

U.S. will Have to Negotiate with Syria's Assad: Kerry

SHARM EL-SHEIKH - The United States will have to negotiate with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for a political transition in Syria and is exploring ways to pressure him into agreeing to talks, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry told CBS News in an interview. Washington has long insisted that Assad must be replaced through a negotiated, political transition, but the rise of a common enemy, hardline militant group Islamic State, appears to have slightly softened the West's stance towards him.

In the interview broadcast on Sunday, Kerry did not repeat the standard U.S. line that Assad had lost all legitimacy and had to go.

Syria's civil war is now into its fifth year, with hundreds of thousands killed and millions of Syrians displaced. "We have to negotiate in the end," Kerry said. "We've always been willing to negotiate in the context of the Geneva I process," he added, referring to a 2012 conference which called for a negotiated transition to end the conflict.

Kerry said the United States and other countries, which he did not name,



were exploring ways to reignite the diplomatic process to end the conflict in Syria. "What we're pushing for is to get him (Assad) to come and do that, and it may require that there be increased pressure on him of various kinds in order to do that," the secretary of state said.

"We've made it very clear to people that we are looking at increased steps that can help bring about that pressure," he added. The United States led efforts to convene a U.N.-backed peace talks in Geneva last year between Western-backed Syrian opposition representatives and a government delegation. The talks collapsed after two rounds and no fresh talks have been scheduled. Russia convened some opposition and government figures in January for talks on

the crisis but they yielded little progress and the main opposition coalition boycotted them. "To get the Assad regime to negotiate, we're going to have to make it clear to him that there is a determination by everybody to seek that political outcome and change his calculation about negotiating," Kerry said. "That's under way right now. And I am convinced that, with the efforts of our allies and others, there will be increased pressure on Assad." Syria sank into civil war after a peaceful street uprising against four decades of Assad family rule began in March 2011. The revolt spiraled into an armed insurgency, which has deepened with the rise of Islamic State and other hardliners. Assad seems more likely to survive the Syrian crisis than at any point since it began. Iran's support for Assad is as solid as ever, with Russia showing no sign of abandoning him. U.S.-led forces started air strikes against Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq in the summer. Washington has said the campaign in Syria is not coordinated with the Syrian military, which also views the group as its enemy. (Reuters)

Iraqi Kurds Say IS Used Chlorine Gas against Them

ARBIL - Iraqi Kurdish authorities said on Saturday they had evidence that Islamic State had used chlorine gas as a chemical weapon against their peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq in January.

The Security Council of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region said in a statement to Reuters that the peshmerga had taken soil and clothing samples after an Islamic State car bombing attempt on Jan. 23.

It said laboratory analysis showed "the samples contained levels of chlorine that suggested the substance was used in weaponized form." The Kurdish allegation could not be independently confirmed.

Chlorine is a choking agent whose use as a



chemical weapon dates back to World War One. It is banned under the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits all use of toxic agents on the battlefield. Peter Sawczak, spokesman for the Dutch-based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, said: "We have not had a request from Iraq to investigate claims of use of chemical weapons in Iraq, and the OPCW cannot immedi-

ately verify the claims." Chlorine has been used "systematically" in the civil war in neighboring Syria, an OPCW fact-finding mission found last year. The OPCW would have to get its own samples to confirm the use of chemical weapons in a member state. The Kurdish statement said the car bombing attempt happened on a highway between Mosul and the Syrian border. A ... (More on P4)... (21)

Iraqi Offensive on Tikrit Stalled for Third Day

BAGHDAD - Islamic State fighters traded sniper fire and mortar rounds with Iraqi troops and allied Shi'ite militia forces on Sunday in the city of Tikrit but no major advances were made by either side, a military official who returned from the front said. The nearly two-week-old operation to win back the city from the radical Islamist militants occupying large parts of the country's north and west been stalled since Friday, when security officials said Iraqi forces and their militia allies would wait for reinforcements before moving forward.

Two days later, back-up had not yet arrived, and officials continued to stress the challenges they faced in flushing out militants in street-by-street battles and defusing bombs and booby traps they laid while retreating from parts of the city.

There were no new pushes today from either side, only scattered skirmishes in the northern and southern parts of the city," Colonel Mohammed Abid al-Jubouri told Reuters by phone after visiting the southern edge of Tikrit on Sunday. Jubouri said the process of "organizing troops and waiting for reinforcements" was ongoing and did not say when a fresh effort to seize the central districts of the city still held by IS would begin. (Reuters)

US-Turkey Relations Crucial for Region: Envoys

WASHINGTON - Ambassadors from both countries say the relationship between the two nations has never been more important than it is today. Turkish and American diplomats on Saturday vowed to fight international threats together, as they spoke at the 35th Annual Convention of the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, or ATAA, in Washington.

