

EU Energy Chief Wants Russia to Agree Turkish Pipeline Plan with EU

LONDON - Russia should consult with the European Union on its plans to transport natural gas through Turkey, EU Energy Chief Maros Sefcovic said on Tuesday, news agency Reuters reported.

"When we speak about some big supplies for European customers, you cannot adopt such a decision [on Russian gas supplies through Turkey] without talking to them, without talking to the EU and without talking to the European Commission," Reuters quoted Sefcovic as saying at a press briefing in Ankara on Monday evening.

During his visit to Turkey, the European Commission's Vice-President for Energy Union said no details on the Russian proposal had been received and any plans should be economically viable and consistent with Gazprom's obligations to its long-term European customers.

Sefcovic also voiced concern over a possibility that the existing routes via Ukraine might be switched off in favor of the proposed Turkish Stream.

"If all this should just change like that, I don't think this is ordinary procedure and that this is how such a big client like



the EU should be treated," Sefcovic said. Gazprom and Turkey's Botas Petroleum Pipeline Corporation signed a memorandum of understanding on December 1, 2014, envisaging the construction of a gas pipeline across the Black Sea to Turkey. The Turkish Stream gas pipeline will have a capacity of 63 billion cubic meters, of which 50 billion cubic meters will be supplied to a new gas hub on the Turkish-Greek border. Russian President Vladimir Putin announced on December 1 that the project to build the South Stream gas pipeline was closed due to the European Union's unconstructive approach to cooperation in that sphere, including Bulgaria's decision to stop the construction of the pipeline's stretch on its territory. Instead, Russia will build a gas pipeline to Turkey where a gas hub on the border with Europe will be created, Putin said. South Stream was Gazprom's global infrastructure project designed to build a gas pipeline with a capacity of 63 billion cubic meters across the Black Sea

to Southern and Central Europe in order to diversify natural gas export routes and eliminate transit risks.

The South Stream's overland part was expected to run across Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Slovenia and Austria with a gas metering station at Tarvisio, Italy, as its terminus.

The South Stream gas project envisaged the pipeline's offshoots to Croatia and the Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The South Stream gas project was estimated at €16 billion euros and the first gas deliveries were expected to start in late 2015.

The construction of the Bulgarian stretch was launched on October 31, 2013. However, the European Commission later started an anti-monopoly probe into the South Stream project, saying it contradicted the norms of the Third Energy Package. The Turkish Stream gas pipeline will run 660 km (410 miles) along the old corridor of the South Stream project abandoned by Russia and 250 km (155 miles) in the new corridor towards Turkey's European part. (Agencies)

Neighbor News

Iran, US 'Resolve 90% of Nuclear Technical Issues'

TEHRAN - Iran and the United States have agreed on 90 percent of the technical questions in bilateral talks on Tehran's nuclear programme, an Iranian official at the Lausanne negotiations said Tuesday.

"We have agreed on 90% of the technical issues" in the negotiations with US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, the head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation Ali Akbar Salehi said, quoted by state television's website. "In most of the issues we have come to mutual agreements - we have differences only in one major issue which we will try to solve in this evening's meeting" between Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Salehi appeared more optimistic than a senior US official at the talks in the Swiss city, who said key disagreements remain ahead of a March 31 deadline to agree the outlines of a major nuclear deal.

Zarif and Kerry met for almost five hours on Monday before Zarif went to and from Brussels to meet European foreign ministers and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini. The Iranian and US top diplomats met again on Tuesday morning. Political directors from the other five world powers involved - Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany - began arriving in Lausanne on Tuesday and were due to meet on Wednesday, the EU said. (AFP)

Voting Starts in Israeli Parliamentary Elections

JERUSALEM - Israeli voters started to cast their ballots Tuesday morning in an early parliamentary election which will decide whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's rightwing Likud will continue its hold on power.

Voting started at 7 a.m. local time (0500 GMT) Tuesday at 10,119 polling stations across the country and is due to end at 10 p.m. According to the Central Election Committee, there are around 5.8 million Israeli citizens eligible to vote in this

election. Vying for the 120 seats in the one-chamber parliament Knesset are 24 parties, of which opinion polls predict some 11 will make it into the Knesset. The opposition center-left Zionist Union is projected to be the largest party with around 25 seats, followed by the Likud with around 21 seats. (Xinhua)



EU Police Group Launches Team to Tackle Migrant Smugglers

THE HAGUE - The European Union police agency launched a new team Tuesday to crack down on the organized crime gangs that smuggle tens of thousands of migrants across the Mediterranean from North Africa to Europe. The new team based at Europol's headquarters in The Hague will analyze and share intelligence gathered by the EU border agency Frontex, Interpol and EU member police forces to identify and track smuggling networks.

