

US soldiers with YPG insignias unacceptable, says Turkish FM

Hurriyet Daily News, 27.05.2016



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has strongly reacted to photos of U.S. special operations forces wearing Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Unit (YPG) insignia on their shoulders during an assault on Syria's Raqqqa, saying it is "unacceptable."

"It is unacceptable that an ally country is using the YPG insignia. We reacted to it. It is impossible to accept it. This is a double standard and hypocrisy," said Çavuşoğlu. Commenting on the photos, the Pentagon acknowledged that special operations forces do what they can "to blend in with the community."

"Special operations forces, when they operate in certain areas, do what they can to blend in with the community to enhance their own protection, their own security," said Pentagon spokesperson Peter Cook during a press briefing, adding that he would not comment on specific photos.

Agence France-Presse released photos showing armed men in uniform identified by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as U.S. special operations in the northern Syrian province of Raqqqa. Some of the men seen in the photos wore an YPG insignia on their shoulders.

"Special operations forces in the past have worked with partners, and in the past have conducted themselves in such a way that they might operate in an atmosphere in which they are supportive of that local force in their advice and assist role," Cook said. "And they might be, again, for visual purposes, blending in with the local community," he added.

The U.S.-backed SDF, which consists of the YPG, Syrian Arabs and Syriacs, launched an offensive against ISIL stronghold Raqqqa. Advancements have been reported since the launch of the operation, though a spokesperson for the SDF had said they did not initially aim at taking the Raqqqa city center.

The YPG is the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which Turkey says is a Syrian offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), thus making both the YPG and PYD terrorist organizations.

Though designating the PKK as a terrorist organization, the U.S. does not perceive the PYD and the YPG in the same way and says they are "reliable" partners in its fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). This designation difference has caused a rift between the two NATO allies, Turkey and the U.S. SDF field commander Hawkar Kobane told AFP that "U.S. forces are taking part in this [Raqqqa] operation" alongside his own troops.

“On the rooftop of this house, there are U.S. forces using [anti-tank] TOW missiles to fire on the explosives-rigged cars that Daesh is using to attack the SDF,” Kobane said, using an Arabic acronym for ISIL.

Meanwhile, the U.S. denied it has provided arms to the YPG in Syria, despite the insistence of the group to the contrary. “We are playing an advise and assist role,” U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner said. “But assisting is not specifically providing arms.” Toner said, however, that there is a lot of “liberated” equipment being used on the battlefield and that it was impossible to say where from where they come. “We just don’t have the clarity on that,” he said. Toner’s comments came after media reports said the YPG has admitted it is being armed by U.S. forces.

He also said Washington has been working to “diversify” the SDF, adding that the town of Shaddadi in Syria, recaptured a few weeks ago by the SDF, consists of 60 percent Kurds and 40 percent Arabs and “other elements.” Toner added that the Pentagon recently graduated a class of 200 Arabs who are joining the fight against ISIL and that it was currently training another class of 200. “We’re cognizant of the need to have diversified forces conducting these kinds of operations, given the sensitivities of the communities that they’re liberating,” he said.

Turkish official: Turkey no longer interested in buying US drones

Anadolu Agency, 27.05.2016



A U.S. restriction on the sale of some weapon systems has driven Turkey to develop its own technologies, the head of Turkish defense industry said.

“I don’t want to be sarcastic but I would like to thank for any of the projects that was not approved by the U.S. because it forced us to develop our own systems,” according to Smail Demir. While Turkey fights the outlawed PKK as well as ISIL, the American Congress has dragged its feet on approving the sale of armed drones and guided ammunitions to its NATO ally, citing concerns about the Turkish army’s fight against terrorism in southeastern Turkey and northern Iraq.

Turkey has developed tactical unmanned armed aircraft that are now operational in the fight against terrorist groups, Demir said, noting that Ankara will no longer need U.S. drones. “Unfortunately in the case of armed drones, on our part, we have closed that page,” he said. He added that Turkey has developed its own guided ammunitions and is developing more.

Blocking arm sales to Turkey would not set back Ankara from its national security goals, according to Demir, who cautioned the U.S. that the restriction would not be productive for long-term strategic relations between the two allies.

“In terms of defense technologies, once we render we will develop it. It might take a longer time for us but we will have that,” he said, adding that Turkey’s goal is to become more independent in defense and technology.

Demir is in the U.S. for a meeting on the F-35 Lightning program at Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, Arizona. According to the Turkish undersecretary, as one of the strongest air powers in NATO, Turkey has been developing its indigenous fighter jets which are planned to be made operational by 2020.

