

Ukraine's Military Reports Significant Fall in Fighting

KIEV - Ukraine's military said on Saturday there had been a significant decrease in attacks by pro-Russian separatists in the east overnight, but said rebels had fired GRAD missiles at the town of Avdiivka despite a two-week-old ceasefire deal.

On Friday, Ukraine reported the first deaths among its servicemen in three days, underscoring the fragility of the truce meant to have taken effect on Feb. 15, as government troops and rebels pulled back heavy weapons from the frontline.

Overnight there was a "significant decrease in attacks in general and a full ceasefire in certain parts of the conflict zone," the military said on its Facebook page. It said the truce had been most fully observed around the rebel-controlled city of Luhansk and near government-held Mariupol on the Sea of Azov.

Kiev feared the port city and industrial hub could become the next rebel target after they humiliated government troops by seizing the strategic town of Debaltsevo after the truce was meant to have



come into force. The Ukrainian military reported isolated attacks by rebels on government positions, including strikes from GRAD missiles around government-held Avdiivka, north of rebel-held Donetsk and home to one of Europe's largest coke plants. Fighting in Ukraine's industrialized east has devastated the steel sector, which before the conflict erupted last April accounted for 15 percent of the economy. Both government troops and separatists said they continued withdrawing heavy weapons from the front line, "point two" of the peace agreement aimed at ending the conflict which has killed more than 5,600. (Reuters)

British PM Cameron Vows to Hunt down 'Jihadi John'

LONDON - British Prime Minister David Cameron vowed on Friday to use all means at his disposal to hunt down militants such as "Jihadi John" after the killer was identified as a Kuwaiti-born computer programming graduate from London. The black-clad militant brandishing a knife and speaking with an English accent was shown in videos released by Islamic State (IS) apparently decapitating hostages including Americans, Britons and Syrians. "When there are people anywhere in the world who commit appalling and heinous crimes against British citizens, we will do everything we can with the police, with the security ser-

vices, with all that we have at our disposal to find these people and put them out of action," Cameron said. Cameron refused to comment on the identification of "Jihadi John" as 26-year-old British militant Mohammed Emwazi, but said that people should get behind the security services, which he praised as impressive and dedicated to defending Britain. Emwazi was known to the security services, which had tried to recruit him, according to prisoners' group Cage. The case has sparked debate about whether the security services let him slip through their grasp to join IS in Syria. Dressed entirely in black, a balaclava covering ... (More on P4)... (25)

Nieghbor News

China Reiterates Support for Palestine

BEIJING - Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao on Saturday reiterated China's backing for the just cause of the Palestinian people, and called for peace talks between Palestine and Israel. Li made the remarks as he met with a delegation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) headed by Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri. Li said China would continue to support the cause, and understand and support Palestine's aspiration to join the international community as a state. "[We] hope Palestine and Israel will continue working toward a resolution through peace talks," said the vice president. China will continue to enhance communication with the Middle East and work with the countries involved toward an inclusive and just resolution to the Palestine issue. Shukri said he appreciated China's long-standing and firm support and looked forward to China playing a bigger role in the issue. (Xinhua)

Sharif to Visit S. Arabia Next Week

ISLAMABAD - Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will visit Saudi Arabia next week to meet the new king. A brief statement from the Prime Minister's Office said that Mr Sharif would travel to Saudi Arabia on "a special invitation" from King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud. The reason for the sudden invitation was unclear. Also read: PM Nawaz meets Saudi crown prince Mr Sharif travelled twice to the kingdom in January, once to inquire about the health of former King Abdullah and then to attend his funeral. He held extensive talks with then Crown Prince Salman on bilateral relations, Middle East situation and issues facing the Muslim world. The issue of financing terror groups in Pakistan by some Saudi entities was also raised. Know more: Gen Raheel meets with Saudi political, military leadership Saudi Arabia is recently facing intense criticism in Pakistan because of alleged terrorism funding from there. (Monitoring Desk)

Sanctions Serious Hurdle to N. Deal: Iranian FM

TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif underlined that Tehran and the six world powers (the US, Russia, China, Britain and France plus Germany) have made progress and are at a sensitive stage in their nuclear talks, but the issue of sanctions has become a stumbling block. "The nuclear negotiations have arrived at a sensitive stage. We had highly good, detailed and precise talks last week," Zarif said in a joint press conference with his Italian counterpart Paolo Gentiloni in Tehran on Saturday. Noting that considerable progress has been made ... (More on P4)... (27)

Massive Rockfall Blocks Dushanbe-Khorog Highway

DUSHANBE - A massive rockfall has blocked the Tajikistan's Dushanbe-Khorog highway in the Darvoz district of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). The rockfall occurred on the 374th kilometer of the highway from Dushanbe to Khorog yesterday at around 3:00 pm, an official source at the Committee on Emergency Situations and Civil Defense (CES) told Asia-Plus in an interview. Approximately 200 vehicles reportedly stuck in both sides of the rockfall. Fortunately no injured was reported, according to the source. "Blast works are needed to clean the road but the threat of a big piece of rock crashing into the road still makes road-cleaning works and rescue operations impossible," the source added. (Asia-Plus)

Ocalan Calls for Disarmament of Kurdish Fighters

ANKARA - Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the pro-independence Kurdish fighters in Turkey, has called on his followers to lay down their arms.

