

U.S., Israel have no doubt about Iran's defense power: minister **2**

Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan cut 50% of common rail transit tariffs **5**

Iran to meet Japan in AFC Beach Soccer semis **15**

Tehran museum displays collection once slated for exhibit in Berlin, Rome **16**

IRGC warns U.S. of 'irreversible consequences' after vessel encounter

POLITICS TEHRAN — An **d e s k** official with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' navy warned on Wednesday that unprofessional acts by the U.S. Navy in the Persian Gulf may have "irreversible consequences."

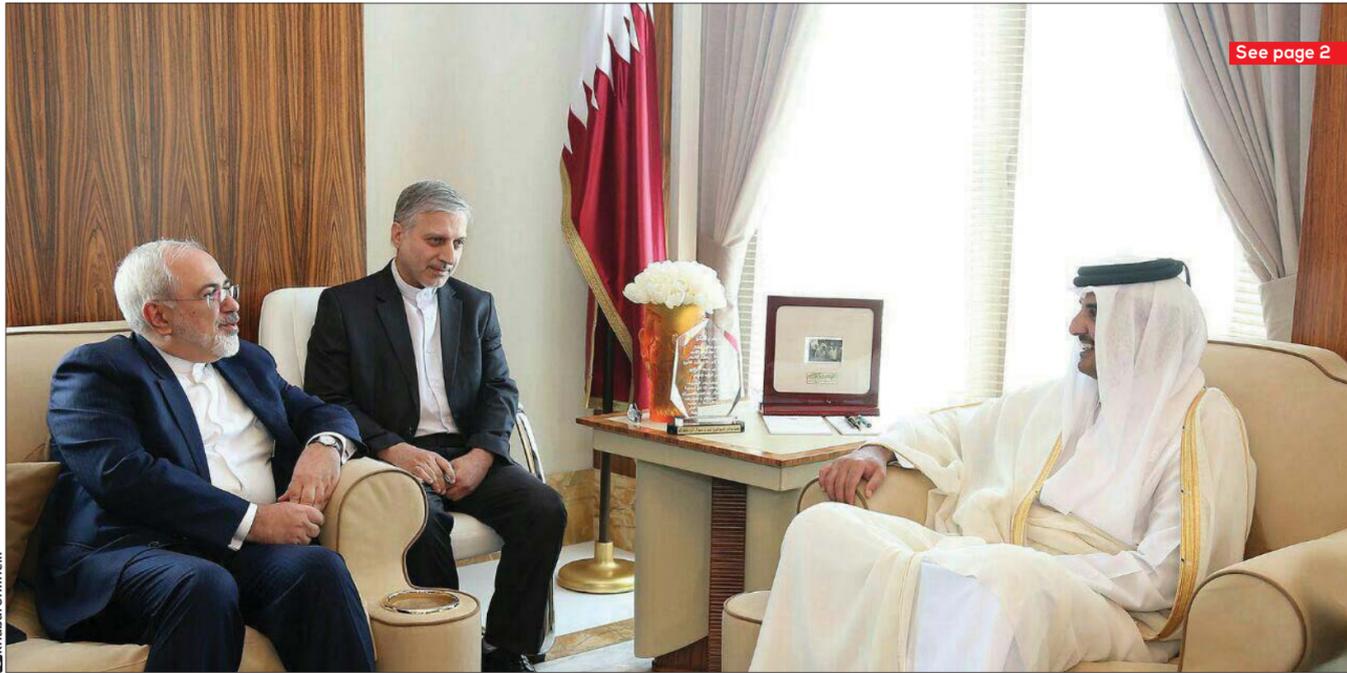
The comments come after IRGC fast-attack vessels forced on Saturday the USNS Inevitable and three ships from the British Royal Navy accompanying it to change direction in the Strait of Hormuz.

"The unprofessional actions of the Americans can have irreversible consequences," Admiral Mehdi Hashemi said, dismissing claims by U.S. officials that it was the IRGC boats that had come within 600 yards of the U.S. warship.

"A U.S. warship from the American and British fleet that was passing the traffic zone of the Strait of Hormuz, changed direction from the international route toward the boats of the IRGC navy."

The U.S. warship had acted "unprofessionally" and had come within 550 meters of the boats, Hashemi added, accusing Washington of resorting to "lying" and "propaganda techniques." **->2**

Zarif in Qatar amid frosty Arab ties



Zarif meets Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani (R) in Doha on March 8, 2016.

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Petchem exports anticipated to reach \$9b

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Iran's **d e s k** worth of annual petrochemical exports is forecast to hit near \$9 billion by the end of current Iranian calendar year (March 20), National Petrochemical Company (NPC) Managing Director Marziyeh Shahdaie told IRNA on Wednesday.

The country exported \$9.5 billion worth of petrochemicals in the past Iranian calendar year, according to Ali-Mohammad Bosaqzadeh, the production control director of NPC.

Shahdaie also said that the weight of Iran's annual exports of petrochemical products is anticipated to hit 21 million tons by the yearend, rising from 19 million tons in the previous year.

The official further put the weight of Iran's petrochemical production at over 48 million tons during the first ten months of the current calendar year (ended on January 19) and said that the figure is forecast to reach 52 million tons by the yearend, with 20 percent rise from the figure of previous year.

Iran plans to boost its petrochemical output to 140 million tons per annum by the end of its outlook plan for the calendar year of 1404 (March 20, 2026) and \$70 billion of investment is required to meet this objective. **->4**

China hopeful Saudi and Iran can resolve problems

POLITICS TEHRAN — Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Wednesday that he hopes Saudi Arabia and Iran can resolve their differences through talks, speaking ahead of a visit by the Saudi king to China, Reuters reported.

Wang described China as a friend to both countries.

China has traditionally played a limited role in the Middle East conflicts or politics, despite relying on the region for oil. However, lately it has been trying to get more involved in efforts to end the Syrian conflict, where Saudi Arabia backs the armed opposition groups and Iran supports Bashar al-Assad's government.

Last year, China offered support for Yemen's government, which is backed by a Saudi-led coalition in a war against the Houthis, which Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of supporting them militarily.

However, China has to act carefully, as it also has close relations with Iran. President Xi Jinping visited both Saudi Arabia and Iran in January last year.

Saudi Arabia's King Salman's visit to China would take place from March 15 to 18.

"We hope that Saudi Arabia and Iran can resolve the problems that exist between them via equal and friendly consultations," Wang said at his annual news conference.

"China is friends with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. If there is a need, China is willing to play our necessary role," he added, without elaborating.

Saudi King Salman began a month-long tour through Asia late February to build up ties with the fastest growing importers of Saudi oil and to promote investment opportunities.

Earlier, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif commented on Saudi-Iran relations in an interview with the ISNA news agency, saying, "We do not see positive behavior by the Saudi officials in area of politics and they continue spreading tension in the region instead of using the current situation to hold dialogue and interact".

However, he added "Iran has good intentions for the region and is willing to cooperate with regional countries and hold talks with them". He also said that there is no need for mediation between Tehran and Riyadh.

Leader highlights preserving vegetation

SOCIETY TEHRAN — Leader of **d e s k** the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday emphasized the need to preserve vegetation, urging officials to take measures against forest encroachment.

The Leader made the remarks after planting two fruit tree saplings on the occasion of the Natural Resources Week. "Some profit-seeking traders exploit forests and natural resources regardless of national interests. Forests should be safeguarded against encroachment," he highlighted.

A lot of predicaments emerging from dust storms and air pollution are related to the shortage of vegetation, he said, adding that considering the country's

ecological situation and spread of deserts, the preservation of vegetation is of great significance.

The Leader further noted that forests in northern Iran are nearly unbeatable in the world but some profiteers ruin them, insisting "these forests must be preserved".

Elsewhere in his remarks, he commented on the quality of fruits produced in Iran, saying import of fruits is among "wrong" acts which except in some rare cases it should be avoided.

At the end of his remarks, Ayatollah Khamenei described tree planting as a symbol of respect to the nature and that everyone should be grateful for this blessing.



State of Hawaii to challenge Trump's new travel ban

The United States state of Hawaii has said in a court motion that it plans to seek a temporary restraining order on Wednesday against the U.S. President Donald Trump's new executive order restricting travel from six Muslim-majority countries.

The Trump administration this week issued the revised immigration order replacing an earlier, more sweeping one which had been blocked in court.

The new measure prevents citizens of Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen from obtaining U.S. visas for at least 90 days. It also suspends the refugee resettlement process for 120 days.

The federal judge who blocked the first ban was persuaded by the argument of two state attorneys general that it was causing "irreparable harm".

It is less clear those arguments would prevail the next time around.

"We are carefully reviewing the new executive order to determine its impacts on Washington state and our next legal steps," Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson said on Monday.

Immigration advocates said the new ban still discriminated against Muslims and failed to address some of their concerns with the previous directive.

Noor Zafar, a lawyer with expertise in abusive immigration practices at the Centre for Constitutional Rights, New York, said the new executive order "is still a ban designed to keep Muslims out of this country".

Camille Mackler, director of legal initiatives at the New York Immigration Coalition, called Trump's new order a "backdoor Muslim ban."

The 3 biggest risks haunting the global economy

The stock market could crash. Protectionist trade policies might backfire leading to job losses. Or housing booms in some countries could go bust.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) looked into its crystal ball Tuesday, and warned that while the global economy is slowly improving now, these are some of the shocks that could derail the still-fragile recovery in the not-too-distant future.

The OECD never mentions President Donald Trump by name in its report, but the Paris-based organization made it clear it does not endorse his "America First" trade pro-

posals, or the broader protectionist zeitgeist sweeping across the United States, Britain, and Europe.

"A roll-back of existing trade openness would be costly," the OECD warned, noting an increase in trade barriers in the major global trading economies like the United States, Europe, and China could adversely impact GDP and jobs in those places.

The warning comes with a chart, showing about 10% of American jobs are linked to global trade. In the United Kingdom, that number is over 20%, and in Germany, it's near 30%.

■ A stock market correction

Stocks have surged to record highs recently, even though interest rates are also starting to rise and long-term forecasts for economic growth have barely changed.

The OECD warns that a "snap-back" in markets may be in the cards, as investors reassess this disconnect between equities and fundamentals.

"A sharp reassessment by markets of the future path of interest rates could result in substantial and widespread re-pricing of assets that have been supported by low bond yields," the OECD report said. **->13**

Astana format most effective for Syrian dialogue: Russian senator

POLITICS TEHRAN — Astana **d e s k** is the most effective framework for the intra-Syrian negotiations, a Russian senator has told the Russian news agency TASS.

According to Igor Morozov, member of the Federation Council's (upper house of parliament) International Affairs Committee, the Russian-Iranian stance on resolving the Syrian crisis is crucial for facilitating the negotiation process.

"Of course, the issue of Syria's post-war settlement was discussed at all meetings between our delegation and Iranian lawmakers. We have a common understanding here that Syria should be sovereign and independent. These approaches were confirmed at our representatives' meeting in Astana," said Morozov, who visited Tehran as a member of a delegation of Russian senators.

The senator voiced regret over the fact that "the Geneva talks have failed once again". However, he added that Astana is coming to the fore in the efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria.

"The role and importance of Russia and Iran is growing, and growing substantially at that," he said. "The Astana talks bring together the leaders of the armed opposition groups, which actually control a sizeable part of Syria's territory. Today they are willing to discuss the algorithm proposed by Russia and Iran. That's why I believe that establishing peace in Syria and the process of moving further towards drafting and adopting the (Syrian) constitution, electing a new parliament and, subsequently, the president, depends on the Astana framework".

The first Syria peace talks in Astana were held on February 6. During the second international conference, on February 15-16, Russia, Iran and Turkey created a joint trilateral ceasefire group as part of the Syria truce monitoring mechanism.

The talks were regarded as a progress in resolving the Syrian conflict. Both the Syrian government and the armed opposition were present at the talks on February 15-16 and, subsequently, at the Geneva peace talks on February 23.

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



'Religious minorities' peace valuable to us'

POLITICS TEHRAN — "It is valuable to us for religious minorities to live in peace," Iran's intelligence minister said on Wednesday in a meeting with leaders of religious minorities from across the country.

Mahmoud Alavi appreciated the role of religious minority representatives in the Majlis to create proximity with governmental organizations, ISNA reported.

Alavi also underlined that unlike other countries where Christian minorities are categorized by the central governments under one group, Iran has distinguished between Armenians and Assyrians based on their ethnicities.



Iran condemns use of chemical weapons in Syria, Iraq

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iran's permanent envoy to the Hague-based Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has roundly condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria and Iraq.

Addressing the 84th meeting of the executive council of the organization on Wednesday, Alireza Jahangiri voiced grave concern that terrorist groups in these two countries have access to chemical weapons, Alamal reported.

He asked the organization to prevent the chemical weapons dossier in Hague from being treated politically.



Rezaei advises Rouhani not to be soft on U.S.

POLITICS TEHRAN — The Expediency Council secretary has warned President Hassan Rouhani against the dangers of taking a soft line toward the new U.S. government, IRIB reported on Wednesday.

In a letter to Rouhani, Mohsen Rezaei said a soft attitude towards the U.S. government could undermine Iran's national security and be misconstrued as a weakness.

"With the Trump administration taking office in the U.S." along with adventures of "Israel and Saudi Arabia, things have changed in the region and your administration should be more vigilant than ever," the former IRGC chief stated.



Tehran conference made Palestine Intifada top priority: Hamas

POLITICS TEHRAN — Hamas spokesman Sami Abou Zahri has praised the recent conference on Palestine in Tehran, saying the international event raised the Palestinian issue again and made it a top priority.

He said that the main goal of the conference was to stress that the anti-Israeli resistance is a strategic option to liberate Palestine and to create mechanisms to support the resistance, Tasnim reported on Wednesday.

The 6th international conference on the Palestinian Intifada was held in Tehran last month with around 700 foreign officials and intellectuals.



Iran seeks to purge dual national company managers

POLITICS TEHRAN — After it purged the government of dual nationals, Iran is looking to do the same about managers of major companies holding dual nationality.

Mostafa Pourmohammadi, minister of justice, said a list of company managers with dual nationalities is being investigated, stressing that the government has already been cleared of dual nationals, Mehr reported on Wednesday.

Two weeks earlier Attorney General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri had said a list of dual national managers had been sent to the Ministry of Intelligence for investigation.



Reformists to have candidates more than Rouhani: Aref

POLITICS TEHRAN — The reform front is going to name more candidates than Hassan Rouhani alone for the May presidential election, the front's decision making council chief Mohammad Reza Aref told Fars on Wednesday.

"It is my personal idea that we will converge on Mr. Rouhani in the end, but naturally other people will also become candidates in the meantime," Aref explained.

He nevertheless called on the to-be candidates to "respect our collective wisdom" and the decision of the council.

U.S., Israel have no doubt about Iran's defense power: minister

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehqan said on Wednesday that the U.S. and Israel have no doubt about Iran's defense power unless they attack the country.

"Today, the defense power has resulted in the people's security against any threat," he said during a meeting with officials of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

In the current volatile world, some countries make every effort to expand their scope of "infiltration" and make others obey them, he said.

He also said that the Islamic Republic is an "independent political system" and will not abandon its causes.

Dehqan added that Iran has always



backed resistance movements and will continue to do so.

