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About CRP News & Background

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Editorial Team

Series Editor | Eszter Balogh

Authors – February 2014 | Orsolya Pálmai, Katalin Szabó, Emese Embersits, Sofia Popnikolova

Executive Publisher | Csilla Morauszki

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Cuba to boost relations with the EU after eighteen years

Cuba, the traditionally isolated Caribbean island with Venezuela as its main trading partner and major ally, has decided to reconsider relations with the Western world. President Raul Castro has recently introduced economic and social reforms that can gradually weaken the communist system in Cuba. To respond to these "serious changes", negotiations are to be restored with the European Union, EU ambassador to Havana, Herman Portocarero said. "We hope to promote a future model of Cuban society which is closer to European values", he added. Despite the launch of talks, the EU has underlined its concern with the human rights situation and the legal status of civil society organizations operating in the country. Relations with Cuba were halted in 1996, following the approval of the so-called Common Position by the Council of the European Union, which Cuba considered an intrusion into its internal affairs. The document urged the government for transition to a pluralist democratic system, respect for civil liberties and sustainable improvement of the living standards of society, among others. Twelve years later, in 2008 the EU imposed sanctions against Cuba, hence the current talks can be a positive step forward based on dialogue rather than isolation. It has not been a complete isolation, however, as more than half of EU member states have bilateral relations with the island.

The European Union being a primarily economic alliance, the consequence of closer ties will be an increase in the volume of trade and investment to the island. The EU counts as Cuba's second most important trading partner after Venezuela and largest external investor. Europe cannot be ignored in terms of tourism either as one third of tourists visiting Cuba comes from the old continent. Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez stated at a news conference that diplomats will work with Brussels to determine the details and dates for further negotiations. A new bilateral agreement was agreed to be signed in 2015.



Raúl Castro. Photo: Government.ru



The Yes/No question: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”

The independence of Scotland is not a very recent phenomena in the United Kingdom, but as the referendum comes nearer and nearer, the question becomes more relevant. Until the 18th of September, we have to wait to see what the Scottish people themselves have to say about the matter, but others have already spoken out. The President of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso recently said that Scotland would have an exceptionally difficult situation in joining the EU as an independent state. “If not impossible” – he added. The obstacle in the way of Scotland is not the fact that it might not be able to join, but that Scotland has to “apply for membership and get the approval of all current member states”. According to Barroso, this case will be extremely hard on the members of the EU, because a new member would be from another member state.

Barroso mentioned the example of Kosovo in the eye of Spain which has not yet even recognised the new country. He feels that the situation with Scotland would be similar, but he does not want to interfere in any way, and the Scottish people have to decide about their own life.



Scotland in the European Union. Map: Wikimedia Commons

Barroso's comments were not welcomed by all. The Finance Minister of Scotland, John Swinney said that the comment was “pretty preposterous”, and “based on a false comparison”. Scotland has been in the EU for 40 years, already the part of it, and Swinney sees the situation in Scotland quite different from the case in Kosovo. He believes that none of the members would veto the accession of Scotland. Not even Spain: “The Spanish Foreign Minister said if there is an agreed process within the United Kingdom by which Scotland becomes an independent country then Spain has nothing to say about the whole issue.” He understands this statement that



the Spanish government will have nothing against Scotland joining the EU.

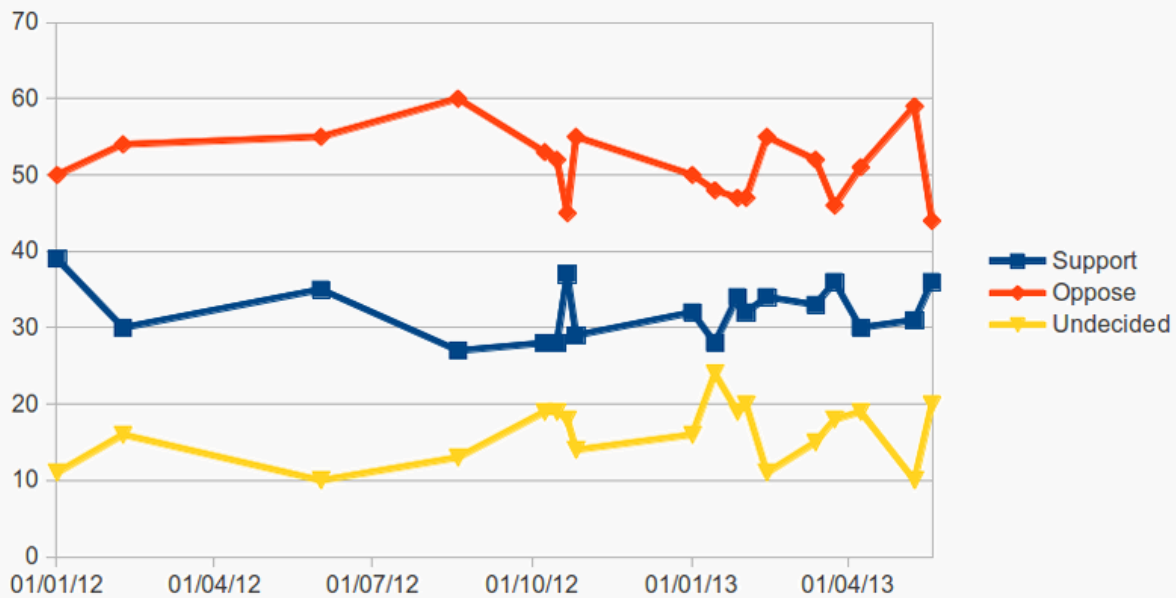
Others called the ideas “nonsense”, and the situation – that those who want to become parts of the EU, cannot be – “revolutionary”. However, these comments will have the positive effect towards Scotland, and will help its accession.

Technically, there are no barriers in the way of Scotland. In the Scottish “White Paper of Independence”, the government says that “the country would gain membership through Article 48 of the Treaty of the European Union”. The country does not even have to join the euro if it does not want to, not even sign the exchange rate mechanism.

Not surprisingly, the British side also has opinions. Labour leader, Ed Miliband said that the UK is able to provide a better position for Scotland than the country for

itself, standing alone. According to Alastair Darling, the former chancellor and chairman of the pro-Union “Better Together” campaign, it seems that the nationalist campaign is falling apart, and that Alex Salmond, the First Minister of Scotland, has no real plan, and who also lacks clarity about the issues of an independent Scotland which “would ... take a wholly unnecessary ... risk if it were to vote to separate this autumn”. Salmond also sees that there is no reason to think that in case of independence, Scotland could not take the pound as its currency. George Osborne’s idea “is ill-thought out and misinformed”.

The debate between the different parties can go on for a while, but only after the 18th of September can we be sure what is going to happen, and who was right.



A graph of polls for the Scottish independence referendum, 2014. Graph: Metallurgist [Wikimedia Commons]



“No” to money union between the UK and Scotland

The Scottish government wants to keep the pound as their currency, and preserve the services of the Bank of England, even in the case of an independent Scotland. To make things more complicated, the British government does not think in the same way.

The Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats declared that “the next UK government will not enter a currency union with an independent Scotland”. Nicola Sturgeon, the Deputy Scottish First Minister thinks that this action “would backfire spectacularly” because so “the Westminster establishment ... lay[s] down the law to Scotland”.

The Treasury Review, written by government officials, argues that in case of a currency union, both countries have to “underwrite each other’s banks; allow taxpayers in one country to subsidise the other; reach broad agreements on tax, spending and borrowing levels on both sides of the border”. The review does not give an opinion about the currency union, but others do. The Chancellor, George Osborne warns against such a construction, and calls them unacceptable.

Ms Sturgeon highlights that originally the plan was that Osborne is going to reject the union but now she sees the review as a “starting point in negotiations to secure a Sterling area” which is “overwhelmingly in the ... UK’s economic interest following a Yes vote”. In an earlier interview, she declared that refusing the union “would make no sense”.

Both sides have different opinions about the question, such as problems in balance of payments, UK debts, transaction costs, higher interest rates in Scotland stress against the other.

Labour’s former Scottish First Minister, Henry McLeish criticised the British intervention, and declares that the Scottish people “shouldn’t be fooled”, and what Scottish really need is “a bit of statesmanship” but which behaviour the British lack.

“Scotland would have an exceptionally difficult situation in joining the EU as an independent state”



February saw deepening crisis in Ukraine

Tensions are still high in Ukraine as protests have continued in February. Anti-government demonstrators have been occupying Kiev's City Hall since December but after the government's pledge to release and drop charges against 234 detained protestors they ended the occupation on 16 February. Demonstrations started in December when President Yanukovich decided to abandon a political-economic treaty with the European Union and turned to Russia instead.

"EuroMaidan" protestors clashed brutally with the police. Approximately 25,000 people at Independence Square

unsatisfied with the country's political-economic system were demanding the resignation of the president and refreshing ties with the European Union. 20 February saw the bloodiest day in the past decades of Ukraine when 88 people were killed when snipers from the roofs shot at protestors. The foreign ministers of France, Germany and Poland mediated the talks between government and opposition the next day. Even though they managed an agreement to return to the 2004 constitution it soon became abundant as opposition insisted that Yanukovich needed to leave.

After being forced from power he eventually fled Kiev to Russia 22 February. Nevertheless, many claim that even though he left the capital, the dysfunctional nature of governance and political rivalry in Ukraine persist, led by the same regime for the past twenty years. Evidence for the latter is the return of Yulia Timoshenko to the political realm. The main rival of the ex-president was released from prison on the day Yanukovich was overthrown. The country's new cabinet presented itself for Maidan's "approval" on the evening of February 26th and announced new elections to be held on 25th May.



Euromaidan in Kiev, 21 February 2014. Photo: Amakuha [Wikimedia Commons]



Alexander Turchynov was appointed as interim president and Arseniy Yatsenyuk as prime minister, both with close ties to Timoshenko's right-wing party, Fatherland. The majority of Yanukovich's supporters are in the East of the country, mostly ethnic Russians who believe that a deal with the EU would restrict emerging economic relations with Russia that has considerable investments in the country. After electing right-wing government in Kiev tensions became high in the Eastern parts of the country and in Crimea, over which a territorial dispute between Ukraine and Russia emerged. On 28 February Russia's

parliament agreed to deploy soldiers to the peninsula, located south of the Ukrainian mainland and west from Russia. They argued the military presence was needed in defense of the area's ethnic Russians. Pro-Russian protestors occupied government buildings and the presence of troops from both countries made the situation extremely tense. Yanukovich held his first news conference since leaving the country, in which he claimed to remain president. Russia handed The Crimean Peninsula to Ukraine in 1954, which became the Autonomous Republic of Crimea within Ukraine after 1991.



*Euromaidan in Kiev, 19 February 2014. Protesters are burning tires near Kiev Conservatory.
Photo: Amakuha [Wikimedia Commons]*



Turkey faces internet censorship after corruption scandal

A new law is granting the Turkish government's Telecommunications directorate (TIB) the authority to block any internet site within 24 hours without first seeking permission from a court. The law passed in the Parliament in the beginning of February also forces Internet providers to keep records of the activities of their users for two years, and if needed, to make them available to the authorities. It is debated in the public sphere if these measures could turn into a tool for the government to exercise control and censorship on the Internet. The possibility that the government profiles Internet users is raising concerns amongst the members of the EU. The EU underlined the need for Turkey, as a candidate country in accession negotiations, to engage in early consultations with the EC on all laws related to both the accession process and the political criteria, according to a statement the EU Commission.

In response, Turkey has expressed uneasiness over EU officials' statements, and urged officials to be more conscious when making statements about the country's internal affairs, especially those with political nuance. Minister of European



Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Photo: World Economic Forum

Union Affairs and Chief Negotiator Çavuşoğlu commented:

“We reminded them that some official statements [of EU officials] contain incorrect information. ... If they have any concerns or hesitations regarding a bill, [they should] first get the information [directly] from us to see exactly what it is, what we want to do, what it contains and its aims,” Çavuşoğlu said, adding: “If they are still not satisfied with this information, then it is their call.

With the deportation of Mahir Zeynalov, a Turkey-based online editor at Today's Zaman and a contributing columnist in Al Arabiya News, numerous questions related



to internet censorship are being raised. He has been deported to his native country after posting a message on twitter that criticizes Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The government decided to deport him on the grounds that his residence in Turkey was “detrimental to public security and political and administrative requirements” under Article 19 of the law regulating the residence of foreign nationals. Critics find this as a move restraining freedom of expression, and limiting the repercussions of the ongoing corruption scandal.

“My deportation as a journalist and as someone who is married to a Turkish citizen constitutes the apex of what the government of Erdogan can do. This also will seriously damages Ankara’s international reputation – something Turkey might not care at a time of a graft scandal,” Zeynalov wrote.

Shortly before Christmas, police arrested more than 50 suspects, including politicians with the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), influential businesspeople, and the sons of three cabinet ministers. The scandal has taken Prime Minister Erdoğan into the most serious crisis of his nearly 11 years in office. The corruption scandal within his inner circle is jeopardizing the power of the AKP and threatens to tear it apart- in an election year, when Erdogan might run for a president. The ministers of economics, the interior and urban development resigned on 25 December, after the arrest of their sons, who allegedly accepted bribes for providing building permits and public contracts. The next day, Erdogan fired seven other ministers.

Investigators are apparently planning further arrests, with a list of suspects that includes Erdogan’s son Bilal. The 32-year-old is the founder and a board member of the influential TÜRGEV Foundation, which acquired a government property in Istanbul’s Fatih district at a very favorable price, allegedly paying about €3 million in bribes in return. The supposed record of the conversation between the Prime Minister and his son was recorded and released on Soundcloud, an online audio platform. The site was shut down in Turkey soon after the release.

Turkey’s main opposition party, Republican People’s Party (CHP), has denounced the recordings and demanded the prime minister’s resignation.

