

IRAN NUKE TALKS EU sees 'good deal' at hand

AFP, Riga

EU foreign affairs head Federica Mogherini said yesterday a "good deal" was near as an end-March deadline looms over talks on Iran's controversial nuclear programme.

US Secretary of State John Kerry is leading marathon international efforts to get Iran to agree strict limitations on its nuclear programme in exchange for ending punishing Western economic sanctions.

"I believe a good deal is at hand," Mogherini told European lawmakers gathered in Riga where EU foreign ministers meet later yesterday. "I also believe that there is not going to be any deal if it is not going to be a good deal," she said.

"This is something that we have to pass as a message to all our friends and partners," she added, apparently referring to Israel which is bitterly opposed to any nuclear deal with Iran.

Mogherini said a successful outcome now depended more on political will than on technical negotiations, suggesting that some progress has been made.

Kerry held intensive talks in Switzerland earlier this week with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif as the clock runs down on the end-March deadline to secure a political settlement.

A final deal is meant then to be concluded by end-June. The so-called P5+1 group of Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States and Germany wants an accord that would prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear bomb.

In return, the West would ease damaging sanctions on Iran, which insists its nuclear programme is purely civilian.

The European Union has facilitated the talks and on Thursday hosted a technical meeting between the parties in Switzerland.

"The meetings were constructive and useful. Some progress was made and a better understanding on some of the issues emerged," a statement issued by Mogherini's office said.

"The (parties) will continue to work on the remaining gaps and will meet again very soon," it added.



Ukrainian servicemen load a Uragan multiple rocket launcher system onto a cargo train at the railway station in the eastern Ukrainian city of Artemivsk, Donetsk region, yesterday. Kiev announced on Thursday it was starting to pull back Grad rocket launchers as part of the next stage of the withdrawal spelt out in the deal struck in Minsk.

PHOTO: AFP

LIBYA CRISIS Italy's Renzi seeks key role for Russia

AFP, Moscow

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said Thursday Russia could play a decisive role in resolving the crisis in Libya, during a rare visit by a European leader to Moscow.

Renzi held talks with President Vladimir Putin in a visit that also focused on the conflict in Ukraine and Russia's chilly relations with the European Union over its backing of separatist rebel in eastern Ukraine.

Then he raised one of his country's most pressing concerns with the Russian strongman: the chaos in Libya which has seen thousands of migrants flee to Italy and also sparked fears of a new stronghold for jihadists to launch attacks on Europe.

The TASS news agency quoted Renzi as calling for joint efforts to fend off "terrorism and religious fanaticism."

He said Russia's role in the UN Security Council and its relations with Egypt could provide crucial help in finding a solution to the Libyan crisis.

Putin said he supported UN mediation efforts and called for a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Libya, which has been wracked by conflict since the overthrow of dictator Moamer Kadhafi in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising.

EU's Mogherini, Germany downplay sanction options

AFP, Riga

EU foreign affairs head Federica Mogherini downplayed yesterday the threat of fresh sanctions against Russia over Ukraine, insisting instead on the need for full implementation of the latest ceasefire accord.

France and Germany brokered a second Minsk peace agreement with Russia and Ukraine last month which so far seems to be holding better than a September deal but the situation remains fragile.

"So far the ceasefire ... is not perfect but for sure the trend is positive," Mogherini said ahead of a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Riga where Russian intervention in Ukraine is seen as a direct security threat.

Asked about the possibility of imposing additional sanctions against Moscow, Mogherini said: "Obviously

they are always there. "They will not be lifted until something really good happens on the ground and on the other side we are always ready to increase the pressure if needed," she said.

"But I don't start from that. I start from the positive actions the European Union can do now to make things work."

The key issues were to monitor the ceasefire, especially the withdrawal of heavy weapons by both sides, and to strengthen the OSCE which monitors implementation on the ground, she said.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier made the same point, saying more needed to be done to make the ceasefire accord work and that Friday's meeting would discuss how to help the OSCE be more effective.



Sanctions were not on the agenda of the informal foreign ministers meeting, which is a format for discussion not decisions.

"The German position is very clear - this depends on implementation of the Minsk accord," Steinmeier said.

"At the moment, we are trying to accelerate again the process. That is the issue in the foreground and not the question if there will be new sanctions."

RETAKE TIKRIT 28,000 flee drive: UN

AFP, Baghdad

Some 28,000 people have fled the Tikrit area as Iraqi forces battle the Islamic State jihadist group in a massive offensive aimed at retaking the city, the UN said.

The involvement of Shiite militiamen in the operation, which has been dubbed an attempt to avenge the ISIS massacre of hundreds of mainly-Shiite recruits last year, has raised fears of sectarian killings targeting Sunni Arabs.

"Military operations in and around Tikrit have precipitated displacement of an estimated 28,000 people to Samarra," the UN said in a statement Thursday.

"Field reports indicate that additional displacements are under way and that yet more families remain stuck at checkpoints," it said.

The newly displaced Iraqis join what the International Organization for Migration says are 2.5 million people already forced from their homes in the country.