He said as Turkey engages in international joint defense technology projects, it has learned a lot that will help its own program. Noting the challenges that the F-35 project, a joint venture with nine U.S. allies that has been criticized particularly by Congress for running over budget and schedule, Demir said Turkey is “ambitious, optimistic” but also “well aware of the risks” related to the technological acquisition as well as financial challenges to produce its own aircraft.

“We will go very carefully,” he said. “We know the experiences about the budget, and time.” He added that Turkey has been looking at involving tech companies as partners in the fighter project but underlined that Ankara does not “want to end up with some redlines” that would limit use, development or change of the original designed technologies as well as other limits on the marketing of the aircraft. He also encouraged multinational companies to invest in Turkey, jointly with the Turkish defense industry, to minimize risks.

Erdoğan says Turkish Parliament will block EU migrant deal if no visa-free travel

AFP, 24.05.2016



President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan warned the European Union that the Turkish Parliament would block laws related to the landmark deal to stem the flow of migrants to Europe if Ankara was not granted its key demand of visa-free travel.

“If that (the visa exemption) is not what will happen... no decision and no law in the framework of the readmission agreement will come out of the parliament of the Turkish Republic,” Erdoğan said at the close of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul. “Our foreign ministry, our EU affairs ministry will have discussions with the Europeans. If there is a result then great. If not, then I’m sorry.”

There have been growing indications Turks will not be given the visa-free travel by the target of the end of June and Chancellor Angela Merkel warned after talks with Erdoğan on May 23 that the target was unlikely to be met. The agreement -- which is already being implemented -- saw Turkey pledge to work to stop migrants cross the Aegean to Europe and also readmit migrants who crossed illegally.

EU officials have hailed the success of the deal, but Ankara has grown increasingly uneasy about the bloc's wariness to grant it the visa-free travel to the passport free Schengen area it was offered in return. Erdoğan also complained about the EU's wariness in handing over to Turkey a promise of 3 billion euros followed by another 3 billion to help Syrian refugees.

"Turkey is not asking for favours what we want is honesty," Erdoğan said, speaking alongside UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon at the closing news conference. "Turkey is supposed to fulfil criteria? What criteria are these I ask you?" he asked in an angry tirade that overshadowed the end of the summit.

Erdoğan had emphasised during the summit how Turkey's hosting of some 3 million refugees from Syria and Iraq was an example to the world and said he hoped the event would lead to a "rekindling" of the world's collective conscience.

But he added: "If it goes into history books as one of the countless meetings where nothing comes out.. I will be very upset." But Ban said he was a "bit disappointed" many world leaders, with the exception of Merkel, had stayed away from the Turkish metropolis and said their absence was "no excuse" for not taking action.

Turkish FM calls for 'pluralist new Syria'

Hurriyet Daily News, 26.05.2016



Turkish FM Çavuşoğlu has called for the implementation of a "real political transition" to a "pluralist new Syria," amid reports of a new constitution being drafted for Syria.

"A real political transition needs to be implemented for a new democratic Syria, based on the rule of law, in which people can elect their leaders through their free will," said Çavuşoğlu at a meeting of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly held in the Turkish capital of Ankara. "You represent the will of the Syrian Turkmen. Our aim is that our Turkmen brothers, who are an indispensable component of Syria, have their say in the administration of the country," the minister said.

Saying Turkey supported the Syrian people's aspirations for a "pluralist and freedom-based state," Çavuşoğlu said this support was regardless of Syrians' origin or doctrine – including Turkmen, Arabs, Kurds, Sunnis, Christians, Alawites and others.

Çavuşoğlu also said he would never forget "the victims of the Syrian regime, the Democratic Union Party [PYD] or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL]," recalling that Turkey was sheltering more than 3 million refugees fleeing war in Syria and Iraq, including 300,000 Turkmen. On the same day, a United Arab Emirates newspaper stated that a new Syrian constitution, drafted by lawmakers in Damascus, was presented to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in March, who in turn gave a draft to his U.S. counterpart John Kerry.

One of the most striking differences in the new constitution would be the omission of the word “Arab” from the countries name, thus making it the “Syrian Republic” from the “Syrian Arab Republic,” Gulf News reported on its website. “Another notable change in the new constitution is omitting Article 3 which says that ‘Islam is the religion of the President of the Republic,’” said the report, adding that it open the way for especially Syrian Christians to become president.

The new charter also gives Syrian Kurds the constitutional right to use the Kurdish language, which was a taboo topic in all previous charters, in their towns and villages, providing that it is placed “on equal footing with the Arabic language,” the report stated.

It said that the new constitution was debated during the months of April and May by presidential envoys from Moscow and Washington, and was expected to see the light, at least in draft, by August 1, as mandated by U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. The new charter also empowers Syrian districts with a strong de-centralized system of government, greatly reducing the authority of Damascus.

