

Lavrov, Clinton discuss arms deal over phone

MOSCOW (Xinhua) — Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his U.S. counterpart Hillary Clinton on Monday discussed preparations for a nuclear security summit and exchanged views over a new arms treaty in a telephone conversation, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday.

The top diplomats discussed preparations for an international nuclear security summit scheduled for April in Washington and negotiations on a successor to the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-1), the ministry said in a statement on its website.

Russia and the United States resumed talks last week on a replacement for the START-1 that expired on Dec. 5, last year. A Kremlin aide said last Wednesday that the two countries could hammer out a new arms reduction pact in March or April.

Signing the new arms treaty is widely seen as a breakthrough for Moscow and Washington to reset ties, which in the final days of the Bush administration plunged to an unprecedented post-Cold War low.

Five Americans appear in court in Haiti kidnapping case

PORT-AU-PRINCE (AFP) — Five of 10 American Baptists charged with kidnapping and conspiracy appeared at a Haitian court Monday for hearings on their attempt to take a busload of children to the neighboring Dominican Republic.

Laura Silsbey, group's leader, was among those taken to the court for hearings, a judicial source close to the case told AFP.

"We will get into the details today," the source said, adding that any request to transfer the case to the United States would be studied before a decision is finalized.

The 10 Americans from Idaho will then be heard together on Wednesday to iron out any potential contradictions in their accounts of the incident.

Officials also said they hope to interview most of the children's parents before the end of the week. The head prosecutor can then decide whether to grant them a conditional release.

The judge then has three months to examine the case and reach a final decision.

Edwin Coq, a Haitian lawyer who had been seeking to free the Americans arrested near the border after Haiti's devastating quake, said he quit the case on Saturday after being accused of trying to bribe the judge.

He strongly denied the bribery accusation.

His former clients have claimed they meant no ill-intent in taking children they thought were orphans, but some of the children's parents have said they had reached a deal to give away their kids.

The case has distracted attention from the stumbling efforts to help Haitians rebuild their lives amid the ruins left by the January 12 quake, which killed more than 200,000 people.

The 10 Americans belong to the New Life Children's Refuge, a Christian religious organization whose Haiti mission statement says they planned to "rescue Haitian orphans abandoned on the streets, makeshift hospitals or from collapsed orphanages."

Reports: Ukraine's Tymoshenko to challenge vote

KIEV (AP) — Ukraine's Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has refused to concede the presidential race to opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich and plans to legally challenge the results, Ukrainian and Russian media reported Tuesday.

Tymoshenko told officials with her party that she will "never recognize" the legitimacy of Sunday's runoff election, the respected Ukrainskaya Pravda Web site and Russia's ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

The reports said Tymoshenko has instructed lawyers to mount a legal challenge and plans to demand a third round of voting.

Tymoshenko has not yet issued any protest calls and on Monday she canceled two planned news conferences.

Yanukovich is leading in the vote by 3.2 percent with almost all the ballots counted. Unlike past elections in Ukraine, international monitors have praised this vote as being free and fair.

Tymoshenko's campaign declined to comment on the reports, but her allies said they were getting ready to challenge the result.

"A decision has been taken to challenge results in the individual polling stations and to demand a recount at those stations," said Yelena Shustik, a deputy with the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc in parliament.

There are signs of dissent within Tymoshenko party ranks, however.

Ukrainskaya Pravda and ITAR-Tass cite deputy speaker Mykola Tomenko, also a member of Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc, as saying at a party meeting Monday that Tymoshenko should accept defeat and take up her new role as the opposition.

Yanukovich's Party of Regions,



Ukraine's Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, accompanied her bodyguard, arrives at the news conference in Kiev, Sunday, Feb. 7, 2010. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

meanwhile, rejected calls for further scrutiny of the election.

"There will be no third round," Mykola Azarov, deputy head of the Party of Regions, told parliament on Tuesday. "They are dragging us into an unnecessary war."

In comments apparently directed at Tymoshenko, a top European election observer urged Ukraine's politicians to heed the official vote tally.

"It is now time for the country's political leaders to listen to the people's verdict and make sure that the transition of power is peaceful and constructive," said Joao Soares, head of the observation mission from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Parliamentary Assembly.

