

Disagreements over Future of Assad Re-Emerge Ahead of Geneva Peace Talks

DAMASCUS/GENEVA

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem and representatives of the opposition on Saturday made diverging comments on whether to discuss the future of President Bashar al-Assad at the imminent peace talks in Geneva.

"We will not talk with anyone who wants to discuss the presidency... Bashar al-Assad is a red line," Moallem told a Damascus news conference. The opposition has insisted



that the removal of Assad is a must to end a prolonged civil war that has already killed more. In a fresh rendition of its... (More on P4)...(25)

U.S., France Say Syrian Government Trying to Spoil Peace Talks

PARIS - The United States and France accused the Syrian government of trying to disrupt a new round of peace talks set to begin on Monday and said Russia and Iran would need to show the Syrian government was "living up to" what had been agreed.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem said on Saturday that his government would not discuss presidential elections at peace talks in Geneva this week or hold talks with any party wishing to discuss the question of the presidency. "It's a provocation... a bad sign and doesn't correspond to the spirit of the ceasefire," French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault told a news conference with his British, German, Italian, U.S. and EU counterparts. Calling... (More on P4)...(26)

Nieghbor News

31 Killed in Rain-Triggered Accidents in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD - At least 31 people were killed and 47 others injured in separate rain-related accidents in Pakistan over the last three days, the authorities said Sunday. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) said in a statement that the country's south Balochistan province was the worst hit where 17 people were killed, 15 others injured and 48 houses collapsed in separate incidents caused by torrential rains. The northwestern tribal area of the country also received heavy rains which caused several accidents of roof collapse. The NDMA said that eight people were killed,

18 others injured and three houses collapsed in the heavy downpour in the area.

The authorities said that five laborers were killed and six others injured when a coal mine caved in due to landsliding caused by heavy rains in Orakzai area of the tribal belt.

Earlier media reports said that the coal mine accident left seven laborers killed and 10 others injured.

In the country's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, one man was killed, eight injured and two houses destroyed due to torrential rains. (Xinhua)

Syria Army Approaches Ancient City of Palmyra

DAMASCUS - The Syrian troops are approaching the ancient city of Palmyra in central Syria, pan-Arab al-Mayadeen TV reported on Sunday.

After capturing two points at the outskirts of the city a day earlier, the military forces have closed in on the ancient city of Palmyra, which fell to the Islamic State (IS) group last May. Meanwhile, a source told Xinhua that the government in Damascus is determined to recapture Palmyra. For his side, the

head of the Syrian antiquities department in Damascus, Maamoun Abdulkarim, told Xinhua that capturing Palmyra would be "the end of a nightmare" for this millennia-old oasis city in the eastern countryside of the central province of Homs.

Sources familiar with the situation told Xinhua that the army backed by air force from the nearby T-4 military airbase are trying to storm the ancient city from its western rim, close... (More on P4)...(27)

Libyan Presidential Council Demands Power Transfer to Unity Gov't

TRIPOLI - Libyan presidential council demanded for a transfer of power to the newly appointed UN-backed government of national accord, local media reported on Sunday. "The presidential council calls on all sovereign institutions of the Libyan state, mainly official financial institutions, to immediately start communicating with the government of national accord in order to make necessary arrangements for an organized and peaceful transfer of power," the council said in a



statement. The statement also demanded "the international community and regional and international institutions, mainly United Nations, Arab League, the

Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the African Union, and the European Union, to immediately stop dealing with any other executive authority that does not follow the government of national accord." The presidential council was named under a UN-sponsored peace... (More on P4)...(28)

Non-Interference Key to Solve 5-Year-Long Syrian Crisis

DAMASCUS - The Syria crisis, which is going to brace for its 5th anniversary on Tuesday, has become the most lasting and influential hotspot in the second decade of this century, bringing catastrophic consequences to the country and its people and profoundly affecting the surrounding areas and the wider world. Analysts say the crux of the long-running crisis is the foreign interference, which has made the situation in the country unusually complicated and stripped Syrians of the right to decide their

own fate. Massive anti-government demonstrations broke out in Syria on March 15, 2011 and gradually evolved into a civil conflict. According to data released by UN agencies, the chronic conflict has killed more than 250,000 people, with 6.6 million being internally displaced. During the civil conflict, the country has witnessed massive damage of infrastructure and houses, severe deterioration in public services as well as inadequate food supply. Around 13.5 million Syrians... (More on P4)...(29)

