

Trump Backs Attorney General over Russia Phone Talks Controversy

WASHINGTON - U.S. President Donald Trump said Thursday he has "total" confidence in Attorney General Jeff Sessions after media reports revealed Sessions had spoken with Russian Ambassador twice during Trump's campaign but didn't tell the Senate hearings for his confirmation.

Ahead of delivering a speech aboard the USS Gerald Ford in Newport News, Virginia, Trump told reporters he "wasn't aware" that Sessions had contact with Sergey Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to the United States.

Asked if Sessions should recuse himself from a Justice Department probe into links



between the Trump campaign and Russia, Trump said "I don't think so."

"I have said that, when it's appropriate, I will recuse myself from the investigation," Sessions told MSNBC on Thursday. Bipartisan pressure for Sessions to resign or step aside from any investigations into Russia's role in the U.S. 2016 elections is mounting as top Democrats at the Capitol, Nancy Pelosi in the House and Chuck Schumer in the Senate, are urging him to depart. Sessions lied under oath at the Senate hearings, Pelosi said. Schumer said the Justice Department should appoint a special prosecutor to examine the case. (Xinhua)

Moody's Warns Brexit, Trump Administration Threaten Irish Economy

DUBLIN - Although Ireland's growth prospects remain strong, the country faces risks from the impact of the Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit) and the prospect of corporate tax reforms in the United States, ratings agency Moody's warned on Thursday.

In a research report, the agency said that Brexit will likely mean lower export growth, deeper disruption to well-established supply chains and the need to establish controls at the border with the Britain, its

second-largest export market after the United States. It said higher foreign direct investment inflows could mitigate some of the negative impact, as Ireland will likely be a key beneficiary from the diversion of investment from the UK. However, Ireland faces important supply constraints, in particular in the area of housing and might not be able to realize its full FDI potential, the agency added. Moody's said the scale of the second risk to the Irish economy is still unclear... (More on P4)... (24)

U.S. Senate Confirms Ben Carson as Housing Secretary

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Senate on Thursday confirmed Ben Carson as President Donald Trump's housing secretary by a 58-41 voting. 65-year-old Carson, a retired doctor, won support from 51 Republicans, six Democrats and one independent in the confirmation vote. He will lead the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) with about 8,300 employees and a budget of some 47 billion U.S. dollars.

The department manages housing assistance to low-income people through vouchers and

public housing. It also enforces fair housing laws and offers mortgage insurance to poorer Americans through the Federal Housing Administration, part of HUD. During the Senate hearings in January, Democrats said Carson would not have been their choice since he has never held public office and has no housing policy experience, but they welcomed his promises to address lead hazards in housing, homelessness and other issues, according to a USA Today report. (Xinhua)

UN Nuclear Watchdog Chief to Discuss Iran Deal with Trump Official

TEHRAN - The chief of the UN atomic watchdog will hold talks on Iran's nuclear deal on Thursday with senior officials from the administration of US President Donald Trump, who has branded it "the worst deal ever negotiated", Reuters reported.

The 2015 deal between Tehran and major powers places restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions against the Islamic

Republic.

The accord will be the main topic of Yukiya Amano's talks in Washington, officials involved in the dealings of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said on Wednesday.

Trump's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who has called for a "full review" of the accord, is among the senior U.S. officials Amano will meet, they said.

Amano, whose agency is in charge of policing those nuclear restrictions



under the deal, has publicly argued in favour of the agreement, describing it as a "net gain". But Trump, who took office on Jan. 20, has said he

wants to "police that contract so tough they don't have a chance". "IAEA Director General Amano will meet with ... (More on P4)... (25)

Brussels Hosts Int'l Meeting to Fundraise for Family Planning after U.S. Funding Ban

BRUSSELS - Nearly 50 countries attended an international conference here on Thursday, aiming to collect funds for sexual health and family planning worldwide, after a U.S. decision to ban funding, local media reported. Belgian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Development Cooperation Alexander De Croo said he was delighted to see the strong support from the international community to participate to the Global Fundraising Initiative She

Decides. The conference aims at

joining forces to support non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working around family planning and women's rights.

It came following U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to ban funding for organizations that support girls and women on family planning, contraception, and safe abortion.

