

India Displays Military Might at Republic Day Parade

NEW DELHI - India on Tuesday displayed its military might at its 67th Republic Day parade in the national capital, with French President Francois Hollande as the chief guest.

The parade started in the morning under unprecedented security that included deployment of 5,000 policemen and 15,000 para-troopers, anti-aircraft guns and around 1,000 snipers amid terror threats.

The Indian Army, Indian Air Force and the Indian Navy displayed their tanks, guns, air craft and models of warships



and submarines on Raj Path, an iconic road at the heart of the national capital. Indian President Pranab Mukherjee took salute from the passing forces at the parade, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the French president looked on. Tableaux of various Indian states were put on display, alongside the military, as the nation glued on to TV sets to watch the celebrations. Though the parade this year was shorter as there were fewer marching contingents, a contingent of French soldiers added to the colours of celebrations. The marching contingents were led by the French 35th Infantry Regiment that was deployed in India between 1781 and 1784. (Xinhua)

EU Allocates 11.5 Mln Euros for Survey Programs of Plant Pests

BRUSSELS - The European Union (EU) is expected to commit close to 11.5 million euros (12.5 million U.S. dollars) to support the survey programs for plant pests in 22 member states in 2016, said the European Commission in a press release on Tuesday. A large part of the budget, about 15 percent, would be dedicated to the survey of xylella fastidiosa, one of the most dangerous plant bacterium in the world, and which has been affecting olive trees in Apulia, Italy since 2013. Moreover, an

equally high budget will go toward the survey of pinewood nematode, a microscopic worm which attacks coniferous trees and that could lead to the devastation of Europe's pine forests. The EU has supported the implementation of survey programs in member states with the view to contribute to a high level of health for plants along the food chain since 2015, said the press release. Timely identification of plant pests at a national level and detection of new emerging risks... (More on P4)... (18)

Syrian Army fully Captures Strategic City in Southern Region

DAMASCUS - The Syrian army took full control over a strategic city in the southern province of Daraa, as part of the wide-scale offensive the government forces backed by allied troops have recently been achieving on several fronts.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said on Tuesday that the military forces backed by Iranian officers and fighters of the Lebanese Hezbollah Shiite group as well as Russian air cover succeeded to take full control of the key city



of Sheikh Miskeen in the countryside of Daraa, following the large-scale offensive unleashed by the Syrian forces on Dec. 28 of last year. The battles are now focused in the vicinity of the city between the Syrian army and an array of jihadist groups, mainly the al-Qaida-linked Nusra Front, added the Observatory. Amid the ongoing intense battles, many militants... (More on P4)... (19)

Poland will Veto Forced Relocation of Migrants: Minister

WARSAW - Poland will veto any plan by the European Union that would oblige member states to accept set numbers of migrants, the nation's interior minister said Tuesday. Last year, Poland and other countries in the region opposed a plan to redistribute over 120,000 migrants from Africa and the Middle East among the EU members. Warsaw agreed to accept no more than 7,000 asylum-seekers, but not economic migrants, by the end of 2017.

Mariusz Blaszczak said that Poland would veto any new relocation plan that would impose quota of migrants to be accepted, saying such a plan would encourage more arrivals.

Poland says that the migrants should be helped outside Europe, at refugee camps close to their home countries.

Some 53 percent of Poles are against accepting any migrants, while 41 percent are for offering them temporary shelter



only, according to a poll released Tuesday by the CBOS survey center. Only four percent of respondents said Poland should allow migrants to settle permanently. The poll conducted Jan. 7-14 on 1,063 adults has margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points. ... (More on P4)... (20)

Syria Opposition Meets in Riyadh, Casts Doubt on Talks

AMMAN/BEIRUT - The Syrian opposition cast doubt on whether it would go to peace talks planned for Friday, throwing U.N. diplomatic efforts into question as it accused the United States of adopting unacceptable Iranian and Russian ideas for solving the conflict.

