

U.S. Slaps Sanctions on Ukrainian Rebels, Russian Bank

WASHINGTON - The United States on Wednesday placed sanctions on eight Ukrainian separatists and a Russian bank, warning that recent attacks by rebels armed by Russia violated a European-brokered ceasefire in the war-torn country.

The sanctions signal Washington is ratcheting up pressure on Moscow a day after accusing Russia of sending tanks and heavy military equipment into Ukraine, which a top U.S. official also said breached the Minsk accord agreed on Feb. 12.

"If Russia continues to support destabilizing activity in Ukraine and violate the Minsk agreements and implementation plan, the already substantial costs it faces will continue to rise," Adam Szubin, the Treasury Department's acting undersec-



retary for terrorism and financial intelligence, said in a statement announcing the sanctions. The sanctions ban any U.S. financial firm from doing business with sanctioned individuals or institutions.

Among the more prominent individuals sanctioned was Roman Lyagin, who chairs an election commission in separatist territory. The U.S. Treasury accused him of preventing voting in Ukraine's May presidential election.

Lyagin said he was not a fighter and was playing a peaceful role in the separatists' activities. "It's the opposite, I do my best to stop the bloodshed," he said.

Washington also sanctioned the Russian National Commercial Bank, which the Treasury said moved into Ukraine's Crimea region after it was annexed by Russia in 2014. (Reuters)

Kerry Calls for US War Powers to Strike IS

WASHINGTON - US Secretary of State John Kerry urged lawmakers Wednesday to give President Barack Obama updated war powers to go after Islamic jihadists at "a pivotal hour" in the battle against the militants.

"Our nation is strongest when we act together - and we simply cannot allow this collection of murderers and thugs to achieve its ambitions," Kerry told Congress.

He said the Islamic State (IS) group which has captured a swath of land in Iraq and Syria wanted to ensure "the death or submission of all who oppose it" as well as "the incitement of terrorist acts across the globe." Appearing at the Senate foreign relations committee, Kerry as well as Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and the top US military officer, General Martin Dempsey, called for a united vote in favor of a new authorization for use of military force (AUMF) to take on IS. Tantamount to a declaration of war, the authority would provide Obama political cover at home



and a firmer legal basis on which to prosecute the fight, particularly among allies abroad who have joined a US-led international coalition. So far, the Obama administration has used the existing authorization for use of military force against Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and their branches approved in the days after the September 11, 2001 attacks as the legal justification for going after IS. "The president already has statutory authority to act against ISIL, but a clear and formal expression of your backing would dispel any doubt anywhere that Americans are united in this effort," Kerry said, using another

acronym for the group. He urged the divided body to come together and "speak with a single powerful voice." Carter stressed the new resolution would expire in three years and "wisely does not include any geographical restriction because ISIL already shows signs of metastasizing outside of Syria and Iraq." "I cannot tell you our campaign to defeat ISIL will be completed in three years," Carter said, but including a so-called "sunset clause" would give the next president and "the American people the chance to assess our progress" at the end of that period. (AFP)

Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev to Run for Reelection

ASTANA - Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev will run for reelection in an early presidential poll scheduled for April 26. At its congress in the capital Astana today, the ruling Nur Otan party has unanimously supported Nazarbayev's candidacy for reelection. On February 25, Nazarbayev announced that an early presidential election in Kazakhstan will be held on April 26. Nazarbayev said that he made the decision "in order to avoid an overlap of presidential and parliamentary elections, both of which are scheduled for 2016, which is unconstitutional." Nazarbayev added that he had decided to sign a decree on holding the early election after taking ... (More on P4)... (25)

China, S. Korea, Japan to Restore FM Meeting

SEOUL - China, South Korea and Japan on Wednesday held the 10th trilateral senior foreign affairs officials' consultation in Seoul, preparing for restoring the upcoming trilateral meeting among foreign ministers of the three countries in late March. The consultation brought together Chinese vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin, South Korea's deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Lee Kyung-soo and their Japanese counterpart Shinsuke Sugiyama. The main task of the consultation was to prepare for the 7th trilateral foreign ministers' meeting in late March, according to China's foreign ministry. During the consultation, the high-level diplomats drew the initial consensus about the arrangement of the upcoming ... (More on P4)... (26)

Tensions over Intermediate Nuclear Force Treaty High: Russian FM

MOSCOW - The intermediate nuclear force (INF) Soviet-US treaty of 1987 that outlawed the intermediate and shorter range missiles is not falling apart yet, but tensions over it are soaring high, the director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's non-proliferation and arms control department, Mikhail Ulyanov, told a news conference on Wednesday.

