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Diplomats' Day

On February 10, 2016, we will mark Diplomats' Day for the fourteenth time. Different events will be held with the participation of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and high-ranking ministry officials.

I'd like to say a few words about the history of this date. You know everything about it, but it is always worth repeating. As you know, this day was endorsed as our professional holiday by a presidential executive order in 2002.

This year, the holiday will be observed against the backdrop of growing global turbulence, international tensions, increasing conflict potential at the global and regional levels and an unprecedented upsurge of

the terrorist threat. In these conditions, the constructive course of the Russian Federation is especially relevant. This course is based on international law, the UN's central role, collective methods of resolving the key problems of modern times, and the recognition of national identities and the right of nations to decide their future themselves. Russia's approaches aimed at forming a broad anti-terrorist front, settling conflicts and generally improving international relations are enjoying increasing support. In this context, the Foreign Ministry's Central Office, its foreign offices and other foreign ministry agencies are stepping up their work. Consistent efforts are made to improve the efficiency of the diplomatic work methods, which combine time-tested traditions and innovative approaches.

Naturally, on this day, we will recall our colleagues and revere the memory of our comrades. A number of memorial events will be held. Foreign Minister Lavrov will take part in the traditional wreath-laying ceremony at the memorial plaques in the ministry's lobby in honour of our predecessors – employees of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade, who died on the fronts of the Great Patriotic War, when fulfilling their service duty or during Stalinist reprisals. Flowers will be brought to the graves of prominent diplomats buried in Russia and abroad, who effectively upheld the interests of our homeland at different times, including at abrupt turns of world history.

Our foreign offices will also hold events devoted to Diplomats' Day. We'll inform you about all this in detail. Many events will be open to the press and we'll certainly invite you. By tradition, on that day our building on Smolenskaya Square will host a meeting attended by the heads and employees of the Foreign Ministry as well as representatives of the Russian leadership and other ministries. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is expected to address the staff. A number of employees will be awarded high government decorations.

Day of Memory of Diplomatic Couriers, who died in line of duty

On the first Saturday of February, the Foreign Ministry's Department of Diplomatic Courier Communications will observe the Day of Memory of Diplomatic Couriers, who died in line of duty.

I'll say a few words about the history of this day. It began exactly 90 years ago in February 1926, when diplomatic courier Theodore Nette was buried in Moscow's Vagankovskoye Cemetery. He died a heroic death on February 5 in a shootout with bandits on a train in Latvian territory, defending diplomatic mail and cargo. Nette predetermined the outcome of that gun battle by wounding two attackers. The fight was finished by his colleague Johann Mahmastal, who, wounded and bleeding, continued protecting the diplomatic mail until the train arrived in Riga. He allowed his colleagues to take him to hospital only after he handed over all diplomatic valises to a Soviet Embassy employee.

Both diplomatic couriers (one, regrettably, posthumously) were awarded the Orders of the Red Banner.

This is yet another date linked to our professional activities and history.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's participation in Munich Security Conference

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov will participate in the 52nd Munich Security Conference, which will be held in Bavaria's capital on February 12-14.

The conference participants will exchange views on a wide range of topical issues on the global and

European agenda. It is expected that the central themes will be the future of European security, combatting international terrorism, the Ukraine conflict, the situation in Syria, and the migration crisis in Europe.

The conference is traditionally accompanied by numerous bilateral and multilateral meetings on the sidelines, which will be attended by the Russian delegation. These events with the participation of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov have been planned for this year as well. A schedule is being drawn up presently. At the next briefing, on Wednesday, I will be ready to provide detailed information about upcoming meetings on the conference sidelines.

As you know, it has been agreed to hold a meeting of the International Syrian Support Group (ISSG), also known as the Vienna Group, in Munich on February 11, as the Russian Foreign Minister and the US Secretary of State said today. We will inform you about other events next week.

The situation with a teenage Russian girl in Germany

We informed you at the previous briefing, in regular comments and in contacts with the media, about the investigation into an alleged assault against an underage Russian citizen in Germany.

The Russian and German foreign ministers discussed the matter, as I told you during my previous briefing. As Mr Frank-Walter Steinmeier reassured us, no information would be held back but would be passed to the Russian side through diplomatic and other channels, because a Russian citizen is involved.

I cannot but get back to the matter now, especially considering the large number of questions we have received.

Regrettably, no information has come from Germany through diplomatic channels a week on. We'd like to hope that the reassurances we have received will be backed by actions and relevant information and will not remain just reassurances.

Importantly, the girl's family lawyer has given a detailed account of the case in an interview published by the Moskovsky Komsomolets daily and some other media outlets today.

To reiterate: the Foreign Ministry hopes to receive relevant information not only from the media and the lawyer but also from Germany's official agencies through diplomatic channels, as is right and proper in relations between countries.

Intra-Syrian dialogue suspended until February 25

I won't quote from the ample and detailed commentaries Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov has made in Geneva. He took an active part in the events that were held there on the sidelines of the UN-sponsored talks between the Syrian government and the opposition. You can read his comments, if you want.

I will now comment on media reports, according to which Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria Staffan de Mistura decided yesterday to announce a temporary pause in the indirect intra-Syrian dialogue in Geneva until February 25 because the delegation of the opposition's High Negotiations

Committee (HNC) refused to continue consultations because of the latest attack by the Syrian Army in the north of the Aleppo Province and demanded that Russia stop its bombing raids.

Here is what I can say on this matter, and I'm prepared to provide factual data. It appears that the reason for this harsh move by the so-called Riyadh group (HNC) is the recent military success of the Syrian government army in northern Aleppo. The Syrian army has liberated several towns there and joined forces with militants from the towns of Nubbul and al-Zahraa, which had been under terrorist siege, near the Maarasta al-Khan village. The Shia population of that enclave had been under siege by Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham terrorists for three years.

As a result of a successful joint operation, the Syrian Army and local militia cut off terrorist supply routes between northern Aleppo and the terrorist-controlled Idlib Province. It was a heavy blow to all the terrorists, their accomplices and patrons. The thing is that a year ago several opposition groups, who claim to be fighting ISIS, including those on the side of Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, struck a mutual supply deal with ISIS. Under this deal fuel and munitions were delivered to Idlib and agricultural products were shipped from Idlib to Raqqa and other parts of eastern Syria. These well running routes, which brought major dividends to both sides, were cut off after this latest operation. Terrorists cannot effectively use the military equipment they have at Idlib without fuel and shells. They can now receive petrochemicals from Turkey only via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing that is controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra. But this business, even if it is launched, is unlikely to be very profitable as Turkey has no need for Syrian potatoes or citrus fruits, and delivering them to the ISIS-controlled regions by a detour route would be risky and too costly.

