

# Escalating Violence in Syria Undermining Political Process: UN Envoy

GENEVA - The UN Syria envoy warned Saturday that an upsurge in fighting in Syria is not only endangering a fragile truce in place since last year, but also jeopardising ongoing peace talks a day after they formally resumed.

Staffan de Mistura noted in statement that "the growing violations in recent days are undermining the ceasefire regime addressed through the Astana meetings, with significant negative consequences for the safety of Syrian civilians, humanitarian access and the momentum of the political process."

The fifth and latest round of UN-mediated political talks resumed Friday in a bid to broker a political end to the



Staffan de Mistura

six-year Syrian conflict which has killed over 310,000 people and displaced millions more. De Mistura has repeatedly reminded that the upkeep of a ceasefire in place since December last year is key to give discussions the best chance of success.

Considering the worsening situation on the ground, de Mistura indicated that he has sent letters to the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran, who act as guarantors of the shaky truce. The envoy said that their efforts to safeguard the truce are vital "for improving the conditions on the ground and contributing to an environment conducive for a productive political process." (Xinhua)

## Russia Says New U.S. Sanctions Run Against Washington's Anti-Terrorist Commitment

MOSCOW - New sanctions imposed by the United States on Russian companies go back on Washington's promises to prioritize the fight against terrorism, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Sunday.

A U.S. State Department representative said Saturday that penalties are being applied to eight Russian companies for their violations of the Iran, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (INKSNA).

The INKSNA authorizes the United States to im-

pose sanctions against foreign individuals, private entities and governments that engage in proliferation activities.

The U.S. decision to punish the Russian companies, including those related to aircraft construction and the training of flight specialists, is "puzzling and disappointing," said Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

The United States did not even mention specific reasons but only referred to their legislation prohibiting individuals and

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## Brexit Sparks Race to Host European Banking Authority

LONDON - Along with banks that have signaled they will be moving jobs abroad, Brexit will probably see the European Banking Authority leave London -- and rival cities are jockeying to be its next host.

The London headquarters of the European Union's financial regulator, in the Canary Wharf district, has 170 staff members from 27 of the 28 European Union nations.

Brexit is "a major talking point among the staff", executive director Adam Farkas told AFP, as Prime

Minister Theresa May prepares to take the historic step of launching the exit process this week.

"The outcome of the referendum, which will likely lead to a removal of the EBA from London, is having a major impact," said Farkas, 49, a Hungarian who has headed the EBA since 2011.

Britons voted in June to quit the EU bloc in a referendum that sent shockwaves across the globe and prompted several banks to announce plans to move jobs from London to continental



Europe. Media reports suggest that cities including Amsterdam, Dublin, Frankfurt, Paris and Vienna could be trying to woo the EBA away. "We have seen really

wide interest from European capitals, and even not only from capitals but other cities as well, who expressed their desire or intention to host us," Farkas said. (AFP)

## Arab World Faces Pressing Challenges with Deepening Woes

AMMAN - Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul-Gheit said Sunday that Arabs need to heal their wounds with their hands.

Speaking at the opening of the Economic and Social Council's preparatory ministerial meeting at the Arab Summit level, he said more than half of the world's refugees are Arabs.

He said that there are pressing challenges facing the Arab economies and societies, stressing that high unemployment among

the Arab youth stands at around 29 percent.

He added declining economic growth rates and continued conflicts and violence in the region are all challenges that make any developments efforts in the Arab world more difficult.

"Arabs represent about five percent of the world's population but they account for 50 percent of the total number of the world's refugees," Arab League Secretary General

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## U.S. Presidential Envoy to Attend Arab Summit in Jordan

DEAD SEA, Jordan - Jordan's Minister of State for Media Affairs Mohammad Momani said Saturday that a U.S. presidential envoy will attend the 28th Arab Summit held in Jordan. Speaking at a press conference at the summit's media centre, Momani said the summit will also be attended by United Nations Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria Staffan de Mistura.

The UN official will also take part in the Arab foreign ministers meeting and will brief them on the

latest developments in Geneva talks between the Syrian regime and the opposition, said Momani. He added that representatives from the UN, Russia and the EU will also take part in the summit.

Referring to issues discussed during the preparatory meetings for the Arab Summit, Momani said the Arab League officials discussed the threat of terrorism and extremism and means to address them.

