

NATO's Leader to Meet Russia's Foreign Minister for 1st Time

BRUSSELS - NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg will meet with Russia's foreign minister for the first time - an encounter that comes as relations between Moscow and the West have plunged to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said Tuesday that Stoltenberg and Sergey Lavrov, the Kremlin's top diplomat, will hold bilateral talks



during the Munich security conference, a three-day gathering of foreign and security officials that begins Friday. It will be Stoltenberg's first meeting with Lavrov since he became chief of the U.S.-led NATO alliance on Oct. 1. At the Munich conference, Stoltenberg will also hold bilateral meetings with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and other attendees, Lungescu said. (AP)

Birth Control Access Key Means of Reaching Climate Goals: Experts

LONDON - In Pakistan, where just a third of married women use contraception, half of all pregnancies - 4.2 million each year - are unintended, according to the Washington-based Population Reference Bureau. At the same time, the rising population in Pakistan - and elsewhere around the world - is creating more climate-changing emissions and putting more people in the path of extreme weather, food and water shortages, and other climate change pressures. That suggests that giving more women who want it access to birth control to limit their family size - in both rich and poor countries - could be a hugely effective way to curb climate change and to build greater resilience to its impacts, according to population and climate change researchers and policy experts. "We're not talking about population control.

We're talking about giving people the choice to limit their family size and all the good things that go on from that" such as better health and education, said Baroness Jenny Tonge, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, during an event at the UK Parliament Monday on linking population and climate issues. Bringing together two politically contentious concerns - climate change and managing population growth - in an effort to build effective policy has been far from easy. "They're both sensitive and it's difficult to make headway on either, much less both together," admitted Jason Bremner, a demographer and associate vice president of the Population Reference Bureau. Still, an international coalition of experts on climate change, family

planning and development aid are now pushing for universal access to family planning to be recognized as a part of "climate-compatible development" and included in new U.N.-backed Sustainable Development Goals set to be agreed in September. Some countries, such as Ethiopia, already have included family planning among the activities they want to undertake on climate change, using international climate finance, according to an analysis by the London-based Population and Sustainability Network. "They themselves identified population as a factor making it more difficult for them to adapt. We in the north are worried about, 'Is it fair to make this connection?' when people in the south are already making it," said Karen Newman, coordinator of the network. (Reuters)

Iraqi Cabinet Approves Draft Law to Set Up National Guard

BAGHDAD - Iraq's cabinet on Tuesday approved a draft law creating a national guard, which Sunni political figures have described as a necessary step to achieving national reconciliation. But a measure to reform the government's ban on former Baath Party members from government proved divisive. Sunni ministers boycotted the second draft law, saying it did not go far enough, while the rest of the cabinet approved it. It remains unclear how parliament will greet the two sets of legislation, which are already generating controversy. Approval by the cabinet does not guarantee passage by the parliament. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's spokesman Rafid Jaboori applauded the sending of the national guard law to parliament as "a way to confront ISIL", a reference to the militant group Islamic State which controls large sections of the country. Sunni political and tribal leaders have billed

the national guard law as a way to handle their own security in combating the militant group. The guard would be a locally-based force, answerable to the provincial government, and then the prime minister. Sunni leaders hope it will empower their communities, who distrust the army and national police they blame for carrying out indiscriminate arrests in the past. Ending the ban on ex-members of the Baath Party, which ruled Iraq before the U.S.-led invasion to topple Saddam Hussein in 2003, from public service has also been a main Sunni demand. But Sunni cabinet members were disappointed by the second draft law. Dr. Muhannad Hussam, a politician and close aide to Deputy Prime Minister Saleh Mutlaq, said the measure on "debaathification" adopted by Shi'ite government ministers without their Sunni counterparts was a disaster. (Reuters)

Sergio Mattarella Sworn in As Italian President

ROME - New Italian President Sergio Mattarella on Tuesday pledged to guarantee the constitutional foundation and rule of law of his country's legal system as he was sworn in at the lower chamber. Mattarella, a former constitutional judge, in his inaugural address defined the role of head of state as a "referee" who has to make the law punctually applied. "The referee must be and will be impartial," the 73-year-old president stressed. "And players must help him with their honesty," he added. Mattarella highlighted the difficult times Italians are facing because of the economic crisis, which caused rampant

unemployment especially among young generations. "The urgency of institutional and economic reforms derives from the duty to give effective answers to the country," he said. "Citizens are asking for transparency and coherence in (political) decisions," Mattarella went on saying, calling on politics to be a "common good" for everyone. Mattarella, who entered politics in the 1980s after his brother was killed by the Sicilian mafia, particularly stressed the need of "national unity" in combating the organized crime. Right to education and work, technological advancement, safeguard of cultural heritage, justice

rapid response, pluralism of mass media, right to health care and individual freedoms, fight against tax evasion and corruption were among the main topics cited in his inaugural address. Mattarella also mentioned Italy's full support to the international community in the fight against global menaces, including terrorism. He said the European Union (EU) represents a "frontier of hope" and the "perspective of a true political union must be relaunched without hesitation." The swearing-in ceremony took place in front of the 1,009 lawmakers and regional representatives who elected Italy's 12th head of state with 665 votes on Saturday. (Xinhua)

