

Kerry Heading to Middle East This Week: State Department

WASHINGTON - U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry will travel to Saudi Arabia and Paris this week to discuss Middle Eastern issues, a spokeswoman said on Monday. Kerry will be in Riyadh on Wednesday and Thursday to meet with senior Saudi leaders to discuss regional security issues, State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said. Saudi Arabia has been leading a coalition conducting air strikes on Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. After Riyadh, Kerry will go to Paris to meet with foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council nations to discuss



security and other regional issues. He also will take part in commemorations of the allied victory in World War Two and meet with French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius. Kerry's visits to Riyadh and Paris will be part of a trip that already has taken him to Sri Lanka to strengthen ties with that country. He currently is in Kenya to discuss fighting the militant Islamist group al Shabaab, among other issues. (Reuters)

No Indication Civilians Killed in Syria Strike: US Military

BEIRUT - The U.S. military denied Monday reports that civilians were killed in U.S.-led coalition airstrikes last week on a village controlled by the Islamic State group in northern Syria. Meanwhile the rights group which first reported the civilian casualties said the death toll has risen to 64, including at least 31 children. It was not immediately possible to independently verify the conflicting reports in the village. Two videos and several photos purporting to show the aftermath of the strikes on

the remote mixed Arab and Kurdish village were mostly produced by the Islamic State group's media arms. The strikes happened overnight Thursday on the Syrian village of Bir Mahli, near the border city of Kobani, the Britain-based based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. Observatory director Rami Abdurrahman said that the death toll rose to 64 Sunday after missing persons were found dead. He said the airstrikes hit civilians, all of them Arabs, in their homes... (More on P4)...(23)

NATO Starts Anti-Submarine Exercise in North Sea as Tension with Russia Rise

ABOARD THE USS VICKSBURG, North Sea - NATO launched one of its biggest-ever anti-submarine exercises in the North Sea on Monday, inviting non-member Sweden for the first time, amid increasing tensions between Russia and its northern neighbors. More than a dozen vessels from 11 countries are participating in the "Dynamic Mongoose" exercise. NATO will simulate detecting and attacking submarines in one of the most



hostile seas, with rugged but shallow underwater canyons, rapid currents and unusually high sound pollution from freshwater pouring in from Norway's fjords. Tensions have

run high since Russia annexed part of Ukraine last year, with the three small Baltic states, who also rely on the Nordics for defense, fearing they may be next as they are home to big Russian minorities. Finland detected an unidentified submarine along its coast last week, firing depth charges at the vessel, while NATO-member Latvia, a former Soviet state, last month said it detected a Russian submarine near its waters... (More on P4)...(21)

Palestinian Building Permits 'Political', Admits Israel

JERUSALEM - Approval of building plans for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank is subject to political considerations, Israeli defence officials have acknowledged. The admission came as a landmark court case seeks to challenge Israel's housing policy in Area C, which covers 60 percent of the West Bank but is under full Israeli civil and security control. All building in Area C, whether by Palestinians or Jewish settlers, comes under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Civil Administration which has full control over all zoning and planning issues. In practice, almost all Palestinian applications for a building permit are rejected, with the Civil Administration granting only a handful of permits. In a written response to AFP regarding the legal case in which a Palestinian village and a coalition of NGOs are seeking to tackle Israel's policy of house demolitions, COGAT -- the defence ministry body to which the Civil Administration belongs -- admitted that planning issues required political approval. "Any construction in Area C, both Palestinian and Israeli, requires the approval of the qualified authorities, according to the law practised in the region and in accordance with the Interim Agreement," it said, referring to the 1995 Oslo 2 agreement which divided the West Bank into areas A, B and C. "The Civil Administration's planning committee examines and promotes construction plans equitably, dependant on the fact that these plans meet the relevant planning criteria and their promotion is approved by the political echelon," it said, without giving further detail. (AFP)

