

Coal mine bosses sent to jail as mining resumes in Soma

Daily Sabah, 22.05.2014



If convicted, they may face prison terms of up to 25 years. Can Gurkan is the son of Alp Gurkan, CEO and owner of Soma Holding. Alp Gurkan held a press conference with Akin Celik and Ramazan Dogru following the mining accident in which the three men denied any negligence on their part.

Gurkan was rearrested after Dogru told prosecutors that documents which assign all authority and responsibility to him for the mine's operation and safety. Gurkan denied the allegation. It was reported that the two suspects argued in the halls of the courthouse in Soma as they were being escorted to the prison where they will be held until the trial.

Based on the suspects' statements and initial reports by experts appointed by authorities to investigate the accident, mining operations continued despite rising carbon monoxide emissions over the past two years. According to Turkish media outlets, Halil Sari, a shift supervisor questioned by prosecutors, said coal production was halted in a gallery where carbon monoxide was concentrated but production was resumed six months later without any precautions taken. Prosecutors asked the suspects why they did not take measures related to the carbon monoxide emissions and the suspects replied that sensors used in detection of rises in carbon monoxide levels did not detect any extraordinary emissions.

On the other hand, it was revealed that data from computers at the mining facility showed that gas sensors displayed warnings of a 50 percent rise in carbon monoxide levels two days before the accident. An explosion in a faulty power distribution unit was initially blamed for the fire but prosecutors announced later that the first expert report found the fire could have been triggered by coal heating up after making contact with the air. Speaking to the Turkish media, fire department officials said the fire in the mine was reported more than one hour after it broke out. They said mining officials believed they could extinguish the fire themselves but it got out of control. Allegations of negligence over safety led to a debate over safety in mines across Turkey.

Critics claim most mining companies employ miners after only a couple of days of training, unlike the training programs in past years which used to last for at least one month. The brief training is particularly common in mines in Soma and some miners claim safety drills were not held in mines, and instead officials showed them videos of previous drills to teach them how to act in cases of emergency. Miners then signed documents approving that they had undergone training and thus mining companies can earn the approval of inspectors examining the safety standards applied in the mine. Speaking to the Turkish media, miners and mining engineers claimed companies prefer slide shows and videos to train the miners so as not to interrupt production. The tragedy also revealed a huge gap between the salaries of miners working at private-run mines and state-run mines.



For instance, workers in several mines in Soma are paid up to TL 1,300, while the salary of a miner working at a state-run mine in the northern Turkish city of Zonguldak is up to TL 3,500 with extra day offs. Despite low salaries, people from impoverished families turn to mining. Coal mines in Soma resumed operations late Sunday, less than a week after the accident. The government earlier assured that workers in other mines will not be forced to go back to work and their salaries will be paid even if they do not work. Days after a fire killed 301 miners in a coal mine in the western Turkish town of Soma, Can Gurkan, acting chairman of Soma mining company which operates the mine, was arrested late Monday. Gurkan and the mine's general manager, Ramazan Dogru, blamed one another during the prosecutor's questioning for the lack of safety in the mine. The number of arrested suspects has risen to eight. A total of 25 people were detained over the weekend in connection with the mining accident but most suspects were released on probation. Following his arrest, the prosecutor requested Gurkan's release on probation but upon Dogru's statements, he was re-arrested.

The suspects including the mine's operations manager Akın Celik, engineers Yalcin Erdogan and Ertan Ersoy, security supervisors Hilmi Kazik, Yasin Kurnaz and Mehmet Ali Celik face charges of reckless homicide. If convicted, they may face prison terms of up to 25 years. Can Gurkan is the son of Alp Gurkan, CEO and owner of Soma Holding. Alp Gurkan held a press conference with Akın Celik and Ramazan Dogru following the mining accident in which the three men denied any negligence on their part. Can Gurkan was rearrested after Ramazan Dogru told prosecutors that documents which assign all authority and responsibility to him for the mine's operation and safety were forged. Gurkan denied the allegation. It was reported that the two suspects argued in the halls of the courthouse in Soma as they were being escorted to the prison where they will be held until the trial.

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Erdogan fracas amid Turkey's mourning betrays growing polarisation

Reuters, 18.05.2014



Flanked by half a dozen body guards, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan turns towards a crowd baying for his resignation in a mining town still shocked and grieving after the country's worst industrial disaster. Stern-faced and wagging his finger, he remonstrates with several men before leaning towards them over a police barricade and delivering a warning.

"Don't be rude," he says, according to mobile phone footage captured by a member of the public and broadcast by the Dogan news agency. "If you boo the prime minister of this country, you'll get a slap."



“Come here and jeer at me!” he dares another demonstrator in a separate clip before his entourage forces its way into a supermarket. Grainy footage from another phone, published by the Sol news website, appears to show him slapping a man in a blue T-shirt, who then drops to the floor next to an ice cream freezer as he is punched and kicked by suited bodyguards. The man, Taner Kurucan, initially told a Turkish television station that Erdogan had been unable to control himself in the heat of the moment and had given him an “involuntary slap”. But he later said in an interview with a local broadcaster that he had been mistaken, and that the prime minister had in fact been trying to shield him from the body guards, CNN Turk and other media reports said on Sunday.

Erdogan’s aides denied he struck anyone, but the episode set in stark relief the impulsive tendencies of a man who has dominated Turkish politics for over a decade, and who takes criticism of his leadership as a deep personal affront. Yet while the sight of him confronting angry residents of a town still burying its dead may shock, it is unlikely to derail his ambition to become Turkey’s first popularly elected president in August or to irreparably dent his image among a religiously conservative class who see him as their champion. To their eyes, Erdogan has delivered not only a decade of rising living standards, but social justice, promoting Islamic values and fighting for a segment of the population largely excluded from the privileges of state power for much of the past century by a secularist and Western-facing elite.

If that means pugnacity in politics, so be it. Footage of the melee has emerged bit by bit on a handful of news websites and on social media since Erdogan’s visit to Soma last Wednesday, a small town 480 km (300 miles) southwest of Istanbul where more than 300 miners died last week after fire sent carbon monoxide coursing through a coal mine. The disaster has sparked small-scale protests in cities around the country from demonstrators angry at what they see as the coziness of Erdogan’s AK Party with tycoons, its failure to ensure the safety of workers, and his insensitivity. Erdogan has done little to ease the tensions. He expressed regret for the disaster during his visit to Soma but entered a press conference there armed with a list of mining accidents starting in Victorian-era England, when children worked the pits by candle light and oil lamps, to defend himself against any suggestion of political culpability.

“Explosions like this in these mines happen all the time,” he said, reading off examples dating back a century and a half. Kurucan said he had not even been protesting and had gone to the supermarket to shop when Erdogan’s entourage burst in next to the fruit section. The video footage shows Kurucan in the entrance way seeming to gesture for calm. “I saw the crowd coming towards me and I ended up face-to-face with the prime minister,” he said in the initial interview with Kanal D television last week. “At that moment the guards started to push people about and Mr Prime Minister unfortunately could not control his anger and rage and involuntarily gave me a slap,” he said, showing wounds to his arm and neck after the beating by the guards.

AK Party spokesman Huseyin Celik said he had watched the footage and concluded there was no visual evidence of the prime minister striking anyone. Top Erdogan adviser Yalcin Akdogan accused “gang members” of attacking his entourage as he tried to meet grieving families. On the same day, one of Erdogan’s deputy personal assistants, Yusuf Yerkel, was caught in photographs kicking a protester being wrestled to the ground by armed special forces officers. Yerkel, who has been given a week’s leave, later said he regretted having been unable to control himself in the face of provocations. Celik said it was impossible to tell the whole truth from one photograph.