We reaffirm that the objective of the Russian Aerospace Forces group has been and remains fighting terrorist groups and aiding in their defeat in Syria. According to reports on combat operations, Russian air raids are effectively facilitating the achievement of this goal.

I'd like to again draw your attention to today's telephone conversation between Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry. They have agreed to make the necessary steps to make the temporary pause in the intra-Syrian dialogue as short as possible.

We will act proceeding from this premise.

Russian humanitarian aid in light of the February 4 international donors conference in London to help Syrian refugees

I'd like to answer several questions, including by Agence France Presse (AFP), about Russia's involvement in the Supporting Syria & the Region conference in London. Russia is represented at the conference by Russia's Ambassador to Britain, Alexander Yakovenko.

A few words about humanitarian assistance to Syria: Russia has greatly contributed to coordinating and reaching the necessary level of interaction between the UN agencies, international NGOs and the Syrian Government. In particular, Russia provides humanitarian aid to Syria directly via the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and also through UN humanitarian agencies.

We closely monitor the distribution of our humanitarian aid in Syria and send it in the form of goods in order to preclude any abuse.

We protest the politicisation of humanitarian issues. The use of humanitarian aid by the conflicting sides to strengthen their positions is unacceptable, just as the situations allowing terrorists to use humanitarian aid for terrorist purposes.

Ambassador Gérard Stoudmann's visit to Russia

From January 25 to 31, Ambassador Gérard Stoudmann, Special Representative of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe and a high-ranking Swiss diplomat, visited Moscow and the Crimean Federal District together with three experts from the General Secretariat of the Council of Europe at the invitation of the Russian Federation.

Russian authorities and the Secretariat of the Council of Europe prepared the programme for his Moscow visit. While in Moscow, he met with Human Rights Commissioner Ella Pamfilova, Foreign Ministry and Justice Ministry officials.

While in Crimea, Mr Stoudmann held numerous meetings with leaders of the Crimean Federal District, the Republic of Crimea, Sevastopol, the Republic's Prosecutor and Supreme Court Chairman. He held talks with the leaders of traditional religious denominations, cultural-ethnic autonomies of Crimea, Crimean Tatar public associations, including representatives of the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatar People, NGOs, the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol human rights commissioners, representatives and editors of the main Crimean TV channels and newspapers, including the new Crimean Tatar TV channel Millet.

The delegation visited Simferopol, Sevastopol, Yalta and Bakhchisarai. We expect that, after visiting Russia, Mr Stoudmann will be able to prepare in due course a high-quality, unbiased and well-balanced report for Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

Summoning Ukrainian Charge D'Affaires Ad Interim to Foreign Ministry

On February 4, the Ukrainian Charge D'Affaires Ad Interim in Moscow was invited to the Foreign Ministry and to whom information was presented regarding the February 2-3 incident at the Goptovka-Nekhoteyevka checkpoint on the Russian-Ukrainian state border.

For 16 hours, representatives of Ukrainian law enforcement agencies, while checking and examining a group of 73 Russian officers who are part of the joint centre to control and coordinate a ceasefire and to stabilise the demarcation line between the warring parties in southeastern Ukraine, behaved outrageously. The officers were returning to Russia during a planned and agreed-upon rotation after completing their assignment. I repeat, these people were checked and examined for 16 hours. The Ukrainian side was probably looking for tanks but instead found only two laptops and a hard drive. Naturally, they were confiscated for no apparent reason. The behaviour of Ukrainian law enforcement officers and the confiscation of property give us reason to expect further provocations.

Foreign Ministry officials told the Ukrainian diplomat that Moscow was extremely concerned with this treatment of Russian military personnel involved in, I repeat, the implementation of a joint mission whose initiative was agreed upon at highest levels. Russian officers are staying in Ukraine with the consent of the General Staff of its Armed Forces. The Ukrainian provocation is, of course, absolutely impermissible. All responsibility for the possible negative consequences of the incident rests with the authorities in Kiev.

Developments around the upcoming referendum on ratifying the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in the Netherlands

In recent days, we have been witnessing very interesting developments around the upcoming referendum on ratifying the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which is scheduled to take place in the Netherlands on April 6.

We acknowledge that the official Hague has launched an information campaign in the media with a view to discrediting the very idea of the referendum. Strange as it may seem, the main goal is to do everything to urge the population not to take part in the vote. I will quote one figure to illustrate the trend: the number of voting stations has been more than halved.

The officials did not even shrink from using 200,000 euros from the notorious Soros Foundation (how can one do without it!), which mostly sponsors colour revolutions and government reshuffles in those countries that cannot take care of themselves. All these steps are being made to prevent the quorum of 30 percent, which is a minimum requirement for the referendum results to be considered valid. This goal is absolutely clear because once it is reached the ratification of the agreement by the Netherlands will become a *fait accompli*. We are perplexed that these developments are being accompanied by the allegations that “the Moscow hand secretly leads” the advocates of the referendum. This looks like paranoid delusion. One more figure: while it saves money on the referendum in its own country, the Hague has already allocated, without batting an eyelid, 1.5 million euros on combatting the bogey of “Russian propaganda.”

The only move we ventured to make – and Western countries are vigorously fighting against it – is to openly declare our position in the media, expressing the view that the referendum in the Netherlands is a natural reaction to the EU foreign policy, which is being carried out without taking into account public opinion in the EU member countries. The only thing the public wants is to be heard; the public wants its opinion to be heeded, if such a mess has already been made. Putting it mildly, the results of Europe’s lack of independence in international affairs have become a heavy burden on the Europeans. Every European saw the consequences of EU policy in Syria for himself, when the refugees started flocking to Europe. What has prompted our stand on this issue? What is the rationale for our approach? We are convinced that the voting in the Netherlands, as in any other country, should take place with the observance of all democratic procedures, and that voters should not be subjected to excessive information pressure by the authorities.