French Leader Oversees Qatar Jet Deal



DOHA - French President Francois Hollande sought to boost ties in the Gulf Monday as he oversaw the signing of a warplanes deal with Qatar and headed to Saudi Arabia for a summit. Hollande was to be the first Western head of state to attend a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) annual gathering when it meets in Riyadh on Tuesday. The summit comes at a crucial time for the six-nation GCC, with a Saudi-led coalition bombing rebels in Yemen, concern over the rise of Islamist militants and regional worries over a potential final nuclear deal with Iran. With Hollande in attendance, the CEO of French aerospace firm Dassault, Eric Trappier, signed the 6.3-billion-euro (\$7-billion) deal with Qatari defence officials in Doha. The agreement includes an order for 24 Rafale fighter jets, with an option on a further 12. "Good choice," Hollande said as the deal was signed. "If we are present here in Qatar... it is because there has been a long tradition, and because France is seen as a reliable country which a partner country can have confidence in." Having struggled for years to sell any Rafales abroad, Dassault has recently scored several lucrative high-profile contracts with Egypt, India, and now Qatar. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said recently that talks with the United Arab Emirates on buying Rafales were also headed in the "right direction". (AFP)

Nigerian Army Fights Militiamen in Central Nigeria

JOS, Nigeria - Nigerian troops battled militiamen in central Nigeria on Sunday after they destroyed several villages and killed scores of people last week, including six soldiers who had their eyes gorged out and tongues cut off, a military spokesman said. The group is not part of Islamist militant group Boko Haram, Special Task Force spokesman Captain Ikedichi Iweha told Reuters, but he did not give further details on their identity. "Tongues were cut off,

eyes were gorged out, bodies were decapitated," Iweha said of the soldiers killed in the April 28 attack that saw several villages on the border of the central states of Plateau and Taraba razed to the ground. "Yesterday, contact was made with the militia group and a firefight ensued. It is still going on," he said. Iweha said he could not disclose what triggered the initial attack until the operation was completed.... (More on P4)...(24)

IS Hit with 19 Air Strikes by U.S., Allies: Statement

WASHINGTON - The United States and its allies staged 19 strikes on Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria in a 24-hour period ending Saturday, the Combined Joint Task Force said in a corrected statement that was released on Sunday.

Three of the strikes were in Syria and hit

land features, denying the Islamic State "tactical advantage," the military said.

In Iraq, 16 air strikes near Mosul, Ramadi, Baiji, Sinjar, Tal Afar and Fallujah hit units, buildings and fighting positions, the statement said.

The strikes took place on Friday and Satur-

day. A group monitoring the conflict said 52 civilians had been killed in a coalition air strike in the northern Syrian province of Aleppo on Friday. The U.S. military said Saturday it could not confirm the civilian deaths but was looking into the allegation. (Reuters)

Finnish Military Reaches out to Reservists, Denies Russia Link

HELSINKI - The Finnish military began sending letters to some 900,000 reservists on Monday in the largest campaign of its kind, amid increased tensions between the Nordic states and Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

The military said the letter campaign, which aims to improve communication with former army conscripts, was prompted mainly by cuts in the defense budget and was not a response to a more assertive Russia, with which Finland shares an 833 mile (1,340 km) land border. But the move also comes at a time when

Russian air force sorties, spy accusations and military border exercises have prompted a debate within non-aligned Finland about how to boost its security arrangements and whether it should even join NATO.

Last month, Finland and similarly neutral Sweden joined with NATO members Norway, Denmark and Iceland in an unprecedentedly hawkish joint statement that directly cited the Russian "challenge" as grounds to boost defense cooperation. Finland, one of few countries in Europe still to have compulsory

military service for men, said the plan to improve coordination with reservists pre-dated the Ukraine crisis, which erupted last year when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea region. "The aim is to update reservists about their wartime roles and assignments and to open up interaction on how their know-how has developed," said military spokesman Mika Kalliomaa. He attributed the timing of the campaign mainly to recent defense budget cuts that had changed assignments and locations for many reservists. (Reuters)

Ethiopian Protests Draw Attention to Racism in Israel

JERUSALEM - Images of Israeli police firing stun grenades are usually set in the West Bank and involve Palestinian protesters. But on Sunday the situation was quite different - riot police battling thousands of Ethiopian Jews in the center of Tel Aviv.

The spark was a week-old video showing two Israeli policemen punching, beating and trying to arrest an Israeli soldier of Ethiopian descent in what appeared to be an unprovoked attack.

