

After Iran Deal, World Looks to Jump-Start Nuclear Disarmament

UNITED NATIONS - Nuclear powers join non-nuclear nations on Monday to launch a conference on non-proliferation, buoyed by the Iran deal but alarmed by slow-moving US-Russian disarmament.

US Secretary of State John Kerry will address the conference that reviews the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and he may meet on the sidelines to discuss the hard-fought Iran deal with Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Work on the framework Iran agreement must be



completed by June 30 but it is already earning praise as a potential

happy ending to one of the world's most vexing nuclear disputes.

Despite applause for the Iran deal, delegates from more than 150

countries are heading into the month-long conference with a sense

of gloom over the lack of progress on disarmament and the deadlocked plan for a nuclear weapons-free zone for the Middle East.

The United States and Russia have made little headway in cutting their nuclear stockpiles since 2011, and the crisis over Ukraine is stoking distrust, dimming prospects for future cooperation. "We have a stalling in the path to a nuclear-free world," Angela Kane, the UN high representative for disarmament affairs, said ahead of the gathering at UN headquarters in New York. (AFP)

Neighbour News

Nawaz Shairf Reaches London on Britain PM's Invite

ISLAMABAD - Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reached London on Friday on the invitation of Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron, Dawn News reported. "The prime minister, during the course of his visit, will participate in the National Commemoration of the Centenary of Gallipoli Campaign and Anzac Day where he will interact with other participating leaders and dignitaries," Foreign Office (FO) spokesperson Tasneem Aslam had said on his departure. Nawaz embarked on the trip to United Kingdom only a day after return-

ing from Saudi Arabia. The spokesperson further said that the premier will also hold official talks on bilateral, regional and global issues with his British counterpart. Nawaz is also expected to meet British leaders and business executives during his visit. Yesterday, PM Nawaz along with Army Chief Raheel Sharif went to Riyadh for a day-long visit where he expressed "solidarity" with Saudi Arabia after Pakistan's parliament refused to send forces to help a Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, a Pakistani official had said. (Agencies)

Powerful Former Syrian Army General Dies in Hospital

BEIRUT - Rostom Ghazali, the powerful Syrian general who was once considered the most powerful man in Lebanon and was suspected of involvement in the 2005 assassination of a former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, has died in a hospital in the capital Damascus, a Syrian activist and local media reported on Friday. Ghazali, in his early 60s, was once head of his military's powerful political security branch and one of Syrian President Bashar Assad's most trusted generals. There was no official government comment

and the circumstances of his death remain unclear.

Director of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Rami Abdurrahman said Ghazali died nearly two months after he was admitted with a head injury. Abdurrahman said Ghazali had been clinically dead for weeks, quoting informed medical officials in the hospital. The Beirut-based Al-Mayadeen TV, which has access to Syrian officials, and other Lebanese TV stations also reported Ghazali's death, quoting officials. (AP)

More Fighting, Air Strikes in Yemen, Civilian Death Toll Exceeds 550

ADEN - Fighting between Yemen's warring factions raged in southern and central parts of the country and air strikes hit Houthi militia forces in Aden on Friday, but there were no fresh moves toward dialogue. Saudi Arabia says it is winding down its month-old bombing operation against the Iran-allied Houthis and forces loyal to Yemen's former president. But Riyadh pounded targets with at least 20 airstrikes across Yemen on Thursday and 10 more on Friday. The civilian death toll from the fighting and airstrikes since the bombing started on March 26 has reached an estimated 551 people, the United Nations said on Friday. Its children's agency UNICEF said at least 115 children were



among the dead. Washington and other Western countries backing the Saudi-led aerial campaign have grown increasingly worried about the humanitarian crisis on the ground and also about the risk of Sunni Muslim jihadist groups taking

advantage of the chaos. Islamic State, which has had little presence in Yemen, released late on Thursday a video it said showed members of the group in the country conducting military exercises and pledging to attack the Houthis, who are from

the Zaydi Shi'ite sect. Saudi Arabia has called a meeting with major U.N. aid agencies and others to discuss improving aid deliveries to Yemen, which have been hindered by the naval blockade, Saudi officials and U.N. sources said. (Reuters)

Iran Ships 'Turn Back' From Yemen as Fighting Rages

SANAA - An Iranian ship convoy suspected of carrying weapons for Shiite rebels in Yemen has turned back, US officials said, as Saudi-led warplanes kept up air strikes on the anti-government forces. Yemeni Foreign Minister Riyadh Yassin on Thursday accused Tehran of trying to break a naval blockade on his country, describing the war as an "Iranian plot implemented by the Houthi militia". A US official said Thursday the nine-ship Iranian convoy that had been heading for Yemen is "no longer on the same course". The USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier and other American warships have deployed off Yemen's coast to track the Iranian flotilla and possibly prevent any arms deliveries to the Iran-backed Houthi Shiite rebels. The flotilla

included two "armed vessels," said the US official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

It was possible the Iranians "could make a turn to Yemen at any time," the official added.

