

U.N. Calls for Safe Passage from Damascus Refugee Camp

DAMASCUS - The head of the U.N. agency responsible for Palestinian refugees called from Damascus on Sunday for safe passage for people wishing to leave the Yarmouk camp on the city fringes that Islamic State insurgents are trying to take over.

UNRWA Commissioner General Pierre Krahenbuhl and another senior U.N. official are in the Syrian capital to find ways to ease the plight of some 18,000 people estimated to be trapped in Yarmouk, which has been under government siege since 2013. A Syrian military source said the army was giving a chance for solutions aimed at resolving the



situation in Yarmouk, which U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has said is "beginning to resemble a death camp". Islamic State's arrival

in Yarmouk has given the jihadist group a significant foothold a few kilometers (miles) from President Bashar al-Assad's seat of power.

Islamic State, which has already seized wide areas of eastern and northern Syria, has in recent weeks mounted several big attacks on re-

gions closer to the main population centers of western Syria, both in government- and rebel-held areas. Ban said last Thursday that residents

of Yarmouk were being "held hostage" by Islamic State militants and other extremists. He also said they "face a double-edged sword - armed elements inside the camp, and government forces outside".

Islamic State moved into Yarmouk last week. Aided by fighters from the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, it has seized large parts of the camp from other insurgents based there.

Krahenbuhl visited a Damascus school where he met several dozen evacuees from Yarmouk. "We are very concerned of course about the survival needs of the people inside Yarmouk," he said. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

Iran to Attend SCO Security Meeting in Russia

TEHRAN - Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani is to visit Russia to attend a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Moscow. Shamkhani's visit will take place at the invitation of head of Russia's Security Council Nikolai Patrushev. During his stay in Moscow, the SNSC secretary is scheduled to address the 10th meeting of the secretaries of the SCO security council and hold talks with Russian political and security officials as well as his counterparts attending the event. The meeting is set to open on Monday in the presence of representatives from SCO's six member states - Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan,

Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - and observer states - Afghanistan, Iran, India, Mongolia and Pakistan. The participants in the forum plan to discuss security issues regarding the ongoing upheavals in the region. The SCO is an inter-governmental organization which seeks to strengthen mutual trust and good-neighborliness between the member countries, facilitate their effective cooperation in various fields, promote peace, security and stability in the region and establish a new, democratic, just and rational political and economic international order. The organization was founded in 2001 in Shanghai by the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. (Press TV)

Israeli PM Fears Immediate Removal of Bans as per Iran's Demand

TEHRAN - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has railed against an emerging final nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries, expressing concern over an immediate removal of anti-Iran sanctions. "We see that the sanctions are being lifted, immediately, according to Iran's demand, and this is without Iran having changed its policy of aggression everywhere," Netanyahu claimed late Saturday.

Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council - the US, Britain, France, Russia and China -- plus Germany along with officials from the European Union reached a mutual un-

derstanding on Tehran's nuclear program after eight days of marathon talks in the Swiss city of Lausanne on April 2. According to the statement, no Iranian nuclear facility will be shut down while all sanctions against the Islamic Republic will be terminated.

The two sides will now work on drawing up a final accord by the June 30 deadline. Claiming that the mutual understanding reached in Switzerland gives Iran "a certain path to nuclear bombs," Netanyahu stressed that a final nuclear agreement will leave Iran with "significant nuclear capabilities." (Press TV)

KSA Dismisses Iran Calls for Yemen Ceasefire

ADEN/RIYADH - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) dismissed Iranian calls to end air strikes on neighboring Yemen on Sunday as Saudi-led attacks hit a military camp in the Yemeni city of Taiz, killing eight civilians according to a medical source.

Riyadh said Tehran should not interfere in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies began air strikes against Iranian-allied Houthi militia fighters over two weeks ago to try and prevent them making further advances.

The air raids on the central Yemeni city targeted a site held by soldiers loyal to former Yemeni Presi-

dent Ali Abdullah Saleh who have joined up with Houthi fighters against local militias in the south, the source said.

"How can Iran call for us to stop the fighting in Yemen?" Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said in the Saudi capital Riyadh at a news conference with his French counterpart Laurent Fabius. "We came to Yemen to help the legitimate authority, and Iran is not in charge of Yemen."