“In theory, this means that in addition to choosing their own language, these districts can now elect their own governor, rather than have him or her appointed by Damascus officialdom,” it said. With regard to the Syrian Presidency, the new charter keeps the age at 40 for running for office but cancels a clause that says a Syrian president needs to hail from two Syrian parents and prevents him from marrying a non-Syrian woman.

New minister: EU isn't sole option for Turkey

Hurriyet Daily News, 25.05.2016



Turkey's relationship with the European Union is important but it is not the “only option” for Ankara, Ömer Çelik, Turkey's new minister for EU affairs, said.

Çelik, who replaced Volkan Bozkır in the new cabinet named by PM Binali Yıldırım, also told reporters that Turkey wanted the EU to drop its “double standards” in the fight against terrorism. Çelik made the comments in a ceremony in which he took over the post from Bozkır. Turkey-EU ties have been tense over the bloc's demand that Ankara fulfill all 72 agreed criteria to lift visa obligations for Turkish citizens, as part of the deal on Turkey readmitting refugees to Europe.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan warned the EU that the Turkish Parliament would block laws related to the landmark deal to stem the flow of migrants to Europe if Ankara was not granted its key demand of visa-free travel. “If that [visa exemption] does not happen ... then no decision and no law in the framework of the readmission agreement will come out of the parliament of the Turkish Republic,” Erdoğan said at the closing ceremony of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul.



Turkey is not “bluffing” or uttering “threats” when it says it could suspend all agreements signed with the EU, including the readmission agreement, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said on the same day, adding that the EU needed to be “fair” to Turkey.

Disagreements have emerged on Turkey’s counter-terrorism law, which Brussels wants to see brought in line with EU standards, prompting reactions from Turkey, which says it cannot change its anti-terror law while fighting both the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIL).

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said that she was not worried about the migrant pact between the EU and Turkey, but more time was needed to address sticking points on visa liberalization for Ankara. “I am not worried,” Merkel told reporters after a cabinet meeting near Berlin, according to Reuters. “Maybe some issues will require more time, but in principle we, for our part, will stick to the agreement.”

Merkel’s cabinet approved on May 25 a raft of new measures combining “opportunities and obligations” designed to help Germany deal with the influx of some 1.1 million asylum-seekers registered as entering the country last year and help those who stay to become “good neighbors and citizens.”

The package seeks to provide migrants with better access to the German job market and also foresees the creation of 100,000 government-funded “job opportunities” for migrants, the Associated Press reported. At the same time, migrants will be expected to participate in expanded orientation and language courses, which will also be made available more quickly and to more people than before.

“Learning the German language quickly, rapid integration in training, studies and the labor market, and an understanding of and compliance with the principles of living together in our society and compliance with our laws are essential for successful integration,” the cabinet said in a statement after the meeting. “The newcomers are to become good neighbors and citizens, which will enable us to strengthen social cohesion and prevent parallel structures in our country.”

In a provision designed to prevent the development of migrant ghettos in big cities, the measures, which still need parliamentary approval, would mandate newcomers to stay where they have been officially placed for a minimum of three years unless a job is found that takes them elsewhere.

Merkel told reporters that Germany has “learned from the past,” when immigrants were frequently thought of as guest workers or otherwise temporary residents and integration measures were not offered. Now that they are, “we expect people to take up these offers so that integration can work better.” “I think it’s a milestone that the federal government is passing an integration law that’s based upon the principle of opportunities and obligations, obligations and opportunities,” she said.

UN chief: Turkey deserves more help for refugees

Anadolu Agency, 21.05.2016



As he prepares to leave office, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon granted a sit-down interview to discuss topics ranging from Syrian refugees to Cyprus reunification talks. He began by saying Turkey should receive more help for the assistance it is providing to refugees fleeing the Syrian war.

“Turkey and the other countries hosting Syrian refugees have borne a huge amount of the responsibility and deserve more help from the international community,” according to Ban. “At this time, we have at least 130 million people who need daily humanitarian assistance, including 60 million refugees and displaced people.

Turkey has been most generous in accommodating more than 3 million Syrian refugees,” he said. “Currently hosting more than 3 million refugees from neighboring countries, Turkey has the experience, knowledge and tradition to respond to humanitarian crisis. The Secretary-General urged greater solidarity in order to find new ways for admitting more Syrian refugees and focused on contributions displaced persons could provide for a host country.

“When managed properly, accepting refugees is a win for everyone. Refugees are famously devoted to education and self-reliance. They bring new skills and dynamism into aging workforces,” he said. “Attempts to demonize them are not only offensive; they are factually incorrect. I have been calling on leaders to counter xenophobia and fear mongering with reassurance,” he added.