Whoever threw the first punch, the episodes highlight not only a thuggish side of Turkish politics, but also a growing sense of polarisation in the country at large which Erdogan has exploited to consolidate his support. “Even if Erdogan survives with limited damage, the disaster has increased the likelihood that, if he is elected president in August, he will head a deeply divided country in which tensions and intermittent eruptions of anti-government protests will become the new norm,” said Wolfango Piccoli, managing director of political risk research firm Teneo Intelligence. Erdogan’s political rhetoric plays on an underlying schism reaching back to the 1920s when Mustafa Kemal Ataturk forged a secular republic from the ruins of an Ottoman theocracy, banishing Islam from public life, replacing Arabic with Latin script and promoting Western dress and women’s rights.

For many among his more ideological supporters, Erdogan and his Islamist-rooted AK Party represent an opportunity to redress the balance and settle scores, a powerful narrative in the country’s conservative Anatolian heartlands. From weeks of anti-government protest last summer to a corruption scandal around his inner circle early this year, Erdogan has cast challenges to his authority as part of a foreign-backed conspiracy, an assault on Turkey’s core values. Tempers have flared before. Parliamentarians threw punches and water bottles during a debate in January about government control over the judiciary. One ruling party MP leapt on a table and launched a flying kick as others wrestled and punched, with document folders and even an iPad flying through the air.

Yet for all the turbulence, Erdogan’s AK Party swept the map in municipal elections on March 30, retaining the main cities Istanbul and Ankara and fuelling his ambition to run for the presidency in three months’ time. “Go to the ballot box tomorrow and teach them all a lesson,” the blunt-talking premier, son of a poor sea captain hardened by a childhood in Istanbul’s rough Kasimpasa district, said of his opponents on the eve of the March election. “Let’s give them an Ottoman slap.” The farcical scenes in Soma at the height of a national tragedy won greater attention on Twitter and YouTube and in the international press than in Turkey’s own cowed media, suggesting this is another storm Erdogan will comfortably ride out. Even Kurucan seemed somewhat uneasy with the attention. “There was just one slap. I believe Mr Prime Minister did not do it consciously but involuntarily,” he emphasized.

Germany says Turkey's Erdogan welcome despite mounting criticism

Reuters, 19.05.2014



Germany has rejected calls for Turkey's Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan to cancel his visit to Cologne on Saturday, when he is due to address almost 20,000 supporters in what could amount to a de facto rally for Turkey's presidential poll in August.

Erdogan has not yet said whether he will run for the Turkish president, but he is widely expected to do so. Although his party says the Cologne speech is not a campaign event, some German lawmakers have urged Berlin to discourage it, owing to Erdogan's pugnacious style and what critics say are his increasing authoritarian tendencies.

One leading Christian Democrat, Julia Kloeckner, urged Turks living in Germany to boycott the event to protest Erdogan's reaction to a mining disaster in Turkey last week that killed 301 people. His stance sparked angry protests in Turkey. German government spokesman Steffen Seibert said the visit was a private one and the Turkish premier was welcome. But he added: "The government expects Prime Minister Erdogan to approach this appearance with responsibility and sensitivity." Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said he expected the speech to be "appropriate to international customs and above all fitting to the close nature of German-Turkish ties".

Erdogan's fiery, patriotic speeches to Turkish audiences in Germany have frequently caused controversy. In 2008, he told them not to assimilate and called for Turkish-language schools. Turkey's presidents have until now been chosen by parliament and played a largely ceremonial role. August's election will be the first direct vote for the post, which Erdogan wants to carry more power. An estimated 2 million Turkish citizens living in Germany have a right to vote in Turkish elections, and Erdogan would want their support if he stands. Another 1 million people of Turkish origin have become German citizens. "In theory, we are a country which is open to visitors," said Peter Tauber, the secretary general of the Christian Democrats, Chancellor Angela Merkel's party.

"Everyone can speak here and we have freedom of speech and freedom to gather." However, those rights did not exist everywhere, he said, including in Turkey. Over the past year, Erdogan has weathered anti-government protests, a corruption scandal and a feud with an influential Islamic preacher he accuses of trying to unseat him. His two-week closure of social networking site Twitter and a block on access to video-sharing platform YouTube earlier this year drew criticism at home and abroad, including the German government. Yet he still remains hugely popular among Turkey's poorer and more religious voters.

Turkey shuts Benghazi consulate due to security threat

World Bulletin, 19.05.2014



Turkey temporarily closed its consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi on Monday, a spokesman said, because of a threat of an attack after scores of people were killed in clashes between a renegade general and Islamist militias.

The flag that normally flies over the consul building in Libya's second city had been taken down according to a Reuters witness, but Turkish officials said staff had not been evacuated. The consulate was closed after a specific threat, spokesman for the Turkish Foreign Ministry, said, without giving further details. "The consulate has been closed for today as a security measure."

Bilgic continued; "Whether it will remain closed tomorrow or not will be decided in light of the security situation." Turkey is one of the last countries to maintain a diplomatic presence in Benghazi, where the U.S. ambassador was killed during an attack by Islamist militants on the American diplomatic mission in the port city in 2012. Saudi Arabia closed its embassy and consulate in the capital Tripoli, in western Libya, and withdrew all of its diplomatic staff on Monday due to security concerns, the ambassador said.

Syrian election candidate praises Assad's war on rebels, wants ties with West

Reuters, 17.05.2014



One of President al-Assad's two challengers in next month's election praised his military campaign against Islamist rebels but said Syria must do more to maintain ties with the West and rebuild its economy after three years of war.

al-Nouri said there was no difference between the three candidates over military strategy against Syrian rebels and their foreign Sunni Muslim backers in the ongoing conflict. "Our enemy is still the same enemy. We are all against terrorism," Nouri told in an interview less than three weeks before an election which authorities portray as a landmark for democracy and the West has dismissed as a sham.



The June 3 election is the first time in half a century that Syrian ballot papers will contain any name other than Assad. The last seven votes were referenda to approve Bashar al-Assad or his father, Hafez al-Assad. Hafez never scored less than 99 percent, while his son got 97.6 percent seven years ago. Despite the move to allow two rivals approved by parliament and the constitutional court to run this time, Assad's international foes say the election is a charade intended to rubber stamp his rule for another seven year term. They say no credible vote can be held in a country fractured by a war which grew out of a popular uprising against the president and which has displaced millions of people. But Nouri, a U.S.-educated economist and former junior minister, said most Syrians would be able to vote. "In the middle of the country the situation is perfect for election. On the coast the situation is very good. In the southern part of Syria the situation is getting better," the grey-suited Nouri said in the interview at a Damascus hotel.

Some Syrians still "have doubt and fear about how to react to this new democracy" and even some of Nouri's friends were reluctant to endorse him in public, he said, but state media were giving fair coverage to him and the other challenger, parliamentarian Abdul-Hafiz Hajjar. "The problem is you are competing (with) Bashar al-Assad - 14 years a president and coming from a heritage of a great president of Syria," he said, speaking in English. "But you have to admit that I am very courageous to build my program to go (against) the system ...I am not with Assad. I am going to compete with him to the end."

Nouri, a 54-year-old Damascene who has an MBA in public management from Wisconsin University, said that if elected he would push harder for "international dialogue" including with Assad's Western critics. "I would be trying to adapt the relationship with the West in a more aggressive way," he said, adding that Damascus should keep chances alive "for very strong diplomatic ties with all countries, including the USA." He said he would be ready to negotiate with armed groups but would "never deal with terrorist groups", a position he portrayed as being in line with Assad's policy.