Obama 'Due in Britain in April' to Make Pro-EU Case

LONDON - US President Barack Obama will head to Britain next month and make the case for the UK to stay in the European Union, a British newspaper reported Sunday. The visit will take place towards the end of April, around two months before the June 23 referendum in which Britain will decide whether to leave or stay in the 28-country bloc, The Independent on Sunday said. A spokesman for Prime Minister David Cameron's Downing Street office refused to comment on the report,

calling it "speculation". Obama is heading to Germany in late April to talk trade with Chancellor Angela Merkel and promote US exports at the Hannover fair, said to be the world's largest for industrial technology, which takes place April 25 and 29. In February, Obama spoke with Cameron by phone and "reaffirmed continued US support for a strong United Kingdom in a strong European Union," according to the White House. Washington has long backed Britain playing a



central role in the world's largest economic bloc, warning the "special relationship" with the UK could be at risk if Britain were to leave. Leave. EU, one of the campaign groups calling for Britain to pull out of the EU, blasted the reported plans for intervention by Obama. "People in this country have had enough of American presidents dictating our foreign policy to us," said the campaign's spokesman Jack Montgomery. (AFP)

Turkish Troops in Syria for Operation Against Kurds: Russia

ANKARA - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov says Russia has information that Turkey's military is entrenched a few hundred meters (yards) inside Syrian territory to prevent Kurdish groups from strengthening their positions.

In an interview with Russian REN TV broadcast on Sunday, Lavrov calls the move part of Turkey's "creeping expansion" in northern Syria. He said: "According to our information, they are digging in a few hundred meters from the border inside Syria." Lavrov said he had seen the reports of Turkish tanks on the border, but gave no further details about Turkey's military presence in Syria. The Russian foreign minister said Turkey has declared a sovereign right to create a security zone on Syrian territory to prevent the unification of Kurdish enclaves to the east and west. (AP)

Germans Flock to Vote in "Super Sunday" Test for Merkel

BERLIN/WITTENBERG - Germans turned out in force to vote in three state elections on Sunday, with the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany (AfD) party looking to profit from popular angst about Chancellor Angela Merkel's welcome of more than a million migrants.

The election is the biggest test year of the German public response to the influx, totaling more than a million last year alone and showing no sign of halting, of refugees and other migrants from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. Merkel, who says Germany is a rich enough country to host desperate people and has a moral



obligation to shelter those in danger, has staked her reputation on her management of the unprecedented influx, which has come to define her leadership. Her conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) have been losing support to the AfD, which has profited

from the growing unease. A poor CDU performance would weaken Merkel just as she tries to push through a deal to resolve the crisis in EU negotiations with Turkey, the country from which most migrants depart by sea to reach the EU through Greece. (Reuters)

Syria's Deputy FM Due in Tehran for Talks

TEHRAN - Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mekdad is to pay a visit to Iran to discuss the latest developments in Syria with senior Iranian officials. Mekdad is scheduled to arrive in Tehran on Monday for a two-day visit and will meet with Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. The Syrian diplomat's visit to Tehran comes as a new round of UN-mediated peace talks between the Syrian government and foreign-backed opposition groups is expected to start on March 14. Negotiations are expected to end by March 24. The development comes following remarks by Syria's Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem on Saturday who said his country will take part in peace talks with no preconditions and will not accept any preconditions by other negotiating parties. Elsewhere in his remarks, Muallem said it is only for Syrians to decide their country's fate, including the issue of presidency, which Damascus considers as a "red line," noting that no foreign power could decide what is going to happen to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. (PressTV)

Somali Forces Kill 2 Al-Shabaab Militants in Central Somalia: Official

MOGADISHU - Somali National Army (SNA) on Sunday killed two Al-Shabaab militants and wounded three others in a clash in Hiraara region of central Somalia, a military official said. Colonel Mohamed Omar Abdulle told journalists that heavy fighting ensued following an ambush by Somali forces on Al-Shabaab base in El Ali village Saturday evening resulting in the casualties. "Our troops fought hard and killed two militants and injured three others. We launched... (More on P4)...(32)

