

KERRY DIPLOMACY
Syria war, Iran, US-EU trade deal key issues

AFP, London

New US Secretary of State John Kerry met British Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday at the start of a get-acquainted tour of Europe and the Middle East, but the Syrian conflict threatened to taint the trip.

Kerry is due to meet his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Berlin on Tuesday and is expected to push Moscow to put pressure on the Syrian regime to allow a "political transition".

The two men discussed Syria and also talked of how to achieve a trade deal between the United States and the European Union.

They agreed that the G8 summit in Northern Ireland in June "will be an important moment to inject further momentum into this", according to a statement from Cameron's office.

The trip will also include stops in France, Italy, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

Kerry is also expected to address issues including Iran, Mali and North Korea during the two-week tour.

The Kerry-Lavrov meeting on Tuesday will take place at the same time as talks in Kazakhstan between the so-called 5+1 world powers -- US, China, Russia, France, Britain and Germany -- and Iran over the issue of Tehran's nuclear policy.

Regime ready for talks

UNHR chief says Security Council failed in Syria

AFP, Moscow

The Syrian regime is ready for talks with armed rebels and anyone who favours dialogue, President Bashar al-Assad's foreign minister said in Moscow yesterday in the first such offer by a top Syrian official.

Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem was in Moscow for talks with Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, whose country is one of the few big powers to still maintain ties with Assad's regime.

Russia has renewed calls for rebels and regime to engage in direct negotiations to end the two-year conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people, warning that pressing for a military victory risked destroying Syria.

"We are ready for dialogue with all who want dialogue, including those who are carrying arms," Muallem said at the talks with Lavrov, in an apparent reference to the rebels battling the Assad regime.

"We still believe in a peaceful solution to the Syrian problem," said Muallem, pointing to the creation of

a government coalition that would negotiate with both the "external and internal opposition."

Lavrov said alongside Muallem that there was no alternative to a political solution to the two-year conflict agreed through talks.

"There is no acceptable alternative to a political solution achieved through agreeing positions of the government and the opposition," said Lavrov.

SYRIA CIVIL WAR

"The Syrian people should decide their fate without external intervention," he said.

He warned that there was no point for the sides trying to fight towards a "victorious end" and warned Assad's regime not to give into what Lavrov termed "provocations".

Russia has been working on agreeing a trip to Moscow, possibly in early March, by the head of the Syrian opposition National Coalition Ahmed Moazal-Khatib.

The United Nations Security

Council has "failed" to bring an end to the spiralling conflict in Syria, the UN's human rights chief said on Monday.

"The Security Council has so far failed with regard to Syria," Navi Pillay told ministers as the 22nd session of the UN Human Rights Council kicked off in Geneva.

Vuk Jeremic, the president of the UN General Assembly, joined Pillay in criticising the international community's inaction on Syria.

"For close to two years, the international community has failed to put a stop to the carnage," he said.

"The immediate cessation of hostilities should be our foremost priority."

Pillay said her office had pushed repeatedly for the Security Council to refer the conflict to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.

The diplomatic activity came as there appeared to be no let-up in the fighting which according to the United Nations has claimed 70,000 lives since the conflict began in March 2011.

IRAN NUKE TALKS
World powers have good offer

REUTERS, Almaty

Major powers will offer Iran some sanctions relief during talks in Almaty, Kazakhstan, this week if Tehran agrees to curb its nuclear program, a U.S. official said yesterday.

However, the Islamic Republic could face more economic pain if the standoff remains unresolved, the official said ahead of the February 26-27 meeting, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Western diplomats have told Reuters that the United States, Russia, China, Britain, Germany and France will offer to ease sanctions on trade in gold and precious metals if Iran closes its Fordow underground uranium enrichment plant.

Raul Castro to retire in 2018

AFP, Havana

President Raul Castro has been re-elected to what he vowed would be his last term in office, and unveiled a 52-year-old political heir tasked with securing the future of the communism in Cuba after 2018.

"This will be my last term," Castro, 81, told lawmakers after the National Assembly reelected him Sunday and named a new regime number two, Council of State Vice President Miguel Diaz-Canel.

Castro said he was "elected to defend, maintain and continue perfecting socialism -- not to destroy it," adding that his economic reforms will create "a less egalitarian society, but a fairer one."

Choosing Diaz-Canel, a former military man and professor from Villa Clara who has represented the president on foreign trips in recent months, "marks a final step in configuring the country's future leadership, through the slow and orderly transfer of the main leadership positions to new generations," Castro said.