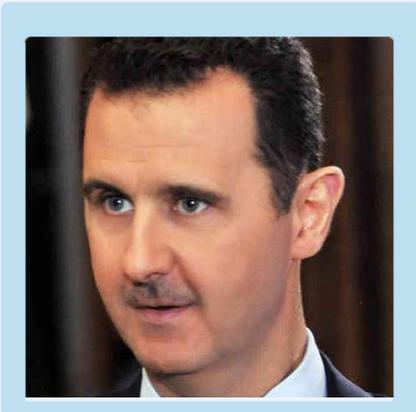
While suggesting authorities gave protesters little chance to voice grievances when the uprising erupted in March 2011, he said it would be wrong to criticize the government now that "terrorism has become the number one factor in this revolution". Syria's opposition in exile says it was Assad's forceful response to peaceful demonstrations which pushed the uprising towards armed insurgency, now backed by foreign jihadi fighters. "After evaluating the current government and the current president's performance concerning this ... I see they are doing fine," said Nouri. Nevertheless there was a large middle ground of Syrian opinion which was neither with the president nor the radical Islamist wing of his armed opponents.

"I know the pro-Assad (side) will never be convinced no matter what I do and the opposition, the extremists... will never consider my program," Nouri said.

"But you know what? Both are not the majority," he added, appealing to what he said was Syria's silent majority who "care about their country, care about their security (and) want food on their table." Describing himself as a free market economist, he said his immediate priority would be to rebuild Syria's infrastructure which has been devastated by a conflict in which 150,000 people have been killed, and revive the middle class. "A country without a middle class will never grow."

Street by street, Assad extends grip in central Syria

UNDPI, 18.05.2014



From his base in Damascus, al-Assad can contemplate a broad sweep of Syria clawed back from rebels who once threatened to drive him out. The capital which they targeted is now plastered with posters inviting Syrians to reelect him.

Powerful foreign allies have helped Assad retake a chain of cities which form the north-south backbone of the country, keep his grip on the Mediterranean coast to the west and restore control over the Lebanese border. The culmination of that slow military turnaround came last week with the final withdrawal of rebel fighters, a month before the presidential election in which Assad faces no serious challenge.

His foes dismiss the June 3 vote as a farce, saying the huge areas still beyond his command make a credible vote impossible, but the fact that authorities can consider a notionally nationwide ballot reveals their growing confidence. One of the two candidates officially approved to run against Assad said the overwhelming majority of Syrians would be able to vote, downplaying the fighting that still kills around 200 people a day and the almost three million who have fled. "In the middle of the country the situation is perfect for election. On the coast the situation is very good. In the southern part of Syria the situation is getting better," said Hassan al-Nouri, a U.S.-educated former minister of state. The military respite has come at a cost.

Assad's foreign Shi'ite supporters have often taken the lead in battle, leaving his own forces to play a peripheral role against rebels who are themselves increasingly directed by outside Sunni powers. Whoever pulls the strings, though, the long term momentum is clear. Rebels have fought Assad's forces in Homs city since the early days of the uprising in 2011. Until a year ago they held territory along the main highway from Homs to Damascus and controlled the capital's eastern and southern suburbs. Now that they have pulled out of Syria's third biggest city, battered by years of bombardment, siege and retreat, Assad's hold over the heart of the country is tighter than it has ever been since protests against his rule turned to armed insurgency.

On the fringes, rebels still pose a deadly challenge, holding parts of Aleppo and Deraa at the northern and southern tips of that backbone of Syrian cities. Most of the northern border with Turkey is also in rebel hands, as are swathes of northern Syria, the eastern oilfields and farmlands, and southern areas close to Jordanian border and the Golan Heights. Assad's enemies make much of the fact that the territory under his control may only account for a third of the country, but it forms an increasingly coherent core, linked by secure road connections, where a semblance of normality exists and the great majority of the population now lives. By contrast the rebel-held land - riven with internecine fighting and battered by waves of Assad's aerial bombardment - offers neither security to the population nor a military platform to strike against his strongholds.



The three-year conflict has killed at least 150,000 people, but the relentless nature of the devastation and the lack of a single frontline marked by advances and retreats means the war often seems deadlocked. In reality multiple battles are fought on a local level, the small scale of their ebb and flow making little impact on the broader war. With the possible exception of Tartous, one of two Mediterranean strongholds of Assad's Alawite minority, not one of Syria's 14 provinces is totally controlled by either side. "It's a fluid form of stalemate," said one military official in the region who closely monitors the Syrian conflict. "The regime holds the strategic upper hand while the rebels fight tactical battles on the fringes."

Assad has been helped by the multiple fractures in rebel ranks. Rival al Qaeda groups are at each others' throats and the Western-backed coalition known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has been eclipsed by more Islamist brigades. "Bashar has the upper hand on the ground. As long as the FSA exists he will always have the upper hand," said a fighter from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), highlighting the mutual animosity which plagues Assad's enemies. ISIL, a breakaway al Qaeda faction, is battling the official al Qaeda branch in Syria, the Nusra Front. It has also clashed with the powerful Islamic Front and fighters from the FSA.

ISIL's rebel opponents say the group is more intent on carving out a jihadist heartland in rebel territory than it is on fighting Assad, who in turn has carefully avoided targeting ISIL in government air strikes, they say. In his final speech to the U.N. Security Council before he steps down in despair, international mediator Lakhdar Brahimi lamented on Tuesday that there are "probably well over a thousand" rebel groups involved in Syria's complex war. "Peace in Syria will not happen and be sustainable without a much more intimate understanding of the military map in Syria, and a deeper understanding of their interests, goals and potential to engage in a political process," he said. "We have not developed that understanding to a sufficiently high level."

Complicating the battle is the presence on both sides of thousands of foreign fighters. The mainly Sunni Muslim rebels, who are backed by Sunni regional powers, have been joined by Sunni jihadi fighters from across the world. Assad, whose Alawite community is an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam, has been reinforced by Iraqi Shi'ite fighters and the Lebanese Shi'ite group Hezbollah, and supported by Shi'ite Iran and his main arms supplier and diplomatic supporters, Russia. Hezbollah's role has been crucial over the last 12 months in consolidating control over the Qalamoun region close to the Lebanese border, overlooking the road linking Damascus to Homs. "Qalamoun is now completely free," said a military source close to the pro-Assad forces. "Five important towns which were the main strongholds of the gunmen are now under the control of the government."

Thirty crossing points with Lebanon which had been used to supply rebel arms and fighters have been sealed along 124 km (78 miles) of border, he said, a crucial element in Assad's consolidation of power over the centre of the country. A rebel offensive launched from Turkey into northern Latakia, the other Mediterranean Alawite bastion, seized ground two months ago not far from the ancestral Assad town of Qardaha, but petered out and lost most of its early gains. Similarly, rebels have launched several attacks on Assad's forces around Aleppo - Syria's biggest city before much of it was reduced to ruins - but probably hold less territory there than they did after storming the city in the summer of 2012. "What has been under government control still is," the military source said, describing both the rebel assaults around Aleppo and Latakia as failures. The battle around Aleppo, as in most parts of the country, is far from straightforward. Fighters often have a better understanding with their foes than their brothers-in-arms.

“Those on the frontline are thugs and traders who are willing to sell and buy,” a Nusra Front gunman said dismissively of his fellow insurgents. “Sometimes they make deals with Assad’s forces, and sometimes they fight.” Assad’s air force has bombarded rebel-held areas of Aleppo and other cities with barrel bombs, crude explosives packed into cylinders or barrels and rolled out of the backs of helicopters from a great height to avoid rebel fire from the ground. The resulting damage is largely indiscriminate and has been condemned by rights groups and Assad’s international foes who say thousands of civilians have been killed in the bombardment. The United States and France have also said preliminary evidence suggests Syrian government forces have used chlorine gas in the last two months - in violation of a treaty Damascus signed up to as part of a deal to eliminate its chemical arsenal after deadly sarin attacks around Damascus in August last year. Trying to level the battlefield, rebels have acquired heavy weaponry - some supplied from Gulf Arab allies and some seized from Syria’s army - including sophisticated rockets and tanks.