Iraqi Troops Repel IS Attacks in See-Saw Grabs of Key Positions

BAGHDAD - A total of 21 Islamic State (IS) militants were killed on Sunday in clashes with security forces and airstrikes by Iraqi and U.S.-led coalition aircraft, security and medical sources said. In Iraq's northern central province of Salahudin, dozens of IS militants carried out two attacks at dawn: one on the positions of security forces in Fat'ha area, and another on the positions of paramilitary units in the oil fields of

Allas in east of Tikrit, a provincial security source told Xinhua on condition of anonymity. The troops in both areas fought back the attackers and forced them to withdraw after killing a total of seven IS militants and wounding at least 13 others, along with destroying a vehicle carrying heavy machine gun, the source said, adding that two security members were killed and... (More on P4)...(30)

Helicopters Kill 17 as Yemen Government Moves Against Aden Militants

ADEN - Saudi-led forces attacked al Qaeda militants in Aden overnight in an effort to dislodge them from a stronghold in the southern Yemeni port city, killing at least 17 people in helicopter strikes, medics and a security official said on Sunday. On another front, the Saudi-backed forces supporting President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi fought to widen their

control of Taiz in the southwest after breaking a siege there on Friday. Islamist militants from al Qaeda and Islamic State have exploited the conflict to expand their control, especially in areas where Hadi supporters have managed to expel the Iran-allied Houthis, including in Aden and Lahej provinces. Witnesses and medics said... (More on P4)...(31)

West Says one thing, does Another in Terror Fight: Rafsanjani

TEHRAN - The chairman of Iran's Expediency Council says the West's rhetoric contradicts its action when it comes to the fight against terrorism. Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani made the remarks in a Saturday meeting with visiting former French Prime Minister Francois Fillon in the capital, Tehran. This contradiction, he said, "has complicated the real fight against terrorism and its roots." Citing a case in point, he referred to Israel's bloody aggression against Lebanon in the past and its ongoing deadly violations across the Palestinian

territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. "Unfortunately, Western countries are indifferent to these violations and killings," he said. The senior Iranian cleric also called attention to the fact that the United States invaded Afghanistan back in 2001 under the pretext of providing security and eradicating the drugs industry rampant there. "Today, after years of US presence in the country, we witness that not only has not the situation improved, but also security has worsened and [the volume] of drugs [production there] has increased tenfold." (PressTV)

UAE Sends Relief Aid to Various Areas in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE - The Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation, KF, has provided relief aid to areas affected by the recent earthquake and floods that swept Tajikistan. The gesture is in implementation to the directives of President His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Vice President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The foundation has sent aid convoy comprising

95 trucks from the capital of Tajikistan to the Badakhshan Province to the west of Dushanbe. The aid convoy carries hundreds of tonnes of construction material, heavy equipment and various relief materials. An official source at KF said that the first stage of the aid programme to Tajikistan meets the needs of beneficiaries in the disaster-affected areas in coordination with the Committee for Emergency Situations and Civil Defence of Tajikistan, CES. (WAM)

Xi Underlines Innovation, Reform in Defense, Military Upgrade

BEIJING - Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, on Sunday highlighted theoretical and technological innovation as the key to upgrade the country's military and national defense. Speaking to national lawmakers from the military at the ongoing annual parliamentary session, Xi, also Chinese president and chairman of the Central Military Commission, said the future of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) hinged on innovation and reform. He urged the armed forces to fully implement the innovation-driven development strategy, place combat

capacity at the center of all their work, and step up theoretical and technological innovation. Military administration and personnel competence were also identified as areas to be improved. The PLA should focus on priority areas in order to kickstart cross-the-board innovation and make the military stronger, Xi said. He told PLA lawmakers that the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020) is crucial to China's national defense and military development, and urged the armed forces to uphold political integrity, reform and rule of law, and strengthen their military buildup and combat readiness. (Xinhua)