

U.S., France 'On Same Page' Over Iran, Want Stronger Deal: Kerry

PARIS - The United States and France sought on Saturday to play down any disagreements over nuclear talks with Iran, saying they both agreed the accord now under discussion needed to be strengthened. "We are on the same page," U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters after talks with French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius in Paris. "If we didn't think that there was further to go, as Laurent said, we'd have had an agreement already," Kerry added. "The reason we don't have an agreement is, we believe there are gaps that have to be closed. There are things that have to be done to further strengthen this. We know this." The aim of the negotiations is to persuade Iran to restrain its nuclear program in exchange for relief from sanctions that have crippled its economy. Iran, a major oil exporter, wants the sanctions scrapped swiftly, the powers only in phases. France's Fabius said on Friday commit-



ments offered by Iran in the nuclear talks with six world powers do not go far enough and more work needs to be done, notably on what he called "volume, checks and duration". On Saturday, Fabius made clear that by volume he meant the number and quality of centrifuges Iran might be allowed to operate under any deal. By checks, he meant an inspection and verification regime to ensure Iran does not violate the deal. "There is still work to be done," said Fabius, whose government has positioned itself as more demanding on the conditions Iran must meet under any nuclear agreement. As well as the United States and France, the other world powers involved in the Iran negotiations are Britain, China, Germany and Russia. Western powers and Israel suspect Iran of having used its civil nuclear program as a cover to develop a nuclear weapons capability. Iran denies this, saying its nuclear program is solely for peaceful purposes such as generating electricity. (Reuters)

EU Shows Little Appetite for More Russia Sanctions

RIGA - EU foreign ministers showed little appetite on Saturday for stepping up pressure on Russia over Ukraine, preferring to give a fragile ceasefire a chance before deciding whether to apply more sanctions or even to extend existing ones. Most ministers at an EU meeting in the Latvian capital pinned their hopes on the latest Minsk agreement succeeding and said the EU should only consider tightening sanctions if the ceasefire was seriously violated, such as by a separatist offensive on the Ukrainian port of Mariupol. Both Kiev and pro-Russia separatists have accused each other of violence since last month's peace accord called for heavy weapons to be withdrawn from the frontline in east Ukraine. Italian Foreign Minis-



ter Paolo Gentiloni saw "encouraging signals" on the ground in eastern Ukraine. "At the moment we don't need either new sanctions or automatic renewals (of sanctions)," he told reporters. Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz agreed. "There is a glimpse of hope since Minsk ... We should do everything now to improve the situation and decide later

whether that improvement really happened and we can reduce the sanctions, or if we have to extend them," he said. The comments reflect divisions within the 28-nation EU over sanctions on Russia, the bloc's biggest energy supplier. While Britain, Poland and the Baltic states take a tough line, many other EU members, including Italy, Austria and Cyprus, are skeptical ... (More on P4)...(17)

Accept That Assad is here to Stay: Syria to West

NEW YORK - Syria's envoy to the United Nations said that it's time for the United States and other Western powers to accept that President Bashar al-Assad is here to stay, and to abandon what he suggested was a failed strategy of trying to split the Middle East into sectarian enclaves. Speaking to Reuters on the eve of the fourth anniversary of the Syrian war, Assad's long-serving U.N. ambassador Bashar Ja'afari said his president was ready to work with the United States and others to combat terrorism in the Middle East. "We don't want any vacuum in the country that would create chaos such as happened in Libya and Iraq and ... Afghanistan," he said. "President Assad can deliver because he is a strong president. He rules over a strong institution, which is the Syr-



ian army. He has resisted pressure for four years." "He is the man who can deliver any solution," he added. Britain and France have rejected calls to restore ties with the Assad government. U.S. officials say there is no shift in their policy regarding Assad, even as their focus is fighting Islamic State, an al Qaeda offshoot which is also an enemy of Damascus. "We have been open for cooperation (with the U.S.)," Ja'afari said. "They don't want it." Some European Union countries that withdrew their ambassadors from Syria are saying privately it is time for more communication with Damascus, diplomats said in February. Diplomats say the calls have come from or would be supported by countries including Sweden, Denmark, Romania, Bulgaria, Austria and Spain, as well as the Czech ... (More on P4)...(19)