Those weapons have taken a heavy toll on Assad’s forces. Figures collated by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group suggest that more pro-Assad fighters (58,000) were killed than rebels (38,000) by the beginning of April. Rebels have been gaining ground in the heavily militarized south, seizing army positions between the city of Deraa and the town of Quneitra close to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Lacking air power, they have also turned underground, detonating three huge ‘tunnel bombs’ under targets in the northern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib in the last two weeks. With video footage showing columns of earth flying into the sky like smoke, an Islamic Front commander said from inside Syria they would not be the last. “We will use this strategy whenever there is a target that is difficult for us to reach.”

At least 162,000 killed in Syria conflict: monitoring group

Tehran Times, 19.05.2014



At least 162,000 people have been killed in Syria’s three-year-old conflict, a monitoring group said on Monday, and thousands more are missing after being captured by al-Assad’s forces and rebels trying to overthrow him.

The pro-opposition, British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said losses among fighters on the government side were higher than those among pro-rebel groups, and estimated that at least 54,000 civilians had been killed since the conflict began. It estimated 62,800 deaths among the army, pro-Assad Syrian militia, Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and other foreign Shi’ite gunmen.

That compared with 42,700 people who had died on the rebel side, including fighters from al Qaeda’s Nusra Front, other Islamist brigades, and soldiers who defected from Assad’s army. Nearly 3,000 people of unknown identity or affiliation had been killed, it said.

The Observatory said all sides in the conflict played down their losses, making an accurate count almost impossible, and the overall death toll was probably around 70,000 higher at 230,000. Efforts to find a political solution to the conflict collapsed in Geneva three months ago and the international mediator Lakhdar Brahimi will step down at the end of the month. Assad, who has steadily clawed back control over the center of the country, is widely expected to win a third seven-year term in a June 3 election which his enemies have condemned as a charade. The Observatory said its figures did not include 18,000 people who had been detained by authorities and whose fate was unknown, as well as thousands more who were missing after raids by security forces. Another 8,000 soldiers and pro-Assad militia were also missing after being held by rebels, and hundreds of people had been kidnapped, it said. A further 1,500 fighters were abducted during inter-rebel conflict.

UN bid to refer Syria to ICC vetoed

Al Jazeera, 23.05.2014



Dozens of countries backed the French-drafted resolution in a move to demand a path to justice in the conflict, which has entered its fourth year.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said he was appalled by the Russian and Chinese veto. The US ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, accused the Russians of providing diplomatic protection to the Syrian government “no matter what it does”. In a statement published after the vote he said the countries would have to justify “why they are continuing to shield those responsible for the most horrific atrocities,” the Reuters news agency reported.

Prior to the vote, Russia’s ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, told reporters that his country’s vote would be “boringly predictable” and dismissed the resolution as a “publicity stunt”. Speaking after the vote, Churkin said his country shared the “emotions” of the countries who supported the bill but questioned whether France was using the bill as a pretext for armed intervention. Al Jazeera’s James Bays, reporting from the UN in New York, said Western nations could pursue special tribunals independent from the UN to bring individuals in Syria to justice. The resolution would have referred Syria’s crisis to the world’s permanent war crimes tribunal in The Hague without targeting either the government or the opposition. Before the vote, UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson pleaded with council members to find unity and “put an end to this long nightmare”, the AP news agency reported. More than 150,000 people have been killed during the Syrian conflict.

Next Iran nuclear talks due on June 16-20

Aljazeera, 18.05.2014



The next round of nuclear talks between Iran and six world powers will take place in Vienna on June 16-20, senior Iranian nuclear negotiator Abbas Araghchi was reported as saying by the IRNA official state news agency.

There were no further details in the agency's report late on Saturday about the planned discussions, which are aimed at ending a decade-old standoff over Iran's nuclear program. Tehran says its nuclear program is for peaceful aims such as power generation and medicine. The West and Israel suspect it is a cover for acquiring the capability to make nuclear weapons.

The latest round of negotiations in Vienna last week resulted in little progress. The six powers want Iran to agree to scale back uranium enrichment and other sensitive nuclear activity and accept more rigorous U.N. inspections to deny it any capability of quickly producing atomic bombs, in exchange for an end to sanctions. In a related development, Iranian media reported that an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) delegation would visit Tehran on Monday to discuss Iran's nuclear work. In Vienna, there was no immediate IAEA comment, but diplomatic sources on Friday said a meeting early this week was expected.

Iran has offered to work with the IAEA in clarifying what the U.N. agency calls the possible military dimensions of the country's nuclear program. The talks between Iran and the nuclear watchdog will last one day and "will summarize the 13 measures that Iran has taken in different forms during its cooperation with the agency," Iran's Atomic Energy Organization spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi said, according to the Iranian Students' News Agency. The IAEA-Iran talks are separate from those between Tehran and six world powers - the United States, France, Germany, Britain, China and Russia - aimed at reaching a broader deal to settle the decade-old nuclear dispute by July 20. But they are complementary, as both focus on fears that Iran may covertly be seeking the means and expertise to assemble nuclear weapons.

Iran voices tougher line on planned nuclear reactor

Gulf Times 18.05.2014



Iran appeared to take a harder line in its nuclear dispute with world powers on Sunday by dismissing as “ridiculous” one idea that could allay Western concerns about a planned atomic research reactor. The fate of the heavy-water reactor at Arak, which has not yet been completed, is one of several thorny issues in talks between Iran and six powers aimed at reaching a long-term deal on Tehran’s nuclear program by an agreed July 20 deadline.

“It is ridiculous that the power of the (Arak) reactor would be cut from 40 megawatts to 10 megawatts”, nuclear negotiator Abbas Araghchi said, the official IRNA news agency reported.

Western powers fear the Arak plant - 250 km (150 miles) southwest of Tehran - could provide a supply of plutonium - one of two materials, along with highly enriched uranium, that can trigger a nuclear explosion - once operational. Iran says it would produce isotopes for medical treatments, and denies any of its nuclear work is aimed at making a bomb. If operating optimally, Arak could produce about nine kg (20 pounds) of plutonium annually, enough for about two atom bombs, the U.S. Institute for Science and International Security says. Araghchi made no other reference to the idea in the remarks carried by IRNA, and it was not clear whether such a reduction in electrical power at the planned facility had been formally proposed at the latest round of talks last week.

But possible options that could allow Iran to keep the reactor at Arak while satisfying the West that it would not be used for military purposes include reducing its megawatt capacity and altering the way it will be fuelled, experts say. Iran’s atomic energy organization chief said in February Tehran was prepared to modify Arak, while insisting that Western concerns over Arak were a ploy to apply pressure on Tehran. The fate of Arak was a big hurdle in talks last year that led to a landmark agreement to curb sensitive aspects of Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for some easing of sanctions. Araghchi said Iran’s negotiating team would do its utmost to get an accord by July 20 based on the country’s “red lines,” but it would not be a “tragedy” if no deal was reached by then. Iran’s red lines include preserving the Arak reactor and maintaining the enrichment capabilities. He said the talks would resume in Vienna on June 16-20.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on his Twitter account that a deal was “possible”. “Back from Vienna after tough discussions. Agreement is possible. But illusions need to go. Opportunity shouldn’t be missed again like in 2005,” Zarif tweeted. Zarif was referring to a 2005 proposal for Iran to convert all of its enriched uranium to fuel rods, making it impossible to use it for nuclear weapons. The proposal was rejected as the United States was not prepared to accept any level of Iranian nuclear enrichment. Today, Western diplomats privately acknowledge that forcing Iran to halt all uranium enrichment, as stipulated in U.N. Security Council resolutions, is unrealistic given the scale of the work and resistance from Tehran.

In a related development, the International Atomic Energy Agency said a team from the U.N. nuclear watchdog would hold one-day talks with officials in Tehran on Tuesday. The IAEA-Iran talks are separate from those between Tehran and six world powers - the United States, France, Germany, Britain, China and Russia - but are complementary, as both focus on fears that Iran may covertly be seeking weapons capability. The six powers want Iran to scale back uranium enrichment and other sensitive nuclear activity and accept more rigorous U.N. inspections to deny it any capability of quickly producing atomic bombs, in exchange for an end to sanctions.