The European Union and Turkey struck a deal in March that stipulated all refugees who reach Europe would be returned to Turkey. Ankara would then benefit from additional funds to help deal with the crisis and the opening of one policy area on accession to EU membership.

“I hope this agreement will be faithfully implemented. Most importantly, there should be a political solution through dialogue,” he said. The refugee crisis is fueled by the five-year-old war that erupted during the Arab Spring. More than a quarter of a million victims have been killed and 10 million others have been displaced in Syria.

Ban condemned the violence and human rights violations in Syria and although a solution to the conflict has been elusive, he remains optimistic that a diplomatic answer can be found through U.N.-lead talks. “I call on the warring sides in Syria to immediately renew their commitment to the cessation of hostilities,” he said. “Instead of bombing civilian areas, all Syrian parties must renew their focus on a political process.” After world powers failed earlier this week to agree on a date to restart stalled talks on Syria, Ban stressed that the U.N. has been encouraging all sides that there is no military solution to the conflict, and a “negotiated solution” needs to be found.



Since becoming head of the world body, Ban has been trying to put an end to a seemingly endless number of conflicts around the globe. Perhaps the most intractable is that of Israeli-Palestine, in Syria's neighborhood.

In speaking to Anadolu Agency, Ban questioned Israel government's commitment to peace between the two sides with its continued "illegal" encroachment on land intended for a future Palestinian state, that he said not only runs afoul of international law but subverts a two-state solution.

"Demolitions and settlement building raises questions about whether Israel's ultimate goal is, in fact, to drive Palestinians out of certain parts of the West Bank, thereby undermining any prospect of transition to a viable Palestinian state," he said. He urged both parties to return to stalled negotiations.

Turning to Cyprus, the Secretary-General said he is encouraged by ongoing negotiations there as the parties have expressed a commitment to intensifying efforts with the aim of reaching a comprehensive settlement agreement in 2016. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was founded in 1983, after Cyprus was divided into northern Turkish and southern Greek territories, when a Greek-Cypriot coup in 1974 to join the island to Greece was answered by a Turkish peace mission.

Reunification talks between the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots resumed last May. "I am confident that a peaceful reunification of Cyprus will reap real political and economic benefits," Ban said. "As someone who comes from Korea, itself a divided nation, Cyprus offers me hope for the future."

Global hot spots that remain as the U.N. chief sets to leave his post are a source of disappointment for Ban. He said he would have wanted all of the organization's peace efforts to have succeeded while he held the top office but for all the problem areas -- from Syria to South Sudan to the eastern Congo -- peace can be achieved with the right amount of international unity.

A different kind of hot spot is brewing right within the body Ban leads. Some U.N. member states have demanded reform of the Security Council. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan again made a call for changes last month, citing an imbalance of power and no permanent member that is from a Muslim nation.

On the issue, the 71-year-old statesman would go only as far as to say that he would "encourage measures that can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Security Council" and leave any possible changes up to member states as laid out in the organization's charter.

As for his legacy, Ban is proud that the organization has been able to achieve "new sustainable development goals and forged a strong deal on climate change. Those are accomplishments that can help future generations deal with the challenges of the 21st century," he said.

But he prefers to leave the question to the writers of history to decide. He concluded, however, by saying that he hopes the reforms that were made at the U.N. and the international system during his tenure will endure.

Juncker: Turkey ‘threats’ over migrant deal won’t work

AFP, 26.05.2016



Turkey must uphold its side of a deal made with the European Union over stemming the flow of migrants, a top EU official said, warning “threats” against the bloc will not work.

European Commission President Juncker said Ankara must ease strict anti-terror laws if it wants its citizens to enjoy visa-free travel on the continent. Juncker was speaking after Turkish President Erdoğan warned the EU his parliament would block laws related to the landmark deal if it did not get its way on visa liberalization. “We do expect that Turkey will stick to its commitments - and threats are not the best diplomatic instrument you can use,” Juncker told.

“So one should stop to use them because they will produce no effect whatsoever.” German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned after talks with Erdoğan that the target of an end-June implementation was unlikely to be met. The agreement saw Turkey pledge to work to stop migrants crossing the Aegean to Europe and also readmit migrants who had crossed illegally.

EU officials hailed the success of the deal, but Ankara has grown increasingly uneasy about the bloc’s wariness to grant it the visa-free travel to the passport free Schengen area it was offered in return. “If that [the visa exemption] is not what will happen... no decision and no law in the framework of the readmission agreement will come out of the parliament of the Turkish Republic,” Erdoğan said at the close of the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul.

“Our foreign ministry, our EU affairs ministry will have discussions with the Europeans. If there is a result then great. If not, then I’m sorry.” Erdoğan also complained about the EU’s wariness in handing over to Turkey a promised three billion euros followed by another three billion to help Syrian refugees.