In an example of the work the team will do, Europol announced it had helped Greek authorities who arrested 16 suspected human traffickers last week. The suspects are accused of arranging travel for 350 migrants, mostly Syrians, who paid up to 9,000 euros (\$9,500) each to get from Turkey to the Greek islands and then onward to mainland Europe using forged travel



documents.

"By establishing a permanent network of operational officers ... I expect that we'll be doing those kinds of operations more often on a bigger scale so we can have a bigger overall impact on reducing this problem," Europol Director Rob Wainwright told The Associated Press. The scale of the human trafficking trade is vast and the risks are high for migrants desperate to reach Europe. Europol says 220,000 migrants crossed the Mediterranean last year, costing 3,000 migrants their lives. A further 1,000 have died al-

ready this year.

Linking with Interpol gives the Europol team intelligence beyond Europe's borders and into the chaotic North African region that is the jumping off point for many migrants fleeing conflicts in countries like Syria and Iraq. Wainwright said it's hard to build law enforcement relationships with such countries, "which makes it even more important ... that at least within Europe we come together in a stronger way. At least in Europe we can do what we can to identify those people that are behind this terrible trade." (AP)

Xi Reaffirms China's Support for European Integration

BEIJING - Chinese President Xi Jinping on Monday reaffirmed support for European integration, expecting closer cooperation between China and the European Union (EU).

Xi made the remarks as he met with European Parliament President Martin Schulz at the Great Hall of the People, saying the development of Europe was an important component of multipolarization of the world. Recalling his visit to EU headquarters last spring, Xi said the two sides have been deepening their partnership for peace, growth, reform and civilization. Xi said the two sides



should consider the 40th anniversary of official EU-China diplomatic relations as a new starting point, and work together to increase political interactions and practical cooperation.

During the meeting, Xi also briefed the guest on China's annual sessions of the legislative and political advisory bodies, which were convened in the past two weeks, as

well as the work on formulating the country's 13th Five-Year Plan.

For his part, Schulz said it is important for Europe and China to consolidate their relationship as they share many common interests and are faced with similar problems. Europe will work with China to boost practical cooperation and advance the partnership, Schulz said. (Xinhua)

Germany Confirms to Join China-Proposed Investment Bank

BERLIN - Germany is going to be a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schaueble said on Tuesday. "We want to work with international financial organizations together, use our extensive experience, to help the new bank to reach a high international reputation," the minister said after the first China-Germany High Level Financial Dialogue held in Berlin. According to a joint statement of the dialogue, both China and Germany agree that "the AIIB bank as a new investment Bank could



play an important role to provide funds for infrastructure in Asia." Both France and Italy officially confirmed their intention to join the bank on Tuesday. With an expected initial subscribed capital of 50 billion U.S. dollars, the AIIB will be an international financial institu-

tion to fund infrastructure projects in Asia and is expected to be formally established by the end of this year. Twenty-one countries including China, India and Singapore signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Beijing in October last year to build the bank. (Xinhua)

Popular Forces Ready to Take Back Mosul: Iraq

TEHRAN - A senior commander of Iraq's popular forces underlined that his men are ready to launch a fresh offensive against the Takfiri terrorists in Mosul, capital of Nineveh province.

"All resistance groups who purged Salahuddin province of Takfiri terrorists are now fully prepared to liberate Mosul," Abu Morteza Al-Sa'adi, commander of Asaeb Ahl Al-Haq Battalion (one of the popular forces fighting alongside the Iraqi army), told FNA on Tuesday.

He said during the Salahuddin battles, his Battalion was responsible for setting free Albu Ajil, Al-Dour and the roads leading to Samarra, and continued, "All Al-Dour, Al-Elm and Albu Ajil had been booby-trapped by the ISIL and we seized US and Israeli-made weapons and ammunition from the terrorists in these regions." (FNA)

Peshmarga Fighters Raid ISIL Positions



TEHRAN - Iraqi Kurdish Peshmarga fighters launched a major offensive against the ISIL terrorists in Mosul, and inflicted major losses on the Takfiri group, a military source said.

A senior Peshmarga commander, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the Kurdish forces stormed the ISIL strongholds in the Forest area, Mosul, using artillery shells, killing scores of the terrorists.

