

Chinese President Takes Oath of Allegiance to Constitution for First Time

BEIJING - "I pledge my allegiance to the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to safeguard the Constitution's authority, fulfill my legal obligations ..." Newly elected Chinese President Xi Jinping took the solemn oath in Beijing Saturday.

This was the first time for a Chinese president to take a public oath of allegiance to the Constitution upon assuming office.

Xi was elected Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the PRC earlier Saturday at the ongoing first session of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC), the national legislature. Last October, he was elected general secretary of the Central



Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and appointed CMC chairman of the CPC at the first plenary session of the 19th CPC Central Committee.

With the national emblem hung up high in an auditorium inside the Great Hall of the People, everybody stood and a hard copy of the

Constitution was brought to the stage by honor guards as the ceremony started at around 10:49 a.m.

After a chorus of the national anthem was sung by all present, 64-year-old Xi, in a dark suit, took the podium, placed his left hand upon the Constitution, raised his right fist, and

read the oath.

"[I pledge to] be loyal to the country and the people, be committed and honest in my duty, accept the people's supervision and work for a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful," he said.

He then bowed and returned to his seat amid warm applause.

The ceremony was held just six days after the national legislature added oaths of allegiance into the newly-amended Constitution Sunday.

The amendment also added Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as a guiding theory for China. (Xinhua)

Neighbor News

Iran Arrests another Ally of Former President

TEHRAN - A former Iranian vice president was detained by Iran's judiciary, local media reported on Sunday.

In a statement, the Office of Prosecutor General of Tehran announced that Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, also former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's close ally, has been arrested by the police for interrogation. The judiciary statement did not provide further details. On Thursday,

Mashaei burnt a copy of a court verdict in public, which had sentenced Hamid Baghaei, another vice president in Ahmadinejad's administration, to 15 years. Baghaei, who served as vice president for executive affairs under Ahmadinejad, was found guilty of financial corruption. He was also ordered to pay a fine of 430 billion rials, an equivalent of 8.96 million U.S. dollars. (Xinhua)

Insecurity Detrimental To All Regional Countries: Iran President

TEHRAN - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani says the spread of insecurity and instability in the Middle East will be highly detrimental to regional countries.

In a meeting with Oman's Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi in Tehran on Sunday, the Iranian president said Tehran and Muscat shoulder a heavy responsibility vis-à-vis regional issues and must take steps to develop regional peace and stability.

He described as "very critical and worrying" the ongoing humanitarian situation in Yemen and stressed the importance of dispatching medicine and food to the war-ravaged Yemeni people and making efforts to put an end to their killing.

Rouhani expressed hope that Iran-Oman cooperation would help the Yemeni people and restore peace to the country.

Saudi Arabia has been incessantly pounding Yem-

en since March 2015 in an attempt to crush the popular Houthi-Ansarullah movement and reinstate former president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who is a staunch ally of the Riyadh regime.

About 14,000 people have been killed since the onset of Saudi Arabia's military campaign against Yemen. Much of the Arabian Peninsula country's infrastructure, including hospitals, schools and factories, has been reduced to rubble due to the war.

The United Nations says a record 22.2 million people are in need of food aid, including 8.4 million threatened by severe hunger. Three years into the devastating Saudi-led war on Yemen, the UN health agency on Saturday voiced alarm over the rapid spread of a diphtheria outbreak in the country, saying some 1,300 Yemenis have contacted the highly infectious disease. (PRESS TV)

People to Again Give Heavy Mandate to PML-N: Khawaja Asif

SIALKOT - Foreign Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif on Saturday said politically matured masses would again give heavy mandate to PML-N in general elections. Addressing the party workers convention held here, he said people would again bring PML-N into power with their votes during the next general elections.

The minister said the PML-N government was fulfilling its promises, adding only the PML-N had full capabilities to serve the nation and the country in a better way. He said the government had put the country on the path to development and prosperity besides ensuring economic and political stability as well.

Khawaja Asif said PML-N was ensuring the sanctity of votes and respect of voters and their mandate in the country, adding only the ballot papers could change destiny of the nation.