Iran says Kuwait's emir to visit, turn 'new page' in ties

Arab News, 21.05.2014



Kuwait's ruling emir will visit Iran at the end of the month to help turn a "new page" in bilateral ties, Iran's foreign ministry said on Tuesday, in the latest sign that Tehran seeks to improve relations with its Arab neighbors.

Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Amed al-Sabah will visit Iran on May 31-June 1 at the invitation of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, a foreign ministry spokeswoman said. The trip will be his first to Iran since becoming emir in 2006. Kuwait, home to a sizeable Shi'ite Muslim minority, is seen by some as a potential bridge between Shi'ite power Iran and more wary and sometimes hostile Sunni Muslim Gulf countries.

The visit "will usher in a new page of Kuwait-Iran relations," Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham told a televised news conference in Tehran. The office of Kuwait's emir has not confirmed the trip. Sheikh Sabah, a former foreign minister, is often described by analysts as one of the region's most important diplomats, often acting as a mediator and peacemaker. He has maintained good ties with Iran, directly across the Gulf waterway, as well as with Kuwait's large neighbors Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Iran's Rouhani, a relative moderate elected last year, has repeatedly vowed to improve relations with neighboring countries. The planned meeting follows Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's tour of the Middle East in December after Tehran signed an interim nuclear deal with world powers. Kuwait welcomed the agreement, saying it hoped it would help to preserve stability and security in the region. Saudi Arabia is a leading backer of rebels fighting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who is a close ally of Iran, which the kingdom believes to be one of its biggest threats. Afkham also said an Iranian visit to Saudi Arabia was on the "agenda" but did not specify an exact date or participation.

Race begins to succeed Peres as Israel's president

Huffington Post, 19.05.2014



The race to succeed Shimon Peres as Israel's president began officially on Monday, after what was widely seen as a bid by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to abolish the post and its king-making potential.

Legislators will elect a new president on June 10, Speaker of Parliament Edelstein announced. At least five candidates are expected to vie for the position of head of state, in a contest that Edelstein said had already begun with smears against several likely contenders. "The post of president of Israel is important, and it is aimed at healing rifts in the nation ... This hasn't been the kind of campaign we wanted to see."

Raising eyebrows among political pundits, Netanyahu floated a trial balloon on the future of the presidency while visiting Japan last week. Political sources said Netanyahu - who has not commented publicly on the issue - left key advisers at home to sound out cabinet colleagues on suspending the pending poll and evaluating the need for the position. Some political analysts linked the maneuver, which was roundly rejected in Facebook postings by top ministers, to the candidacy of a member of Netanyahu's own Likud party with whom he has had a rocky relationship.

Reuven Rivlin, a former speaker of parliament who formally entered the race on Monday, has a reputation for political independence in the Likud. An opinion poll last week named him as a front-runner. A Rivlin victory in the campaign to succeed the 90-year-old Peres could make Netanyahu more vulnerable in a general election. Israeli law grants the head of state the power to choose a legislator to try to put together a government. No one party has ever won an outright parliamentary majority in a national poll. That makes the president - whose duties are usually largely ceremonial - a key player in coalition-building. In a letter to fellow legislators on Monday, Rivlin, 74, stressed "the importance of a president as a builder of bridges between parties in dispute".

"If the Knesset is the home of debate, controversy and decision, President's House is the home of cooperation, dialogue and compromise," he wrote. Rivlin, a lawyer, was first elected to parliament in 1988 and served as communications minister between 2001 and 2003. Others who have voiced interest in standing as president include former Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, former Finance Minister Meir Sheerit and Nobel chemistry prize laureate Dan Shechtman. Peres, Israel's most respected statesman, has been president since 2007. He took over from Moshe Katsav, who was convicted of rape in 2010 and is serving a seven-year prison term. On Monday, the Supreme Court rejected Katsav's petition for a re-trial, saying the testimony of a woman he was convicted of raping was credible, while his was not.

EU pays out first loan tranche to Ukraine

Kyiv Post, 21.05.2014



The European Commission paid out a first loan tranche of 100 million euros to Ukraine on Tuesday, launching a 1.6 billion euro macro-financial assistance loan program to prop up the beleaguered economy, the EU executive said.

The loans are part of the EU's 11 billion euro package announced in March. Another 500 million euro payment is now being prepared and any further payments will depend on Ukraine meeting policy conditions outlined in an agreement with the IMF. A Reuters poll showed the Ukrainian economy will slide deeper into recession as pro-Russian rebellion cripples activity in the industrial regions.

Ukraine crisis will be 'game changer' for NATO

NATO, 18.05.2014



Artillery and tank fire reverberate around a Baltic airstrip where U.S. paratroopers are fighting alongside Lithuanian soldiers. The battle is just an exercise and it only involves 150 U.S. soldiers - but the symbolism is clear.

With eastern European states nervous about Russia after it annexed Ukraine's Crimea region and massed 40,000 troops on Ukraine's borders, the United States and NATO allies want to show Moscow that former Soviet republics on the Baltic are under the alliance's security umbrella. "We're ready if something were to happen, but we're not looking to start any problems," said a Sergeant, during war games in Lithuania.

That chimes with NATO's current posture. In an initial response to Russia's intervention in Ukraine, The United States has sent 600 soldiers to the three Baltic countries - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - and Poland to take part in exercises to bolster NATO's presence in eastern Europe. But the alliance has no inclination to intervene militarily in Ukraine. Longer term, the crisis will have a profound impact on NATO's relations with Russia, its strategy and how it deploys, trains and equips its forces, although Europe has no wish to return to a Cold War-style confrontation between huge armies. The crisis will compel the alliance to refocus on its core mission of defending its members after years in which its main effort has been far away in Afghanistan.



The 28-nation military alliance accuses Russia of tearing up the diplomatic rule book with its annexation of Crimea. “For 20 years, the security of the Euro-Atlantic region has been based on the premise that we do not face an adversary to our east. This premise is now in doubt,” NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow said last month. The crisis, called a “game changer” by Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, will dominate the alliance’s agenda as it prepares for a summit in Wales in September, which will mark the imminent end of the NATO-led combat mission in Afghanistan. The United States, Britain, Denmark, France, Canada and Germany have sent or promised extra fighter aircraft to increase patrols and training over the Baltics, Poland or Romania. A fleet of nine minehunters from NATO countries has been dispatched to the Baltic and another task force of five ships to the eastern Mediterranean. In the longer term, NATO will consider permanently stationing forces in eastern Europe, something it has refrained from doing in the 15 years since the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined the alliance after the fall of the Berlin wall.

NATO will also have to think about how it deals with the unorthodox tactics used by Russia in Crimea, including exploiting political divisions, using large-scale military exercises as cover for intervention, and denying Russian troops were operating in the peninsula. The crisis has already affected relations between NATO and Russia, which have cooperated uneasily in recent years in areas such as combating terrorism, piracy and Afghan drug-trafficking. NATO suspended cooperation with Russia last month over Crimea. The damage is not likely to be repaired as quickly as after Russia’s 2008 war with Georgia, when a freeze in top-level contacts between NATO and Russia lasted barely six months. “As compared, say, with the reset after the Georgia war, this is going to be a much more prolonged and difficult period,” said a senior NATO official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Russian President Vladimir Putin declared in March he had the right to invade Ukraine to protect Russian speakers there, causing alarm in NATO members Estonia and Latvia, which have large ethnic Russian minorities of their own. Officials at NATO are asking themselves if Putin would seriously consider challenging a NATO member, although if it tangled with a NATO member state, Russia would also be risking a confrontation with the United States. “Just as NATO doesn’t want a war with Russia, so too Russia doesn’t want a war with NATO, because the risks on both sides are global and catastrophic,” said Samuel Charap of the International Institute for Strategic Studies think-tank.

