

EU Draft Would Extend Russia Sanctions over Ukraine Escalation

BRUSSELS - The EU has prepared a draft statement for the foreign ministers of its 28 members to agree to extend sanctions against Russia by six months, add new people to the sanctions list and prepare new measures. Foreign ministers have called an extraordinary meeting for Thursday after a new advance by pro-Russian rebels. Kiev says 30 civilians were killed in shelling of the Ukrainian government-held port of Mariupol by pro-Russian rebels on Saturday, shattering a five-month ceasefire. "In view of the worsening situation, the Council (of foreign ministers) agrees to extend the restrictive measures targeting persons and entities

for threatening or undermining Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity ... until September 2015," draft conclusions for the meeting, seen by Reuters, said. The statement was referring to asset freezes and travel bans put on dozens of Ukrainians and Russians since Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula last March. The ministers will also ask the EU's executive Commission and its diplomatic service to draw up a list of further names that could be put under sanctions, for a decision within a week, the draft statement said. Ministers will pledge to closely follow the situation on the ground and to

"act accordingly". They will ask officials to carry out more work "on any appropriate action, in particular on further restrictive measures, aiming at ensuring a swift and comprehensive implementation" of a truce deal signed last September in Minsk, which Western countries accuse Moscow of violating. A decision on further economic sanctions on Russia is likely to be left to EU leaders who next meet on Feb. 12. The draft statement noted evidence of continued and growing support given to the separatists by Russia, saying it underlined Russia's responsibility for the conflict that has already killed more than 5,000 people.



Russia denies direct involvement in the conflict. Kiev and NATO say Moscow has sent thousands of troops to fight alongside pro-Russian rebels, as well as arming and funding them. Forging a unanimous policy on Russia has been tricky for the European Union, and one wild

card could be Greece, whose newly elected leftist Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has complained about Brussels speaking on Russia without consulting him first. Greece's new foreign minister said he would not comment on Greece's position ahead of Thursday's meeting. A govern-

ment spokesman said the issue was not discussed at a meeting of the new cabinet.

According to the draft, EU ministers will call on Russia to condemn the actions of the separatists and implement the Minsk deal. The most urgent goal was ending ... (More on P4)... (18)

Russian FM Urges Kiev to Keep Neutral Status

MOSCOW - Ukraine must maintain its neutral status so as to prevent further division of the war-torn country, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said. "In order to prevent the further disintegration of Ukraine, it is essential that the country retain its neutral status," Lavrov told the Serbian magazine Horizons, which was published Wednesday. Lavrov criticized the United States and its Western allies for their "attempts to impose

their own will across the world" and blasted NATO for its "empty words" of not expanding eastward. "NATO's infrastructure has continuously drawn closer to Russian borders," Lavrov claimed. The minister said he was disappointed that the task of creating a common space of peace, security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area has not been accomplished despite Russia's repeated calls. Lavrov said West's trend of ignoring Russia's in-

terests culminated in the Ukraine crisis. He said that attempts to put pressure on Russia through unilateral and illegitimate sanctions will not make the country forgo what it thinks is right and just. As the article, titled "Russia's priorities in Europe and the world," was published, U.S. Treasury Secretary Jack Lew was touring Kiev, where he said his country will "continue to work with our allies to increase the pressure on Russia." (Xinhua)

Syrian Meeting in Moscow Should Help Peace: Lavrov

MOSCOW - Russia's foreign minister says Moscow consultations between representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition should help pave the way for a peaceful settlement. Sergey Lavrov told participants of the meeting that support for Syria as a sovereign, united and secular state could be the basis for moving toward a compromise.



He said Wednesday that the parties should focus on working out confidence-building measures between the government and the op-

position, negotiating local cease-fires, removing obstacles to humanitarian aid deliveries and freeing prisoners. Russia, which has staunchly backed Syrian President Bashar Assad throughout the nearly four-year

civil war, hoped that hosting the consultations could help raise its international profile amid tensions with the West over Ukraine. Top opposition groups have refused to attend the consultations. (AP)

Greek PM Outlines Priorities of New Govt.

ATHENS - The New Greek government is ready to restore the debt-laden country's prestige, people's dignity and social justice, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras told the first Cabinet meeting on Wednesday. Acknowledging the tough road ahead and the pressure of high expectations of Greek people, Tsipras said that the new government intends to radically change the way the country has been ruled for decades. The government's first priority is to address the humanitarian crisis, said

the prime minister, noting that after the 2009 debt crisis and the painful austerity and reform program introduced under the bailout agreements with lenders, Greece has led developed countries in poverty among children. Another priority is to restart the economy by supporting debt-ridden enterprises to stand on their feet, stimulating growth and creating new jobs to tackle record high unemployment, Tsipras said. He added that the government is ready to

move ahead with a four-year comprehensive national plan of reforms, investment and development which would not lead to new deficits. The third priority is to renegotiate with lenders on collaboration after the expiry of the bailout in late February this year. Meanwhile, Tsipras also pledged to fight corruption and create a fair and stable tax system. Tsipras, leader of anti-bailout SYRIZA party, was sworn in on Monday as Greece's new prime minister. (Xinhua)

