

## Pope's Trip to Morocco to Highlight Christian-Muslim Ties

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis's weekend trip to Morocco aims to highlight the North African nation's tradition of Christian-Muslim ties while also letting him show solidarity with migrants at Europe's door and tend to a tiny Catholic flock on the peripheries. Francis will address the first two items on the agenda Saturday when he begins his 27-hour visit to Rabat, the Moroccan capital. He'll tend to the third when he wraps up the visit with a Mass and a meeting with Moroccan clergy on Sunday. "Morocco has always been a pioneer in initiatives of dialogue with Christians," said Abdellah Boussouf, an Islamologist and secretary general of the Council of the Moroccan



Community Living Abroad. "Christians have always enjoyed their rights in Morocco, including freedom of movement, church build-

ing and marriage." The highlight of the trip is likely to be Francis' visit Saturday to the Mohammed VI Institute, a school of learning for imams that epitomizes Morocco's efforts to promote a moderate brand of Islam and export it via preachers to Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Morocco, a Sunni Muslim kingdom of 36 million, reformed its religious policies and education to limit the spread of fundamentalism in 2004, following terrorist bombings in Casablanca in 2003 that killed 43 people. The trip follows Francis' February visit to the United Arab Emirates, where the pope and the imam of Cairo's Al Azhar, the seat of Sunni learning, signed a landmark joint statement establishing the relationship between Catholics and Muslims as brothers, with a ...*(More on P4)...(13)*

## Neighbor News

### Pak-China Border Via Khunjerab Top to Re-Open from Monday

ISLAMABAD - Pak-China Border via Khunjerab top will re-open for trade and travel from Monday. According to protocol signed between both the friendly countries, the border remains closed from 1st of December to 1st of April every year due to heavy

snowfall, Radio Pakistan reported. The Khunjerab Pass is the highest paved international border at an altitude of 15,500 feet; a daily bus service runs between the Sost valley of Gilgit-Baltistan and Xinjiang province of China. (Monitoring Desk)

### Iraq Needs to Import Electricity from Iran for 3 Years: Parliament Speaker

TEHRAN - Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mohammed al-Halbosi says he hopes the United States will keep waiving sanctions on energy imports from neighboring Iran, noting that the Arab country will need to purchase electricity from the Islamic Republic for three years. In November last year, Washington granted a 45-day waiver on electricity to the Arab country and extended it by 90 days in December after US President Donald Trump's administration reimposed sanctions on Iran in May, following walking out of the Iran nuclear deal.

Earlier this month, the US State Department extended the 90-day waiver for the second time to let Iraq continue energy imports from Iran. The original exemption granted in December expired on March 19. "Hopefully this waiver will be extended until Iraq can stand on its feet economically," said Halbosi at the US Institute of Peace on a visit to Washington, where he met senior officials, including Vice President Mike Pence. Iraq is the biggest importer of electricity from Iran. It needs more than 23,000 megawatts of electricity to meet its domestic demand but years of war following the 2003 US invasion have left its power infrastructure in tatters and a deficit of some 7,000 megawatts. "After these three years, maybe we can see Iraq as economically independent and we won't need to import power or electricity from a foreign country. Maybe we can address this issue after three years," he added.

At a press conference held after his speech, Halbosi warned Washington of the negative effect of "any hasty, uncalculated step to adopt policies and procedures against countries in this region." (Press TV)

### Uzbek Airlines Increase Flight Frequency to New York

TASHKENT - The national airline Uzbekistan Airways plans to increase the frequency of flights to Jeddah three times. The national airline launched flights Tashkent - Jeddah with a frequency of twice a week since October 28 last year. To attract potential tourists in the direction of Ziyorat tourism, they are docked with Kuala Lumpur - Tashkent flights. (Trend)

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### The Hidden 40th Candidate? Ukrainian Presidential Campaign Is Largely about Vladimir Putin

KIEV - Ukrainians will choose from 39 candidates this Sunday, but one name has received a huge amount of attention despite not being on the ballot - Vladimir Putin. The contenders seem to be unable to stop talking about him. Of course, the leader of Ukraine's powerful neighbor is not unworthy of the voters' attention. But some candidates may have gone too far shaping their campaigns around Russian President Vladimir Putin. For instance, Petro Poroshenko, the incumbent

