

UK Labour Leader Calls for Back Channel to Islamic State

LONDON - British opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn says there should be a communications channel created with the Islamic State group in hopes of ending the war in Syria.

The Labour leader told the BBC on Sunday that a back channel - similar to the one created with the Irish Republican Army during the decades-long conflict in Northern Ireland - should be established. Corbyn says "There has to be a



route through somewhere," particularly given that some IS commanders are former officers in the Iraqi Army.

He says "there has to be some understanding of where their strong points are, where their weak points are."

Corbyn also reiterated his long-standing opposition to Britain's Trident nuclear deterrent and suggested that submarines could be deployed without nuclear warheads on them.(AP)

Air Strikes Kill 40 Civilians in IS's De Facto Capital in Syria

DAMASCUS - Air strikes against the de facto capital of the Islamic State (IS) group in northern Syria killed 40 civilians on Sunday, a monitor group reported. At least eight children were among those killed by the air strikes against the northern city of al-Raqqa over the past 24 hours, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The UK-based watchdog group said the air raids were not known whether

er they were Russians or Syrians.

It added that small diners and shops were targeted in the strikes.

The opposition count couldn't be independently verified.

Al-Raqqa in northern Syria has been self-declared by the IS as the capital of the so-called "caliphate." U.S.-led air strikes and Russian ones as well as Syrian warplanes usually strike IS positions in that city. (Xinhua)

Turkey's Opposition Leader Reelected Despite Poll Defeat

ANKARA - The head of Turkey's main opposition party was reelected to the post despite a bruising defeat by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party in November elections.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the only candidate, received 990 votes out of 1,238 at a congress of his Republican People's Party (CHP) on Saturday, Turkish media reported.

Kilicdaroglu, a 67-year-old former civil servant, has lost all the elections he has taken part in since

he was chosen as head of the party for the first time in 2010, when he replaced former leader Deniz Baykal who was sunk by a sex tape scandal.

In the November 1 general elections, the CHP, the party of modern Turkey's secular founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, garnered just 25 percent of the vote compared to 49 percent for Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), which won back the parliamentary majority it had lost



five months earlier. In a speech to the congress on Saturday, Kilicdaroglu

condemned Erdogan as a "type of dictator" who has ... (More on P4)...(18)

Foreign Monitors under Fire in East Ukraine: OSCE

KIEV - Western monitors of Ukraine's tattered truce reported Sunday that they had come under fire during an assessment of the situation in the war-torn east of the former Soviet state. An Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) vehicle was hit with small-arms fire in an area controlled by Ukrainian forces fighting pro-Russian separatists, monitors said on the organisation's website. The incident, which did not cause any casualties, oc-



curred Saturday close to Mariinka, a town some 20 kilometres (12 miles) southwest of de-facto

rebel capital Donetsk. Three OSCE observers accompanied by a paramedic and a translator

were visiting the area in two armoured vehicles to assess damage to ... (More on P4)...(19)

Obama Declares Emergency in Michigan over Bad Water: WH

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Barack Obama declared a state of emergency in Michigan on Saturday and ordered federal aid for state and local response efforts in the county where the city of Flint has been contending with lead-contaminated drinking water.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder had asked the president to declare both an emergency and an expedited major disaster in Genesee County to protect the safety of Flint

residents. Obama is authorizing the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate disaster relief efforts there, the White House said in a statement.

The action is being taken to "lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe in Genesee County," it said.

Snyder sent the Michigan National Guard to distribute bottled water and other supplies in the area earlier this week. A ... (More on P4)...(20)

Pope Welcomes 5,000 Migrants in Rome Prayers

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis on Sunday welcomed 5,000 migrant worshippers at a special mass at St Peter's to mark the world day of migrants and refugees, urging them to treasure their "culture and precious values".

"Your presence here at this square is a sign of hope in God. Don't let yourselves be stripped of this hope and joy of living," he said at the close of his weekly Angelus prayer.

Francis has repeatedly called on European states to welcome people fleeing war and misery amid the continent's worst migrant crisis since World War II.

After the prayer, the pope hailed "with great affection the ethnic communities present" in the Vatican City and "the people who help and welcome" the migrants.

"Dear migrants and refugees, each of you carries a story, a culture and precious values," Francis said.(AFP)

Israeli PM Vows to Monitor Iran for Possible Violations of Nuclear Deal

JERUSALEM - Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his country would continue to monitor Iran, a day after the announcement of the implementation of the nuclear deal between world powers and the Islamic Republic.

"Israel would continue to monitor Iran's international violations of the nuclear agreement and the ballistic missiles agreement, as well as its involvement with terrorism," Netanyahu said on Sunday, at the start of a weekly cabinet meeting. The prime minister, a vocal opponent of the



deal between the P5+1 countries (Russia, China, the United States, Britain, France and Germany) and Iran, added that the international community must also keep a close eye on Iran and enact "grave sanctions" for any future violations. Netanyahu added that now that economic sanctions will be lifted from Iran, the country would increase its involvement with terrorism and aggressive behavior in the region, adding that "Israel is ready to face any ... (More on P4)...(21)

Myanmar's Peace Process to be Continued in 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 in a future similar conference in the next term of the government which will take office at the end of March.

Current Vice President Sai Mauk Kham underlined the peace conference as a peaceful exchange of views on agenda items and building trust among stakeholder groups.