"We cannot let thousands of women and girls down because of the ideological choices of one country. We have a choice and a voice," De Croo said at the opening of the conference. "What unites us today is



the willingness to mobilize ourselves not against someone, but for thousands of women," he said. According to local media RTBF, the U.S. ban would

trigger a financial gap estimated between 500 and 600 U.S. million dollars, a gap that the international coalition is struggling to fill. (Xinhua)

Syria Talks May Surprise by Meeting the Low Bar of Expectations

GENEVA - No breakthrough was promised at Syria peace talks in Geneva, and no breakthrough has occurred. But as the first U.N.-led talks in almost a year neared their end on Friday, neither side has walked away and both claim small wins.

Russia, seen as holding the balance of power, has met both sides behind the scenes, and Western diplomats expect the talks to conclude later on Friday with an "agreed agenda" and a plan for a return to the Swiss city later this month. In eight days of



talks, the warring sides have not negotiated face-to-face, but haggled over the agenda with U.N. mediator Staffan de Mistura, who wants to discuss a new constitution, elections and reformed governance.

As the text was still being finalized, the opposition met de Mistura to ensure the process would focus squarely on "political transition", Western diplomats said. Syrian ... (More on P4)... (26)

Russian Opposition Leader Accuses Premier of Corruption

MOSCOW - Russia's leading opposition figure has published a sweeping report accusing Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev of corruption, claims which the government has shrugged off as propaganda. In a report posted Thursday, Alexei Navalny alleged Medvedev has amassed a collection of lavish mansions, yachts and vineyards managed by companies and charities controlled by his associates.

Medvedev's spokeswoman, Natalya Timakova, dismissed Navalny's claims as part of election campaigning, saying in a statement carried by Russian news agencies that it's "senseless" to comment on his "propaganda attacks." Asked about the report Friday, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said he had nothing to add to Timakova's statement. The charismatic ... (More on P4)... (27)

Syrian Border Wall Reduces Illegal Crossings: Turkish Army

KILIS, Turkey - As Turkey has completed more than half of a planned wall along its 911-km border with Syria, the number of illegal crossings and smuggling attempts has decreased, a Turkish officer said on Thursday.

The constructed 3.6-meter-high concrete wall along Hatay, Kilis and Gaziantep provinces with Syrian border reduced the number of attempts for smuggling and illegal crossings, Colonel Alparslan Kilinc told reporters on a press trip to the Turkish army military post in the region.

A total of 2,044 detected smuggling attempts in 2015 decreased to 77 in 2016 along the 169-km border line under the 1st Border Regiment Command, Kilinc told reporters in Kilis.

The number of detected illegal crossings declined from a total of 12,183 attempts in 2015 when clashes were intense on the Syrian side of the border, to 8,531 in 2016, he stated.

In 2016, 210 third country nationals, mostly from Islamic State (IS) group and 49 Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) members were captured as they attempted illegal crossing in the regiment area, Kilinc said.

As part of the border security work along the Syrian border, the Turkish government builds modular walls next to a mined area followed by ditches and reinforced cage wire barriers. The military conducts routine patrols along the border line which is controlled by cameras day and night. (Xinhua)

Turkish Minister: German 'Deep State' Working Against Vote

ANKARA, Turkey - Turkey's foreign minister said Friday that forces within the state in Germany are working to prevent Turkish leaders from campaigning there for a "yes" vote in a referendum to increase the president's powers - a claim quickly rejected by the government in Berlin. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu made the comments a day after local authorities in southwestern Germany withdrew permission for the Turkish justice minister to use a venue for a political rally for Turks living in Germany, citing insufficient space. The justice minister, Bekir Bozdogan, canceled a meeting with his ... (More on P4)... (28)

Britain must Obey Free Movement Laws until it Leaves EU: MEPs

BRUSSELS - Britain must obey laws of the European Union (EU) on free movement until it leaves the bloc, EU lawmakers stressed in a plenary here. In a late-night debate with the European Commission on Wednesday, the bloc's executive arm, a majority of members of the European Parliament (MEPs) urged that the free movement rights of EU citizens living in Britain must be ensured.