Europe is ready to work with

Ukraine's new pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton said on Monday, praising the "calm atmosphere" of the vote, AFP reported.

"The European Union remains committed to deepening the relationship with Ukraine and supporting it in implementing its reform agenda. It looks forward to working with the new president to this end," Ashton said in a statement.

Ashton also welcomed the relatively high turnout of 69 percent on Sunday, saying it showed "strong commitment demonstrated to the democratic process."

Meanwhile a delegation of eight members of the European parliament confirmed that both rounds of presidential election met "most of the country's international commitments."

Met Commander jailed for corruption

Metropolitan Police Commander Ali Dizaei has been sentenced to four years for assaulting and falsely arresting a man in a dispute over £600.

Southwark Crown Court was told Waad Al-Baghdadi was arrested by Dizaei in a row over work on the officer's website.

Dizaei, 47, was convicted of both misconduct in a public office and perverting the course of justice.

Prosecutor Peter Wright QC said he was guilty of a "wholesale abuse of power" motivated by self-interest and pride.

Dizaei was ordered to spend two years in prison and two years on license.

Justice Simon said the sentence included a deterrent element "to send a clear message that police officers of whatever rank are not above the law".

The judge told Dizaei: "You knew how the system worked and you thought you would never be discovered."

"You crossed that line and now stand convicted of these offences."

Commenting after the verdict, Al-Baghdadi said: "I would like to thank all those who listened to me after I made my complaint, in particular the jury who have delivered justice and found Ali Dizaei guilty."

Speaking after the trial, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson said: "It is extremely disappointing and concerning that this very senior officer has been found guilty of abusing his position and power."

"He has breached that trust and damaged not only his own reputation but that of the entire police service."

Speaking outside court, Gaon Hart, of the Crown Prosecution Service, said: "Dizaei's corruption, which would have been deplorable in any police officer, was all the more so given his position as a highly-ranked police commander."

"The public should have confidence that we will pursue anyone, regardless of their position, where there is evidence that they have committed serious offences of corruption."

The Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC)



Ali Dizaei, a commander in Britain's Metropolitan Police, arrives at Southwark Crown Court on the first day of his trial, in central London January 11, 2010. (Reuters/Andrew Winning)

said "criminals in uniform like Dizaei" were the greatest threat to the reputation of the police.

The dispute between the men came to a head when Al-Baghdadi, 24, demanded payment from Britain's most senior Asian officer for work on his personal website, alidizaei.com.

A police doctor told the court that injuries Dizaei claimed had been caused by Al-Baghdadi were probably self-inflicted.

The court also heard that Dizaei, who had a 24-year police career in the UK, claimed to have received threatening voicemails and text messages from Al-Baghdadi before the incident, but had "accidentally" deleted them.

Al-Baghdadi said he was left "scared" and "shocked" after the incident.

Dizaei is a former president of the Metropolitan Black Police Association.

He had emerged unscathed from a series of earlier inquiries, including a multimillion-pound undercover operation examining claims of corruption, fraud and dishonesty.

He has been suspended on full pay since September 2008, but now stands to be sacked from the Metropolitan Police.

Responding to the verdict, Nick Hardwick of the IPCC said: "He (Dizaei) went on to lie about what had happened and, if he had been successful, Al-Baghdadi may have been sent to prison."

"Dizaei behaved like a bully and the only way to deal with bullies is to stand up to them."

"Corruption comes in many forms and remains a threat to the police service. It requires constant vigilance to fight it."

Last November Dizaei was cleared of misusing his corporate credit card.

He had been accused of spending more than £5,000 on clothes and perfume during a trip to the U.S. but an inquiry by Dorset Chief Constable Martin Baker found no evidence of wrongdoing.

(Source: BBC)

Clinton presses EU parliament to back terror data deal

STRASBOURG (AFP) — U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has urged the European Parliament not to block an EU-U.S. deal on the transfer of banking data which Washington says is key to the fight against terrorism.

Euro members of parliament, concerned about protecting European citizens' personal data.

European governments have already endorsed the nine-month agreement permitting U.S. justice authorities to data from the interbank transfer service SWIFT, but the deal needs EU parliamentary backing to have legal weight.

