

Greek PM Visits Turkey to Improve Strained Ties



Greek PM Alexis Tsipras (2nd L) and Turkish officials visit the Byzantine-era monument of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Feb. 6, 2019.

ISTANBUL (Reuters) - Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras paid a symbolic visit to Istanbul's former cathedral Hagia Sophia on Wednesday on a trip aimed at improving ties with Turkey, long strained by disputes over territory, energy exploration and Cyprus.

Tsipras met Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara on Tuesday, where the Turkish president said he expected more cooperation from Athens in the repatriation of eight soldiers who fled to Greece following an

attempted coup in 2016. Tsipras told their joint news conference that Greece does not welcome putschists, but that the case of the eight soldiers was a matter for the judiciary.

He said both countries had agreed to de-escalate tensions in the Aegean Sea and proceed with confidence building measures. Differences with Turkey "can and must be solved with dialogue," he added.

Erdogan spokesman Ibrahim Kalin accompanied Tsipras on his tour of Hagia Sophia, which was the

foremost cathedral in Christendom for 900 years and one of Islam's greatest mosques for another 500 years. It has been a museum since 1935.

Tsipras later visited an island near Istanbul to attend mass at the Orthodox Halki theological school, a centre of scholarship until it was closed by the Turkish state in 1971. Turkey's refusal to reopen it is another bone of contention.

He was also to meet Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual head of Orthodox Christians worldwide, and representatives of the Greek community in Istanbul.

Another source of tensions between the Aegean neighbors is the divided island of Cyprus, split in a Turkish invasion in 1974 triggered by a brief Greek-inspired coup. UN-led peace talks between the Greek and Turkish sides collapsed in 2017.

NATO members Greece and Turkey were nearly drawn into a military clash as recently as 1996 over an uninhabited Aegean islet.

On Tuesday, Turkey updated a list of former military officers wanted for their alleged role in the 2016 failed putsch to include the eight officers granted asylum in Greece, and offered a bounty of 4 million Turkish lira (\$770,446) for each of them.

Germany, France to Build Next-Generation Warplanes



Europe plans to build a 6th generation stealth fighter.

PARIS (Reuters) - France and Germany will build the jet that is expected to replace Dassault's Rafale and Germany's Eurofighters by 2024, will start work on the concept and architectures of the program, the source said.

Dassault Aviation and Airbus, which will build the jet that is expected to replace Dassault's Rafale and Germany's Eurofighters by 2024, will start work on the concept and architectures of the program, the source said.

The French and German governments are expected to award the companies involved additional contracts to advance technologies and work on demonstrators this summer.

French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel first announced plans in July 2017 for the new Future Combat Air System (FCAS), which will include a fighter jet and a range of associated weapons, including drones.

After nearly two years of preparatory work by the companies involved, Wednesday's agreements and contract signing will pave the way for the program to begin in earnest.

The initial contracts being signed on Wednesday will run for two years, the sources said.

Airbus and Dassault have been waiting for initial contracts to be signed to start work on

the new project. France's Safran and Germany's MTU Aero Engines will jointly develop the new warplane's engine, a German security source said.

French Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly and German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen were to preside over the signing ceremony at a Safran site in northeastern Paris on Wednesday, where representatives for the two companies were expected to sign a memorandum of understanding, the source said, adding that Spain is to join the project in the summer.

French electronics firm Thales and European missile maker MBDA would also participate.

Germany removed a key obstacle to progress on the project last week when it bowed to French demands and excluded Lockheed Martin's F-35 stealth fighter from a multibillion-euro tender to replace ageing Tornado fighter jets that are fitted to carry U.S. nuclear weapons.

Paris, Germany's closest European partner, had warned that buying the F-35 in particular would derail plans to develop the new Franco-German fighter by 2040 since it would constitute a potential competitor to that project.

France and Germany will add Spain as a full partner in the program this summer, sources told Reuters in December.

Trump Vows to Build Border Wall, Warns Democrats



House Speaker Nancy Pelosi watches as U.S. President Donald Trump delivers his second State of the Union address on Capitol Hill in Washington, February 5, 2019.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Donald Trump vowed in his State of the Union speech to build a border wall, which is a source of a deep partisan divide, and said Democratic attempts at "ridiculous partisan investigations" could damage U.S. prosperity.

Trump spoke to a joint session of the U.S. Congress facing political discord over his demands that Democrats end their opposition to funding for a U.S.-Mexico border wall he says is needed to stem illegal immigration and smuggled drugs.

During his 82-minute speech, he outlined his political priorities without providing specific policy details.