The Kurdish fighters have so far made major gains in their fight against the ISIL Takfiri group in Mosul and Kirkuk. The terrorist group has sustained a heavy toll across Iraq and large swathes of lands are now under the control of the Iraqi troops, as the army, backed by popular fighters and Peshmarga troops, are intensifying their offensive in an attempt to liberate the Muslim country from the control of the dregs of the humanity. (FNA)

ASEAN Meeting Against Illegal Drugs Held

MANILA - The Philippines hosted Tuesday a regional cooperation meeting aimed to consolidate and strengthen efforts in control and prevention of drug problems in the Southeast Asian region. The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) said the 2nd Inter-session Working Group Meeting on Law Enforcement under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Senior Officials on Drugs (ASOD) took place in its headquarters in Quezon City, Metro Manila. PDEA Director General Undersecretary Arturo Cadac Jr. said the one-day meeting was devoted to discussing topics ranging from the updates on new types of illegal drugs, development of laws and legislation, discovery of new modus operandi of drug traffickers such as mail order, postal issue, online order, and strengthening cross-border cooperation among ASEAN member states. (Xinhua)

Harvard's President Speaks in China about Climate Change

BEIJING - The Harvard president told students at one of China's most prestigious universities Tuesday that academic institutions must be unfettered places where every topic can be raised and every question asked to help tackle challenges such as climate change. The comments by Drew Gilpin Faust were part of a 30-minute speech at Beijing's Tsinghua University on climate change in which she urged universities in the two countries to collaborate on research and on teaching the next generation how to deal with climate change.

"Knowledge emerges from debate, from disagreement, from questions, from doubt, from recognizing that every path must be open because any path might yield an answer," Faust said. Her speech at the alma mater of Chinese President Xi Jinping came one day after she met Xi for discussions on U.S.-China cooperation in higher education and the threat of climate change. (AP)

More European Countries to Join AIIB

BEIJING - The membership of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is set to expand further, with France, Germany and Italy reported to have all agreed to join the China-proposed institution. The three European countries confirmed their respective intentions on Tuesday in the wake of Britain's application last week to be a founding member of the \$50 billion bank. Meanwhile, Australian leaders have been lining up in the past few days to voice support for joining the AIIB, which marks a conspicuous U-turn from the cabinet's previous stance. "Our position all along has been that we are happy to be part of some thing which is a genuine multilateral institution such as the World Bank, such as the Asia Development Bank," Prime Minister Tony Abbott said during an interview with Sky News over the weekend. In addition, South Korea, Switzerland and Luxembourg have reportedly been pondering whether to join the new international initiative. As regards Japan, Chinese Finance Minister

Lou Jiwei said earlier this month that the chance to be an AIIB founding member is available for all Asian countries including Japan by March 31, and the ball is in Japan's court. "They told us they are considering. Whether Japan will join, we do not know. It is Japan's own decision," Lou said. Nearly 30 countries have confirmed their participation in the AIIB, which is aimed at helping finance infrastructure projects across Asia and expected to come into being within 2015. In response to US concerns about the standards of the AIIB, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said last week that the AIIB's operation and governance will be open, transparent, inclusive and responsible.

"It will draw experiences from other multilateral development banks and avoid their detours so as to be more cost-effective and efficient," he told a press conference. "The AIIB will complement existing multilateral development banks and support the infrastructure and economic development in Asia," he added. (Xinhua)

Foreign Investment Increased Twofold in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD - The foreign investment from July 2014 to February 2015 in Pakistan has increased by at least US \$1.3 billion.

According to the figures issued by the State Bank of Pakistan, the

foreign investment has increased twofold in the current fiscal year as compared to the last year.

The Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) was more than US \$1.7 billion. (Monitoring Desk)

Rehmon Assesses the Elections as Democratic and Transparent

DUSHANBE - In a statement delivered at the first session of the first session of the Majlisi Namoyandagon (Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament) of the fifth convocation, President Emomali Rahmon said Tuesday that the March 1 parliamentary elections "were democratic, free and transparent," the Tajik president's official website reports. The president reportedly noted that numerous international election observers and representatives of international organizations had recognized the March 1 parliamentary elections as "democratic and transparent." Emomali Rahmon stressed that two academicians, eight doctors of sciences and

17 candidates of sciences had been elected to the lower house of the parliament. According to the final parliamentary election results, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) received 65.4 percent of the votes cast in the March 1 elections (according to the preliminary results, 65.2 percent), the Agrarian Party (APT) - 11.7 percent (11.8 percent), the Party of Economic Reforms (PER) - 7.5 percent (7.6 percent), and the Socialist Party (SPT) - 5.5 percent (5.5 percent).

Thus, 16 PDP members, 3 APT members, 2 PER members and 1 SPT member came to the Majlisi Namoyandagon from party lists. (Asia-Plus)