Russia Speeds Up Air-Force Upgrading

MOSCOW - Russia's air force will receive a massive reinforcement this year, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said Tuesday, with 33 percent of the Air Force's armament set to be modernized. "In 2015, the Russian Air Force and Naval Aviation will get 126 new warplanes and 88 helicopters as part of the state defense procurement," the minister told a teleconference, saying "the serviceability levels should be raised to 67 percent." Besides, 80 percent of the airplanes of the Russian Air Force's Long Range Aviation must be in com-

bat-ready status, he said. Among the most advanced military hardware, the air force will receive and put into service the multifunctional fighter SU-35S this year, which is "the principal task for 2015," Shoigu said. Another task of the Defense Ministry is to modernize the MiG-31 jet fighter by the end of the year, according to the minister. By 2018, Russia plans to upgrade over 50 MiG-31 warplanes. In 2014, the cutting-edge weaponry in Russia's Strategic Missile Troops, Aerospace Defense Forces and the Navy has made up over 30 percent

of all combat equipment, Shoigu noted. He also ordered to finish the naval infrastructure construction for new submarines by the year-end in the northwestern towns of Gadzhiiyev and Zaozersk, as well as the Black Sea port of Novorossiisk. Meanwhile, Shoigu said that 454 warehouses for rockets and ammunition will be built in 2015, "thereby finalizing the infrastructures of 13 modern arsenals and bringing the storage system of rockets, missiles and ammunition in accordance with current requirements." (Xinhua)

Kurdish Forces Seize Villages near Kobani

BEIRUT - Kurdish forces and their Syrian rebel allies have seized a belt of villages around Kobani from Islamic State militants, a senior official said Tuesday, days after they drove the extremists from the Syrian border town. IS militants overran large parts of Kobani and surrounding areas in mid-September, forcing tens of thousands of Kurds to flee to neighboring Turkey. For months Kurdish forces fought to retake Kobani, assisted by airstrikes from the U.S.-led coalition. The battle was seen as a major test of whether the airstrikes could halt the extremists' advance across Syria and neighboring Iraq. The Islamic State group has blamed coalition airstrikes for its defeat in Kobani. "Most of the villages close to Kobani have

been liberated," said senior Kurdish official Anwar Muslim. "The rest will be liberated soon," he said. Muslim said Kurdish forces and their allies had secured a diameter of six to nine miles (10 to 15 kilometers) around Kobani. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported similar information. Kurdish officials meanwhile asked for international funds to rebuild Kobani. "We liberated the city but most of it is destroyed," Muslim said. In an appeal sent to media outlets, Muslim and other Kurdish officials asked the United Nations to "actively take part in reconstruction of the province" and to open a "humanitarian corridor" to allow displaced Syrians to return. (AP)

Death Toll from Conflict in East Ukraine Exceeds 5,350: UN

United Nations - The United Nations has expressed concern over civilian casualties in eastern Ukraine, announcing that the death toll from conflict in the region has exceeded 5,350. At least 5,358 people have been killed in the eastern Ukraine crisis since mid-April 2014, said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Zeid al-Husseini on Tuesday. Some 12,235 people have been injured since the fighting began in eastern Ukraine, the UN official

said, adding that at least 224 civilians were killed and 545 wounded over a time span of only three weeks in January. Hussein voiced alarm that any further escalation of chaos will be disastrous for the 5.2 million residents of the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine. Ukraine's mainly Russian-speaking regions of Donetsk and Lugansk in the east have witnessed deadly clashes between pro-Russia forces and the Ukrainian army since ... (More on P4)... (21)

UN'S Highest Court Absolves Croatia, Serbia of Genocide

THE HAGUE - The United Nations' highest court ruled on Tuesday that neither Croatia nor Serbia had committed genocide against each other's populations during the wars that accompanied the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Both sides said they hoped the ruling would mark a watershed in relations, long since improved but still sometimes frosty. Peter Tomka, president of the International Court of Justice, said the forces of both countries had committed crimes during the conflict, but that the intent to commit genocide - by "destroying a population in whole or in part" - had not been proven against either country.

"This marks the end of one page on the past, and I'm convinced we will start a new page on the future, much brighter and better," Serbian Justice Minister Nikola Selakovic told reporters in the Hague. Croatian Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic said she hoped the ruling would contribute to "closing this historic chapter and moving on to a better and safer period for people in this part of Europe." The cases were part of the long legal fall-out from the break-up of Yugoslavia into seven states in wars that lasted for much of the 1990s and left more than 130,000 dead in Europe's worst conflagration since World War Two.