The MEPs stressed the uncertainty in which the 3.1 million EU nationals living in Britain were left after the June 2016 referendum on EU membership. They insisted that these citizens' right

to free movement should be guaranteed as long as Britain remains a member of the EU and that their acquired rights must be respected even after it leaves. It comes amid reports that British Prime Minister Theresa May is to end automatic rights given to EU nationals to stay in Britain, when she triggers Article 50. British media said Britain would establish a "cut-off date" of around March 15. The EU citizens who are already in Britain and others who come before that date would have their rights protected - providing the EU agreed to the same status for British citizens living in the EU. By ... (More on P4)... (29)

Nieghbor News

UN Sees Chinese Strategy on Cyberspace Cooperation "Important Report"

UNITED NATIONS - UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric on Thursday described the first Chinese strategy on cyberspace cooperation as "a very important report," saying that "China has a big role to play" in the global cyberspace governance.

Dujarric, in his answer to a Xinhua question at his daily news briefing here, said "it is obviously a very important report and I know a lot of effort has gone into it."

"I think China has a big role to play," he said. China on Wednesday released its strategy on cyberspace cooperation.

"The International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace" is the first report China has released regarding the virtual domain. The new report also attaches great importance to the leading role of the United Nations in promoting world cooperation on cyberspace. The aim of the strategy - jointly building a community of shared future in cyberspace - illustrates China's approach to cyberspace cooperation, notably a strategy that is based on peace, sovereignty, shared governance and shared benefits. (Xinhua)

Iran not to Hold City Councils Elections Electronically in Major Cities: Official

TEHRAN - Iran has called off plans to hold the 5th City and Village Councils elections in big cities, a senior member of the central board responsible for monitoring the polls announced.

Speaking to the Tasnim News Agency, Farhad Tajari said previously, the Interior Ministry had planned to hold the upcoming elections through using electronic ballot boxes in major cities.

However, he added that the plans have been canceled due to the possibilities for some problems in elections. The Iranian official went on to say that the electronic elec-

tions will be held in small towns with high security. Earlier in February, Qassem Mirzaee Nekou, another member of the central board, had told Tasnim that 11,000 machines will be used for the upcoming City and Village Councils elections.

The City and Village Councils elections is scheduled to be held simultaneously with the presidential election on May 19. Registration of candidates for the City and Village Councils will start on March 13. Members of the councils across Iran are elected by public vote for a 4-year term. (Tasnim)

Pakistan Army Second to None: COAS

RAWALPINDI - Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa visited Multan Garrison on Thursday. The COAS was given a detailed briefing on operational readiness of the corps. COAS also witnessed the troops' training as they executed population census support plan. He appreciated the vigilance of the forces and said that the army shall extend full support for the population census. Later, Bajwa witnessed the combat training exercise of the troops at Muzaffargarh field firing ranges. He complimented the troops for their excellent training standards

and said that Pakistan army, by virtue of its combat experience over the years, is second to none. While talking to officers and troops he also acknowledged their contributions towards internal security. He said that through operation Radd-ul-Fasaad we will take on all militants and play our part in bringing back peace in our country. Earlier, the COAS was received by Multan Corps Commander Lieutenant General Sarfraz Sattar. Inspector General Training and Evaluation Lieutenant General HidayatUr Rehman was also present. (Daily Times)

Uzbek President to Visit Turkmenistan

ASHGABAT - The preparation process is underway for Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's visit to Turkmenistan, said the Turkmen Foreign Ministry in a message on Friday.

The issue on the visit's preparation was discussed during negotiations between Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov and Uzbek Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, Investments and Trade Elyor Ganiev

in Ashgabat. "The sides also expressed satisfaction with the current state of fruitful cooperation and noted the necessity of further intensification of mutually beneficial partnership, which is based on principles of mutual respect and trust," says the message. In particular, the sides viewed bilateral documents, which are planned to be signed during Mirziyoyev's above-mentioned visit. ... (More on P4)... (30)

Ruling Parties of Tajikistan and Russia Sign Cooperation Agreement

DUSHANBEH - The People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan and Russia's Yedinaya Rossiya have signed an agreement on cooperation in Dushanbe, reports Asia Plus news agency. The document was signed by deputy leader of the Tajik party Saidmurod Fattohzoda and deputy secretary of the General

Council of the Yedinaya Rossiya, member of the committee of the State Duma on international affairs Sergey Jeleznjak. The agreement envisages exchange of experiences between the two political parties concerning the electorate and preparing the party cadres, as well as mutual trips of the delegations. (AKI)