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IRAN DAILY



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Number 5452 • Sunday September 18, 2016 • Shahrivar 28, 1395 • Zilhijjah 16, 1437 • Price 5,000 Rials • 12 Pages • www.irandailyonline.ir



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Colombia's FARC kicks off last congress as guerrilla army

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia kicked off its last conference as a rebel army as it looks to transition into a political movement following the signing of a peace accord.



The FARC's top leader addressed about 500 mostly unarmed and semi-uniformed guerrillas who had arrived from all parts of Colombia to attend the meeting that started early Saturday, AP reported.

The bearded leader known by his alias Timochenko said that over the next week commanders will ratify a peace accord reached with the government last month and debate political strategy going forward.

Timochenko and President Juan Manuel Santos will sign the accord next week in the city of Cartagena. After that Colombians will be asked in an Oct. 2 referendum to ratify or reject the deal.

Rouhani highlights NAM global role



Political Desk

President Hassan Rouhani said the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) can play a great role in global affairs. "The Non-Aligned Movement can be a great player in today's world and its members should advance their collective interests through unity and mutual cooperation," Rouhani told his Venezuelan counterpart

Nicolas Maduro in Margarita Island, where he arrived on Friday to attend the 17th NAM summit.

Rouhani pointed to friendly ties between Iran and Venezuela, and congratulated Maduro on assuming the NAM presidency. He underlined Iran's readiness to present its four years of experience in the presidency of the movement to Venezuela.

During the summit, which started on Sep-

tember 15 and will wrap up on Thursday, Rouhani will hand over NAM's rotating presidency to Maduro for three years.

NAM, an international organization with 120 member states and 21 observer countries, represents nearly two-thirds of the UN members. It is considered as not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc.

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Protesters rally across Germany against mega trade deal

Demonstrators took to the streets across Germany on Saturday in protest over a massive transatlantic trade agreement, dealing a new blow to the disputed accord.

In Berlin, as in Munich, there was a sea of flags as people flocked to join the rallies despite the rain, carrying placards and banners representing everything from anti-globalization groups to political parties and unions. "People are not letting their mood be ruined" by the weather, a spokeswoman for the organizers, Kathrin Ottoway, told AFP.

Roland Suess from anti-globalization group Attac had earlier said they expected 250,000 people to turn out in seven German cities.

The European Union and the United States began negotiating the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in 2013, aiming to create the world's biggest free trade market of \$50 million consumers.

A new round of talks is due to start in October and US President Barack Obama wants the deal concluded before he leaves office in January.

A smaller version of TTIP is also in the works with Canada, and that deal, called



CETA, is due to be signed in October.

Exporters are in favor of the deal as it promises lower tariffs, less red tape and a wider base of consumers for their goods.

But the negotiations have faced opposition in Europe, where consumers fear it would

roughshod over the 28-nation bloc's labor market and environmental standards, and lead to more outsourcing and thereby job losses.

Another prickly issue is the plans for a special court to hear cases by companies against governments over breaches of regulatory issues, which opponents see as giving firms a veto over public policy.

"CETA and TTIP threaten environmental and consumer protection for millions of people in Europe and North America," said Jennifer Morgan, executive director Greenpeace International.

Vice-Chancellor and Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel last month declared that talks on TTIP have "de facto failed".

He had also insisted that "Europeans must not give in to (the Americans') demands".

Suspicion is running high in Germany over the accords. A recent survey found some 28 percent of respondents doubted if free trade could really bring benefits. More than half (52 percent) say it would lead to weaken standards and spawn increasingly inferior products.

Juncker urges Britain to start Brexit talks 'as soon as possible'

Britain should launch formal Brexit negotiations quickly and the bloc will not allow itself to be held back if London hesitates to trigger Article 50 of the EU treaty, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said on Saturday.

"I will not meddle in Britain's domestic politics," Juncker told German media group Funke. "But it would be in the best interest of all parties if the divorce letter is submitted as soon as possible to not unnecessarily prolong the phase of uncertainty," Reuters reported.

European Council President Donald Tusk said on Friday that British Prime Minister Theresa May has signaled that she could be ready to launch formal Brexit negotiations in January or February next year.

