

Russian president reiterates backing for his successor

MOSCOW (Xinhua) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday offered his support again for his preferred successor, First Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

Speaking at an informal summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in Moscow, Putin said he supports Medvedev as a presidential candidate because they have worked together for long and known each other well, the Itar-Tass news agency reported.

Medvedev is an important member of the president's executive team and has been directly involved in the government's decision-making, he said.

Putin also said Medvedev helped set Russia's CIS policy and would not make any major change to it if he is elected president.

Russia's final pre-election opinion poll showed on Thursday that Medvedev has the support of 72.9 percent of voters in the presidential election, which is scheduled for March 2.

Official: Poland-U.S. talks on missile shield normal

WARSAW (Chinaview) — Talks with the U.S. on its plans to install elements of an anti-missile shield in Poland are going on in a normal way, head of the Polish Prime Minister's cabinet Sławomir Nowak said Friday.

On Friday the newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza (GW) reported that just two weeks before the planned visit of the Polish prime minister to the U.S., negotiations on the shield have reached deadlock because Poland is unhappy with recent U.S. proposals.

According to GW's sources the Polish side has cancelled consultations planned for Friday. No further Polish-U.S. meetings are set to take place before Prime Minister Donald Tusk meets U.S. President George W. Bush in Washington on March 10, it said.

Nowak stressed the two sides were holding normal talks but added that Poland had not taken any decision on the shield yet.

Talks are being held to achieve an agreement that can satisfy the two sides, Nowak said.

Nowak added that next week a special U.S. military delegation is coming to Poland to discuss modernization of Polish armed forces. This is the most significant for us, he added.

The United States is currently negotiating with Warsaw and Prague on the possible installation of 10 interceptor missile sites in Poland by 2012 and associated radar stations in the Czech Republic.

Brazilian president calls for solidarity with poor countries

BUENOS AIRES (Xinhua) — Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said here on Friday that the Latin American countries with stronger economic power must be solidary with and help the poor countries.

Speaking before Argentina's Legislative Assembly as part of his state visit to Argentina which began on Thursday night, Lula said "a rich Argentina or Brazil is not any good (in the region) if all the other (countries) are poor."

Lula said Latin America "has a historic opportunity" for its development and "Brazil is no longer an international debtor and has become an international creditor," adding that this situation "had not occurred in 500 years of history."

EU awaiting Polish, Romanian replies on CIA jails



BRUSSELS (Reuters) — The European Commission said on Friday it was awaiting responses from Poland and Romania to charges that they hosted CIA prisons where Al-Qaeda suspects were questioned and guards used methods akin to torture.

A day after Britain said Washington used its territory to transfer terrorism suspects, a spokesman for the EU executive said Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini had renewed an appeal for the countries to respond to the Council of Europe report.

The Council of Europe, Europe's main human rights watchdog, said last year that detention centers in Romania and Poland were used to

interrogate top Al-Qaeda suspects from 2003-2005.

"They (the letters) reminded the two countries ... of the obligation to carry out effective investigations and asked for detailed information as to how this has been implemented and in particular what the outcome of the investigation is," Johannes Laitenberger told a daily news briefing on Friday.

"We have not received a reply from Poland and the information, the reply so far received, from Romania was not considered complete by Vice President Frattini. So Vice President Frattini sent reminders to both countries on January 29 and we are currently awaiting replies to these reminders."

German FM call for better ties between EU, Serbia



Serbian riot policemen clash with rioters after an anti-Kosovo independence rally in Belgrade on February 21. (AFP)

BERLIN (Agencies) — German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier met his visiting Czech counterpart Karel Schwarzenberg on Friday, calling for better ties between Serbia and the European Union, Xinhua reported.

Steinmeier said Germany wanted to see "Serbia embark on the path to Europe" despite its strong reaction to the proclaimed independence of Kosovo,

considered by Serbia as its breakaway province.

Germany was ready to "extend the European hand" to Belgrade, he said.

Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg also called on Serbia to improve ties with the EU.

Serb nationalists attacked the U.S. embassy in Belgrade late Thursday and some western leaders blamed Serbia for not being able to provide adequate protection.