Our colleagues in the Netherlands and many other Western countries have based their strategy of criticising Russia, for instance, as regards Crimea, on the premise that the Crimean referendum was illegitimate. Many politicians officially declared that the way a referendum was held was more important than the fact of the referendum as such. No doubt, the declaration of will by the population is of primary importance and it is vitally important to listen to it because citizens should call the shots in their own country. It transpires that the referendum should not have been held in Crimea the way it was held. Allegedly time was needed to prepare it properly. The “proper preparations” for the Dutch referendum is probably an example of the Western view on how the referendum in Crimea should have been “prepared:” the number of voting stations is being reduced and the official authorities are spending huge funds to push through their viewpoint.

In other words, the expression of will by the public should be organised, not when people want and are

ready to voice their opinion that had been held back for decades, nor when they have received a chance to be heard, but when, as many Western politicians believe, they are duly “prepared.” Now the Hague authorities are showing us how the referendum in Crimea could have been prepared. After such preparations, the results of the voting would have probably been counted differently. The way this is being done causes major questions. Meanwhile, these are the nations that have always given top priority to the democratic principles of the expression of will by the population.

Turkish authorities’ allegations of Russia’s violation of Turkey’s airspace

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Defence Ministry have already commented on this issue. In particular, a Defence Ministry representative has provided sufficient explanation with regard to the repeated accusations submitted by Turkey and NATO of the so-called “violation” of Turkey’s airspace by a Russian fighter jet, which allegedly entered Turkish airspace on January 29. We would like to stress that no Russian Aerospace Forces’ aircraft in Syria have violated Turkey’s airspace.

Based on the continuing speculations of Turkish officials, the media are reporting on various statements and the official position of Turkey. I’d like to note that Ankara has thus far not presented any feasible data to confirm its allegations. We have received no answer to the direct requests that the Russian Embassy submitted to the Turkish Foreign Ministry. Neither the note of protest filed by the Turkish Foreign Ministry, which represents its “point of view” or “version,” nor similar material in the UN Security Council can serve as evidence of a violation. It should be noted that Russia’s demands concerning the previous baseless allegations have also remained unsettled. We have not received answers to any of our requests to specify or provide information and specific data on what Russia is accused of and what it has done wrong. The statement made by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, that Russia “has been in a state of denial of facts” is absolutely unacceptable. It is also worth noting that in this context the Turkish Foreign Ministry and other officials consider themselves entitled to threaten Russia by speaking of “escalation” of the situation in the region by Russia and of “certain consequences”, statements that sound like a sort of blackmail. Concerning the statements made by the Turkish party that “NATO was the first to register this violation” of the airspace by Russian aircraft, we have also requested for observation data from NATO leaders. But they haven’t provided us with any convincing evidence so far. It is sad that this provocative approach taken by Ankara is fully supported by the US and NATO. Although, “NATO” should mean the “US”. Washington states that it heads the Western Anti-ISIL Coalition and therefore committed to the provisions of the Russian – US Memorandum of October 20, 2015, aimed at preventing incidents and providing for flights’ safety during operations in Syria. In this context, we have some questions for Washington. NATO and its members are guided by the considerations of the notorious solidarity, and hence cover the destructive activity of Turkey in the north of Syria, turning a blind eye to the obvious violations of Syria’s sovereignty by Ankara. We have repeatedly pointed out that the closing of the Turkish-Syrian border is a major driver for the stabilisation of the situation in Syria, and serves to prevent the promotion of the terrorist groups’ activity.

It looks like all these baseless accusations of wrongdoing by Russian Aerospace Forces are produced by Ankara, among other reasons, to find a pretext for or to provide cover to boosting its own military activities near the Turkish-Syrian border.

Let me reiterate that we have repeatedly reported on the events near this border, including in the UN Security Council.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights criticises Turkey

As you know, the other day the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein urged the Turkish authorities to promptly investigate the shooting of unarmed protesters by the local security forces in Cizre, a town in southeast Turkey. You probably saw an absolutely shocking video of the incident on the Internet.

Meanwhile, cameraman Refik Tekin, who was wounded while filming the conflict, has been charged by local authorities with aiding the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which is banned in Turkey. We agree with the UN High Commissioner who said that "filming an atrocity is not a crime, but shooting unarmed civilians most certainly is."

We support the UN official's call on the Turkish Government to carefully and objectively investigate this and other events that resulted in deaths and injuries of civilians in the Kurdish districts in southeast Turkey. The situation with regard to human rights has been worsening there. The introduction of numerous "security zones" and curfew in Cizre, Sur and other towns have seriously affected the people's social and economic rights, including the limiting of their access to such basic services as healthcare, tap water, foodstuffs and electricity.

Of course, this is absolutely unacceptable in a country that has proclaimed allegiance to common European values of democracy and human rights.

Istanbul Prosecutor's Office demands life sentences for Turkish journalists

We take notice and we have to react to reports of increased violations of press freedoms in Turkey, and we cannot disregard the continued arrests and persecution of local journalists.

It is alarming that Cumhuriyet Editor-in-Chief Can Dündar and the daily's Ankara Bureau Chief Erdem Gül have been accused of treason. The Istanbul Prosecutor's Office demands that these journalists, who were arrested in November 2015 for writing about the Turkish authorities' arms deliveries to ISIS, be sentenced to life and to 30 years in prison, respectively. We especially regret that the prosecution of Turkish journalists has been initiated by the Turkish President.

We are satisfied with the appropriate reaction of international organisations such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE, as well as of concerned NGOs on the arrest of Turkish journalists. We express our solidarity with the international community, which has denounced the politically motivated arrest of Turkish journalists and support the calls for the immediate release of Can Dündar and Erdem Gül.

We have taken note and we largely agree with a Turkish public figure, writer and Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk, who has accused the EU of turning a blind eye to the state of democracy in Turkey because the migrant crisis has "tied Europe's hands."

The introduction of visas for Russian journalists entering Turkey

We have been asked to comment on media reports citing the Turkish Embassy in Moscow, according to which Turkey, acting on the principle of reciprocity, will introduce visas for Russian journalists entering Turkey, even for short trips, beginning February 15, 2016. We have the same practice, under which

foreigners entering Russia for journalistic purposes should get an entry visa.

However, Turkey has not officially notified us yet about the introduction of visas for Russian journalists. This would certainly create some problems for those journalists who plan to go there on a business trip in the near future.

But as I said, we have not received any official information on this issue from our Turkish partners.