Trump called illegal immigration "an urgent national crisis," but stopped short of declaring a border emergency that would allow him to bypass Congress for wall funding. Instead, he urged Democrats and Republicans to find a compromise by a Feb. 15 deadline.

"In the past, most of the people in this room voted for a wall, but the proper wall never got built. I will get it built," Trump said in the

House of Representatives chamber, with his main Democratic adversary, new House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, watching over his shoulder.

Democrats call the wall a waste of money and ineffective.

During the speech, Democratic Representative Pramila Jayapal tweeted her opposition to the wall, saying: "The border is more secure than ever. Enough."

Trump warned, without offering evidence, that Democratic efforts to investigate his administration, along with the possibility of U.S. involvement in wars abroad, would endanger the U.S. economy.

"An economic miracle is taking place in the United States and the only thing that can stop it are foolish wars, politics, or ridiculous partisan investigations," he said.

His remarks came as Democrats who now control the House planned a series of probes into the Trump administration and his personal finances, while Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller investigates Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election and possible collusion between the Trump campaign and Moscow. Russia denies meddling and Trump has said there was no collusion.

Democratic Representative Val Demings called Trump's remarks shameful and said the investigations would proceed. "We're not going to stop," she said.

Macedonia to Join NATO Despite Russia Opposition



Macedonian Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov shakes hands with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels, February 6, 2019.

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - NATO members signed an accord with Macedonia on Wednesday allowing the tiny ex-Yugoslav republic to become the 30th member of the U.S.-led alliance after a deal with Greece ended a 27-year-old dispute over its name.

At a formal signing of the NATO accession protocol, which must now be ratified by allied governments, Macedonia's Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov hailed the moment as showing that the country "will never walk alone" once in the alliance.

"We stand beside these 29 allies... able and ready to assume the obligations arising from our full membership in NATO," Dimitrov told a news conference after NATO ambassadors signed the protocol.

The ratification process typically takes about a year, and the United States has said it expects Macedonia - now known officially as North Macedonia under the terms of its name deal with Greece - to formally join the alliance in 2020.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said the admittance of a new member highlighted that all European nations who met the entrance criteria could join the regional alliance, a position Moscow rejects.

Russia says that by taking in Balkan members, the alliance is undermining security in the region.

would improve regional stability, echoing the view of Western countries which see NATO and EU membership as the best way of preserving peace in the Balkans after the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

"For us NATO is about making the world more peaceful, more stable," he said.

Three other ex-Yugoslav republics - Slovenia, Croatia and Montenegro - have already joined NATO, as have other countries in the Balkan region including Albania, Bulgaria and Romania.

Both Greek and Macedonian parliaments have agreed to rename the country the Republic of North Macedonia, ending Athens' years-long veto of its neighbor's efforts to join NATO and the EU. Greece sees the use of "Macedonia" as implying territorial claims to a Greek province of the same name.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has also warned NATO against cultivating closer ties with Ukraine and Georgia, two ex-Soviet republics that also aspire to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which is headquartered in Brussels.

After the Macedonia signing protocol, Stoltenberg praised Georgia on Wednesday, saying: "We are very encouraged by what we see in Georgia, their commitment to reforms, their commitment to strengthening defense and security institutions, their commitment to transparency, judiciary reforms."

EU Has Abandoned Hope to Stop Brexit: Tusk

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - EU summit chairman Donald Tusk said he had abandoned hope that Brexit might be stopped and said on Wednesday his priority was now to avert a "fiasco" in 50 days if Britain crashes out without a deal.

Assuring Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar of the solidarity of all other member states as Dublin insists Britain give legal guarantees to avoid disrupting the Northern Ireland border, Tusk told a joint news conference in Brussels that he saw no force capable of blocking a "pro-Brexit" government and opposition.

As British Prime Minister Theresa May prepares to meet EU officials in Brussels on Thursday with a mandate from lawmakers to rework the withdrawal treaty she agreed with the Union in November, Tusk and Varadkar both echoed other European

leaders in ruling out change to the text, including the Irish "backstop" — the protocol which parliament roundly rejected last month.

"I hope that tomorrow we will hear from Prime Minister May a realistic suggestion on how to end the impasse," Tusk said. "I strongly believe that a common solution is possible."

Tusk, the European Council president, said, however, that the EU must step up planning for Britain leaving on March 29 without having a legal agreement: "A sense of responsibility also tells us to prepare for a possible fiasco," he said.

In combative mood, he added that those who promoted Brexit without offering a clear plan for how to unravel safely 46 years of membership deserved "a special place in hell".