May herself has ruled out giving formal notification this year of Britain's intention to

leave the European Union under Article 50 of the EU treaty.

But beyond that, she has been vague about when her government might trigger the process, which would set in motion a two-year countdown to Britain's exit.

"Prime Minister May was very open and honest with me," Tusk said of his visit to London on Sept. 8.

"She declared it's almost impossible to trigger Article 50 this year but it's quite likely that they will be ready maybe in January, maybe in February next year."

The remarks in English by the former Polish premier left open whether May had indicated she would launch the process then or would simply be in a position to do so, having secured agreement in her cabinet on what Britain wants



to achieve and having set up the negotiating teams London will need to deal with Brussels.

Tusk said the other 27 EU leaders, whose summit he chaired on Friday in Bratislava to plot a course ahead for the bloc after the shock

of Britain's June referendum to quit were being patient for now: "Our British colleagues need more time to prepare themselves for these negotiations," he told reporters.

Senior officials in Brussels and national capitals say they are very anxious that Britain complete its divorce by mid-2019. Failure to hit that deadline would complicate elections to the European Parliament and the appointment of a new EU executive, the Commission, that year as well as hobble negotiations on a new seven-year EU budget.

However, Britain is wary of triggering Article 50 because this could weaken its leverage. It would then be at the mercy of an extremely tight two-year timeline to negotiate the divorce, risking a loss of preferential access to its main export market.

Iran Parliament endorses IPC

Economic Desk

Iran's Parliament has given the green light to the government to put into effect the new oil contract model called Iran Petroleum Contract (IPC).

The new formula, which has drawn criticism from some politicians and experts, was reviewed by a parliamentary panel but not put to vote by the house.

"After examining the new contract model, the parliamentary board charged with verifying the conformity of government bills with the laws declared it did not contradict the regulations," Shana quoted MP Asadollah Qareh-Khani as saying.

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Putin: Militants using Syria truce to regroup

Russian President Vladimir Putin accused Syrian foreign-backed militants Saturday of using a fragile cease-fire to regroup, as diplomatic tensions between Moscow and Washington simmered over a lack of humanitarian aid access.

Fresh shelling and clashes were reported overnight in some areas of the war-torn country, but the US-Russia brokered truce which took effect on Monday appeared to be largely holding.

In New York, the UN Security Council canceled an urgent meeting that had been called to discuss whether to endorse the cease-fire, billed as the "last chance" to end the five-year war that has killed 300,000 people, AFP wrote.

The closed-door consultations were scrapped after Moscow and Washington failed to agree over disclosing details of the cease-fire to the council.

Putin, a key ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, said he remained "positive" about the truce but lashed out at terrorists.



"We see attempts to regroup among these terrorists, to switch one label for another, one name for another and keep their military capacity," he said in televised remarks while on a trip to Kyrgyzstan.

Putin said Washington apparently "has the desire to keep the capabilities to fight the lawful government of President Assad," calling it a "very dangerous path."

Putin expressed hope that the US would stick to its commitments on Syria, adding that he believed securing a truce was the common goal of both Moscow and Washington.

"Our partners (the US) are calling for openness and transparency... but they are deviating from this posture," Putin said.

"This is because of the difficulties they (the Americans) are facing... that they still can't separate the healthy part of (the Syrian) opposition from the semi-criminal... But we are more positive than negative and expect that promises given (by the Americans)... will be fulfilled."

Moscow said Friday that it was ready to prolong the truce by 72 hours, but there has been no formal announcement of an extension.

The implementation of the truce has been complicated by the presence of terrorists - who are not covered by the cease-fire - and mainstream rebels on some of the same frontlines.

US Secretary of State John Kerry meanwhile called his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov and condemned "repeated and unacceptable delays of humanitarian aid," spokesman John Kirby said.

A key plank of the truce deal was the delivery of aid to areas including Aleppo, where an estimated 250,000 people in militant-held areas of the city are living under government siege.

Under the deal, the main route into Aleppo, the Castello Road, would be demilitarized and aid convoys would enter from Turkey. But 40 trucks carrying desperately needed food aid were still stuck on the border with Turkey on Saturday.