EU leaders are insisting that Turkey abides by 72 conditions before the visa exemption takes place, with a demand to change counter-terror laws proving particularly contentious. Turkey rejects to make amendments to its anti-terror law, saying that it is fighting both the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Turkey’s new minister for EU affairs, Ömer Çelik, said that Turkey’s relationship with the European Union is important but it was not the “only option” for Ankara. Çelik, who replaced Volkan Bozkır in the new cabinet named by Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, also told reporters that Turkey wanted the EU to drop its “double standards” in the fight against terrorism.

Kurds in Syria will let you down, Turkey warns US

Hurriyet Daily News, 25.05.2016



Turkey's deputy chief of staff has warned a top U.S. commander visiting Turkey that cooperating with the YPG in northern Syria is highly dangerous.

“Do not be surprised if the YPG lets you down when the fight against ISIL gets tough,” Deputy Chief of Turkish General Staff Ya ar Güler told General Joseph Votel, the head of U.S. Central Command. According to reports, the top commanders briefly supervised efforts to build up local forces in the fight against the ISIL, discussing an anticipated operation against ISIL Raqqa and on the “Azaz-Jarablus line,” which Turkey considers a “red line.”

Güler reportedly outlined Turkish efforts in the fight against ISIL, including the opening of the ncirlik Air Base in the southern province of Adana, logistical support and intelligence sharing. However, he also pointed out that the United States falls short in providing Turkey with similar support in pushing ISIL militants from the Azaz-Jarablus line using “moderate” opposition forces rather than the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is affiliated with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

“An important threat will disappear if you provide support to the moderate opposition rather than the PYD to clear this line of ISIL,” Güler was reported as saying. Turkey considers both the PYD and its militia forces the YPG as off-shoots of the PKK, against which it has been conducting military operations in southeastern provinces for the last few months.

The Turkish general reportedly signaled that Turkey would not permit a takeover of the aforementioned region by the PYD. He also underlined that Turkey has no intention of dispatching soldiers into Syrian territory without a decision by the United Nations Security Council.

Votel arrived in Ankara, following his visit to Kobane to meet U.S. military advisers working with Syrian Arab fighters and the leaders of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes the YPG and the PYD. His visit comes at a time when Ankara has been calling on the U.S. and its Western allies to stop supporting the PYD. Washington has provided air power and small arms ammunition to the militant group, saying the PYD and the YPG are “reliable” partners in the fight against ISIL.

The United States has roughly 200 advisers on the ground in Syria but no combat units. Votel's visit comes as the first of 250 more U.S. special operations forces are beginning to arrive. Kurds play a dominant role in the U.S.-backed SDF, providing the core of the forces that have pushed back ISIL in the country's northeast. The SDF has a total of around 25,000 Kurdish fighters and around 5,000 Arab fighters, and Washington is pushing to bring more Arab forces into the group.

Netanyahu joins forces with ultra-nationalist to expand Israel government

AFP, 25.05.2016



Israeli PM Netanyahu joined forces with a hardline nationalist party to expand his coalition, forming what is being called the most right-wing government in the nation's history.

Avigdor Lieberman and his party will add five lawmakers to Netanyahu's previously wafer-thin majority if the deal is given parliamentary approval as expected. Lieberman, who has spoken of harsh measures against Palestinian "terrorists," will take over the key role of defense minister after being sworn in. The two men announced the deal at parliament, with Lieberman pledging to be "balanced" and saying he was committed to "responsible, reasonable policy."

Netanyahu said that "we are joining hands now to march Israel forward." The move to hand the defense ministry to the 57-year-old hardliner has sparked deep concern among Israeli centrist and left-wing politicians, as well as among some of Netanyahu's Likud party colleagues. Religious nationalists from the Jewish Home party already hold key cabinet positions in Netanyahu's government. Moshe Yaalon, a Likud member who resigned as defense minister and who has also served as armed forces chief, warned of a rising tide of extremism in the party and the country as a whole.

Former Labor Prime Minister and Defense Minister Ehud Barak went further, saying Israel's government "has been infected by the shoots of fascism." But others say that Lieberman is above all a pragmatic politician who aspires to be prime minister one day, noting also that he will face opposition from the security establishment if he seeks to carry out some of his most controversial ideas.

The deal brings to a stunning conclusion weeks of speculation over Netanyahu's efforts to expand his government, which has held only 61 of the 120 seats in parliament since elections in March 2015.

Netanyahu had earlier engaged in negotiations with Labor party leader Isaac Herzog to join the government before turning to Lieberman instead. Besides Lieberman becoming defense minister and another member of his party becoming immigrant absorption minister, the government agreed to allocate approximately 1.4 billion shekels (\$363 million, 325 million euros) to pensions of elderly Israelis.

