

# UN is Warned of 'Active Iranian Nuclear Procurement Network'

UNITED NATIONS - Britain has told a U.N. panel of experts that it is aware of an "active Iranian nuclear procurement network" linked to two Iranian companies, raising new concerns as world powers began Thursday to work out the details of a possible comprehensive agreement with Iran over its nuclear program.

Two U.N. sources confirmed Thursday that Britain's warning on April 20 is included in a confidential report by the panel. The sources spoke on anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss it.

The warning names two



companies, "Iran's Centrifuge Technology Company and Kalay Electric Company," but it gives no

details. Both companies are under U.S. sanctions, and Kalay Electric Company is on the U.N. sanc-

tions list. World powers, including the five permanent U.N. Security Council mem-

bers plus Germany, are aiming for a deal on Iran's nuclear program by June 30 with a goal of slow-

ing any path the country might have toward developing a nuclear weapon. Iran, which insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only, has not commented on the report by a panel of experts for the U.N. sanctions committee on Iran. Iran is pushing for U.N. and other sanctions on it to be lifted as soon as a nuclear agreement with the United States and others is reached. U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf told reporters Thursday, "We remain concerned about their procurement, taken steps to designate entities..." (More on P4)...(25)

## US Navy Ships to Accompany US-Flagged Ships in Gulf

WASHINGTON - U.S. Navy ships will begin accompanying U.S. commercial ships during their transit through the Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf to ensure they encounter no interference from Iran, U.S. defense officials said Thursday. Iran says it intervened with the Maersk Tigris because the Maersk shipping line owes it money awarded in a lawsuit. Iranian naval patrol boats also surrounded a U.S. cargo vessel in the strait last Friday before departing without further incident. The Pentagon later said it considered the incident a provocation. The strait is narrow and par-

tially within Iranian territorial waters. Under an internationally recognized protocol called "innocent passage," maritime traffic is permitted to pass through the strait without interference, even if ships at times are in Iranian territorial waters, so long as they are not violating strictures against such things as carrying weapons or collecting intelligence. U.S. defense officials said the decision to begin accompanying U.S. commercial vessels as they transit the strait was based on a recommendation by U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for U.S. military operations in the Middle East. (AP)

## Islamist Rebels Battle Syrian Army near Assad Heartland



AMMAN/BEIRUT - Islamist rebels and the Syrian army fought fierce battles in Latakia province overnight close to President Bashar al-Assad's ancestral home, the army and rebels said, after weeks of insurgent gains in the country's northwest. An army source told state news agency SANA fighter jets hit insurgent hideouts in the northern Latakia countryside with "tens killed and wounded." Latakia is the main port in Syria and along with the capital Damascus is one of the most important government-held areas in

the country. The violence follows advances in neighboring Idlib province by the hardline Ahrar al-Sham group and Syria's al Qaeda wing Nusra Front as well as other allied fighters. Rami Abdulrahman, who runs the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group, said the Latakia battles started with an army offensive on Thursday, backed by local militias, aimed at pushing the insurgents out of the province in order to advance on captured areas of neighboring Idlib. (Reuters)

## Israel Blames Arab Neighbors for Stalling on Nuke-Free Zone

UNITED NATIONS - Israel is blaming its Arab neighbors for the failure of progress toward achieving a Middle East free of nuclear weapons, saying that "if a serious regional effort has not emerged in the Middle East during the last five years, it is not because of Israel." Israel's statement, distributed Thursday to a global conference on a landmark disarmament treaty, is the country's first public comment since it showed up as a surprise observer. Israel has never publicly declared its nuclear weapons, and it is not a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As an observer nation, it cannot address the ongoing conference, where many countries have expressed frustration that a key meeting toward a Middle East nuclear weapons-free zone, promised for 2012, has not taken place. That goal was set the last time the conference met five years ago. Establishing such a zone in one of the world's most tense regions is an area of rare agreement these days between the United States and... (More on P4)...(28)

## Russia may be Ready for new Ukraine Offensive: NATO

WASHINGTON - Russia's military may be taking advantage of a recent lull in fighting in eastern Ukraine to lay the groundwork for a new military offensive, NATO's top commander told the U.S. Congress on Thursday. "Many of their actions are consistent with preparations for another offensive," Breedlove said. Pressed during the hearing, Breedlove acknowledged he could not predict Moscow's

next move but characterized its ongoing actions as "preparing, training and equipping to have the capacity to again take an offensive." "In the past they have not wasted their effort," Breedlove told the Senate Armed Services Committee. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which is monitoring the ceasefire, says the violence is down markedly since the accord was signed

in Minsk, Belarus, in February. But the United States says Russia now has its largest force on the border since October and has deployed additional air defense systems, the biggest number since August. Breedlove said Russia was seeking to tighten its grip over separatist fighters, bolstering its command and control "because there was disunity in some of the earlier attacks." "We do see a very distinct

