

China, Saudi Arabia Agree to Expand Cooperation

BEIJING - Chinese Vice Premier Han Zheng on Friday met and co-chaired a meeting of a high-level steering committee with Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, Saudi Arabia's crown prince, deputy prime minister and minister of defense.

Applauding the rapid development of bilateral relations in recent years, Han, also a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, said China-Saudi Arabia had maintained close communication and coordination since the second meeting of the committee.

The China-Saudi Arabia High-level Joint Committee was set up in 2016, and this year marks its third meeting.



The steering committee is an all-round, high-level and institutionalized platform between the two governments, which has played an important coordinative role, Han said, adding that institutional building has

been improved and abundant achievements yielded as a result of advanced cooperation in various fields since last meeting. The vice premier also made several suggestions on major cooperation fields and prior-

ity projects between the two countries.

He suggested China and Saudi Arabia deepen political mutual trust, support each other's core interests and enhance communication and coordination in multilateral affairs.

China and Saudi Arabia should strengthen the synergy of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Saudi Vision 2030, enhance pragmatic cooperation on energy, infrastructure construction, finance, and high tech, Han said. Han called on the two countries to push forward anti-terrorism, law enforcement and security cooperation, while enhancing experience exchanges on de-radicalization. (Xinhua)

Turkey Sticks with Purchase of Russian S-400 Missiles in Defiance of U.S. Warnings

ANKARA - Turkey has made it clear that it is determined to purchase and deploy Russia's advanced S-400 anti-ballistic missile systems, a move that could pose a new challenge to its ties with the United States, analysts said.

In recent days, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly stated that his country would go ahead with the agreement with Russia to buy its defense system, and accused the United States of "coax-

ing Ankara into abandoning the S-400 deal." According to Turkish sources close to the missile deal, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence appealed Erdogan to renounce the deal with Russia in favor of the U.S. surface-to-air Patriot missiles.

However, Serkan Demirtas, a political analyst, told Xinhua that talks between the two allies have been strained as the Patriots do not meet the Turkish needs. (Xinhua)

Netanyahu-Putin to Meet in Russia on Wednesday

JERUSALEM - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will visit Russia on Wednesday for talks with President Vladimir Putin that had been scheduled for this week, the Israeli government said. It gave no further details in its Thursday evening statement, but Netanyahu's office said earlier this month that the two men planned to discuss Iranian military activity in Syria.

The meeting was originally set for Thursday but was postponed the previous day with the Kremlin telling Russian state news

agency Ria Novosti it was for domestic Israeli political reasons.

Israeli media said Netanyahu was working with allied right-wing parties to hammer out strategy for an April 9 general election ahead of a Thursday night deadline for the submission of electoral lists.

The rescheduled meeting will be the first extensive face-to-face exchange between the two men since a deadly friendly fire incident in September that saw a Russian plane being downed by Syrian air defences during an Israeli



raid, which angered the Kremlin. Netanyahu and Putin, who have spoken by telephone several times since the incident, met in

Paris in November on the sidelines of commemorations for the centenary of the end of World War I. (AFP)

Neighbor News

Iran Starts Gulf War Games, to Test Submarine-Launched Missiles

DUBAI - Iran on Friday began large-scale naval drills at the mouth of the Gulf, which will feature its first submarine cruise missile launches, state media reported, at a time of rising tensions with the United States. More than 100 vessels were taking part in the three-day war games in a vast area stretching from the Strait of Hormuz to the Indian Ocean, the state news agency IRNA reported. "The exercise will cover confronting a range of threats, testing weapons, and evaluating the readiness of equipment and personnel," navy commander Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi, said in remarks carried by state television. "Submarine missile launches will be carried out ... in addition to helicopter and drone launches from the deck of the Sahand destroyer," Khanzadi said.

State media said Iran would be testing its new domestically built Fateh (Conqueror) submarine which is armed with cruise missiles and was launched last week. Iranian officials in the past have threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, a major oil shipping route, in retaliation for any hostile U.S. action, including attempts to halt Iranian oil exports through sanctions. U.S. President Donald Trump pulled out of an international agreement on Iran's nuclear program last May and reimposed sanctions on Tehran. He said the deal was flawed because it did not include curbs on Iran's development of ballistic missiles or its support for proxies in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. Iran has expanded its missile program, particularly its ballistic missiles. (Reuters)

Pakistan Re-Imposes Ban on US-Wanted Suspect's Charities

ISLAMABAD - Pakistan has re-imposed a ban on two charities run by a U.S.-wanted suspect behind the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.