Russian proposal of joint air strikes not being discussed, says US

Reuters, 24.05.2016



The United States said it was not discussing joint air strikes with Russia and called on Moscow to press Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government to cease air strikes against opposition forces in Aleppo and the Damascus suburbs.

"We're not looking at joint operations," said Mark Toner. "We're discussing with them proposals for sustainable mechanisms to better monitor and enforce the cessation of hostilities - we're not talking about joint operations." Toner said the United States was concerned about violence in Syria - by ISIL and Assad's forces - and said Russia had a special responsibility to press the Syrian leader to end attacks.

The Syrian government needs to recognize that "if this keeps up, we may be looking at a complete breakdown" of the cessation of hostilities, Toner said. A truce brokered by the U.S. and Russia in February has been unraveling for weeks. The appeal came in a phone call from Secretary of State John Kerry to his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

"Secretary Kerry raised these concerns in a call with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov earlier today and urged him to press the regime to cease at once airstrikes against opposition forces and innocent civilians in Aleppo and the Damascus suburbs," the State Department said in a statement.

The latest attempts to salvage the truce come after at least 161 people were killed in car bombings and suicide attacks in the northwestern cities of Jableh and Tartus that were claimed by ISIL. The U.S. envoy for Syria urged rebels to respect the Feb. 27 cease-fire after they gave its brokers - Washington and Moscow - until May 24 afternoon to stop the advance on rebel bastions outside Damascus.

"We recognize that the CoH [Cessation of Hostilities] is under severe stress, but believe that to abandon it now would be strategic error," Michael Ratney said in a statement on Twitter. "If the armed factions abandoned the CoH, Assad and his supporters would claim this gives them licence to attack all the opposition forces without international objection."

Twenty-nine rebel groups had called on Washington and Moscow to force Assad's regime "to completely and immediately halt their brutal offensive against Daraya and Eastern Ghouta" near Damascus. Staunch regime ally Russia called for a temporary local truce in Eastern Ghouta and Daraya - within the wider nationwide cease-fire - from May 24.

"The Russian reconciliation center is calling for a 72-hour regime of silence in Eastern Ghouta and Daraya," Russian defense ministry quoted the head of the Russian coordination center in Syria, Sergei Kuralenko, as saying.

UN envoy tells Security Council no Syria talks for 2-3 weeks

Reuters, 27.05.2016



There will be no new round of Syria talks for at least two or three weeks, the office of U.N. special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura said, after he consulted the U.N. Security Council.

“He briefed on his intention to start the next round of talks as soon as feasible but certainly not within the next two/three weeks,” said the statement. It said de Mistura wanted to see progress, particularly relating to the cessation of hostilities and humanitarian access. “Meanwhile, the special envoy will maintain close and continuous contact with the Syrian parties as well as the members of the ISSG before determining the ‘appropriate time’ to reconvene the parties to Geneva.”

The ISSG, or International Syria Support Group, is the group of countries led by the United States and Russia that is backing de Mistura’s peace efforts. It also includes regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, who are expected to press the warring parties to respect the statements made by the Security Council.

But Syria’s cessation of hostilities, a partial truce brokered by the United States and Russia in February, has been unravelling for weeks, and the Syrian government has largely blocked humanitarian aid access despite repeated U.N. appeals to prevent civilians starving in besieged towns.

De Mistura had said he expected to announce a date for a new round of talks after consulting the Security Council, citing the need to keep up momentum. Speaking to reporters in New York after de Mistura’s briefing, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power said the U.N. mediator was increasingly impatient.

“He expressed his continued frustration with insufficient humanitarian access, the serious dangers to the cessation of hostilities, and the need for real progress on the political talks,” she told reporters. Power said the main threat to the cessation of hostilities was the Syrian government and its allies - and their attacks on civilians.

Power acknowledged there were concerns about the fact that the U.S.-Russian partnership on Syria had not yet ended the five-year-old war. “We think the answer is to continue to press Russia and Iran to use the influence they have” on the Syrian government, she said.

Putin says EU needs Russia to stay on global stage

AFP, 26.05.2016



Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed in an article that the EU would not be a global player without his country's help as he prepared to visit the bloc for the first time in almost a year.

Putin, who starts a two-day visit to Greece on Friday, also called for an energy alliance with Europe and the relaxation of visa rules for Russians travelling to the EU. "A rightful position of the Old Continent in the new international realities can only be secured by combining capacities of all European countries, including Russia," Putin said in the article in the Kathimerini daily. "We believe our relations with the EU do not face any problems that we cannot solve.