Some 30,000 Iraqi security forces members and allied fighters launched the operation to retake Tikrit on Monday, the largest

of its kind since IS overran swathes of territory last June.

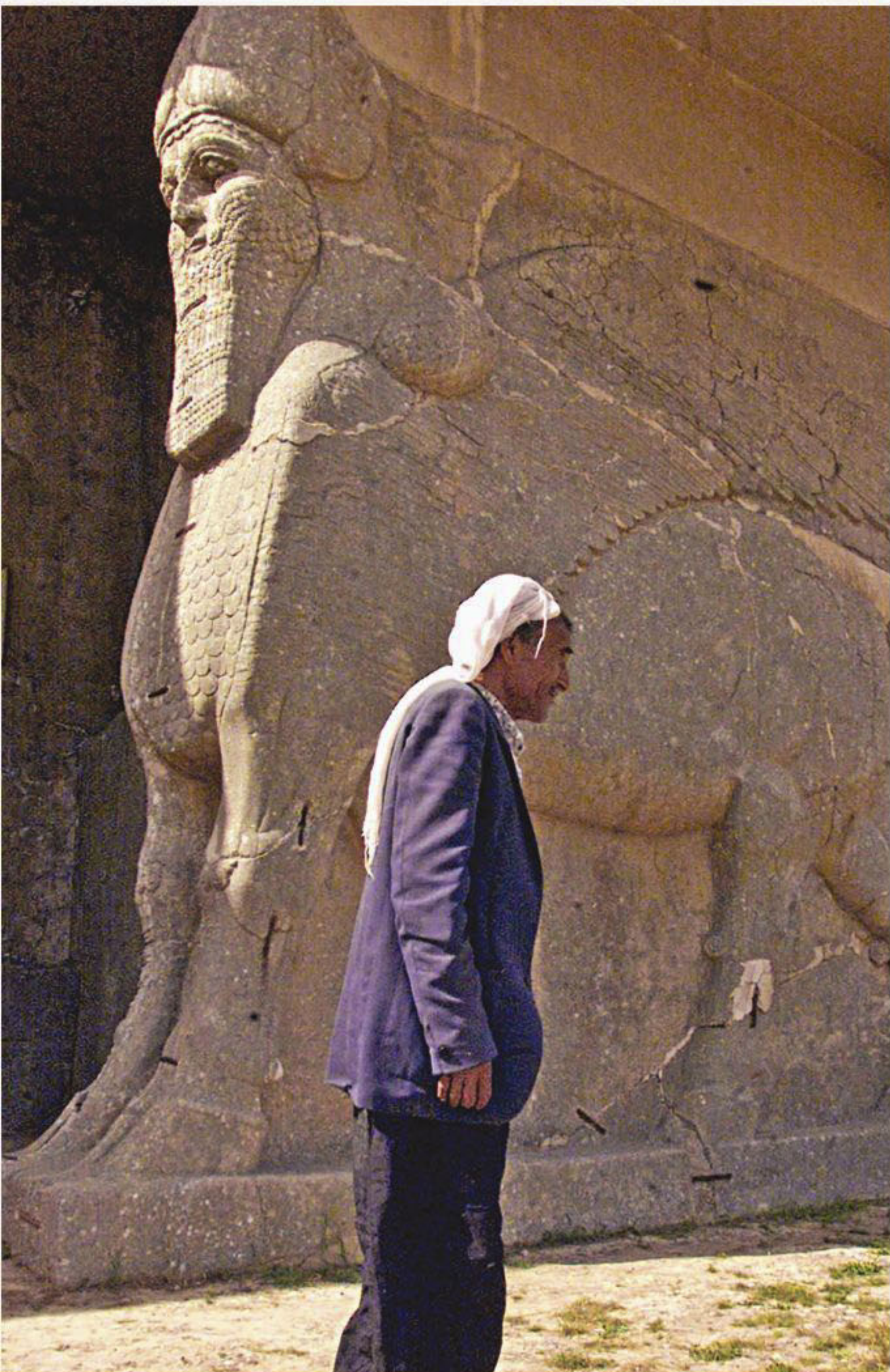
Retaking Tikrit, the hometown of executed president Saddam Hussein, from militants who have had more than eight months to dig in poses a major challenge for the country's forces.

Sectarian-fuelled revenge killings targeting Sunni Arabs have been a feature of past operations involving Shiite militias, raising concerns that the same may happen in Tikrit.

"We have urged all Iraqi forces to avoid and prevent the abuse to civilians of any kind of activity that violates international norms, fuels sectarian fears, and promotes sectarian divides, and that includes Iran in terms of their activities," US Secretary of State John Kerry said Thursday in the Saudi Arabian capital Riyadh.

Kerry confirmed that the US had information indicating the commander of Iran's powerful Quds force, General Qassem Suleimani, was on the ground in Iraq aiding the offensive.

"We've got information to that effect," he said, insisting however that the operation was Iraqi-led.



A picture taken on April 21, 2014 near Mosul shows an Iraqi worker standing next to the ancient statue of a winged bull with a human face at the archaeological site of Nimrud. The Islamic State group has begun bulldozing the ancient Assyrian city in Iraq, the government said yesterday in the jihadists' latest attack on the country's historical heritage. Nimrud was built in the 13th century BC during Mesopotamia's Assyrian era and excavations, carried on since the mid-19th century, have revealed remarkable finds.