Consular assistance to Russian citizens in difficult circumstances abroad

We often receive questions not only from journalists but also from ordinary people, especially social media users, regarding the provision of consular assistance to Russian citizens who have found themselves in difficult circumstances abroad. This issue concerns or may concern any person who travels abroad. I would like to expand on this and draw your attention to the information resources where exhaustive information is available, and also make a few points that will help Russians traveling abroad plan their trips and minimise problems that may arise. The most frequent reasons why people traveling abroad turn to Russian consular agencies include the loss of ID, detention by local law enforcement, including due to violation of migration procedures, road traffic accidents and the need for medical evacuation.

When contacting a Russian agency abroad, it is important to remember that Russian law, the law of the host country and international agreements clearly and strictly regulate Russian agency's purview. Consular service officers obviously cannot solve all the problems that Russian citizens may encounter while abroad. Thus, it is important that travelers understand that Russian agencies abroad may not:

- cover expenses for services provided by doctors and lawyers or hotel accommodation;
- provide services to book hotel accommodation or travel vouchers;
- loan money;
- issue Russian citizens residence permits or extend their visas in the host country or receive visas to third countries on their behalf.

In this connection, we strongly recommend that before they go abroad, citizens closely study the information that we regularly post and update on the ministry's official website (www.mid.ru) in the Traveling Abroad section. We have a consular online information portal (www.kdmid.ru). Checking the relevant sections on the websites of Russian agencies abroad in countries which Russians plan to visit can also be useful.

In keeping with Government Resolution No. 370 of May 31, 2010, Russian agencies abroad may, under exceptional circumstances, help Russian citizens who have found themselves in a foreign state without a livelihood return home. Exceptional circumstances refer to situations where the return of Russian citizens will eliminate an immediate danger to their lives. In case of a lost or expired passport, a Russian citizen should go to the nearest consular office to be issued a temporary ID – a certificate of return. In 2015, 12,670 such certificates were issued.

We note that recently, there has been an increase in the number of medical evacuations of Russian citizens from foreign states. Consular officers are responsible for the timely processing of all documents and the organisation of such evacuations, which entail time limitations, the objective difficulties of interaction with local medical agencies and the need to coordinate all actions with the victims' relatives, etc.

In 2015, 37 Russians were evacuated from abroad with the direct participation of Russian consular offices.

We strongly recommend taking out a health insurance policy in any case, even if it is not required for getting a visa or entering a particular country. Of course, in purchasing an insurance policy, it is important to factor in a person's individuality, age, state of health, etc. The absence of an insurance policy can result in significant expenses involved in the provision of medical care. In taking out an insurance policy, it is advisable to find out what medical services you are entitled to receive in the host country if/when an event is covered by insurance, as well as the procedure for the provision of these services and their coverage (sometimes a visit to a doctor has to be paid for independently and then, based on receipts and invoices, the expenses made are compensated through an insurance company).

Nobody thinks about these things before going on a trip. We all live in anticipation of our vacation, recreation and look forward to something exciting, seeing all the sights. We do not know when and/or where something may happen to us. This is why I am drawing your attention to these things. We want our citizens who travel abroad to take maximum precautions to minimise the possible negative consequences if such problems arise.

In late 2015, amendments to federal law went into force, establishing minimum insurance requirements for people traveling abroad, including with regard to how much voluntary insurance is required. In our opinion, this will help provide better protection of Russian people's rights abroad.

If information about the detention of a Russian citizen comes to a consular office a consular officer may recommend a qualified lawyer and/or translator, help get in touch with relatives and friends and monitor judicial proceedings and compliance with the established rules of procedure.

In addition to what a diplomatic official or a consular or embassy officer is duty-bound to do, of course, there is also the human dimension. We know that we still have a lot to work in this regard and we are working on it. We address citizens' suggestions. Some of them criticise us, while some, on the contrary, thank us. We analyse all information. We are grateful to the media for keeping this issue in focus. We pay special attention to healthcare and insurance policy matters.

"Royal" information and propaganda war against Russia

I will spend a moment discussing another favourite issue, which is propaganda.

You are probably familiar with our responses to statements made on different levels and on different occasions. There were quite a few of them lately: just look at what British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond had to say. Today, I'm not going to talk about propaganda in general, but about propaganda of "royal quality", and the statements most recently coming from London. We do our best to contain ourselves, so that no one can blame the Foreign Ministry for not using diplomatic language. But we are at

the end of our tether. I would like to understand what's going on.

It seems that our British colleagues, especially lately, have been trying to convince both the British public and the international community that Russia is pursuing an aggressive foreign policy and to portray us as the embodiment of universal evil. I believe that these attempts have long since surpassed the Cold War standards. This is a new level of information aggression. Previously, there may have been doubts, but we are now 100 percent positive that the official London and the British media have adopted a coordinated stance. There's no doubt about it. I wonder if anyone can still have any doubts about them being in perfect harmony. We are well aware that it's not about some facts that are verified or supplied to the British media, and are then confirmed or denied by official London. I'm talking about planned information campaigns, which have nothing to do with facts. I'm talking about political cliches and arguments that seem to have been specifically designed and then implemented, and facts are used to fit these cliches. They give the green light to certain court cases and proceedings, which can then be stalled. I will focus on them in more detail.

Take, for instance, our British colleagues' stance on Syria. Where does such a burst of creativity come from? Things that we hear are nothing short of absurd, in particular, statements regarding Russia's military intervention in Syria and our airstrikes allegedly inciting the civil war in that country. I would like to remind those who cover these issues about what really happened. How many years has it been since the start of the civil conflict in Syria, and when did Russia's Aerospace Forces join the fray? The Russian Aerospace Forces' operation in Syria began in the autumn of 2015. The events in Syria have been unfolding for several years now. Reporting should follow certain rules; you can't just go and dumb people down. Many, including politicians and officials, have recognised that without Russia's military involvement in Syria the Vienna process would have been a non-starter. Creating, or even raising the issue of creating the International Syria Support Group, would have been unlikely without Russia's involvement. Incidentally, the Geneva talks – which have, unfortunately, been suspended – would have been impossible without Russia's decisive moves in this area. We haven't heard or seen anything that would tell us that the world is about to start making progress in this area until September-October 2015.