To get back to a multifaceted partnership, the deficient approach of one-sided relationships should be abandoned. There should be true respect for each other's opinions and interests." EU-Russia relations are at a low ebb over the conflict in Ukraine that broke out in 2014, with European sanctions still in force against Moscow.

The sanctions on Russia's banking, defence and energy sectors expire in July. Extending them will require a unanimous vote, and EU leaders are expected to discuss the issue next month. Putin is due to meet Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos and Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in Athens.

He will join celebrations for the 1,000th anniversary of the Russian presence at the ancient monastic community of Mount Athos in northern Greece, one of Orthodox Christianity's holiest sites. Greece has repeatedly sought the help of Russia, a fellow Orthodox country, as it descended into economic crisis over the past six years.

Tsipras is believed to have requested Russian financial assistance last year as the country teetered on the verge of bankruptcy, although Russian officials have publicly denied any approach. Russian companies have also been repeatedly linked to Greek energy and transport privatisation deals that were never completed.

However, Putin indicated in the article that Russia remains interested in tenders involving Greek rail assets and the port of Thessaloniki. Kathimerini said a deal between Russian oil giant Rosneft and Greek refiner Hellenic Petroleum could be signed during the visit.

Putin was last in Europe in June, when he visited Italy and held talks with Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and Pope Francis. Tsipras visited Moscow for talks with Putin twice last year, in April and June, ahead of his re-election in September.

Greece starts evacuating squalid Idomeni migrant camp

AFP, 24.05.2016



Hundreds of Greek police began clearing the overcrowded Idomeni camp, a migrant flashpoint where thousands of desperate refugees have been living for months in squalid conditions.

The overcrowded and muddy camp on the Macedonia border has become a potent symbol of the human suffering and chaos as Europe struggles to cope with its worst migrant crisis since World War II. In an operation that began shortly after sunrise, Greek police put more than 1,000 people on buses to newly opened camps near Greece's second city Thessaloniki, about 80 kilometres (50 miles) to the south.

"The operation ... is taking place slowly and in a calm atmosphere. There has not been any need to use force," government migration spokesman Yiorgos Kyritsis told AFP. Most media were kept at a distance, but footage and images handed out by state TV ERT and state agency ANA, who were allowed access, showed migrants queuing up to board buses and being driven away, some waving at the camera.

Many carried their worldly goods in huge bin bags, while others piled belongings into pushchairs, watched at a distance by groups of dark blue-clad police in white helmets. A group of children -- one of them a young boy who struggled over the bumpy ground in a wheelchair -- played nearby as they waited for their turn to leave. Authorities said priority would be given to unaccompanied minors and single-parent families.

The transfer comes after a brutal winter of freezing rain and mud which saw many people trying to force their way across the border, sometimes resulting in violent encounters with the Macedonian police. Around midday, bulldozers moved in to clear out tents, according to tweets from activists at the camp. Many in the camp are fleeing war, persecution and poverty in the Middle East and Asia.

And Doctors Without Borders (MSF) representative Vicky Markolefa told AFP there was "high insecurity" and "an increase in stress" for the migrants who are "not fully aware of where they are going and what will come for them in the next days." In Geneva, the UN refugee agency said it was sending additional staff to help the process.

"It's important that organised movements are voluntary, non-discriminatory, and based on well-informed choices by the individuals at the moment," UNHCR spokesman Adrian Edwards told reporters. However Markolefa noted that a police cordon thrown around the camp -- mainly to keep media out -- had also prevented access for many humanitarian workers. "This complicates food handout efforts and sanitation maintenance for those who will remain in the camp," she told AFP.



At its height, more than 12,000 people crammed into Idomeni, a camp originally opened by aid groups last year to accommodate just 2,500 people during what was, at the time, a short procedure to cross the border.

But the camp exploded in size after Balkan states began closing their borders in mid-February to stem the human tide seeking passage to northern Europe. Kyritsis said the operation to clear all 8,400 people living there would take at least 10 days.

Officials have said 6,000 spots are available at reception centres, and that most of the migrants are to be moved to camps at former industrial facilities near Thessaloniki. Many of the camp's residents are women and children desperate to be reunited with male relatives who have forged ahead on their own -- with the aid of smugglers -- hoping to find a place of refuge for their families in EU states more financially viable than debt-hit Greece.

The leftist government of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has for months been trying to persuade migrants to move away from makeshift tent encampments at Idomeni and at the port of Piraeus for their own comfort and safety. Over the past two weeks, Greek officials have managed to convince some 2,500 people to leave Idomeni, while the number at Piraeus was brought down from around 5,000 people in March to 1,500.

But many are wary of relocating to organised camps away from the border or Athens, because it could be harder to find people-smuggling contacts. There are over 54,000 migrants stranded in Greece, according to government estimates.