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Thursday that the air strikes were a "crime and genocide" and Iran's president Hassan Rouhani called for a ceasefire and dialogue among

Yemen's factions.

Saudi Arabia and its Sunni Arab allies bombing Yemen fear that Shi'ite Iran seeks hegemony by backing armed Shi'ite groups in the region, a charge the Islamic Republic denies.

Former president Saleh was forced to give up power in 2012 after mass protests against his rule, but his loyalists in the military remained in place and now fight alongside the Houthis.

The campaign has raised fears that a sectarian proxy war between rivals Riyadh and Tehran will further destabilize the Middle East and potentially destroy the Yemeni state. (Reuters)

France Supports Saudi Aggression against Yemen

PARIS - France has expressed support for Saudi Arabia's illegal military campaign against Yemen, as the number of civilians killed in the deadly Saudi onslaught increases. Speaking in the Saudi capital of Riyadh on Sunday, visiting French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said, "Concerning Yemen, we are here to demonstrate our support, especially political, to the Saudi authorities."

The French foreign minister made the remarks as he began meetings with senior Saudi officials, including King Salman.

According to local sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, Saudi fighter jets struck a military academy in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, on Sunday morning, leaving a number of people killed and injured.

Two civilians were also killed on Sunday as Saudi warplanes struck the al-Khaffi district in Yemen's northwestern province of Sa'ada.

Despite his support for the Saudi aggression against Yemen, Fabius said, "It will be necessary, at one moment or another, to hold talks" for a political solution to the deadly crisis in Yemen. (Agencies)

Pakistani FO Mum over UAE Minister's Tirade

ISLAMABAD - The Pakistani Foreign Office (FO) on Saturday avoided reacting to remarks by a UAE minister following the resolution adopted during the parliament's joint session that stressed the need for neutrality on Islamabad's part in the Yemen conflict.

The resolution, which expressed solidarity with Saudi Arabia but insisted on remaining neutral in the dispute, apparently riled the Emirati leadership, which is already said to be displeased with Pakistan over some bilateral matters. "We don't have any confirmation of what exactly has been said and by whom.

I have no comments," Foreign Office spokesperson Tasnim Aslam said when asked to comment on the statement by the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Dr Anwar Mohammed Gargash.

Dr Gargash, a western-educated man, has held a number of important positions in the UAE government. In a series of messages (in Arabic) sent from his verified account on the social networking site, Twitter, he said the Pakistani parliament's decision to opt for neutrality in the Yemen conflict would cost the country 'heavily'. (Monitoring Desk)

Turkmenistan Plans to Harvest over 1 Million Tons of Cotton

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan - Turkmenistan plans to harvest 1.05 million metric tons of cotton in 2015, said the message from the country's Turkmenpagta (Turkmen cotton) state concern.

Cotton has been sown in around 30 percent of the fields throughout the country. Cotton sowing in Ahal, Lebap and Mary provinces began on March 27 and while in Dashoguz province it

started on Apr.3.

Cotton is the main product exported by Turkmenistan and is a sought after raw material for tens of modern enterprises developing dynamically in the country's textile industry.

Ashgabat hosts the international fair of cotton products of Turkmenistan every year. The total area allocated for cotton sowing is over 500,000 hectares. (Trend)

Park Calls for Closer Ties with Tajikistan

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan - Islam Karimov assumed the office of the President of Uzbekistan on Friday.

At the joint session of the chambers of Oliy Majlis, Islam Karimov was sworn-in as the President of Uzbekistan. He vowed to serve the people of Uzbekistan, strictly follow the Constitution and laws of the country, guarantee the rights and freedoms of citizens, fulfill the duties of the President of Uz-

bekistan in good faith.

Chairperson of the Central Election Commission, Mirza-Ulugbek Abdusalomov handed over a certificate of the President of Uzbekistan to Islam Karimov. Afterwards Islam Karimov delivered a speech. Islam Karimov collected 90.39% of votes in the presidential elections, which took place on 29 March. About 18.942 million out of 20.798 million registered voters casted their vote in the elections. (PR)

Fresh Aid Reaches Yemen Capital

SANAA - The Red Cross on Saturday delivered a second plane load of aid to war-battered Yemen in as many days, as the Saudi-led coalition stepped up air raids on allies of Iran-backed rebels.

