

Turkey informs P5, EU on Ankara bomber's alleged PYD link

Hurriyet Daily News, 18.02.2016



Turkey has informed world leaders, including the United States and Russia, that deadly Ankara car bombing was perpetrated by Syria's Democratic Union Party's (PYD) military wing, in an obvious message that they should no longer cooperate and support the Syrian Kurdish group.

Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Feridun Sinirlioğlu held separate meetings with the ambassadors of five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, the U.S., Russia, the United Kingdom, France and China as well as with envoys of Germany, Netherlands (the current term president of the EU) and the EU Delegation in Ankara.

Both President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu announced the attack was conducted by a Syrian national and alleged he was a member of the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the PYD. Turkey recognizes the PYD as an offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and therefore has called on allies not to lend support to the group though the group is currently fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) with Western support.

Davutoğlu told reporters that he instructed the Foreign Ministry to provide all necessary information about the Ankara incident, including evidence that supposedly proved the YPG was behind the bombing. Turkey has long criticized the U.S. and Russia over their political and military support to the PYD. The U.S. has openly said it differs from Turkey on the role of the PYD as its military wing has been conducting an effective fight against ISIL in Syria.

Russia has further cemented its ties to the PYD in the aftermath of a jet downing by Turkish Air Forces and allowed the group to open an office in Moscow. Ankara accuses both Moscow and Washington of supplying weapons to the PYD, claiming that these weapons were later found in the hands of the PKK inside Turkey.

Deputy PM: We will not send Turkey into an unpredictable future

Anadolu Agency, 12.02.2016



Turkey's government will not send the country on an unpredictable adventure amid the continued shelling of PYD positions in northern Syria, Deputy PM Kurtulmuş said.

“No one should doubt that we are taking all measures that will protect all the national interests of Turkey and making all kinds of preparations. In the end, we will not agree to send Turkey on any unpredictable adventure,” Kurtulmuş said. Kurtulmuş said the main topic that should be brought to the attention of the U.N. Security Council was the Feb. 15 attacks targeting hospitals and civilian regions in Azez, urging the U.N. to raise its voice against attacks by Russian warplanes.

The Deputy Prime Minister also criticized the United States and Russia over recent developments in the region, calling on the countries to declare no-fly zone in Syria at the U.N. Security Council if they are sincere about peace.

Turkey will continue to strike back at PYD in Syria, PM tells Merkel

AFP, 15.02.2016



Turkey will continue to strike back at fighters of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party in Syria, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu told German Chancellor Angela Merkel, despite growing pressure on Ankara to stop the shelling.

In telephone talks, Davutoğlu told Merkel that Turkey “will not permit the PYD to carry out aggressive acts. Our security forces gave the necessary response and will continue to do so,” his office said in a statement. Turkish artillery struck at targets of the PYD and its People's Protection Units (YPG) militia on both days of the weekend, while insisting that it was returning fire under the rules of engagement.

Davutoğlu told Merkel that the Syrian Kurdish forces, who Turkey accuses of being the Syrian branch of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), had been advancing with Russian air support. Russia is the key ally of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who Turkey wants to see ousted.

Davutoğlu said the move by the PYD was aimed at uprooting “hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians” from the border region and “creating a new humanitarian crisis” that would affect both Turkey and the European Union. “This is aimed not just at Turkey but also the European Union,” he said, warning of a “new wave of hundreds of thousands of refugees.”

The EU and Turkey, which hosts over 2.5 million Syrian refugees, are already grappling with the crisis that saw around one million migrants cross the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the EU in 2015. France had earlier called for an “immediate halt” to Turkey’s artillery bombardments while the U.S. State Department had also urged Turkey to cease firing.

Erdoğan: 14 detained for Ankara attack, int'l community must understand PKK-PYD ties

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Fourteen suspects in seven provinces were detained for links to a car bomb attack in Ankara on Feb. 18 that claimed at least 28 lives, including 20 high ranking soldiers and eight citizens, and wounded 61 people, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said.

“Although the PKK and the PYD are denying it, the information from the Interior Ministry and intelligence show that they are behind [the attack],” said Erdoğan, referring to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). PYD leader Salih Muslim had earlier denied that the Syrian Kurdish group was behind the attack.

“I guess that the detentions will not be limited to 14,” Erdoğan said, adding that the domestic and foreign connections behind the attack had been discovered. “This process will conduce our friends in the international community to understand how tight the PYD and YPG’s connection to the PKK is,” Erdoğan said, repeating that Turkey had insisted on the link, submitting documents. The People’s Protection Units (YPG) is the armed wing of the PYD.

