

Obama, World Leaders Head to Saudi Arabia to Offer Condolences

RIYADH - U.S. President Barack Obama will visit Saudi Arabia on Tuesday to meet its new King Salman after the death of his predecessor Abdullah on Friday, testimony to Riyadh's important role in energy markets and the fight against Islamist militancy.

Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron, French President Francois Hollande and Japan's Crown Prince Naruhito will visit on Saturday and Sunday to offer condolences.

Obama will cut short a visit to India to pay his respects instead of Vice President Joe Biden, who had been scheduled to fly in from Washington, the White House said on Saturday. Muslim lead-

ers paid their respects on Friday at Abdullah's funeral in Riyadh. Some international human rights groups, meanwhile, have called on Western leaders to condemn Saudi Arabia's record of crushing dissent and depriving women and foreign workers of rights instead of praising its late king.

Salman takes charge in Saudi Arabia at a time of deep uncertainty in the kingdom, surrounded by a region in tumult and nervous about both Iranian influence and the spread of Islamist militancy.

The kingdom's role in orchestrating Arab support for joint action against the Islamic State group has won praise in Washington, while its

role as biggest oil exporter is particularly important at this time of market instability.

Saudi jets have bombed IS targets in Syria, its top clerics have issued repeated denunciations of the militant group despite similarities between its ideology and Wahhabism, and the police have detained thousands of militant suspects in the past decade.

Salman pledged on Friday to maintain the kingdom's policies and kept most of Abdullah's cabinet, including the oil, finance and foreign affairs ministers, in place.

Western countries also value the kingdom as an important market for their defense industries and Salman quickly moved to appoint his



son Prince Mohammed, 35, as his own successor as Defence Minister, responsible for big arms contracts.

Saudi Arabia observes no official period of mourning, in keeping with the ascetic traditions of its official Wahhabi school of Sunni Islam, but the royal court has announced

that it will receive condolences and pledges of allegiance until Sunday.

Late on Friday state television showed princes, Wahhabi clerics, tribal chiefs, military leaders, major businessmen and other dignitaries crowding the royal palace to kiss King Salman's shoulder or hand.

The king's rapid appointment of half-brother Muqrin, 69, as Crown Prince and nephew Mohammed bin Nayef, 55, as Deputy Crown Prince, appeared to resolve for many years to come speculation that succession disputes might destabilize the ruling family. (Reuters)

Syrian Forces Killed 117 Qaeda Militants

DEMASCUS - Syrian government forces have engaged foreign-sponsored militants during separate military operations in the country's volatile southern regions, killing more than 100 terrorists.

A military source, requesting anonymity, said Syrian troops killed 47 members of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front in Mashara village of the strategic southwestern province of Quneitra, situated some 60 kilometers (37 miles) south of the capital, Damascus, on Saturday, Syria's official news agency, SANA, reported.

Another 40 terrorists were killed in a fierce exchange of fire between a group of armed men and Syrian army soldiers in the village of Ibtat, in the southwestern Dara'a Province.

Syrian government troops also killed 30 for-



eign-backed militants in the town of Da'el, also in Dara'a, on Saturday.

Over 200,000 people have been killed in the crisis in Syria over the past nearly four years, according to reports. New figures show that over 76,000 people, including thousands of children, lost their lives in Syria last year alone.

Over 7.2 million Syrians have also become internally displaced due to the ongoing Syrian crisis, according to the UN.

ISIL Takfiri militants, with members from several Western countries,

control some swathes of Syria and neighboring Iraq, and have been carrying out horrific acts of violence such as public decapitations and crucifixions against all communities, including Shias, Sunnis, Kurds, and Christians.

Syrian troops have so far managed to make significant gains in the fight against the terrorists. The Iraqi army, backed by pro-government tribes, Shia volunteers and Kurdish Peshmerga forces, has also gained grounds in battles against ISIL members. (Press TV)

ASEAN to Declare Single Market but Delays Deeper Integration: Malaysia

DAVOS - ASEAN will officially call itself a single market by year's end, but "big things" like seamless travel within the 10-nation bloc would only come in 2020, Malaysia's trade minister told AFP in an interview.

"We're going to declare ourselves as an ASEAN Economic Community," said Mustapa Mohamed, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the Southeast Asian bloc this year.

"We don't have complete integration or harmonisation yet, 2015 is laying the stage for bigger things to come," he said on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos. "We're going to get almost there by 2015 but the big things like seamless travel... would come in 2020.

"What's important is that we're committed, I'm not saying that we're backtracking," added the minister.

The Southeast Asian bloc, a market of about 600 million people, had set 2015 as a deadline for integrating the region's vast economies into a single European Union-style market, with tariffs abolished and free movement of skilled workers.

But there is much scepticism that the targets could be met, as the bloc

is made up of countries in vastly different stages of economic development. Myanmar, for instance, is just opening up its economy after decades of isolation over its outright military rule which came to an end in 2011.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Singapore, which ranks among the world's richest nations.