Neighbor News

Chinese Leaders Stress Stabilizing Economic Growth

BEIJING - Chinese Premier Li Keqiang called Saturday for efforts to further streamline government administration and optimize the country's economic structure amid efforts to stabilize growth in the face of downward pressure. Li made the remarks during panel discussions with lawmakers from Jiangsu and Hebei provinces attending the annual session of the National People's Congress (NPC), the country's top legislature. Speaking with NPC deputies from Jiangsu, Li said the government should further streamline administration and delegate more powers to lower levels so as to give the market and society more play in promoting development. Mass entrepreneurship and innovation should be encouraged to achieve medium-high level of economic development, he said. He also urged common development of the central and western regions.

While attending the panel discussion with deputies from Hebei, Li said the province should explore a new path of development, nurturing emerging industries and phasing out outdated production capacity. He also called on coordinated development in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, emphasizing battle against pollution, which has raised public concern in recent years. Yu Zhengsheng, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, joined a panel discussion with NPC deputies from Taiwan. Noting achievements in last year's work on Taiwan affairs, Yu said the trend of peaceful development of cross-strait relations was not changed despite some new situations and problems. Yu urged both sides to unswervingly stick to the path of peaceful development and a shared political foundation as well as ... (More on P4)...(20)

Operations to Continue Until Militancy is Eliminated: Gen. Raheel

PESHAWAR - Pakistani Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif visited the Corps Headquarters in Peshawar on Saturday, where he was briefed on progress made in the ongoing

Zarb-i-Azb and Khyber-1 operations, Director General Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Major General Asim Bajwa said on his Twitter account. (Monitoring Desk)

Technical Ways Helpful in Removing Obstacles in Nuclear Talks: Iran

TEHRAN - Technical problems over Iran's nuclear program were removed in the talks between Iran and the United States, head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Ali-Akbar Salehi said Saturday. "We had faced a kind of deadlock in the negotiations over the technical issues," Salehi told state IRIB TV, adding that however, in the last two rounds of negotiations, "talks were very useful and we took good steps." He did not spell out the details of the talks over the technical issues, but he said "we proposed some technical ways to help remove the other party's concerns." The uranium enrichment activities of Iran, Arak heavy water plant, research and development activities of Iran in nuclear field and underground Fordow uranium enrichment facilities were on the agenda of the talks between Iran and the United States, Salehi said. The Iranian delegation to

the talks has been able to defend the national interests and the nuclear rights of the country as well as the achievements of the nuclear industry, he said. Earlier this month, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said that his country was ready to show further transparency concerning its nuclear program but did not accept conditions beyond that. Salehi and U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz joined the recent high level nuclear talks between Iran and the United States in Switzerland to discuss the technical details along with other issues relevant to Iran's nuclear program. Following the Feb. 22 talks in Geneva, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry also held a three-day discussion with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad-Javad Zarif in Montreux earlier this week. Both sides said that there was progress in the talks but some differences still remained over some issues. (Xinhua)

IS Advances on Strategic Town in Syria: Monitor

BEIRUT - Islamic State group jihadists launched a fierce assault Saturday in a bid to gain control of a strategic town in Syria's northeastern Hasakeh province, a monitoring group said. In Hama province, meanwhile, government forces conducted air strikes on an IS convoy, killing 26 jihadists, including a senior local commander, the Syrian Observatory for Human rights said. The IS offensive on the Hasakeh town of Tal Tamar "has advanced in several surrounding areas," Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP. "Kurdish fight-



ers supported by Assyrian militia have fought them off in Tal Nasri," just south of Tal Tamar, killing at least eight IS fighters, he said. Two civilians were also killed. Assyrian Christian fighters withdrew from some areas to Tal Tamar itself to join Kurdish forces

defending the town, said Osama Edward, head of the Sweden-based Assyrian Network for Human Rights. "This is the most violent offensive on the town in a long time," he told AFP. Since it began its onslaught in the province on February 23, IS has ... (More on P4)...(18)

Qatar Women Launch Start-Ups Despite Social Constraints

DOHA - Qatari women are increasingly defying social constraints and joining the workforce in the booming energy-rich country, which offers support for new enterprises and encourages start-ups by university graduates. They benefit from a national "Qatarisation" programme, which aims to increase the number of working citizens by guaranteeing them jobs and high wages in industry and government departments. The programme also helps people set up their own businesses in the small Gulf emirate. Maryam al-Subaiey, 28, started her own company, Q-Talent, which sells items "Made in Qatar."

