

US, UN Press Europe to Make Strong Return to Peacekeeping

UNITED NATIONS - Russia's aggressiveness in the east. The Islamic State group's sudden rise in the south. As Europe finds new threats close to home, it's now being asked by the United States to make a strong return to peacekeeping around the world as well. The U.N. on Friday convenes an unprecedented meeting of defense officials from more than 100 countries to seek support for the largest peacekeeping effort ever deployed, with nearly 130,000 personnel in 16 missions from Congo to the Golan Heights. They

face growing threats from groups like the Islamic State that have little regard for traditional ideas of war and peace. Following up in September, President Barack Obama will chair a meeting on the sidelines of the annual U.N. General Assembly of world leaders, with the goal of collecting countries' peacekeeping pledges after Friday's pitch by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and other top officials. Obama's envoy to the U.N., Ambassador Samantha Power, this month made it clear that Europe is expected to



step up and is needed "more than ever." Two decades ago, European nations contributed more than 40 percent of U.N. peacekeepers, she said in a speech in Brus-

sels. It's less than 7 percent now. This call from the United States, easily the biggest contributor to the U.N.'s peacekeeping budget at \$2.5 billion,

comes as tens of thousands of troops from European and other countries emerge from years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. In her speech, Power envi-

sioned the German and Dane helicopter pilots from Afghanistan doing similar work in Darfur, or Romanian and Czech patrols guarding bases in South Sudan. (AP)

Assad Calls Chlorine Allegations 'Malicious Propaganda': CBS

WASHINGTON - President Bashar al-Assad of Syria dismissed as "malicious propaganda" allegations that his troops used chlorine gas in the fight against insurgent rebels, according to an interview broadcast on Friday on CBS "This Morning." Asked about allegations Syrian government forces have used chlorine gas and barrel bombs, Assad said: "Let me fully answer this. It's very important. This is part of the malicious propaganda against Syria. First of all the chlorine gas is not military gas. You can buy it anywhere." The Syrian president has been fighting Islamist and other rebels since 2011. Syria agreed in 2013 to destroy its entire chemical weapons program under a deal brokered with the United States and Russia after hundreds of people were killed in a sarin gas attack on the outskirts of the capital, Damascus. "It's not very effective. It's not used as military gas. That's very self-evident. Traditional arms is more important than chlorine," he told CBS. "And if it was very effective, the terrorists would have used it on a larger scale." (Reuters)

Israel Committed War Crimes in Gaza War: Rights Group

GAZA - A nongovernmental federation for human rights organizations says Israel perpetrated war crimes and crimes against humanity during its devastating military onslaught on the besieged Gaza Strip last summer. In a report entitled "Trapped and Punished: The Gaza Civilian Population under Operation Protective Edge" published on Friday, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) pointed to exam-

ples of indiscriminate and direct attacks against civilians and civilian objects, disproportionate use of force as well as deliberate attacks targeting medical services during the Israeli war on Gaza. The report further made a reference to Israel's "refusal of access to humanitarian relief, the targeting of residential areas, operational healthcare facilities and transport, and life-sustaining civilian infrastructure" among the regime's violations of international law.

"Most of people we met with, all of whom have lived through previous attacks on Gaza, told us that the summer offensive in 2014 was the worst they had seen. Bombs fell entirely indiscriminately, on men, women and children alike," said Gaelle Dusepulchre, one of the members of the FIDH delegation that recently visited the Gaza strip. The Paris-based FIDH has presented the report to the International Criminal Court (ICC), where the Ramallah-based Pal-

estinian Authority is planning to lodge its first case against the Tel Aviv regime's crimes. "It's now time for ICC to move from a mere preliminary examination of the conflict to a full investigation. The Prosecutor must go to the field in order to appreciate the magnitude of the crimes committed," said Shawan Jabbarin, the FIDH vice president, adding, "Palestinian have been waiting for justice for far too long." (Agencies)

19 Hurt as Blast, Then Fire Bring Down New York Buildings

NEW YORK - Nineteen people were hurt when three New York buildings collapsed and a blaze tore through another in what preliminary indications suggested was a gas-related explosion. Four people were critically injured after the blast ripped through a commercial and residential building in the popular East Village and then partly collapsed, triggering the collapse of the next-door building, the partial collapse of another and a huge blaze. Dramatic cell phone footage broadcast by TV channel PIX11 showed panicked people running in fear from a sushi restaurant after the explosion. "What happened? Oh my God!" one woman is heard yelling. Bystanders bend over a person lying amid debris. Witnesses several blocks away described hearing a loud bang and thick smoke could be seen wafting high over the Manhattan skyline. "It was crazy loud. The windows were shaking," said Philip McElroy, a 23-year-old student, who was visiting a friend two blocks away. "There was a lot of smoke and part of the building was blown out." New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said the initial impact appeared to have been caused by plumbing and gas work at the site. The incident quickly heightened safety fears, a year after eight people were killed when a gas explosion leveled two apartment buildings in East Harlem in northern Manhattan on March 12, 2014. "Our thoughts, our prayers are with everyone of them (the casualties) and of course we are praying that no other individuals are found injured and that there are no fatalities," de Blasio told a news conference. A fire department spokesman raised the number of casualties from 12 to 19, including four people in a critical condition. Pommies Frites, a shop selling Belgian-style fries at 123 Second Avenue, said on Twitter it was closed until further notice due to "severe damage," but said its staff and customers were safe. (AFP)