As a consequence of the passing of the bill hundreds of demonstrators gathered in Istanbul’s Kadıköy district in January chanting “Tayyip Erdoğan the thief”. They were later dispersed by riot police using tear gas and water cannon. These anti-government protests are part of the series of protests that took place in 2013 and 2014, some of which had victims as a result. Erdoğan rejected criticism against his government, after raising concerns that it is becoming increasingly authoritarian. He claimed that EU candidate Turkey is much better than most EU states speaking of freedoms. Erdogan and government supporters claim there is an attempted “coup” being orchestrated by Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim cleric who fled Turkey in 1999 for the Pocono Mountains of rural Pennsylvania and preaches a moderate form of Islam.



Amnesty International's report accuses Israeli forces of wilfully committing war crimes

Amnesty International published its latest report about the conflict-hit area of the West Bank on 27 February. The report, entitled "*Trigger-happy: Israel's use of excessive force in the West Bank*", has accused Israeli security forces of using unnecessary violence and killing Palestinians who were not a direct or immediate threat.

In the year 2013, Amnesty International documented the killing of 22 Palestinian civilians in the West Bank which is almost as many as in the previous two years altogether. The number of injured people was also significant between 2011 and 2013, at least 261 Palestinians were seriously injured by live ammunition and at least 8,000 were wounded by other types of weapons. Israeli forces were deploying tear gas, rubber-coated metal bullets and stun grenades among others.

The report not only examined killings and injuries due to the use of live ammunition and other weapons, but it also laid a great emphasis on the impunity of Israeli settlers and soldiers. According to Amnesty International, in most cases, Israeli military and security forces have allowed settlers to use violence and commit crimes against Palestinians without any impeachment. Moreover, the soldiers have also used excessive force against Palestinian protesters according to the report. Amnesty International has formulated various

recommendations in order to stop unlawful killings and violation of human rights and humanitarian law. For instance, the non-governmental organisation urged Israeli forces to refrain from deploying lethal weapons unless it is unambiguously necessary. The report also called on the international community, such as the USA and the European Union, to suspend the transfer of various weapons, munitions and



Amnesty International. Photo: Tamorlan [Wikimedia Commons]



equipment to Israel. Of course, Israeli authorities have immediately responded to Amnesty's accusations. According to the Israeli Defence Forces' official statement, the report totally ignored the substantial increase in Palestinian violence, such as rock throwing, violent demonstrations, shootings, use of improvised explosive devices, and the abduction and murder of an Israeli soldier. The statement has also underlined that IDF only authorises its soldiers to use precision munitions after all non-lethal means of crowd control have been exhausted and human life and safety is still endangered.

Not only has the IDF commented on Amnesty International's report, but a Jerusalem-based non-governmental organisation called NGO Monitor has also raised questions about the report's credibility. NGO Monitor has criticized Amnesty's research team because of the group members' alleged anti-Israeli

political background, and lack of military and legal expertise. Moreover, it has rejected the report's accusations and blamed the research for being biased.

Although it is difficult to examine which side is impartial and which is not, the report is undoubtedly studying a highly-relevant issue. On 27 February, Israeli soldiers killed a Palestinian man in Bir Zeit, a town in the central West Bank. The Israeli and Palestinian media has commented on the circumstances quite controversially. According to Israeli media sources, two Palestinians were arrested when the third person from the group hid in a house, resisted arrest and forced Israeli troops to shoot him. On the other hand, Palestinian media was referring to witnesses who told that the man was shot in the head. According to these reports, an assault rifle was also found in the house but Palestinian sources suggest that it had not been fired at the Israeli forces.



A Palestinian boy and Israeli soldier in front of the Israeli West Bank Barrier. Photo: Justin McIntosh



Iran's debated nuclear programme: one step closer to the solution?

In the last decade, suspicions about Iran's alleged atomic weapon and military nuclear programme have been a recurring dispute in the field of international politics. Teheran has regularly stressed the peaceful nature of its nuclear programme but the Western powers have kept being suspicious about the country's possible aim to develop an atomic arsenal. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran has agreed to start cooperating with the UN agency a bit more tightly on the transparency of its nuclear programme.

Iran's isolation started to become less resistant after last year's election when the relatively moderate president Hassan Rouhani came into power. Now the IAEA

and Iran has not only made an agreement on seven practical measures but one of these measures is specially dealing with the UN nuclear agency's inquiry into the possible military dimensions to Iran's atomic activities. According to a joint Iran-IAEA statement issued this month, Iran has already implemented six initial steps such as access to certain nuclear-related sites. Furthermore, Iran is also going to provide access to the Saghand uranium mine and the Ardakan uranium ore milling plant by 15 May. In addition, more information on the extraction of uranium from phosphates will be given by the country to the IAEA. In spite of this positive turn of events, the IAEA's statement does not mention the Parchin military site at all which has been



Iran Nuclear Negotiators, 18.02.2014. Photo: Dragan Tatic [Das österreichische Außenministerium]



the suspected place of explosives tests for a long time.

The country has been holding negotiations not only with the IAEA about its nuclear programme. On 18 February, separate negotiations started between Iran and six world powers, namely the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany, with the coordination of the European Union foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and her office. The main aim of the high-level talks is to reach a broader international diplomatic settlement on Iran's nuclear programme and its transparency. Last November, an interim

deal was already reached about limiting Iran's nuclear work in exchange for some sanctions easing.

In conclusion, there is not anything new about the international community's and the IAEA's intentions to monitor Iran's nuclear programme and its motives. Nonetheless, the fact is much more remarkable that Iran is seemingly acting as a cooperative partner in this process. The IAEA's tactic to start the negotiations with less sensitive issues is apparently working, and hopefully helps to build mutual trust between Iran and Western powers.

Possible Iran-Russia deal: oil for a nuclear reactor?

According to Mehdi Sanaei, Iranian ambassador to Moscow, Russia and Iran have been negotiating the possibility of a broad economic deal. Russia could not only supply Iran with trucks, railroad tracks and mini-refineries, but it could build a second reactor at the Bushehr nuclear power plant in exchange for Iranian oil. The two countries are hoping to sign the agreement before August. Western powers, especially the United States, have warned that such a deal could make much more difficult to reach a multilateral agreement on Iran's nuclear programme and its transparency.

“Iran has agreed to start cooperating with the IAEA”



First Chinese-Taiwan Government Meeting in 60 years

On the 16th of February, the first official governmental meeting between China and Taiwan took place. The last such event occurred before the civil war six decades ago. The meeting was held on the Mainland, in the city of Nanjing which was the capital of China before the civil war. Then, in 1949 Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang Party had to leave the country, fleeing to Taiwan from the Communists. Since then, the two countries are governed separately, Taiwan keeping the name of the Republic of China. Both countries believe that it represents the "real" China.

The head of Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council, Wang Yu-chi, will meet with the head of China's Taiwan Affairs Office, Zhang Zhijun. Joseph Cheng, a political science professor at the City University of Hong Kong said that "[t]he meeting is a considerable breakthrough because this is the first time that two government officials are going to meet in their formal capacities, representing a certain level of mutual recognition." On the meeting, such topics are scheduled to be discussed as "the establishment of cross-strait representative offices, access for each side's news media, and cross-strait economic restructuring".

