

Tillerson Cuts Short Africa Trip to Return to Washington

N'DJAMENA - U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson will cut short his first diplomatic trip to Africa on Monday to return to deal with urgent work in Washington, his spokesman said. The top U.S. diplomat will now spend just a few hours in key ally Nigeria on Monday evening rather than the overnight visit originally planned. There was no immediate response from Abuja. "Due to demands in the Secretary's schedule, he is returning to the U.S. one day early after concluding official meetings in Chad and Nigeria," Under Secretary of State Steve Goldstein told reporters.



Tillerson's week-long, five-country tour coincided with several urgent foreign policy developments, including Thursday's announcement that U.S. President Donald

Trump will meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The trip has also been plagued by ill health. Tillerson, 65, cancelled some events in Kenya on Saturday, saying he was feeling unwell. Tillerson travelled to Chad on Monday morning to meet President Idriss Deby, an important American ally whose military is battling al Qaeda and Islamic State-affiliated groups in the Sahel region. He will then visit Nigeria before flying home later the same evening. Nigeria is Africa's biggest oil producer whose security forces are battling Boko Haram Islamist militants in the northeast. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Ashgabat, Kabul Mull Prospects of TAPI Project

ASHGABAT - President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov discussed topical issues of cooperation with his Afghan counterpart Mohammad Ashraf Ghani in a phone conversation, the Turkmen government said in a message March 12. The two presidents noted the high dynamics of expanding cooperation in multilateral format - in international organizations and regional structures. Afghanistan's president said that construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, the transportation and communication projects initiated by Ashgabat will be a valuable contribution to the peaceful settlement of the situation in Afghanistan and the sustainable social and economic development of the entire region. It was noted that construction of the Afghan section of the TAPI gas pipeline, which started in February, will give a powerful momentum to the economic development of Afghanistan and will contribute to the strengthening of peace and stability. Presidents of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan exchanged views on a number of regional and international issues of mutual interest. Turkmen leader congratulated Mohammad Ashraf Ghani on the adoption of a resolution extending the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. Under the document, members of the UN Security Council supported regional projects for Afghanistan's development, including the construction of TAPI and the Kerki-Yamnazar-Akina railway, which is the starting segment of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan corridor. The above-mentioned projects also include the construction of an international power transmission line and fiber-optic communications. Turkmenistan's biggest field Galkynysy will be the raw materials source for the TAPI project, the implementation of which started in December 2015. (Trend)

Uzbekistan, EU Mull Priority Spheres for Co-Op

TASHKENT - The Uzbek capital, will host the "Cooperation between Uzbekistan and the European Union: Future Visions" round table, Uzbek media reported. According to the information, the round table is aimed at discussing prospective and priority spheres for development of cooperation between Uzbekistan and the EU within the framework of the EU's new Strategy on Cooperation with the Central Asian states. The event is organized by the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of Uzbekistan, the delegation of the EU and the Uzbek representative office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. During the meeting, the sides will discuss new ideas and initiatives on further strengthening the mutually beneficial and multidirectional cooperation between Uzbekistan and the EU's key institutions. (Trend)

First Islamic Bank Can Start Working In Tajikistan In 2018

DUSHANBE - The first Islamic bank will start working in Tajikistan in 2018, TajikTA news agency reported. "The first Islamic bank will work this year in Tajikistan. The issues of expanding the operations of the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation (ITFC) in the financial market of Tajikistan were discussed at a meeting of Deputy Chairman of the National Bank of Tajikistan Sirojiddin Ikromi with the director of an ITFC department Nazem Normali," says the report. It was noted at the meeting that the main goal of IIFC is to support trade cooperation between the countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, to provide assistance and financial intermediation to companies in commercial financing. Sirojiddin Ikromi said that currently, the National Bank of Tajikistan is speeding up the process of introducing the Islamic banking system; in particular, regulatory legal acts are being developed on the issue of licensing for the activities of Islamic credit organizations. (Trend)