Nieghbor News

Nationalists Keen on China's New Regional Bank

TAIPEI - President Ma Ying-jeou of Taiwan has declared his government's desire for membership of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China's forthcoming development bank. Ma's statement came as the U.S. and key European countries take different views of China's new financial institution. Washington feels Beijing is creating the AIIB as a regional counterweight to the World Bank in Washington and the Asian Development Bank in Tokyo, while London, Berlin, Paris and Rome are coming on board with Beijing. "We want to become an AIIB member because we can be a peacekeeper and provide aid for the region," Ma told Taiwan's mass cir-

ulation China Times. Vincent Siew, a former vice president of Taiwan, will meet President Xi Jinping of China during the Boao Forum in China on Saturday, and the two are expected to discuss the AIIB. Traditionally, Taiwan sees the U.S. as its most important strategic partner, but China-friendly Ma has promoted closer ties with Beijing since taking office in 2008. However, there has been a growing feeling in Taiwan that Ma's China policies have undermined sovereignty and hurt the livelihoods of ordinary people. There is concern Beijing may use its increasing economic leverage to promote its territorial claims on Taiwan. The two sides split in 1949 after a civil war. (Agencies)

Iran, Six Powers Demand Mutual Concessions in Tense Nuclear Talks

LAUSANNE, Switzerland - Major Powers and Iran were pushing each other for concessions on Friday ahead of an end-March deadline for a preliminary nuclear deal, with Tehran demanding an immediate end to sanctions and freedom to continue sensitive atomic research, officials said. Tehran and six major powers - the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China - are meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland, to hammer out a political framework accord by the end of this month that would lay the foundations for a full deal by June 30. Under a final settlement, Tehran would halt sensitive nuclear work for at least a decade and in exchange, international financial and oil sanctions on Iran would be lifted. This would aim to end Iran's 12-year nuclear standoff with the West

and reduce the risk of war in the Middle East. While all sides agree they are moving closer to a deal, there are major disagreements. Tehran insists on the freedom to continue research on advanced centrifuges, machines that purify uranium for use in nuclear power plants or, if very highly enriched, in weapons, at the underground Fordow site, and immediate lifting of all U.N. sanctions. "There has been massive progress on all the issues," a senior Iranian official told Reuters. "There are still disputes over two issues - R&D (research and development) and U.N. sanctions." A Western official close to the talks confirmed that centrifuge research and enrichment in general remained the most difficult unresolved issue. (Press TV)

Pakistan will Not Participate in Conflict that Divides Muslim Ummah: Khawaja Asif

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Federal Defence Minister Khawaja Asif in the National Assembly elucidated Pakistan's role in the Yemen conflict, saying that no decision to participate has been taken and that Pakistan has only pledged to safeguard the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). "Instead of aggravating the situation by participating in it, Pakistan should do what it can to prevent it - for the alliance and unity of the Muslim world," the defence minister said. "Pakistan is ready to adopt whatever role is needed in order to facilitate the termination of conflicts in the Islamic world." "We will not take part in any conflict that could result in differences in the Muslim world, causing fault-lines present in Pakistan to be disturbed, the aggravation of which will have to be borne by Pakistan," he asserted. The request from Riyadh

comes at a time when the Pakistan military is engaged in an operation against terrorists in North Waziristan. Asif's reference to "fault-lines" hints at Pakistan's widespread sectarian conflict, as a result of which Shia and other religious minorities are targeted in tit for tat killings by extremist groups. The defence minister's statement comes a day after Saudi Arabia said that Pakistan will join its operation against Iran-backed Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen, for a conflict that is rapidly escalating into a murky civil war. The minister's announcement today apparently rules out Pakistan's immediate participation in the Yemen conflict. "We want this issue to be resolved in a common forum where the Muslim world or Arab League is involved," said the defence minister. "The need of the hour is alliance and solidarity, not division." (Monitoring Desk)

