 2014, though it assessed that Pyongyang had yet to complete it. (Xinhua)

Polish Constitutional Court Strikes Down New Rules on Court

WARSAW - Poland's Constitutional Tribunal ruled Wednesday that many new rules regulating its own function introduced by the new government are unconstitutional. The country's top legislative court weighed in on a legal crisis that has upended politics in Poland and brought sharp condemnation from European and U.S. authorities. However, it's not clear what effect the ruling will have because the government of Prime Minister Beata Szydlo has indicated that it will not treat the court's judgment as valid. The court ruled that many of the laws passed late last year that fundamentally change how the 15-judge court functions breach Poland's constitution. One is a rule that the court should take up cases in the order in which they are brought to the court. Another requires a two-thirds majority to support a ruling for it to be valid, a change from the simple majority ... (More on P4)... (27)

Hungary Declares Migrant Crisis Situation, Boosts Border Patrols

BUDAPEST - Hungary has declared a migrant crisis situation throughout the country and is increasing border patrols as a result, Hungarian interior minister Sandor Pinter announced here on Wednesday. Pinter said the move was a precautionary one, coming on the heels of tightened immigration measures by Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia that went into effect at midnight local time. These countries have resolved to apply Schengen rules for all people arriving at their borders, meaning that they will need passports and visas to enter. How the refugees will respond to this is anyone's



guess, Pinter said, but given there are already about 10,000 migrants in these countries who want to travel onward, Hungary has to prepare for growing attempts to break through its fences. As facilities at the Hungarian border where people can apply for asylum are already full, Pinter said he

expected overcrowding and related disturbances. Pinter said 1,500 military troops were being deployed to the border along with "a large number" of police. Plans were also being considered for building roads to the border regions to make it easier and faster for troops to get around, he said. (Xinhua)

British Business Secretary to Head High-Level Delegation to Iran in May

TEHRAN - British Business Secretary Sajid Javid will travel to Iran for high-level economic and trade talks with Iranian officials, reports say. Heading Britain's biggest-ever trade delegation, Sajid is scheduled to visit Iran in May to use the opportunity created following the recent lifting of sanctions against the Islamic Republic. The Financial Times reported on Wednesday. The trade mission will include executives from across the oil and gas, financial services, infrastructure and engineering sectors, said the report. Sajid is expected to address an Iran investment event in the British capital, London, later on Wednesday. The report added that Sajid will tell the participants of the summit that Britain's future as a trading nation cannot depend on engaging only with "easy, familiar trading partners." "We can't afford to stick with what we know," he will say. "We have to secure new markets for British goods, new sources of foreign investment." (PressTV)

Biden Gives Nod to Israeli Demands in Talks on U.S. Defense Aid

JERUSALEM - Israel's regional military clout should be preserved in terms of the quantity as well as the quality of its weaponry, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said on Wednesday in a nod to Israeli requests in defense aid negotiations with Washington. Current U.S. military grants to Israel, worth about \$3 billion annually, expire in 2018. The allies want to agree on an extension before U.S. President Barack Obama leaves office in January 2017 but have differed ... (More on P4)... (30)

Albania to Boost Cooperation with Germany in Bid for EU Membership

TIRANA - Albania will work with Germany to ensure its judicial system is up to par in its application for EU membership, parliament Speaker Ilir Meta said in a meeting with German lawmakers. The two sides also agreed on the need to boost economic cooperation, the Albanian Daily News reported on Wednesday. Receiving lawmakers from

Germany's Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU), Meta said Albania has received support from Germany in strengthening the rule of law and in the fight against corruption and organized crime as well as improving economic governance. "Albania relies strongly on Germany for its European future. The ... (More on P4)... (28)

