UK Labour Leader Calls for Black Channel to Islamic State

BELGRADE - British opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn has called for a permanent ban on Britain’s private airlines to Afghanistan.

The Labour leader told the BBC on Sunday that a black channel to the Islamic State (IS) group in Afghanistan was “a stitch-up”.

He said: “It is absolutely disgraceful that the US and UK governments have been allowing our citizens to travel to Afghanistan.

“People who have been to Afghanistan say that there is a danger of getting involved in conflict or worse.

“But the UK government and US administration have been allowing our citizens to travel to Afghanistan.

“The Labour Party is clear: we want a permanent ban on our citizens travelling to Afghanistan.”

Serbia PM Calls for Early Parliamentary Vote with EU in Mind

BELGRADE - Serbia’s Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic on Sunday called for early parliamentary elections in the country.

Vucic, who is also the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), has been a strong advocate for Serbia’s closer relationship with the European Union (EU).

He said: “I believe that the Serbia-EU dialogue should be continued.

“The dialogue should be continued with the aim of achieving a common strategy for both countries.”

The SNS controls a majority in parliament and the Prime Minister has been under pressure to hold early elections.

Vucic’s call during a meeting of his party’s leadership in Belgrade comes two years before the next parliamentary elections are due under the constitution.

His conservative, pro-EU Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) holds an absolute majority in parliament and the Prime Minister has been under pressure to hold early elections.

In order for early elections to happen, the prime minister must dissolve parliament.

(More on P.4/12)

Somali Extremists Say They Captured Some Kenyan Soldiers

MADAGASCAR - The Somali Islamist extremist group Al-Shabab on Sunday said that it had captured some Kenyan soldiers during its latest attack on a base of African Union peacekeepers.

The group claimed that its fighters had killed two Kenyan soldiers and wounded two others.

The operation, which took place in the town of Badme in the north of Somalia, was part of a wider offensive by Al-Shabab to disrupt the peacekeeping mission.

Al-Shabab, which is fighting to overthrow the internationally-backed government in Mogadishu, has been blamed for a series of attacks on African Union peacekeepers in recent months.

The group has said that it wants to “isolate” the Somali government and “finish off” its foreign supporters.

(More on P.4/23)

Myanmar’s Peace Process to be Continued Next Government Term

NAY PYI TAW - The five-day first Myanmar Union Peace Conference ended on Saturday in Nay Pyi Taw, setting the unfinished discussions to be carried on in future similar conferences in the next government which will take office at the end of March.

Current Vice President SaiMauk Kham Paw drive peace process during the conference.

He said: “The peace process is a long-term process and we need to continue it.

“Political peace is not the only solution to the conflict.

“We need to find a political solution that is acceptable to all parties.”

Peshawar Schools Closed After Taliban Attack Rumours

ASHABAT - The authorities of Turkmenistan have put schools and the capital Ashabat on alert.

The government had earlier announced that it would “take all necessary measures” to ensure the safety of students and staff.

It is not clear what the alert is for, but local media reported that there had been a shooting incident at one of the schools.

(More on P.4/20)

EU Officials to Visit Iran in February to Develop Energy Ties

BRUSSELS - The European Union will undertake a first “political mission” in February to visit Iran and discuss the possibility of developing energy ties.

An EU official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said around 15 officials from the bloc planned to go on the initial four-day technical visit and one high-level EU Commission official, who did not want to be named, said on Saturday that the EU is willing to develop “comprehensive energy ties” with Iran.

In particular, he mentioned the development of a long-term gas pipeline and the potential for the EU to invest in the country’s oil and gas sector.

(More on P.4/28)

Air Strikes Kill 46 Civilians in IS’s Facto Capital in Syria

ANKARA - The US-led coalition against Islamic State (IS) group in Syria announced on Sunday that air strikes had killed 46 civilians in the IS-held city of Raqqah.

The US-led coalition said that it had targeted an IS command center in the city, which it said was responsible for a “large-scale massacre”.

The coalition said that it was unable to confirm the number of civilian deaths, but added that it had caused “serious damage”.

(More on P.4/22)

Obama Declares Emergency in Michigan Over Water Contamination

WASHINGTON - President Barack Obama declared a state of emergency in Michigan over the contamination of lead-tainted drinking water in Flint.

The declaration on Thursday came after a string of reports and media investigations that revealed high levels of lead in the city’s water supply.

Obama said: “The health impacts of lead are well known, and that’s why this urgent step was necessary.

“Today, I am ordering all federal agencies to take immediate action to protect the health and safety of the citizens of Flint.”

(More on P.4/19)

Foreign Monitors Under Fire in East Ukraine: OSCE

KIEV - Western monitors of Ukraine’s tattered truce have been facing increasing criticism for their ability to provide a clear picture of the situation on the ground.

The OSCE mission in Ukraine, which is charged with monitoring the conflict, has been criticized for its lack of transparency and for not providing enough information on the ground.

(More on P.4/10)

Turkey’s Opposition Leader Calls for Reelected Depend Poll Defeat

CIPAR - Turkey’s opposition leader at a rally on Sunday called for a new election in the country.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the current prime minister and leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), has been re-elected in the June 7 election.

But the opposition Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) has refused to accept the results, saying that it was “stolen”.

(More on P.4/11)

Serbia’s Call to End Fatwa on Jerusalem

VIENNA - Serbia has called for an end to the “fatwa” against Jerusalem.

Serbian Prime Minister Mladen Vukic said on Sunday that the fatwa was “an expression of anti-Semitism”.

He said: “We call on the international community to support our call for an end to the fatwa against Jerusalem.”

(More on P.4/21)

Turkey’s EU Bid: Stamp out the Habit

The European Union (EU) has announced plans to stamp out the use of cigarettes in Turkey.

The EU said in a statement that it would support Turkey’s efforts to reduce the number of smokers and to increase the number of those quitting.

Turkmenistan’s bid to stamp out the habit comes after the country announced plans to increase taxes on tobacco products and to introduce new laws regulating the sale of cigarettes.

(More on P.4/20)