

South Korea Aims For High-Level Talks about Talks with North

SEOUL - South Korea will seek high-level talks with North Korea this month as preparations for a summit began on Friday, the presidential chief of staff said, while officials in the South expressed interest in a separate summit with the United States.

If North Korea agrees to the talks, they would be the first North-South contact since a South Korean delegation returned from a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un this month and a chance for North Korea to break its silence on promised engagements with the South and the United States.

The talks about talks come after the head of the U.S. Pacific Command said the United States could not be overly



optimistic about the outcome of any summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and Kim, aimed at ending the North's nuclear and missile programs, and must go into it with "eyes wide open". Admiral Harry Harris told the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee he believed the United States would stick to

its demand for the "complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation" of the Korean peninsula. Officials of the two Koreas will discuss key agenda topics and other matters related to the pending summit between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Kim, Moon's presidential chief of staff, Im

Jong-seok, told a media briefing. "We've decided to narrow down the agenda topics to denuclearising the Korean peninsula, securing permanent peace to ease military tension and new, bold ways to take inter-Korean relations forward," said Im, who is head of the preparation team.

The isolated state has always maintained it will continue to develop its nuclear weapons as a deterrent against U.S. aggression but, according to South Korea, it later said it was open to abandoning the program if the security of its regime was guaranteed.

Im added Moon may meet Trump after the inter-Korean summit but before Trump's planned summit with Kim in May. (Reuters)

Dutch PM Warns Macron, Merkel against Dictating EU Reforms

BERLIN - Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte on Friday cautioned Berlin and Paris not to try to push through their ambitious EU reform plans against the will of other member states. Rutte, who believes deeper integration is not the answer to the club's problems, told German news weekly Der Spiegel that countries would not just "nod along" to French-German proposals to shake up the bloc, particularly the eurozone. The warning came just hours before German Chancellor Angela Merkel was due in Paris for talks with French President Emmanuel Macron, who is ea-

ver to push his vision for an overhaul of EU institutions. "We have freedom of movement in the EU, and of course the German government can meet the French government without us being there," Rutte told Spiegel in an interview. "But that doesn't mean that we and other EU countries agree with everything the Germans and French agree on. We won't just nod along to everything." Macron has called for a major reform drive to reinvigorate the European Union and deepen eurozone cooperation to respond to rising populist challenges on the continent. (AFP)

Putin Urges High Voter Turnout Ahead Of Russian Election

MOSCOW - President Vladimir Putin has urged Russians to cast ballots in Sunday's election, which he is certain to win, saying that the vote will shape the country's future. Putin said in a televised address Friday that "the will of the people, the will of each Russian citizen will determine the path the country will take." The Russian leader, whose approval ratings top 80 percent, is set to easily win another six-year term against seven challengers, but the Kremlin has been concerned about voter apathy and has sought to boost turnout to make Putin's victory as impressive as possible.

Putin urged Russians to "use their right to choose the future for the great Russia that we all love." He warned that failure to cast a ballot would mean that "this decisive choice will be made without your opinion taken into account." On Friday, the final day of the campaign, the president is set to visit a medical center in St. Petersburg, his home city. The president has traveled across Russia, promising



to raise wages, modernize crumbling health care and education and pour more funds into dilapidated infrastructure. Ksenia Sobchak, a 36-year-old TV host who has campaigned on a liberal platform and criticized Putin's policies, announced the creation of a new political party late Thursday. (AP)

Signatories to Iran Nuclear Deal Meet In Vienna amid Trump's Threat



VIENNA - Signatories to Iran's 2015 nuclear agreement with world powers have held a new round of their periodic meetings to review its implementation amid US threats to kill the multilateral accord. Representatives from Iran, the US, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany convened in the Austrian city of Vien-

na on Friday for a meeting of the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action Joint Commission, or JCPOA. One European diplomat said representatives from Europe were desperate to save the JCPOA from a possible collapse, which could be a case due to policies adopted by US President Donald Trump. "We need to make sure that we don't throw out the baby with the bath water, so we keep the nuclear agreement and we act on the rest in parallel," said the diplomat.