The U.S. has refused to name the PYD a terrorist group as it is cooperating with the group in fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria. The stance against the PYD has become a major bone of contention between allies U.S. and Turkey. Erdoğan also said he was sad that the attack came just four months after an Ankara suicide bombing that claimed 101 lives.

International community condemns Ankara blast, stands with Turkey

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The international community has condemned a car bomb attack in Ankara that killed 28 people and wounded 61 others near the armed forces' headquarters, parliament and other government buildings. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned the explosion in a statement issued by his spokesperson and extended his "heartfelt condolences" to the victims' families.

"The Secretary-General hopes the perpetrators of this terrorist attack will be swiftly brought to justice," said the statement. "The United Nations stands in solidarity with the people and the government of Turkey at this tragic time."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg also strongly condemned the terrorist attack and offered his "deepest condolences to the families of those killed and to the Turkish people." He said there could be no justification "for such horrific acts" and that "NATO allies stand shoulder to shoulder in the fight against terrorism."

Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini and Commissioner Johannes Hahn released a joint statement on the terrorist attack, saying their "fullest sympathy goes to the Turkish people and authorities." "We are with Turkey and its people in these difficult times and stand by all those who suffer from the consequences of such violence, and of terrorism," the statement said.

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland, conveyed his condolences to Turkey's government and people, saying he was "deeply saddened by the news of yet another deadly attack in Turkey." "Our thoughts are with the many people who are mourning and suffering as a result of these horrific terrorist attacks," he said. "At the Council of Europe we stand in solidarity and sorrow today with our member state Turkey." Meanwhile, the White House said it condemned the attack in Ankara and that stands in solidarity with Turkey. "We stand together with Turkey, a NATO ally, a strong partner, and a valued member of the counter-Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant coalition in the face of this attack," said Ned Price, a spokesman for the White House National Security Council.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel also released a statement, in which she sharply condemned the "horrifying" attack. The chancellor said she was horrified by the attack in Ankara and that her thoughts were with the families of the victims and the injured. "I'm telling the Turkish people: we as Germans are sharing your pain," the statement said. "In the battle against those responsible for these inhuman acts we are on the side of Turkey," Merkel added. Russia also expressed condolences to Turkey after the blast, saying the attack demonstrates the "need for all countries to unite in the fight against international terrorism."

Face to face with illusions and realities

Turkish Policy Quarterly, 11.02.2016



On the occasion of the International Peace Congress organized in Paris in 1849, in his speech entitled “A Day Will Come,” Victor Hugo had spoken of a period when Europe would be known as the “United States of Europe” and where in his words:

“You France, you Russia, you Italy, you England, you Germany, you all, nations of the continent, without losing your distinct qualities and your glorious individuality, will be merged closely within a superior unit and you will form the European brotherhood.”

A European Union exists to-day but without Russia. John Maynard Keynes in 1930 in his Essays in Persuasions wrote an article called “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren” where he tried to answer the following question: “What can we reasonably expect the level of our economic life to be a hundred years hence? What are the economic possibilities for our grandchildren?” His answer was as follows:

“The pace at which we can reach our destination of economic bliss will be governed by four things; our power to control population, our determination to avoid wars and civil dissensions, our willingness to entrust to science the direction of those matters which are properly the concern of science, and the rate of accumulation as fixed by the margin between our production and our consumption; of which the last will easily look after itself, given the first three.”

The influx of refugees from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, and the specter of the rise of extreme right parties and fascism within the EU forces us to contemplate a somewhat dark future for Europe. Today, we are far from being able to make similar projections for our world or the EU. We can no longer speak of a unifying Europe at a time when we speak of a Brexit and Grexit, or of an EU with no problems when it is still living the economic side effects of the 2008 crisis which started hitting them hard in 2009.

The recovery is still slow and the Eurozone still prone to ups and downs. To the existing economic crisis, new social and political problems have been added. The influx of refugees from Iraq, Syria and elsewhere, and the specter of the rise of extreme right parties and fascism within the EU forces us to contemplate a somewhat dark future for Europe.

Things do not look too bright for Turkey either. The economy is slowing down, many cities and regions of Turkey are living the aftershocks of having close to three million Syrian refugees living in the country, looking for jobs, living quarters, and schools while the widening conflict in Turkey’s Workers’ Party (PKK) continues causing domestic and regional uncertainties. These multifarious problems have led Turkey and the EU to revitalize their up till now frozen relations. The EU that had always emphasized its concerns on human rights, civil liberties.