"Some actions by our US colleagues cause great surprise. At a meeting with a US delegation in Moscow on the issue US delegates did explain what particularly they do not like - in their scheme of things we are expected to say voluntarily what we have violated and to confess violations," Ulyanov said. "This kind of approach does not look

serious to us." "At the same time we have at least three questions about US compliance with the treaty. I cannot say that the replies the Americans offered satisfied us," the diplomat said. "The discussion with the United States on this subject will go on. Its outcome is anyone's guess but at this point it would be wrong to say that the treaty is falling apart," Ulyanov concluded. US actions jeopardize nuclear disarmament process. Ulyanov said that US actions undermine the global strategic stability and make further steps towards nuclear disarmament problematic. He reminded that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty signed in 2010 envisaged a re-

duction in the nuclear potentials of Russia and the United States, adding that "there was no doubt that both countries would accomplish the task." Ulyanov added that Washington's current actions, specifically, the deployment of anti-ballistic missile system in Europe and development of high-precision strategic non-nuclear weapons brought into question further steps towards nuclear disarmament. "In such circumstances, the continuation of the nuclear disarmament process seems problematic," he said. "This is a question that should be posed to the United States", Ulyanov said, adding that Russia's focus was on creating the necessary conditions for disarmament. (Agencies)

Russia Says Has Right to Deploy Nuclear Weapons in Crimea: Report

MOSCOW - Russia has the right to deploy nuclear arms in the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, which Moscow annexed from Ukraine last year, a Foreign Ministry official said on Wednesday, adding he knew of no plans to do so.

"I don't know if there are nuclear weapons there now. I don't know about any plans, but in principle Russia can do it," said



Mikhail Ulyanov, the head of the ministry's department on arms control, was quoted as saying by Interfax news agency. (Reuters)

Iraqi Forces Push into Tikrit from North and South

BAGHDAD - Iraqi security forces and militias fought their way into Saddam Hussein's home city of Tikrit on Wednesday, advancing from the north and south in their biggest counter-offensive so far against Islamic State militants.

The provincial governor said the army and militia fighters captured part of the northern district of Qadisiya, while in the south of the Tigris river city a security officer said another force made a rapid push toward the center. "The forces entered Tikrit general hospital," an official at the main military operation command center said. "There is heavy fighting going on near the presidential palaces, next to the hospital complex." Islamic State fighters who stormed into Tikrit



in June during a lightning offensive through north and central Iraq have used the complex of palaces built in Tikrit under Saddam, the executed former president, as their headquarters. More than 20,000 troops and Iranian-backed Shi'ite Muslim militias known as Hashid Shaabi, supported by local Sunni Muslim tribes, launched the offensive for Tikrit 10 days ago, advancing from the east and along

the Tigris river. On Tuesday they took the town of al-Alam on the northern edge of Tikrit, paving the way for an attack on the city itself. "The governor of Salahuddin announces the purging of half of Qadisiya district, the largest of Tikrit's neighborhoods," a statement from governor Raed al-Jubouri's office said. The army and militia fighters raised the national flag ... (More on P4)... (27)

NATO Chiefs Warn EU Not to Duplicate Military Resources

MONS, Belgium - The civilian and military heads of NATO cautioned the European Union on Wednesday against duplicating efforts following remarks by the president of the EU Commission suggesting the bloc should develop an "EU army" to deter Russia.

Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary general of the Western defense alliance, told a news conference he would welcome in-

creased European investment in defense, but said duplication would be inefficient.

"It's important to avoid duplication and I urge Europe to make sure that everything they do is complementary to the NATO alliance," he said. General Philip Breedlove, the U.S. supreme commander of NATO forces, told the news conference he was "not concerned" by the comments at the weekend by

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker.

"But what we would like to avoid is any duplication because we need to smartly invest," Breedlove said.

Juncker told a German newspaper on Sunday that the EU needed its own army to face up to a resurgent Russia and other threats as well as to restore the bloc's foreign policy standing around the world. (Reuters)

IS Battling Kurdish Forces in Syria

BEIRUT - Hundreds of Islamic State fighters have launched an attack on Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria, triggering fierce fighting that has killed dozens on both sides, a group monitoring the war said on Wednesday.

The Kurdish YPG militia, backed by U.S.-led air strikes, had made significant gains in recent weeks against Islamic State in the region, cutting an important supply route from territory controlled by the militant

group in Iraq. Islamic State appeared to try to seize back the initiative on Tuesday, attacking Kurdish forces using tanks and heavy weapons around Ras al-Ayn town near the Turkish border, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

An official in a Kurdish-run defense council in the area also reported heavy clashes in the area of Ras al-Ayn and said the Kurdish forces had been forced to withdraw from a nearby village.