The meeting comes ahead of a May 12 deadline for US President Donald Trump to extend waivers of economic sanctions on Iran. He vowed in January, when he last extended those waivers, not to do so again unless the Europeans meet his demands to fix what he calls "flaws" in the deal. European Union foreign ministers are expected to affirm that they believe the deal with Iran is good, and work to discourage Trump from pulling out of the deal in May. (Press TV)

Greek Court Rejects Extradition of Turkish Coup Fugitives

ATHENS - A Greek court on Friday dismissed a Turkish demand for the handover of eight Turkish soldiers accused by Ankara of having played a direct role in the abortive coup against President Tayyip Erdogan in 2016. It was the third request by Turkey to extradite the same eight suspects which Greek courts have rejected, an issue which has further strained frosty relations between the two NATO allies at odds over a host of issues from airspace to mineral rights in the Aegean Sea. The court said it was not convinced the eight would face a fair trial in their country. "Justice rose to the occasion and it is a day of joy for the eight of them," their lawyer Omiros Zellos told reporters. The group - three majors, three captains and two sergeant majors - fled to Greece in a helicopter on July 16, 2016, as the coup attempt against Erdogan crumbled. Turkey says they are traitors and coup plotters and has repeatedly demanded they be returned. Erdogan himself has addressed the issue several times, accusing Greece of renegeing on a pledge to swiftly send them back. (Reuters)

Germany's New Foreign Minister Holds Talks in Poland

WARSAW, Poland - Germany's new foreign minister arrived Friday in Poland for talks on the European Union's future and security and on the two neighbors' bilateral relations. Heiko Maas said before departing he wanted to make it clear that Germany was not taking trust and good neighborly ties with Poland "for granted." German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was sworn in for a fourth term this week, is to visit Warsaw for talks on Monday. Maas said the "close partnership" with Poland is "true despite the different perspectives we have in some areas" but that Poland, the largest of the EU's central and eastern members, and Germany have a "joint responsibility to keep Europe together." In his previous capacity as justice minister, Maas criticized changes that Poland's right-wing government has introduced to the country's judiciary, seen by many as a violation of the rule of law. (AP)

Egyptians Abroad Vote In Presidential Elections

CAIRO - Thousands of Egyptian expatriates around the world are heading to polling stations to cast their ballots in the presidential election. Lasheen Ibrahim, head of the election commission, said the turnout Friday appears to be "good," without elaborating. Overseas voting started Friday and ends Sunday. Voting in Egypt takes place March 26-28. Ibrahim told reporters the commission received no complaints from any polling stations and the voting process went smoothly. Egypt's army chief-turned-President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi is virtually certain to win reelection after a string of potential contenders withdrew from the race under pressure or were arrested. That left an obscure sole candidate, Moussa Mustafa Moussa, as the only rival. And he's a supporter of el-Sissi's government. (AP)

German Minister Questions Islam's Place in the Country

BERLIN - Germany's new interior minister said Friday he doesn't consider Islam to be a part of Germany, a position that puts him at odds with Chancellor Angela Merkel on the central question of migration. Horst Seehofer, the country's top security official, told the Bild newspaper that "Islam doesn't belong to Germany," but added that "the Muslims who live with us are, of course, part of Germany." Seehofer said his message to Muslims was: "Live with us, not parallel to or against us." His Bavaria-only Christian Social Union, which has always taken a harder line on migration than Merkel's conservative



Christian Democratic Union, faces a state election later this year. The anti-Islam Alternative for Germany party is relatively strong in Bavaria and some of its lawmakers welcomed his comments. Asked about Seehofer's comments, Merkel said she stood by her view that while Germany is

shaped by its Judeo-Christian heritage, "now there are 4 million Muslims living in Germany," a country of about 82 million people. "They can live their religion here too," she said. "These Muslims belong to Germany and in the same way their religion belongs to Germany, that is to say Islam." (AP)

North Korean Minister in Sweden amid Trump-Kim Speculation

STOCKHOLM - North Korea's foreign minister met briefly with Sweden's prime minister Friday during a surprise trip to Stockholm that has fueled speculation about a possible meeting in the Scandinavian country between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom said Sweden is hoping that "we can use our role and also our contacts," but

stressed that it is up to the countries concerned to decide "which way we are going." She said that "we value this opportunity to arrange a meeting," though she didn't specify what she meant. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, speaking at a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin, did not answer directly whether his country had U.S. support to organize talks with North Korea. (AP)

Neighbor News

Pm Decides To Give 1 Mln New Gas Connections

ISLAMABAD - Parliamentary Secretary for Cabinet Division Raja Javed Akhlaq on Friday apprised the National Assembly that the Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has decided to give one million new domestic gas connections to the consumers across the country. Responding to a Calling Attention Notice moved by DrAzra Fazal Pechuho and others regarding non-provision of new gas connections to the consumers of Sindh provinces, he said the Cabinet approved the policy in 2013 to provide gas connection purely on merit. He said there was no discretionary quota of anyone including the Prime Minister, the minister or MNA. Connections were strictly being provided on merit basis, he said.