And democracy in Turkey seems now to have replaced the priority it had given to these fundamental values with new concerns about regional security, rising terrorism in the West, and the increase in the flow of refugees. This duplicity in the way relations between Turkey and the EU is conducted is saddening but a reality.

The Turkey-EU Summit meeting of November 29, 2015 and the meetings that followed the summit allowed for the opening of a new Chapter — Chapter 17 – in the accession negotiations, the starting of discussions over visa free travel for Turkish citizens by the end of the current year, the upgrading of the Customs Union Agreement, and the initiation of multiple talks on energy cooperation. This revitalization of relations was coolly welcomed by pro-EU constituencies in Turkey. One has only become too used to the “one step forward two steps back” policies of both the EU and Turkey.

The EU that had always emphasized its concerns on human rights, civil liberties, and democracy in Turkey seems now to have replaced the priority it had given to these fundamental values with new concerns about regional security, rising terrorism in the West, and the increase in the flow of refugees.

Chapter 17 on Economic and Monetary Policy which was opened to negotiation during the Intergovernmental Conference last December had been formerly blocked by France’s former President Nicolas Sarkozy. It is the 15th chapter to have been opened out of a total of 35. In my opinion, Turkey will face no trouble in aligning itself to the directives of Chapter 17.

Its level of alignment to the Maastricht Criteria is somewhat satisfactory especially with regard to the levels of budgetary deficit and public debt. But inflation, total independence of the central bank, and aligning Turkey’s laws with the EU’s Economic and Monetary Policy legislation are areas in which further progress is needed.

The visa issue is a complex one. It is stated that by October 2016, Turkish citizens will be able to travel to the EU without a visa. However, 72 criteria have to be met by Turkey during this visa liberalization roadmap, including the recognition of Cyprus which currently Turkey does not recognize. This political issue will have to be resolved before visa exemption for Turkish citizens can become a reality. Visa-free travel is also contingent on Turkey implementing the EU-Turkey readmission agreement, which would result in third country citizens illegally entering Europe via Turkey forced to return to Turkey.

The agreement is an ambiguous one since all illegal entrants from Turkey, independent of the time they might have moved to an EU country, could be sent back. There seems to be no time limit and one expert jokingly pointed out that even those illegal immigrants who had entered Europe in the 1940s could end up being sent back.

Upgrading the Customs Union agreement (CU)[1] by modernizing its functioning and extending it to new areas and Turkey’s inclusion in the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)[2] are two important topics on Turkey’s agenda. It has been argued for quite sometime that the present CU agreement was in need of revision. When examining the many possibilities concerning what kind of changes might be involved, five potential scenarios come to light:

1. Not changing the agreement thus letting the current and worsening implementation deficit and non-compliance record stand

2. Modernizing the agreement by making amendments without changing its sectorial scope, that is letting it deal only with industrial products
3. Taking the agreement as a base and revising it with a view to facilitating its functioning and expanding it to cover new areas
4. Working out a totally new CU agreement
5. Replacing the CU with a Free Trade Agreement

My preference would be Scenario 3 since it would necessitate less time to agree on revisions than rewriting a totally new CU agreement. Since Turkey is not a member of the EU, Turkey's inclusion in the TTIP faces serious obstacles. There is a slight chance that when a final agreement on TTIP is reached, Turkey might be integrated into the agreement since it is already a candidate country that has already signed a Customs Union Agreement with the EU.

If this does not happen, then the solution might reside in Turkey's signing a separate Free Trade Agreement with the US. Right now the EU-US trade talks are still continuing and a final agreement does not appear to be within reach. The 12th round of talks will take place in Brussels from 22 to 26 February 2016. We should be ready for a succession of rounds in the future.

Coming back to where we stand today in Turkey's relations with the EU, the main item on the agenda for the EU seems to be to secure its borders with the help of Turkey in return for which it will extend financial aid to Turkey for hosting refugees while leaving the door slightly open for future accession. Wondering whether we shall ever squeeze in...

Business world condemns Ankara bombing, calls for unity against terror

AFP, 06.02.2016



Turkey's business world expressed sorrow over the bomb attack targeting shuttles carrying military personnel in Ankara killed at least 28 people and wounded 61. "We feel terrible sorrow for the lives lost in the terror attack in Ankara.

We condemn all types of terrorism and violent attacks and offer condolences to all families who have lost relatives. We wish all those injured a quick recovery," said Turkish TÜSİAD head Cansen Başaran-Symes. Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey head Rifat Hisarcıklıoğlu also "condemned terrorism," which he said "targets peace and fraternity by slaughtering innocent people."