The Saudi-backed opposition was meeting on Tuesday to decide whether to attend the talks which U.N. envoy Staffan de Mistura aims to open in Geneva on Friday, ushering in months

of indirect negotiations between delegates in separate rooms. Opposition official Asaad al-Zoubi told Arabic news channel Al-Hadath that he was pessimistic, though the final decision would be taken at the opposition meeting in Riyadh. De Mistura was expected to issue invitations on Tuesday. "It's going to be very low-key proximity talks," U.N. spokesman Ahmad Fawzi told journalists in Geneva. The Syrian government, which is clawing back... (More on P4)... (21)

Russia Urges for Including Kurds in Syria Talks

MOSCOW - Russia on Tuesday argued strongly against Turkey's demand to keep a leading Kurdish group out of Syrian peace talks, and said it expects the U.N. envoy to resist "blackmail" by Turkey and others, reflecting sharp differences that remain ahead of the talks. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also denied allegations that Moscow had urged Syrian President Bashar Assad to step down and could offer him political asylum. He specifically shrugged off reports last week claiming that Russia's military intelligence chief had traveled to Damascus to try to persuade Assad to go. Lavrov said there was no point in such a trip as Assad visited Moscow in the fall and had extensive talks with President Vladimir Putin. "No one has asked for or offered any... (More on P4)... (22)

German SMEs Look to Refugees to Alleviate Skilled Labor Shortage

BERLIN - German small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) considered a lack of skilled workers as their biggest challenge, and looked to the influx of refugees to alleviate the shortage, according to a survey published on Tuesday.

More than two thirds of SMEs, the backbone of German economy, found it difficult to recruit qualified skilled workers, leaving 360,000 vacancies unfilled, the survey by Ernst & Young (EY) on 3,000 German SMEs found. They calculated that revenue losses due to the labor shortage amounted to nearly 46 billion euros (about 49.8 billion U.S. dollars) a year. "The skills



shortage threatened the German SMEs, especially in rural areas, for a long time," said EY Partner Peter Englisch. According to the survey, 55 percent of German SMEs expected that refugees coming into Germany would contribute to alleviate the shortage of skilled workers. Some 85 percent said they were ready to hire refugees. "Many people who are young and willing to learn come to Germany. It could revive the labor market," Englisch said. In 2015, nearly 1.1 million refugees entered Germany. A similar number of them were expected to arrive this year. Economists said the influx of refugees would benefit Europe's biggest economy as it would boost consumption and government spending for accommodating the new comers. (Xinhua)

Vatican Says Iran Now Called on to Combat Terrorism

VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis met with the Iranian president Tuesday, joining in a cordial discussion which touched on the recent nuclear accord and Iran's role in the region.

President Hassan Rouhani met first with Francis, privately for 40 minutes, and later with other officials. The Vatican in a statement said the conversation delved into the nuclear accord recently taking effect and "the important role that Iran was called to play" to combat terrorism along with other countries in the region.

Rouhani was also urged to help fight arms trafficking, the Vatican said. The Vatican described the talks as "cordial" and said "common spiritual values were highlighted," as well as good Iranian-Vatican relations. After the meeting, Iran's president asked Pope Francis to pray for him. The Vatican meeting was a key part of an Iranian effort to take a more prominent place on the world stage after a nuclear deal with Western powers.

Rouhani's visit to the Holy See saw the first meeting between a pope and an Iranian president since 1999. Iran, which agreed to limit its nuclear activities in exchange for an end to economic sanctions, is eager to carve out a bigger role in mediating Middle East conflicts. Francis' papacy has emphasized mediation and conflict resolution, including his role in helping Cuba and the United States to normalize their relations after. (AP)

Canada Discriminated Against Aboriginal Children: Tribunal

OTTAWA - Canada discriminated against aboriginal children by underfunding welfare services on reserves, a human rights tribunal ruled on Tuesday, in a decision that could affect the way Ottawa funds the education, health and housing for indigenous Canadians. The ruling

comes nearly nine years after aboriginal groups opened a human rights complaint against Ottawa over its funding formula for child welfare on reserves, and adds to a litany of problems in the relationship between the nation's 1.4 million aboriginals... (More on P4)... (23)