Ukrainian president struggling to stay in office, states in non-ambiguous terms that he is running against Putin. "Who is my opponent? I don't hesitate to say this openly, since others are afraid to do it. It's Putin." The message was also given a prominent place during a big event in which the Ukrainian president announced his candidacy in January. Displays showed banners featuring him and his Russian counterpart with the slogan: "Either Poroshenko, or Putin." (RT)

### A Look at Sunday's Local Elections in Turkey

ANKARA, Turkey - Turkey is holding local elections on Sunday that are seen as a test of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's popularity amid a sharp economic downturn. Erdogan, who has not lost a vote since his party came to power in 2002, has cast the elections as a "matter of national survival" and has been campaigning for a strong mandate that he says would come as slap to Turkey's enemies. If his party sweeps municipal seats, Erdogan's dominance

would be further solidified with his grip on the presidency, parliament and local administration. But a loss in major cities could signal a crack in his party's long hold on power. THE VOTE More than 57 million people will cast votes at some 200,000 ballot boxes across the country to elect the mayors for 30 large metropolitan cities, 51 provincial capitals and 922 districts. They will also vote to elect local assembly representatives as well



as tens of thousands of neighborhood or village administrators, called "muhtar." Polls are open between 7 a.m. and 4 p.m. (0400 to 1300 GMT) in eastern provinces and between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. (0500 to ...*(More on P4)...(14)*

### Egypt Sentences 18 to Life in Prison for Islamic State Ties



CAIRO - An Egyptian court has sentenced 18 suspected militants to life in prison for allegedly forming a "terrorist cell"

affiliated with the Islamic State group. The Cairo criminal court on Saturday sentenced another 12 defendants to 10

to 15 years on charges that include plotting attacks on the country's Christian minority in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria,

assaulting security forces and disrupting public order. All sentences are subject to appeal. Egypt has been battling Islamic militants for years, but the insurgency gained strength after the 2013 military overthrow of a freely elected but divisive Islamist president. Since then, courts have held mass trials and sentenced hundreds of people to death. Rights groups have repeatedly criticized such mass sentences in Egypt and called on authorities to ensure fair trials. (Fox News)

### Palestinians Mark 1 Year of 'Great March of Return' Protests with Massive Rallies

RAMALLAH - Palestinians continue to stage massive rallies along the Israel-Gaza border, as part of the resistance campaign launched exactly one year ago. A protester is said to have been killed by Israeli troops just hours before. A 21-year-old Palestinian man died in the hospital on Saturday, after he was shot while protesting near the border fence the night before, Gaza health officials said. The IDF told the media that it had not heard about the incident. The

army earlier reported that it attacked a " Hamas military post" in Gaza, and said that militants were hurling explosives during a "riot" near the border. Meanwhile, thousands of protesters holding Palestinian flags have gathered across the border fence to denounce the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the "blockade" of Gaza. Several groups of Palestinians made attempts to charge at the border fence, while Israeli security forces launched tear gas at the protesters. (RT)

### Australia to Boost National Security Funding by \$400 Million: Newspaper

MELBOURNE - Australia's budget for the 2019/20 fiscal year will include an additional A\$570 million (\$404.36 million) for national security to boost counter-terrorism and anti-espionage operations, The Weekend Australian newspaper reported on Saturday. The extra spending package for domestic spy agency the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and the Australian Federal Police (AFP) will fund programs such as anti-drone technology for the police and intelligence gathering in offshore conflict zones. Prime Minister Scott Morrison will unveil a budget on Tuesday that is expected to feature an avalanche of spending in an effort to arrest his conservative government's slide in popularity. (Reuters)

### Macron's Pro-EU Party Kicks Off European Parliament Campaign

PARIS - With Brexit looming and nationalism rising, French President Emmanuel Macron's pro-EU party is launching its campaign for the European Parliament elections. The centrist Republic on the Move party and allies are holding a rally Saturday in the Paris suburb of Aubervilliers. The grouping calls itself Renaissance. Polls suggest Renaissance will be among France's top two vote-getters in the May elections, alongside Marine Le Pen's anti-immigration, far-right National Rally. Saturday's Renaissance rally will be led by Nathalie Loiseau, who quit this week as France's European Affairs minister to lead the campaign. (AP)