"Message of the Islamic Revolution has been sent to the world, passed our geographical borders and influenced the nations," he noted.

Elsewhere, he said his ministry has increased its capability in a way that will guarantee victory if the country comes under any attack.

The defense chief added Iran is able to identify the threats and plots and foil them. "We have always resisted against the threats and defended the Iranian people... We have paid a high cost to protect the country's independence and these costs have led to many achievements and values that should be protected to be transferred to the next generations."

Zarif in Qatar amid frosty Arab ties

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif paid a formal visit to Doha on Wednesday, the third Arab country Tehran is consulting with within a month to mend fences with the Arab world.

Zarif held talks with the country's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani on ways to improve ties as Doha has yet to reinstate its ambassador to Iran.

The top Iranian diplomat also met his Qatari counterpart during the trip, his second this year.

An Iranian diplomat in Doha, who declined to be named, said Zarif discussed on Wednesday with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani how to "better ties" between the two countries.

The visit comes weeks after a one-day visit to Oman and Kuwait by President Hassan Rouhani, itself a response to a rare visit to Tehran in two years by Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled al-Sabah to deliver a message to Rouhani on a "basis of dialogue" between Arab states and Iran.

Less tension between Iran and Arab states will make inroads into the beleaguered Middle East.

Efforts to settle conflicts in Syria and Yemen have failed so far. One main cause, according to people familiar with the issue, is the political standoff between Tehran and Riyadh over a list of issues, with no let-up in war of words between the two.

In a recent interview with the Iranian ISNA news agency, Zarif said Tehran was not receiving positive signals from Saudi Arabia although he was hopeful the Saudis could take lessons from their previous misdoings in the region.

While Iran is seeking a reconciliation, Saudi Arabia continues with its vehement discourse about Iran.

During the recent Munich Security Conference in Germany, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir demanded that Iran be "punished," claiming Tehran is funding separatists in Yemen, what Tehran strongly rejects.

Riyadh and some other Arab countries claim that Iran interferes in their affairs by fueling sectarianism to expand its sphere of influence in the sensitive region. Tehran denies any interference in the region, saying it is the Salafi ideology promoted by Saudi Arabia that is the

root cause of extremism and sectarianism in the region and beyond.

Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have particularly reached levels unseen since the 1980s, when most Arab countries sided with Iraq after it waged a war against Iran, which lasted for nearly eight years.

Tehran and Saudi Arabia do not agree on the situation in Syria. Backing President Bashar al-Assad unflinchingly, Iran opposes demands by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states that Assad should step down.

Prior to the recent Astana talks on the Syrian conflict, Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehqan said that Riyadh should be barred from taking part in the negotiations because of its stance on a Syria without al-Assad.

On Saturday, Iran's parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Committee declared that it was going to review Tehran's policies toward Saudi Arabia.

As archrivals, Tehran and Riyadh have had no political relations for a little more than a year after Riyadh summoned its diplomats from Tehran in the aftermath of attacks on its diplomatic missions in Iran by angry mobs.

The storming came after Riyadh's execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, an outspoken opponent of the Saudi kingdom.

On Jan. 17, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said at least 10 countries had offered mediation to lessen the escalating feud.

An Iranian diplomat in Doha, who declined to be named, said Zarif discussed on Wednesday with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani how to "better ties" between the two countries.

Iran denounces Daesh deadly attack on Kabul hospital

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iranian Foreign Ministry has strongly condemned a deadly attack on a hospital in the Afghan capital Kabul on Wednesday.

In a statement released on Wednesday afternoon, Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi denounced as "inhumane and barbaric" the terrorist attack which was claimed by Daesh, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

According to Afghan officials, at least 30 people were killed after attackers dressed as doctors stormed the largest military hospital in Kabul.

Qassemi offered his deep condolences to the Afghan people and government as well as the bereaved families of victims of the brutal attack.

The attackers were armed with guns and grenades when they entered the hospital. One of them detonated explosive at the hospital's gate and then opened fire on staff and others present at the scene.

Over 50 people were also wounded in the attack.

All four attackers were killed



following several hours of fighting with commandos who landed on the Sardar Duad hospital roof.

"Most of the victims are patients, doctors and nurses," Afghan Defense Ministry spokesman Dawlat Waziri said.

The Taliban has denied any involvement in the terrorist attack.

The attack comes while Taliban has warned Daesh's ringleader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, against waging a parallel insurgency in Afghanistan.

Faith more important than weapons against enemies: Rouhani

POLITICS TEHRAN — President Hassan Rouhani has said that what makes Iran stronger against its enemies, especially the U.S. and Israel, is not just weapons but also the nation's faith, determination and unity.

Rouhani made the remarks at an annual event commemorating martyrs in Mashhad on Wednesday.

"Today's war is a war of determinations," he said.

The president underlined the need to possess advanced weapons to resist the enemies in case a war breaks out, saying "We should develop missiles and aircrafts and we do."

However, he said that the enemy "fears the nation's faith and determination more than weapons."

The president also said there is no end to wars and that speaking of peace only means ending military actions.

"However, the economic war will never end," he said, referring to the new U.S. president's first speech which



was about an economic war with the country's allies.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Rouhani hailed the Iranian people's resistance against the enemies in the last 38 years. "Even today, pressure and sanctions exist, but we resist [the enemy] in any difficult condition."

He also said that only nuclear-related sanctions were lifted and other sanctions were not discussed in the nuclear negotiations.

IRGC warns U.S. of 'irreversible consequences' after vessel encounter

1 -> The U.S. Navy presence in the Persian Gulf, Iran says, has jeopardized the security and stability of the strategic region which the U.S. Energy Information Agency calls "the world's most important oil chokepoint"

This is the first time under the tough-talking U.S. administration that the two navies have an encounter in the Persian Gulf waters where IRGC navy keeps regular

patrols in Iran's territorial waters.

The last serious naval incident was in January when a U.S. destroyer fired three warning shots at four Iranian fast-attack vessels near the Strait.

In January 2016, 10 Americans, including one woman, were arrested by the naval forces of the IRGC after entering Iranian waters. They were released after

some hours.

The peaceful settlement of the development was itself the result of an international nuclear deal between Iran and six world powers, including the U.S., which removed sanctions against the Middle East powerhouse in exchange for it rolling back its nuclear program.

Russian lawmaker urges U.S. to comply with nuclear deal

POLITICS TEHRAN — A Russian lawmaker says Tehran is right in accusing the U.S. of stalling the process of implementing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly called the nuclear deal.

Igor Morozov, a member of the Federation Council's (upper house) International Affairs Committee, told TASS in an interview that "Americans must fully comply with the treaty the way Iran does."

"Our position on abiding by the terms of the agreement on the Iranian nuclear deal is as follows - we believe that the treaties must be observed," he stressed.

"If sanctions are to be lifted under the terms of the reached agreements, they

must be lifted. If the U.S. is to return the money frozen under these sanctions, it must be returned," the lawmaker noted.

He also added that Tehran is quite right in accusing the U.S. of stalling the implementation of the nuclear deal. "Iran simply has no time, it must make up for the time when the country was under a trade embargo," the Russian lawmaker insisted.

"The Iranians must build a new system of relations with their partners, they must urgently restore the economic infrastructure, and first of all in the oil sector, and for this, money is needed. That is why the U.S. is obliged to return these means to Iran, as well as to contribute to the normalization of Iranian banks' relations with the global

financial community," Morozov stressed.

Commenting on the recent U.S. sanctions against 25 individuals and entities linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps after Iran's ballistic missile test on January 29, Morozov said, "For now, this is one of the fundamental problems preventing Iran's full cooperation with its economic partners."

The Foreign Ministry of Iran said in a statement that the new U.S. sanctions are "contrary to the U.S. commitments and the spirit of the UN Security Council Resolution 2231". The resolution endorsed the nuclear deal signed between Iran and six world powers including the U.S.

According to the deal, sanctions on

Iran must be terminated in exchange for a limit on Tehran's nuclear program.

U.S. President Donald Trump has repeatedly criticized the nuclear deal, calling the pact a "disaster," "the worst deal we've ever made" and a "nuclear holocaust."

Iran denies that its ballistic missile test was in violation of the 2015 nuclear deal, which calls upon Iran "not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons."

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that the country's missiles are "not designed for the capability of carrying a nuclear warhead". He added that Iran is only developing ballistic missiles to defend itself.

Blasts, gunfire hit Kabul military hospital

At least 30 people have been killed and dozens of others wounded in a bomb and gun attack on a military hospital in Afghanistan's capital, officials said.

Defense ministry officials said the attack started at 9:00 with a blast at the front gate of the Sardar Daud Khan hospital in the Wazir Akbar Khan area, central Kabul on Wednesday.

The gunmen, dressed as medical personnel, took position on upper floors of the hospital and engaged Special Forces sent to the scene, officials said.

Dawlat Waziri, spokesman for the defense ministry, told Al Jazeera three attackers with automatic weapons and hand grenades entered the complex, the largest of its kind in the Afghan capital.

"Our security forces engaged but they were also careful to not cause any casualties. It was a difficult situation," Waziri said.

Security forces blocked off the area around the hospital, near a busy traffic intersection. As fighting went on, a second explosion struck inside the hospital.

Some patients climbed out of the building and could be seen sheltering on window ledges visible from outside the hospital, which treats military casualties from across Afghanistan.

The Taliban, which has staged similar raids in the past, denied responsibility for the attack.

President Ashraf Ghani condemned the attack saying it "trampled on all human values".

"In all religions, a hospital is regarded as an immune site and attacking it is attacking the whole of Afghanistan," he said in impromptu remarks during a speech for International Women's Day in Kabul.

The Wazir Akbar Khan area of central



Kabul is heavily guarded and houses several government offices and foreign embassies.

The attack comes a week after 16 people were killed in simultaneous Taliban suicide assaults on two security compounds in Kabul.

Dozens of others were wounded as a suicide car bomber struck an Afghan police precinct in western Kabul and a five-hour gun battle ensued after another attacker snuck in, sending clouds of smoke billowing into the sky.

In the second attack, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the gates of an Afghan

intelligence agency branch in eastern Kabul.

The growing violence underscores rising insecurity in Afghanistan over the resurgent Taliban.

The country is bracing for an intense fighting season in the spring as the government's repeated bids to launch peace negotiations with the Taliban have failed.

Kabul last month endorsed the United States General John Nicholson's call for thousands of additional coalition troops in Afghanistan to fend off the group before the spring offensive.

Extra troops were needed to end the

stalemate in the war, Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, told the U.S. Congress in what could be President Donald Trump's first major test of military strategy.

Separately, the Pentagon this year said it would deploy some 300 U.S. Marines this spring to Helmand province alone.

The Marines will assist a NATO-led mission to train Afghan forces, in the latest sign that foreign forces are increasingly being drawn back into the worsening conflict.

(Source: Al Jazeera)

Najib softens line in bid to get Malaysians out of North Korea

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak struck a softer tone with North Korea on Wednesday, a day after accusing it of assassinating the estranged half-brother of Kim Jong Un and treating Malaysians as "hostages."

Malaysian police have identified eight North Koreans wanted for questioning in connection with the killing of Kim Jong Nam at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on Feb. 13, three of them hiding in the North Korean embassy.

In a bid to "ensure the safety" of its diplomats and citizens in Malaysia, North Korea retaliated on Tuesday by banning Malaysians from leaving the country until the case was "properly solved."

Najib denounced that move as an "abhorrent act" and ordered a reciprocal ban. He also for the first time directly accused North Korea of murdering Kim Jong Nam, who Malaysian police said died from super-toxic VX nerve agent smeared on his face by two women.

"What we are facing now is the result of their action in assassinating their own citizen in Malaysia, on Malaysian soil, using a strictly banned chemical weapon," Najib told state media agency Bernama on Tuesday.

In Malaysia's Borneo state of Sarawak, 37 North Koreans were detained on Tuesday at a construction site for overstaying their visas, a state government source said. They were among 176 North Koreans working in Sarawak. Those who overstayed would be given 30-day extensions, however, an immigration source said.

But faced with the priority of securing the release of the 11 Malaysians stuck in North Korea, Najib sounded more conciliatory in parliament on Wednesday, saying there were no plans to cut diplomatic ties.

"We are a country that's friendly to them," Najib said, after reassuring MPs



the three embassy staff, six family members, and two other Malaysians in North Korea were safe.

Najib declined to elaborate on the next steps: "If there's any negotiations, we can't do it through the media."

North Korea is in danger of losing one of the few friends it has outside of China. On Monday, Malaysia expelled North Korea's ambassador for questioning the impartiality of the murder investigation and ended visa free travel for North Koreans. Last week, Malaysia said it would investigate North Korea front companies after a Reuters report showed that Pyongyang's spy agency was running an arms network in the country.

North Korea says the dead man is not Kim Jong Nam, and has suggested he had a heart attack.

Najib said the body has to be formally identified, although the deputy prime minister and senior police officials have

previously confirmed that it is Kim Jong Nam.

"It's been hard for us to do the DNA verification as no one has come forward," Najib said. "Maybe they're scared to come forward."

Malaysia has said it would only release Kim's body to the next of kin, refusing demands from North Korea to hand it over without an autopsy.

Video emerges of man claiming to be Kim Jong-nam's son

Meantime, a man claiming to be Kim Jong Nam's son said he was lying low with his mother and sister in a video posted online by a group that said it helped rescue them following the airport murder.

The governments of Netherlands, China, the United States, and a fourth unnamed country provided emergency humanitarian assistance to protect the family, the group, called Cheollima Civil

Defense, said in a statement released on Wednesday along with the video.

An official at South Korea's National Intelligence Service said the man in the video is Kim Han Sol, Kim's 21-year-old son.

"I'm currently with my mother and my sister..." the man says during the 40-second video, without disclosing his location. "We hope this gets better soon."

Reuters could not independently verify the video.

Kim Han Sol is the son of Kim Jong Nam's second wife, who had been living in the Chinese territory of Macau with Kim under Beijing's protection after the family went into exile several years ago.

Extraction & protection

South Korean intelligence officers say Kim Jong Un had issued standing orders for the elimination of his elder half-brother.

The statement released on the website of Cheollima Civil Defense said the organization responded last month to an emergency request by Kim Jong Nam's family for "extraction and protection".

The United States officials and South Korean intelligence suspect North Korean agents were behind the assassination of Kim Jong Nam. He had spoken out publicly against his family's dynastic rule of North Korea.

The only people charged so far are a Vietnamese woman and an Indonesian woman, accused of smearing the victim's face with VX.

The police are pressing to question up to three men believed to be hiding in the North Korean embassy, but said they would not raid the building. Police have said that four other North Koreans fled Malaysia hours after the murder.

The only one to have been detained was released and deported on Friday due to insufficient evidence.

(Source: Reuters)

China urges U.S., N. Korea to avoid 'head-on collision'

China has called on North Korea to suspend its nuclear and missile activities in exchange for the United States and South Korea halting military war games, to avoid what it called a "head-on collision".

"To defuse the looming crisis on the [Korean] peninsula, China proposes that as a first step, the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) may suspend its nuclear and missile activities in exchange for the halt of the large-scale U.S.-ROK exercises," Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Wednesday, using the acronyms for the two Koreas.

He also said South Korea is making a

mistake in deploying the United States anti-missile defense system THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense), which he said undermined China's security.