The Interior Ministry said on Friday that the country's top security body decided on the ban during a meeting held by Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The two charities - Jamat-ut-Dawa and Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation - are thought to be a front for Lashkar-e-Taiba, a militant group founded by

Hafiz Saeed, a Muslim cleric who lives freely in Pakistan and often addresses anti-India rallies.

The two were banned last February when the government froze their assets in compliance with a U.N. request. But Pakistan's Supreme Court in September allowed them to resume operations. The U.S. has announced \$10million bounty for Saeed's arrest. Lashkar-e-Taiba has been blamed for the Mumbai attacks. (Fox News)

Wanderlust World Guide Awards: Uzbekistan Wins as 'Top Emerging Destination'

TASHKENT - Uzbekistan was declared the winner in the nomination "Top emerging destination" according to the Wanderlust World Guide Awards, Trend reports via Uzbek media.

London hosted the award ceremony in the field of tourism "Wanderlust World Guide Awards" according to the popular British magazine Wanderlust that specializes in covering events in the tourism industry.

The winners were selected by interviewing readers of the magazine in such nominations as "The most popular country to visit", "Top emerging destination", "and "The most popular city for tourists", "Best airline" and "Best Tour Operator". This year Namibia, Japan, New Zealand, Iran, Laos, Singapore,

the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and Spain became the winners of the competition in various nominations.

During the vote, Uzbekistan was able to get ahead of Iran, thanks to the rich cultural and historical heritage of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva, as well as the measures taken to develop the tourism market," Uzbek State Tourism Committee noted.

The magazine stressed that nowadays, Uzbekistan can claim to be among the most visited countries, in 2020 due to the decision to abolish visas for up to 30 days for citizens of 45 countries, including the UK. Wanderlust was founded in 1993 by Paul Morrison and Lyn Hughes and is one of the leading British travel magazines. (Trend)

Turkmen Ambassador Presents Credentials in China

ASHGABAT - Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Turkmenistan Parakhat Durdyev presented his credentials to President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, Trend reports referring to the Turkmen government.

The Chinese president noted that the ambassador's diplomatic mis-

sion will be given full support in order to fully utilize the accumulated potential for cooperation.

Chinese companies are represented on the Turkmen market in the oil, gas and telecommunications sectors, transport, agriculture, textile, chemical and food industries, healthcare and construction. (Trend)

Warsaw Won't Bow to 'Lies & Racist Insults,' Polish PM Says Amid Simmering Row with Israel



WARSAW - After an Israeli minister claimed that Poles harbor anti-Semitism from childhood, a Polish PM fired

back, saying his country, where thousands risked their lives to help Jews during WWII, will not accept "racist insults."

Amid a simmering political row between Warsaw and Tel Aviv, Mateusz Morawiecki told Haaretz that Poland "will no longer give in to a pressure to accept lies, misleading phrases, let alone racist insults."

Morawiecki was apparently directing the comment at Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz, who upped the ante last week by saying that every Pole "suckled anti-Semitism with his mother's milk." The Polish PM said the controversial quote "seemed totally un-

believable," and that such words "could be used by a radical extremist, but not by a Foreign Minister." He added that "some politicians want to make headlines" ahead of the elections in Israel.

Morawiecki said that "tens of thousands of Poles, perhaps even more, were helping their Jewish brethren," and that Poland was the only German-occupied country "in which a person helping Jews faced death penalty at the hands of the Germans." (RT)

Swede Gets 4 1/2 Years in Prison for Royal Jewels Heist

COPENHAGEN, Denmark - A 22-year-old Swede was sentenced Friday to four and a half years in prison after he was convicted of stealing 17th-century Swedish royal treasures estimated to be worth 65 million kronor (\$7 million) from a cathedral last year.

The Eskiltuna District Court said Johan Nicklas Backstrom stole two crowns and an orb used at the funerals of King Karl IX and Queen Kristina. The jewels, dating from 1611, had been on display in Strangnas Cathedral,

west of Stockholm. On the closing day of his trial last week, Backstrom confessed to stealing the items on July 31. His confession came after prosecutors said his DNA was found on the jewels, which were discovered Feb. 5 in a garbage bin north of Stockholm. Backstrom said he cut himself when smashing the alarmed glass case during the theft.