The aid is urgently needed for hundreds wounded in fighting between pro-government forces and the Shi'ite Houthi rebels, who are allies of troops loyal to ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Coalition warplanes on Saturday launched several raids in and around Sanaa, with at least 11 around Sanhan, Saleh's home

town. A raid on military targets in Amran province north of Sanaa killed eight rebels, medics said on the 18th day of the Saudi-led air campaign.

Fighting in and around the southern city of Aden since late Friday between rebels and pro-government forces has killed 42 people including three civilians, medics and military sources said. The International Committee of the Red Cross said its aircraft landed in Sanaa with medical equipment after weeks of intense fighting across the country. (AFP)



Georgia, Denmark, Brazil, Netherlands, Finland Join China's AIIB Bank

BEIJING - The existing founding members of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) have accepted applications of Georgia, Denmark, Brazil, the Netherlands and Finland to join the bank as founding states, the Chinese Finance Ministry said Sunday.

"With the consent of the existing founding members, the Netherlands,

Brazil, Finland, Georgia and Denmark officially became the founding countries of the AIIB on April 12," a statement on the Chinese finance ministry's website said. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang put forward an initiative to set up the AIIB in a bid to boost investment in infrastructure projects in the Asia-Pacific region. (Sputnik)

Clinton Campaign to Focus on Economic Security, Opportunity

CHICAGO - Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential campaign will center on boosting economic security for the middle class and expanding opportunities for working families, while casting the former senator and secretary of state as a "tenacious fighter" able to get results, two senior advisers said Saturday. President Barack Obama all but endorsed her, say-

ing "I think she would be an excellent president." The senior advisers provided the first preview of the message Clinton planned to convey when she launches her long-anticipated campaign on Sunday with an online video. Until now, the former first lady has offered only hints of what would drive her if she were to run a second time for the White House. (Reuters)

In Historic Face to Face, Obama, Castro Vow to Turn the Page

PANAMA CITY - President Barack Obama and Cuba's Raul Castro sat down together Saturday in the first formal meeting of the two country's leaders in a half-century, pledging to reach for the kind of peaceful relationship that has eluded their nations for generations. In a small conference room in a Panama City convention center, the two sat side by side

in a bid to inject fresh momentum into their months-old effort to restore diplomatic ties. Reflecting on the historic nature of the meeting, Obama said he felt it was time to try something new and to engage with both Cuba's government and its people. "What we have both concluded is that we can disagree with a spirit of respect and civility," Obama said. (Reuters)

Obama Optimistic about Iran Nuclear Deal

PANAMA CITY - U.S. President Barack Obama expressed optimism on Saturday that major world powers and Iran could finalize a deal to curb Iran's nuclear program despite strong words this week from the country's Supreme. Obama downplayed Khamenei's demands that a final deal result in an end to all sanctions on Iran, telling reporters at the Americas summit in Panama that Khamenei and others in Iran were addressing their own internal politics. "Even a guy with the title 'Supreme Leader' has to be concerned about his

own constituencies," Obama said. "There may be ways of structuring a final deal that satisfy their pride, their optics, their politics, but meet our core practical objectives," Obama said at the news conference.

Iran and world powers reached a framework nuclear agreement on April 2 that would require Iran to shut down parts of its nuclear program that could be used to build a bomb, and accept intrusive inspections, in exchange for the West lifting economic sanctions.

But he blasted some U.S. Republican senators who have argued against the deal, including Arizona Senator John McCain, who told a conservative radio show this week that he found Khamenei's interpretation of the deal more credible than that of Secretary of State John Kerry, who has said sanctions would be lifted in phases and "snap back" in place if the deal is violated.

"That's not how we're supposed to run foreign policy, regardless of who is presi-

dent or secretary of state," Obama said. Obama said he has talked to the top Republican and Democratic senators on the Senate Foreign Relations committee about the role for the U.S. Congress in assessing the final deal.

Kerry is expected to brief lawmakers this week.

"What I'm concerned about is making sure that we don't prejudge it, or those who are opposed to any deal whatsoever try to use a procedural argument essentially to screw up the possibility of a deal," Obama said. (Reuters)

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