"The two sides are like two accelerating trains coming towards each other with neither side willing to give way," Wang said at a news conference on the sidelines of China's annual parliament session.

"The question is: Are the two sides really ready for a head-on collision? Our priority now is to flash the red light and apply the brakes on both trains."

A cascade of events has led to a dramatic increase in tensions in northeast Asia.

Pyongyang blasted at least four missiles across the ocean towards Japan on Monday, three of them splashing down into waters within Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone.

Seoul and Washington have begun annual joint military exercises that always infuriate Pyongyang, and the U.S. has said it has started deploying an anti-missile system directed at North Korea, but which Beijing has taken as a threat to its own defense interests.

"This 'suspension for suspension' can help us break out of the security dilemma and bring the parties back to the negotiat-

ing table," Wang said of his proposal.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is expected to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing next week to discuss the two countries' relationship.

In his news conference on Wednesday, Wang said that he hopes that China and the U.S. "can truly rise up over the old ideas, open up new horizons and build a new mature and robust relationship, so that we can put the minds of our two people and the whole world at ease."

He said the relationship between China and the U.S. is on a "positive track".

(Source: agencies)

Germany makes 'red lines' clear to Turkey

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel says he has made it clear that any attempt by Turkish officials to compare the German government to Nazi Germany is a "red line" that should not be crossed.

Gabriel, who hosted his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, in Berlin on Wednesday, said he "made clear that comparisons between Nazi-era and the cancellation of rallies or rule of law in Germany is forbidden."

"Both sides have the responsibility to simply not cross certain red lines, and comparisons to Nazi Germany is one of them," Gabriel said.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan earlier accused Germany of "fascist actions" reminiscent of Nazi practices after Berlin blocked three Turkish rallies aimed at promoting a "yes" vote in a referendum on constitutional reforms in Turkey next month.

On Tuesday, and because of the German ban, Cavusoglu had to address supporters from the balcony of the Turkish consul's residence in Hamburg.



Gabriel further said that "returning to normality is what my Turkish colleague and I want."

"Whatever differences and arguments we have, there is no alternative to talks because (only) then is there a possibility of returning, step-by step, to normalized and friendly relations between Germany and Turkey," Gabriel said.

The recent row has strained the bilateral diplomatic relations over the past week. Earlier, and also in reaction to the German ban, Erdogan accused Germany of "harboring" terrorism.

Turkey has also detained a German-Turkish reporter over accusations that he was a German spy. It was not clear if the detention was motivated by political reasons.

(Source: Press TV)

Fillon received \$53,000 loan from billionaire friend: report

Embattled French presidential hopeful Francois Fillon received an undeclared loan of \$53,000 from a billionaire friend in 2013, according to the Canard Enchaîné weekly.

The conservative candidate "did not deem it necessary" to report the interest-free loan from Marc Ladreit de Lacharriere to a state transparency watchdog, the weekly said in its edition to appear on Wednesday.

The investigative and satirical newspaper reported that Fillon's lawyer Antonin Levy had confirmed the loan had been repaid in full.

"The 'oversight' may be costly for the presidential candidate," said the publication.

Ladreit de Lacharriere is the CEO of Fimalac, a financial services holding company, and owns the literary magazine La Revue des Deux Mondes, which employed Fillon's wife, Penelope.

The publication paid Penelope Fillon some \$105,000 euros in 2012-13, but there is little evidence of her work.

Investigators are also looking into a possible link between this job and the bestowal of France's highest civilian honor, the Grand Croix of the Legion of Honor, on Ladreit de Lacharriere in 2011 when Fillon was prime minister.

The Canard Enchaîné also said investigators were also looking into a consultancy firm called 2F Conseil that Fillon set up in 2012 after he left office as prime minister, which the paper says has paid him hundreds of thousands of euros.

Fillon has denied any wrongdoing with his consultancy work.

The 63-year-old former prime minister faces embezzlement charges later this month.

Once the frontrunner to become France's next president in May, he has had to battle to stay in the race because of revelations in January that he had paid his wife hundreds of thousands of dollars from public funds, allegedly for fake jobs.

With just seven weeks to go before France goes to the polls in the April 23 first round of a two-stage vote, Fillon has remained as the rightwing candidate despite calls for him to allow rival Alain Juppe to stand in his place because of the scandal.

On Monday, he won the "unanimous" backing of his Republicans party after Juppe, 71, adamantly rejected the calls while lamenting the state of Fillon's candidacy, calling it a "waste".

Juppe also chastised Fillon for the disdain he has shown the justice system and his swipes at the media.

The infighting among Republicans and Fillon's chaotic campaign have made an already unpredictable election even harder to call.

Centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron, 39, has gone from strength to strength, with the latest poll putting him neck-and-neck with far-right Leader Marine Le Pen with 25.5 percent to 26.5 percent for her.

Fillon is lagging behind in third place with 18.5 percent, according to the Ifop-Fiducial poll out on Tuesday.

(Source: agencies)





Technical, engineering services export reaches \$2b post-sanctions

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Iran has exported over \$2 billion worth of technical and engineering services since the implementation of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in January 2016, IRNA reported on Wednesday.

According to Mohammad-Reza Ansari, the head of International Consultants and Contractors Association (ICCA) of Iran, electrical engineering and technical services account for most of the increase in this sector's value of exports.

The official noted that further development of exports in this area needs removing the hindering barriers among which banking issues especially issuance of bank guarantee could be mentioned.

Iran mainly carries out constructional, power, and road building projects overseas.



Russia considering annual purchase of 5mt of Iranian crude

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak said on Tuesday that Russia is considering the purchase of up to five million tons (mt) of Iranian crude oil on an annual basis, IRNA reported.

Addressing the press, the official noted that for the time being Russia plans to import a daily amount of 100,000 barrels per day (bpd) which will be about 5 million tons a year.

"The two sides are making efforts to reach an agreement in this regard and hopefully in near future we will see the results," he said.



Copper concentrate output up 10% in 11 months

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Iran's copper concentrate output reached 982.95 tons in the first 11 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2016- February 18, 2017), which shows 10 percent increase compared to the same period in the preceding year, IRIB news reported.

The figure stood at 893.839 tons in the same period last year, the report said.

Copper concentrate is the result of a flotation process after the copper ore has been mined and milled. Copper concentrate is an intermediate product used as raw material in the production of copper metal.



S. Korea to deliver 1st mega-container vessel to Iran in March 2018

ECONOMY TEHRAN — South Korea's Hyundai Heavy Industries Company, Ltd. (HHI) will deliver the first TEU 14500 mega-container vessel to Iran by March 2018, managing director of Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) announced.

According to Mohammad Saeedi, after the first delivery HHI is going to deliver one vessel each month, Tasnim reported on Wednesday.

"Maritime Transportation accounts for more than 87 percent of Iran's trade," the official highlighted.

In December 2016, IRISL signed an agreement with HHI based on which the S. Korean company will build mega-container vessels as well as tankers for carrying petroleum products for Iran.



Iran's exports to U.S. stand at \$5.6m in Jan.

ECONOMY TEHRAN — According to the latest report of American Statistical Association (ASA), Iran exported \$5.6 million of goods to the U.S. in January 2017.

U.S. imports of Iranian goods stood at zero in the same month in 2016, the report added.

Iran's import of goods from the U.S. in January was \$4.9 million registering a 52-percent drop compared to the same month in 2016, when the figure touched \$10.2 million.

Iran-U.S. trade in January stood at \$10.5 million, registering a three-percent growth in comparison with the same time in the preceding year.

Pakistan pursuing implementation of IP Gas Pipeline Project

Pakistan's Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Shaikh Aftab Ahmad on Monday told the house that the government is pursuing the implementation of the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline Project.

He said that work on the project could not be started due to international sanctions on Iran. He said Pakistan is ready to complete the gas pipeline project within thirty months after the removal of international sanctions on Iran.

(Source: Onlinenews.pk)

Annual petchem exports anticipated to reach \$9b

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After the implementation of Iran's nuclear deal, NPC has received high willingness from European companies for cooperation with Iran in the petrochemical sector both in financing and licensing, Farnaz Alavi, the NPC director for planning and development, announced in last December.

It also comes true about Asian companies, especially the petrochemical giants in Southeast Asia, the official added.

"Thanks to its experts and industrialists, the Islamic Republic of Iran could reach 70 percent self-sufficiency in manufacturing equipment needed in petrochemical



industry," Shahdaie announced in December 2016.

Making the remarks in the 8th oil, gas, refining and petrochemical exhibition in the southern port city of Asalouyeh, the NPC director noted that there is no need

for foreign experts to help with designing and manufacturing the required equipment in Iran's petrochemical industry and the exhibition was aimed to help domestic companies with marketing.

Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan cut 50% of common rail transit tariffs

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Railway delegations from Iran, Russia and Republic of Azerbaijan signed memorandum of understanding (MOU) on reducing common rail transit tariffs by 50 percent, in a trilateral meeting in Moscow on Tuesday.

The MOU seeks getting north-south transport corridor, which is expected to connect northern Europe to Southeast Asia, fully operational, IRNA reported.

During the meeting, the participants agreed on activation of the corridor for transporting goods from Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, to the Persian Gulf and India and vice versa.

They also accorded on the common rail tariff for the year 2017 as well as the time duration needed for transportation of goods through the corridor.

During the meeting, a member of board of directors of Islamic Republic of Iran Railways Hossein Ashuri noted that after 14 years from the time when Iran, Russia and India accorded on launching the north-south corridor, a cargo train transported goods from Mumbai to Moscow through Iran's Bandar Abbas and Astara, in 2016, by cooperation of the Azeri and Russian railways.

As he added, according to the held talks in the meeting, the corridor will be fully operational in 2017 and hopes are high that other countries including Finland, Estonia, Lithuania and Belarus will join the corridor in future.

North-south corridor will connect the north hemisphere to the south. It will link the railway networks of Finland, Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran with those of Pakistan and India.

India submits \$3b new plan for Iran's Farzad-B field

India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) Videsh Ltd has finalized an over \$3 billion master development plan (MDP) for the coveted Farzad-B gas field off Iran and is likely to wrap up a deal by September.

The new plan, filed with Iranian Offshore Oil Company (IOOC), excludes liquefaction facilities to turn the gas into LNG for ease of shipping to nations like India, sources privy to the development said.

The two nations were initially targeting concluding deal on Farzad-B field development by November 2016 but later mutually agreed to push the timeline to February 2017.

Now, the deal is being targeted to be wrapped up by September after the two sides agree on a price and a rate of return for OVL's investments.

Iran was initially unhappy with the

\$10 billion plan submitted by OVL for development of the 12.5 trillion cubic feet reserves in Farzad-B field and an accompanying plant to liquefy the gas for transportation in ships.

It felt the \$5 billion cost OVL and its partners have put for developing the field was on the higher side and wanted it to be reduced. OVL will earn a fixed rate of return and get to recover all the investment it has made in the field development.

Sources said in the new MDP the company has revised the cost downwards after making some adjustments in the production facilities.

The field in the Farsi block was discovered by the OVL-led consortium in 2008. It has an in-place gas reserve of 21.7 trillion cubic feet (tcf), of which 12.5 tcf are recoverable.

(Source: Millennium Post)

Japan fourth quarter GDP revised up

Japan's economy grew more than earlier estimated in the fourth quarter as capital expenditure grew at its fastest in almost three years, welcome news for policymakers as they begin to discuss how to wind down years of massive stimulus.

The economy grew an annualized 1.2 percent in October-December, less than the median estimate for 1.6 percent annualized growth but more than the preliminary reading of a 1.0 percent annualized expansion.

The figure translates into quarter-on-quarter growth of 0.3 percent, versus a preliminary reading of 0.2 percent growth and the median estimate for 0.4 percent growth.

A stronger pace of growth will be a boon to the government as policymakers have been counting on an increase in business investment to drive future expansion and increase low productivity.

However, growth is still not robust enough to generate sustained inflation that the Bank of Japan wants, and the risk of rising protectionism could discourage Japanese exporters from raising wages, seen as key to boosting consumption and economic activity at home.

"The economy will remain in recovery mode, because we are seeing the benefits of capital expenditure from manufacturers and the construction sector," said Shuji Tonouchi, senior market economist at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley Securities.

"I am a little worried about the strength of consumer



spending. I am still not sure how protectionism will materialize, but this is also a potential risk."

Private consumption registered no growth in October-December, the same as preliminary data. Sluggish household spending has kept the country in prolonged deflation and been a key challenge for the BOJ in meeting its 2 percent price goal via its massive bond buying program.

Households cut spending for the 11th straight month in January even as the job market tightened further, separate data showed earlier this month. Private consumption accounts for around 60 percent of GDP.

The capital expenditure component of GDP rose 2.0

percent from the previous quarter, which was more than the forecast for 1.7 percent growth, and faster than the preliminary 0.9 percent.

The revised data showed capital expenditure grew at the fastest since a 2.3 percent quarterly rise in January-March 2014.

Increased investment from the real estate sector, construction companies, food processing companies and electronics makers drove gains in capex, a Cabinet Office official told Reuters.

Some economists expect capital expenditure to increase further as companies will soon have to start investing in more efficient equipment to deal with a shrinking pool of workers as the population ages.

However, U.S. economic policy poses a risk, because companies could suddenly turn cautious on capex if U.S. President Donald Trump adopts protectionist trade policies. There are also concerns that protectionism could hurt Japan's exports.

After capital expenditure, net exports were the second-biggest driver of growth in the fourth quarter, revised data showed.

However, the plus 0.2 percentage point contribution from net exports was unchanged from preliminary figures, which raises questions about the strength of external demand.

(Source: Reuters)

Oil drops further below \$56 on report of U.S. inventory rise

Oil dropped further below \$56 a barrel on Wednesday after an industry report pointed to a large rise in crude inventories in the United States, renewing oversupply concerns despite OPEC output curbs.

U.S. crude inventories rose by a more-than-forecast 11.6 million barrels last week, data from industry group the American Petroleum Institute (API) showed on Tuesday, ahead of the government's supply report due later on Wednesday.

Brent crude, the international benchmark, was down 29 cents at \$55.63 a barrel at 0950 GMT. U.S. crude fell 40 cents to \$52.74.

If the API report of an inventory rise is confirmed by the U.S. Energy Information Administration report at 1530 GMT, it would be the ninth straight week of increases. Analysts had forecast a 1.9 million-barrel inventory rise.

"All eyes are on the EIA numbers," said Jeffrey Halley, senior market strategist at Oanda in Singapore. "A big washout of that will see oil test technical support levels."

U.S. crude supplies have continued to rise despite a supply cut that started on Jan. 1 by the Organization of the Petrole-

um Exporting Countries plus Russia and other non-members. Data has suggested high compliance with the deal.

Total output reductions have exceeded 1.5 million barrels per day, Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih said on Tuesday, out of the almost 1.8 million bpd pledged. He also said the results had exceeded the low market expectations.

Oil is also facing headwinds from a likely U.S. interest rate rise next week, a strong dollar and rising U.S. oil production, which has been given a boost by the OPEC-led effort to support prices.

The EIA now expects U.S. crude production in 2017 to rise by 330,000 barrels per day, more than previously forecast, according to its monthly outlook on Tuesday.

OPEC is trying to get rid of a supply glut that is keeping oil prices at about half their level of mid-2014. Rising U.S. inventories have raised speculation it may extend the supply cut deal which runs until June.