The court noted that the king's crown was damaged, and some of the ornamental stones had fallen off. (AP)

UN Body Expresses Concern Over Executions in Egypt

CAIRO - A U.N. human rights body has expressed concerns about a recent spike of executions in Egypt, following several death sentences handed down amid allegations of the use of torture to extract confessions. Rupert Colville, the spokesman for the U.N. Human Rights Office, told reporters in Geneva on Friday that Egyptian authorities should take all measures needed to guarantee due process and investigate allegations of torture. A total of 15 people were executed this month, including nine suspected Islamists. The nine were found guilty of taking part in the 2015 bombing that killed Hisham Barakat. It was the first assassination of a senior official in Egypt in a quarter century. Colville said that during their trial, the judges ignored accounts of torture to extract confessions. (Fox News)

India Starts Upgrading 8 More Airports to Match World Class Standards

NEW DELHI - India's Civil Aviation Minister Suresh Prabhu on Friday inaugurated several infrastructure projects at as many as eight airports, situated across the length and breadth of the country, in a bid to upgrade them to match the world-class standards.

The minister inaugurated the projects through video-link, said an official press release. These airports are located in Trivandrum, Calicut airports (in southern state of Kerala), Mangaluru airport in (southern state Karnataka), Madurai airport (in southern Tamil Nadu), Rupsi airport in (north-eastern Assam), Jaipur airport in (western Rajasthan), Amritsar airport in (northern Punjab) and Imphal airport (in northeastern Manipur). (Xinhua)

Psych Evaluations & Strict Code of Conduct: Pope Offers 'Concrete' Steps to Fight Sexual Abuse

VATICAN - Pope Francis has proposed a list of 21 initiatives he believes will stall the erosion of trust in the Catholic Church which has been plagued by numerous sexual abuse scandals and accusations of trying to sweep them under the rug.

Trying to apply maximum pressure to convince the clergy to confront the issue, the Pope opened a landmark summit on "The Protection of Minors in the Church" by presenting a "practical



handbook" which should serve as "a simple starting point" for the Vatican to overcome its sexual abuse crisis. "The holy People of God look to us, and expect from us not simple and predict-

able condemnations, but concrete and effective measures to be undertaken," Francis stressed Thursday in the Vatican, as nearly 200 clerics began debating ways to respond to the emergency. (RT)

Worry About US-Skorea Alliance Grows before Trump-Kim Summit

SEOUL, South Korea - As President Donald Trump seeks a nuclear deal with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un next week in Vietnam, some in Seoul are wondering if the fate of Washington's decades-long military alliance with South Korea could be at stake.

Much of this worry is linked to Trump's repeated assertions that the U.S. military deployment in South Korea is too costly, and to his surprise suspension of some U.S. military exercises with South Korea - including a major summertime drill - as a concession to Kim after their first summit in Singa-

pore last year. Added to this concern are policies by South Korea's liberal President Moon Jae-in that critics say favor engagement with North Korea at the expense of the alliance with Washington. The broader U.S.-South Korean alliance, sealed during the bloodshed of the 1950-53 Korean War, won't be on the negotiating table during the summit in Hanoi on Feb. 27-28. But some observers say its long-term future could be in doubt and that Trump may eventually withdraw some of the 28,500 U.S. troops deployed in South Korea. (AP)

Gene-Edited Chinese CRISPR Babies May Have Mental 'Superpowers', Researchers Warn

BEIJING - The genetically-modified Chinese twins born resistant to HIV last year may also have mental 'superpowers' their creator has kept quiet - a cognitive superiority that could kick off a genetic arms race, according to new research.

Lulu and Nana, the genetically-modified Chinese twins reportedly born HIV-resistant courtesy of the CRISPR gene editing tool, may also have been born with markedly superior mental abilities linked to the same gene edit. New research has confirmed that deleting the CCR5 gene - the same modification performed on the girls' DNA - significantly improves cognition, learning, and memory in mice and men.

"The answer is likely yes, it did affect their brains," University of California at Los Angeles neurobiologist Alcino Silva told MIT Technology Review, after publishing a paper demonstrating CCR5 deactivation's beneficial role in post-stroke recovery this week. "Those mutations will probably have an impact on cognitive function in the twins," but the effect is unpredictable, he said, and "that is why it should not be done."

He Jiankui, a researcher at Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, made headlines in November after claiming his team had created the first HIV-resistant babies by deleting the CCR5 gene from human embryos using CRISPR, then implanting the embryos in women. (RT)