A former Polish prime minister, Tusk has been a notable EU voice in encouraging Britons to try to reverse the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum but on Wednesday he was notably downbeat.

"I know that still a very great number of people ... wish for a reversal of this decision. I have always been with you, with all my heart. But the facts are unmistakable."

He said the "pro-Brexit stance" of May and opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn meant that "today, there is no political force and no effective leadership for remain".

Varadkar, visiting Brussels a day before May as Ireland strives to protect its interests in the bloc as its former colonial ruler and main trading partner quits, said the Brexit deal made last year was "the best deal possible".



WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump will hold a two-day summit with North Korea leader Kim Jong Un Feb. 27-28 in Vietnam to continue his efforts to persuade Kim to give up his nuclear weapons. Trump has said his outreach to Kim and their first meeting last June in Singapore opened a path to peace. But there is not yet a concrete plan for how denuclearization could be implemented. Denuclearizing North Korea is something that has eluded the U.S. for more than two decades, since it was first learned that North Korea was close to acquiring the means for nuclear weapons. "As part of a bold new diplomacy, we continue our historic push for peace on the Korean Peninsula," Trump said Tuesday in his State of the Union address. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats told Congress last week that U.S. intelligence officials do not believe Kim will eliminate his nuclear weapons or the capacity to build more because he believes they are key to the survival of the regime. Satellite video taken since the June summit has indicated North Korea is continuing to produce nuclear materials at its weapons factories.

BERLIN (Reuters) -- Germany must continue to increase its defense spending despite having less wiggle room in its budget, NATO Secretary General said, after a government document on Monday showed the tax revenues were likely to rise less than expected in coming years. Germany has begun to increase its spending and it has to continue on this way, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told Germany's Funke newspaper group. "I understand that this is not easy and states prefer investing in health, education or infrastructure, but we have to invest more in our security if the world becomes more unsafe," Stoltenberg said. The German government has assured NATO that it will stick to its aim of boosting defense spending to 1.5 percent of its gross domestic product by 2024, despite having less wiggle room in its budget, a German security source told Reuters on Wednesday.

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) -- Pakistan's top court on Wednesday warned the military and intelligence agencies they must not exceed their mandate and meddle in politics, an apparent rebuke over their handling of protests in 2017. The judges' comments were a rare public ticking off for the powerful armed forces, which have ruled for nearly half of Pakistan's history and have in recent years been criticized for resuming a more active role in politics. The army denies interfering. The Supreme Court was investigating the so-called "Faizabad protest", which saw a hardline group paralyze the capital Islamabad accusing a minister of blasphemy. But the inquiry also looked at the role of security agencies, including ending the standoff through mediation. Seven people were killed and nearly 200 wounded when police initially tried but failed to remove protesters.

OUAGADOUGOU (Reuters) -- Burkina Faso's army said it had killed nearly 150 militants in response to an attack on civilians this week, but an international rights group said some of them had been executed in front of their families. The army has stepped up operations in response to worsening security across northern Burkina since last year, including attacks by Islamist militants and inter-ethnic clashes, leading to accusations of extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests. Rights activists fear such abuses could fuel spiraling instability in previously peaceful Burkina as they have in neighboring Mali, where jihadist groups have tapped into ethnic rivalries and anger with the central government to recruit.

NEW DELHI (Reuters) -- A board that oversees an ancient Hindu temple in southern India said on Wednesday it now favored allowing women of menstruating age to enter the temple, reversing its previous support for a centuries-old ban. The Sabarimala temple has been the site of tension since India's Supreme Court ruled in late September to end a ban on women and girls aged from 10-50 from entering. The Travancore Devaswom Board, which administers the temple, had refused to abide by the court ruling and thousands of devotees have blocked attempts by women to visit the site. On Wednesday, the board said it would now abide by the court ruling.

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The Vatican on Wednesday clarified comments by Pope Francis about a case of what he called "sexual slavery" within a French congregation of nuns, saying he was referring to an abuse of power that was reflected in instances of sexual abuse. Francis cited the case when responding to a question about the sexual abuse of nuns by clergy during a press conference Tuesday returning home from the United Arab Emirates. It was the pope's first-ever public acknowledgment of the problem of priests and bishops sexually abusing nuns. He stressed that the Vatican had been confronting the issue for some time and vowed to do more. Vatican spokesman Alessandro Gisotti said Wednesday Francis "spoke of 'sexual slavery' to mean 'manipulation' or a type of abuse of power that is reflected in a sexual abuse."