IS Commander 'Likely Killed' in Syria Air Strike: US Official

WASHINGTON - The Islamic State group's battle-tested equivalent of a defense minister is believed to have been killed in a US air strike in northeastern Syria, a US official here said. The target of the March 4 attack was Omar al-Shihani, a red-bearded Georgian fighting with the jihadist group in Syria, the Pentagon said Tuesday, cautioning that results of the operation were still being assessed. A US official speaking on condition of anonymity later said Shihani "likely died" in the assault by waves of US warplanes and drones, along with 12 other IS fighters. Al-Shihani is the nom de guerre of Tarkhan Batirashvili, who ranked among ... (More on P4)... (29)

Neighbor News

IRGC Tests two Ballistic Missiles

TEHRAN - The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) on Wednesday "successfully" test-fired two ballistic missiles in ongoing military drills across the country. The missiles Qadr-H and Qadr-F were fired from East Alborz heights in northern Iran and could hit the targets in Makran Coasts southeast of the country, the report said. Qadr-H missile has a range of 1,700 km while Qadr-F missile can destroy targets some 2,000 km away, Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Division Amirali-Hajizadeh was quoted as saying. On Tuesday, Iran fired several ballistic missiles as the IRGC started the large-scale missile drills in different parts of

the country. In the day, the United States said that although Iran's recent ballistic missile tests did not violate an international agreement over Tehran's nuclear agreement, the issue could be the source of concern for the West and it might be raised at the UN Security Council. The White House spokesman Josh Earnest said that if it was determined that Iran ballistic missiles tests were in violation of UN Security Council resolutions, Tehran could face "some consequences." Under UN Security Council Resolution 1929, Iran is prohibited from working on ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads. (Xinhua)

Six Pakistani Institutes Among World's Top 800 Varsities

ISLAMABAD - Six Pakistani institutes of higher education are ranked among the world's top 800 universities by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), a British ranking agency. The Pakistani varsities that made it to the QS World University Rankings 2015-2016 include the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) Islamabad, Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), University of Engineering and Technology (UET)

Lahore, University of Karachi (KU) and the University of Lahore. NUST was also ranked separately at 340 in the 'Engineering and Technology' category. The QS rankings take into account academic reputation (40 per cent), employer reputation (10pc), student to faculty ratio (20pc), citations per faculty (20pc), international faculty ratio (5pc) and international students (5pc). The methodology aims to assess research, teaching, employability and internationalisation. (Agencies)

900 Million Chinese to Vote in Grassroots Elections for Lawmakers

BEIJING - More than 900 million Chinese voters are expected to directly elect more than 2.5 million lawmakers in county or township-level elections set to begin this year, top legislator Zhang Dejiang said on Wednesday. "Beginning in 2016, elections will be held for new people's congresses at the county and township levels across the country," Zhang said when delivering a work report on the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee.

"This will be a major political event in China, and an important step in the development of socialist democracy," he said. Under China's current Electoral Law, deputies to people's congresses at the level of townships and counties, who account for more than 90 percent of lawmakers at all levels nationwide, are elected directly by voters. They in turn elect deputies to people's congresses of cities who then elect deputies at the provincial level. (Xinhua)

Ever Largest Tajik-Russian Joint Military Exercise Starts in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE - Russia's Antonov-124s have airlifted military equipment and other supplies to Tajikistan for a joint Tajik-Russian military exercise. According to the press center of Russia's Central Military District, mobile management communications engineering systems as well as military police units have been airlifted to Tajikistan. The joint military exercise reportedly involves military management bodies of the Ministry of Defense of Tajikistan and Russia's Central Military District, motor-rifle, tank and paratrooper units, as well as sappers and military medics. A joint air force group and drones will provide an air support.

The purpose of the exercise is reportedly to rehearse coordination and interaction in combat missions in mountains. The Antonov An-124 Ruslan (NATO reporting name: Condor) is a strategic airlift jet aircraft. It was designed by the Antonov design bureau in the Ukrainian SSR, then part of the Soviet Union (USSR). Until the Boeing 747-8F, the An-124 was, for thirty years, the world's highest aircraft gross weight production cargo airplane and second heaviest operating cargo aircraft, behind the one-off Antonov An-225 (a greatly enlarged design based on the An-124). The An-124 remains the largest military transport aircraft in the world. (Asia-Plus)