Officially, OPEC maintains that it is too early to talk of extending the agreement, a position reiterated by the Saudi minister on Tuesday.

(Source: Reuters)

Former Treasury secretary: Trump will hurt the economy

A former Democratic Treasury secretary says President Trump's economic agenda will hurt the economy, not help it.

Robert Rubin, who held the job for four years under President Bill Clinton, tells CNNMoney that imposing tariffs, slashing certain regulations and increasing infrastructure spending without raising federal taxes will stifle long-term economic growth.

"There's the risk that we're going to take some kind of measures that can be very counterproductive," says Rubin, who is on the advisory council for the Hamilton Project, a left-leaning think tank.

Tax cuts for the wealthy, he says, serve "no useful economic purpose."

Rubin, who spoke to CNNMoney from the Brookings Institution in Washington, says Trump's financial stimulus -- infrastructure spending and tax cuts -- may provide a short-term boost to the economy, but at a cost in the future.

The labor market today is tight, Rubin explains, as evidenced by an unemployment rate of 4.8%. Injecting stimulus into a strong labor market will spark inflation, he says. Add that to tariffs that could raise consumer prices.

"That's a whole set of policies that could be highly detrimental to American workers," Rubin says.

Instead, Rubin advocates career retraining for out-of-work Americans and a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants so companies don't have to hire as much abroad. All that, he says, would have to be paid for with higher taxes.

"The reality, no matter who's in office," says Rubin, "we're going to have higher taxes."

Under Clinton, Rubin was head of the National Economic Council for two years, then served as Treasury secretary from 1995 to 1999. It was a time of strong economic growth, but Rubin was later criticized for deregulation and for failing to identify risks that helped cause the 2008 financial crisis.

After he left government, Rubin joined Citigroup as a top executive. In the decade that followed, Citi ramped up its exposure to risk, notably in the housing market. In November 2008, the bank nearly collapsed before the U.S. government announced a massive rescue package. Rubin stepped down in January 2009.

(Source: CNNMoney)

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WikiLeaks at it again — this time, the CIA

WikiLeaks, in a stunning move, released what it called "the largest ever publication of confidential documents" on America's premier intelligence agency, the CIA.

There are two takeaways.

The first: Julian Assange, you are never coming to America without facing arrest.

And the second: Let's hope there's not an Operation Mockingbird in the works against President Trump.

Operation Mockingbird — as it may or may not have been called, to use spy lingo — was a secret campaign — that may or may not have existed — begun in the 1960s to infiltrate and influence the media. Reportedly, allegedly and supposedly, the CIA funded operations to sway media, both domestic and foreign, to achieve ends favorable to U.S. interests.

The story goes on to report how Jeff Bezos, the founder and CEO of Amazon who purchased The Washington Post in 2013 shortly after, clinched a \$600 million contract with the CIA. The contract was supposed to be a deal for Bezos and his web-based business to build the CIA a private cloud for intel data.

And then there was this, from November in CNBC: "After learning the Washington Post reporters were looking into his past, Donald Trump railed against Amazon chief Jeff Bezos in a tweet storm."

Bezos made nice — at least, surface nice — with Trump after the election, sending him congratulatory well-wishes in a tweet. But the point is this: Bezos did indeed sic his Post team on Trump. That was then; this is now? Perhaps. But there's still a sour taste.

Into all this steps WikiLeaks. The group released 8,761 documents and files on the CIA, packaged as "Vault 7 Part 1" and titled "Year Zero." According to a report in Fox News, the documents originated from an "isolated, high-security network" at the agency's Center for Cyber Intelligence in Langley, Virginia.

The CIA, of course, is not commenting. But WikiLeaks suggested the information it has released shows just how deep the CIA gets into spying on targets via secret surveillance and malware. The agency's technology, for instance, allows it to capture data by infecting iPhones, Android phones, smart TVs and the like, and then send the information back quietly and secretly to its own private servers.

The documents will take days to sift through — and some are redacted, including specifics on the agency's "thousands of ... target and attack machines throughout Latin America, Europe and the United States."

It's that last that sparks the most interest. What exactly were the CIA's targets in America — or whom? As Operation Mockingbird reminds, and Trump's warnings and the Bezos angle underscore, the agency's not exactly free of political agendas that seem to focus more on domestic, rather than foreign, entities.

(Source: The Washington Times)

How the Maldives sold its land to Saudi Arabia and turned a blind eye to ISIL

King Salman's visit to the islands demonstrates the corruption of the regime that seized power in 2012

As King Salman of Saudi Arabia is set to arrive on the Maldives today, economic cooperation and investment opportunities will likely dominate the talks. The kingdom is planning on buying an entire atoll of the island — a development that opposition figures warn could endanger the stability of the country and threaten the security of the Indian Ocean.

Maldivian land was previously protected under the country's constitution, but following the coup in 2012 — against the first democratically elected government of President Mohamed Nasheed — the constitution was amended in 2015 and now allows for foreign investors to buy land.

"The implications cannot be stressed enough," warns former Vice President Mohamed Jameel Ahmed. "Our most precious resource is our land — over 90% of territory is covered in water. We live from tourism. Selling our land is giving away our sovereignty to countries with their own agenda — an agenda that could threaten the stability of the Maldives and the Indian Ocean."

The dismantling of democracy in the country is going hand in hand with the rise of extremism. Nasheed was disposed by a movement led by the former autocratic leader Maumoon Abdul Gayoom under the premise of "defending Islam" against Nasheed's alleged collusion with the West and promotion of Western culture.

■ A bigger foothold

Allowing Saudi Arabia to gain a bigger foothold in the Maldives could exacerbate that problem. Since the current president Abdulla Yameen came to power in 2013, the government has reached out to Saudi Arabia for cooperation in various sectors, including Islamic affairs.

In November 2015, the Maldives and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement that was hailed as a bridge between the two countries, by which the kingdom would invest in the religious infrastructure of the island — mosques, madrasas, education,



Saudi King Salman, left, rides on a golf cart with Indonesian President Joko Widodo in Jakarta, on March 2, 2017.

The kingdom is planning on buying an entire atoll of the island — a development that opposition figures warn could endanger the stability of the country and threaten the security of the Indian Ocean.

and student exchange programs.

Saudi Arabia is known for its financial assistance to other countries to push their own version of religion — Wahhabi. The vast majority of terrorist organizations in the world today adhere to the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology, including ISIL. The Maldives claims second place — after Tunisia — of countries that provide the highest per capita of foreign fighters to the terrorist organization.

"The current regime is corrupt to the core, all they care about is their own survival," explains Ahmed. "They do not stop people from travelling to Syria or Iraq, as long as they do not protest against the corruption of the government at home. Each fighter that leaves is a headache

gone for the decision-makers in Male."

Ahmed believes there is clear evidence that it is a deliberate government policy. "They lock people up for petty offences. Even on trumped-up charges, if you speak out against the regime. Of course they know who these people are that join Islamic State (ISIL). But they let them go with impunity. Their corruption clouds everything."

■ Vigilante gangs

In recent years, vigilante gangs — comprising mostly of extremists — have been known to abduct individuals accused of spreading secularism and atheism. In June 2014, several young men were abducted by a gang for being irreligious. They were asked by their captors to recite

the Shahadha and prayer verses from the Quran as a test of their beliefs.

In August of the same year, journalist Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla disappeared after investigating the activities of vigilante groups and voicing concern over the rise of extremism on the island. He has not been seen since and a group of young men that later left to join ISIL were linked to his abduction.

The deteriorating human rights situation on the island has put the Maldives on the agenda of the international community. The country announced in October 2016 that it would resign its membership of the Commonwealth, after mounting pressure from the organization over corruption and human rights violations in the Indian Ocean state.

"The UK, the U.S., India — all of them — should have an interest that democracy prevails in the Maldives and free and fair elections can take place in 2018, guaranteed by international standards," according to Ahmed.

"The current regime has time and again postponed local elections and there is no indication that they are interested in a nationwide vote next year," he warned. "We rely on the support of bigger democracies to put pressure on the Maldives, so that our citizens can fight back against the corruption and exercise their democratic right to elect their leaders."

The European Union has some leverage as the Maldives second largest export partner and EU citizens accounting for the second highest number of visitors to the island that remains hugely dependent on foreign income earnings through the tourist industry.

The Maldives is better known for its picture-perfect landscapes and lavish tourist resorts than extremism and political corruption. But if we continue to ignore the dark shadows that cast over the island, it is questionable for how much longer we can soak-up the sunshine.

(Source: ibtimes.com)

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By William Blum

The United States and the “Russian Devil”: 1917-2017

Conservatives have had a very hard time getting over President Trump's much-repeated response to Fox News anchor Bill O'Reilly's calling Russian president Vladimir Putin “a killer”. Replied Trump: “There are a lot of killers. We have a lot of killers. You think our country is so innocent?”

One could almost feel a bit sorry for O'Reilly as he struggled to regain his composure in the face of such blasphemy. Had any American establishment media star ever heard such a thought coming from the mouth of an American president? From someone on the radical left, yes, but from the president?

Senator John McCain on the floor of Congress, referring to Putin, tore into attempts to draw “moral equivalency between that butcher and thug and KGB colonel and the United States of America.”

Ah yes, the infamous KGB. Can anything good be said about a person associated with such an organization? We wouldn't like it if a US president had a background with anything like that. Oh, wait, a president of the United States was not merely a CIA “colonel”, but was the Director of the CIA! I of course speak of George Herbert Walker Bush. And as far as butchery and thuggery ... How many Americans remember the December 1989 bombing and invasion of the people of Panama carried out by the same Mr. Bush? Many thousands killed or wounded; thousands more left homeless.

Try and match that, Vladimir!

And in case you're wondering for what good reason all this was perpetrated? Officially, to arrest dictator Manuel Noriega on drug charges. How is that for a rationalization for widespread devastation and slaughter? It should surprise no one that only shortly before the invasion Noriega had been on the CIA payroll.

It's the “moral equivalency” that's so tough to swallow for proud Americans like O'Reilly and McCain. Republican Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell also chipped in with: “And no, I don't think there's any equivalency between the way the Russians conduct themselves and the way the United States does.” Other Senators echoed the same theme, all inspired by good ol' “American exceptionalism”, drilled into the mind of every decent American from childhood on ... Who would dare to compare the morals of (ugh!) Russia with those of God's chosen land, even in Moscow's current non-communist form?

The communist form began of course with the October 1917 Russian Revolution. By the summer of 1918 some 13,000 American troops could be found in the newly-born state, the future Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Two years and thousands of casualties later, the American troops left, having failed in their mission to “strangle at its birth” the Bolshevik state, as Winston Churchill so charmingly put it.

US foreign policy has not been much more noble-minded since then. I think, dear students, it's time for me to once again present my concise historical summary:

Since the end of World War 2, the United States has:

- Attempted to overthrow more than 50 foreign governments, most of which were democratically-elected.

- Dropped bombs on the people of more than 30 countries.

- Attempted to assassinate more than 50 foreign leaders.

- Attempted to suppress a populist or nationalist movement in 20 countries.

- Grossly interfered in democratic elections in at least 30 countries.

- Though not as easy to quantify, has also led the world in torture; not only the torture performed directly by Americans upon foreigners, but providing torture equipment, torture manuals, lists of people to be tortured, and in-person guidance by American instructors.

Where does the United States get the nerve to moralize about Russia? Same place they get the nerve to label Putin a “killer” ... a “butcher” ... a “thug”.

It would be difficult to name a world-renowned killer, butcher, or thug – not to mention dictator, mass murderer, or torturer – of the past 75 years who was not a close ally of Washington.

So why then does the American power elite hate Putin so? It can be dated back to the period of Boris Yeltsin.

During the Western financial looting of the dying Soviet Union the US could be found meddling in favor of Yeltsin in the election held in 1996. Under Yeltsin's reign, poverty exploded and life

expectancy for men actually decreased by five years, all in the name of “shock therapy.”

The US/Western-backed destabilization of the Soviet Union allowed global capitalism to spread its misery unfettered by any inconvenient socialism. Russia came under the control of oligarchs concerned only for their own enrichment and that of their billionaire partners in the West. The transition of power to Vladimir Putin in the 21st century led to a number of reforms that curbed the disastrous looting of the nation by the oligarchic bandits. Putin and his allies vowed to build an independent, capitalist Russia that was capable of determining its own affairs free from US and Western domination. Such an orientation placed Putin in direct confrontation with US imperialism's plans for unipolar global hegemony.

Washington's disdain for Putin increased when he derided US war propaganda leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Then, the Russian leader played a crucial role in getting Iran to curtail its nuclear program and arranging for Syria to surrender its stockpiles of chemical weapons. Washington's

has been responsible for the deliberate deaths of many journalists. In Iraq, for example, there's the Wikileaks 2007 video, exposed by Chelsea Manning, of the cold-blooded murder of two Reuters journalists; the 2003 US air-to-surface missile attack on the offices of Al Jazeera in Baghdad that left three journalists dead and four wounded; and the American firing on Baghdad's Hotel Palestine, a known journalist residence, the same year that killed two foreign news cameramen.

The Trump honeymoon is over for me. It was never actually love; hardly more than an intriguing curiosity; mainly that he wasn't Hillary Clinton; that he was unlikely to start a war with Russia or close down the Russia Today (RT) TV station in the US, which I and many others depend on daily; and that he was not politically correct when it came to fighting the Islamic State. Trump's “moral equivalency” remark above gave me some hope. But this all vanished with his appointment to high office of one war-loving, bemedalled general after another, intermingled with one billionaire Goldman-Sachs official after another; his apparent confirmation of



Washington's disdain for Putin increased when he derided US war propaganda leading up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003.



Senator John McCain on the floor of Congress, referring to Putin, tore into attempts to draw “moral equivalency between that butcher and thug and KGB colonel and the United States of America.”

powerful neo-conservatives had been lusting for direct US military strikes against those two countries, leading to regime change, not diplomatic agreements that left the governments in place.

Lastly, after the United States overthrew the Ukrainian government in 2014, Putin was obliged to intervene on behalf of threatened ethnic Russians in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. That, in turn, was transformed by the Western media into a “Russian invasion”.

The same Western media has routinely charged Putin with murdering journalists but doesn't remind its audience of the American record in this regard. The American military, in the course of its wars in recent decades,

his Mexican Wall; and, worst of all, his increasing the military budget by \$54 billion (sic, sick) ... this will certainly be at the expense of human life and health and the environment. What manner of man is this who walks amongst us?

The word is “narcissism”. New York Times columnist Frank Bruni (February 28, 2017) captures this well: “Why do I get the sense that fighter jets are Donald Trump's biceps, warships are his pectorals and what he's doing with his proposed \$54 billion increase for the Pentagon is flexing?”

Will there ever be an end to the never-ending American wars?

How should we react to terrorism?

I hadn't planned on returning to this subject so soon, if ever, because of

Not every American soldier in World War II was a knowledgeable and convinced anti-fascist; nor were all of those fighting in Vietnam knowledgeable and convinced anti-communists; but they deeply believed in American exceptionalism.



the distasteful experience of last summer when at least 50 of my subscribers canceled because I said that terrorism carried out by Islamics was to some extent motivated by their religion, an hypothesis rejected by what I see as the “politically correct” who took it to be an unjust attack upon an ancient and noble religion. The fact that I, a leftist, a comrade, would say such a thing was especially hard for them to take.