“We will stand against such brutal attacks as a whole country together,” Hisarcıkliođlu said. The Independent Industry and Business Association (MÜSİAD) offered condolences to all families who lost their relatives. “Terror has no religion, language or excuse. We will overcome these days just as we have done in the past,” said MÜSİAD in a written statement.

Board of Foreign Economic Relations (DEİK) head Ömer Cihad Vardan slammed the attack and called for “social unity against terrorism.” The International Investors Association of Turkey (YASED) underlined the importance of “being and acting together against such brutal attacks.”

Meanwhile, the Marmara Group Foundation published a statement along with 3,200 think tanks with a consultative member status at the U.N. Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). “With the hope of never again experiencing such grief, we would like to express our deep condolences to the martyrs who have fallen for their country and wish a quick recovery to the wounded,” said foundation president Akkan Suver.

Many other business communities condemned the deadly attacks in Ankara and demanded peace and solidarity across the country, including the Exporters’ Assembly of Turkey (TİM), the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (İTO), the Istanbul Chamber of Industry (İSO), the Turkish Young Businesspeople Association (TÜGİAD), the Touristic Hoteliers Federation (TUROFED), and the Union of Chambers of Agriculturalists (TZOB).

Deputy PM: Turkey still safe for investments

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Ankara understands investors’ concerns about terror attacks in Turkey, but the country will again draw investment because its foundations are solid, Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek has said in a joint press meeting with the head of the EBRD.

Rising violence is a key concern regarding Turkey, but it should not be forgotten that Turkey has fought against terror for the last 40 years, Şimşek noted, adding that there was no need for any economic concerns. “Turkey has robust foundations and is doing well despite all of the negativities around,” he said, according to Anadolu Agency.

“The country has a well-balanced budget and has created new jobs. Namely, Turkey continues to create value, although there are serious geopolitical tensions in its regions...Turkey has fought against terror attacks for the last 40 years. And I do not expect any change here,” he said. “We understand any concerns about the terror attacks, but Turkey has strong basics. I believe the country will be a center of attraction again,” he noted, as quoted by Reuters.

At least 28 people were killed and 61 others were injured in a bomb attack targeting shuttles carrying military personnel in the Turkish capital Ankara. The Turkish General Staff announced that 30 of the injured were discharged from hospitals while the other 31 were in fair condition, continuing to receive treatment in various hospitals. EBRD President Suma Chakrabarti expressed deep condolences to the victims of the Ankara in his speech.

“The brutal terror attack in Ankara last night has shocked all of us. We are so sorry for your losses ... The EBRD will continue to work with Turkey. We will make investments to create a brighter future for the society. Such attacks cannot prevent us,” he said. Şimşek also said Turkey was not in a dispute with Russia and that both countries had had strong economic and political ties until Ankara shot down a Russian jet in November 2015, voicing his hope for the normalization of relations once more.

Data: Turkey becomes EU's fifth-largest trade partner

Hurriyet Daily News, 12.02.2016



Turkey became the EU's fifth largest trade partner in 2015, according to data released by Eurostat. According to a new report, the EU exported goods worth 2.04 trillion euros in 2015, while total imports stood at 1.79 trillion euros.

In 2015, Turkey's exports to the EU rose to 79 billion euros from 75 billion euros, a six percent rise. Turkey's imports from the EU surged to 61.6 billion euros, a rise of 13 percent. The advance in both export and import numbers push the Turkey-EU bilateral trade volume to 140.6 billion euros from 128.9 billion euros, up nine percent, making Turkey surpass Norway as the EU's fifth top trade partner.

Norway's trade volume with the EU was down to 123.2 billion euros in 2015 from 135.3 billion euros a year earlier, declining nine percent. The U.S. retained the title of the EU's top trade partner in 2015, with the bloc's exports to the U.S. reaching 369.5 billion euros and imports at 246.2 billion euros. Both exports and imports to the U.S. rose by 19 percent.

The EU's second-largest trading partner was China in 2015. The EU's exports to China were worth 170.4 billion euros, while imports were 350.3 billion euros. After China came Switzerland, Russia and Turkey.

First step taken to establish Turkey Investment Fund

Anadolu Agency, 15.02.2016



The first steps have been taken to establish an investment fund that will develop financing for Turkish small and medium scaled enterprises' (SMEs) innovative initiatives, during a joint meeting with the World Bank in Ankara.

Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek and Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey's (TOBB) head Rifat Hisarcıkıoğlu signed the protocol to launch the fund. "Turkey needs to establish a solid ecosystem to boost the digital economy. The Turkey Investment Fund will be a crucial constituent of this system," said Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek.