He called for making great stride in building a democratic federal union that can ensure peace and prosperity and equality for the next generation.

During the final day of the conference on Saturday, the seven stakeholder groups submitted a set of discussions on the given agenda items to the conference for approval which cover political, security, economic and social issues, as well as issues related to land and natural resources. Four proposals were also submitted to the conference: to make efforts to finish the national-level political dialogue and the peace conference successfully within three to five years to be able to reach the union agreement; to convene the second union peace conference at appropriate time; to enable at least 30 percent participants at different levels of political dialogue under the dialogue framework of the Nationwide Cease fire Accord (NCA) to be women; and to honor those who have participated in the peace process.(Xinhua)

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 so that the country can "be ready to join the European Union" by 2020.

Vucic's call during a meeting of his party's leadership in Belgrade

comes two years before new elections are due under the constitution.

His conservative, pro-EU Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) holds an absolute majority in parliament with 158 of 250 seats.

In order for early elections to happen, the prime ... (More on P4)...(22)

Somali Extremists Say they Captured some Kenyan Soldiers

MOGADISHU - The Somali Islamic extremist group al-Shabab said on Sunday that it had captured some Kenyan soldiers during its attack Friday on a base of African Union peacekeepers in southwestern Somalia.

On Sunday four wounded Kenyan soldiers were airlifted back home but Kenyan officials gave no death toll. President Uhuru Kenyatta confirmed on Friday that some soldiers had been

killed in the attack, which involved suicide car bombs and gunmen.

Kenyan Defense Secretary Rachel Omamo told reporters Sunday that there is an ongoing search, rescue and recovery operation in the area where the attack happened.

"The operation area remains dangerous, volatile and fluid, and our soldiers still remain at risk," she ... (More on P4)...(23)

Neighbor News

Peshawar Schools Closed after Terrorist Attack Rumours

PESHAWAR - Parents spent a restless Saturday as rumours of possible terrorist attacks on schools circulated in the provincial capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Peshawar, and urban areas and thus, forcing most headmasters to close educational institutions much early.

The panicked parents rushed to the schools to pick their children recalling the Dec 2014 Army Public School militant attack, which killed 144 students and staff members.

Sources said the district administration had di-

rected the headmasters of some government and private schools located in the cantonment area, Nothia and Gulberg to close their campuses for one day (Saturday) insisting there were reports of possible terrorist attack on them. They said the directives were not meant for the entire district.

"Under a coordinated plan, the decision of school closure was taken by district administration, police and security agencies," an officer privy to the development told Dawn. (Agencies)

EU Officials to Visit Iran in February to Develop Energy Ties

BRUSSELS - The European Commission will undertake a first "technical assessment mission" in February to explore energy ties with Iran following the lifting of international sanctions, European Climate and Energy Commissioner Miguel Arias Canete said on Sunday.

Late on Saturday, the European Union, the United Nations and the United States lifted sanctions on Iran, opening the door to closer EU-Iran energy cooperation.

The EU executive is particularly keen to develop Iranian supplies as an alternative to Russia, whose powerful role as a source of EU oil and gas has divided the bloc. "A first technical assessment mission in the field of energy to the country

(Iran) will take place at the beginning of February," Arias Canete said in a statement.

An EU official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said around 15 EU officials would go on the initial four-day technical visit and after that, high-level Commission staff, possibly with a business delegation, would travel to Iran.

Arias Canete said potential areas for cooperation included all areas of energy -- nuclear, oil, gas, renewable energy and energy efficiency.

In particular, he mentioned developing liquefied natural gas and also pipeline shipments through a route the European Union refers to as the "Southern Gas Corridor" to carry supplies into southern Europe as an ... (More on P4)...(24)

Beijing, Riyadh Share Great Potential for Cooperation: Chinese Envoy

RIYADH - Though Saudi Arabia is the last among the Arab nations to set up diplomatic ties with China, the two in recent years have made notable progress in building up their relations, said Beijing's envoy to Riyadh.

Li Chengwen, Chinese ambassador to Saudi Arabia, made the remarks in a recent interview with Xinhua prior to an incoming visit to the kingdom by Chinese President Xi Jinping later this month.

He said recent years have witnessed constant high-level exchanges, fast-growing trade ties as well as intensive cultural and people-to-people interactions between the two sides.

President Xi visited Saudi Arabia in 2008 when he was the vice president, while former Chinese President Hu Jintao visited the country in 2006 and 2009 respectively.

Saudi Arabia's late King Abdullah visited China both as the crown prince and after he succeeded the throne. King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud visited Beijing in 2014 as the heir to the crown.

"Such high frequency of high-level visits has shown the strong willingness for the two nations' leaders to promote bilateral ties," Li said. The two countries' economic and trade cooperation has also been quite dynamic these years. (Xinhua)

Turkmenistan Bans All Cigarettes and Holds Mass Burning in Bid to Stamp out the Habit

ASHGABAT - Thousands of cigarettes have been publicly burned in Turkmenistan as the president, a former dentist, embarks on a campaign to stamp out smoking.

State television in the secretive and authoritarian Central Asian nation broadcast imag-

es of village elders and diplomats looking on as blocks of cigarettes were shovelled into a stove on Friday.

Officials said the cigarettes were seized after being illegally smuggled into Turkmenistan, where smoking is legal, but strongly discouraged. (Agencies)