In Islamabad, Zarif Says Iran Seeks Free Trade with Pakistan

PAKISTAN - On a visit to Pakistan, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif says Iran pursues "free bilateral trade" with the neighboring South Asian country. The Iranian top diplomat arrived in Islamabad on Sunday at the head of a high-ranking politico-economic delegation. Zarif further said the Islamic Republic also seeks to promote its banking relations with Pakistan and boost preferred tariffs levied on traded goods. After attending political and economic gatherings in the Pakistani capital during the three-day visit, which is especially geared towards enhancing bilateral trade, Zarif is expected to travel to the business and industrial hub of Karachi, where further economic talks have been scheduled. Iran and Pakistan seek to increase bilateral trade volume to almost five billion dollars per year. Zarif pointed to the notable increase over the recent years in the volume of bilateral trade, adding, however, that "the area still contains more capacities." "Tehran and Islamabad enjoy special relations," he also said, describing the quality of bilateral political relations as "very good." The trip is Zarif's seventh to Pakistan in his capacity as foreign minister. The last visit in May featured talks aimed at boosting border security following an attack on the common border that killed 10 Iranian guards. (Press TV)

Merkel Faces US, EU Challenges, Says 'Time to Start Work'

BERLIN - Chancellor Angela Merkel promised Monday to work for a strong Europe and said she's hopeful talks can resolve the standoff over U.S. tariffs, declaring that "it's finally time to start work" as Germany's new government prepares to take office. Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, its Bavaria-only sister party the Christian Social Union, and the center-left Social Democrats signed their coalition agreement Monday. Parliament is due to elect Merkel for her fourth term as chancellor on Wednesday, a record 171 days after Germans voted. Merkel has been only a

caretaker chancellor since October, and many unresolved issues await the new government. Those include U.S. tariffs on foreign-made steel and aluminum announced by President Donald Trump, along with threats of taxes on German automakers. Merkel welcomed talks the European Union has already started, and said the new German government will hold talks of its own. "Such differences of opinion over whether situations are fair or not have to be resolved in talks, I think, and not if it can be avoided in some way by unilateral actions," she told reporters in Berlin. (AP)

North Korean 'Caution' Seen In Announcing Stance on Upcoming Summits

SEOUL - North Korea's silence on its upcoming summits with the United States and South Korea is probably due to caution over organizing its stance on the meetings, the South said on Monday, as China's leader urged patience. North Korean media mentioned a visit by a delegation from the South last week, but no coverage has been seen of leader Kim Jong Un's invitation to meet U.S. President Donald Trump or the South Korean president to discuss the future of North

Korea's nuclear weapons program. "We have not seen nor received an official response from the North Korean regime regarding the North Korea-U.S. summit," Baik Taehyun, spokesman for the South's Ministry of Unification, told a regular news conference. "I feel they're approaching this matter with caution and they need time to organize their stance." The South Korean officials who took Kim's invitation to Washington are visiting China and Japan this week to update



their neighbors on the talks. South Korea's National Security Office chief, Chung Eui-yong, who led the delegation, heads to Russia on Tuesday after meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping, the South Korean president's office said. (Reuters)

S. Korea Praises China's Role in Nudging N. Korea to Talks



BEIJING - South Korea's national security director on Monday praised Chinese President Xi Jinping's role in nudging North Korea toward denucleariza-

tion talks, following word of a possible summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Meeting with Xi at the

Great Hall of the People in Beijing, Chung Eui-yong said the situation on the Korean Peninsula had "undergone very positive changes." "(South Korean) President Moon Jae-in believes that the leadership of the Chinese government, especially the leadership ability of President Xi, has played a big role in this," Chung said. "That we were able to get to this stage shows China has played an important role," he said. "Once again, we expect that China will

continue to play an active and leading role and the South Korean government will continue to coordinate closely with China." Xi told Chung the peninsula was "facing an important opportunity of mitigation and dialogue," according to state broadcaster CCTV. He referred both to the potential Trump-Kim summit and talks between Moon and Kim scheduled for next month at a truce village inside the Demilitarized Zone that divides their countries. (AP)

No Hiding Place for Poor Quality Universities under Gold Standard Rating Method

LONDON - Britain's university minister Monday launched a rating system for British universities by either gold, silver or bronze standards. The aim of the initiative, announced by Sam Gyimah, is to reward excellent teaching and expose poor quality teaching with a new rating system for universities. The universities will be held to account for the quality of their teaching, learning environment and graduate outcomes. "Prospective students deserve to know which courses deliver great teaching and great outcomes, and which ones are lagging behind. In the age of the student, universities will no longer be able to hide if their teaching quality is not up to the world-class standard that we expect," Gyimah said. Gyimah said the new Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) will give students more information than before, allowing them to compare universities by subject. "This will level the international playing field to help applicants make better choices, and ensure that more students get the value-for-money they deserve from higher education," he added. (Xinhua)

