

Russia to Continue Backing Iraqi, Syrian Governments: Lavrov



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov

MOSCOW (PRESS TV) – Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has expressed Moscow’s determination to continue to back the Iraqi and Syrian governments in their ongoing battle against extremism in the Middle East.

“We are continuing to aid the governments of Iraq and Syria, as well as other countries in the region in the fight against religious extremists that are fighting for power,”

Lavrov said on Monday. He added that Moscow’s support consists of providing Baghdad and Damascus with “large-scale deliveries of weapons and military equipment” aimed at strengthening their fighting capacity.

The top Russian diplomat also urged the reinforcement of international efforts to counter the threat of terrorism.

Lavrov further voiced Moscow’s

readiness to form a coalition tasked with fighting the ISIL terrorist group with the approval of the United Nations.

“If [we are] speaking about a coalition, then let’s make a coalition, let the UN Security Council make decisions that will be grounded on international law,” he said.

Moreover, the Russian foreign minister described as “incorrect and even immoral” any attempts seeking to serve “geopolitical interests” under the guise of fighting terrorism.

ISIL terrorists control large parts of Syria’s east and north. ISIL also sent its Takfiri militants into Iraq in June, seizing large swathes of land straddling the border between Syria and Iraq.

They have been committing heinous crimes in the captured areas, including mass executions and beheading of people, and terrorizing all communities, including Shias, Sunnis, Kurds, Christians and Izadi Kurds.

The United States and its allies have been launching airstrikes against the ISIL terrorist group in Syria since September. Washington has been also carrying out airstrikes on ISIL positions in Iraq since August.

This comes as the US and its regional allies have been the leading supporters of the ISIL and other affiliated militant groups in Syria and Iraq.

Japanese PM Abe Suffers Setback as Two Ministers Quit



Japan’s Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Yuko Obuchi bows as she arrives for a news conference at her ministry in Tokyo October 20, 2014.

TOKYO (Reuters) - Two Japanese cabinet ministers resigned on Monday over the dubious use of political funds, dealing Prime Minister Shinzo Abe his biggest setback since he took office in December 2012.

The resignations of the two women, including the high-profile trade and industry minister, could complicate tough decisions on key policies, including whether to go ahead with an unpopular plan to raise the sales tax and planned restarts of nuclear reactors shut down after the 2011 Fukushima disaster.

Abe hopes to contain the damage through swift replacements of the two, but the opposition is looking for other potentially vulnerable ministers also appointed in an early September cabinet reshuffle. Further resignations could raise doubts about Abe’s own future, some political experts said.

“There are more than two (other) ministers with regard to whom there are suspicions,” Yukio Edano, the opposition Democratic Party’s second-in-command, told

reporters. “We will coordinate our actions among opposition parties, point out the problems and ask for explanations about the other ministers.”

He did not identify the ministers nor explain how the opposition planned to seek any explanations.

Trade and industry Minister Yuko Obuchi, 40, the daughter of a prime minister and tipped as a future contender to become Japan’s first female premier, tendered her resignation after allegations that her support groups misused political funds.

Just hours later, Justice Minister Midori Matsushima also resigned. The opposition Democratic Party had filed a criminal complaint against Matsushima, accusing her of violating the election law by distributing paper fans to voters.

Obuchi and Matsushima were two of five women appointed by Abe in the cabinet reshuffle, a move intended to boost his popularity and show his commitment to promoting women as part of his “Abenomics” strategy to revive the economy.

News in Brief

STOCKHOLM (Reuters) - Sweden released on Sunday a grainy photo of a mysterious vessel in Stockholm’s archipelago, as the military hunted for a foreign submarine or divers in the country’s biggest such mobilization since the Cold War.

The search in the Baltic Sea less than 30 miles (50 km) from Stockholm began on Friday and reawakened memories of the final years of the Cold War when Sweden repeatedly sought out suspected Soviet submarines along its coast with depth charges.

The military showed one picture of what appeared to be a craft surrounded by white ripples. The witness who took the photograph said the vessel then submerged -- one of three sightings that the military said were credible reports.

The Swedish armed forces have consistently labeled the hunt one of investigating “foreign underwater activity”.

NEW DELHI (PRESS TV) – India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has scored a major victory in key assembly elections in the country’s two northern and western states, boosting the prime minister’s popularity.

According to official results released on Sunday, the BJP won the majority of the votes in Haryana State and took most of the assembly seats in the state of Maharashtra.

Both states had previously been ruled by the rival Congress Party, which was defeated in the national elections back in May.

The latest electoral victories are widely regarded as a confirmation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s popularity five months after he rose to power as the country’s top executive. The victory in the recent state elections will likely facilitate Modi’s efforts to push through his promised economic reform plans.

The development comes as Modi’s administration, with an apparent concern over impacting the state elections, has put off unpopular policy making decisions on hiking the price of natural gas and ending a price cap on diesel fuel.

While media outlets across India have widely described the success of the ruling BJP in the two key states as a sign of Modi’s “unabated popularity,” they also warn that he must deliver on his campaign pledge of change.

Meanwhile, India’s prominent Business Standard also strikes a cautionary note, writing on Monday that negotiations on government formation in Maharashtra will be “closely watched, including by investors.”