PHOTO: AFP

ISIS bulldozes Nimrud Widespread outrage after ancient city bulldozed

AFP, Baghdad

Condemnation poured in yesterday of the Islamic State group's bulldozing of the ancient city of Nimrud, the jihadists' latest attack on Iraqi cultural treasures that the UN termed a "war crime".

After rampaging through Mosul's museum with sledgehammers and torching its library last month, ISIS "bulldozed" the nearby ruins of Nimrud Thursday, the tourism and antiquities ministry said.

Antiquities officials said IS militants had moved trucks last week to the site overlooking the Tigris River, 30 kilometres southeast of their main hub of Mosul.

"Until now, we do not know to what extent it was destroyed," one official said.

Nimrud was the latest victim of what appears to be a systematic campaign by the jihadists to obliterate Iraq's rich heritage.

"I'm really devastated. But it was just a matter of time, now we're waiting for the video. It's sad," Abdulmir Hamdani, an Iraqi archaeologist from Stony Brook University in New York, said of the propaganda film of the destruction that ISIS is likely to release.

Nimrud was founded in the 13th century BC and was considered the jewel of the Assyrian era.

Its stunning reliefs and colossal statues of winged bulls with human heads guarding palace gates filled the world's museums in the 19th century.

A collection of 613 pieces of gold jewellery, ornaments and precious stones discovered in a royal tomb in 1988 has been described as one of the greatest archaeological finds of the 20th century.

"Their plan is to destroy Iraqi heritage, one site at a time," said Hamdani.

"Hatra of course will be next," he added, referring to a 2,000-year-old UNESCO-listed site about 100 kilometres south of Mosul known for its beautifully preserved temples blending Hellenistic, Roman and Eastern influences.

Irina Bokova, the head of the UN's cultural body UNESCO, condemned the destruction of Nimrud "with the strongest force".

"We cannot stay silent. The deliberate destruction of cultural heritage constitutes a war crime, and I call on all political and religious leaders in the region to stand up against this new barbarity," she said yesterday.

UNESCO has called for tougher action to protect the many heritage sites in one of the cradles of civilisation, but little can be done in areas under jihadist control.

The destruction was met with condemnation and sadness on Baghdad's Mutanabi Street, a favourite haunt of Iraqi intellectuals.

"After they killed the human spirit, they began killing civilisation," Ibrahim Dawood, a writer and poet, said of ISIS.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's top Shiite cleric who is revered by millions, sharply criticised ISIS's targeting of the Mosul museum and archaeological sites.

It demonstrates "their savagery and their barbarism and their hostility to the Iraqi people", Sistani's representative said on his behalf at weekly Friday prayers in Karbala.

ISIS tries to justify the destruction by saying the statues are idolatrous, but experts say the jihadists traffic antiquities to fund their self-proclaimed "caliphate" and destroy only those pieces that are too bulky to be smuggled.

Stuart Gibson, a UNESCO expert on museums, said pressure from the international community would have little effect on ISIS.

"We have also traditionally called upon the peoples of the region to recognise the irreplaceable value and cultural necessity in protecting their cultural heritage," he said.

"Unfortunately today the people in the region are exhausted and terrified. The remainder of us can only stand on the outside looking on in absolute despair."

Polish jails open doors for a day

AFP, Warsaw

Warsaw bank manager Grazyna Dubiel would not normally be behind bars on a Sunday.

"I'd be out taking a walk somewhere," the 57-year-old said while following guards down a windowless corridor of a jail in the Polish capital.

Dubiel and her husband were among 60 curious members of the public who toured the Warszawa-Bialoleka penitentiary, Poland's biggest prison and one of 10 Polish facilities to throw open their gates for a day in February.



"We're still seen as this institution that detains inmates and that's it: nothing else happens," said prison psychologist Dorota Alame, who ushered visitors in through a barred door with a smile and sky-high heels.

"We wanted to show that we really work with the inmates. We're constantly giving them tools they can use on the outside."

Polish prisons are overcrowded, with around 80,000 inmates for a country of 38 million people, said Piotr Kladoczny, a criminal lawyer with the Warsaw-based Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights.

Greece seeks EU talks

AFP, Athens

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has requested a meeting with European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker, a government source said yesterday, after Athens got no help from the European Central Bank to address a cash squeeze.

The government later said in a statement: "The meeting will discuss how Greece will utilise European funds to address the humanitarian crisis and unemployment."

German daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung had earlier reported that Tsipras had wanted to see Juncker yesterday, but his request was turned down.

A finance ministry source yesterday said Athens had repaid the International Monetary Fund a first debt instalment of 310 million euros.

Greece's new anti-austerity government last month reversed course and agreed to temporarily extend its EU-IMF bailout, but until Athens wins approval for its plans for a four-year economic recovery blueprint it has no access to funds remaining in the 240-billion euro (\$272-billion) rescue programme.

The government has said it will present a first batch of concrete proposals to eurozone ministers on Monday in a bid to break the deadlock.