Since then I have regularly received emails pointing out that neither I nor the media have the right to categorically condemn brutal terrorist actions because the terrorists are reacting to decades of Western, particularly American, violence against the Muslims of the Middle East and elsewhere; and that if only the West would stop their bombing they would stop creating new terrorists. Liberal columnists often echo these sentiments, but at the same time cannot accept the role played by radical Islamic beliefs in instigating the Islamic terror.

Not every American soldier in World War II was a knowledgeable and convinced anti-fascist; nor were all of those fighting in Vietnam knowledgeable and convinced anti-communists; but they deeply believed in American exceptionalism. I proceed from the assumption that Islamic terrorists deeply believe in the leading tenets of Islam though many of them may have been drawn to ISIS for a variety of reasons and may have only a passing knowledge of the Koran and may only rarely enter a mosque.

Why is it that terrorists routinely shout “Allah Akhbar” (“God is great”) while carrying out a bloody attack?

Why is it that so much of Islam teaches that non-Muslims are the enemy, that “disbelievers” are to be executed?

Why do they speak of their duty to perform “jihad”, which is usually defined as a struggle against the enemies of Islam or against the “infidels”?

Why do they speak of “martyrs”, which is often used as an honorific for Muslims who have died fulfilling a religious commandment, especially those who die waging jihad, or historically in the military expansion of Islam?

Why do they speak of martyrs going to paradise after dying and receiving heavenly rewards? Even being resurrected on earth, to once again die as a martyr, going again to paradise.

Yes, yes, I know about the terrible crimes of the IRA Catholics and the Israeli Jews, but on the scale of human moral evolution they don't compare to the routine cutting off of heads; the whippings; demolishing 2000-year-old monuments; sternly banning alcohol, music, gays and sex; covering up women's faces; forcibly imposing religious law; and on and on, including the worst of all: the never-ending horrific suicide bombings. ISIS has done the impossible: It has made American foreign policy look almost halfway decent.

Occasionally I reply to critics with something to this effect: Even if I completely accepted your premises, I'd still feel that it was too late. We can't undo the harm that US foreign policy and

the West have caused. The barn door is wide open and all the horses have escaped. There is an entire generation, or two generations, in the Muslim world totally committed to gaining bloody revenge against the West. It appears to be that it's either us or them.

Explaining the cause of terrorism is not the same as excusing it

It might be different if the terrorists focused on killing only those in the West responsible for the horror carried out against their people, but their acts of violence are largely indiscriminate; they attack Westerners at random, often with Muslim victims included; often with only Muslim victims.

As I've pointed out in the past, we should consider this: From the 1950s to the 1980s the United States carried out all kinds of very harmful policies against Latin America, including numerous bombings, without the natives ever resorting to the uncivilized, barbaric kind of retaliation as employed by ISIS. Latin American leftists generally took their revenge out upon concrete representatives of the American empire: diplomatic, military and corporate targets – not markets, theatres, nightclubs, hospitals, schools, restaurants or churches.

France, the site of numerous terrorist attacks, has experimented with deradicalization centers in an attempt to combat homegrown extremism. The centers subjected those they housed to intense courses in French history and philosophy. But after five months the experiment has been abandoned as a complete failure. My guess is that one reason for the failure is that French officials, like their American counterparts, were too politically correct when it came to questions of religion. If I were a teacher at one of these centers I would ask the students how they know – I mean really know – that “martyrs” go to paradise. They are, after all, considering sacrificing their lives for this belief. Seriously confronting this question for perhaps the first time ever, the students' minds may well become somewhat confused, leaving them open for other challenging questions and thoughts.

For the record: I don't support the US fighting ISIS in Syria. I don't trust the Pentagon's motivation, or their choice of bombing targets. They're probably still into regime change. I'd leave the job to Russia and its allies.

Notes:

Washington Post, February 9, 2017
See William Blum, *Killing Hope*, chapter 50 for the details of the Panama intervention.

Associated Press, February 6, 2017
Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. IV (1951), page 428.

William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, chapter 18

Ibid, chapter 5 (ends in 2005; much more is now known)

See Bob Parry, “The Politics Behind ‘Russia-gate’”, *Consortiumnews.com*, March 4, 2017

Washington Post, February 25, 2017
(Source: Anti-Empire Report)

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Foods that are good for your skin

By Shereen Lehman

1. Nourish your skin

The foods you eat can help keep your skin smooth, supple and beautiful. A healthy balanced diet should provide all the nutrients your skin needs:

- Omega-3 fatty acids may help reduce dryness of your skin.
- Vitamin C is necessary for collagen production, an important component of the connective tissue layers of your skin.
- Vitamin A keeps your skin healthy so it can function as a barrier to keep bacteria and other pathogens out of your body.
- Selenium may help prevent skin cancer.
- Red, orange, yellow and dark green plant pigments like lycopene and lutein are natural antioxidants that protect your skin.
- Zinc is necessary for wound healing.

2. Strawberries



Strawberries are packed with vitamin C so they help keep the connective tissue underneath your skin strong and healthy. Strawberries are also rich in folate (a B vitamin), fiber, and an array of phytochemicals that may help prevent skin damage due to exposure to free radicals

Pro tip: eat fresh strawberries with Greek yogurt or steel cut oatmeal for a healthy breakfast.

3. Oysters



Oysters are good for your skin because they're very high in zinc. Eating just three oysters will give you a whole day's worth of zinc. Oysters also supply you with protein and iron. You'll find canned or fresh raw oysters in most grocery stores.

Pro tip: eat raw, smoked or cooked oysters as an appetizer, or make oyster stew.

4. Oranges



Oranges are rich in vitamin C, which is needed for collagen formation and keeps skin feeling firm. Oranges are also rich in vitamin A, which is required for normal growth and cell differentiation.

Vitamin C is necessary for collagen production, an important component of the connective tissue layers of your skin.

Pro tip: eat an orange as an afternoon snack instead of a candy bar.

5. Blueberries



Blueberries are super high in antioxidants that may protect your skin from free radical damage. They are also high in fiber, vitamins, and minerals. They're also naturally diet-friendly -- one cup of fresh blueberries has 84 calories.

Pro tip: serve blueberries as a low-cal dessert or add them to cereal or use them in smoothies.

6. Carrots



Carrots provide vitamin A and it's precursor, beta-carotene. Vitamin A is essential for healthy skin. Carrots are also rich in potassium and fiber while being low in calories and almost fat-free.

Pro tip: serve carrot sticks with a low-calorie veggie dip, top a salad with chopped carrots, or serve cooked carrots as a healthy side dish.

7. Kale



Carrots provide vitamin A and it's precursor, beta-carotene. Vitamin A is essential for healthy skin. Carrots are also rich in potassium and fiber while being low in calories and almost fat-free.

Pro tip: serve carrot sticks with a low-calorie veggie dip, top a salad with chopped carrots, or serve cooked carrots as a healthy side dish.

8. Salmon



Salmon is rich in omega-3 fatty acids that your skin needs to stay soft and supple. It's also an excellent source of protein, selenium, and zinc. Although it's rich in healthy fats, salmon isn't high in calories, so it's perfect for many types of diets.

Pro tip: keep canned salmon on hand for quick and easy sandwiches and salads. Bonus if you salmon with

bones because it ups your calcium intake.

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Pro tip: keep canned salmon on hand for quick and easy sandwiches and salads. Bonus if you salmon with bones because it ups your calcium intake.

9. Brazil nuts



Brazil nuts are crazy high in selenium. One serving gives you a day's worth of selenium several times over. Brazil nuts are also rich in calcium, magnesium, and protein. They're a little high in calories -- one serving of six nuts has close to 200 calories, but you'll get all the selenium you need from just two nuts.

Pro tip: eat a few Brazil nuts with an apple or pear for a healthy afternoon snack.

10. Sweet potatoes



Sweet potatoes are rich in vitamin A, so they're perfect for keeping your skin in good condition. They're also rich in potassium, and fiber. Sweet potatoes live up to their name and are usually a hit with everyone -- even picky eaters.

Pro tip: serve baked sweet potatoes with olive oil, or a touch of a sweet glaze or top with baked beans, onions, cooked spinach or nuts.

11. Tuna



Tuna is an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids that keeps your skin soft. Plus it's high in zinc, selenium, and protein. Tuna is typically served as fillets or steaks, and it can be grilled, baked, or broiled. You'll also find canned tuna in your local grocery store.

Pro tip: choose canned tuna packed in spring water to save on calories.

12. Broccoli

Broccoli is very high in vitamin C that you need for healthy connective tissues. It is also a good source of vitamins A and K, plus fiber and antioxidants that may help protect your skin from sun damage.

(Source: verywell.com)

Red, orange, yellow and dark green plant pigments like lycopene and lutein are natural antioxidants that protect your skin.

How to lose stomach fat

By Andrew Bennett

Let's face it -- losing stomach fat gets harder with age. Moreover, it can be downright infuriating for women because their bodies naturally store fat more easily and burn it far more reluctantly, as compared to men. For a woman over 40 years old to lose stomach fat, she really has to take a multifaceted approach by combining proper nutrition with highly effective exercise techniques. According to a 2011 study published in "The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research," training the abdominal muscles exclusively does not lead to decreased fat mass in the stomach area. But the good news is that you can fight age-related metabolic decline and stomach fat with the right diet and some balanced resistance-training exercise, according to "Xtreme Lean" by Jonathan Lawson and Steve Holman.



1. Take in fewer calories than your daily maintenance intake. According to "You: On a Diet Revised Edition: The Owner's Manual for Waist Management" by Dr. Mehmet C. Oz and Michael F. Roizen, this is one of the fundamentals of weight loss that you simply can't get around. Use a calorie calculator such as the one at MayoClinic.com to help you determine your daily maintenance intake.

2. Choose lean proteins, low-glycemic carbohydrates and healthy fats for your meals, says "The Abs Diet" by David Zinczenko. Examples of lean proteins are chicken, fish, whey and egg whites. Low-glycemic carbs include sweet potatoes, quinoa, brown rice and vegetables. Some healthy fats are avocados, olive oil, raw nuts and seeds, and dark chocolate.

3. Do resistance-training workouts three to five days per week. According to the Mayo Clinic, it's best to start with two or three days a week and then add more workouts as you become more experienced in the gym. Make sure to allow adequate recovery by taking at least one day off between workouts for the same muscle groups.

4. Build your workouts around the compound movements for the major muscle groups of the body. For example, leg presses and squats for the legs, assisted pullups for the back, bench presses for the chest, upright rows for the shoulders and biceps curls and triceps pushdowns for the arms. These exercises provide the most efficient fat-burning workout, according to "Burn the Fat Feed the Muscle" by Tom Venuto.

5. Add one negative-accentuated set per exercise by slowing down the negative or lowering portion of the lift to six seconds. According to Lawson and Holman, this technique can increase fat burning from trouble areas for up to 72 hours following your workout. Use this technique on your last set of any given exercise.

6. Do three to four sets each of three different abdominal exercises. For example, begin with incline bench knee-ups, then do full-range crunches and finish with 30-second planks. The abdominal muscles are like any other muscle group and should be trained once or twice per week, say Lawson and Holman.

7. Add 20 to 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise immediately after your resistance-training workout. Lawson and Holman say that timing it this way forces your body to burn fat directly. MayoClinic.com recommends a total of 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity, or 75 minutes of vigorous activity, per week.

(Source: livehealthy.chron.com)

lean proteins are chicken, fish, whey and egg whites. Low-glycemic carbs include sweet potatoes, quinoa, brown rice and vegetables. Some healthy fats are avocados, olive oil, raw nuts and seeds, and dark chocolate.

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Shiraz exhibit features ample national crafts

HERITAGE TEHRAN — A major exhibition of handicrafts opened its doors to the public at the historical Karim Khan Citadel (Arg-e Karim Khan) in the city of Shiraz on Tuesday.

About 150 artisans from 31 provinces contribute to the event that is organized under the auspices of the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization.



A view of the historical Karim Khan Citadel in Shiraz

The four-day exhibit touches upon woodwork, illuminated manuscript, miniature, textile printing, enamel, leatherwork, handwoven products, calligraphy, traditional musical instruments, metalwork, and marquetry, amongst a lavish circle of other skills.

Karim Khan Citadel is an immense brick stronghold that has dominated the southern Iranian city since the 18th century.

Study finds security tops tourist concerns in holiday choice

Security is holidaymakers' main consideration when choosing a destination, a research report released on Wednesday by Bournemouth University and travel search site Travelzoo said.

"Since Tunisia happened, safety and security has moved higher and higher up the agenda," Travelzoo's European President Richard Singer told Reuters, adding that security was now travelers' number one concern.

A British coroner last week criticized the security arrangements of a Tunisian hotel where 38 tourists were killed by a militant in 2015.

The study said it had found that "97 percent of all respondents have personal safety at the forefront of their minds when choosing a holiday destination, and that the majority feel significantly more concerned now than they did in 2014".

"Two years ago, the most important things to do with choosing a holiday probably revolved around price or sunshine. But now, it's just safety and security," Singer said, adding that travel advice needed to be easier to understand.

Some of the families of victims of the Tunisia attack said that they would have changed their plans if they had been aware of warnings about travel to Tunisia.

Wednesday's report recommended a "pass/fail" security accreditation for hotels and landmarks, although Singer said its exact form was up to the industry to decide.

(Source: Reuters)

UN tourism chief criticizes U.S. travel ban, hails Iran's welcome

TOURISM TEHRAN — The head of the UN World Tourism Organization on Tuesday expressed disapproval of the freshly revised U.S. travel ban as an approach that still limits tourism, hailing Iran's positive stance on welcoming inbound passengers.

The difference between Iranian and U.S. presidents is obvious; Trump puts limitations on tourists' arrivals while Rouhani invites people across the globe to visit Iran, Taleb Rifai said.

He made the remarks during a visit to Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization Director Zahra Ahmadipour on the sidelines of the Silk Road Ministers Meeting in Berlin.

Iran gives people all over the world a message of peace and security, said Ahmadipour who left Tehran for Germany on Monday to attend the opening ceremony of the Internationale Tourismus-Börse Berlin (ITB Berlin), which runs from March 8 to 12.

Rifai also attached importance to the significant growth of international arrivals to Iran over the past couple of years.

Under the 2025 Tourism Vision plan, the country is expecting to increase the number of tourism arrivals from 4.8 million in 2014 to 20 million by 2025.

U.S. President Donald Trump's move to revise a travel ban on citizens of certain Muslim-majority countries will not lessen its impact on tourism, Rifai said in an address to reporters.

"People don't go to places where they don't feel welcome," Reuters quoted Rifai as saying on Tuesday.

Last week, Rifai told Reuters that the United States had lost \$185 million in one



Secretary-General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Taleb Rifai in an undated photo

month after the first ban was introduced and stood to lose tens of millions more each month if similar policies continued.

Trump on Monday signed a revised executive order banning citizens from six Muslim-majority nations from traveling to the United States but removing Iraq from the list, after his controversial first attempt

was blocked in the courts.

"The travel ban, based on nationality, is contrary to the principles of freedom of travel," the UNWTO announced in a statement on earlier in January.

Known as the World's Largest Travel Trade Show, the ITB Berlin focuses on the 'International Year of Sustainable

Tourism for Development 2017', a slogan introduced by the UNWTO earlier this year.

