

Turkey Calls for Joint Control with Russia & Iran over US Troop Pullout from Syria

ISTANBUL - As the US is experiencing "certain difficulties" with the withdrawal from Syria, it should be coordinated with Iran and Russia to prevent "terrorists" from taking up the vacated space, the Turkish foreign minister said.

"The United States [has] been facing certain difficulties with the process of the troops' withdrawal from Syria. We want to coordinate this process with Russia and Iran, with which we had arranged work in the framework of the Astana process," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Wednesday.

Cavusoglu visited Moscow late in December to discuss the situation in Syria. On Wednesday, he mulled bilateral talks



between Turkey and Iran, giving no time frame, however. At the same time, Cavusoglu revealed that a summit between all three

parties is being prepared in Moscow. The proposal comes as Ankara and Washington are engaged in a bitter war of words

over the US troop withdrawal from Syria. On Tuesday, US National Security Advisor John Bolton blasted an opinion piece penned by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for the New York Times as both "offensive and wrong." Erdogan praised his own efforts in combatting terrorism in Syria, while criticizing the US-backed operations in Raqqa and the Iraqi city of Mosul, as well as recalling the "lesson of Iraq" and the "premature declarations of victory" which led to the emergence of Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS). Prior to that exchange, Bolton demanded safety guarantees for Syria's Kurds from Turkey, calling it a precondition for US withdrawal. (RT)

Neighbor News

India Begins Settling Iran Oil Debt after US Sanctions

TEHRAN - Indian refiners have begun clearing their oil debt to Iran under a new payment mechanism which they put in place after the US reimposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic. The development comes after the Indian government intervened recently to exempt some \$1.5 billion of Iranian oil money held at state-owned UCO Bank from withholding taxes. It also coincided with a visit by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to New Delhi where he said Tehran was working with its traditional partners such as China, Russia and India to circumvent the US sanctions. UCO Bank "received a good amount from some oil companies" which have pending payments to Iran, its executive director Charan Singh told Reuters.

India is Iran's second biggest oil customer after China. Oil accounted for about 90 percent of Indian imports from Iran, which totaled about \$11 billion between April and November.

"Iran has been and will be a reliable source of oil supply to India," Zarif said on Monday as he arrived in New Delhi to take part in an annual research forum attended by economists and entrepreneurs.

India was among the eight countries which got US waivers late last year to continue crude oil imports from Iran for six months.

On Tuesday, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for economic diplomacy Gholamreza Ansari called on India to try to get another waiver from US sanctions.

Indian refiners have said they want to continue buying Iranian oil for which they are accorded free shipping and an extended credit period.

They also pay Iran all in rupees under a new transaction mechanism which Tehran has worked out with its trade partners in the face of dawdling by the EU to put a much-hyped special purpose vehicle into operation. (Press TV)

Turkmenistan Creating Artificial Lake in Karakum Desert

ASHGABAT - Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov at a working meeting noted the importance of the artificial lake "Altyn Asyr" being established in the center of the Karakum desert, Trend reports with reference to the Turkmenistan State News Agency.

The project is aimed at improving the environment, rational use of water and land resources. "This important environmental project includes creation of a unified system of collectors for the purposeful collection of drainage water from irrigated lands in all regions of the country and diverting them to the giant hollow cave Garashor located in north-west Turkmenistan," the report said.

This cave is located in the territory of the Balkan region, and it holds about 580 million cubic meters of accumulated water there. The Turk-

men president instructed the relevant officials, together with scientists, to study in detail the state of the lake, to determine the volume of water accumulated in the artificial reservoir, its quality with a view to using it for agricultural needs, especially for the needs of the crops grown in this area.

The water can also be used on lands that are resistant to salinization, and the work can be intensified to develop fisheries, animal breeding, in particular, camel breeding in areas adjacent to the lake.

This project is estimated at several billion US dollars.

The collector-drainage discharges formed within the Mary, Akhal and Balkan regions previously accumulated in the lowlands of Karakum sands, flooding and, among other things, reducing the desert pastures. (Trend)

Pakistan on Track to Eradicate Polio in 2019

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani officials say the country is on track to eradicate polio in 2019 despite Taliban attacks and superstition that has spurred many parents in the region bordering Afghanistan to refuse to vaccinate their children against the crippling disease.

Dr. Naima Abid says authorities told visiting head of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, that Islamabad is taking measures to make Pakistan polio-

free by the end of 2019. The WHO chief visited Islamabad on Tuesday and met with Prime Minister Imran Khan. He visited Kabul before coming to Pakistan.

In 2018, Pakistan reported only eight new polio cases, compared to 306 in 2014.

The WHO often helps Islamabad launch anti-polio campaigns. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria are the three countries in the world where polio is still endemic. (Agencies)

Turkey to Co-Op with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan in Several Spheres

TASHKENT - Turkey will cooperate with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in several spheres, Trend reports with reference to Resmi Gazete newspaper.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ratified agreements on cooperation in the field of culture with Uzbeki-

stan, as well as on cooperation in the fields of sports and culture with Kyrgyzstan. "The agreement between Ankara and Tashkent was signed on April 30, 2018, and the agreement between Ankara and Kyrgyzstan was signed on April 9, 2018," the report said. (Trend)

Military Help UK Police Respond to Heathrow Drone Threat

LONDON - Britain's armed forces were supporting police Wednesday at London's Heathrow Airport after a drone sighting led to the suspension of all departing flights for nearly an hour on Tuesday.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said the military had been sent to Europe's busiest airport at the request of police.

It follows a similar deployment at Gatwick Airport just three weeks ago after multiple drone sightings there caused three days of travel cha-

os. "Last night, at the request of Metropolitan Police, our armed forces deployed to assist and support them," he said in a statement Wednesday.