"I was the director of programmes and creation at Qatar TV," she told AFP. "Before that I worked in marketing, and the ministry of foreign affairs. And I started several youth initiatives. So I just reached a point in my life where I wanted to create something that's my own." Former first lady Sheikha Moza bint Nasser al-Misnad, had played a major role in opening the way for women in the Gulf emirate. The mother of the emir, Sheikh Tamim, she chairs the Qatar Foundation, which specialises in education and culture, and runs an "Education City" that groups branches of a number of universities, including Georgetown, and also a "Science and Technology Park" in Doha. (AFP)

IS Destroying another Ancient Archaeological Site in Iraq

BAGHDAD - Iraqi officials in the northern city of Mosul said Saturday that militants with the Islamic State group have begun demolishing the ancient archaeological site of Hatra in northern Iraq in a push to rid its territory of symbols it says promote idolatry. An official with the ministry of tourism and antiquities' archaeological division in Mosul told The Associated Press that multiple residents living near Hatra heard two large explosions this morning, then reported seeing bulldozers begin demolishing the site. He spoke anonymously for fear of reprisal. Saeed Mamuzini, a Kurdish official from Mosul, told the



AP that the militants had begun carrying away artifacts from Hatra as early as Thursday and on Saturday, began to destroy the 2,000-year-old city. Hatra, located 110 kilometers (68 miles) southwest of the city of Mosul, was a large fortified city during the Parthian Empire and capital of the first Arab kingdom. The ancient city, a UNESCO world heritage site, is said to have withstood invasions by the Romans in A.D. 116 and 198 thanks to its high, thick walls reinforced by towers. (AP)

Obama in Selma for Milestone March's 50th Anniversary

SELMA - Tracing the footsteps of civil rights leaders who made his journey to the White House possible, President Barack Obama will on Saturday visit Selma, Alabama to enlist a new generation in their fight. America's first black president will mark the 50th anniversary of the fateful march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where brutal state suppression only catalyzed support for black voting rights. Accompanied by wife Michelle and daughters Sasha and Malia, Obama will argue that events in the city half a century ago are not confined to place or time. "Selma is not just about commemorating the past," Obama said on the eve of the visit. "It's about honoring the legends who helped change this country through your actions today, in the here and now." On March 7, 1965, some 600 peaceful activists were attacked by police with clubs and tear gas at the bridge, a seminal moment in America's democracy. (AFP)

Donetsk Republic Prepares Suggestions Kiev May Use to Implement Agreements on POW Exchange

MOSCOW - Authorities of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) have prepared suggestions Kiev may use to observe part of the Minsk agreements related to exchange of prisoners, the republic's envoy Denis Pushilin said in a statement on Saturday. In the statement published on the website of the Donetsk news agency, he said: "according to item 6 of the Complex of Measures, the exchange of prisoners of war on the all-for-all basis should be completed latest on the fifth day following withdrawal of heavy weapons, which is before 7 March." "The Ukrainian party has been keeping behind the bars at least 3,000 people related to events in our territories." This way, he said, the self-proclaimed republic "is

pushed to unilateral fulfillment of this item." "We are ready to treat with understanding the complicated situation the Ukrainian side is facing in settlement of this problem, and, from our side, we have drafted certain suggestions, using which the Ukrainian side may observe fully items 5 and 6 of the Complex of Measures. Those suggestions should be discussed at working groups in the Contact Group - on organisation of which we continue insisting from the very first days the Complex of Measures was signed," the statement reads. The official called on all participants and guarantors of the Minsk process to organise a meeting of the Contact Group "in order not to fail the process of settlement and to make constructive the ac-

tions on implementation of the Complex of Measures to implement the Minsk agreements." The Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine comprising representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE /Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/, adopted a memorandum on September 19, 2014 in Minsk. The document outlined the parameters for the implementation of commitments on ceasefire in Ukraine laid down in the Minsk Protocol of September 5, 2014. The nine-point memorandum in particular envisioned a ban on the use of all armaments and withdrawal of weapons with the calibres of over 100 millimetres to a distance of 15 kilometres from the contact line from each side. (TASS)