He said since 2007, there were total 1.9 million consumers of Sui Southern Gas Company Limited (SSGCL) and now number of connections was surged to 2.89 million. SSGCL received around 80,000 to 100,000 application for new connections every year, he said. Raja Javed said SSGCL was providing new gas connection to the consumers in just 45 days. As many as 15,000 to 20,000 gas connection applications were pending with SSGCL, he said. He said some 2.2 million applications were pending in Punjab with Sui Northern Gas Company Limited (SNGPL). The Parliamentary Secretary said under Article 158, priority was being given to the areas where new gas reserves were discovered. (Monitoring Desk)

Tajik President to Visit New York

DUSHANBE - Tajik President Emomali Rahmon will take part in the UN events in New York, TajikTA news agency reported. Rahmon will visit New York March 21-23, a source in the Tajik government said. He will take part in the UN activities dedicated to the International Decade of Action "Water for Sustainable Development", 2018-2028, the source noted. Rahmon is also scheduled to meet with the UN leadership, including UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. According to the UN news website, the "Making Every Drop Count: An Agenda for Water Action" report, released by a panel of 11 heads of state (including Emomali Rahmon) and a special adviser, calls for a fundamental shift in the way the world manages water so that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 6 on ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, can be achieved. According to the report, 40 percent of the world's people are being affected by water scarcity. If not addressed, as many as 700 million could be displaced by 2030 in search for water, the report said. (Trend)

Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan May Unite Asia, Europe - Envoy

ASHGABAT - Turkmenistan is open for negotiations on accession to the International North-South Transport Corridor project, Turkmen Ambassador to Azerbaijan Mekhan Ishanguliyev said at a briefing in Baku. He said that Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have the potential to unite Asia and Europe. "Turkmenistan has all necessary infrastructure to join the International North-South Transport Corridor project, and the construction of the Turkmenbashi International Seaport is nearing completion," the diplomat said. He also noted the significance of the Lapis Lazuli transport project, the participants of which are Afghanistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Lapis Lazuli Route agreement was signed in October last year between Afghanistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Azer-

baijan and Georgia and once implemented will become a key international trade and transport corridor that will directly connect Afghanistan to Europe. The Lapis Lazuli Route will start in Afghanistan's northern Aqina port in Faryab province and Torgandi in western Herat province and will run through to Turkmenbashi in Turkmenistan. From there it will cross the Caspian Sea and will link the Azerbaijani capital Baku to Tbilisi and Georgia's Black Sea ports of Batumi and Poti. It will then connect with Kars in eastern Turkey before linking to Istanbul and Europe. The International North-South Transport Corridor is meant to connect Northern Europe with Southeast Asia. It will serve as a link connecting the railways of Azerbaijan, Iran and Russia. (Trend)

Russia to Expel UK Diplomats As Crisis over Nerve Toxin Attack Deepens

ASTANA/LONDON - Russia is set to expel British diplomats in retaliation for Prime Minister Theresa May's decision to kick out 23 Russians as relations with London crashed to a post-Cold War low over an attack with military-grade nerve agent on English soil. After the first known offensive use of such a weapon in Europe since World War Two, May blamed Moscow and gave 23 Russians who she said were spies working under diplomatic cover at the London embassy a week to leave. Russia has denied any involvement, cast Britain as a post-colonial power unsettled by Brexit, and even suggested London fabricated the attack in an attempt to whip up anti-Russian hysteria. Asked by a Reuters reporter in the Kazakh capital if Russia planned to expel British diplomats from Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov smiled and said: "We will, of course." Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia could announce its response at any minute.

Britain, the United States, Germany and France jointly called on Russia on Thursday to explain the attack. U.S. President Donald Trump said it looked as though the Russians were behind it. A German government spokesman called the attack "an immense, appalling event". Chancellor Angela Merkel said an EU summit next week would discuss the issue, in the first instance to seek clarity, and that any boycott of the soccer World Cup, which Russia is hosting in June and July, was not an immediate priority. (Reuters)

Chinese Firm to Fund Iran Plane Purchases

TEHRAN - Iran's media wrote the newspaper without mentioning the name of the Chinese company. "The problem of providing funds for new plane purchases has thus been resolved." In December 2016, Boeing sealed deals with Iran's flag-carrier airliner Iran Air over sales of 80 jets valued at \$16.6 billion. They include 50 narrow-body Boeing 737 passenger jets and 30 wide-body 777 aircraft. Iran Air also sealed deals with Airbus over purchases of 100 planes worth \$18-20 billion at list prices and has already received three of them. (Press TV)