So far, NATO has reinforced eastern allies with short-term deployments that will continue until at least the end of the year. If tensions with Russia persist, NATO may look at longer term ways to beef up its presence. NATO’s top military commander, U.S. Air Force General Philip Breedlove, said last week that NATO would have to consider permanently stationing troops in parts of eastern Europe. With many NATO allies, including the United States, cutting defense budgets, there is a question mark over where the troops or the money for permanent bases would come from. U.S. forces in Europe have shrunk dramatically since the Cold War. Their numbers are about 80,000, including 14,000 civilian staff, according to the U.S. military’s European Command, down from more than 300,000 during the Cold War. Diplomats and analysts do not expect any major shift of U.S. troops back to Europe and say the United States will not reverse its policy of “rebalancing” towards Asia.

NATO does not plan to put nuclear arms, new troops in Eastern Europe

Reuters, 20.05.2014



Russia and China have vetoed a United Nations resolution to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court for possible prosecution of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed during the country's civil war as a positive step.

The move on Thursday was the fourth time Russia and China had blocked UN Security Council action on Syria. Moscow is a close ally of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad. The US ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, accused the Russians of providing diplomatic protection to the Syrian government "no matter what it does".

NATO does not expect to base nuclear weapons or large numbers of new combat troops in eastern Europe, despite tension with Russia over Ukraine, Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said on Monday. NATO officials also said Russian and NATO ambassadors may meet as early as next week to discuss the Ukraine crisis. In 1997, during a period of better relations, NATO reached an agreement with Russia under which alliance members said they had no intention of deploying nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states, which began joining in 1999 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Under that agreement, NATO also committed to defending its members through reinforcement rather than by permanently stationing additional "substantial combat forces" on their territory. Asked if the Ukraine crisis would lead NATO to reconsider its pledge not to place nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states, Rasmussen told a news conference: "At this stage, I do not foresee any NATO request to change the content of the NATO-Russia founding act (the 1997 agreement)." He said, however, that Russia's actions in Ukraine had created "a completely new security situation in Europe" and NATO must adapt accordingly. Long-term decisions would be taken when NATO leaders meet in Wales in September, he said.

Since Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea, NATO has moved to reassure its nervous eastern European. Ships and planes have been temporarily deployed to their countries and military exercises in the region stepped up. Poland has urged NATO to base troops on its territory permanently, something Russia says would break the 1997 agreement. Some NATO diplomats argue privately that, by annexing Crimea, Russia has broken the 1997 agreement, under which Russia and NATO pledged not to threaten force against any state. Rasmussen also said that NATO had proposed a meeting of Russian and NATO ambassadors, possibly next week, but had not yet heard back from Moscow. A NATO official said Russia had indicated it wanted to discuss the Ukraine crisis with NATO and just the date remained to be set. NATO last month suspended all practical cooperation with Russia to protest the annexation of Crimea. It left open the possibility of high-level dialogue.

Hard for NATO to defend Baltic states from Russia

Reuters, 18.05.2014



NATO would struggle to defend the Baltic states from any Russian aggression “with conventional means”, Germany’s Spiegel magazine reported on Sunday, citing sources close to the organization and a draft of a NATO planning document. Eastern European states are nervous about Russia after it annexed Ukraine’s Crimea region and massed 40,000 troops on Ukraine’s borders.

The United States has sent 600 soldiers to the three Baltic countries - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - and Poland to take part in exercises to bolster NATO’s presence in eastern Europe.

“Russia’s ability and intention to undertake significant military action without much forewarning poses a far-reaching threat for the maintenance of security and stability in the European-Atlantic area,” the weekly magazine said, citing a NATO defense planning committee document. Russia is capable of building up a local or regional military threat at short notice and at an arbitrary spot, the draft document continued. However, Europe at the end of the Cold War had concluded that “it could reduce its capabilities for fighting conventional, large scale and high intensity conflicts in Europe”.

“While we never comment on alleged leaks or on our defense plans, NATO’s core task is collective defense and we will do what it takes to defend any ally under attack,” said NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu. “In light of the new security situation created by Russia’s illegal and illegitimate aggression against Ukraine, we have taken immediate measures to enhance collective security in the air, at sea and on the ground.” The Ukraine crisis has compelled the alliance to refocus on its core mission of defending its members after years in which its main effort has been far away in Afghanistan.

Failing Ukraine state plays in to Russia's hands

Kyiv Post, 18.05.2014



In late February, just two days after pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich fled Kiev, Ukraine's parliament repealed a law enshrining the rights of Russian-speakers to use their first language. Ukraine's Russian speakers, concentrated in the east and the south where the law applied, viewed the action as vengeful. In Moscow, Russia's leaders saw an opportunity.

Ukraine's new rulers took just five days to reverse course to once again allow the use of Russian in some schools, courts and other state institutions. Shocked by the outcry it caused, Ukraine's acting president had refused to sign the legislation.

But those five days were enough for Russian President Vladimir Putin to set in motion a chain of events that have undermined Kiev's pro Western government and drawn large areas of the country back into Russia's orbit, abetted by a divided West. While Putin has presented separatist violence in eastern Ukraine as spontaneous, interviews with Ukrainian politicians and security sources with knowledge of Russian thinking suggest months of detailed planning by Moscow. A key plank of Russia's plan, they say, was to deepen splits in a country that has struggled to form an identity since it emerged from the Soviet Union in 1991.

To that end, Russia sought to exploit its connections to Ukrainian business, youth groups, the church, politicians and criminal networks. The sources point to a paper from June 2013, described as a Kremlin consultation document by the Ukrainian newspaper Dzerkalo Tyzhnia and first made public in August that year. It sets out Moscow's fear of losing influence in Ukraine and its desire to draw its neighbor into an economic union. The Kremlin declined to comment on the document, entitled "On the complex of measures to involve Ukraine in the Eurasian integration process", and Russian officials have previously written it off as a "provocation" by pro-Western politicians in Ukraine. Bearing no signature or stamp, it is hard to trace its provenance, but a former security source in Ukraine corroborated its contents. He said he was present during conversations about the document involving officials in Ukraine with close connections to Moscow.

Like others interviewed for this article he declined to be identified because of political sensitivities. The document indicates that as far back as early 2013 Russia was nervous about Ukraine. Yanukovich's rule was widely seen as corrupt and the Kremlin was worried the president's unpopularity could harm Putin's plan to create a Russian-led "Eurasian" economic union to reunite part of the former Soviet Union. Many Ukrainians believed Yanukovich was a Kremlin puppet, according to the document. Moscow was worried it would lose all influence in a new Ukraine if Yanukovich and his Party of the Regions were toppled. "This aggravates the threat of a seizure of power by forces hostile to the Russian Federation," the document said.



“As the Party of the Regions has suppressed any independent pro-Russian movement, the collapse of the Yanukovich regime would leave us in a “scorched earth” situation, without any influential political forces on which we could rely.” It said Russia should apply pressure to oligarchs who enjoyed preferential trade with Russia but at the same time publicly criticized Putin’s plan to create a Russian-led economic union. A month after the report was written, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev decided to scrap quotas for steel pipe supplies, hitting at least one prominent oligarch. Russian pipe makers had taken issue with cheap Ukrainian pipe imports. In the same month, Russia’s consumer watchdog banned imports of sweets from the Roshen factory belonging to Ukrainian billionaire Petro Poroshenko, now front runner in a presidential election due on May 25. The watchdog cited health concerns for the ban, saying a carcinogenic substance had been found in Roshen’s chocolate.