Tour operators, online booking portals and hotels, and many other service providers from over 180 countries will present their products and services at the event.

Impact of latest travel ban on international students unclear

The Trump administration's revised executive order temporarily suspending travel by people from six predominantly Muslim countries could affect an estimated 15,000 international students.

Of those, about 12,000 come from Iran, which is one of the countries named in the ban.

Students who have valid visas are not expected to be affected.

"The new order signed today ... [applies] only to foreign nationals outside the United States who do not have a valid visa," said Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary John Kelly. "It is important to note that nothing in this executive order affects current lawful permanent residents or persons with current authorization to enter our country."

"If you have a current valid visa to travel, we welcome you," Kelly wrote in a release from DHS.

However, it remains unclear what impact the order will have on students who will need to renew their U.S. visa to

continue their studies.

Peter Asaad, an immigration attorney and partner at Quarles and Brady in Washington, advised that "although the executive order purportedly will not automatically invalidate current unexpired visas, individuals from the six countries should be advised to refrain from exiting the U.S. when possible."

"And those outside the U.S. should seek to enter as soon as possible until there is greater clarity," Asaad said.

There are more than a million international students in the U.S., a number that has nearly doubled in the past decade.

Several well-known universities pushed back against the original executive order announced in January, which was later suspended following legal challenges.

Some 17 universities filed legal papers February 13 against the first travel ban, calling it "serious and chilling" to international education. They included Brown, Columbia, Harvard, John Hopkins,

Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton, Stanford, Vanderbilt and Yale.

"The new travel ban will surely get litigated," Asaad said. "The court will look at whether there is a rational basis for the travel ban, which may again stop the president's action under the same rationale as the Washington District Court's nationwide ban."

The U.S. green card is available to international students who show exceptional ability in the sciences, arts or business, and who can certify that they have a job offer. The U.S. limits those EB-2 visas to 40,000 holders each year. Students may obtain a green card through family channels, as well, by being the spouse, minor child, married or unmarried son or daughter, or brother or sister of a U.S. citizen who is 21 or older.

They may also be priority workers through an EB-1 visa if they have extraordinary abilities or are outstanding professors or researchers on a tenure track position.

In addition to green card holders, those excluded from the new restrictions are dual nationals using passports from unaffected countries; persons with valid U.S. visas or other travel documents; persons on diplomatic or similar passports; and persons who have been granted asylum in the U.S.

Consular officers may also make exceptions on a case-by-case basis for individuals with business, study or family connections to the United States. Individuals already in the United States are also excluded.

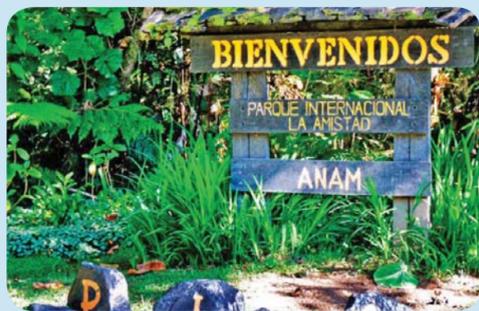
The new order includes a temporary halt to refugee admissions and approval for admissions for 120 days. Some exceptions are possible, but they are limited. The order also calls for refugee admissions for all of 2017 to be capped at 50,000. This could be called a "refugee cap" or "refugee limit."

Last year, international students added \$32.4 billion to the U.S. economy. (Source: VOA)

ROUND THE GLOBE

La Amistad National Park

The Talamanca Range-La Amistad Reserves / La Amistad National Park extends along the border between Panama and Costa Rica. The transboundary property covers large tracts of the highest and wildest non-volcanic mountain range in Central America and is one of that region's outstanding conservation areas.



The Talamanca Mountains contain one of the major remaining blocks of natural forest in Central America with no other protected area complex in Central America containing a comparable altitudinal variation.

Inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage site, the property has many peaks on both sides of the border, including Cerro Chirripo, the highest elevation in Costa Rica and all of southern Central America. The surface area of the property 570,045 hectares, of which 221,000 hectares are on the Panamanian side.

The beautiful and rugged mountain landscape harbors extraordinary biological and cultural diversity. Pre-ceramic archaeological sites indicate that the Talamanca Range has a history of many millennia of human occupation.

There are several indigenous peoples on both sides of the border within and near the property. In terms of biological diversity, there is a wide range of ecosystems, an unusual richness of species per area unit and an extraordinary degree of endemism.

The scenic mountains and foothills contain impressive footprints of Quaternary glaciation, such as glacial cirques, lakes and valleys shaped by glaciers, phenomena not found elsewhere in the region. (Source: UNESCO)

Seven global attractions ruined by tourism

From tobogganing at the Great Wall of China to playing golf at Pyramids of Giza

By Julia Buckley

It's been standing haphazardly for over 800 years but the Leaning Tower of Pisa has a new rival on its way: a 56m ferris wheel which will dominate the townscape in its bid to give visitors a view of the tower and the Mediterranean at the same time.

Preservationists are up in arms at the city's plans; although Pisa generally struggles to attract tourists for more than half a day (enough time to see the tower, the baptistry and the cathedral), building something that'll make an indelible mark on the landscape may end up not being the right idea.

As Pisa begins its battle, the authorities might want to have a look at what happened in these seven other places which pandered to tourists and in doing so, spoiled the sights themselves.

Great Wall of China: toboggan run

You already knew that the Great Wall is not the great experience you might have imagined, once you have to share it with thousands of other daytrippers from Beijing.

One thing that makes it greater (or less great, depending where you stand on heritage preservation) is the giant metal slide which you can toboggan down to exit from the wall at Mutianyu, which Michelle Obama used during her 2014 trip. Even better, you can get a chairlift up to the wall. Who said tourism wasn't innovative?

Pyramids of Giza: golf course

For culture-loving golfers, this is as good as holidays get: a golfing break in the shadow of the pyramids of Giza.

For everyone else, the green slopes right behind the Great Pyramid – whether that's the Oberoi (closest) or the Hilton (further away, but a bigger course) – may feel a little less atmospheric.

Venice: cruise ship views

Overcrowding, litter, expulsion of locals – the crimes



A massive cruise ship dwarfs Venice as it pulls into town. (Photo: World Monument Fund)

tourists have committed against Venice are myriad. But no 50-strong group of selfie stick-wielding tourists can be quite as grotesque the cruise ships docking in the middle of La Serenissima to disgorge their won't-spend-a-penny clientele.

Giant ships pass alongside the city to dock at the cruise terminal, but stay around the Arsenale on the iconic Riva degli Schiavoni and you might wake up to find your perfect view of the lagoon has been replaced by a close encounter with a billionaire's yacht or smaller ship.

Lijiang: Epcot-style reconstruction

Such a fine example of Han Dynasty architecture that after a 1996 earthquake they not only rebuilt many fallen buildings but also demolished others and rebuilt to Epcot standard, as the pearl of Yunnan province, Lijiang not only charges tourists 80RMB (£9) to enter its old town, but also spoils them with wall-to-wall souvenir shops.

Don't worry if you don't buy that "yak" yoghurt or "handmade" shawl on your first stop; you'll see its twin the next place you set foot in.

Stonehenge: heavy traffic

There's nothing like a trip to Stonehenge to soak up the peace of Salisbury Plain and understand why this place was sacred to the druids.

You'll probably need earplugs to do that, though, because the "gateway to the Southwest" A303 road runs right alongside the site, and on weekends and throughout summer, it's clogged solid with holiday-makers chugging down to Cornwall.

Plans to reroute the road are ongoing; the latest idea is to build a 1.7 mile tunnel, though it's been vociferously opposed by archaeologists.

Niagara Falls: casinos and a wax museum

For once, it's not America to blame for mass consumerism. In fact, the U.S. side of Niagara Falls is a pristine state park where the river races beneath and alongside you, where you can sally down to the Cave of the Winds to soak in the atmosphere, and where the only sound is from 160,000 cubic meters of water rushing past per second.

Unfortunately, being in the park means looking at the Canadian side, a veritable excrement of casinos, tacky shops, and what must surely be one of the world's worst wax museums. Rarely was nature treated so badly.

Lascaux: total destruction

An example of what can happen if tourists aren't controlled before they do damage, the prehistoric cave of Lascaux with its paleolithic paintings only lasted 23 years after its discovery in 1940, before it was closed due to mould on the paintings caused by the air conditioning system.

Lascaux now has a full-scale replica of the site, "Lascaux IV", which opened last year as an extension to the existing "Lascaux II". But as tourists pour into the facsimile, the black mould has caused irreparable damage in the original.

(Source: independent)

NASA proposes building artificial magnetic field to restore Mars' atmosphere

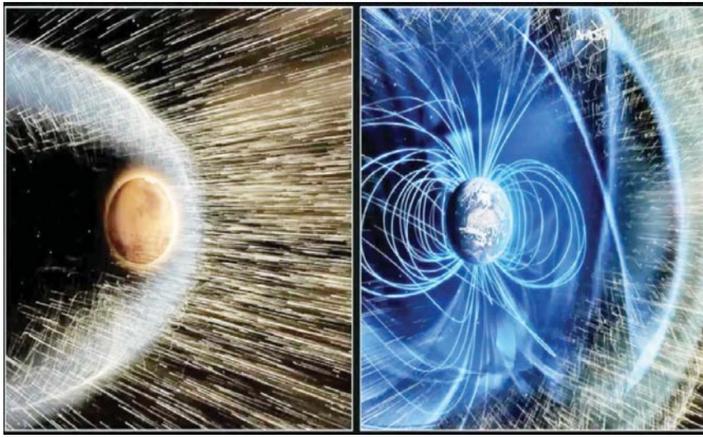
The Mars of today is a cold, dry husk with no life as far as we can tell. Even if there is still some hearty microorganism living on the Red Planet, it's not suitable for human habitation without a great deal of protective equipment. A NASA talk given at the recent Planetary Science Vision 2050 Workshop presented a potential way to make Mars more habitable by giving it an artificial magnetic field. This could protect human residents from radiation and bring back some of the planet's ancient oceans.

Data from missions like NASA's MAVEN and the ESA's Mars Express supports the idea that Mars was once more Earth-like. A few billion years ago, Mars had a magnetic field (like Earth does) that shielded it from radiation and the solar wind. Then, the magnetic field died out roughly 4.2 billion years ago, and the Martian atmosphere as slowly stripped away over the next 500 million years. Gone was the warm, wet Mars of the past. If we want to colonize the planet, we need to bring that Mars back.

■ Magnetic field

Even if we were to dump more atmosphere into Mars, it would just be stripped away again. It's not clear how we would go about restoring Mars' magnetic field, but we might be able to build an artificial one.

According to NASA Planetary Science



Division director Jim Green, a powerful magnetic dipole positioned at the Mars L1 Lagrange Point could potentially deflect the solar wind like a natural magnetic field. The L1 Lagrange Point is a location of gravitational equilibrium that

ensures the structure remains between Mars and the sun.

Green notes that advances coming out of plasma physics could allow for the future development of inflatable structures that can generate a mag-

netic dipole of 1 or 2 tesla. That could be enough to shield Mars against the solar wind, and it wouldn't need to be anything near as large as the planet itself.

The Planetary Science Division worked with scientists from Ames Research Center, the Goddard Space Flight Center, and a number of universities to run simulations of this scenario (PDF). The team found that a magnetic shield would allow Mars' atmosphere to find a new equilibrium.

Currently, it has stabilized at roughly 1% the density of Earth's atmosphere, thanks to the release of gases from internal pockets. With the shield, that could increase by several times and allow the surface temperature to rise to an average of 4 degrees Celsius (7 degrees Fahrenheit).

The thicker, warmer atmosphere could release the frozen carbon dioxide in the Martian ice caps, leading to even more temperature increases from the greenhouse effect. The frozen water hiding under the surface could also thaw and fill some of those ancient basins. Not only would Mars be warmer, but human residents wouldn't have to worry about high radiation levels, or, you know, suffocating the instant they step outside.

(Source: Extreme Tech)

According to NASA Planetary Science Division director Jim Green, a powerful magnetic dipole positioned at the Mars L1 Lagrange Point could potentially deflect the solar wind like a natural magnetic field.

Vision, not limbs, led fish onto land 385 million years ago

A provocative new Northwestern University and Claremont McKenna, Scripps and Pitzer colleges study suggests it was the power of the eyes and not the limbs that first led our ancient aquatic ancestors to make the momentous leap from water to land. Crocodile-like animals first saw easy meals on land and then evolved limbs that enabled them to get there, the researchers argue.

Neuroscientist and engineer Malcolm A. MacIver of Northwestern and evolutionary biologist and paleontologist Lars Schmitz of Claremont McKenna, Scripps and Pitzer colleges studied the fossil record and discovered that eyes nearly tripled in size before -- not after -- the water-to-land transition. The tripling coincided with a shift in location of the eyes from the side of the head to the top. The expanded visual range of seeing through air may have eventually led to larger brains in early terrestrial vertebrates and the ability to plan and not merely react, as fish do.

■ Mechanical engineering

"Why did we come up onto land 385 million years ago? We are the first to think that vision might have something to do with it," said MacIver, professor of biomedical engineering and of mechanical engineering in the McCormick School of Engineering.

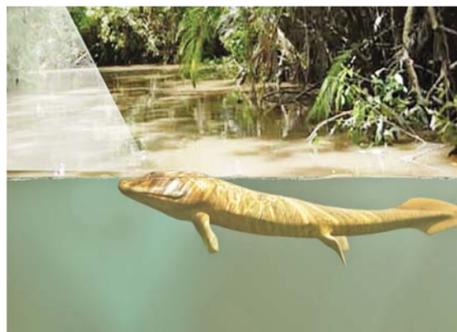
"We found a huge increase in visual capability in vertebrates just before the transition from water to land. Our hypothesis is that maybe it was seeing an unexploited cornucopia of food on land -- millipedes, centipedes, spiders and more -- that drove evolution to come up with limbs from fins," MacIver said. (Invertebrates came onto land 50 million years before our vertebrate ancestors made that transition.)

The enlargement of eyes is significant. By just popping those eyes above the water line, the fish could see 70 times farther in air than in water. With the tripling of eye size, the animal's visually monitored space increased a millionfold. This happened millions of years before fully terrestrial animals existed.

■ Bigger eyes

"Bigger eyes are almost worthless in water because vision is largely limited to what's directly in front of the animal," said Schmitz, assistant professor of biology at the W.M. Keck Science Department, a joint program of Claremont McKenna, Scripps and Pitzer colleges.

"But larger eye size is very valuable when viewing through air. In evolution, it often comes down to a trade-off. Is it worth the metabolic toll to enlarge your eyes? What's the point? Here we think the point was to be able



to search out prey on land," he said.

Larger eyes were consequently selected for, whereas the study shows that in water, larger eyes led to negligible increases in visual range. In fact, one animal group that arose after animals came onto land went back to full-time life underwater, and their eyes went back to the smaller eye size normally seen in fish, MacIver and Schmitz found.

(Source: EurekAlert)

Lightning mapper beams back first views from space

A sensitive infrared camera mounted on NOAA's new GOES-16 weather satellite has captured its first astounding images of lightning flashes from a perch more than 22,000 miles (nearly 36,000 kilometers) out in space.