### Do The Right Thing? Venezuelan Defense Minister Responds to Bolton's Calls to Defect

CARACAS - US National Security Advisor John Bolton has been flooding Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino with messages asking him to "do the right thing," playing the "Good Cop" to his own "Bad Cop." Bolton's most recent "do the right thing" tweet implores Padrino and the army to "protect the Constitutional order from Maduro's usurpation of democracy" - though US special envoy Elliott Abrams admitted earlier this month that Juan Guaido's self-appointed presidency was technically in violation of



Venezuela's constitution, until he unilaterally opted to change it. Bolton has been tweeting at Padrino all week - and those are just the messages he's sent publicly. The Venezuelan military's refusal to throw its support behind Juan Guaido,

the opposition leader turned self-appointed US-backed "interim president," is clearly a thorn in his side. "We call on the Venezuelan military to uphold its constitutional duty to protect the citizens of Venezuela," Bolton ...*(More on P4)...(15)*

### Trump Wrecked Summit with Kim by Suggesting N. Korea Give All Its Nukes to US - Report

WASHINGTON - US President Donald Trump reportedly proposed that North Korea transfer all its nuclear weapons to the US, a denuclearization template borrowed from Libya before the NATO intervention and brutal murder of its leader. The second summit between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in February wrapped up early, ending with a big question mark over the

future of the talks and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In the wake of the Vietnam meeting, Pyongyang and Washington offered different accounts of what actually transpired, with the White House alleging that North Korea demanded all sanctions be lifted from it. Pyongyang insisted that it was talking only about partial relief. The essence of the talks was kept under a veil of secrecy. (RT)

### New Silk Road Critics are 'Prejudiced', China's Top Diplomat Says

BEIJING - China has never forced debt upon participants of its new Silk Road project as "prejudiced" critics have suggested, the country's top diplomat said on Saturday in a strongly worded defense of a key policy platform of President Xi Jinping. Xi's Belt and Road Initiative, as it is formally called, envisions rebuilding the old Silk Road to connect China with Asia, Europe and beyond with massive infrastructure spending. But it has proved controversial in many Western capitals, particularly Washington, which views it as merely a means to spread Chinese influence abroad and saddle countries with unsustainable debt through nontransparent projects. The United States has been particularly critical of Italy's decision to sign up to the plan this month, during Xi's visit to Rome, the first for a G7 nation.

Speaking to the ruling Communist Party's official People's Daily, Yang Jiechi, who runs the party's foreign affairs committee, said he had noted that some in the international community believed this was a geopolitical tool and would only bring debt traps for participating countries. "This obviously shows a lack of objectivity and fair understanding of the Belt and Road initiative. It is a misunderstanding, misjudgment and is even prejudiced," wrote Yang, a former foreign minister and ambassador to Washington. (Reuters)

### Tajikistan Embassy Marks Spring Festive in Ankara

DUSHANBE - Tajikistan's embassy on Friday marked the country's spring festival at a reception in the Turkish capital of Ankara, reports Trend citing to Aa.com.tr. Speaking at the opening ceremony of the Nevruz celebrations, Ambassador Mahmudali Rajabiyon said it was a part of the country's "spiritual legacy" as well as a unique example of cultural heritage belonging to the whole of humanity. Rajabiyon said Nevruz was celebrated by people of different religions and cultures across countries along the Silk Road, to mark the new year and welcome the spring season. "The return of the spring was seen to have great spiritual significance, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil and joy over sorrow," he said. He noted that Nevruz is an occasion for traditional activities combining common and local customs with such practices as poetry festivals, music and folk songs.

"Our forefathers welcomed this holiday in ancient times by singing songs and reciting pieces of poetry during the spring celebrations," the envoy said. He stressed that Nevruz had been officially added to the UNESCO Representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In his speech, Rajabiyon also called for the preservation and enhancement of the ideals of the "wonderful holiday", for the sake of future generations. Cultural performances, folk dances, traditional cuisine and poetry recitations were also held at a reception. Diplomatic representatives from other missions, ministries and government offices also attended the event. Nevruz falls on March 21 and has been celebrated for more than 18 centuries across Anatolia and Asia. The spring festival is celebrated mainly in Iran, Afghanistan, India, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Albania and Macedonia. (Trend)