Ambassadors from both countries said the relationship between the two nations has never been more important than it is today. "There is a long list of common threats, risks and challenges that require a strong U.S.-Turkish partnership, including the civil war and humanitarian tragedy in Syria," said Turkey's ambassador to the U.S., Serdar Kilic. The Syrian conflict is "the worst humanitarian tragedy of the 21st century, having claimed the lives of 300,000 Syrians and left 6 million Syrians as refugees and approximately 10 million as internally displaced persons," he added. U.S. ambassador to Turkey John R. Bass, who addressed the convention via video conference from Ankara, said the two countries were working to support moderate Syrian opposition groups, including units in Turkey, in order to help them defend their communities against Daesh and other groups. (Agencies)

FRANKFURT - Ukraine's president accused Russian-backed separatists in the east of failing to respect a ceasefire with Ukrainian troops and called for further sanctions on Russia in comments to a German newspaper to be published on Monday.

Attacks have become less frequent since the latest ceasefire came into force in mid-February, but both sides accuse each other of violations. Ukraine's military said last week that pro-Russian rebels were using the truce to amass heavy weapons.

An agreement signed in Minsk in September called with the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front line.

"Ukraine has fulfilled every single point of the Minsk agreement. The ceasefire has been implemented immediately on

Truce Not Working, Urges More Russia Sanctions: Ukraine



our part, but the Russian fighters have done the exact opposite," Petro Poroshenko told the Bild newspaper. "Every day, there is shooting from the Russian side, often more than 60 times a day. In total, the ceasefire has been broken 1,100 times," he said. "The truth is that the agreement is not working." Poroshenko also called for additional sanctions against Russia for breaking the ceasefire. At a summit in Brussels

next Thursday and Friday, European Union leaders will discuss the sanctions imposed on Russia's financial, energy and defense sectors last July over Russia's annexation of Crimea and supporting the separatists in Ukraine.

Germany and other EU member countries want to push for a declaration that will not allow sanctions to be eased unless Moscow complies with the Minsk agreement, two officials said on Saturday. (Reuters)

UN will Vote on Iran Deal: White House

WASHINGTON - White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough has announced that the UN Security Council would vote on any nuclear deal between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

"Just as it is true that only Congress can terminate US statutory sanctions on Iran, only the Security Council can terminate the Security Council's sanctions on Iran," McDonough said.

"Because the principal negotiators of an arrangement with Iran are the five permanent members of the Security Council, we anticipate that the Security Council would pass a resolution to register its support for any deal and increase its international legitimacy," he added. McDonough made the remarks in a



letter to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker on Saturday. On Friday, US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki made similar remarks. She said that the United Nations Security Council would endorse any final nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 group. "We would anticipate that, if we're able to reach a joint comprehensive Plan of Action between the P5+1 and Iran, an endorsement vote would be held by the UN Security Council," Psaki told reporters. Iran and the P5+1 group - the US, Britain, France, China, Russia, and Germany - are currently working to complete the outlines of a nuclear deal by the end of March after they reached an interim agreement in November 2013. The two sides have by the end of June to clinch a final agreement. US Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif are in Switzerland on Sunday to hold new round of talks. (Press TV)

Neighbor News

Iran Nuclear Negotiators Return Back to Switzerland for "Possible Deal"

GENEVA - A fresh round of talks over Iran's long-disputed nuclear program will resume Sunday evening in Lausanne of Switzerland, which will participated by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, as well as diplomats from other world major countries. A source close to the Iranian delegate said that after meeting his U.S. counterpart Sunday evening in Lausanne, Zarif will go to Brussels to talk with his EU peers and then will return to Lausanne for further talks.

The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, and U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz also are scheduled to meet in a bilateral nuclear talks Sunday afternoon in Lausanne. The Information office

of Switzerland's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) on Sunday morning has opened a press center in Lausanne, the first time of its kind for the Iran nuclear talks this year held in the country.

"Through agreement with the participating parties, Switzerland will be organizing media accreditation and a press filing center for the international media traveling to Lausanne to cover the nuclear negotiations with Iran," the FDFA Information office said in a letter to the press.

According to a source close to Zarif, the Iranian top diplomat said in the plane to Lausanne earlier on Sunday that if there were political will, making a deal would be possible. "If other side's political will were like ours, deal would not be out of mind," Zarif was cited as saying. (Xinhua)

China Vows to Press on with Economic Reforms despite Pain for Some

BEIJING - Premier Li Keqiang expressed determination Sunday to press ahead with reforms meant to reduce the Chinese government's role in the world's second-largest economy in hopes of spurring growth despite what he acknowledged would be pain for "vested interests" that benefit from regulation.