The document pinpointed one political movement in Ukraine that could help influence opinion, Ukrainian Choice led by Viktor Medvedchuk, a one-time adviser to Ukraine’s former President Leonid Kuchma. Putin is godfather to one of Medvedchuk’s children. On Ukrainian Choice’s website, Medvedchuk is sometimes critical of the roles of the United States and European Union in the crisis that has followed Yanukovich’s fall and Russia’s annexation of the Crimea region. He denies being pro-Russian. In a statement to Reuters, he said Ukrainian Choice was pro-democracy. One of its founding principles was the “decentralization of power followed by the transition to a federal structure, while maintaining the territorial integrity and unity of Ukraine”.Russia too has spoken in favor of a “new federal constitution” for Ukraine, a system which would strengthen regional governors, possibly allowing Moscow to retain its influence in Ukraine’s industrial east.

In response to questions from Reuters, Medvedchuk denied he was a go-between for Russia in Ukraine. He said he always had Ukraine’s interests at heart and had nothing to do with the document. “At this level all politicians are independent and act on the basis of their understanding of the public interest,” he said. Even so, a former intelligence source, who was present during conversations involving Ukrainian officials with close contacts to Moscow, said Russia had hoped Medvedchuk would become the savior when Yanukovich suppressed what it saw as inevitable protests. But the protests came sooner than Russia expected and Moscow’s plans changed. In November 2013 thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets angered by Yanukovich’s decision to spurn closer ties with the European Union in favor of Moscow.

At this time, according to two sources in Ukraine’s political and security apparatus, two of Putin’s close allies took charge of “Project Ukraine”, designed to spread the message that many Ukrainians would lose out if the country looked West. Vladislav Surkov, a Putin aide, cultivated ties in Crimea, and Sergei Ivanov, Putin’s chief of staff, took over Ukrainian operations, the sources said. The Kremlin declined to comment. Surkov and Ivanov did not respond to a request for comment. With Russia’s interests entrenched in Ukraine, many of those interviewed doubted whether Russia, which has massed troops at the border, needed to cross into Ukrainian territory to fuel the uprising in its east, where two regions have voted for self-rule. The chaos in eastern Ukraine may already have achieved many of Putin’s aims. The Kremlin denies playing any role in the uprising. Mykola Malomuzh, director of Ukraine’s foreign intelligence service for five years until 2010, said Russia’s target now was the presidential election - to have it postponed or make it impossible to be seen as legitimate. “Putin has a network of his own among the special services, pro-Russian organizations, and the old regime which wields incredible influence through the mafia-type organizations which dominate the economy here,” said Malomuzh, who is also running for president on May 25.

Russia says ties with EU and NATO need ‘rethink’

The Moscow Times, 19.05.2014



Russia’s ties with the European Union and NATO need a “rethink” in light of deep differences over Ukraine, Russian news agencies quoted Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying on Monday.

“These relations require a substantial rethink, and together with our partners from the EU and NATO nations we are trying to conduct an analysis in order to better understand where we are, where our assessments coincide and where we disagree,” state-run news agency RIA quoted Lavrov as saying at a meeting with Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajcak.

Russia to complete troop pullback from Ukraine border ‘within days’

Kyiv Post, 23.05.2014



Russia will pull back all forces deployed to regions near its border with Ukraine “within a few days”, its deputy defense minister said on Friday, a move that if carried out could ease tensions before Ukraine’s presidential election on Sunday.

Moscow has concentrated thousands of troops across the border from eastern Ukraine where pro-Russian separatists have declared two independent states. Kiev and its Western allies see the Russian troops as a potential invasion force should Moscow choose to back the rebels openly, fuelling pre-election tensions. The United States and EU hope the vote will strengthen the embattled central government.

Asked whether Russia would comply with Western calls for a withdrawal of its troops near the Ukraine frontier, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov told Reuters: “They will see it - 100 percent ... We will leave less than nothing behind.” He said that Russia had already moved 20 transport planes and 20 trains worth of personnel and military equipment out of the provinces of Rostov, Belgorod and Bryansk flanking Ukraine after completing what he said were military exercises there.

China and Qatar seek more Russia investment as U.S. interest fades

Reuters, 23.05.2014



Sovereign wealth funds in China and Qatar on Friday signaled their increased commitment to Russia, boosting Moscow's hopes of strengthening ties with Asia and the Middle East as relations with the West deteriorate.

Major sovereign wealth funds in the Middle East and Asia have invested in Russian businesses and backed its state-funded private equity fund, the Russian Direct Investment Fund. By contrast, U.S. financial investors in the country are few. "CIC has invested several billions of dollars in Russia," said Xuedong, chairman of the \$575 bn CIC, on the sidelines of the country's main annual investment conference.

"We will continue to increase our investment in Russia, not only in the public markets, but in direct investments," he said. Russia's RDIF separately announced that Qatar's sovereign wealth fund, the Qatar Investment Authority, is allocating \$2 billion to investments with the fund. Numerous U.S. financiers avoided the annual investment conference in St Petersburg on advice from the White House. Washington and the European Union have imposed sanctions against various individuals deemed close to Russian President Vladimir Putin in response to the situation in Ukraine. "In our platforms - we raised \$10 billion from our partners - around 90 percent came from Asia and the Middle East," said Kirill Dmitriev, the RDIF chief executive.

"Those longer-term investors ... take a longer-term view on Russia. They see some turbulence but realize it is impossible to isolate the sixth-largest economy in the world." Among those present on a panel discussion on Friday were senior executives at Korea Investment Corporation and Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA). European funds, facing less government pressure than their U.S. counterparts, also showed commitment to Russia. "We think there is a lot of potential in this country," said Laurent Vigier, CEO at France's CDC International Capital. "We are looking actively at the moment at opportunities in this country and are optimistic about the medium and long term."

Private equity firms have in general found Russia a tricky place to invest, citing concerns about corporate governance, the rule of law and finding a lack of opportunities. U.S. giant TPG is the notable exception, making several times its money on its investment in supermarket chain Lenta. "The history of private equity in Russia is about 20 years old - in that period we have had at least two tsunamis of global political events and upheaval and we are now in the middle of the third," said Drew Guff, founding partner of New York-based Siguler Guff & Co, which has invested in Russia for many years. "There were at one point 30 different private equity funds raising money (in Russia) at the same time. And then the global crisis of '98 came and the tsunami wiped out many of the competitors."

Anatoly Chubais, the architect of Russia's post-Soviet privatisations, said a problem is that limited partners (LPs) - the investors in private equity firms - use foreign money rather than Russian investors. He said the solution was a major restructuring of non-government pension funds. "It's ironic when the entire private equity industry that exists here, while investing in Russia, makes almost no use of Russian LPs," Chubais said. "It is totally wrong and the situation could be radically changed." CIC, which invests in Russia directly as well as via a joint venture with the RDIF, has a minority stake in Russian potash company Uralkali and has done deals with the RDIF to invest in projects such as infrastructure for senior citizens and forestry.

"Our exposure to Russia is relatively small, which means the potential is big," said Xuedong, who is particularly focused on agriculture and energy. "We focus on the long term and on increasing our exposure to Russia. Xuedong said that in the coming 10 to 20 years infrastructure will provide lucrative opportunities and said that Russia should "renew and update" its infrastructure. Using government money for such projects would not be sufficient, he said, and other instruments, such as public-private partnerships, could be used.

"Governments should sell some of the businesses ... to private investments and the money received for the sale of such businesses could be rechanneled into projects," Xuedong said. "If we take this approach, we could speed up the infrastructure development rates." Still, some were sceptical that Asian investors would commit heavily given Russia's slowing growth and the risk of recession. "I suspect most Asian and Middle East investors are going to look at this picture and see the same things that everyone else does - that you had growth slowing before the annexation of Crimea and the conflict with the West," said Bernard Sucher, board member of Russian investment group Aton.

No sign of Russian troop pullback from Ukraine border

US News, 20.05.2014



The Pentagon said it has not seen any indication of Russian troop movements away from Ukraine's borders despite a Kremlin announcement that Russian President ordered them to return to their permanent bases. "We have seen reports of President's orders to withdraw Russian forces from the border with Ukraine. Putin's office said he had issued the order because the spring maneuvers were over.