The changes are in line with a decision adopted by the Communist Party last year to limit the terms of top office holder to 10 years. Raul Castro will reach this limit on February 24, 2018.



President Raul Castro



British Prime Minister David Cameron talks with US Secretary of State John Kerry at 10, Downing Street in central London, England yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Israel, US test Arrow missile

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the United States yesterday staged the first test flight of the latest generation of their Arrow missile defence system, the Arrow 3, the Israeli defence ministry said.

"This is the first flight test of the Arrow 3 interceptor and was conducted at an Israeli test range over the Mediterranean Sea," it said in a statement.

"Israel's Missile Defense Organisation and US Missile Defense Agency officials conducted the flight test," it added.

BBC frequencies jammed in China

AP, London

The BBC says it has received reports that its world service English shortwave radio frequencies are being jammed in China and condemns what it called efforts to disrupt free access to news and information.

The broadcaster said while it can't attribute the source of the jamming definitively, "the extensive and coordinated efforts are indicative of a well-resourced country such as China."

Fatah vows revenge for death

AFP, Sair

Militants of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the armed wing of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah movement, vowed yesterday to avenge the death of a prisoner they say was tortured in an Israeli jail.

"This horrific crime will not go unpunished and we promise the Zionist occupation that we will respond to this crime," said a statement distributed to crowds at the funeral of Arafat Jaradat, while masked members of the militant group fired assault rifles into the air, AFP journalists at the scene reported.

UK senior Catholic cleric resigns

AFP, London

Cardinal Keith O'Brien, Britain's most senior Roman Catholic cleric, has resigned with immediate effect in the wake of allegations of inappropriate behaviour, he said in a statement yesterday.

O'Brien had announced in November that he was planning to resign in view of his 75th birthday next month, but he said: "The Holy Father has now decided that my resignation will take effect today, 25 February 2013." The cardinal had denied allegations of inappropriate behaviour by three priests and a former priest which were sent to Rome a week before Pope Benedict XVI's shock resignation announcement on February 11.

Italy's centre-left ahead in election

AFP, Rome

Italy's centre-left was poised to win against Silvio Berlusconi yesterday in a key election for the eurozone, but a new anti-austerity party was also set to make major gains, exit polls showed.

The main Democratic Party led by Pier Luigi Bersani and its smaller leftist allies were ahead with between 34.5 and 37 percent, beating the 29 to 31 percent for a coalition led by the scandal-tainted former prime minister Berlusconi.

A projection by the SkyTG24 news channel said the left would manage to win a majority in both chambers of parliament, following fears that it would fail to snag a majority in the upper house Senate.

China's Xi vows ties with Taiwan

AFP, Beijing

New Chinese leader Xi Jinping vowed yesterday to pursue friendly ties with Taiwan and keep seeking "peaceful reunification" in a meeting with an influential politician from the island, state media reported.

Xi, who became Communist Party chief in November and is set to assume the country's presidency next month, held talks with Lien Chan, a former vice president of Taiwan, the official Xinhua news agency said.

China and Taiwan have been governed separately since 1949 when China's communists defeated the nationalist Kuomintang party in a civil war. The nationalists fled to Taiwan and have ruled the island for most of the past six decades.

Xi echoed Beijing's longstanding position, saying it was the "duty" of the party's new leadership to keep pushing for "peaceful reunification" and "maintain consistency in policies... by unwaveringly upholding the one-China principle".

Cross-strait relations have improved since the Kuomintang's Ma Ying-jeou became Taiwan's president in 2008 on a Beijing-friendly platform. He was re-elected in 2012 for a final four-year term.



Xi Jinping

S Korea inaugurates first female president

AFP, Seoul

Park Geun-Hye became South Korea's first female president yesterday, vowing zero tolerance with North Korean provocation and demanding Pyongyang "abandon its nuclear ambitions" immediately.

As leader of Asia's fourth-largest economy, Park, the 61-year-old daughter of late military strongman Park Chung-Hee, faces challenges of slowing growth and soaring welfare costs in one of the world's most rapidly ageing societies.

Taking the oath of office less than two weeks after North Korea carried out its third nuclear test, Park called on the regime in Pyongyang to "abandon its nuclear ambitions without delay" and rejoin the international community.

"North Korea's recent nuclear test is a challenge to the survival and future of the Korean people, and there should be no mistake that the biggest victim will be none other than North Korea itself," she said.

"I will not tolerate any action that threatens the lives of our people and the security of our nation," Park said, while promising to pursue the trust-building policy with Pyongyang that she had promised in her campaign.



Park Geun-Hye

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