President Ma Ying-Jeou said at an official meeting in Honduras that the meeting was a highly "inevitable step" regarding the relations which used to be as severe as having fire missiles in the strait in 1996. Since 2008, the beginning of Ma's presidency,

there are warmer relations between the countries because Ma has moved away from the "independence-leaning policies of his predecessor, Chen Shui-bian".

In 1993, the Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation and China's Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits had their first public meeting since 1949, and also non-governmental representatives have met with Chinese presidents in the near past. However, this meeting in February "is a step toward recognising each other's government and its legitimacy, which hasn't happened in the past" – said Ting Jen-fang, a professor of politics at Taiwan's National Cheng Kung University.

In last October in Bali, Indonesia, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Chinese President Xi Jinping said that the two countries have to pay attention not to pass on the political deadlocks to the next generations.

According to Cheng, "Beijing certainly is eager for this kind of meeting because Beijing hopes to have some kind of political dialogue leading to formal peace agreement" which the two parties have never reached before. The massive problem is that China thinks about Taiwan as a part of its territory, therefore it would "take the island by force if necessary". The Ministry of National Defence of Taiwan declared that China could achieve a successful invasion against the island by 2020. Hopefully, the meeting is going to prove a different scenario.



China as the “Nazi Germany of Asia”

“If we say yes to something we believe is wrong now, what guarantee is there that the wrong will not be further exacerbated down the line? ... At what point do you say, ‘Enough is enough’? Well, the world has to say it — remember that the Sudetenland was given in an attempt to appease Hitler to prevent World War II.”

The President of the Philippines, Benigno S. Aquino III asked for more support for his country from the nations around the world. He compared the situation between the Philippines and China to Czechoslovakia and Hitler’s demands in 1938: the Sudetenland was given to Germany after Hitler promised to Chamberlain that he will not invade the rest of the country. A parallel can be seen that “the Philippines faces demands to surrender territory piecemeal to a much stronger foreign power ...”.

Although comments arrived later that the president had not want to offend China but only “answering a question with a historical fact”, the Chinese reaction was strong to the president’s remarks. The official Chinese news agency, the Xinhua declared that the president’s “approach [is] inflammatory and unfortunate”, “ignorant” and “amateurish”. China



China and the Philippines. Map: Zuanzuanfuwa [Wikimedia Commons]

believes that she has historical rights for the region in question, and “a professional and mature Philippine leader could do more good to his country by seeking to resolve the territorial disputes with China through dialogue and consultation”. China proves her claims with centuries-old maps showing territories reaching almost as far as Borneo. Aquino is not the only one among the Asian leaders who is alarmed by the territorial claims. The Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe compared China and Japan in the present to Britain and Germany in 1914 when – apart from their



close economic ties – they went into war against each other. China has conflict with Japan over uninhabited islands in the East China Sea. The animosity has gone so far that the diplomats of the two countries call each other “Asia’s Voldemort”. China also has quarrel with South Korea over “rocks” in the South China Sea. Last November, China declared an “air defence identification zone” over the skies of the disputed Japanese area. The Philippines has already lost the Scarborough Shoal to China in 2012. The Americans mediated in the dispute, ordered both parties away while negotiating, but China remained, and gained control.

Aquino has been president for 4 years now, and has “exceeded expectations” so far. He was a “low-key senator”, but after the death of his mother he was voted for presidency “by a wave of national sympathy”. The administration has fought and also reduced corruption, and “finally address[ed] an impediment to commerce”. More roads are paved; all major credit-rating agencies give the country “an investment-grade rating”; negotiations ended up in a major peace



Benigno Aquino III. Photo: Jay Morales

agreement with the Muslims on the southern island (although the agreement has problematic points). On the other hand, the president was criticised by his slow reaction towards the devastating typhoon last year, and he has been less aggressive on land reforms, shifting the social spending to poor villages instead. However, the almost “feudal power of some entrenched families ... is a further obstacle to growth”.

Doubts have emerged whether positive changes could continue after 2016 since the president cannot be re-elected due to the law. Aquino hopes for closer American-Filipino ties, and more American troops in the future for enhanced security. Some from the political elite do not want this experience since history should repeat itself: earlier the “American possession [made] them wary of closer military ties”. America is “pushing for the deal” to help balancing in Asia, and “retain a strong influence” despite of China. But the task is not so easy to fulfil.

China opposes applying procedures and formulas of the UN, and multilateral discussion as well – China wants bilateral agreements with the countries since China would be much more powerful in this case. Also militarily, as China has the capability to improve the armed forces with around 90 billion pounds – this is more than the combined budget of Britain, France and Germany.

The citizens of the area have other problems with China. The Hong Kong government has decided “to stop allowing 14-day visa-free visits by Filipino diplomats



and officials” which is well-supported by the Chinese Foreign Ministry. The sanctions appeared as the next step in the long-running demand by Hong Kong: 4



Flag of China. Picture: Wikimedia Commons

years ago, a rescue attempt in the capital city of the Philippines failed, and 8 Hong Kong citizens died. Hong Kong still waits for the apologies from the Philippine government. Aquino said that China has

never paid any compensation to those Filipino families who lost relatives in that violence, so he has no plans to apologize. The commander of the US Navy, Admiral Jonathan Greenert declared that “[t]he United States will come to the aid of the Philippines in the event of conflict with China over disputed waters...”. However, “I don’t know what that help would be specifically. ... we have an obligation because we have a treaty. But I don’t know in what capacity that help is”. Greenert also said that the US opposes China’s aggressive behaviour, and will work with the allies to maintain freedom in the area.

China claims 90% of the South China Sea because of her historical rights. As an answer to this, Aquino said: “You may have the might, but that does not necessarily make you right”.

Chinese water cannon attack on Filipinos

On the 27th of January, Filipino fishermen were fired with water cannons from a Chinese vessel. The incident happened near a disputed area, at the Scarborough Shoal off the coast of the Philippines. Chinese officials did not comment it, but re-asserted the claim of the country to the waters. The area in question is believed to be rich in resources – that is the reason why China claims ownership of huge parts of the South China Sea. The Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan also compete for several islands, reefs, and shoals in the area. Scarborough Shoal gained attention in 2012 when a tense stand-off happened between the Philippines and China, followed by “protests and angry rhetoric on both sides”. The Chinese vessels which arrived in 2012 are still at the shoal which provoked the Philippines to challenge the claims at a UN tribunal in 2013. Regarding the incident, it is known that the Philippines try to reach a solution peacefully, but if needed, there would be answers towards provocation; on the other hand, “... China has indisputable sovereignty over relevant waters and China’s maritime surveillance fleet are carrying out routine patrols in relevant waters”. China also has disputes with Japan regarding islands in the East China Sea – it is not really believable that solutions could be found in neither areas, or between the states themselves.



The North and the South finally meet again after 4 years

According to BBC's Lucy Williamson, North Korea is on a "charm offensive", but others are sceptical about the family reunion meetings between the two countries. After the Korean War in 1950–1953, many Korean families were split, never to meet again. Millions were separated with the drawing of the new border, and the creation of the two states. Because of this reason, and after the calls from Pyongyang "to improve ties", the two countries agreed to hold so-called "family reunion events".