Iran is a key ally of the Houthis but vehemently denies arming them. It has presented a peace plan to the UN calling for a ceasefire and the formation of a unity government. With international pressure mounting for a political solution, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon announced plans to appoint Mauritanian diplomat Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed as his new envoy to Yemen. He replaces Morocco's Jamal Benomar, who resigned last week after losing support for his mediation efforts from oil-rich Gulf countries. (AFP)

Biden, Seeking to Ease U.S.-Israel Strains, Pledges Delivery of New Warplanes

WASHINGTON - Seeking to ease U.S.-Israeli tensions, Vice President Joe Biden on Thursday promised Israel delivery of top-flight fighter jets next year to maintain its military edge and vowed that any final nuclear deal with Iran would ensure Israel's security. Addressing an Israeli Independence Day celebration in Washington, Biden insisted that Barack Obama "has Israel's back," despite a recent strains between the U.S. president and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over Iran nuclear talks and Middle East diplomacy. Biden won applause from a pro-Israel audience when he told them the United States would begin delivery of Lockheed Martin's new F-35 jets to its ally next year, making Israel the only country in the Middle East to have the new stealth warplane. But he was met with silence when he reaffirmed U.S. support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an allusion to White House ob-

jections to Netanyahu's comments last month casting doubt on his commitment to a Palestinian state. "We've had our differences," Biden said. But he added: "We love each other and we protect each other." Biden's appearance at an event hosted by the Israeli Embassy was the latest sign of White House efforts to lower the temperature after a period of acrimony between Obama and Netanyahu.

Ties became badly frayed early last month when Netanyahu accepted a Republican invitation to speak to the U.S. Congress, where he railed against Obama's quest for a nuclear deal with Iran. Netanyahu later condemned a framework deal reached earlier this month with Tehran as a threat to Israel's survival. Obama, who has faced complaints from some fellow Democrats that the public feud had gone too far, has reached out to U.S. pro-Israel groups and American Jewish leaders seeking to soothe their concerns. (Reuters)

UN Rights Chief Accuses British Tabloids of Hate Speech

LONDON - The United Nations' human rights chief on Friday accused Britain's tabloid newspapers of hate speech against immigrants. Zeid Raad al-Husseini, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, said that an article in The Sun comparing migrants to cockroaches used language similar to that employed by the instigators of Rwanda's 1994 genocide. The April 17 column by Katie Hopkins, a former contestant on TV show "The Apprentice," has caused controversy in Britain. Hopkins said gunboats should be used against migrant boats in the Mediterranean, and called immigrants "feral humans." Zeid urged British media, authorities and regulators to curb incitement to hatred. "The Nazi media described people their masters wanted to eliminate as rats and cockroaches," he said. "This type of language is clearly inflammatory and unacceptable, especially in a national newspaper." (AP)

Suspected Qaeda Militants Arrested in Italy for Vatican Plot

ROME - Italian police were arresting 18 people on Friday suspected of belonging to an armed group linked to al Qaeda who were plotting attacks on the Vatican as well as in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Some of the suspects, who are all Pakistanis and Afghans, were arrested in early morning raids across Italy.

Police burst into the home of the group's suspected spiritual leader, in the northern city of Bergamo, a video released by them showed.

Though the suspects were plotting attacks mainly in their native countries, phone taps suggest the Vatican was also a target, said Mauro Mura, chief prosecutor of the Sardinian city of Cagliari, where the group based its headquarters.

In the tapped conversations, the suspects discuss "a big jihad in Italy," added Mario Carta, head of the police unit on the case.

They reference the word "baba", which could mean the pope, Carta said. "We don't have proof, we have strong suspicion," that the Holy See was a possible target, he added. Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said the hypothetical attacks were in the past, and that the new disclosures were not a matter for concern. Italy, like other European countries, has been on heightened alert for possible terrorist schemes in the wake of the January attack on French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. (Reuters)

Russia, France Close to Deal on Mistral Helicopters: Source

YEREVAN - Russia and France are close to reaching an agreement for Paris to cancel a frozen contract on the sale of Mistral helicopter carriers and reimburse Moscow, a Russian source close to talks indicated on Friday. France suspended the delivery of the warships last year after the European Union decided to impose sanctions on Russia over the separatist conflict in neighboring Ukraine.