Women Empowerment, Ebola, Security Top AU Summit Agenda

ADDIS ABABA - The African Union (AU) Commission said African leaders are expected to dwell upon challenges such as women empowerment, Ebola outbreak and security faced by the continent at the upcoming AU summit in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa. Erastus Mwencha, Deputy Chairperson of the

AU Commission, told the media on Wednesday the year of 2014 was busy for Africa with challenges including among others, the Ebola outbreak, huge drop in commodity prices, and extremism by the Boko Haram group. While launching the Agenda 2063, the summit will be dwelling upon issues related to the Ebola epidemic and Boko

Haram among others, which Mwencha said are challenges to the African continent. Agenda 2063, a framework developed to give a roadmap on how to transform Africa's economies in the next 50 years, will be accompanied with 10-year programs, according to Mwencha. He said that the Agenda 2063... (More on P4)... (19)

Bahrain's Most Senior Opposition Leader Goes on Trial

MANAMA - Bahrain's top opposition leader went on trial on Wednesday on charges of promoting the violent overthrow of the political system, a case that has riled his followers and inflamed unrest in the Sunni-ruled Gulf Arab state. Sheikh Ali Salman's detention after a protest rally in December sparked violent demonstrations in Bahrain, with protesters throwing iron bars and stones at security forces who fired tear gas, rubber bullets and bird shot. Washington, a close ally of Manama, has expressed its concern over Salman's arrest. Al-Wefaq Islamic Society, of which 49-year-old Salman is secretary-general, has called for civil disobedience in response to the trial.

Appearing in court on Wednesday, Salman denied all the charges and said he had been calling for reforms in Bahrain through legal and peaceful means, according to defense team member Mohamed Ahmed. Sheikh Salman also said he had conveyed this position to King Hamad and Crown Prince Salman in person, according to

Ahmed. The prosecution has accused Salman of promoting the overthrow of the political regime by force, inciting violence against the kingdom and supporting attacks that caused the deaths of 14 policemen. If convicted, he faces up to 10 years in jail under Bahraini law, Ahmed said. He also faces three other, lesser charges, including inciting hatred and insulting the Interior Ministry.

The kingdom, which hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet, has been in turmoil since an uprising erupted in 2011. Mass protests, led by majority Shi'ite Muslims demanding reforms and a bigger role in government, were put down with the help of Saudi Arabia. The court adjourned until February 25 and ordered Salman to remain in jail, rejecting the defense team's request to release him until the next hearing, his lawyers said. Since the authorities quelled the 2011 revolt with Saudi support and help from other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council but sporadic unrest has continued. (Reuters)

Israel Fires into Lebanon, Killing UN Soldier

JERUSALEM - Israeli forces were attacking southern Lebanon from the sky and ground on Wednesday, amid steep escalation in the volatile border, killing a Spanish UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) soldier, officials and local media said.

The Lebanese Shiite organization Hezbollah assumed responsibility for an earlier missile attack Wednesday, which targeted an Israeli military convey near the border. The attack killed and wounded an unconfirmed number of soldiers. Shortly afterwards, Israel fired at least 50 artillery shells into southern Lebanon and later also launched an air strike, a military spokesperson said in a statement.

"In response to Hezbollah attacks today, a short while ago, the Israel Defense Force (IDF) responded with combined aerial and ground strikes at Hezbollah operational positions," the spokesperson said. Later, mortar shells were reported to hit an Israeli military position and a house in the Arab Druze village of Ragar in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. (Xinhua)

36 Killed in Attacks and Clashes with IS Militants

BAQUBA - A total of 36 people were killed in attacks and clashes with the Islamic State (IS) militants in Iraq's eastern province of Diyala on Wednesday, security sources said.

Heavy clashes erupted when Iraqi security forces and Shiite militias attacked IS militants hiding in Himreen mountainous area in northeast of Baquba, Diyala's provincial capital, some 65 km northeast of Baghdad, leaving at least 20 IS militants killed, Lieutenant General Jamil al-Shimari, the provincial police chief, told Xinhua.