The parliament's primary concern is that personal information, possibly including data from electronic bank payments, could be transferred to U.S. authorities and handed on to other governments and agencies.

A longer-term agreement must be negotiated, and the assembly fears the interim deal may set dangerous precedents

and tie EU hands in future negotiations.

However, Clinton in a letter to EU parliament president Jerzy Buzek stressed that The Terrorist Finance Tracking Program (FTTP) agreement "is important to our common efforts to prevent terrorism."

Clinton's joint letter with her Treasury colleague Timothy Geithner expressed "our sincere hope" that the European Parliament will consent to the interim agreement "which provides narrowly targeted and valuable data, fully protects individual data privacy and is subject to multiple layers of review and oversight."

Republicans skeptical on Obama health summit

By Stephen Collinson

WASHINGTON (AFP) — Republicans staked out a tough bargaining position Monday and demanded President Barack Obama shelve his massive health reform plan, after he cajoled them into a summit on his top priority issue.

The February 25 meeting will be live on television, forcing Republicans to publicly justify their opposition to Obama's signature reform plan, which is now becalmed, with deep political implications for his presidency.

"If the point is to listen to Republican ideas and really consider them, the president's announcement is very welcome," said Senate Republican whip Jon Kyl.

But Kyl also hit out at indications that the White House has no intention of ditching its effort to pass a sweeping, comprehensive health care plan.

"Such preconditions suggest the White House is not serious about genuine negotiations," Kyl said.

"A large majority of the American people strongly oppose the Democrats' massive bill, and Republicans will not abandon them."

Obama's new gambit reflected an apparent acknowledgement that he will need at least some Republican votes to pass the historic measure, after Democrats last month lost their vital supermajority in the Senate.

But it was unclear whether he was ready to offer genuine compromises on the bogged-down plan, or was simply trying to paint Republican foes into a corner.

Obama unveiled the new strategy in a CBS interview Sunday as a record television audience tuned in for the Superbowl and previewed the political theater sure to develop during the meeting.

"How do you guys want to lower costs?" the president asked during the interview, paraphrasing questions he would ask Republicans.

"How do you guys intend to reform the insurance market so people with preexisting conditions, for example, can get health care?"



"How do you want to make sure that the 30 million people who don't have health insurance can get it? What are your ideas, specifically?"

Republicans, after complaining for months that their ideas on health insurance had been ignored by Democratic leaders in Congress, had little option but to welcome the summit.

But they signaled that after mounting blanket opposition to the Obama program, they have no intention of folding under political pressure.

Senate Republican minority leader Mitch McConnell, who has the power to block Obama's reform agenda after Democrats lost their 60th Senate seat, Sunday said the president must put his mammoth health bill "on the shelf."

McConnell argued Obama's effort would result in higher taxes and cuts to the Medicare health program for the elderly -- a charge the White House denies.

"We always appreciate the opportunity to share ideas with the president, particularly on an issue where Americans have spoken so clearly," McConnell said, in an sign Republicans may have the political wind at their backs.

John Boehner, the top Republican in the House of Representatives, called on Obama to abandon his bid to pass comprehensive reforms of America's mostly private health care system, and to start afresh on a "step-by-step" process.

Obama's suggestion of a live televised health reform meeting, came after he was hammered in the press for going back on a campaign promise to hold negotiations on the bill live on C-Span public affairs cable television.

It also followed his widely praised televised showdown with House Republicans last month, which White House insiders believe showed the president at his best, and outmaneuvering critics.

Should Obama somehow succeed in securing Republican votes for his proposals, he may still be able to claim a famous victory -- though likely one well short of the sweeping reform dreams of his liberal backers.

However, with mid-term congressional polls looming in November, and amid a poisoned political climate in Washington, compromise looks unlikely.

But even if the meeting fails, Obama may be able to portray himself as the kind of bridge of political divides that voters tell pollsters they want.

In a crucial campaign year, he could also charge Republicans with blocking a historic reform drive and consigning Americans to rising health care costs, a narrowing of access to care, and leaving them prey to insurance firms.

His decision to shine the spotlight on Republicans also takes the heat for the time being off Democrats, and House and Senate negotiators who have failed to piece together a joint bill that can pass either chamber.