French President Fran-

cois Hollande, who was holding talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Armenian capital of Yerevan on Friday, suggested on Wednesday that Paris could cancel the contract and reimburse Moscow. Putin had said the previous week that Moscow would not impose penalties on France over the 1.2 billion euro (\$1.29 billion) deal if all costs incurred by Russia were reimbursed. Referring to the statement Hollande

made on Wednesday, the Russian source close to talks said: "We value this declaration very highly." The source said Hollande had proposed an "acceptable" solution and that France would be able to "save face" but declined to give more details of the proposed solution. Putin and Hollande were meeting on the sidelines of ceremonies marking the centenary of a mass killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks. (Reuters)

Europe Needs Strong will to Tackle Migrants: Australian Minister

BRUSSELS - Australia's tough policies have stopped migrants reaching the country by boat and Europe will need strong will to tackle boat migrants in the Mediterranean, Australia's foreign minister said on Friday. Julie Bishop said NATO ambassadors had discussed the thousands of migrants from Africa and the Middle East taking to dangerous, overcrowded vessels to try to reach Europe, during a meeting in Brussels she took part in on Friday.

The Australian government has been criticized at home and abroad for its

tough immigration policies, which include turning back refugee boats and sending asylum seekers to camps in Papua New Guinea and Nauru, where they face long periods of detention. "There is nothing humanitarian, there is nothing merciful about criminal networks luring people to their deaths by putting them on unseaworthy boats," Bishop told journalists. "We offer our experience," she added. "It is for individual governments and regions to determine what they believe will work, but it will require significant political

will." Four days after up to 900 people drowned trying to reach Europe from Libya, EU leaders agreed on Thursday to triple the size of the naval search mission in the Mediterranean. Australia had refused to consider asylum requests from people who paid smugglers to take them to Australia, Bishop said. "Under a military commander, we adopted policies and initiatives across government to send the very strong message that we would not accept people who pay people-smugglers," she said. (Reuters)

Iraq Forces Recapture Key Ramadi Bridge from IS Group

BAGHDAD - Iraqi security forces recaptured a key bridge from Islamic State militants in the capital of Anbar province on Friday, said an Iraqi security official, as the country's top Shiite cleric renewed calls for national unity among political rivals in the face

of the Islamic militant threat. Abbas said that the bridge was controlled by the IS group for several months and served as a primary supply route for the insurgents. The security situation in Ramadi sharply deteriorated after the IS group

seized three villages around the city, forcing thousands to flee their homes. In recent days Iraqi soldiers and police have been able to secure the center of Ramadi and push the militants back from some areas of the city. (AP)

Gurbanguly Meets Italian Minister

ASHGABAT - Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov met with Italian Agriculture Minister Maurizio Martina, who headed Italy's delegation that arrived in Ashgabat to take part in a Turkmen-Italian business forum. The parties emphasized big opportunities for extending bilateral cooperation in all sectors, especially in agriculture, which is an important sector of Italian and Turkmen economies, the state information agency of Turkmenistan reported. For this purpose Turkmenistan will take part in the upcoming international exhibition

EXPO-2015 in Milan, where Turkmenistan plans to extend its international cooperation in the production and export of food products. According to the Italian agriculture minister, dynamically developing Turkmenistan with its huge resources and economic potential is of great interest for Italian business circles that are attracted by the country's favorable investment climate and reliable legislation. Relations between Turkmenistan and Italy received a new impetus after Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi's official visit to Turkmenistan in November 2014. (TCA)

China Rejects Philippines Armed Robbery Claim

BEIJING - Chinese authorities on Friday dismissed an accusation by Manila that the Chinese coastguard robbed Filipino fishermen at gunpoint during a confrontation in the disputed South China Sea, calling the claim "inconsistent with the fact".

The rebuttal came one day after the Philippine fisheries bureau said that fishermen aboard three vessels with clear Chinese coastguard markings boarded two fishing boats in Scarborough Shoal earlier this month and took the crew's catch. "What we have learned shows that accusations made by the Philippine side are inconsistent with the fact," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei said in a

statement posted on the ministry's website. Using the Chinese name for the disputed area, Hong maintained that Chinese vessels "perform guard duties and keep order in waters off the Huangyan Island in accordance with the law". He urged Manila to "discipline and educate its fishermen and put an end to its illegal activities".

The Scarborough Shoal lies 220km off the main Philippine island of Luzon, and is 650km from Hainan island, the nearest major Chinese land mass. China took control of the shoal following a tense standoff between Chinese maritime patrol vessels and the Philippine navy in 2012. (AFP)