What kind of logic is London relying on when it incriminates us with escalating the civil war in Syria? It's Russia that made possible several meetings with the Syrian opposition in Moscow, Cairo and many other places. The representatives of these groups were the first to come to Geneva and join the talks without any preliminary conditions. This was made possible due to many years of Russia's efforts, which have finally brought results. The West did a portion of their homework by forming, among other things, the Riyadh Group. Foreign Minister Lavrov described their prior conditions as "endless whims." This is despite the fact that their sponsors include the movers and shakers of international relations, such as the current leader of the United States. What kind of a relationship between major capitals of the world and the opposition groups is that, where the latter dictate their terms to the most powerful nations on Earth? I don't think it even makes sense to try to discern logic in these accusations, because this is propaganda at its finest.

Serious discussions about actually bombing ISIS oil infrastructure and actual actions to that effect started in the wake of Russia's airstrikes. Before that, the coalition that had been operating in Syria for over a year by then, did nothing to destroy their oil infrastructure. Apparently, London is unaware of that and is unwilling to learn anything about it, either, because this doesn't sit well with its information campaigns.

Another argument that we are hearing from London is a case of sheer misinformation that is regularly

rotated in official statements and the media about the so-called civilian casualties of the Russian airstrikes with references to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. The person behind this organisation moved to the UK after serving three prison terms in Syria. This organisation dominates the information field on this issue. Speaking in terms of real reporting, this is absurd. But it is not at all absurd if we are talking about propaganda and running information campaigns.

London's declared focus on the humanitarian angle of the Syrian conflict is a welcome development. But what is the issue actually about? Discrimination or humanitarian problems in Syria are followed by London on a daily basis. At the same time, the refugees who came to the UK and Europe precisely for these humanitarian reasons can wait. The fate of the people who are already there is less interesting than the fate of those who stayed behind in faraway Syria.

A slew of attacks across several information fronts have been prepared in the same aggressive manner and with the use of the same tools. I'm referring to the films about corruption and the Litvinenko case. One could open up to the idea that the leading British media are doing their best to help Russia overcome the terrible scourge – corruption – which causes us a lot of harm. But there's a caveat. On the one hand, films are made about corruption, and on the other hand, we are used to seeing the "dirty" money finding a home in London. All those who have been accused in Russia of corruption are welcome friends in London and are welcome in the most respectable circles. This just doesn't add up. By the way, we have asked the British media why they are not interested in how the "dirty" money from Russia made it to London. For some reason, they don't find it worthy of their attention. Who in the official London gives the nod to the Russian nationals charged with corruption being offered a safe haven not only in the capital of Great Britain, but across the entire country? No one seems to be interested in that.

The Litvinenko case is crystal clear. What we are seeing are the same old materials, stovepiping and sources. They keep citing endless defectors who live off the money paid to them by the British secret service.

The BBC Two documentary, World War Three: Inside the War Room, is the crown jewel in this propaganda campaign. If there is a propaganda school, they must be taking the course in their second year. This is a TV series, a show that focuses on a military conflict between Russia and Latvia involving the use of nuclear weapons. Was it done on purpose? Everyone, especially in the United Kingdom, is familiar with the complicated Russian-Latvian relations, and the history of relations between Russia and the Baltic countries in general. They aren't simple, and we never said they were. We are doing our best to normalise our relations and become good neighbours with those countries. Why are you doing this? This is propaganda pure and simple when, in these difficult times, you make a film simulating a nuclear strike against countries bordering on Russia. It's all part of the same propaganda campaign. A case of hard work for the government's handouts. We are aware, and no one is hiding this fact, that a number of so-called independent media in the UK are publicly funded, and, for some reason, it is considered perfectly normal.

This has less to do with the official London, even though its foreign policy looks strange and does not benefit our bilateral relations, or communication between people. I have a question for the British media: have you ever wanted to conduct your own independent investigation into the Litvinenko case or the death of Boris Berezovsky? Here's another exciting topic, since the issue of Crimea is being raised. Wouldn't you like to call upon official London and ask it to declassify the Foreign Office files dating back to the middle of the 19th century, the time of the Crimean War? I believe we may learn a great deal about the principles underlying the way the United Kingdom operates. Apparently, it will never happen.

Unfortunately, the Murdoch media empire style of reporting currently prevails in England. I have another question for the British media: don't you feel disgusted by the fact that you are being used? You will never become generals in this information war, you will stay rank and file forever, and then they will throw you to the dogs. They will first use you and then dispose of you.

Excerpts from replies to media questions:

Question: Today, the Japanese media have reported that on February 15, Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov will meet with his Japanese counterpart in Tokyo, and that the parties will discuss preparations for Russian President Vladimir Putin's meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Could you confirm this information?

Maria Zakharova: I can confirm that Russian Foreign Ministry's representatives are in close contact with their Japanese colleagues on a number of issues. High- and top-level visits are traditionally commented by the agencies which plan to organise such visits or meetings. We will provide additional information on Mr Morgulov's visit to Japan.

Question: In the context of deterioration in the Russian-Turkish relations caused by the Turkish party, Ankara submitted a request by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. No answer has been received. Has Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu requested a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov?

Maria Zakharova: I have no information about this. As far as I know, Mr Lavrov has no plans to meet with any of his Turkish colleagues at present. As you are aware, we have repeatedly stated our official position on the state of the Russian-Turkish relations. You said that bilateral relations have deteriorated. Russia has done nothing to aggravate these relations. Unfortunately, all these problems have been triggered by Ankara. In fact, they have been truly destructive.

Question: A recent BBC film about an attack on Latvia represents a new genre featuring real politicians of the past in fictional situations. Do you find it acceptable? Will the British, Russian and possibly Latvian foreign ministries discuss the film?