Putin's Russia: From Basket Case to Resurgent Superpower

MOSCOW - Vladimir Putin and his Russia look more invincible today than at any other time in his 18 years in power. Since Putin last faced an election in 2012, Russians have invaded Ukraine, annexed Crimea, blanket-bombed Syria, been accused of meddling in the U.S. presidential election and claimed to have a scary new nuclear arsenal. "No one listened to us. You listen to us now," he said earlier this month, boasting about those weapons. Putin will overwhelmingly win re-election as president on March 18, again. So why bother holding a vote at all? He disdains democracy as messy and danger-



ous - yet he craves the legitimacy conferred by an election. He needs tangible evidence that Russians need him and his great-power vision more than they worry about the freedoms he has muffled, the endemic corruption he has failed to eradicate, the sanctions he invited by his actions in Crimea and Ukraine. "Any autocrat wants love," said analyst Andrei Kolesnikov of the Carnegie Moscow Center, and Putin gets that love "from high support in elections." Expected to win as much as 80 percent of the vote, Putin will further cement his authority over Russia, a czar-like figure with a democratic veneer. (AP)

EU Extends \$1.2 Billion Loan to Ukraine

MINSK, Belarus - The European Union's foreign policy chief says the EU will extend a 1 billion-euro (\$1.2 billion) loan to struggling Ukraine. Federica Mogherini, who was visiting the capital Kiev on Monday, told reporters the loan should "support Ukraine's economic stability and structural reforms." While confirming the EU's support for the Ukrainian

government, Mogherini also signaled Europe's growing wariness over the slow pace of much-touted reforms. She called on Kiev to set up an anti-corruption court as promised. She also urged the government to comply with 2015 peace accords that called for a truce between government forces and Russia-backed separatists. (AP)

Modi, Macron Inaugurate Solar Power Plant in India's Largest State

NEW DELHI - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and visiting French President Emmanuel Macron Monday jointly inaugurated a 75-megawatt solar plant built by a French company in the country's largest state of Uttar Pradesh. The state's largest solar plant has been set up by French company Engie Solar in Mirzapur district, some 300 km from Uttar Pradesh capital Lucknow. Modi and Macron flew from Delhi to Varanasi, the parliamentary constituency of the Indian prime minister, from where they went by road to Mirzapur, some 40 km away, for inauguration of the solar power plant. Solar power in India is a fast developing industry. In January 2015, the Modi government expanded its solar plans, targeting 100 billion U.S. dollars in investment and 100 GW of solar capacity by 2022. The inauguration of the solar plant came a day after Modi and the visiting French president Sunday co-chaired the Founding Conference of the International Solar Alliance (ISA), a flagship Indian initiative launched by the two nations on sidelines of Paris Climate Conference in 2015. India and France Saturday inked as many as 14 pacts, including on security, nuclear energy and protection of classified information, after Modi held talks with the French president in Delhi and vowed to boost bilateral ties and vowed to fight terror. The French president and his wife arrived in India late on Friday night on a four-day state visit. This is President Macron's first visit to India after taking office in May in 2017. He will wind up his tour late Monday night. (Xinhua)

Britain Prepares For Day When 1-In-10 People Live Beyond 100

LONDON - Britain announced a new strategy Monday for healthy ageing to prepare for the time when more than one-in-ten people born today reach the age of 100. The government announced a 416 million U.S. dollar worth competitive fund to develop the innovations and new technologies of tomorrow, for the landmark ageing society grand challenge. The funding will support better diagnosis for British patients through artificial intelligence (AI) and new tech at a new network of regional centers of excellence. Around 500,000 Biobank volunteers will be recruited so their genome can be sequenced to provide data that will help the UK lead the world in development of tools for early diagnosis and new pioneering therapies. (Xinhua)

U.S. Students Rally to Warn Dangers of Social Isolation

SAN FRANCISCO - More than 100 people including middle school students demonstrated Sunday in Oakland, a major U.S. West Coast port city, to speak out against the dangers of social isolation, organizers said. Beyond Differences, a nonprofit organization established in 2010 to promote inclusiveness among students, organized the event. Participants marched along a lake in downtown Oakland, the largest city in the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay Area, carrying signs that advocate diversity and inclusion. "If #BeyondDifferences lives its mission, millions of young people will become the generation that completely transforms this nation," Lateefah Simon, who is on the Board of Directors of Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) public transportation system in the San Francisco Bay Area, told the rally. (Xinhua)