Russian set of command and control in the eastern part of Ukraine," he said. "Command-and-control, air defense, support to artillery, all of these things increased ... making a more coherent, organized force out of the separatists." The United States has so far declined to provide weapons to Ukraine, a move which advocates say could help end the conflict but opponents warn might escalate the war. (Reuters)

## Egyptian President's Spain Trip Angers Human Rights Groups

MADRID - Rights groups slammed an official visit to Spain on Thursday by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, saying he should be shunned for his authoritarian rule rather than courted for business deals. Spain's King Felipe VI hosted the Egyptian leader to lunch at the royal palace after interior ministers from both nations signed an agreement to boost cooperation against illegal immigration, terrorism and organized crime. The visit, the first by an Egyptian head of state to Spain since 2006, comes amid mounting concern in the West over unrest in the Middle East with conflicts raging in Libya, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. "In these times of war and turmoil in your region, Egypt stands out as the key to stability and balance in the Middle East," the king said during the luncheon for Sisi. Spain's economy ministry said it had agreed to cooperate with Egypt on a possible high-speed rail link between Cairo and Luxor. Several other agreements are expected to be signed during Sisi's one-day visit in areas ranging from tourism to culture, a diplomatic source said.

Sisi was to hold talks with Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy later Thursday and visit Spain's lower house of parliament. No press conference was scheduled. The visit has been heavily criticized by Amnesty International which urged Rajoy in an open letter to call on Egypt to respect human rights during his talks with Sisi. Critics accuse Sisi, a former army chief who was elected president in May 2014, of eliminating all opposition and establishing an authoritarian regime since he overthrew Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. (AFP)

## Kremlin says too Early to Speak of Ukraine Peacekeeping Mission

MOSCOW - Russia said on Friday that it was premature to discuss the deployment of a peacekeeping mission in war-torn eastern Ukraine before a peace deal agreed in February is implemented in full. "Before the text of the Minsk agreement and its concrete points are implemented we believe that it would be absolutely wrong to raise any other issues including that about peacekeepers," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian news agencies. On

Thursday, the Ukrainian presidency said Russian President Vladimir Putin was open to the deployment of a peacekeeping mission in Ukraine, after the leaders of both countries spoke by phone with their French and German counterparts. "In the context of the discussion of ways towards a peaceful resolution (of the conflict), President Putin has accepted the possibility of deploying a peacekeeping contingent to the Donbass region," the Ukrainian presidency

said in a statement. Moscow however made no mention of a possible peacekeeping force in its own statement issued after the talks. The French presidency also made no such reference, saying in a statement that the parties had reviewed the implementation of the peace accords and "considered areas for improvement." Asked on Friday whether Putin agreed to a peacekeeping force in Ukraine, Peskov said: "No, this is not true." (AFP)

## Yemen Rebels Attack Saudi Border, Dozens Dead

RIYADH - Saudi Arabia said its forces killed dozens of Iran-backed rebels from Yemen who launched their first major attack on the kingdom since Saudi-led air strikes began last month. There have been deadly skirmishes before but this is the first time the Saudi military has reported a full-scale Huthi attack on its borders. Gulf foreign ministers on Thursday meanwhile rejected a proposal to hold talks on neutral ground between rival Yemeni political forces, while an expert report said Iran has been shipping weapons to the Huthis since at least 2009. The United Nations is trying to bring an end to the



weeks-long air campaign and return to peace talks. After a meeting in Riyadh, the Gulf ministers insisted that talks between Yemen's political factions be held in Saudi Arabia, which leads an Arab coalition that has been bombing the Shiite rebels since late March.