Mustapa acknowledged that it would only be "in 2020 that you'll see more progress in ASEAN economic integration" in term of the abolishing of non-tariff barriers, and flow of skilled labour.

By year's end, there will be "freer movement of goods and services but not free movement of goods and services."

The business community has been pushing political leaders to move faster on integration, but Mustapa said the ASEAN model is gradual.

"The business community wants ASEAN to be integrated as one entity. The fact is that there are

border issues, customs, immigration, and different regulations," he said. In addition, there is little understanding among the general public on how a single market can change their lives, said the minister. "Some fear that they would be robbed of their jobs, that come December 2015, I'll be out of job because my Malaysian friend is coming over," he said. "We need to do a lot more in terms of communication." Asked if Europe's recent economic woes over heavily indebted member states like Greece had put off integration plans, Mustapa said that "from day one, we know that we're not going to adopt the EU model". (AFP)



Egypt Court Orders Retrial for 37 Brotherhood Members

CAIRO - An Egyptian court ordered a retrial for 37 Muslim Brotherhood members sentenced to death and 115 others sentenced to life in a mass trial last year, judicial sources said on Saturday.

The 152 were initially sentenced last March at a trial of more than 500 defendants, some tried in absentia. The proceedings lasted only a few

days and were widely criticized by Western governments and human rights groups. They will face a retrial for carrying out attacks during clashes that erupted in the southern province of Minya after the forced dispersal of two Muslim Brotherhood protest camps in Cairo on August 14, 2013, when hundreds were killed.

The Brotherhood was protesting at the removal of President Mohamed Mursi after he was ousted by the military following mass protests against his rule. The original trial last year in Minya also saw 377 sentenced in absentia. Those sentenced in absentia automatically receive retrials when they turn themselves in, according to Egyptian law. (Reuters)

Kurdish Forces Take Control of Southern Kobani

the Levant (ISIL) Takfiri terrorists in the Southern parts of the border town of Kobani.

The People's Protection Units (YPG) who have been fighting for over four months against ISIL are now in control of many parts of Kobani.

The YPG forces took control of Seida district, Al-Sharia school, Al-Sanaeh district, Mashte Nour hill and Tarmak village in the surrounding areas of Kobani town.

The Kurdish forces also killed 24 ISIL militants in heavy fighting. Earlier this month, senior commanders in Syria said the Kurdish forces had gained control over 90 percent of the border town of Kobani, underlining that the town will be fully liberated from ISIL control in the coming days. "The main parts of Kobani are under the control of our forces and we will see liberation of Kobani and restoration of full security to the town in the next few days," the commander told FNA.

He noted that the Kurdish fighters are now controlling more than 90 percent of Kobani after three months of clashes with ISIL terrorists. (FNA)

US, Allies Conduct Air Strikes in Syria and Iraq

WASHINGTON - The United States and its coalition partners have launched another round of air strikes against Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria, conducting 26 strikes since early Friday.

In a statement on Saturday from the Combined Joint Task Force leading the military operation, officials said 13 strikes hit in Syria and also 13 hit in Iraq.

In Syria, 12 air strikes targeted Islamic State positions near Kobani. In Iraq, five strikes hit near Mosul and five near Tal Afar, the statement said. (Reuters)

UN Security Member Killed By Unknown Gunmen

TRIPOLI - A security staff of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to Libya was shot dead by unknown gunmen in Libya's Tripoli on Saturday, said local security sources. A number of armed men carried out "a lightning attack" in the front of the UNDP headquarter in Libya, killing a diplomatic police, a security source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity.

"They shot the security man inside their car and then sped off," the security source said, adding that nobody knows their identities. The UNDP

had withdrawn its staff months ago, and only some security staff were left to guard the building. It is not immediately known if the UNDP was the intended target.

The capital Tripoli is under control of the Islamist armed alliance Libya Dawn, which has been warring against the Libyan army since July.

The security conditions in the North Africa country has been plagued by assassinations, kidnappings and armed robberies since the removal of the former leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. (Xinhua)

15 Killed By Rebel Shelling in Ukraine: Interior Ministry

KIEV - Fifteen people were killed in shelling in the east Ukrainian port city of Mariupol on Saturday, Ukraine's interior ministry said, an attack Kiev blamed on separatist rebels and the Russian military.

A witness described the shelling to Reuters as enough to knock the paint off his house.

The deaths follow the separatists' rejection of more peace talks and as fighting surged to its most intense in months. The United Nations said on Friday 262 had been killed in the previous nine days.

Government-held Mariupol, on the Sea of Azov, lies on a coastal route from the Russian border to Crimea, which was annexed by Russia from Ukraine last March.

The city council said rockets fired by rebels from long-range GRAD missile systems struck a multi-story building and caused fires to break out.

Oleksander Turchynov, secretary of Ukraine's national defense council, described the incident as "another bloody crime against humanity com-

mitted by the Russian military and the bands of terrorists under their complete control," in an online statement.