The minister said Nawaz Sharif was still ruling on hearts of masses as he had put Pakistan on the way to progress and development. He added that the PML-N had served the people due to its people-friendly policies. Provincial Minister for Local Bodies Manshaullah Butt, MPA Ch Muh ammad Ikraam, Mayor of Sialkot Ch Tauheed Akhtar, Deputy Mayor Ch Bashir and Chairman Union Council Pakka Garah Mian Asifjaved were also present. (Monitoring Desk)

Pakistan, Afghanistan Reiterate Commitment to Peace, Stability

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan and Afghanistan have reiterated their commitment to peace and stability of each other and agreed to work in a cooperative framework for a brighter future and expressed resolve to work together and enhance cooperation to improve bilateral relations. "It's time to build bridges. We have a shared history and shared future. That is what our ancestors left for us and we have to leave for our children. We should work for our shared interests in all fields including political, economic and security. We must protect our relationship and advance it further," said Haneef Atmar National Security Adviser (NSA) Afghanistan. The commitment was made during the

visit of National Security Adviser Lt. General (R) Nasser Khan Janjua during his visit to Afghanistan on Saturday on a special invitation from National Security Adviser (NSA) Afghanistan Haneef Atmar. His visit was acknowledged by Afghanistan as a great gesture of Pakistan, particularly after the peace offer made by President Ashraf Ghani, said a news release. During his visit, the NSA had elaborate and successful meetings with President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, his counterpart Haneef Atmar, Minister of Defense and NDS Chief. Meetings were held in a very congenial, warm and cordial environment. (Monitoring Desk)

Brazil Presidential Contender Gomes Would Reverse Privatizations

RIO DE JANEIRO - The most likely leftist contender in Brazil's presidential race, Ciro Gomes, is warning investors to hold off buying state assets in the energy sector because he would expropriate them if he wins in October. That includes rights to oil fields granted last year and a legislative push to dilute state control of Centrais Eletricas Brasileiras SA, or Eletrobras, the country's largest power utility. "What I want to say is: 'Don't buy. Wait a bit,'" Gomes said in an interview

on Thursday in which the former governor of Ceara state detailed plans to raise taxes on wealthy Brazilians, reduce the country's hefty public debt and change the Central Bank's sole focus on fighting inflation. Gomes maintains that President Michel Temer is illegitimate because he took office in the controversial impeachment of leftist Dilma Rousseff, arguing that his policies should be revised by the next government elected by the Brazilian people. (Reuters)

Germany, France Start Work on 'Road Map' For EU Future

PARIS - The German and French leaders started working Friday toward what French President Emmanuel Macron said will be an "ambitious, clear road map" for Europe's future, months after Macron first laid out his proposals for reforming the European Union. Macron hosted German Chancellor Angela Merkel on her first trip abroad after she was sworn in for a fourth term this week, ending months of post-election political drift in Germany.

The leaders showed soli-

arity with Britain after the nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy and his daughter, which Western nations suspect Russia was behind. Merkel said the EU is looking for "the most appropriate response."

Germany and France have long played a key role as leading powers in the EU, which Macron wants to reform dramatically, along with the euro currency union.

Macron said a new vision for Europe is "indispensable" as the continent faces mounting populism, seen



most recently in Italy's election, and the Euro-skepticism highlighted by Britain's vote to leave the EU. "We will propose an ambitious, clear

roadmap" covering everything from defense to migration to education and culture, Macron said ahead of a dinner with Merkel. (AP)

Russians in Ukraine to Be Blocked From Voting In Presidential Poll



KIEV - Russians living in Ukraine will be unable to vote in Russia's presidential election because access to Moscow's diplomatic missions will be blocked,

Kiev said Friday. "On Sunday, March 18, 2018, security arrangements for Russia's Ukraine-based diplomatic missions in Kiev, Kharkiv, Odessa and

Lviv will not provide access to these facilities for Russian nationals voting in the election," Ukraine's interior minister Arsen Avakov said. The announcement came in retaliation for Russia's annexation of Crimea, which votes in a presidential election for the first time since it was taken over in 2014.

"Ukraine's interior ministry states that conducting illegal elections on Ukraine's sovereign territory in violation of all norms of international law is unacceptable," Avakov said on Face-

book.

He also pointed to "Russia's aggressive hybrid war against Ukraine" and "the occupation of parts of Donetsk and Lugansk regions" in eastern Ukraine.

Moscow's foreign ministry responded by criticising what it called Ukrainian "overt interference in the internal affairs of the Russian Federation."

It accused Ukrainian authorities of displaying "righteous indignation" and "taking their revenge on ordinary Russian citizens." (AFP)

Kremlin Furious As Britain Blames Putin for Ex-Spy Attack

MOSCOW - Britain provoked Russia's wrath on Friday by directly implicating Vladimir Putin in the poisoning attack on an ex-double agent, with the Kremlin saying the claims were "shocking and unforgivable."

The war of words between Moscow and London over the nerve agent attack on a former Russian spy escalated as Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said his government's "quarrel" was with Putin rather than the Russian people.