This year's meeting took place at the end of February, and lasted for 5 days; the last such event occurred in 2010. Another meeting was planned for November 2013, but North Korea cancelled it in September, saying the South was hostile. Annually, South Korea and the US have military trainings – Pyongyang asked Seoul to cancel the event in 2013, but it was refused. The result was the anger of the North, and the cancellation of the previous family meetings. North Korea uses this kind of deliverance every time it opposes something happening in the South. On the contrary, the North was criticised that it uses "reunions as a bargaining chip".

The reunions are organised by a waiting list.

The system works quite slowly, the number of people is limited, only a few hundred may take part each time. The majority "will be left behind". In South Korea, there is a "lottery system" to pick people for the meetings. In the North, the picture is more unclear, one reason to believe that families are chosen according to political reasons. Approximately, there are 72,000 South Koreans on the list – almost 50% over 80 years of age. Most people do not even know whether their relatives are still alive, because there are no emails, phone calls or mail connections between them.

The initiative is not a bad one although many are sceptical about the "charm offensive" and "warmer ties" from the Northern side.

No talks on Bae release

For the second time, North Korea cancelled the invitation for a US envoy to discuss the possible release of a long-detained American missionary, Kenneth Bae.

The cancellation happened few days after Bae told a pro-Pyongyang newspaper that the meeting is expected, as a Swedish





Flag map of Korea. Map: Wikimedia Commons

diplomat had told him. Alongside, the US prepared for the annual military drills with South Korea, which was threatening for North Korea, but the drills are not linked in any ways with this case. However, talks on the release will occur only after the drills end. The State Department said that civil rights leader, Rev. Jesse Jackson “offered to travel to North Korea at the request of Bae’s family”.

Analysts highlight that earlier North Korea used Americans “as leverage ... with the US over its nuclear and missile programs”. North Korea denies these charges. Bae has

been in North Korea for almost one and a half year, accused of smuggling “inflammatory literature and trying to establish a base for anti-governmental activities...”. He has lost 50 pounds since his captivity. Because of this, he was taken to a hospital, but now he returned to the labour camp where he works 8 hours per day. Bae is in a bad state: “he suffers from diabetes, an enlarged heart, liver problems and back pain”.

Donald Gregg, a former US ambassador to South Korea, and Lynn Turk, a former US diplomat arrived in Pyongyang. Turk said that they were “invited by the North Korean Foreign Ministry and their aim is to discuss how to build bridges between the countries”.

Outside observers has pointed to the recent “tone down” in the rhetoric of North Korea towards South Korea, and think this is for the “improved ties with the outside world in order to attract foreign investment and aid”.



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry meets with the family of Kenneth Bae at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C., on January 28, 2014. Photo: US Department of State



Thai political crisis continues in February

Although general election was held on 2 February, the political crisis had been continuing throughout the month in Thailand. Protests have been going on since November 2013 for various reasons. On one hand, the unrest was caused by a proposed amnesty bill concerning people involved in different incidents since 2004. On the other hand, the most debated issue by the protesters is an amendment to the 2007 constitution proposed by the government. This amendment would have made the Senate a fully elected body if it would not have been invalidated by the Constitutional Court. Demonstrations are aiming to make Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her government step down and create an unelected 'people's council' which would oversee reforms in order to fight corruption and alleged vote-buying.

The anti-government protests have been led by the main opposition Democrat Party, particularly by former MP Suthep Thaugsuban. After the closure of several government offices caused by the protesters, all Democrat Party MPs resigned on 8 December 2013. Therefore, Prime Minister Yingluck had to dissolve the House of Representatives and announce general election for 2 February. Owing to spreading violence, shootings and blockade of major road intersections in Bangkok, the government declared a state of



Suthep Thaugsuban holds a speech on the day of the general elections at the Silom anti-government protest site. Photo: Takeaway [Wikimedia Commons]

emergency in the capital city and its surrounding areas as of 21 January.

The events were quite turbulent before February but they turned even more tense and violent during this month. In spite of the protests and various incidents, the government has decided not to postpone the election. So advance voting began on 26 January but protesters were blocking the distribution of ballot boxes in certain parts of Bangkok and in twelve provinces in the south. According to an estimation, around 440,000 people were unable to vote because of the anti-government protesters' various actions. Although Suthep Thaugsuban was calling for a peaceful blockade of roads in Bangkok, gunfire broke out between government supporters and protesters. The final turnout for the elections was only 47.72 per cent. Therefore, on 12 February, new election dates were announced for April in order to



create voting opportunities for those citizens who were restrained by anti-government protests. Tension has not been lowered either after the general election. On 14 February, thousands of riot police were deployed in Bangkok to clear some of the occupied streets and areas of the capital. The police's actions were mainly focusing on governmental buildings and their surroundings. Actually it was not difficult to retake these areas since the number of protesters had been falling sharply since mid-January, the beginning of the 'occupation'. Moreover, this operation can be interpreted as a shift in the government's tactics since previously it allowed the protesters to camp out on Bangkok's streets for months.



A crowd of anti-government protesters the day before the scheduled elections at the intersection of Silom road and Rama 4 road. Photo: Takeaway [Wikimedia Commons]

As clashes between the riot police and protesters had been continuing, the number of deaths and injuries were constantly rising. Government has accused protesters of using grenades and tear gas; on the other hand, protesters have blamed the police for deploying snipers and various weapons against their peaceful demon-

stration. Meanwhile the clashes, Thailand's anti-corruption commission has announced charges of neglect of duty against Prime Minister Yingluck.

Her role is questioned in a controversial rice farm subsidy scheme which had caused a loss of billions of dollars for the country. Prime Minister Yingluck has denied the charges and any wrongdoing, furthermore, government officials has said that the commission's charges are part of a judicial coup against the Prime Minister and the government.

On 23 February, the events turned even more serious. A bomb exploded in a busy shopping district of Bangkok and killed two people and wounded at least 22. The location of the explosion was near to one of the few remaining large protest sites. It has not been proved who was responsible for the attack. In a statement on social media, Prime Minister Yingluck condemned the deadly action and called it a terrorist act for political gains.

In addition, this crisis is not only the opposition of two political sides, but a political struggle between two social groups. On one hand the mostly middle-class anti-government protesters from Bangkok and the south, and on the other hand, the supporters of Yingluck from the rural north and northeast of Thailand. According to the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration's Erawan Medical Centre, 23 people were killed and more than 750 got injured due to the violence from 30 November until the end of February.



Crisis in deeply divided Venezuela

Violent protests in Venezuela broke out in January in response to the critical situation that the country is currently finding itself. After the death of Hugo Chávez last year, leader of the country throughout the past decade, the effectiveness of the so-called “chavismo” is being questioned. After doubtful elections, his successor, Nicolás Maduro became president last April, who is aiming to follow the policies of the former head of state.