Maria Zakharova: We certainly think that it is up to active or retired politicians themselves to decide whether to take part in such projects. It's impossible to prohibit interviews and participation in programmes, provided the latter are within legal limits. Now, what is the message of the BBC dystopia? It has nothing in common with journalism. If it's sheer entertainment, its makers should feel more responsible to the public than they are. Freedom of the media, speech and self-expression implies responsibility and explicit motivations. I suspect that this particular film aims only to instigate hatred between people and sow panic in a small non-nuclear country. Many say that getting to the top of the list is what movie-making is about. But then, I think, nothing attracts audiences more than violence. What's the point of all this? Why was the movie shot? We know how entangled international relations are now, how soon bilateral contacts can be not just spoiled but rendered null, and how hard it is to restore them. There are examples around us – we have mentioned some today. It is even harder to restore confidence between people. The BBC torpedoes confidence instead of building bridges. Its attack is aimed at ordinary people. Not politicians but people in the street are affected the greatest. If I were in Latvia and had seen the movie, and if, I stress, the respected channel had told me about a tentative nuclear attack on my country and my people, I would be in a terrible panic – a panic that makes one vote for anything, be it

deploying nukes or building a huge wall between countries. We must see what ends such programmes pursue and who is behind them. All this arouses not regret but sheer repulsion. We have always regarded the post-Soviet Baltic countries as friendly neighbours. We have been through thick and thin together. We wanted to let bygones be bygones and build up everything good that links us together. These efforts are a success – just look at thriving cultural contacts and think how many Russians go on holiday and purchase property in the Baltics. It all might be unnecessary to Britain, but it is necessary to Russia and the three Baltic countries. Our friendly contacts irritate and unnerve those who are not interested in neighbourly relations between our countries. Pursuing their own ends, these people are harping on our historically-rooted tensions. The worst thing about it all is that ordinary people are hurt and the media are used.

Question: I have a question about the humanitarian corridor in Syria. The Foreign Ministry has issued a statement on the results of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's telephone conversation with US Secretary of State John Kerry. They agreed to airlift humanitarian relief aid to besieged cities. Could you clarify how and when will this take place?

Maria Zakharova: Regarding Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's telephone conversation with US Secretary of State John Kerry, I can say that we have published our comments. This implied the need for urgent steps by the Government of Syria and the opposition in order to deliver humanitarian relief aid, under UN auspices, to the country's regions besieged by government forces and units of the armed opposition. You have noted correctly that, in this context, the heads of Russian and US foreign policy agencies have agreed to reach consensus on the possibility of well-coordinated efforts to airlift humanitarian relief aid to affected Syrian regions aboard military transport planes. We'll have to decide how this can be accomplished. Currently, we're taking a closer look at this opportunity.

Question: Today, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu noted an exodus of refugees from Aleppo as a result of Russian air strikes, and he estimates their number at 300,000 people. Could you comment on this?

Maria Zakharova: Regarding the Turkish side's statement about more refugees, we would like to understand what this really means. We know the price of Turkish statements, especially concerning specific strikes against specific terrorist targets in Syria. Ankara is reacting nervously to each victory over any specific terrorist cell in Syria. One can only ponder the reasons for this or, maybe, we don't even have to. I believe we're discussing this rather openly.

Question: Could you comment on the statement by US Secretary of State John Kerry that Syria and Russia are pressing for a military, rather than political, solution of the conflict, in the first place?

Maria Zakharova: We've discussed this issue very many times, and we discuss it every day. The Syrian political settlement is our most important end goal. We said that it was impossible to achieve a political settlement by military force alone because these things contradict each other. This implies the fight against terrorism. In this case, our stated final goal was open, we have never confused one with the other, and we have always distinguished between terrorists and the opposition. We've always said that we don't perceive as terrorists even those members of the Syrian opposition who have taken up arms, after deciding that political methods have been exhausted, although this, of course, causes regret. We believe that they are able to reach agreement, and that we need to conduct political dialogue with them. I believe this is a good counter-argument for Mr Kerry's statements. We have always discerned between the armed opposition and terrorists. We're pursuing clear goals in Syria, they have never changed, and, of course,

they are linked with the fight against terrorist organisations because this is a common threat. This is an issue for Syria and for our national security, as well as for regional and global security. At the same time, we've noted the need for a peaceful political settlement for a long time, that is, over the past few years, and not only since the beginning of the Aerospace Force's operation. With your assistance, I would like to remind our US colleagues and others that precisely the United States was on the threshold of launching air strikes against Syria. Is this not so, or has someone at the State Department forgotten about this? A Russian initiative on chemical demilitarisation became the only opportunity for staving off that impending disaster that would have resembled those in Libya or Iraq. And these people are now telling us that we are advocating a military solution for the Syrian issue. Don't make me laugh.

Question: How would you comment on accusations that the Russian Federation is allegedly undermining the Geneva talks by stepping up the military campaign and air strikes in Syria? More than that, UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond accuses Russia of attempts to set up a small Alawite state within Syria.

Maria Zakharova: And may I ask you how exactly did the Russian side "undermine" the Geneva process?

Question: UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon said at a news conference in London today that the intensification of airstrikes on Syrian cities undermines the Geneva process.

Maria Zakharova: If the implication is that the Russian Aerospace Defence Forces [ADF] violate or undermine something, this logic is very interesting. ADF operations are only designed to destroy terrorists. Regarding those in Geneva who took offence after terrorist infrastructure came under attack, the question arises: Who do they represent – the Syrian opposition or terrorists? I would like to reiterate that Russia did its part of the work related to the consolidation of the Syrian opposition and did everything it could to ensure that these people are the first to come to Geneva and sit down at the negotiation table without making any preconditions. I would like to draw your attention again to the fact (we, as well as, most importantly, our colleagues at the State Department, spoke about this) that it was up to their Western sponsors to bring in another Syrian opposition group. So if that Syrian opposition group acts offended and turns capricious, blocking further progress, this is their problem, as they have evidently not done their share of the work. What does this have to do with us? This problem needs looking into, in all of its components. Regarding Philip Hammond's remarks. For the past 10 minutes, I've been talking about the nature of London's comments in conjunction with the efforts of the British media. These statements are precisely what I talked about for one simple reason. For several years, at all talks in multilateral formats, we have said openly and publicly that our understanding of Syria's future, which should be determined through the efforts of the Syrians themselves, through their choice, is that Syria should be an multi-denominational secular state based on democratic principles. We have invariably stressed that it should be a single, integrated state. So, what is all this talk about enclave states or the secession of territories? Our position has been reiterated by top Russian officials at all levels. What else can we do to explain to London and those who are saying the opposite that we see Syria only as a single, territorially integrated state? Many of our efforts, including our political efforts, are aimed at making this happen.

Question: What, in your opinion, is the reason for such aggression on the part of the British media? What are they after?

Maria Zakharova: I've said a lot about this, but I can say it again. When the resolution of the Syria crisis

was addressed at some talks, representatives of several delegations from different countries told us in no uncertain terms – and they repeated this several times: “Perception is much more important than reality.” They told us: “We will do all we can to shape the required perception. People will believe that you are bombing civilians, not terrorists, and that you are destroying civilian infrastructure.” It seems that this is the same kind of logic as there was in the allegations about “Russian tanks in Ukraine”. Regrettably, this is what those who make such statements are doing while the media simply play up to them. Whether they do it for money is not a question for me to answer.