The initial volume of the fund will be 150 million Turkish Liras. Some 100 million liras of this will be offered by the TOBB and the remaining amount will be provided by the Treasury. The Turkey Investment Fund will invest in SMEs with the potential to develop innovative technologies, products and services that will create higher added value for the Turkish economy over the next decade.

Şimşek also noted that the government will restructure the Turkish Development Bank in order to create new financing for innovative ideas and research and development (R&D) projects, adding that the new R&D draft regulation would likely be passed by parliament this week. Hisarcıkıoğlu said the new fund will create resources for venture capital funds that make initial investments in Turkish companies.

"The Turkey Investment Fund is a new generation support model for innovative companies and the Internet economy in Turkey. We don't want state bureaucrats to choose which enterprises will be funded. Instead, the public sector should use its resources to help develop the Internet ecosystem of the country.

At the same time, venture capital funds should choose the right companies to invest in this ecosystem," Hisarcıkıoğlu said, adding that the first steps to establish the fund were taken back in 2011.

"Information matters a lot in today's world ... As private sector players, we are ready to do what it takes to enable the digital economy to develop and to maintain public confidence about the privacy of their personal data," he stated.

Johannes Zutt, the World Bank's new Turkey country director, said information and telecommunications technologies were crucial to raising productivity. "Turkey became a middle-income country over a very short space of time. The country now faces some hurdles that need to be solved in order to become a member of the upper-income league," Zutt noted.

“The World Bank Development Report 2016: Digital Benefits,” which was launched in cooperation with the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), recommended two basic actions to make faster development possible in the new digital age. The report underlined the importance of making the Internet more universal, available at a lower cost, more open, and safer, in order to close the digital gap around the world. It also recommended several measures to increase the accountability of institutions, increase competitiveness, and increase the proportion of the qualified labor force.

Pentagon tells Russia where US commandos are based in Syria

AFP, 19.02.2016



The Pentagon has asked Russia to stay away from parts of northern Syria where US special operations forces are training local fighters to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group, military officials said.

The acknowledgement Russia knows approximately where the highly covert the United States commandos are based is significant because the Pentagon has repeatedly stressed out that it is not cooperating with Moscow as the two powers lead separate air campaigns in war-ravaged Syria. The Pentagon said it was sending about 50 special ops troops to work with anti-ISIL fighters in Syria.

Officials have said next to nothing about their whereabouts or progress since, and have worked hard to ensure no information about the commandos' presence is released, citing security reasons. Lieutenant General Charles Brown, who leads the US air forces in the Middle East, said US officials had asked Moscow to avoid “broad areas” in northern Syria “to maintain a level of safety for our forces that are on the ground.”

He added that Moscow had itself asked the US-led coalition to avoid some of the airfields the Russian military is using. “They don’t want us flying close to (these,)” Brown said. “Typically, we don’t fly there anyway. So, that hasn’t been an issue.” Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said Defense Secretary Ashton Carter was aware of the unusual request.

He said the Pentagon only provided broad geographic descriptions of where the US troops are, not their precise location. “There was an effort made to protect the safety of our people from the risk of Russian airstrikes. ... Those steps were taken, and those, so far, have been honored,” Cook said.

The United States has since August 2014 led an international coalition against the ISIL group in Iraq and Syria. Russia entered the Syria conflict in September, when it began bombing rebels opposed to President Bashar al-Assad.

Russia says it is attacking the IS group and other “terrorists.” Though coalition and Russian planes generally operate in different parts of the country, military officials fret about the possibility of an unintended clash between the two sides. The Pentagon has held a series of “deconfliction” talks with Russian counterparts to outline procedures in case of a mishap.

Russia warns Assad on vow to retake all of Syria

AFP, 19.02.2016



Russia’s envoy to the U.N. Vitaly Churkin warned long-term ally President Bashar al-Assad over his vow to retake all of Syria, saying he faced dire consequences if he did not comply with Moscow over the peace process.

“Russia has invested very seriously in this crisis, politically, diplomatically and now also militarily,” Vitaly Churkin told Kommersant newspaper, referring to an international agreement to cease hostilities sealed in Munich. “Therefore we would like Assad also to respond to this,” he said, adding that the Syrian leader’s stance “is not in accord with the diplomatic efforts that Russia is making.”

At their meeting in Munich, the 17-nation group backing Syria’s peace process agreed to work for a ceasefire, the lifting of starvation sieges and the resumption of talks. In an interview with AFP, Assad defiantly pledged to retake the whole of the country, speaking before the plan for a nationwide “cessation of hostilities” in Syria was announced.