A Kurdish lawmaker of the Turkish parliament on Saturday read a message from Ocalan, in which the jailed leader called on members of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) to hold a disarmament meeting.

"As we are ushering the 30 years of conflict towards permanent peace, it is our primary goal to reach a democratic solution," Ocalan said in the historic message.

Sirri Sureyya Onder, who is a member of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), read the message in a joint press conference with Deputy Prime Minister Yalcin Akdogan.



It was the first time in Turkey that a message by Ocalan was read live on the television and in the presence of a senior Turkish official, a clear gesture that the government in Ankara is taking a long step in resolving the decades-old hostilities with the Kurdish minority. "I'm calling on the PKK to hold an extraordinary congress in spring to make a strategic and historic decision on disarmament,"

Onder (pictured below) quoted Ocalan as saying, Ocalan, who is jailed in the prison island of Imrali on the Marmara Sea, is regarded as the most outspoken figure of a Kurdish insurgency in which more than 40,000 people have been killed since 1984.

He made a similar call for ceasefire in 2013 after months of secret negotiations with Ankara. But efforts ... (More on P4)... (23)

IS Fighters Attack Samarra Ahead of Army Offensive

BAGHDAD - Islamic State suicide bombers and fighters struck targets on Saturday in the northern Iraqi city of Samarra, where security forces and their Shi'ite militia allies have been gathering for an offensive against the radical Sunni militants.

Security sources and residents said the attack on Samarra was launched at 5:30 am (0230 GMT) when two Islamic State suicide bombers blew up their cars in the

northern area of Sur Shnas. At the same time a man drove a Humvee rigged with explosives into the south of the city and detonated it, while Islamic State fighters attacked security forces to the west with sniper fire, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades.

Medical sources said Samarra hospital received the bodies of 14 Shi'ite militia fighters and policemen. Residents reported seeing

black smoke over parts of the city and hearing powerful explosions. After heavy clashes in the morning, the fighting appeared to have subsided by the afternoon. Thousands of troops and fighters from Shi'ite militias known as Hashid Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) have gathered around Samarra for a campaign to drive Islamic State out of nearby strongholds on the Tigris River, ... (More on P4)... (24)

Egyptian Court Lists Palestinian Hamas Movement as Terror Group

CAIRO - An Egyptian court on Saturday designated the Palestinian Islamic movement Hamas as terrorist organization, Egyptian state TV reported.

The Cairo Court of Urgent Matters made the ruling after an Egyptian lawyer filed a lawsuit last November, calling for banning Hamas and classifying it as a terror organization.

The lawsuit argued that Hamas, an offshoot of Egypt's blacklisted Muslim Brotherhood group, used illegal underground tunnels connecting Egyptian Rafah to its twin Palestinian towns to enter the country and smuggle weapons to attack Egyptian police and army personnel.

The lawsuit added that Hamas armed men are also accused of

carrying out terrorist attacks and killing over 30 people in late October 2014 as well as carrying out an armed jailbreak to free Brotherhood members during the 2011 Egyptian revolution.

On Jan. 31, the same court listed al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas as a terrorist organization, a decision coming days after a series of bloody attacks occurred in Egypt's restive Sinai Peninsula and killed at least 33 soldiers and policemen. In March 2014, the court ordered to ban all activities and offices of Hamas in Egypt, considering the Palestinian movement an offshoot of the Brotherhood.

Since the ouster of former Islamist President Mohammed Morsi in July ... (More on P4)... (26)

Investigation into Nemtsov's Death Pursues Several Lines

MOSCOW - The investigation into the death of Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov is pursuing several lines, the Russian Investigative Committee said Saturday. Among the lines, investigators are examining the possibility of an attempt to destabilize the political situation in Russia and the possible involvement of Islamic extremists, said the committee. "For now, the investigation is analyzing several theories, including murder as an act of provocation to destabilize the political situation in the country, and Nemtsov's personality could have been a kind of sacrifice for those who stop at nothing to attain their political ends," Vladimir Markin, spokesman of

the committee, was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency. Markin added that the possibility of Islamic extremist involvement is also being analyzed. "In fact, there is information that Nemtsov had received threats due to his position on the killing of Charlie Hebdo journalists in Paris in January," he said.

Moreover, the theory related to the internal situation in Ukraine is also under examination, the spokesman added.

Also, the committee does not rule out possible connections with Nemtsov's business activities or personal animosity. Meanwhile, eyewitnesses of the shooting are being questioned, according to the committee. (Xinhua)

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