Question: You have said that there is a lot of “dirty” Russian money in Britain. Are there any statistics that show how much money has been taken out of Russia?

Maria Zakharova: This is a question for the relevant agencies. It’s a good question. I’ll look into it. However, it is also a question for the British media. I have seen a lot of reports and attempts to analyse how money is laundered on British soil, where it comes from and how much. The issue merits a separate film.

Question: Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, said a referendum on Kurdistan’s statehood will be held this year. What is Russia’s position on this?

Maria Zakharova: The issue of holding a referendum falls within the jurisdiction of a corresponding state and of course, it is up to the people of that state to decide. Regarding the Kurdish people, our position is that their legitimate rights and interests should be ensured within the existing national boundaries.

Question: On February 10, an office of Syrian Kurdistan will open in Moscow although no official agreement has been signed with Russia to this effect. Can this create any problems? How much is Russia helping the Kurds?

Maria Zakharova: Russian law does not provide for the opening of representative offices of any region of a foreign country in its territory. The regions or territories wishing to open such offices are free to choose a suitable form of organisation, for example NGO, provided it does not run counter Russian legal norms.

Question: Can you comment on the situation when the international community expresses concern and sympathy for Syrian residents of the regions that have been “besieged by government forces” but at the same time does not show any regard for the fact that these people are being used by terrorists as a human shield and nobody has demanded that these people be released?

Maria Zakharova: You’ve addressed your question to the wrong person. We’ve asked our colleagues about this. In this particular case, you should request an answer from those who have been operating under this logic. We believe that double standards are unacceptable in humanitarian issues. It’s worst when a difficult humanitarian situation is made hostage to or is used for political purposes. Unfortunately, it has become the norm when people’s plights are being used to create political concepts and to promote the political interests of those who have no connection to these people, for example in Syria. I mentioned the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) today. You can’t even describe its data as lopsided, because its reporting is not based on data. However, it has been operating for some time, and leading media outlets have cited its reports. Why? On what grounds? Why do they choose to cite information provided by this particular organisation? Here is an indicative example. Several years ago, I cooperated with a leading Western news agency in my official capacity as deputy head of the ministry’s

Information and Press Department. They asked me for comments, some of which were taped and others were not. To qualify for the right to make such comments, I had to pass three stages of approval by their leadership, even though I held an official position at the ministry. But look at the history of the SOHR, a former pizzeria that has become the basic supplier of information about the situation with regard to human rights in Syria. How could this happen? The only possible explanation is that this is an element of a broad information propaganda campaign.

Question: You said today that Turkey has not yet notified Russia about the alleged violation of Turkish airspace by Russian aircraft. A month ago, you said that diplomatic relations between Russia and Turkey had not been disrupted. Why then can't you coordinate this issue, which is similar to the situation that had resulted in the Su-24 tragedy? A spokesman of the Russian Defence Ministry mentioned objective monitoring, but you haven't provided evidence of such monitoring; we only see "markers on the screen". Why can't you print out the results of this objective monitoring? How can we avoid misinterpretation in bilateral relations?

Maria Zakharova: I'd like to remind you of the latest problem with our Turkish colleagues, who did not allow Russia to conduct a scheduled inspection flight yesterday under the Open Skies Treaty. Do you see the connection? Our experts planned an inspection flight in order to show you more than just markers on the screen, but our Turkish colleagues didn't allow them to do this. There is a legal mechanism that our colleagues from the Russian Defence Ministry planned to use, just as other countries do with regard to Russia. But our Turkish colleagues have not given their permission; they have denied us this right. As for diplomatic relations and their failure to provide information, we did not disrupt these relations after the tragic day when the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian plane flying over Syrian territory. So, speaking about this and providing any additional information or justification would not be appropriate. This is not an issue for discussion. We ask Turkey for objective information on the possibility of providing any data at all. Moreover, we also sought to receive this information from NATO, which Turkey refers and complains to. We have not received these data from NATO either. Being a Turkish journalist, you should ask Turkish diplomats about an explanation for this. I spoke on this issue today not just for you but also for the Turkish authorities. If we are denied information that we request through diplomatic channels, maybe we will be able to receive it if we ask the question publicly? We are ready to provide the data at our disposal, but we also expect our partners to reciprocate, so that we have a subject for discussion. But our requests have been denied. I'd like to ask you why these data are not provided to the media. Turkish officials make many public statements on many issues. I believe it would be logical if this material was provided to the media. Instead, they offer political assessments but not facts. I don't know why. You should ask the Turkish side about this.

Question: The spokesperson of the Turkish Foreign Ministry said this morning that they had provided the data. Did you receive the data?

Maria Zakharova: And we say we haven't been provided any. We have asked the Turkish side publicly to do this. As I said, there are two additional sides to this particular case. The first side is NATO, and this is so not because we want it to be, but because Turkey has asked NATO to act as an arbiter or to become involved in this situation in some other manner. But NATO has not provided the required information either. And the second side is Washington, which heads the coalition where Turkey is a member, and with which we signed a corresponding agreement. Maybe the United States has these data, who knows? But it hasn't shared them with us either. This is why we have decided to make the problem public, to state openly that we don't have these data.

Question: The response to the nuclear test in North Korea is now being discussed in New York. A month has passed since the test. Why has no answer been received so far? What is Russia's position on this issue?

Maria Zakharova: We have clearly stated our position on the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, I won't repeat it. It hasn't changed. The work carried out on the UN platform involves both Russia and other countries. It is difficult to say why resolving this issue has been dragged out. Russia provided an immediate response and has addressed this issue when required. I can stress the need to work out this issue in more detail and have all the necessary information to use the UN Security Council mechanism, which is the top level of responding to this or that problem. The process is likely to rest on the ongoing verification of the initial data to provide an absolutely unbiased response.

Question: You have mentioned the allegations of Moscow's breakdown of the Geneva talks. At the start of the briefing, you said that the constructive nature of Russia's foreign policy is obvious. If the Russian Aerospace Forces' operation is a stumbling block, do you think it should be adjusted and ceased in order to continue the talks?