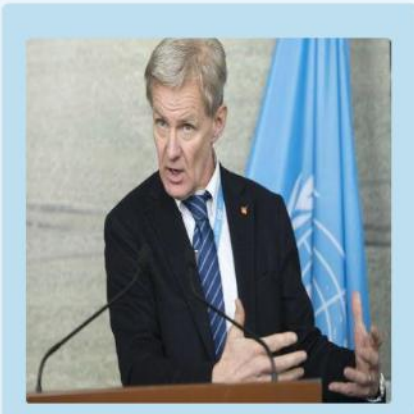
If Syria “follows Russia’s leadership in resolving this crisis, then they have a chance to come out of it in a dignified way,” Churkin stressed. “If they in some way stray from this path - and this is my personal opinion - a very difficult situation could arise. Including for themselves,” he warned.

“If they proceed on the basis that no ceasefire is necessary and they need to fight to a victorious end, then this conflict will last a very long time and that is terrifying to imagine.” Churkin however also suggested that Assad’s comments were made for political impact. “It isn’t worth putting too much significance into one statement or another and dramatizing them,” he said.

“We should be guided not by what he says, with all respect for the statements of a person at such a high level, but by what he finally does.” Churkin said of the Munich agreement that “Damascus, as I hope, understands this is a unique chance for Syria after five years of unremitting destruction.” Russia launched air strikes in Syria in September last year to support Assad and fight “terrorists,” saying it was targeting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other jihadists.

UN aims to send aid to all besieged Syria areas within a week

AFP, 18.02.2016



The United Nations should be able to deliver aid to all of Syria's 18 besieged areas within a week, a senior U.N. official said, after life-saving supplies reached five locations. Jan Egeland, who is the special advisor to the U.N.'s Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura, made the comments after a meeting of representatives from the 17-nation International Syria Support Group (ISSG).

"We discussed the next phase which is to reach all of the remaining besieged areas of Syria. And we should be able to do [so] before the next meeting which will be in a week," Egeland said.

Egeland said that there was plan to deliver aid by air drops to the eastern city Deir Ezzor, the majority of which is controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and where an estimated 200,000 people still live. The U.N. official said the World Food Program "has now a concrete plan" to conduct humanitarian air drops over the city and that this prospective operation has the support of both the United States and Russia.

"It's a complicated operation and would be in many ways the first of its kind," Egeland was quoted as saying by Reuters, giving no details of the air operation which is far more costly than land convoys. Russian cargo planes reportedly delivered humanitarian aid to regime-held neighborhoods in Deir Ezzor.

Egeland said the just concluded mission to five besieged areas included 114 trucks and delivered supplies to an estimated 80,000 people. Truckloads of aid reached Madaya, Zabadani and Mouadamiya al-Sham near Damascus which have been under siege by government forces, and the villages of al-Foua and Kefraya in Idlib province, which are surrounded by rebel fighters.

The operation was made possible by a deal struck at an ISSG meet in Munich last week, where many of the key actors in the Syrian conflict, including Damascus ally Russia, agreed to increase humanitarian access. The Syrian government approved access to seven besieged areas after crisis talks in Damascus between de Mistura and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem.

The ISSG also reached a deal on a cessation of hostilities in Syria, but its prospects appear grim amid continued fighting. The UN estimates that there are more than 480,000 Syrians living in areas besieged by the government, rebels and jihadist forces. More than four million others are living in what the U.N. defines as "hard-to-reach" areas. "The people of Syria ... have waited too long for relief," Egeland told reporters following the meeting in Geneva.

EU, Turkey to hold special migration summit in March

AFP, 19.02.2016



The EU and Turkey will hold a special summit in early March to push forward a deal to stem the migration crisis, European Council President Donald Tusk. EU leaders meeting in Brussels also unanimously opposed “unilateral actions” by member states after Austria said it would cap the daily number of asylum claims.

“We agreed that our joint action plan with Turkey remains a priority and we must do all we can to succeed,” Tusk told a press conference after the first day of a two-day European Union summit in Brussels.

“This is why we have the intention to organize a special meeting with Turkey in the beginning of March,” Tusk said without elaborating. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany -- the EU country that received the most refugees last year at more than one million -- said the special summit with Turkey could take place on March 5 or March 7.

She said the EU “must see quickly if measures work” under the plan agreed at another EU-Turkey summit in November, in which Turkey agreed to cut migrant flows in exchange for three billion euros in aid. Greece wants its EU peers to pledge to keep their borders open to refugees until March or it will refuse to adopt an accord keeping Britain in the bloc at marathon talks, a government source said.