"Our armed forces are always there when needed, ready to support the civilian authorities with our capabilities."

Heathrow, which handles nearly 214,000 passengers daily, closed its northern runway after witnesses, including police officers, spotted a drone above the west London airport. (AFP)

Trump Insists on Steel Wall with Mexico in Prime-Time Speech

WASHINGTON - President Donald Trump used a prime-time address to the nation Tuesday to insist on \$5.7 billion for a steel wall along the Mexican border that he said would stop the shedding of "American blood" by illegal immigrants.

The nine-minute speech contained no concessions to Democrats refusing to fund construction of the wall - a project Trump has made his signature domestic policy idea.

The address also offered

no hope for a quick end to a government partial shutdown triggered by the row that has left 800,000 federal employees without pay.

However, Trump did steer away from earlier predictions that he might announce a national emergency, which would have given him the power to authorize the wall project without congressional approval, likely triggering an even deeper political crisis.

Trump spoke in an unusually measured voice, apparently hoping to claim



the moral high ground, and said he wanted to bridge the political divide in what could be the defining power struggle of

his turbulent presidency. "I have invited congressional leadership to the White House tomorrow to get this done. (AFP)

Russian Involvement? 'Nein': Massive Leak of German Politicians' Data Traced



BERLIN - It took German authorities two days to make an arrest over the massive leak of domestic politicians'

personal data. And it seems there is no Kremlin connection involved, despite expectations to the contrary.

In December, two now-blocked Twitter accounts were used to publish links to caches of personal data of German politicians in the style of an advent calendar. Almost 1,000 public figures were targeted, including Chancellor Angela Merkel. The leaks however remained unnoticed until January, when they were reported by major media outlets.

While some speculated that the security breach may have been the latest 'Russian hybrid at-

tack on Western democracies', the reality seems to be much simpler.

On Tuesday, Germany's Federal Crime Office (BKA) updated the public on the investigation, which was launched on Friday and produced an alleged perpetrator on Sunday.

He is a 20-year-old student, who lives with his parents in the central state of Hesse, they said. The young man was detained and apparently confessed to leaking the data before being released. (RT)

Israel Ex-Minister to Get 11 Years for Spying for Iran

JERUSALEM - An Israeli ex-minister charged with spying for the country's arch-foe Iran has reached a plea bargain with prosecutors that will see him serve 11 years in prison, the justice ministry said Wednesday.

As part of the agreement, Gonen Segev will plead guilty to serious espionage and transfer of information to the enemy, the ministry said in a statement.

Segev's lawyers, Eli Zohar and Moshe Mazor, said in a statement

that as part of the deal a charge of treason was dropped.

"Indeed Mr. Segev had contacts with Iranians, but his motive was not 'to aid the enemy in time of war' - treason. That is why that offence was removed, inter alia, from the amended indictment.

"The amended charge sheet filed today and the plea bargain that was reached, returns this case to its natural and proper proportions," the Hebrew-language statement said. (AFP)

Japan Angry at Korean Court's Nippon Steel Decision, Seoul Urges Calm

TOKYO - Japan on Wednesday demanded talks with South Korea over a Korean court compensation award against a Japanese company for using forced laborers during World War Two, saying all such claims were settled decades ago.

South Korea, for its part, called for calm. Ties between the Asian neighbors have been frosty since the court ruled in October that Nippon Steel & Sumitomo Metal Corp should pay 100 million won (\$90,500) to each of four South Korean plaintiffs. (Reuters)

Pro-EU Lawmakers Try to Speed UK Government's Plan B on Brexit

LONDON - Several pro-EU lawmakers mounted a bid on Wednesday to force Britain's government to return to parliament in three days with a plan B for Brexit if Prime Minister Theresa May's deal to leave the European Union is voted down next week.

Lawmakers from the governing Conservative Party and opposition Labour Party have put forward a so-called amendment in parliament which would force it to offer alternatives to her deal in three days rather than the planned 21 days.

Some local media and lawmakers quoted sources as saying the speaker of parliament had accepted the amendment, meaning it would be voted on. The office of speaker John Bercow declined to confirm that he had accepted the amendment. (Reuters)

Building Boom Turning to Bust as Turkey's Economy Slows

MUDURNU (Turkey) - Deep in a provincial region of northwestern Turkey, it looks like a mirage - hundreds of luxury houses built in neat rows, their pointed towers somewhere between French chateau and Disney castle.

Meant to provide luxurious accommodations for foreign buyers, the houses are however standing empty in what is anything but a fairytale for their investors.

The ambitious development has been hit by regional turmoil as well as the slump in the Turkish construction industry - a key sector - as the country's economy heads towards what could be a hard landing in an intensifying downturn.

After a long period of



solid growth, Turkey's economy contracted 1.1 percent in the third quarter, and many economists expect it will enter into recession this year.

The country has been hit by high inflation and a currency crisis in August. The lira lost 28 percent of its value against the dollar in 2018 and markets are still unconvinced by the readiness of the government under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

to tackle underlying economic issues. The villas close to the town centre of Mudurnu in the Bolu region are intended to resemble European architecture and are part of the Sarot Group's Burj Al Babas project. But the development of 732 villas and a shopping centre - which began in 2014 - is now in limbo as Sarot Group has sought bankruptcy protection. (AFP)

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Meets with U.S. Troops, Iraqi Leaders on Iraq Visit

CAIRO - U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Iraq on Wednesday, where he met with American troops and Iraqi leaders to reassure them about a U.S. military withdrawal from Syria and warn that Iran remains a regional security threat.

The visit, which U.S. officials declined to confirm until Pompeo left Iraq, came on the second day of a tour also taking in Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman. (Reuters)