Maria Zakharova: Now we are going back to the start. The Russian Aerospace Forces' operation in Syria is aimed at countering terrorism. If somebody dislikes it, that doesn't mean that the plans should be adjusted. On the contrary, we should ask those discontent with it why they de-facto support terrorism. Another important point is that all participants of the Vienna format acknowledged the need to counter terrorism in Syria. The adoption of the relevant UN Security Council resolution has made counterterrorism efforts a recognised global issue. No one has cancelled the provisions of the resolution and the goal set by the UN Security Council. Why should we be under the thumb of those who support terrorism in Syria?

Question: Washington recently announced plans to quadruple defence spending in Europe. How does Moscow plan to react to this? Will we respond to these challenges? Is there a probability that the Soviet-era arms race scenario could be repeated?

Maria Zakharova: Unfortunately, we have to revisit this issue time and again. We have already commented on the Pentagon's plans to quadruple defence spending in 2017. This refers to the European theatre. All of this is attributed to the need "to contain Russia." The aggressive manner in which this is being done under the pretext of potential Russian aggression is bewildering and disgusting. It follows from these statements that this necessitates military planning against Russia and practical steps to bring military infrastructure closer to Russian borders. As for your concern about a new "arms race," top Russian officials and our military experts have repeatedly commented on this. Russia has no intention of becoming involved in a new "arms race" or catching up with or surpassing anybody. I'd like to remind our colleagues in Washington and Brussels that such unfriendly steps and attempts by the United States and NATO to exert pressure on Russia will meet with a fitting political, diplomatic and military response. There should be no doubt that everything that needs to be done to ensure Russia's security will be done. However, we believe in peace.

Question: Just an hour and a half ago, the Polish defence minister signed two documents in Warsaw reopening the investigation into the Smolensk air crash on April 10, 2010. The first document is related to the resumption of the investigation commission's work and the second sets its size at 21 members. Could you say what Russia intends to do in this situation? This morning, Polish Foreign Minister Witold

Waszczykowski met with Russian Ambassador to Poland Sergey Andreyev. The meeting was brief (three minutes), which is strange, considering the lack of problems between the two countries, especially in the recent period. After the meeting the minister said it was a courtesy visit and an opportunity to wish each other a happy New Year. Remember that today is February 4. Could you comment on this?

Maria Zakharova: The winter is not over yet. I believe that we will wait to hear what Mr Andreyev has to say about his meeting with Polish officials in Warsaw. He will tell us everything about this apparently substantive meeting and conversation. Regarding your question about Russia's actions in connection with the resumption of the Polish investigation into the Smolensk disaster and the fact that the team will include 21 members, the question is not what Russia will do but rather what Polish officials and experts will do. This is a question for Poland. This is its right as a sovereign state. If Poland still has questions they should be answered. I have no idea how we can pass judgment on this. I'd like to remind you that Russia took unprecedented measures of openness and showed not simply good will but genuine friendship, friendship that it would like to see in our daily routine dealings with the Polish state. I remember those terrible minutes after the disaster, because it was a shock not only for the Polish people but also for us. All those who in some way or another had something to do with this issue remember very well that Russian leadership not only stated but also proved by taking practical steps that it regards this catastrophe as its own, as one of the Russian people, and is interested more than anybody else in establishing the causes of that tragedy. From our perspective, the causes have been established. As you know, Russia has investigated the disaster. The investigation was open. It was openly discussed, relevant data were released, news conferences were held, and so on. To reiterate, it is the sovereign right of Poland and the Polish people to know, to establish the truth. We very much hope that politics are not involved in this. This hope may be faint but it still exists.

Question: The Contact Group met in Minsk on January 27, and it again failed to coordinate several thorny issues, namely Donbass elections and the exchange of prisoners. Does this mean that the talks have been deadlocked? If so, who is hindering these negotiations?

Maria Zakharova: You describe these issues as thorny, but I would say they are fundamental issues. These are policy issues that call for in-depth consideration. Solutions to them depend on the sides' desire to find mutually acceptable compromises and to talk with one another. We see this desire in Donbass, which has been trying to implement it in practice. Unfortunately, we don't see this desire in Kiev, and we only see it acting to the contrary, so as to prevent the settlement of fundamental issues. It's a fact that forward movement is impossible without admitting that, to be able to live together in the same state, the conflicting sides should sit down at the negotiating table and start talking with one another. In this context, we suggested a key that can open the door to a comprehensive settlement: it implies launching talks to negotiate concrete issues. We know that the political situation in Kiev is complicated, to put it mildly. But putting off this issue until later will not help but will only complicate matters. You know about the rules of political science and sociology. There is public discontent brewing in Ukraine over the government's failure to implement the commitments it made a couple of years ago. Ukrainians have been led where they didn't expect to find themselves. We see that the situation in Ukraine is worsening. So, the longer these issues are put off or swept under the carpet, and the more Kiev tries to offer temporary solutions and over-inclusive formulas, which cannot resolve the problem but only offer an opportunity for different interpretations, the more we have all of this, the more difficult our onward movement will be. After all, the point at issue is the future of Ukraine. I know that international relations are influenced by the issue of compliance with and implementation of the Minsk Agreements, yet the main issue is the future of Ukraine as a state. But do they in Kiev understand this? I wonder. Question: Is Russia providing

any assistance to the Greek-owned oil tanker with Russian crewmembers seized in Nigeria? Maria Zakharova: Russian diplomats are actively working on this. As soon as we have concrete information, we'll share it with you. Our direct responsibility is not just to inform but also to assist Russian citizens in an emergency. We are working on it, and we will do our best.

Question: Can Russia convince North Korea to abandon its plans? What could be Moscow's reaction if North Korea launched a satellite? Are sanctions an option?

Maria Zakharova: As you said, we have made public our reaction, and there is nothing to add to it. The only thing I can say now is that we are working with all sides who are concerned with the settlement of this situation, sharing our assessments, ideas and expert opinions. I can assure you that we have been using diplomatic opportunities to the utmost. As for our reaction, let's do things in the right order.

Question: Disregarding bans, North Korea announced after a nuclear test on January 6 that it would launch a satellite before February 25. It is believed that this launch is designed to cover up the planned test of a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile. You said yesterday that you are alarmed by this situation. What should be done to prevent these North Korean provocations?

Maria Zakharova: As I said, we are taking serious political and diplomatic efforts to settle this problem.

Moscow, February 4, 2016