Discussions also focused on the need that Arab states take the lead in the



fight against terrorism especially since terrorists seek to tarnish the image of Islam. The Arab Summit, he said, will work on unifying Arab stances regard-

ing the various issues. Arabs also stressed on their rejection of relocation of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, said the minister. (Xinhua)

## Turkey May Hold Referendum on EU Accession Process: Erdogan

ANKARA - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Saturday that Turkey may have a Brexit-style referendum on whether to continue European Union membership process after the April 16 constitutional referendum. Speaking during the Turkish-British Tatildil Forum in southern Antalya province, Erdogan said Turkey would likely review its ties with the EU after its April 16 referendum on constitutional changes.

"No matter what our nation decides, we will obey it," Erdogan declared, say-



ing that there would be a "Brexit-like referendum on the (EU) negotiations."

In June 2016, more than half of British voters voted in favor of ending Britain's 46-year long EU membership. Turkey applied for

EU membership in 1987, and the accession talks began in 2005. However, negotiations hit a stalemate in 2007 because of Turkey's position on the Cyprus issue. In November 2016, the

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## Iran Sanctions 15 U.S. Firms, Citing Human Rights Abuses and Israel Ties

DUBAI - Iran has imposed sanctions on 15 U.S. companies for alleged human rights violations and cooperating with Israel, the state news agency IRNA reported on Sunday, in a tit-for-tat reaction to a move by Washington.

The agency quoted Iran's foreign ministry as saying the companies had "flagrantly violated human rights" and cooperated with Israel in its "terrorism" against the Palestinians and the expansion of Jewish settlements. It was not immediately clear if any of the companies, which included defense technology firm Raytheon, had any dealings with Iran or whether they would be affected in any way by Tehran's action, which IRNA said would include seizure of their assets and a

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## Germans in Tiny Saarland Vote in big Test for Merkel

BERLIN/SAARBRUECKEN - Germans in the small western state of Saarland voted on Sunday in a regional election that could deliver an upset to Chancellor Angela Merkel and hurt her prospects of winning a fourth term in September's national election.

The election carries significance as it is the first of three regional votes ahead of the Sept. 24 federal vote and as such it offers an opportunity for the parties to build - or lose - momentum in their quest to prevail at national level. The vote is the first electoral test for the Social Democrats under their new leader, Martin Schulz, who has re-energized the center-left party with a promise to tackle inequality that is resonating with many voters tired of Merkel. "This time every vote really counts," an unusually impassioned Merkel told a rally in Sankt Wendel, near Germany's border with France and Luxembourg, on Thursday. "Take my words seriously," she said in a last-gasp effort to drum up support for her conservative Christian Democrats (CDU).

Voting began at 8 a.m. (0600 GMT) and runs until 6 p.m. (1600 GMT), after which exit polls are released. By 2 p.m. (1200 GMT), voter turnout was 32.6 percent, election officials said. Like federal Germany, Saarland is currently governed by a 'grand coalition' of Merkel's conservatives and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). But polls suggest a left-leaning 'red-red-green' alliance of the SPD, the far-left Linke party and the environmentalist Greens - or even a 'red-red' coalition if the Greens fail to win enough votes - could emerge after the vote. (Reuters)

## Nieghbor News

### China, Pakistan to Reap 'Early Harvest' in Economic Corridor: Li Xiaopeng

BEIJING - China's Transport Minister, Li Xiaopeng has said that an "early harvest" is expected for projects involving transportation, infrastructure and energy in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major project of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

"These projects not only form the strategic framework for bilateral cooperation, but also enhance regional interactivity thus serving as an example for the Belt and Road international cooperation," Li said while speaking at ceremony held to mark Pakistan's Day.

While warmly congratulating leadership and people of Pakistan on the Pakistan Day, Li Xiaopeng said, as close and deep rooted friend of Pakistan and its people, China was very happy to witness economic progress and development in Pakistan.

He said, China has been maintaining its exemplary relations with Pakistan since its independence.

In recent years, the way Pakistan and its people showed their firm resolve

and commitment against extremism and terrorism and rendered sacrifices were appreciable.

"The exemplary and longstanding friendship between China and Pakistan and the cooperation for economic development and common prosperity was a model for other nations," he added. Li said, Chinese President Xi Jinping during his state visit to Pakistan in 2015 signed several agreements and translated China-Pakistan all weather friendship and strategic relations into economic cooperation and partnership.