Russia's Ivanovo regions suggests cooperation to Tajikistan

BISHKEK - Russia's Ivanovo region is interested in resuming cooperation with Tajikistan in textile industry, according to Mokhammad Egamzod, a spokesman for the Tajik Embassy in Moscow. The issue was discussed at a meeting of Tajik Ambassador to Russia Imomud-

din Sattorov with Ivanovo Governor Pavel Konkov. Thus, a delegation of Ivanovo plans to visit Tajikistan in May. Furthermore, Sattorov outlined agriculture as an area for implementation of joint projects. Tajikistan could supply its farm products to Ivanovo. (AKIpress)

39 Civilians Dead in Saudi Airstrikes on Yemen

SANAA - Nearly 40 civilians have lost their lives as neighboring Saudi Arabia pushes ahead with its airstrikes against the Houthi Ansarullah movement in Yemen, health officials say. The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP on Friday that twelve of the 39 victims were killed when Saudi warplanes struck residential areas close to al-Samaa military base, north of the capital city of Sana'a. The military base is used by army units believed to be loyal to former Republican Guard Commander Brigadier General Ahmed Ali Ab-



dullah Saleh. Three airstrikes also targeted the presidential compound in southern Sana'a in the wee hours of Friday, witnesses said. The Saudi military aircraft also pounded an army brigade controlled by Ansarullah forces in Yemen's western province of Amran as well as arms depots in the Mala-

hee region in the northwestern city of Sa'ada, located 240 kilometers (150 miles) north of Sana'a. Eight people were wounded when an anti-aircraft missile slammed into a market in central Sana'a on Friday. One of the injured is in a critical condition, a security official said. Tribal sources also said

overnight airborne assaults struck a military installation in the oil-producing central province of Marib, which is used by an army brigade loyal to Saleh. On Thursday, Saudi fighter jets bombed an army camp located in the southern outskirts of Sana'a, inflicting "dozens" of casualties at the camp. (Agencies)

China 'Deeply Worried' Over Saudi Attacks on Yemen

TEHRAN - China's foreign ministry has expressed profound concerns about the ongoing chaotic conditions in Yemen following Saudi Arabia's airstrikes on the capital Sana'a. "The Chinese side has noticed that (Saudi Arabia has launched airstrikes against Yemen) and is deeply worried about the situation in Yemen that is getting worse," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, said at a weekly press briefing on Thursday. Expressing hope that the crisis could be resolved "through political dialogues", Hua said, "We hope that all parties will act in accordance with relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council... and restore national stability and order at an early date." Hua also said advised Chinese citizens to cancel their planned visits to Yemen until further notice. The Saudi invasion of Yemen drew condemna-

tion from Iran, Russia, the Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah, Syria, and Iraq. The Iranian foreign minister called on Saudi Arabia on Thursday to immediately cease its military aggression against Yemen. Speaking to Press TV on the situation in Yemen, he said, "We believe that the situation in Yemen is a very dangerous situation and we advise against any escalation because we believe that any interference in Yemen will simply lead to further loss of human life as it has since this morning." Meanwhile, Russia slammed the Saudi military aggression against Yemen, saying the offensive is not the right way to settle the crisis in the Arab country. Saudi Arabia announced in the early hours of Thursday that it had begun launching airstrikes against the Houthis in the Yemeni capital city of Sana'a, where the Ansarullah fighters have been making advances. (Press TV)

Turkey Passes Controversial Anti-Protest Bill

ANKARA - Turkish lawmakers have passed a controversial security bill that will expand the powers of police in confronting anti-government protesters. Of 231 deputies present in parliament, 199 lawmakers voted for the bill on Friday after 16 hours of deliberations in an assembly dominated by the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Based on the legislation, the Turkish government is allowed to imprison demonstrators who carry Molotov cocktails and other such weapons, while police forces can use firearms to prevent an attack on a public place or against people using Molotov cocktails and similar arms. The measure also enables the police to detain people for up to 48 hours without court authorization, empowering governors to instruct police to act without prior judicial authorization. Those protesters who hold insignia, signs, or put on uniforms resembling those of "illegal organizations" or unfurl illegal



banners or shout banned slogans could be given up to three-year jail terms. The law further says that anyone who hides or partially conceals their face during a protest or public assembly that "turns into propaganda for a terrorist organization" could be imprisoned between three and five years. The draconian law, whose 63 articles have been sent back to a parliamentary committee for further discussion, have created several brawls in parliament over the last weeks as critics fear that it would be used for arbitrary arrest of protesters and more severe crackdown on dissent. The legislation should still be endorsed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to

be signed into law, but the main opposition party has said it would challenge the bill with Turkey's Constitutional Court. "There are no winners but losers. Freedoms and democracy will lose," Republican People's Party (CHP) lawmaker, Akif Hamzacebi, said, adding, "I believe that the blow dealt to the constitution and law will be reversed by the Constitutional Court." The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) also denounced the bill as a "dark law." Turkey saw huge anti-government protests in 2013 when Erdogan was prime minister. The country came under harsh criticism from its Western allies for its heavily-handed police tactics. (Press TV)