Russian Air strikes have Transformed Situation in Syria: Lavrov

MOSCOW - Air strikes by the Russian military in support of forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad have helped turn the tide in Syria, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday. Lavrov said that the Russian air force's strikes had "really helped to turn around the situation in the country, helped towards reducing the territory

controlled by terrorists" since Moscow launched a bombing campaign at Assad's request on September 30. Russia's top diplomat also denied reports that Russia had asked long-time ally Assad to step down and offered him political asylum. "This is not true," Lavrov said of media reports that Russia's late military... (More on P4)... (24)

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Pakistan Province closes all Schools Citing Cold, not Security

LAHORE - Pakistan's most populous province has ordered schools shut for five days and told 22.5 million students to stay at home - not because of security fears after gunmen attacked a university but because of cold weather, an official said on Tuesday.

Punjab province Education Minister Rana Mashood Ahmad Khan said a large number of children were catching flu and pneumonia as temperatures fell to as low as four degrees Celsius (39.2°F) in the capital, Lahore, and a severe shortage of gas left schools unable to heat themselves.

"Two days ago, parents

complained about the harshness of weather and diseases to children," Khan told Reuters.

"The meteorological office, too, told the government that the wave of extreme cold would continue for another three to four days. We took all stakeholders in confidence and made the decision to announce holidays."

Khan denied that the province's more than 100,000 government and private schools were shut because of militant threats, despite recent warnings that militants were planning to attack educational institutions. (Reuters)

China Urges United Efforts on Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue

BEIJING - China on Tuesday called for concerted efforts from relevant parties to push the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue back on the right track.

"Realizing denuclearization of the peninsula and safeguarding peace and stability there are not just China's business, but need concerted efforts from all sides," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said at a daily press briefing.

Hua made the comments when asked to respond to some U.S. officials' comments targeting China over the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue.

"We hope and urge relevant countries can take their due responsibilities, truly play a constructive role and work with Chi-

na to push the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue back on the right track at an early date, instead of pointing fingers at others," Hua said. One important reason difficulties arise and six-party talks have been temporarily stalled is that certain relevant countries have failed to do that, she said, referring to "pulling concerted efforts together."

The six-party talks were launched in 2003 with the aim of solving the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, but stalled in December 2008. The DPRK quit the talks in April 2009. The six-party talks include China, the DPRK, the Republic of Korea, the United States, Russia and Japan. (Xinhua)

Boosting Middle East Economy is way to Beat Extremism: Iranian President

ROME - Generating economic growth in the Middle East is crucial to defeating extremism, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on Tuesday, putting forward his country as a regional trade hub and pillar of stability.

Rouhani is on a four-day trip to Italy and France, looking to rebuild Iranian relations with the West some two weeks after financial sanctions on Tehran were rolled back following the implementation of its nuclear deal with world powers. Italy announced some 17 billion euros (\$18.4 billion) of

business deals with Iran on Monday. Mega contracts are also in the offing in France, reflecting EU countries' keenness to cash in on the diplomatic thaw with the Islamic Republic.

Underscoring the growing warmth, Rouhani said he expected Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to visit Iran in the coming months to help boost bilateral economic alliances. "We are ready to welcome investment, welcome technology and create a new export market," Rouhani told a business forum on the second... (More on P4)... (25)

Tajikistan to Toughen Measures Against Illegal Foreign Currency Transactions

DUSHANBE - Tajikistan plans to toughen measures against illegal foreign currency transactions.

In a report released at a news conference in Dushanbe, Jamshed Nourmahmadzoda, the head of the National Bank of Tajikistan (NBT), revealed that they propose to make illegal foreign currency transactions punishable by up to nine years in jail.

"The NBT specialists together with representatives of other government bodies are currently working on appropriate amendments to the country's legislation," Tajik central bank

head said. According to him, they also propose to increase fines for unauthorized currency exchanges.

"We are forced to introduce new measures to prevent illegal foreign currency transactions," Nourmahmadzoda noted. Meanwhile, despite all measures being taken by Tajik authorities, the Tajik national currency, the somoni, has continued depreciating against the dollar due to impact of economic crisis in Russia, which is one of the main trading partners of Tajikistan and the main country of destination for Tajik labor migrants. (Asia-Plus)