The first-of-its-kind imager can detect in-cloud, cloud-to-cloud and cloud-to-ground lightning strikes, giving weather forecasters an inventory of the location, frequency and intensity of lightning activity that could help warn the public of severe storms.

A video released Monday by NOAA shows a 30-second view of lightning activity in a severe storm complex Feb. 14 over southeast Texas. The green cross indicates the location of Houston, and the green lines illustrate the Gulf Coast.

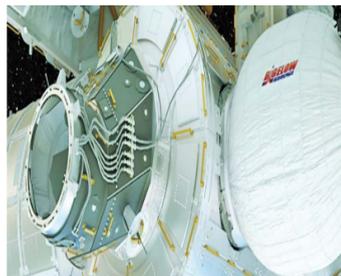
■ Lightning flashes

The lightning flashes are overlaid on an image from GOES-16's primary camera, the Advanced Baseline Imager, which

produces high-resolution infrared and visible pictures of cloud movements, storm tracks, tropical cyclones and smoke plumes.

GOES-16 is the first geostationary weather satellite to carry such an instrument, which is sensitive to lightning flashes day and night. Research satellites in lower orbits have flown with lightning cameras, and a lightning sensor launched to the International Space Station last month, but those detectors do not have the wide coverage of a high-altitude geostationary observatory.

This image shows lightning data captured on Feb. 14 over the course of an hour and displayed over an image of the Western Hemisphere from the Advanced Baseline Imager on GOES-16. Brighter colors indicate more lightning energy was recorded; color bar units are the calculated kilowatt-hours of total optical emissions from lightning.



NOAA says the lightning mapper on GOES-16, and aboard follow-on GOES satellites, will deliver data to weather forecasters within 20 seconds, offering near real-time snapshots of severe storm activity, often outpacing the availability of conventional satellite and radar imagery. The lightning instrument collects observations at 500 frames per second, distinguishing the location, intensity and hori-

zontal propagation of individual strokes within each lightning flash, according to NOAA.

■ Weather imagery

Lightning data currently incorporated into weather imagery and forecasts usually comes from ground-based detection networks.

GOES-16 launched on Nov. 19 from Cape Canaveral on-board a United Launch Alliance Atlas 5 rocket. Lockheed Martin manufactured the weather satellite -- the first in a new generation of NOAA weather sentinels -- and the Geostationary Lightning Mapper.

NOAA says GOES-16 will enter service by November after completing calibration and commissioning. The weather agency will announce in May whether GOES-16 will be stationed over the Pacific Ocean or the Atlantic Ocean.

(Source: spaceflightnow.com)

Yellow taxis are safer than blue ones, says science

Are your city's streets flooded with bright yellow taxis, or do the cabs blend in with other vehicles in traffic?

That detail might seem small, but new research shows that a taxicab's color has an impact on how likely other vehicles are to crash into it.

A new study from the National University of Singapore found that yellow taxis are involved in rear-end collisions 9 percent less frequently than blue cabs. Published Monday in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, the study's findings suggest that the vibrant yellow color makes the vehicles more visible to other drivers, catching their eyes and helping them to avoid collisions more frequently.

"Although there is anecdotal evidence on higher accident rates for dark colored vehicles, few studies have empirically established a strong causal link between color and accident risk," Teck-Hua Ho, a professor at the National University of Singapore and the study's leader author, said in a statement. "The findings of our study suggest that color visibility should play a major role in determining the colors used for public transport vehicles."

■ Iconic symbols

Yellow cabs have become iconic symbols in cities

such as New York, but many companies in other cities have opted for more subtle colors. A University of Chicago study some 100 years ago concluded that yellow was the easiest color to spot, prompting a cab company to select it so passengers could easily hail the cars as they passed through crowded streets.

Do you belong on the road? Take our driver's test.

Today, that choice seems to play a role in helping other drivers avoid the vehicles as well.

For 36 months, researchers tracked 4,175 yellow taxis and 12,525 blue taxis from the same Singapore company. Additionally, they examined three months of data from some 3,000 GPS logs, controlling for differences in distance, number of stops, and the speed driven.

After also ruling out differences in age and level of education of drivers, researchers were able to conclude that the color played a role in avoiding collisions, confirming decades of observational and anecdotal hunches.

■ Street lighting

The researchers found that the effect was strongest in darkness under street lighting, because of the way yellow stands out against dark backgrounds.

Overall, a regular taxi passenger is like to experience one crash over 40 years in a yellow taxi, compared to



1.1 in a blue cab. While that slight bump may seem insignificant to a passenger, it has larger implications for cab companies and drivers, who spend time and money repairing cabs in their large fleets that are involved in crashes.

Researchers say the findings could have implications for colors of vehicles involved in public and private-hire transportation, and hope to conduct similar studies to uncover any benefits to choosing certain colors in those modes of transportation.

(Source: The CSM)

Lullabies to babies in the womb decrease crying

Many expectant parents prepare for the arrival of a new baby by redecorating its intended bedroom in a soothing color and buying lots of rattles and cuddly toys.

But new research suggests that the best way of ensuring a happy and contented newborn is by singing to it while it is still in the womb.

A study of 160 women found that those who sang lullabies both during pregnancy and after giving birth had babies who spent significantly shorter periods crying.

Around 170 pregnant women were split between those who were told to sing lullabies in the months immediately before and after birth and those who were not.

The babies in the singing group generally cried 18.5 percent of the time compared to 28.2 percent of the time in the group who were not sung to.

Meanwhile for those with colic - excessive or frequent crying where there is no ill health - the babies who had enjoyed prenatal lullabies tended to cry for about a quarter of the time.

Bonding was also analyzed using a scientific measurement called the Mother-to-Infant Bonding Scale while they also recorded hours of baby sleep, crying incidences and bouts of colic.

In the weeks after birth, the postnatal bonding measurement was higher among the singers - 1.96 against 1.28 on the scale.

The research was undertaken by the University of Milan and published in the journal Women and Birth.

(Source: The Telegraph)

Almost 90% of the world's oceans will be hotter and more acidic by 2050

We are set to put 86% of the world's oceans under the combined stress of higher temperatures and ocean acidification by 2050.

The individual threats of rising sea temperatures and more acidic oceans are known to change marine life in the oceans. But the combinations of several stressful changes at once could have a much greater effect than the sum of its parts.

Researchers have mapped how these factors will spread and overlap throughout the rest of the century if we carry on with emissions as normal, or if nations stick to their pledges in the Paris Agreement. The results are published in a paper in the journal Nature Communications.

The study looked at combinations of four effects of climate change: increasing acidification, rising temperatures, decreasing oxygen in the oceans and decreasing availability of food. These are already becoming established individually in the oceans. They are also starting to overlap.

Today about 10% of the oceans are under the double pressures of acidification and higher temperatures. This overlap is expected to become much more prevalent in the coming years, extending to more than half of the oceans in the next 15 years, and to 86% by 2050 if countries continue with carbon emissions as usual.

"It doesn't stop the impacts of climate change on the oceans, it just gives an extra 20 years or so for organisms to potentially be able to adapt to changing conditions," Henson said. "If conditions change more slowly, the organisms will have a chance to migrate to regions with more favorable conditions, or undergo adaptation within their populations to adjust."

20 years could make a difference for many marine creatures. However, large marine animals that have a longer lifespan are at a disadvantage compared with smaller animals, as they take much longer to reproduce and to have the chance for genetic adaptation.

(Source: IBT)

Europe launches fifth Sentinel Earth observation satellite

Europe launched the fifth of its Sentinel Earth observation satellites on Monday as part of its multi-billion-euro Copernicus program to provide speedy images of land, oceans and waterways.

The Sentinel-2B satellite, part of a system of satellites that is to monitor Earth, blasted off on board a Vega rocket from Europe's spaceport in French Guiana at 08:49 PM. EST (0149 GMT on Tuesday).

It will join its twin Sentinel-2A, which has been in orbit since 2015, to take high-resolution, color and infrared images for a wide array of environmental initiatives, including crop forecasting and monitoring natural disasters.

The two satellites will orbit 488 miles (786 km) above Earth, on opposite sides of the planet.

Together, they will be able to cover all of Earth's land surfaces, large islands, inland and coastal waterways every five days, providing more up-to-date images and at higher resolution than have been available.

The Copernicus project is described by the European Space Agency (ESA) as the most ambitious Earth observation program to date. The European Union and the ESA have committed funding of more than 8 billion euros (\$9 billion) to it until 2020.

The launch of the Copernicus project became especially urgent after Europe lost contact with its Earth observation satellite Envisat in 2012 after 10 years.

(Source: Reuters)

13th International Drainage Workshop Wraps Up Work in Ahvaz on March 6



The 13th International Drainage Workshop (IDW) wrapped up its work in Ahvaz on March 6.

Mohammad Haj-Rasouliha Deputy Energy Minister and Deputy Head of Iran National Drainage and Irrigation Committee termed implementation of integrated management of water resources in the drainage basin and watershed as one of the necessary programs for the improvement of current situation of water resources of the country and said: "In this regard, the necessity of effective governance and sovereignty on the management of water resources, integrated view to whole drainage basin is inevitable in the creation of balance between water resources and consumption, distribution and consumption of water and also supervision on the fair distribution of water between beneficiaries of watershed from upstream and to downstream basin."

He added: "Maximal support of beneficiaries and functionalities in the processes of decision making, planning, operation and preserving common water in internal drain-



age basins plays an important role in success of this approach."

Managing director of Iran Water Resources Management Company pointed to the protection and revival of hydro ecosystems, including wetlands, rivers, lakes and underground water tables, as one of the other very important projects in the arena of water industry of the country and stated: "In this respect, plan for reviving and balancing underground water resources and reducing consumption of this source especially in agricultural sector is underway with the aim of preventing the immethodical extraction of underground waters, promoting efficiency, saving and optimal use of agricultural water resources."

Adjusting licenses for the extraction of underground water tables, controlling and freeing the bedrock of rivers, controlling quality of water and creating stable water flow and also reviving lakes and rivers are of the salient measures which have been followed up by Iran Water Resources Management Company.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Haj-Rasouliha said that his company has taken giant strides in this field and also has allocated considerable budget for this affair.

He pointed to the motto of World Day of Water in 2017 entitled "Wastewaters" and placed special emphasis on improving quality of water by 2030 globally and added: "Presently, more than 80 percent of produced wastes are released to ecosystem without

treatment operation."

It is expected global demand for water will witness a considerable 50 percent growth by 2030, mainly at urban areas, he said, adding: "Therefore, new approaches of collection of wastewater, safe and secure treatment and their management will be felt direly."

The Deputy Head of Iran National Drainage and Irrigation Committee reiterated: "If the treated wastes are reused, valuable source will be accessible in terms of water and nutrients, details of which will help food security and improvement of livelihood of people, otherwise, adverse effects will be spread."

The deputy energy minister expressed his special thanks to the efforts taken in Khuzestan Water and Power Authority especially unflinching efforts of Mohammad-Reza Shamsaei Managing Director of the organization and his colleagues and unsparing cooperation of governor general and political authorities in Khuzestan Province in the better organization of 13th Intl. Drainage workshop (IDW).

At the end of this prestigious ceremony, top figures attending in 13th International Drainage Workshop (IDW) were appreciated.

It should be noted that 13th International Drainage Workshop (IDW) was held by Khuzestan Water and Power Authority (KWPA) from March 4 -6, 2017 in Ahvaz.



Faculty Member of Berlin Humboldt University in Germany Professor Franc Risbeyk was the next speaker in 13th International Drainage Workshop who appreciated salient activities taken in Iran in the field of implementation of drainage projects which are similar to other advanced countries.

Speaking on the sidelines of International drainage Seminar in Ahvaz, he said: "Salinities of underground waters is the main drainage problem in Khuzestan Province. Accordingly, it is logical that drainages should be installed at 1.7-m depth from the land level."

If the depth of drainages exceed 2.5 meters, drainage will discharge very saline underground water, he said, adding: "It seems that depth of drainages should be reduced."

The Faculty Member added: "According to the data collected, 25-30 percent of underground waters in Khuzestan Province are installed at the distance less than two meters from land level."

There are billions of water drainage cubic meters in this province, he said, adding: "Effective and logical steps should be taken in this regard scientifically in order to discharge it."

Turning to the three strategies to discharge saline waters, he said: "Installing double-layer

drainage for preventing underground water from rising and discharging irrigational water", "creating a barrier on agricultural land and installing vertical drainage in order to transfer drainage water" and "constructing canal at surrounding area of land for passing underground waters" are salient strategies that should be taken in this regard, which can cause desalination of soil gradually."

The university lecturer termed the conditions available in Khuzestan Province similar to a region in U.S. California and reiterated: "Experts and specialists in California have not yet reached to a solution for removing this problem."

Deputy Energy Minister in Water and Wastewater Affairs Rahim Meydani was the next speaker who revealed the mobilization and cooperation of government and Energy Ministry to solve drinking water shortage problem, collection and sanitary discharge of sewage system in Khuzestan Province within the next four years.



Speaking on the sidelines of 13th International Drainage Workshop in Ahvaz, he said: "Once a credit line, worth 18,000 billion to-mans, is provided out of financing scheme, government financial resources and also financial resources of water-supply projects of this province, water shortage problem facing this province will be solved completely within the next three years."

He pointed to reducing water consumption in favor of the environment as main priority of water sector of the Energy Ministry and added: "Returning water right of environment to the very environment can lead the country to avert catastrophic and disastrous phenomena such as dust storm, particulate matters and drying of wetlands."

"I am very pleased to inform that the 13th International Drainage Workshop (13th IDW) will be held in Ahvaz, Iran in March 2017. The event shall be a valuable opportunity for the drainage scholars and experts from all over the world to bring together the technologies, experiences and the latest findings of drainage to be reviewed. In this regard we will increase our knowledge and exchange of our experiences."

The main approach of 13th International Drainage Workshop is environmental aspects of drainage and promotion of drainage management for environmental sustainability. The workshop is organized by IRNCID and hosted by Khuzestan Water and Power Authority (KWPA). Khuzestan province is the birthplace of drainage in Iran. About 60 percent of drained area of the country is in Khuzestan. In addition, there are many ancient unique hydraulic structures in the region such as Cho-

gha Zanbil Ziggurat, an ancient complex built around 1250 B.C. with water physical treatment facility. Participants in the workshop can both visit the modern drainage networks and enjoy the ancient water structures from the dating back over 3000 years."

Completion of Construction Operation of 8 Drainage and Irrigation Projects in Karkheh by KPWPA by Next 4 Months

Project Manager for Development of Drainage and Irrigation Networks in Karkheh Farshad Esmailzadeh was the next speaker who revealed the 90 percent physical progress in the construction operation of a num-



ber of eight drainage and irrigation units in some land areas at south Karkheh, located on land area as large as 26,580 ha."

Once the required credits are provided, this giant project will be put into operation by June 2017, he said, adding: "Despite financial problems, a number of 10 projects including three water conveyance lines in Azadegan Plain (Lot No. 3 and 4, AMC 3 and AMC4, as long as 23 km and also two drainage strings in Chamran and WMD as long as 140 km, have been put into operation, so that these projects have played leading role in supplying agricultural water of the region."