He said, China would continue to give priority to China-Pakistan relations and work together with Pakistan to further enhance and cement existing bonds.

The Chinese Minister said, the economic cooperation between both brotherly countries was not only for mutual benefit but it would bring prosperity in the entire region as this initiative was meant for shared prosperity and common development. (APP)

### Iran to Move further in Development Path: Rouhani

TEHRAN - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani hailed Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution for naming the new Iranian year as the year of 'Economy of Resistance, Production and Employment', and said that fulfillment of Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei's guidelines will make the country pave the path of development.

"Iran will step in the path of development and all Iranians should join hands to help the country make further advances," the Iranian president said while pointing to naming the new Iranian year as the year of 'Economy of Resistance, Production and Employment'.

President Rouhani said that in order to create jobs, production needs to be promoted and more capital has to be attracted by the country's different industrial, agricultural and services sectors.

In relevant remarks earlier in March, President Rouhani underlined the necessity for the country to further develop and increase production and economic growth.

In a televised address to the Iranian nation, President Rouhani expressed the hope that the new year would be the year of progress and development, as well as employment for the youth.

"This year we have a

year full of blessings because it is concurrent with the birthday of Hazrat Fatima al-Zahra (AS) - the daughter of Islam's Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) - and heavenly and divine blessings. God-willing, we will follow the path of unity and empathy and efforts for our country's pride," he said.

"The message of Nowruz for us is letting grudges go. The message of Nowruz for us is the message of prosperity and liveliness. In this year that we have elections coming, we need to learn the necessary lessons of Nowruz and nature more than ever," President Rouhani added.

"The new year will be the year of progress and development for our dear nation. The new year will be the year of more employment for our youths. We need to carry out more efforts to compensate for the shortcoming," he said.

"In the new year, we have two important elections ahead of us. We all must try to have a more active role and presence.

We must turn out in large in healthy and legal elections," President Rouhani said. God-willing we will join hands and have very good elections. (FNA)

### Uzbek, Russian PMs to Hold Talks in Late March

TASHKENT - Prime ministers of Uzbekistan and Russia Abdulla Aripov and Dmitry Medvedev will mull economic cooperation between the two countries in Moscow Mar. 28, a representative of the Uzbek government told Trend.

The sides will discuss expansion of trade and economic cooperation, increasing supplies of marketable products, implementation of joint projects in energy, transportation and agriculture, as well as cooperation in the cultural and humanitarian spheres,

according to the government representative.

It was noted that the PMs' meeting will precede the state visit of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Russia, scheduled for early April.

Russia is one of Uzbekistan's leading trading partners - about 20 percent of the Uzbek foreign trade turnover accounts for this country. The Uzbekistan-Russia trade turnover exceeded \$4 billion in 2016. Russia invested more than \$6 billion in the Uzbek economy. (Trend)

### France's Hollande Looks to Strengthen Ties with Singapore

SINGAPORE - French President Francois Hollande, on an official visit to Singapore, expressed a desire Sunday to strengthen France's partnership with the Southeast Asian city-state.

"France considers Singapore not only for an economic partner, but also as a friendly country," Hollande said at a state banquet, where he gave a toast in French. "In this geopolitical environment of isolation, nationalism and protectionism, we have to lead by example and make our bilateral partnership not only strong and dynamic, but to show the way for opening confidence in international

### U.S.-Backed Syrian Militia Makes Gains against Islamic State

BEIRUT - A Kurdish and Arab Syrian militia backed by the United States has captured the town of Karama as it prepares for an assault on the Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa that it expects to take place in early April, it said on Sunday.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has trapped Raqqa in a shrinking pocket of territory on the northern bank of the Euphrates and has advanced toward it in a multi-pronged offensive over several months.

Dejwar Khabat, a field commander with the SDF, said he expects the assault on Raqqa to begin in early April, affirming

a timeline reported by Reuters earlier this month, after the U.S.-backed militia closes the gap on the city on more fronts. He was answering Reuters questions in a press conference with local reporters in Karama, the last significant town to the east of Raqqa, which lies about 18km (11 miles) away along the Euphrates.

Another thrust of the SDF advance has already reached a few kilometers from Raqqa in the northeast. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said the SDF had almost completely captured Karama but that clashes between it and Islamic State were still going on. (Reuters)