“We are asking for a unanimous decision that until [an EU-Turkey summit planned for] March 6, no state will unilaterally close its borders... if not, the Greek government will not approve the conclusion text” at the so-called Brexit summit, the source told AFP. Pressure to enforce the plan is growing as EU officials say thousands of migrants are still crossing the Aegean daily from Turkey after more than one million made the perilous journey last year, the greatest such movement in the bloc’s history.

A meeting of the leaders of 11 EU countries with Turkey had been planned before the full summit on Thursday but was cancelled after Turkey’s premier Ahmet Davutoğlu pulled out following a bomb attack in Ankara. European Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker meanwhile said the EU leaders agreed “there was no alternative to smart, intelligent cooperation with Turkey.”

Central EU countries which oppose admitting asylum seekers said Wednesday they would push for further border restrictions in Europe’s passport-free Schengen zone unless they see results from Turkey. Central European states say the number of asylum seekers arriving from Turkey needs to drop from as many as 2,000 a day to as low as dozens of people per day. Juncker also said EU leaders unanimously opposed “unilateral actions” to resolve the migrant crisis after Austria said Wednesday it would cap the daily number of asylum claims at 80.

European migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos warned in a letter to Vienna that such plans would “be plainly incompatible” with EU law and Austria should reconsider them. But Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann hit back strongly at his fellow EU leaders and said he would not postpone the asylum cap. “I made clear, if everyone would take as much as Austria, the 37,500 (in 2016, down from the 90,000 it took in 2015), it would be two million in the European Union just in this year,” Faymann told reporters.

“There is nothing to postpone, nothing to change. 37,500 is not peanuts.” Since January, the country of nearly nine million has already received 11,000 asylum claims, or around 250 a day. Last year we had “more asylum requests than Italy and much more than France. And everyone who looked at a map knows that these two countries are much bigger than Austria and have more inhabitants as well.”

The move came a day after Vienna said it would step up controls at existing checkpoints along its southern frontier with Italy, Slovenia and Hungary to curb the influx of migrants and refugees trekking up through the Balkans. Separately the police chiefs of Austria and four other countries on the migrant route through southeast Europe announced an agreement Thursday for a joint refugee registration point at the Greek-Macedonian border.

Sweden said it plans to house nearly 1,800 migrants on a luxury cruise ship, as it struggles to cope with its share of the huge migrant influx into Europe. Meanwhile a top UN official said Europe has “completely failed” in its response to the migrant crisis.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi, speaking in a German newspaper interview, referred to an EU deal struck last September on relocating 160,000 refugees from overstretched Greece and Italy to other EU states, but only about 600 have been moved until now.

EU slams PKK violence, calls for return to peace process

Hurriyet Daily News, 18.02.2016



The European Union’s draft annual progress report slammed “the return to violence” by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey’s southeast and called on all parties to recommit to the abandoned peace process, underlining there is “no violent solution” to the Kurdish question.

The draft report for 2016, which was announced by the European Parliament’s Turkey rapporteur Kati Piri, said the EU “condemns the return to violence by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which is on the EU’s list of terrorist organizations,” adding that “there is no violent solution for the Kurdish question.”



Turkey's fight against terrorism was approved as being "legitimate," but the draft stressed that "security measures must be conducted with respect for rule of law and human rights." Speaking to reporters during the presentation of the report, Kati Piri said the EU must actively engage with the situation in Turkey's southeast by calling for a ceasefire and a resumption of the peace process.

"We could face another refugee inflow, and this time it will be coming from Turkey," she claimed, unless the EU takes decisive steps. Piri claimed in a telephone interview with Reuters that some 400,000 civilians have been displaced since the peace talks between Ankara and the PKK collapsed in July and the ceasefire ended effectively.

The report also praised Turkey for hosting the largest number of refugees in the world, but warned against linking the country's EU accession to the extent of its cooperation on the refugee crisis. "The [EU] accession process ... should be connected to democratic reforms or rule of law or what's happening with the Kurdish question," rapporteur Kati Piri told Reuters. "The European Union gave a pretty bad signal by connecting it so directly to migration."

Piri also told Reuters that the European Commission's decision to postpone the announcement of its progress report until after the November 2015 elections, which was won by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) after it briefly lost the government in the June 7 elections, suggested the bloc stood "silent" in the face of Turkey's deteriorating human rights record.