The military operation in Himreen based on intelligence reports said that dozens of IS militants were hiding in caves and narrow valleys after they were driven away from the villages of Mansouriyah area in northeast of Baquba that were freed from the extremist militants by the security major offensives recently, al-Shimari said. Separately, the security forces and Shiite militias repelled an attack in the early hours of the day by the IS militants on the dam in Udham area, some 80 km north

of Baquba, leaving at least nine IS militants killed, including two suicide bombers, head of the security committee of the provincial council Sadiq al-Husseini told Xinhua. A soldier and two Shiite militiamen were killed, along with wounding three soldiers and three militiamen, al-Husseini said. Also in the province, two suicide bombers wearing explosive vests were shot dead in north of Baquba, while a police officer and a policeman were killed and two others wounded when a booby-trapped house in Shirween area in northeast of Baquba detonated when the police forces entered during a search operation, a provincial police source told Xinhua. Diyala's attacks came two days after al-Shimari and Hadi al-Ameri, a leading figure in the powerful Shiite party Badr Organization confirmed that the whole province is now freed from IS militants. However, Ameri said that "individuals from IS militants are now separately hiding in some orchards and hideouts, but they will be hunted down by the security forces." (Xinhua)

Nieghbor News

China to Push Exports of Railway, Nuclear Power Products

BEIJING - China's State Council, the cabinet, on Wednesday announced plans to push exports of advanced railway, nuclear power and building material products.

In a notice on gov.cn, the cabinet said government departments and enterprises should facilitate China "going global", by increasing international trade, investment cooperation and pushing for domestic economic restructuring.

China's outbound investment reached 102.89 bil-

lion U.S. dollars last year, up 14.1 percent from a year earlier, ascending to the world's net capital exporters for the first time. China will support enterprises in steel, textile and building material sectors to develop the industrial chain to export not only China's products, but also its technology and standards.

The government will aid enterprises with foreign exchange reserves to finance them "going global" through stocks or bonds issuance. (Xinhua)

Iranian Nation Not to Bow to Pressures: Rohani

TEHRAN - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani underlined that the country will no way surrender to the pressures exerted by the world powers and will continue the path of progress with no pause or hesitation.

"With its enthusiastic and more extensive presence and partnership in this year's ceremonies of the Ten-Day Dawn (marking the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution on February 11, 1979), the great Iranian nation will show this year, like the past, that it is not exhausted under the pressures exerted by others and it will not bow," Rouhani said, addressing a cabinet meeting in Tehran on Wednesday.

He underlined that the Iranian nation will continue its progress and development through his

government's efforts and guidelines of Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei. In relevant remarks in 2013, Rouhani underscored that sanctions on Iran by the West couldn't undermine the country's resolve, adding that the Iranian nation was determined to resist against political and economic pressures.

"The West must understand that it will not achieve success through sanctions and pressures against the Iranian nation," the Iranian president said. "If the West uses the language of logic, reason and mutual interests on an equal footing, the Iranian administration is also ready to respond in the language of wisdom, prudence and logic," Rouhani underlined. (FNA)

Uzbekistan to Diversify Agricultural Production

TASHKENT - The Uzbekistan government's program for development of the agricultural sector in 2015-2019 provides for gradual decrease in the area under cotton, one of the main export items of Uzbekistan, with those land to be subsequently used to grow vegetables and potato, and plant fruit orchards, Uzbek media reported.

The government plans measures for further selection of new high-yield salt- and drought-resistant sorts of cotton and grain crops. In cooperation with Claas, Lemken and other leading international companies, Uzbekistan will organize production of modern tractors, cotton and grain harvesters, and other agricultural machinery.

During the next five years, the Uzbek government plans to improve the fertility of 1.4 mil-

lion hectares of irrigated farmland and increase crop yields by construction of new and reconstruction of existing irrigation facilities and the use of the latest energy-saving equipment.

An important task is to continue introducing the latest water-saving technologies, including drip irrigation systems for fruit orchards and vineyards. It will help to save up to one billion cubic meters of irrigation water per year. Another important task is to increase processing of agricultural produce through 391 planned investment projects. It is planned to build more than two thousand refrigerating facilities capable of storing at least 1.3 million tons of fruit and vegetables, with this capacity to be increased up to two million tons. Agricultural logistics will also be developed. (Agencies)

US Drone Strike Kills Seven in North Waziristan

PESHAWAR - At least seven suspected militants were killed and one other was injured in a US drone strike in the Shawal area of North Waziristan Agency on Wednesday.

Intelligence sources said the US drone fired two missiles on a compound and a vehicle on the border of North and South Waziristan Agency in Shawal valley.

The identity of the militants is yet to be ascertained. Drone attacks are widely unpopular across Pakistan and according to survey conducted in June last year, 66 per cent of the country's citizens oppose these strikes.

North Waziristan is among Pakistan's seven tribal districts near the

Afghan border which are rife with insurgents and are alleged to be strongholds of Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives, among others.

Pakistan's military in June 2014 had launched an all-out operation, named 'Zarb-i-Azb', against Taliban militants in the region. The operation was initiated following a brazen militant attack on Karachi's international airport and failure of peace talks between the government and Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) negotiators. The offensive has driven out over 800,000 residents from North Waziristan and the army says it has cleared 90 per cent of the tribal region. (Monitoring Desk)