Meanwhile, around 2,000 migrants seeking to reach Europe from Africa were plucked to safety from unseaworthy boats in the Mediterranean in 15 operations off the coast of Libya, the Italian coastguard service said. So far this year, the International Organisation for Migration says an estimated 190,000 migrants and refugees have entered Europe by sea, arriving in Italy, Greece, Cyprus island and Spain. Another 1,359 have died en route.

Atomic bomb survivors to attend Hiroshima event for Obama visit

Reuters, 26.05.2016



At least three atomic bomb survivors will attend an event in Hiroshima when U.S. President Barack Obama becomes the first incumbent U.S. leader to visit the site of the world's first atomic bombing, Japan's Kyodo news agency reported.

Obama has said he will not apologize or address the debate on whether the Aug. 6, 1945, dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and on Nagasaki three days later was justified, but will honor all those who lost their lives in WWII. He will be accompanied by Japanese PM Shinzo Abe. A group representing Korean victims of the bombings protested their suffering was being neglected ahead of Obama's visit.

The Association of Korean Atomic Bomb Victims estimates that anywhere between 40,000 and 70,000 Koreans died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki when atomic bombs laid waste to the two cities in August 1945. The Korean peninsula was under Japanese colonial rule at the time, and most of those who died had been conscripted by the Japanese military or forced into hard labor.

Consequently, the association argues that Koreans were multiple victims, deserving not only of an apology from the United States, but also from Japan. Around two dozen members of the group - including survivors and relatives of those who died - gathered outside the U.S. embassy in Seoul with placards reading: "Apologize to Korean victims of the Atomic Bomb" and "Acknowledge the 2nd generation victims."

Anti-Trump protesters hurl rocks as Trump wins Washington primary

AFP, 25.05.2016



Protesters opposed to Donald Trump hurled rocks and bottles outside a Trump rally in New Mexico, the same day the billionaire won the Republican presidential primary in Washington state. The primary victory brings Trump, the last Republican standing in the 2016 U.S. presidential race, one major step closer toward clinching his party's nomination.

But the success was clouded by violent anti-Trump demonstrations in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Chaos erupted outside a Trump rally when protesters threw burning t-shirts and bottles at police, and tried to storm the convention center where the provocative Republican candidate was speaking.

Horse-mounted police and officers wielding clubs used pepper spray and smoke bombs to try to disperse the crowd. The protesters, several of whom waved Mexican flags, chanted expletives about Trump. Some also waved signs with expletive-laden anti-Trump slogans in Spanish.

Trump has proposed building a wall on the Mexican border, suggested that Mexican immigrants were rapists and drug dealers, and urged the deportation of the 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. "Protestors are now throwing bottles and rocks at our Police Horses," Albuquerque police tweeted.

The southwestern U.S. state has highest percentage of Hispanic residents - nearly 50 percent - of any other state, and polls show that Hispanics overwhelmingly oppose Trump's immigration proposals. Trump addressed a rally of about 4,000 people earlier, but was frequently interrupted by protesters, the Albuquerque Journal reported.

Police managed to stop a group of about 100 protesters who had tried to storm the convention center when Trump was speaking, the newspaper said. Riot police were deployed soon after. Several Trump rallies have drawn protests, including in Chicago in March when his supporters clashed with protesters. Trump has been criticized for inciting violence at his rallies.



Announcements & Reports

Lessons For The Euro From Early US Monetary and Financial History

Source : Bruegel
Weblink : <http://bruegel.org/2016/05/lessons-for-the-euro-from-early-us-monetary-and-financial-history/>

Young Arab Voices: Moving Youth Policy from Debate into Action

Source : Chatham House
Weblink : <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/young-arab-voices-moving-youth-policy-debate-action>

The Changing Security Structure in the Middle East

Source : CSIS
Weblink : <https://www.csis.org/analysis/changing-security-structure-middle-east>

Upcoming Events

The Search for Europe

Date : 31 May 2016
Place : Brussels - Belgium
Website : <http://bruegel.org/events/the-search-for-europe/>

The UK and the EU: Managing the Euro and the Single Market

Date : 31 May 2016
Place : London - UK
Website : <https://www.chathamhouse.org/event/uk-and-eu-managing-euro-and-single-market>

Competitive Gains in the Economic and Monetary Union

Date : 31 May 2016
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 : 01 June 2016
Place : London - UK
Website : <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/future-capitalist-democracy-uk-japan-perspectives>



Emerging Markets and Europe: Time for Different Relationships?

Date : 02 June 2016
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 : 03 June 2016
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 : 05 June 2016
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 : 05 June 2016
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 : 06 June 2016
Place : Berlin - Germany
Website : <http://www.bruegel.org/nc/events/event-detail/event/541-the-future-of-the-welfare-state/>