The two-minute video is the latest in a string of incidents that have raised



uncomfortable questions about Israel's treatment of ethnic minorities and its struggle to integrate newcomers into broader society, whether Jews or non-Jews. On Monday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met the soldier, Damas Fikadeh, at his Jerusalem office and hugged him. "I was shocked by the (video) footage," he said on Twitter. "We cannot accept it, and we will change it."... (More on P4)...(22)

Neighbour News

US Pursues Division of Mideast States: Rafsanjani

TEHRAN - Chairman of Iran's Expediency Council Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has stressed the importance of remaining vigilant in the face of regional issues, saying the US intends to disintegrate the countries in the Middle East. "In recent days, there have been revelations of talks to break up Syria, Iraq and Yemen into smaller countries," Rafsanjani said on Monday. He added that global developments have not worked out to the benefit of the arrogant and colonial powers, particularly the US and Europeans. They have come to the conclusion that strong and big countries in the region are not in their interests, the top Iranian cleric said. He added that the US Congress has been pursuing a plan since years ago to split the region into smaller countries. Rafsanjani em-

phasized that Iran is currently the only safe haven in the Middle East which can play a fundamental role in maintaining the stability of the region. Saying that Iranian officials and nation should be very vigilant given the existing situation in the region and across the world, he added, "We should remain vigilant [to be able] to safeguard unity and harmony in the country as a real need," the Expediency Council head pointed out. A draft of a US annual defense bill, which was released on April 27 by the House Armed Services Committee, urges the US government to recognize separate Kurdish and Sunni states and provide them with at least 25 percent of the USD-715-million aid money allegedly planned to be given to the Iraqi government to help it fight the ISIL terrorist group. (Monitoring Desk)

Maldivian President to Visit Pakistan on May 6

ISLAMABAD - President of the Republic of Maldives Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom will undertake a two-day state visit to Pakistan on May 6 and May 7 at the invitation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. "President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom will hold talks with Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif besides meeting his counterpart, Mamnoon Hussain, who will also host a state banquet in the honour of the visiting dignitary", Foreign Office spokeswoman Tasneem Aslam said. The FO spokeswoman said Pakistan and Maldives will review all important aspects of their bilateral relations during the Maldivian president's visit.

"A number of documents on cooperation in sports, health, education and illicit drugs and narcotics trafficking will also be signed", Aslam said. She said Pakistan and Maldives enjoy close and cordial relations, adding that the relationship is based on mutual trust, common faith and understanding. Pakistan and Maldives have been actively cooperating with each other at a regional level and within multilateral fora. The Maldivian president was scheduled to visit earlier this year on his first state visit to Pakistan. The trip, however, did not materialise. (Agencies)

Turkmenistan Increases Average Monthly Wage

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan - In January-April 2015, the average monthly wage in Turkmenistan rose by 9.5 percent compared to the same period of 2014, said the message of the Ministry of Finance of Turkmenistan. The message said that in January-April 2015, revenue part of the state budget were executed by 103.2 percent, expenditures - by 90.8 percent. The revenue part of the state budget approved by Majlis (Parliament) of Turkmenistan for 2015 will amount to 102,800,8 billion manats and expenditures - 106,200,8 billion manats. The official exchange rate in

Turkmenistan since January 2015 remains at 3.50 Turkmen manats to one US dollar. Turkmenistan occupies one of the key positions in the region on the supplies of natural gas, which is imported by Russia, China and Iran. The revenue part of the budget of the country will be formed mainly due to such important sectors of industrial areas as oil and gas, chemical, electric power, construction one. Agro-industrial complex, transport and communication spheres, textile and food industries will also be intensely developed. (Trend News)

Seeking Global Role, China Presses Europe in Diplomatic Push

BRUSSELS/BEIJING - Brussels in June. Seizing on the 40th anniversary of diplomatic ties, Beijing has launched a diplomatic offensive to move Sino-European relations beyond trade and raise China's international profile, buoyed by its success winning European participation in a new Asian bank. A two-day visit by European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini to Beijing on Tuesday to meet top Chinese officials, including Premier Li Keqiang, follows up on a visit by the head of the European Parliament in March and comes ahead of a China-EU summit in

Beijing has organized a series of diplomatic events in Brussels, the EU's de facto capital, mostly in May and June, including cocktails at the European Commission, an opera performance, and open days at the embassy, an imposing building normally shuttered behind steel gates. The outreach is a world away from the low-key approach adopted by Beijing since May 1975, when the first European commissioner went to China to establish ties for the bloc to add to most of its members' bilateral ties. (Reuters)