While the sharp reduction of poverty,



Peaceful protestors demonstrating in Caracas, Venezuela. Photo: Diego Urdaneta

thereby the improvement in the quality of life of many Venezuelans is undoubtedly something the society can be grateful for to the Chávez regime, there are multiple concerns Venezuela is facing, which eventually led to violent protests. Among the reasons are the country's crucial security situation; high murder rates; the shortage of basic commodities; constant corruption; price inflation of more than 50% in a year caused by strict price control and the demand from the opposition to take part in public dialogue.

Protests started 4 February in San Cristobál, mainly against the government but pro-government demonstrations likewise took place. On 12th of February the opposition and student movements joined the ongoing manifestation, which was followed by the arrest of main opposition leader Leopoldo López who was accused of a coup attempt and whose name is constantly mentioned ever since. The government insisted that he trained young people to go to the streets with the aim of overthrowing the regime. Approximately five people have died in protests and dozens have been wounded as government forces shot at protestors.



Both government and opposition have its own narrative about the nature of protests. According to the official, government version, the protests are US-backed propaganda, an attempt to support those with closer economic ties to the USA and help them gain power. Maduro repeatedly called the actions a “fascist plan”, and added that the United States keeps maintaining an “Economic War” against the oil-rich country. They claim that the right wing opposition has no political and social agenda but their goal is to put an end to the “Bolivarian government”. The other side of the coin is that the opposition is demanding its right to protest, to make

their voices heard in the Venezuelan political arena. Both sides are blamed by the other one to be either a puppet of Washington or that of Cuba.

The population is generally uncertain about where the unrest will lead as violence is gradually escalating. Many demand the resignation of Maduro but concurrently fear that even in the event of a regime change problems would not possibly be eradicated. The solution can be the urgent initiation of dialogue between the two sides. Discontent can be felt from everyone as many people are tired of the general insecurity and political ambiguities that characterize today's Venezuela.

Venezuela will ostracize CNN?

President Nicolas Maduro said he would expel the US American news agency CNN based on its media coverage about the current series of protests. He added that his opponents were promoting violence and was criticizing the way foreign media companies are reporting about the demonstrations.

“Enough war propaganda, I won't accept war propaganda against Venezuela. If they don't rectify themselves, out of Venezuela, CNN, out” – he said. According to the BBC, media freedom is subject to high concerns in the country as some media stations were closed down after government order. President Barack Obama added the government of Maduro ought to stop false accusations against US officials, after three US diplomats have been expelled from the country as well.

“after the death of Hugo Chávez,
the effectiveness of the so-called
“chavismo” is being questioned”



■ News in Brief

Domestic affairs affecting international relations

The “Go Home or Face Arrest” Minister was forced to resign

■ After illegally employing a foreign cleaner in 2007, Immigration Minister Mark Harper had to resign. He was also behind the posters targeting illegal workers in the United Kingdom. Harper was Immigration Minister since 2012. He said that the Colombian cleaner had seemed to have clean documents, but further investigations now revealed differently. Up until then, the Tory Minister had not had the faintest idea about her illegality – now he may be fined with 5,000 pounds because not keeping the immigration documents. Harper resigned, and apologised to the Prime Minister, David Cameron. The former Security Minister, James Brokenshire replaced Harper. David Cameron accepted the resignation “with regret”. In the resignation letter, Harper said he “had been mindful of his obligation to make checks including her right to work in the UK”. A copy was made of her passport and a letter from Home Office, a proof that she can stay in the country. Harper now said that he “should have checked more thoroughly”. The urgent question is how she “came to be in possession of a letter that gave false details about her right to be in the country”. Interestingly, former investigations revealed that fake passports and other documents can be obtained relatively easily. Harper seems to become aware of her illegal status after getting the Immigration Bill through Parliament. In the Prime Minister’s answer, he was “...very sorry indeed to see you leave the Government, but I understand your reasons for doing so. I hope very much that you will be able to return to service on the Frontbench before too long”. However, Harper had many controversial affairs. Last year he rounded on a five-times-failed asylum seeker, saying: “With the greatest respect, when you were here claiming asylum, taxpayers supported you. You now have no right to be in the United Kingdom and you should return”. He also defended the controversial “Go Home or Face Arrest” posters, and taxpayers paid thousands of pounds during years for his cleaner’s services. One of the beneficiaries of the reshuffle is that Tory Karen Bradley has become a junior Minister at the Home Office.

Nigerian Islamists kill students in a raid

■ Boko Haram Islamists killed at least 90 people, including secondary school students in a raid against a village in the northeast of Nigeria. Estimated 40 students lost their lives when terrorists attacked the Federal Government College in Buni Yadi. They threw explosives into the rooms of the students and those who could not leave were burnt inside. This was not the only case men of Boko Haram sprayed gunfire on sleeping students. Last September 40 people were murdered in such an assault. The name of the group means “Western education is forbidden”. They are fighting to establish an Islamic state and reject everything deriving from the West.



UN warns of “ethnic-religious cleansing” as mass grave was found in Central African Republic

■ In March 2013, the rebels – mainly Muslims – seized power, and started a “campaign of rape, torture and executions” against the Christian population. The action ended up in displacing a million people. Peacekeepers uncovered the grave near a military camp. Seleka rebels station in the neighbourhood of the grave. The violence became worse in the country when the president – Michel Djotodia who is a Seleka leader – resigned because of international pressure. The withdrawal of Seleka troops from the southern part of the country ended up in revenge against Muslims. France mustered 1,600 troops to help the African Union peacekeeping force, but the effort was not successful. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres said that the “humanitarian catastrophe ... must be stopped”. 100,000 Muslims escaped from the south, redrawing the religious map as they went. “We are asking to leave this country even if we have to walk. If there is security for a convoy, none of us wants to stay” says a refuge in Bangui. UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon asked France to send more troops because the violence might partition the country. French troops are needed since the arrival of UN troops would take more time to deploy. Seleka leaders and commanders declared that they do not want to see a separated country. The anti-balaka militia – meaning “anti-machete” – is the main threat to the area. Their desire is “to eliminate Muslims from the country”. The militia contains Christians and animists, members of the armed forces and supporters of the toppled president. The cleansing could end in the disappearance of Muslim communities. Muslims used to make up 15% of the population (4 million), they work as traders, shopkeepers, herders – their fleeing could bring major food crisis. Due to this, the World Food Programme began an emergency airlift of approximately 1,800 tonnes of food. International forces have already evacuated Muslims from dangerous areas. Muslims are, however, regrouping on the northern part of the country because the militias tend to target the population there. A Reuters witness saw the bodies of at least 12 people in the grave in question. The head of the local Red Cross, Pastor Antoine Mboa Bogo confirmed the existence of the grave. It is not yet known who killed those people.

32 people die in Baghdad’s explosions

■ Heavy explosions caused the death of 32 people in the Iraqi capital beginning of February. Several parked car bombs and one suicide bombers' device exploded shortly after one another in Baghdad’s central area. Later on a car bomb went off in a busy commercial area, followed by a last explosion that occurred in Jisr Diyala, a mostly Shiite suburban area in the southeastern part of Baghdad. Two years after the USA withdrew its troops from Baghdad al-Qaeda militants are fighting for control of Sunni Muslim territories to challenge the Shiite-led government's maintenance of security, the Los Angeles Times reported.