"There are martyrs and dead but the number of martyrs is unknown so far," said the official, speaking via Skype.

The fighting continued into Wednesday. It was not clear exactly how many fighters had been killed on both sides.

The Kurdish campaign in northeastern Syria has been closely coordinated with the U.S.-led coalition that is fighting to roll back Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. The YPG has emerged as the ... (More on P4)... (28)

Neighbor News

China Approves New Nuclear Power Project Since 2011

SHENZHEN - China's top economic planner has approved the construction of the second phase of a nuclear power station in the country's north-east, the first approved since 2011, a company source said on Tuesday. The second phase of the Hongyanhe nuclear power station involves two million-kilowatt generators. Approved by the National Development and Reform Commission, the second phase still needs a construction license from the National Nuclear Safety Administration. The construction of the project in Liaoning province will use the self-developed nuclear power technology of China General Nuclear Power Group based in south China's Guangdong province, said Yang Xiaofeng, general manager

of Liaoning Hongyanhe Nuclear Power Co Ltd.

The Hongyanhe nuclear power station is designed to have six generating units of the million-kilowatt class. It began construction in 2007. The first phase has four generating units. Two generators were put into commercial use in 2013 and 2014. A third unit will be put into use in the first half of this year. The fourth unit is under construction. China suspended the approval of new nuclear plants and carried out a nationwide safety review after Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant disaster in March 2011. Last year, China said it would restart nuclear power generation projects in eastern coastal areas with the world's highest safety standard. (Xinhua)

Iran to Increase Imports of Turkmen Gas: Rouhani

ASHGABAT - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said Wednesday his country would increase its imports of gas from Turkmenistan, during a visit to the reclusive Central Asian state in which he signed a slew of bilateral agreements.

Rouhani said energy cooperation with post-Soviet Turkmenistan in oil and gas had "big potential" after talks with his Turkmen counterpart Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov.

"We agreed to increase supplies of Turkmen gas to Iran," Rouhani. He did not specify what the increase would be, but Iran already imports roughly 10 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas per year from Turkmenistan, making it the second biggest purchaser of the country's gas and its third largest trade partner after China and Turkey.

The two countries signed 18 agreements during

the visit and Iran also thanked Turkmenistan for its support of Iran's "peaceful nuclear programme."

Referring to Rouhani as a "brother", Berdimuhamedov said that trade between the two countries reached \$3.7 billion (3.4 billion euro) last year, up 25 percent from 2013. Rouhani responded that he hoped the figure would reach \$60 billion in the next ten years.

Rouhani also said that Iran was prepared to offer its services as a transit country for "transport of Turkmen gas, oil and electricity to third countries."

Officials at the National Iranian Gas Company have recently been promoting Iran as part of a corridor to take gas from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to Europe via Turkey, but Iran remains under sanctions imposed by Brussels and Washington. (Asia-Plus)

Pak-China Sign MoUs for Cooperation in Water, Power Sectors

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan and China have signed two memorandums of understanding for promotion of cooperation in water and power sector, Dunya News reported. The documents were signed by Chairman of WAPDA Zafar Mehmood and Chairman of Chinese Three Gorges Corporation Chun Lu in Islamabad today.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and federal ministers were also present on the occasion.

The first MOU relates to cooperation in construction of water reservoirs and hydel generation. Both the countries will also enhance cooperation in education and training in the respective field under the second MoU. (Monitoring Desk)

Tajikistan Launches Large-Scale Anti-Terror Exercise in Khatlon Province

DUSHANBE - A large-scale military exercise, involving all military units of the Ministry of Defense (MoD), deployed in Khatlon province and reservists from all 25 districts of Khatlon, began last night.

"The exercise that involves more than 30,000 soldiers and officers of the national army and reservists from all cities and districts of the south of the country as well as more than 100 armored carriers, tanks and combat aircraft as well as vehicles of many government agencies located in the province will last until March 14," Faridoun Mahmadiyev, a spokesman for a MoD, told Asia-Plus in an interview.

purpose of the exercise being conducted in Khatlon is to rehearse organization of a territorial defense and mobilization of reserve officers and soldiers.

"The exercise scenario is based on armed formations of international terrorist organizations violating the Afghan-Tajik border and crossing into Tajik territory," said Mahmadiyev. "The exercise participants are rehearsing coordination and interaction in combat missions to annihilate armed groups of international terrorists penetrating into our country." Tajik Defense Minister, Lieutenant-General Sherali Mirzo, is in overall command of the ongoing war game, said the MoD spokesman. (Asia-Plus)