Venezuela investigates cause of fatal plane crash: Chavez

MERIDA (AFP) — Investigators in Venezuela are working to find out why a plane crashed into a mountain face shortly after take-off this week, killing all 46 people on board, President Hugo Chavez said.

The wreckage of the twin-prop ATR-42 aircraft was found early Friday just 10 kilometers (six miles) from the airport of Merida, a town in the western Andes region that was its point of departure.

It went down just before sunset Thursday, minutes after leaving for the capital Caracas, 500 kilometers (300 miles) away.

"The crashed plane practically disintegrated, and only debris can be seen in a rugged zone," the head of Venezuela's civil protection service, General Antonio Rivero, said after flying over the site.

Chavez confirmed that "46 people

died in an accident shortly after their plane took off," and offered his condolences to the victims' families.

"We do not know the cause but an investigation is underway. The crash took place in a remote mountainous area," he said in an address to the nation, adding that weather was not suspected to be a factor.

At least five of the passengers in the fatal crash were Colombians, according to a foreign ministry statement out of Bogota.

The head of the national civil protection service, Antonio Rivero, told AFP the aircraft was carrying three crew members and 43 passengers at the time of the accident.

According to Merida governor Florencio Porras, those believed to have been on board included family of Venezuela's

He said Frattini sent letters to Romania and Poland last July.

Britain, having maintained for years it was unaware of a British link to "rendition" flights, said on Thursday the United States had told it that it had used British territory to transfer terrorism suspects.

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said the EU executive had asked EU member states "to be transparent and investigate what happened in terms of extraordinary renditions."

The Council of Europe report's author, Swiss senator Dick Marty, said Poland housed some of the CIA's most sensitive prisoners, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, reputed mastermind of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

Marty said U.S. intelligence and other sources told him the two EU members hosted the secret jails under a special CIA program created after 9/11 "to kill, capture and detain" terrorist suspects deemed of "high value."

He said they were part of a "global spider's web" of secret CIA detentions and transfers, known as extraordinary renditions. Marty also accused EU members Germany and Italy of using state secrecy to obstruct his investigation.

Frattini said in 2005 that if reports of secret CIA prisons in Europe were true, states would face serious consequences including the possible suspension of their EU voting rights.

At least 150,000 people rallied in Belgrade, waving Serbian flags and signs proclaiming "Stop USA terror," to denounce the bid by Kosovo's ethnic Albanian majority to create their own state out of what Serbs consider the ancient heartland of their culture, AP reported.

The United States strongly criticized the violence and the Serb response. White House spokesman Dana Perino said the embassy "was attacked by thugs" and Serb police didn't do enough to stop it. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said the U.S. warned Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica and Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic that it would hold them personally responsible for further damage.

A charred body was found in the U.S. Embassy after the fire was put out, but all staff were accounted for, embassy spokeswoman Rian Harris said. Belgrade's Pink TV said the body appeared to be that of a rioter.

Russia and China lead the states standing with Serbia, worrying that Kosovo's example could encourage separatist sentiment elsewhere.

Serbian President Boris Tadic has repeatedly claimed that Serbia is willing to join the European Union despite its opposition to Kosovo's independence.

junior minister for citizen security Tarek El Alassami; an opposition political analyst, Italo Luongo; and a mayor from the Merida region, Alexander Quintero, and his 11-year-old son.

Noel Marquez, the regional chief of the civil protection service in Merida said the plane had not sent any emergency signal during its flight.

The first sign that anything was wrong was when it lost contact with air traffic controllers.

Local residents soon phoned in saying they had heard what sounded like a plane crash, triggering an immediate ground rescue operation that had to be suspended overnight because of the rugged terrain and freezing, high-altitude conditions.

Operations resumed early Friday, with one of three helicopters scouring the area finally spotting the crash site.

Betancourt: 6 years as Colombian captive

BOGOTA (AP) — Through public spectacle and private diplomacy, the French government and the family of Ingrid Betancourt have succeeded in drawing the world's attention to her lengthy captivity in the Colombian jungle. But many in Colombia say such fame may work against her hopes of freedom.