Iran has proposed holding UN talks on ending the war in Yemen in a neutral country, one not represented in the coalition. But in a statement after talks at a Riyadh airbase the six Gulf Cooperation Council states "affirmed their support to..." (More on P4)...(26)

## NATO to Hold Anti-Submarine Warfare Exercise in Norway

OSLO - Norway said Thursday that up to 5,000 NATO troops would take part in anti-submarine warfare exercises off its coast in early May, amid growing regional unease over suspected submarine sightings. More than 10 ships and submarines as well as aircraft and helicopters

would participate in the exercise between May 4 and 13 in the North Sea and in Skagerrak, the strait between Norway and Denmark. The drills will take place against a backdrop of growing Russian military activity in the region, and as Moscow and NATO face their worst crisis since the Cold War

due to the conflict in Ukraine. Neighbouring Finland, which is not a member of the military alliance, said on Tuesday that its navy had fired warning shots at a possible submarine in the waters off Helsinki. In October, armed forces in Sweden also not a NATO member... (More on P4)...(27)

## Neighbour News

### Chinese, Russian Navies to Hold Mediterranean Drills

BEIJING - China and Russia will conduct their first-ever joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea within weeks, Beijing's military said Thursday as it extends its reach and the pair's relationship becomes ever closer. The live-fire exercises, set for mid-May, will involve nine surface ships in total, with three from China, military spokesman Geng Yansheng said at a monthly briefing. The Chinese vessels involved are currently participating in international anti-piracy escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and off the Somali coast, he said. "What needs to be stressed is that this joint exercise is not targeting any third party and is not related to regional security," he insisted. The main purpose of the

exercises was protecting the safety of navigation in "far seas", he said, with training to include maritime defence and replenishment, joint escort, "as well as the actual use and firing of weapons". The drills are also aimed at "pragmatic cooperation between the two sides" and improving "the capability of the two navies to jointly deal with maritime threats", he added. Relations between China and Russia have been alternately close and distant over the decades going back to the days of the Soviet Union, but have been on an upswing for the past quarter century. Diplomatically, they often take similar stances at the United Nations where they are both permanent members of the Security Council. (AFP)

### Iran's Zarif Congratulates New Saudi FM Despite Tensions

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif congratulated his newly-installed Saudi counterpart on his appointment, Iranian media reported Friday, even as tensions flare between the rival regional powers over Yemen. Zarif said he hoped that "relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Saudi monarchy will develop" following the nomination of Adel al-Jubeiri as Riyadh's top diplomat. Tensions between Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran

have soared following the launch in March of a Riyadh-led aerial campaign against Shiite Huthi rebels in Yemen. The regional adversaries have long vied for influence in the Middle East, including in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and in confessionally-mixed countries such as Lebanon and Bahrain. Iran denies providing arms to Huthi rebels in Yemen and is insisting on a complete end to Saudi-led strikes as a condition for peace talks in the impoverished Gulf nation. (AFP)

### Govt, Army Fulfilled Promises Made to Waziristan Affectees: Sharif

MIRALI - Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Friday said that the government and the army had fulfilled their promise to the affectees of the military operation being carried out in the North Waziristan tribal region. Flanked by Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif, the premier was addressing a press conference in the Mirali town of North Waziristan. "It is a joyous occasion for the displaced persons, I am happy to see the return of the temporarily displaced," the premier said, addressing the press conference. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Governor Mehtab Ahmed Abbasi, Minister for States and Frontier Re-

gions (Safron) retired Lt-Gen Abdul Qadir Baloch and Chairperson of the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) Marvi Memon were also present on the occasion. Nawaz Sharif said that the army had looked after the welfare of the displaced persons and had played an exemplary role in cleansing Waziristan of terrorists. "Peace has been established in North Waziristan and the Pakistan Army deserves praise for its sacrifices made in this regard. The military played the main role in the rehabilitation of displaced persons and the situation in region has been made favourable," he said. (Agencies)

### Turkmen Border Guards Trained in Border Management

ASHGABAT - Eighteen officers from the State Border Service of Turkmenistan completed an OSCE Border Management and Threat Assessment training course, held at the Imamnazar Border Crossing Point on the Turkmen-Afghan border on Friday. The course was designed to enhance the capacities of personnel from the Border Service in collecting information as well as conducting searches, surveillance, and threat assessments at the border, the OSCE said. "This training course is a continuation of joint efforts with our partners in Turkmenistan to reinforce

the expertise and practical skills of Turkmen servicemen engaged in ensuring the security of national borders," said Richard Wheeler, Officer-in-Charge of the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat. "This course marks a step forward in the development of our co-operation in this important area of mutual interest and interaction. We are confident that providing technical and other support to the State Border Service of Turkmenistan serves our common goal to maintain regional security within the Central Asia and beyond." (TCA)