The attack started in the early morning, 76-year-old pensioner Leonid Vasilenko, who lives in the eastern suburbs of Mariupol, said by telephone. "The walls were shaking, the window frames were shaking, paint started to crumble off the house. I hid in the basement. What else can you do? I took the dog and the cat. In the basement you could hear the earth tremble," he said.

The interior ministry said 15 people had been killed and 76 injured. Separatists denied responsibility for the attack, news agency Interfax reported.

Despite international calls for a ceasefire, rebel leader Alexander Zakharchenko vowed on Friday his forces would push on with a new offensive, as the UN said the conflict, which began in east Ukraine more than nine months ago, was now in its "most deadly period" since a peace deal was agreed last September. (Reuters)

Neighbor News

China's Silk Road Strategy Draws Interest from Over 50 Countries: Official

HAIKOU - China's initiative to build the Silk Road economic belt and the 21st century maritime Silk Road has received interest from more than 50 countries, an official said Saturday.

He Yafei, deputy head of the overseas Chinese affairs office of the State Council, made the remarks at a conference in the southern-most island province of Hainan.

Along the belt and road are many developing countries with a combined population of 4.4 billion and an annual economic output of 2.2 trillion U.S. dollars. Given complementary industrial structures, the economic belt has strong growth potentials, He said.

With huge forex reserves and more frequent uses

of the yuan in trade settlement, China could offer low-cost financing to the countries which participate in the drive, he said. The countries should seek consensus on cooperation and step up cooperation in fields like infrastructure, tourism, energy and finance, he said. China's initiative gives new impetus to regional integration and offers rare growth opportunities for businesses, said Ong Chong Yi, minister counselor at the Malaysian Embassy in China.

The belt and road initiative was put forward by President Xi Jinping during his overseas visits in 2013. The program reminds people of the ancient Silk Road that set a paradigm for interaction among nations. (Xinhua)

TTP Commander Arrested in Balochistan's Harnai

QUETTA - Security forces arrested three suspected militants, including a Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) commander, in Balochistan's Harnai district on Saturday.

An intelligence officer, who declined to be named since he was not authorized to speak to media, told Dawn that security forces conducted a raid in Harnai and arrested the three.

He said the forces acted on an intelligence report in relation to the presence of TTP militants in the area. Security forces also recovered arms and ammunition from the possession of militants. "Initially, the militants resisted," he said, adding

that later more personnel were called to arrest the men.

The arrested militants were being interrogated by security agencies.

Security forces have launched a crackdown against militants operating in northern Balochistan and other parts of the province in the wake of the deadly Taliban assault on Peshawar's Army Public School on Dec 16, which left 150 people, including more than 130 schoolchildren dead. Dozens of militants have been arrested during the ongoing crackdown in Zhob, Loralai, Sanjavi and other parts of Balochistan. (Monitoring Desk)

Karimov Speaks to Uzbekistan's Parliament

TASHKENT - Tashkent played host for the joint session of the Legislative Chamber and Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov took part in the meeting.

Among those attending the meeting were members of the Cabinet of Ministers, heads of government agencies and public organizations, representatives of the diplomatic corps and international organizations accredited in our country, reporters of local and foreign mass media.

The session was chaired by Nurdinjon Ismoilov, Speaker of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis.

After they approved the agenda, deputies and senators considered the appeal of Uzbekistan's Cabinet of Ministers to lay down its powers before the newly elected Oliy Majlis.

President Islam Kari-

mov delivered a keynote speech before the participants of the joint meeting. Speaking afterwards, leader of the parliamentary group of the Movement of Entrepreneurship and Businesspeople - the Liberal Democratic Party of Uzbekistan Sodiqjon Turdiev, Deputy Chairman of the Writers' Union of Uzbekistan for youth issues - Senator Ikbol Mirzaaliev, leader of the parliamentary group of the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan Hatamjon Ketmonov, director of the Tashkent Professional College of Information Technologies - Senator Agrepina Shin, leader of the parliamentary group of the Milli Tiklanish Democratic Party of Uzbekistan Sarvar Otamuratov, director of the Nukus branch of Tashkent Pediatric Medical Institute - Senator Oral Ataniyazova expressed support for the provisions unveiled in the speech by the head of our state. (Agencies)

Iran to Reciprocate Us Sanctions with Giant Progress in N. Activities: Larjani:

TEHRAN (FNA)- Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larjani warned against the US congress decision to impose new sanctions against Tehran, saying any new pressure by Washington will be reciprocated with a leap in Iran's nuclear activities.

"If the US congress imposes new sanctions, certainly, it will regret the path it has paved and of course, they will face Iran's leap in nuclear technology and this is possible for the Islamic Republic of Iran," Larjani said in a joint

press conference with his Georgian counterpart Davit Usupashvili in Tehran on Saturday.

Noting that Iran has shown flexibility and determination to settle its nuclear standoff with the West during the talks with the Group 5+1 (the US, Russia, China, Britain and France plus Germany), he said the differences between the US administration and the congress are not related to Iran and the US officials should be able to control the situation. (FNA)