"This is not nail-clipping. This is like taking a knife to one's own flesh," Li said at a news conference after the close of China's annual legislature in Beijing. "But however painful it might be, we are determined to keep going until our job is done."

During his only news conference of the year, the premier repeated pledges to reduce requirements for government approval of new businesses. He said the number of private businesses being set up has doubled following efforts

already underway simplify the process of registering a new enterprise. Li spoke after Sunday morning's close of the 11-day session of the ceremonial National People's Congress. The legislature does little or no lawmaking work but serves as a platform for the ruling Communist Party to highlight proposed reforms and set a tone for the year's government work.

At this year's meeting, the government lowered China's official economic growth to 7 percent from last year's 7.5 percent and promised to maintain employment levels, fight corruption and curb pollution.

Li acknowledged that reforms face opposition from politically influential state companies that might face tougher competition and officials who might see their own status reduced. (Agencies)

'Pakistan Won't Rush to Join Anti-Iran Alliance'

ISLAMABAD - The Pakistani government has decided against taking sides in the emerging situation in the Middle East - at least for now.

"Pakistan would not rush to join the anti-Iran alliance that is being forged," a senior government functionary told Dawn in a background interview.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif last week visited Saudi Arabia in what the government described as a special invitation of Saudi King Salman Bin Abdulaziz. The invitation for Mr Sharif was part of diplomatic

consultations Riyadh started in view of the evolving situation. Other Muslim leaders that the King met over the past few weeks included the presidents of Palestine, Egypt and Turkey, the Jordanian king, emirs of Kuwait and Qatar and the UAE leader.

King Salman's discussions with Mr Sharif in Riyadh centred on Saudi concerns about Tehran's expanding influence in the region, the official, who had been briefed about the visit, said, adding that the threat from the self-styled Islamic ... (More on P4)... (23)

The New Edition of the Law of Uzbekistan "On Electronic Commerce" Discussed

TASHKANT - The Committee on information and communication technologies of the Legislative chamber of Oliy Majlis held an event devoted to the discussion prepared to the second reading of the new edition of the Law "On electronic commerce".

The event was attended by deputies of the Legislative chamber, representatives of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Central Bank, government and economic man-

agement, banking and finance, business systems of e-commerce and e-payment, non-profit organizations, the media, and a wide range of specialists in banking and finance and information sector.

Event organizers have put before themselves the task of detailed discussion of further legal support of e-commerce in connection with the expected adoption of the law "On electronic commerce" in the new edition. (Agencies)

Russia Prepared Raising Nuclear Readiness over Crimea: Putin

MOSCOW - Russia was ready to bring its nuclear weapons into a state of alert during last year's tensions over the Crimean Peninsula and the overthrow of Ukraine's president, President Vladimir Putin said in remarks aired on Sunday. Putin also expanded on a previous admission that the well-armed forces in unmarked uniforms who took control of Ukrainian military facilities in Crimea were Russian soldiers. Putin's

comments, in a documentary being shown on state TV, highlight the extent to which alarm spread in Russia in the weeks following Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's ouster in February 2014 after months of street protests that turned increasingly violent.

After Yanukovich fled Kiev, separatist sentiment soared in Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula dominated by ethnic Russians.... (More on P4)... (22)

Hamas Warns to Retaliate Any Egyptian Attack on Gaza

GAZA - Hamas militants will retaliate if the Egyptian army wages attacks against the Islamic movement in the Gaza Strip, a senior Hamas official warned on Sunday. Mahmoud al-Zahar, Hamas strongman, told a political seminar that he rules out any Egyptian war on Gaza, but said "under the current situation, everything is possible, and Hamas will respond to any Egyptian attack on Gaza." Ties between Hamas and Egypt deteriorat-

ed since the ouster of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, which was followed by security crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters leaving hundreds of them dead while thousands others are on trials. Matters got worse when an Egyptian court decided in two consecutive sessions that both Hamas and its armed wing al-Qassam Brigades are outlawed and termed them as terrorist organizations. (Xinhua)

Company Optimism toward Future Business Improves: Survey

BEIJING - Chinese enterprises are increasingly optimistic toward business revenues and new orders in 2015, according to a survey released on Sunday. Financial information service provider Markit found the net balance of rate (percent of polled companies expecting an increase in business activity in the next 12 months minus the percent expecting a decline) grew to 30 percent in February from 26 percent in October. (Xinhua)