"We think it overwhelmingly likely that it was

his decision to direct the use of a nerve agent on the streets of the UK, for the first time since the Second World War," Johnson said in London. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded saying Johnson's claims violated all rules of diplomatic protocol. Linking Putin to the attack on Sergei Skripal, who moved to Britain in a 2010 spy swap, "is nothing but shocking and unforgivable behaviour from the point of view of diplomacy," Peskov told Russian news agencies. (AFP)

Slovaks Protest Nationwide After PM's Resignation Fails To Appear

BRATISLAVA - Tens of thousands of Slovaks demanded early elections on Friday in protests across the country after Prime Minister Robert Fico's resignation failed to quell public anger following the murder of an investigative journalist.

Jan Kuciak, 27, and his fiancée were found shot dead at home last month. His journalism and then murder have rekindled public anger over the government's failure to root out graft and cronyism 14 years after Slovakia joined the European Union. (Reuters)

US Seeks To Raise Pressure on Europe over Iran Nuclear Deal

VIENNA - Washington wants its European allies to agree on further measures against Iran in return for keeping a landmark nuclear deal with Tehran alive, U.S. officials said Friday.

Speaking after closed-doors meetings between the U.S., Iran, Russia and other major world powers in Vienna, U.S. diplomats indicated that an American walkout from the deal isn't a foregone conclusion yet, despite harsh words about the agreement from U.S. President Donald Trump.

"In order for the United States to remain in the deal, the United States and Europe must come to an agreement to address sunsets, inspections, and long range ballistic missiles," said Brian Hook, the State Department official who led the U.S. delegation.

Washington opposes the expiry over time of restrictions on Iran's nuclear enrichment program - stipulated in one of the deal's sunset clauses - and wants the U.N. to get greater powers to inspect Iran's military sites, too. (AP)

Italy's 5-Star to Shelve Deficit-Raising Plans to Calm Markets

ROME - The 5-Star Movement, which emerged as Italy's biggest party after this month's election, is preparing an economic plan which will not raise the fiscal deficit forecasts of the outgoing centre-left government, a 5-Star party source told Reuters.

The plan, to be presented in April, may surprise many supporters of the anti-establishment party, which has always pledged to raise the budget deficit in order to fund welfare spending and tax cuts.

"We are not going to propose raising the deficit at this point," the source told Reuters, adding that the program would



maintain the current goal of Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni's caretaker government to balance the budget in 2020. "We know Italy is under scrutiny at the moment and we want markets to understand that we want to be responsible with public finances," added the

source, who asked not to be named. 5-Star won 32 percent of the vote in the March 4 ballot, some 14 percentage points more than its nearest rival, but the election produced a hung parliament, so it needs to find allies to be able to form a government. (Reuters)

Britain Points at Putin in Poisoning Attack As Gulf Widens

MOSCOW - The gulf between Russia and Britain widened on Friday as they cranked up pressure over a nerve agent attack and a suspected murder in Britain that have deepened Western worries about alleged Russian meddling abroad.

Britain's foreign secretary accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of personally ordering the poisoning of ex-Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, describing it as the most brazen such move since World

War II.

Putin's spokesman denounced the claim as "shocking and inexcusable."

As relations between the two nations sank to a new post-Cold War low, nearly two dozen Russian diplomats in London were packing their bags to leave Tuesday after an expulsion order from Britain. British diplomats in Moscow were bracing for a retaliatory order from the Kremlin and were just waiting to be told who had to leave and when. (AP)

US Stocks Inch Higher As Banks and Industrial Companies Rise

NEW YORK - U.S. stocks edged higher Friday as gains from energy companies, industrial firms and smaller companies helped the market end a modest losing streak.

Oil and gas companies climbed along with the price of oil Friday while industrial companies recovered some of the losses they sustained earlier this month. Beauty products retailer Ulta and software company Adobe rose after strong quarterly reports. Tiffany dropped after reporting weak sales, and online retailers Overstock.com and Way fair slumped as investors worried about a possible price war.

All this week, stocks moved higher in early trading only to shed those gains as the day went on. They broke out of that pattern Friday, even though the gains were modest.

"From an investor point of view, the fact that we haven't rallied right back to the highs is a good thing," said Randy Frederick, vice president of trading and derivatives at Charles Schwab.

Positive news about the economy has been countered by concerns about rising tensions over international trade. "The pullback that we've been in is pretty much driven by President Trump's proclamation about tariffs," Frederick said. The S&P 500 index gained 4.68 points, or 0.2 percent, to 2,752.01. The Dow Jones industrial average added 72.85 points, or 0.3 percent, to 24,946.51. The Nasdaq composite rose 0.25 points to 7,481.99. The Russell 2000 index of smaller-company stocks jumped 9.43 points, or 0.6 percent, to 1,586.05. (AP)