Tunisian police kills Islamist militants

■ Three years after the so-called Arab Spring, the Tunisian state is still combating militant Islamist groups that gained strength after the 2011 events. Tunisia is one of the most secular countries of North Africa, thus the government is struggling to weaken extremist Salafi movements that are aiming to establish an Islamic state. Seven Islamist militants were killed in a clash outside the capital, Tunis where an armed group hid arms and bomb belts, Reuters reported. Last time the army carried out such action was against the banned Islamist movement Ansar al-Sharia, one of al-Qaeda's allies, which is listed as a terrorist group by the USA and the moderate Islamist Tunisian government as well. This has been the most dreadful attack ever since, causing the death of one police officer and seven militants. One of those killed in the attack was Kamel Ghadghadi, member of the Ansar al-Sharia who was wanted by the police for murdering opposition leaders. Ghadghadi at the time of the killing was allegedly wearing a suicide bomb belt. How to handle Islamist militancy still present in the country remains one of the major challenges of the new government. Shocking example of the existing extremism is last year's suicide bombing at a beach resort. Islamist networks became more influential in the Arab world and after the unstable situation in neighboring Libya, Tunisian militants received weapons and training that helped them expand.

Killings continue in Balochistan

■ Nine people were killed in an exchange of fire on the border of Sindh and Balochistan. Two groups were involved in the fire which stopped by now, but the police and also the Levies Forces were mobilised after the attack. The Interior Minister of Balochistan, Sarfaraz Bugti stated that a peace force officer, two suspects and six civilians died in the incident. Later in the night, a Baloch Republican Army (BRA) group attacked a house in Dera Bugti. The illicit group killed three women, two children and two men. In the morning, one tribesman and two suspects died, after a group of tribesmen chased the BRA men to Jaffarabad where the two parties started to shoot each other.

Yemen on the way to federalism

■ According to Yemen's state news agency Saba, the country will be transformed into a "federal state of six regions". President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi led the meeting which represented Yemen's parties and agreed on changing the current territorial composition of the state. Yemen's regions have been divided since the end of the British colonial rule in 1967. From 1967 until 1990 Southern Yemen was an independent state, meaning that a united Yemen in its current form has existed solely for the past 25 years. The Yemeni "national dialogue" will be further working on drafting a new constitution within a year and is supposed to incorporate the new shape of the country into it.



Telangana: the most recent controversial and chaotic state of India

■ After a 50-year-long campaign for the separate status, the upper house in India has signed the bill to create the 29th state. With a population at least 35 million, one of the most under-developed regions was born in the country. Telangana is in the southern part of the country. It contains 10 districts from the 23 which used to belong to Andhra Pradesh, including the capital city, Hyderabad. Generally, the area is landlocked, and predominantly agricultural. The birth of the state was not easy. Only one day after the lower house accepted the bill, the chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, Kiran Kumar Reddy resigned. The way of the bill through parliament was completely chaotic: one lawmaker even used pepper spray to try to stop the process. 17 MPs were suspended because of “unruly behaviour”. Many others, mainly from the ruling Congress party, opposed the decision. The upper house approved the bill after days of such political turmoil. However, backers of the creation of the new state highlight that the government have neglected the area for a very long time, and with this move the region would get more attention than before. The capital city, Hyderabad might become the bottleneck. The opponents are unhappy that the home of many major information technology and pharmaceutical companies will become a shared capital between the two regions. Only after 10 years will it be the unmarred capital of Telangana. During this period, Andhra Pradesh has to develop a new capital in place of Hyderabad.



Telangana within India. Map: Wikimedia Commons



■ News in Brief

Bilateral relations

Caviar, Hollywood and wine – Obama and Hollande at state dinner

■ On the first dinner of Barack Obama's second term, on a "highly coveted social soireé", Francois Hollande was hosted, alongside with the crème of Washington and Hollywood. At a state dinner like this, such names were on the invitation list as J. J. Abrams, Bradley Cooper, Stephen Colbert, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan, Secretary of State John Kerry, and many more. It was more like an Oscar ceremony than a state dinner. "We Americans have grown to love all things French – the films, the food, the wine – especially the wine. But most of all we love our French friends because we've stood together for our freedom for more than 200 years", praised Obama his French counterpart and his nation. The main event seemed to be interesting only because of the cuisine and the wine list released by the White House before the dinner which took place in a tent on the South Lawn. Naturally, the White House believes that such events are far more relevant than just about "pomp and pageantry". Behind the scenes, real work was done: "information [was] gathered, opinions [were] exchanged, powerful connections [were] made and appearances [were] upheld". To achieve these goals, the White House invited "the most important and the most sought after in the nation's social whirl". So what duties these two men have to confront? International challenges like the Syrian civil war, Iran, and the economic problems in Europe. The socialist Hollande arrived alone after his affair with an actress had gone public. His longtime partner – who should had been the equivalent of the French first lady on the event – separated from Holland after the scandal. However, it was not the first time when a French president arrived alone: Nicolas Sarkozy had done exactly the same during his presidency.

Botswana terminated diplomatic and consular relations with North Korea

■ The decision of the government came after the UN Commission of Inquiry regarding human rights issues. The statement appeared on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Botswana. The statement declared that the decision was made because of "the recently released report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea". The UN report highlights "systematic, widespread and grave human rights violations by North Korean authorities" with which the government of Botswana does not want to be connected. The government criticises the Korean authorities, emphasising the fact that all governments have to "take responsibility for the welfare of its people and their human rights". Botswana believes that North Korea lacks these obligations towards the citizens. As one of the most prosperous states in Southern



Africa, and also a very entrenched multi-party democracy, Botswana feels it has the right to give an opinion regarding the situation in North Korea: “Botswana wishes to convey its heartfelt sympathies to the people of North Korea who are currently subjected to inhuman treatment under the leadership of Kim Jong-un”. An expert on North Korea said that the UN report “has no small degree of international significance. The South Korean media and people may underplay this decision by Botswana, but it has meaning”.

New start to military cooperation between Egypt and Russia

■ Egypt's army chief Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi had a two-day visit to Moscow where he discussed military issues with Russia as a new start for military and technical cooperations. As the state news agency MENA reported, the partnership is based on common interests. Egypt has a friendship with and respect towards Russia, and the visit is a response to the Russian one to Egypt in last November when a weapon deal was made between the participating members about “air defence missile systems”. The defence minister said that “Egypt is facing challenges ..., especially terrorism”; the country has seen many attacks since July 2013 after the ouster of the Islamist president Mohamed Morsi. Because of this event, the US cut off the 1.5 billion dollar military and economic aid to Egypt, due to “concerns over the country's democratic transition and mounting violence following Morsi's ouster”. As the Egyptian presidential elections come closer, Vladimir Putin wished luck to al-Sisi who is widely believed to win the elections “by an overwhelming majority”, though the election have not been declared yet. There is a kind of “personality cult” forming around al-Sisi, and the election is the most relevant subject in Egyptian politics now. The question of decision to run for presidency was denied constantly, but Putin made it clear for everyone on al-Sisi's arrival: “I know that you have made a decision to run for president. ... That's a very responsible decision: to undertake such a mission for the fate of the Egyptian people. On my part, and on behalf of the Russian people, I wish you success”. The visit was closely followed since the military and strategic alliance between the two countries ended 40 years ago by the former President Anwar Sadat.