Turkey and the EU agreed a refugee action plan last year under which the bloc would provide Turkey with 3 billion euros (\$3.34 billion) in aid to meet the needs of Syrian refugees in exchange for visa liberalization and speeding up accession. The report also touched upon Turkey's deteriorating rights record, saying it "must show improvement in the field of human rights and freedom of expression."

According to reports by Cihan News Agency, the report noted a "serious backsliding" on freedom of expression and the independence of media in Turkey. The report also called for the release of journalists behind bars, including daily Cumhuriyet's editor-in-chief, Can Dündar, and its Ankara bureau chief, Erdem Gül, who were accused of espionage and supporting an armed terrorist organization after they published stories about Turkish intelligence trucks bound for Syria.

Obama starts work to pick Supreme Court justice amid political ‘bluster’

Reuters, 16.02.2016



U.S. President Obama has held preliminary discussions with his team about whom to nominate to the Supreme Court, the White House said, while accusing Senate Republicans of “bluster” for saying they would not confirm his pick.

White House spokesman Eric Schultz told administration officials had started talking with Senate offices about the process, which is shaping up to be an epic fight between Republicans and Democrats. Republicans say Obama should put off naming a replacement for conservative Justice Antonin Scalia, who died over the weekend, and leave it to the next president to decide.

Democrats say it is the president’s responsibility and right to make the choice. Americans will choose a new president in the Nov. 8 elections. Obama leaves office in January 2017. Scalia’s death leaves the court evenly divided between liberal and conservative justices just as it is set to decide major cases on abortion, voting rights and immigration.

A growing number of Republican senators have already said they will not support an Obama nominee, including a dozen who are up for reelection in November. Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania and Rob Portman of Ohio each announced their opposition. Both are up for reelection this year.

“This is not the first time that Republicans have come out with a lot of bluster, only to have reality ultimately sink in,” Schultz said, citing recent spats over raising the U.S. debt limit and approving a nuclear deal with Iran. “At each pass, they took a hard line. They tried to play politics. But ultimately, they were not able to back up their threats,” Schultz said.

Republicans shrugged off the criticism, pointing to past political battles over Supreme Court nominees. In 2006, Democratic leaders in the Senate, as well as then-Senator Obama, tried but failed to block President George W. Bush’s nomination of Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court, noted Don Stewart, a spokesman for Senate Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. “Memories tend to be short around here sometimes,” he said.

Senate Republicans united behind Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in insisting that Obama’s successor fill the Supreme Court vacancy. Democrats looking to reclaim the Senate majority immediately accused them of putting politics ahead of their constitutional responsibility.

Vulnerable Republican incumbents in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, New Hampshire and Ohio - all states that Obama won twice - echoed McConnell’s contention that the winner of the presidency in November’s election should choose the next jurist.



“I believe the best thing for the country is to trust the American people to weigh in on who should make a lifetime appointment that could reshape the Supreme Court for generations,” said Republican Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio, according to the Associated Press.

Announcements & Reports

► *Which Fiscal Union For The Euro Area?*

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/02/which-fiscal-union-for-the-euro-area/>

► *Analysis of Developments in EU Capital Flows in the Global Context*

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/01/analysis-of-developments-in-eu-capital-flows-in-the-global-context-2/>

► *Seeing the Forest through the SAMs on Woody Island*

Source : CSIS
Weblink : <http://csis.org/publication/seeing-forest-through-sams-woody-island>

Upcoming Events

► *Central Banking After The Great Recession*

Date : 19 February 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/monetary-policy-after-the-great-recession/>

► *The New Silk Road: What is in it For Europe*

Date : 19 February 2015
Place : Shanghai - China
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/the-new-silk-road-what-is-in-it-for-europe/>

► *Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union*

Date : 20 February 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/534-competitive-gains-in-the-economic-and-monetary-union/>

► *The Future of Capitalist Democracy: UK-Japan Perspectives*

Date : 21 February 2015
Place : London - UK
Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>



► *Emerging Markets and Europe: Time for Different Relationships?*

Date : 22 February 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/524-emerging-markets-and-europe-time-for-different-relationships/>

► *What future for Europe's Social Models?*

Date : 24 February 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/526-what-future-for-europes-social-models/>

► *Challenges for Growth in Europe*

Date : 25 February 2015
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/521-challenges-for-growth-in-europe/>

► *Global Governance of Public Goods: Asian and European Perspectives*

Date : 25 February 2015
Place : Paris - France
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/529-global-governance-of-public-goods-asian-and-european-perspectives/>

► *The Future of the Welfare State*

Date : 27 February 2015
Place : Berlin - Germany
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>