TRIPOLI (PRESS TV) – At least 75 people have been killed in the north-eastern Libyan city of Benghazi during five days of clashes between pro-government forces and militias.

In the latest wave of violence hitting the city, nine people lost their lives.

According to reports, a woman was killed and her daughter injured in a bomb attack that targeted the vacant house of former General Khalifa Haftar, who has launched an offensive since Wednesday to drive the militants out of Benghazi.

Medical sources also said the bodies of eight people, including two soldiers, had been received.

Meanwhile, air raids made by units of the air force loyal to Haftar pounded militants’ positions.

The Libyan army has endorsed Haftar, while Prime Minister Omar al-Hassi -- who was appointed in August by Fajr (Dawn) Libya militiamen that took control of the capital Tripoli -- has supported the Benghazi armed groups. Libya’s government and elected parliament has taken refuge in the eastern town of al-Baida after militiamen from the Fajr Libya seized the capital and most government institutions.

The new Tripoli rulers have set up a rival parliament and government not recognized by the international community.

Libya plunged into chaos following the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The ouster of Gaddafi gave rise to a patchwork of heavily-armed militias and deep political divisions.

Lufthansa Pilots to Hold Strike on Long-Haul Flights

BERLIN (PRESS TV) – Pilots working for Germany’s main airline Lufthansa have announced that they will be holding a one-day strike on long-haul flights.

Vereinigung Cockpit union announced that the strike would begin on Monday, October 20, 2014. The strike is expected to be held as a previously announced 35-hour walkout is also targeting most of Lufthansa’s long-haul and medium-haul flights.

The strike on short-haul flights is expected to affect 200,000 passengers on some 2,150 flights, on Monday.

The latest move is the ninth of such strikes by the pilots, who seek to keep an early retirement plan the management is trying to get rid of. The walkouts have cost Lufthansa about USD 90 million so far.

Lufthansa pays up to 60 percent of pay to pilots who want to retire early at the age of 55.

The airline says the current retirement scheme is no longer needed, given an increase in life expectancy and a recent court ruling that allows pilots to work until the age of 65.

This is while Lufthansa is in tough competition with major Persian Gulf and low-cost airlines.

The strikes by the Lufthansa pilots come as German train drivers also earlier carried out a strike in protest against low pay and work hours.

Reform-Minded Widodo Takes Over as Indonesia’s President



Indonesian presidential candidate Joko “Jokowi” Widodo gestures during a rally in Proklamasi Monument Park in Jakarta in this July 9, 2014 file photo.

JAKARTA (Reuters) - Indonesia’s Joko Widodo took over as president of the world’s third-largest democracy on Monday with supporters’ hopes high but pressing economic problems and skeptical rivals set to test the former furniture businessman.

Widodo won a narrow victory over a former general in a July election with promises of clean government and tackling entrenched interests. It was the first time in the young democracy’s

history that a president was elected from outside the established military and political elite.

“This is the time for us to unite our hearts and hands, this is the time for us ... to reach and realize an Indonesia that has political sovereignty, economic independence and cultural character,” Widodo said in his inaugural speech to a packed parliament.

His priorities will be getting to grips with slowing growth in the

resource-rich country, as well as deteriorating government finances, a heavy subsidy bill and flagging investor interest.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry attended the inauguration along with various Asian leaders including the prime ministers of neighboring Malaysia and Singapore, the Sultan of Brunei and Australia’s prime minister.

The former mayor of the city of Solo and governor of the capital, Jakarta, is untested on the national and international stages but he already faces resistance from the establishment to his transparent, can-do approach to governance.

“He has climbed up to the top of the pyramid but he’s still weak within the powerful political class,” said Achmad Sukarsono, a political analyst at the Habibie Center, think-tank.

Thousands gathered on the streets of the capital, Jakarta, waving flags and banners to celebrate the unprecedented ascent of the small-town businessman to leader of the country with the world’s biggest Muslim population.

Ukraine, Russia Gas Deal Just Enough to Get Through Winter

KIEV (Reuters) - An interim natural gas deal by Moscow and Kiev, reached over the weekend, could supply just enough to get Ukraine through the winter as long as the weather does not become unusually cold, Reuters research shows.

Russia, Ukraine and the European Commission moved towards an agreement in late September and made further progress at the weekend.

The deal is expected to be finalized at meetings between officials in Brussels on Tuesday.

Russia cut off gas supply to Ukraine in mid-June following more than two years of disagreement over the price and after relations between the two countries deteriorated over Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and fighting in the east of Ukraine.

Not all details of the agreement are known, but below is a summary of the main points.

Russia is likely to deliver 5 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas by the end of March, which should just be enough to meet demand.

Ukraine’s annual gas use is typically around 50 bcm, although this figure varies depending on weather conditions and economic output.

Accessing all available sources, Ukraine is likely to have access to 42-53 bcm of gas to meet its annual demand.

Over half of its consumption is usually provided by Russia, and Moscow probably delivered 5 to 10 bcm between January and June this year before stopping supplies.

Ukraine’s gas storage sites are currently filled to an average of 52.5 percent, equivalent to 16.8 bcm.

It also has domestic production, though the loss of gas-producing Crimea means its output will be much lower this year than its usual figure of over 20 bcm.