We've been clear about our call for the Russian military to work to de-escalate the tension there," a Pentagon spokesman told Reuters. "If those reports are valid, such a withdrawal would be welcome. We have seen movement."

U.S., European allies express concern over Libya violence

New York Times, 23.05.2014



The United States and European allies on Friday expressed deep concern with violence in Libya and warned that the country stood “at a crossroads” between pursuing a political transition or facing chaos, fragmentation, violence and terrorism.

“The European Union, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States, deeply concerned by the repeated acts of violence, call on all sides to refrain from the use of force and to address differences by political means,” they said in a joint statement. The statement also offered Western support for an inclusive reconciliation process.

Ukraine crisis drives a quiet lobbying boom in U.S.

Bloomberg, 23.05.2014



Turmoil in Ukraine has sparked a boomlet of lobbying in Washington, with an almost five-fold increase in the number of companies and organizations weighing in with lawmakers.

The subject is so sensitive that the lobbyists even more than usual want to be heard and not seen. ExxonMobil Co., Coca-Cola Co., Xerox Corp. and GM Co. were among the 29 companies or interest groups adding Ukraine to the list of issues they discuss with federal officials, according to disclosures filed with the U.S. Senate for the Q1 2014. That’s up from six in the final three months of 2013, according to the forms, which don’t say how much is being spent on the issue.

Without fanfare or public display, lobbyists are reminding lawmakers and administration officials of the business interests at stake when sanctions are considered. They are careful to avoid any appearance of trying to dictate U.S. foreign policy. “They do not want to be saddled with the notion that their particular economic interests, as important as they are to their bottom line, have somehow played a huge role in the political sphere and distorted things,” said Thomas Pickering, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia and the United Nations. “And I think they’re wise.”



At stake are commercial interests with Russia as well as Ukraine. The U.S. has sanctioned members of Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle and is holding out the threat of broader economic penalties that risk disrupting business, from oil development in the Arctic and Black Sea to soft drink sales in Russia to contracts with the Ukrainian and Russian governments. The next benchmark comes May 25, when Ukraine is scheduled to elect a new government. While Russia accounts for only about 1 percent of total U.S. trade, \$38 billion in 2013, American-based companies are the biggest source of foreign investment in Russia, according to a 2013 report by Ernst & Young. Companies are "concerned about potential for a sanctions war, and what sanctions are chosen and how the other side seeks to retaliate," Pickering said.

For the U.S. and Russia, "this could be a very mutually destructive possibility." Sensitive to public perception -- and that of the government officials they seek to influence -- many companies are describing their mission as anything but "lobbying." The U.S. unit of Royal Dutch Shell PLC (RDSA), for example, describes its efforts as "general in nature and related to education and keeping an open dialogue," according to Curtis Smith, a spokesman for the company. "Because we currently operate in Ukraine, it's important that we continue to monitor and understand trade controls and sanctions closely and respond appropriately to ensure that we comply with all applicable international sanctions and related measures," Smith said in an e-mail.

A Coca-Cola spokesman referred to the company's legally required disclosure form. "We feel that information adequately describes our activity and position and we don't have anything further to add at this time," the spokesman, Ben Sheidler, wrote in an e-mail. The disclosure, referring to legislation authorizing loan guarantees for Ukraine and sanctions against individuals in Russia and Ukraine, states Coke's interest as in "provisions relating to aid for Ukraine and sanctions on Russia in S.2124, Support for the Sovereignty, Integrity, Democracy, and Economic Stability of Ukraine Act of 2014." Russia is the world's largest oil producer and Ukraine has ambitions to become a shale-gas exporter by 2020, so some of the biggest stakes are in energy.

Oil, gas and nuclear power companies make up the top group lobbying on Ukraine, records show. Along with Exxon Mobil, Chevron Corp., Anadarko Petroleum Corporation, Westinghouse Electric Co., and the Nuclear Energy Institute also filed first-quarter lobbying reports that cover Ukraine. Chevron and Shell have signed shale-gas deals with Ukraine and Shell is among a group planning to drill oil and natural gas prospects in the Black Sea. Shell also has plans to expand its Sakhalin-2 oil and gas project in Russia's Far East. Exxon has drilling rights to 11.4 million net acres (46,134 square kilometers) in Russia, its biggest single cache of drilling rights outside the U.S. The company also is planning Arctic drilling in an alliance with state-owned OAO Rosneft. Westinghouse, the Pennsylvania-based nuclear reactor arm of Toshiba Corp., listed the loan-guarantee package along with "commercial interests in Ukraine" among the issues it lobbied Congress and the departments of Energy, Commerce and State on in the first quarter of 2014.

The company announced in April a deal extending a contract to supply fuel rods for two of Ukraine's 15 Russian-made nuclear reactors. The agreement is similar to one company officials say they reached last year with Ukraine's prior government. "It doesn't matter what color the revolution, Ukraine has supported Westinghouse," said Michael Kirst, the company's vice president for strategy and external affairs in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Steve Kerekes, a spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, declined to discuss details, saying in an e-mail that "we are monitoring the Ukraine situation carefully because of its potential impact on energy markets."

China warns Japan against meddling in South China Sea dispute

Reuters, 20.05.2014



The European Commission paid out a first loan tranche of 100 million euros to Ukraine on Tuesday, launching a 1.6 billion euro macro-financial assistance loan program to prop up the beleaguered economy, the EU executive said.

The loans are part of the EU's 11 billion euro package announced in March. Another 500 million euro payment is now being prepared and any further payments will depend on Ukraine meeting policy conditions outlined in an agreement with the IMF. A Reuters poll showed the Ukrainian economy will slide deeper into recession as pro-Russian rebellion cripples activity in the industrial regions.



Announcements & Reports

▶ *Africa at a Crossroads*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1422.pdf>

▶ *A Partnership for Egypt*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : http://csis.org/files/publication/140324_Jackson_LessonsFromAbroad_Web.pdf

▶ *Post-Election Transition in Afghanistan*

Source : Center for Strategic and International Studies

Weblink : http://csis.org/files/publication/140326_new_perspectives_issue6.pdf

▶ *Middle East Daily Bulletin*

Source : ORSAM

Weblink : http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/trUploads/OrtadoguBulteni/2014327_27%20Mart%202014.pdf

▶ *The Sources of Russian Conduct*

Source : Council on Foreign Relations

Weblink : <http://www.cfr.org/ukraine/sources-russian-conduct/p32785>



Upcoming Events

► *3rd World Turkic Forum*

Date : 28 - 30 May 2014
Place : Edirne - Turkey
Website : http://www.tasam.org/en/Etkinlik/579/3rd_world_turkic_forum

► *The 5th International Conference on Business and Economics 2014*

Date : 1 – 3 June 2014
Place : Madrid – Spain
Website : <http://www.icbe.co>

► *Vienna 2nd Economics & Finance Conference - The ISES*

Date : 3 – 6 June 2014
Place : Vienna - Austria
Website : <http://www.iises.net/economics-finance-conferences/vienna-economics-finance-conference-june-3-6-2014/>

► *ACSEE2014 - The Fourth Asian Conference on Sustainability, Energy and the Environment*

Date : 12 - 15 June 2014
Place : Osaka - Japan
Website : <http://acsee.iafor.org>

► *International Conference on Trade, Business, Economics and Law*

Date : 16 - 19 June 2014
Place : Edinburg - United Kingdom
Website : <http://www.flelearning.co.uk/ictbel-2014/call-for-papers>

► *World Water Conference*

Date : 11 November 2014
Place : Edirne - Turkey
Website : http://www.economistinsights.com/sustainability-resources/event/world-water_forum?region%5B4%5D=4®ion%5B7%5D=7