Croatia, which joined the European Union in 2013, filed its case against Belgrade in 1999 and Serbia - a candidate for EU membership - its counter-case against Zagreb only in 2010. "Croatia has not established that the only reasonable inference was the intent to destroy in whole or in part the (Croatian) group," Tomka said of Serbia's campaign to destroy towns and expel civilians in Slavonia and Dalmatia. Rejecting Serbia's counterclaim, he said Croatia had not committed genocide when it sought to drive ethnic Serb rebels from the province of Krajina, and put hundreds of thousands of civilians to flight. "Acts of ethnic cleansing may be part of a genocidal plan, but only if there is an intention to physically destroy the target group," Tomka said. (Reuters)

PNA Slams Israeli President's Visit to Settlement in Hebron

RAMALLAH - The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) on Tuesday slammed the visit of Israeli President Reuven Rivlin to a Jewish settlement in the southern West Bank city of Hebron. The PNA Foreign Affairs Ministry said in a press statement that the visit of Rivlin to Hebron on Tuesday is "an Israeli escalation that calls for confiscation of land and expansion of settlements." "The visit aims at seizing the old city of Hebron and all the Palestinian territories classified as areas (C). The visit also expresses the Israeli arrogance and the rebel on the international law and the will for making peace," it said. Meanwhile, the Israeli army forces suppressed a popular demonstration which took place at the entrance of Hebron, according to a statement of the Palestinian Popular Struggle Coordination Committee. (Xinhua)

Neighbor News

China to Improve Cooperation along Belt and Road

BEIJING - China will improve industrial and commercial cooperation with countries along the "Belt and Road," an official said Tuesday. A bilateral cooperation mechanism between China and countries such as Mongolia, Iran and Turkey will be created this year, said Yu Xiaodong, spokesperson of China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), China's largest trade organization. Such cooperation mechanisms not only promote international trade, but complement governmental cooperation, Yu said. The "Belt and Road" refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime

Silk Road initiative created by China to better cooperate with countries in Asia, the Middle East and Europe. CCPIT will promote the establishing of a Silk Road Business Council and Zhenghe Economic and Cultural Friendship Association, two institutions that will prop up economic cooperation between China and "belt and road" countries, Yu said. CCPIT also encourages domestic enterprises and local governments to hold exhibitions in "belt and road" countries. Around nine exhibitions are in the pipeline, including automobiles, high-speed railways, consumer electronics and textile industry. (Xinhua)

Final Nuke Deal Blocked: Zarif

TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said the road to a final deal between Iran and the six world powers has been blocked by only two problems. Speaking to reporters during a joint press conference with Ugandan Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Henry Oryem Okello in Kampala on Tuesday, Zarif said the powers need to recognize the "peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program" and remove "all the sanctions" and include these two issues in a final nuclear deal. He underlined the peace-

ful nature of Iran's nuclear program, and said, "Reaching an agreement is possible." Zarif stressed Iran's entitlement to the right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes based on the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and said, "We have this technology and no one can take it away from us since this technology has been acquired by our own scientists." "We try to display the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program and give assurances to the world (in this regard)," he added. The ... (More on P4)... (22)

Key TTP Commander Killed in Kurram Agency Clash

PESHAWAR - A key Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commander and his accomplice have been killed during clash with security forces in Kurram Agency on Tuesday, Dunya News reported. According to security sources, commander Gul was TTP's naib emir in Hangu, Orakzai and Kurram Agency. Earlier today, four troops embraced martyrdom when their vehicle struck a roadside bomb in the village of Warmagai in Kurram, one of the seven autonomous tribal districts bordering Afghanistan where militants rose up against the Pakistani state in 2004. "At least four soldiers were martyred when a bomb planted on a roadside hit a security forces convoy," a senior security official told AFP. Another official confirmed the attack and casualties, and said that immediately after the

bombing security forces launched a search operation in which two militants were killed and three others wounded. The vehicle belonged to a bomb-disposal squad whose mission was to travel ahead of a convoy to clear the road, the second official said. Pakistan began a long-awaited push to clear insurgent bases from the North Waziristan tribal district last June after a bloody Taliban attack on Karachi airport finally sank faltering peace talks. The army has intensified its offensive since the Taliban's massacre of 153 people, 134 of them children, in a school in the northwestern city of Peshawar in December. The semi-autonomous tribal areas on the Afghan border became a hideout for Islamist militants of all stripes in the aftermath of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. (FP)

Prospects for Tajik-Chinese Agrarian Cooperation Discussed

DUSHANBE - Tajik Minister of Agriculture Qosim Rohbar yesterday received a delegation of China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), led by the NDRC deputy head, Mr. Wang Xiaotao. According to the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) press center, prospects for bilateral agrarian cooperation between Tajikistan and China were a major topic of the meeting. Tajik minister reportedly expressed satisfaction with the current level of cooperation between the two countries, not-

ing that China was one of strategic partners of Tajikistan. Rohbar, in particular, hailed cooperation between Tajikistan and China in producing agricultural machines, processing farm produce, farming seeds and training personnel for Tajikistan's agrarian sector. Rohbar and Wang also paid a special attention to further expansion of bilateral cooperation between the two countries in the fields of rice growing, bee keeping, fish breeding and animal husbandry, the source said. (Asia-Plus)