Russian President Vladimir Putin had a separate meeting with First Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Military Industry of Egypt Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Photo: Kremlin.ru



China is not happy about the meeting of Obama with the Dalai Lama

■ US President, Barack Obama's meeting with the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader has been bothering China so much as to ask the US to cancel the meeting. China declared that the meeting "would seriously impair China-US relations" as they see the Lama as a separatist. However, Obama voiced a "strong support" for the protection of human rights in Tibet. The Lama himself said that he wants to receive "greater autonomy for Tibet, not independence". Tibet is now an autonomous region in China where political and religious freedoms are repressed. China sees the situation differently, and believes that the economic developments have improved living conditions in Tibet. According to the Xinhua news agency, "China expresses strong indignation and firm opposition"; "The Tibetan issue is the domestic affair of China, and the United States bears no right to interfere. Such a move will gravely sabotage China-US co-operation and relations, and will definitely undermine its own interests". The Dalai Lama and Obama met last in 2011. That meeting also angered China. Now talk was about hopes that China would meet with the Lama's representatives at last. This year Obama met the Dalai Lama as a "respected religious and cultural leader", and the US also emphasized that it has nothing to do with Tibetan independence, the US mainly "strongly supports rights and religious freedom in China". The problem is highly different from the Tibetan point of view. In the last couple of years, more than 110 ethnic Tibetans, mainly young monks and nuns abroad, have set themselves on fire to protest against the way their country is treated. The Chinese government believes that the Lama is behind these protests: he strengthens them with his behaviour, speeches, and acts. The Lama fled to India in 1959 from Chinese troops who crushed an uprising in the country against China. The Dalai Lama today seeks a "middle way" regarding the state of his country.



“China believes that the economic developments have improved living conditions in Tibet”



■ News in Brief

International relations

Obama is going to Asia

■ Half a year after Barack Obama's visit was cancelled, the President announced that he goes to Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines in April. After the cancellation last year, the President was criticised that he does not show enough "commitment to an increasingly influential region of the world". The step generated a disadvantageous image of the US as "politically and economically volatile and [who] ceded the international stage to China". Obama delayed the visit earlier because of domestic political affairs, and the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010. Now, as the visit is already on the agenda, Obama is due to meet with the leaders of those countries. In 2012, Obama declared that the focus will move from Europe and the Middle East to Asia. The relevance of the region has commenced in the last decade, so the United States is in a search for closer economic and also military ties there. America has to "keep pace with China's growing influence" as well. In Japan, the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement is the main topic, while in South Korea talks will be about the recent developments in North Korea.

France sends more soldiers to the Central African Republic

■ As the violence increases, and concerns grow about the country, France decided to send even more soldiers – this time 400 – to Africa. Thanks to the supplement, 2,000 soldiers are in service now on the continent. Thousands of Muslims had to return to the capital city while they tried to flee from the sectarian violence which was brought down on them by Christian militiamen. The Muslims wanted to go to Chad where they hoped to seek asylum. Almost the 25% of the population had to leave their homes, and at least 2000 people have died so far in the fights. The Muslim Seleka group gained power in March, and thence the violence is constant. The Central African Republic is a "majority Christian country". The French President's office asked for "increased solidarity" from other countries, and also urged the UN Security Council "to accelerate the deployment of peacekeeping troops in the country". UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is concerned that the violence would worsen, and turn into genocide: "Public lynching, mutilations and other horrendous acts of violence are spreading mayhem and fear. All Central Africans have been victims, Muslims and Christians alike." On account of this fear, he asked France to send more troops. The European Union also agreed earlier to send help to the area. A top UN officer noted that there is a chance for "ethnic-religious cleansing", after peacekeepers had found a mass grave at a Seleka military camp. The French forces are cooperating with nearly 6,000 African peacekeepers.



Winter Olympics with different kind of excitement: hijacking attempt

■ A bomb threat forced a plane from Ukraine with 110 passengers to land in Istanbul, Turkey. A “severely intoxicated” passenger wanted to hijack the plane, and flew to Sochi. The main security agency of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Security Service said that the “severely intoxicated” man had been pacified, and he had not been carrying weapons or explosives, but an official from Turkey’s Transport Ministry confirmed that a bomb threat had been made while the plane was in the air, but outside Turkish airspace. Apart from the fact that the man had no weapons with him, he claimed that there was a bomb on board, he had a detonator, and tried to enter the cockpit which was baffled. The man was calmed down by the crew, who allowed the plane to land in Istanbul – an F-16 Turkish military jet forced the plane down. Later all passengers were searched for explosives. The head of Turkey’s main pilots’ union highlighted that he knows the pilot of the plane, who is experienced, and there could be no problem at all. There is not much information about the man in question but since the almost-hijacking happened only hours before the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in Sochi, there was immediate suspicion that it had some connections with the sport event which had been giving much pressure to Russia. The hijacking was also connected to terrorism because terrorists from the Caucasus region had threatened an attack on the Olympic Games. The United States warned Russia before the opening that terrorists could bring a bomb to Sochi in several toothpaste tubes, so the United States “banned the transport of all liquids and gels on flights to Russia”.

No concrete results on Geneva II

■ The conference about Syria still have not produced any relevant results, only the proposed agenda of the next round was discussed and agreed, though without an exact date. The accepted agenda includes “fighting violence and terrorism, the transitional governing body, national institutions, as well as national reconciliation and national debate”, said Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria. Brahimi suggested the next round should have an exact agenda: on the first day, discussions over fighting against violence and terrorism should be discussed. Then the second day should be about the transitional governing body. However, he noted that there were some “sticking points” with this plan. The Syrian government delegation accepted the agenda, but “refused the suggested time-length of discussions” of the first day. They argued that the second item – the transitional governing body – must only be examined after the first item was finished, no matter how long it will take. Brahimi believes that this move shows that “the government did not want to discuss the issue of the transitional governing body”. The so-called Geneva Communique, issued on the 30th of June in 2012, helps both sides to reach a solution. Due to this, Brahimi hopes that next time the two parties will be ready “to engage seriously on how to implement the Geneva Communique”.



Pope Francis travels with an Argentinian passport

■ The first person of the smallest country of the world said he does not want to enjoy any privileges, and renewed his passport and identity card. The Pope started the process via the digital centre in Rome, and later men from the embassy travelled to Santa Marta, to the residence of the Pope to prepare the administration. The Pope expressed his wish for an absolutely normal way of procedure, like any other Argentinians would do. This another positive gesture from the Pope makes the Argentinians very proud, especially if we know that he travelled with a Vatican passport since his first days as the leader of the Christian world.



Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, president of Argentina, with Pope Francis in March 2013. Photo: Casa Rosada [casarosada.gob.ar]





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