As Betancourt, 46, marks six years on Saturday as a captive of leftist rebels, relatives plan to pray for her liberation at a public Mass. Her mother recently gained an audience with Pope Benedict XVI, and French officials have promoted her cause in frequent trips to the region.

The vigorous lobbying for Betancourt's freedom seeks to pressure Colombia's government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, to agree to swap dozens of FARC-held hostages for hundreds of jailed rebels, including two in U.S. prisons.



Ingrid Betancourt's daughter Melanie Delloye-Betancourt, and so put up right, delivers a speech as her father, Ingrid Betancourt's former husband Fabrice Delloye, left, in Paris, Feb. 22, 2008.

(AP Photo/Michael Sawyer)

But Colombians are beginning to say bluntly what many have whispered in private — that Betancourt's fame may backfire, and that the Paris-raised politician and fearless anti-corruption crusader could be one of the last hostages freed.

"Without justifying this atrocity by the FARC, the person who has most contributed to the fact that Ingrid has been turned in to this valuable merchandise, this 'jewel in the crown,'

and so put up obstacles to her freedom, is her mother and the way

she has behaved," Gen. Freddy Padilla, commander of Colombia's armed forces, said in an interview with *Semana* magazine last month.

Padilla compared Yolanda Pulecio's lobbying for her daughter's freedom to the quieter campaign to free her aide Clara Rojas, who was kidnapped with her boss on Feb. 23, 2002, and finally released last month.

"In contrast, the mother of Clara Rojas used the instrument of prudence," Padilla was quoted as saying.

Betancourt's current husband and mother say they're being blamed for her plight because of their criticisms of the Colombian government's seeming reluctance to reach out to the rebels.

"If we hadn't done anything, the government would not be feeling this pressure from around the world to make a deal with the FARC," said Juan Carlos Lecompte, Betancourt's husband when she was kidnapped.

"The mothers of soldiers kidnapped 10 years ago have come to us and said, 'Thanks for your work for Ingrid, because now the world is talking about an agreement.' Before Ingrid's kidnapping the government wasn't doing anything to get these hostages freed."

Indeed, in six years, President Alvaro Uribe's government has not had a single face-to-face meeting with the FARC. That's a radical departure from the previous administration of Andres Pastrana, which ceded a Switzerland-sized safe haven to the FARC for three years until talks collapsed.

Betancourt is one of 44 high-profile hostages, including three U.S. defense contractors, that the FARC is offering to free in a prisoner swap. While the government and the rebels agree in general terms on the idea of a swap, negotiations have never commenced as both sides bicker over conditions.

"The presence of Ingrid has internationalized the search for an agreement," said Leon Valencia, a political analyst.

The FARC, which has been fighting for more than four decades for a more equitable distribution of wealth in Colombia, seeks first to be removed from the European Union's list of international terror groups, a goal endorsed by President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela.

The French, Spanish and Swiss governments have, meanwhile, tried to mediate more hostage releases, and the FARC is promising to free another four.

France's foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, met Thursday with Uribe and said that he was not in Colombia just for Ingrid.

"It's necessary that we consider indispensable the liberation of all hostages," said Kouchner.

Betancourt, meanwhile, is buckling in captivity, Lecompte says, citing her letter to her mother that was made public in December.

In the letter, the last word on her condition, Betancourt she was losing the will to live.

"We know we don't have months or years to save her," Lecompte said. "We're talking days or weeks."

The Colombian government also on Friday denied risking the lives of the hostages after Bogota deployed troops in the region through which the hostages will be transferred by rebels, Xinhua reported.

Colombia's Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos said the military troops stationed in the southeastern region have received orders not to attack the area where the FARC allegedly held four hostages.

"There are high officials and experts in this kind of operations to ensure not to endanger the lives of the hostages," said Santos.

But hostage negotiators and hostages' families considered Santos' declaration as "foolhardy" and added that it sounded more like a warning than a guarantee to protect the hostages.

Colombia's Interior Minister Carlos Holguin said Santos' comments must be understood as a sign of the government's willingness to guarantee conditions of the release.

FARC announced that it would transfer the four hostages through the jungle and mountainous regions toward eastern Colombia where it planned to hand them over to the Venezuelan government.