He pointed to the water-supply projects implemented in this field as follows: Pay Pol regulatory diversion dam, Chamran water basin, Kowsar pumping station and large siphon of Karkheh, water transfer canals in Azadegan Plain in Lot No. 1 and 2 (AMC1 and AMC2). MCI canal in Kowsar Canal, Shahid Chamran Canal and EMD and CMD drainages, AVAN Plain drainage and irrigation networks, etc.

International Irrigation and Drainage Conference Is a Great Chance for Khuzestan Province

Executive Secretary of 13th International Irrigation and Drainage Conference Narges Zahrabi said: "Of total 60 abstracts submitted to the secretariat of the Conference, 63 of which have been admitted."

She went on to say that researchers from 22 countries have submitted their articles to the Secretariat of the Conference, she opined.

Organizing 13th International Irrigation and Drainage Conference is a chance for Khuzestan Province, she said, adding: "The license for organizing this Conference was issued for Iran after 40 years, so that Energy Minister delegated the authority of organizing this Conference to Khuzestan Water and Power Authority."

This prestigious Ceremony was attended by the governor general of Khuzestan Province, Deputy Energy Minister, Head of Supreme Council of Iran National Irrigation and

Drainage Committee, Deputy Minister of Agricultural Jihad, Head of International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage (ICID) and also a number of provincial officials.



Managing Director of Khuzestan Water and Power Authority (KPWPA) Mohammad-Reza Shamsaei was the next speaker who said: "I, on behalf of the Khuzestan Water and Power Authority have the pleasure to invite all researchers, scholars and experts to participate in the Thirteenth International Drainage Workshop which will be held in Ahvaz, Iran in 2017."

Khuzestan plain in the South West Iran, with its unique capacities in water, soil and climatic conditions has long been an attractive place to different ethnic groups. Two summers and mild winters have made double cropping possible this is a unique characteristic throughout the country.

Salt affected heavy soils of Khuzestan need drainage facilities to be irrigated. The first subsurface drainage system was implemented in 12000 hectares of Haft Tappeh sugarcane project in 1970s following the construction of Shavoor open drainage system which was constructed in 1956.

In addition to modern irrigation and drainage networks, one can find old unique hydraulic structures in Khuzestan, such as Chogha Zanbil Ziggurat, an ancient complex built around 1250 B.C. with water physical treatment facility.

Gholam-Reza Shariati Governor General of Khuzestan Province was the last speaker who said: "Fertile land areas and running waters double the significance of drainage."

Fortunately, giant steps have been taken in the 11th government in the field of drainage, he said, adding: "It is hoped that this international conference will boost scientific capability and knowledge of participants to a great extent."

President of ICID DR. Saeed Nairizi said: On behalf of the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage (ICID), I have the pleasure to invite you to the 13th International Drainage Workshop (IDW) of ICID to be held from 4-7 March 2017 at Ahvaz City, Iran the capital of Khuzestan Province located on the banks of the Karoun (Karun) River. Hosted by the Iranian National Committee (IRNCID) the theme of the Workshop is "Drainage and Environmental Sustainability".

ICID, through its Working Group on Sustainable Drainage, has been organizing International Drainage Workshops (IDW) since 1978 with the aim of sharing experience with across regions and at international scales. These workshops are attended by a large number of participants consisting of academicians, scientists, engineers and all those interested in sustainable development through irrigation, drainage and agricultural water management.

Under the umbrella of the main theme "Drainage and Environmental Sustainability" discussions will focus on: (i) Measures to lower volume of drainage water; (ii) Measures to improve drainage water quality; (iii) Adaptation of new design criteria in favor of the environment; and (iv) Application of alternative drainage methods."

By: A.Saeidi



U.S. and Iraqi sources: ISIL Leader Baghdadi abandons Mosul fight to field commanders

Abadi: Iraq to continue operations against ISIL positions in Syria

The United States and Iraqi officials believe the self-declared Caliph of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist group, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has left operational commanders behind with diehard followers to fight the battle of Mosul, and is now hiding out in the desert, focusing mainly on his own survival.

It is impossible to confirm the whereabouts of the ISIL "caliph", who declared himself the ruler of all Muslims from Mosul's Great Mosque after his forces swept through northern Iraq in 2014, Reuters reported.

But U.S. and Iraqi intelligence sources say an absence of official communication from the group's leadership and the loss of territory in Mosul suggest he has abandoned the city, by far the largest population center his group has ever held.

He has proved to be an elusive target, rarely using communication that can be monitored, and moving constantly, often multiple times in one 24-hour cycle, the sources say.

From their efforts to track him, they believe he hides mostly among sympathetic civilians in familiar desert villages, rather than with fighters in their barracks in urban areas where combat has been under way, the sources say.

■ Iraq to continue operations against ISIL

Meanwhile, Iraqi Prime Minister Haid-



er al-Abadi says government forces will press ahead with an aerial bombardment campaign against the hideouts of ISIL terrorists in Syria and neighboring states if they give Baghdad the approval for such operations.

"I respect the sovereignty of states, and I have secured the approval of Syria to strike positions (on its territory)," he told a conference in the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniya, which lies in Iraq's north-

ern and semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, on Wednesday.

Abadi announced in a statement on February 24 that Iraqi fighter jets had pounded ISIL lairs in Syria.

"We are determined to chase terrorism that tries to kill our sons and citizens wherever it is found, so we gave orders to the air force command to strike Daesh positions in Hosaiba and Albu Kamal inside Syrian territory," the statement read.

The Iraqi prime minister added that the targets were connected with a recent string of deadly explosions in Baghdad.

"The heroes of the sky executed the operation and responded to the terrorists with amazing success," Abadi said.

Iraq's Joint Operations Command later stated that the F16 fighter jets had destroyed ISIL positions and strongholds in Hosaiba and Albu Kamal districts inside Syrian territory.

An unnamed source close to the Syrian Foreign Ministry also said the airstrikes were conducted in "complete coordination" with the Damascus government.

Abadi's remarks come as Iraq's battle to liberate the northern city of Mosul, ISIL's last urban stronghold in the country, has entered a sensitive phase.

Iraqi government forces and allies liberated the eastern sector of the city in January following 100 days of fighting with ISIL.

Iraqi forces are now in the middle of an operation to retake the western half of the city. Since February 19, when the offensive, they have made major gains against the extremists on Mosul's western front.

Last week, Iraqi soldiers took control of the last major road out of western Mosul, which links the city to Tal Afar, another ISIL bastion to the west, and then to neighboring Syria.

(Source: agencies)

WikiLeaks exposes alleged CIA hacking program

The United States CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) can turn your TV into a listening device, bypass popular encryption apps, and possibly control your car, according to thousands of documents published by WikiLeaks, an anti-surveillance group.

The group posted nearly 9,000 documents on Tuesday it said were leaked from the Central Intelligence Agency, in what it described as the largest-ever publication of secret intelligence materials.

It said the trove of documents "appears to have been circulated among former U.S. government hackers and contractors in an unauthorized manner, one of whom has provided WikiLeaks with portions of the archive".

Jonathan Liu, a spokesman for the CIA, said: "We do not comment on the authenticity or content of purported intelligence documents."

Experts who have started to sift through the material said that it appeared legitimate.

The leak, named "Vault 7" by WikiLeaks, claims the CIA developed a malware to infect mobile phones to allow easier surveillance - but lost control of the technology. If the CIA really lost control of the technology, hackers worldwide could use the tools to steal data.

The actual hacking tools were not part of the WikiLeaks trove.

WikiLeaks said it planned to avoid distributing tools "until a consensus emerges" on the political nature of the CIA's program and how such software could be analyzed, disarmed and published.

■ Malware systems

WikiLeaks said the documents show the CIA has produced more than 1,000 malware systems - viruses, trojans, and other software that can infiltrate and take control of target electronics.

These hacking tools have targeted iPhones, Android systems such as the kind of personal phone reportedly still used by U.S. President Donald Trump, popular Microsoft software and Samsung smart TVs, which can be transformed into covert microphones, according to WikiLeaks.

The agency has also examined hacking into the electronic control systems on cars and trucks, potentially enabling it to control them.

By infecting smartphones, WikiLeaks said, the CIA can get around the encryption technologies of popular apps such as WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram, Weibo, and Confide by collecting communications before they are encrypted.

(Source: agencies)

ICC withdrawal revoked after court ruling: UN

South Africa's withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC) has been revoked, the United Nations secretary-general said.

A notice dated on Tuesday on the UN treaty website said the move came after a South African court ruled last month that the country's decision to withdraw without parliament's approval was unconstitutional.

South Africa shocked the international community last year when it informed the UN chief it would withdraw from the court that pursues cases of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Withdrawal comes a year after notification.

South Africa's main opposition party challenged the withdrawal in court, saying it was illegal because parliament was not consulted.

"South Africa does not want to be lumped together with pariah states who have no respect for human rights," the Democratic Alliance said after the court decision.

Three African countries last year made moves to leave the ICC, speaking fears of an African exodus. Only Burundi remains on a path to withdrawal.

Gambia under new President Adama Barrow also has revoked its withdrawal.

Some African countries have argued that the court has unfairly targeted their continent and have instead advocated

strengthening their own institutions to deal with threats to human rights.

All but one of the court's full-scale investigations are in Africa, though the majority were referred to the court by the African countries themselves and two by the UN Security Council.

South Africa's withdrawal announcement had followed a 2015 dispute over a visit by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the ICC for alleged war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide in Darfur.

Al-Bashir was allowed to leave South Africa even though a local court ordered authorities to arrest him.

Under the Rome Statute, signatory countries have a legal obligation to arrest anyone sought by the ICC.

South Africa has said the treaty contradicts its diplomatic immunity law and prevents the country from acting as a regional peacemaker, a role that could require it to host adversaries on its own soil.

The court based in The Hague, Netherlands, has more than 120 member states.

Backers of the court had been dismayed by South Africa's move to withdraw, especially after former President Nelson Mandela had been a strong advocate for the court's creation.

(Source: AFP)

Study reveals: Black Americans more often wrongfully convicted

African Americans are far more likely to be wrongfully convicted of crimes such as murder, sexual assault and illegal drug activity than whites, a review of nearly 2,000 exonerations in the United States over almost three decades found.

Of the 1,900 defendants convicted of crimes and later exonerated, 47 percent were African Americans - three times their representation in the population - according to the study from the National Registry of Exonerations, which examined cases from 1989 to October 2016.

The study, released on Tuesday, also said black Americans were about seven times more likely to be wrongfully convicted of murder than white Americans.

"In the murder cases we examined, the rate of official misconduct is considerably higher in cases where the defendant is African American compared to cases where the defendant is white," said Samuel Gross, a University of Michigan Law School professor and a senior editor of the registry.

He said unconscious bias, institutional discrimination and explicit racism were factors in some of the wrongful convictions.

When it comes to drug crimes, black Americans are

about 12 times more likely to be wrongfully convicted than innocent white people, the study said.

It also took longer for innocent African American names to have their names cleared, the study found.

"On average, black murder exonerees spent three years longer in prison before release than white murder exonerees, and those sentenced to death spent four years longer," said the report, entitled "Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States".

A separate study from the same group also released on Tuesday showed that 2016 set a record for known exonerations in the U.S. since 1989 at 166, up from 160 cases in 2015.

Nearly 60 of exonerations came from Texas, the most of any state, where district attorneys in the counties that include Houston and Dallas have set up integrity units to examine prosecutions for possible problems.

Most of the Texas exonerations were drug convictions in Harris County, home to Houston. In many of the cases, suspects pleaded guilty to drug possession and months or years later, reports from crime labs showed that seized material contained no controlled substances.

Nationwide, 52 defendants were exonerated of mur-



der and 73 were exonerated of non-violent crimes, such as drug possession.

Among last year's most notable exonerations were the so-called San Antonio Four - four women convicted of sexual assault in the 1990s and sent to prison because of junk science, tainted testimony and false ideas of lesbian behavior, a Texas appeals court said.

(Source: agencies)

Unions lead mass protests in Buenos Aires

Argentina's most powerful unions have brought tens of thousands of people to the capital's streets to protest against government job cuts, the lifting of restrictions on imports and other policies of President Mauricio Macri.

During the march on Tuesday, organized by the CGT Labor Federation (Confederación General del Trabajo) and backed by other unions, demonstrators

waved banners and white and blue national flags and blocked traffic along the main avenues of Buenos Aires.

Unionists also asked for salary rises to keep up with the high inflation and threatened to stage a nationwide strike in March or April if their demands are not met by Macri's government.

Thousands of teachers also took to the streets of the capital as part of a two-day

national strike demanding a wage increase.

Tens of thousands of state employees have been fired since Macri took office last year, vowing to reduce spending and consumer prices.

Macri says the measures are needed to revive Argentina's weak economy, attract investments and end economic distortions under Macri's predecessor that fanned an inflation rate of around 40 percent, one of the highest in the world.

This year's congressional elections are seen as key if Macri wants to continue implementing pro-market policies that have been praised by investors abroad.

The government claimed the union demonstration was political, as it happened at the same time that former President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner appeared in court investigated for corruption.

(Source: agencies)

South Africa police probe heist at Johannesburg airport

South African police launched an investigation on Wednesday into an armed robbery at the main international airport in the city of Johannesburg.

Officials said the heist took place on Tuesday evening at OR Tambo International Airport and that it was unknown what, if anything, was taken.

Some police officials, however, have said the robbers stole an undisclosed amount of money.

Authorities were investigating the alleged use of a vehicle with police markings in the robbery, according to Jacaranda FM, a local radio station.

"That is a subject of police investigation, to determine whether or not the car used belongs to the police or not," police Col. Athlenda Mathe said in a radio interview.

The Democratic Alliance, South Africa's main opposition party, said it would ask a police watchdog agency to investigate whether police "members or assets" were used in the heist.

The episode "could point to the involvement of corrupt cops," the party said in a statement. It also said it would question the police and transport ministers about security at South African airports.

A company that tries to counter organized crime in the banking industry said it was deeply concerned by the boldness of the criminals as well as their ability to gain access to a secure area.

"It is evident that the heist was executed using accurate information," the South African Banking Risk Information Centre said in a statement.

"This incident exacerbates an already dire situation of attacks on cash in transit vehicles and staff"

Johannesburg's central airport is no stranger to large-scale heists.

According to local reports, in 2006 an estimated \$7.67m was stolen from an international aircraft at the same airport.

A similar incident took place in 2014, when armed men took over a vehicle transporting millions of dollars in cash - US dollars, euros and pounds.

(Source: agencies)

'Feast of charity' starts nationwide

SOCIETY TEHRAN — A charity event called Jashn-e d e s k Nikoukari (the feast of charity) started in Iran on Wednesday.

The nationwide event opens annually a few days before the Iranian New Year, starting usually on March 21, and lasts for three days soliciting contributions to help those underprivileged who can barely afford a living.

The event also aims at encouraging humanitarian efforts and altruistic behaviors among the public.

As announced by Ali Mohammad Zolfaqari, an official with Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, there are some 1.6 million underprivileged families receiving financial assistance from the foundation.

"In addition to the funds allocated by the government to the foundation donations made by the philanthropist also adds up to the budget," Zolfaqari highlighted.

"What we are seeking most is to promote the giving spirit among the young population to stop poverty in the country," he added.

Families left without a breadwinner due to death, diseases or divorce or patients suffering from debilitating diseases are mostly among those seek help from the foundation, he said.

The 3 biggest risks haunting the global economy

1 -> ■ A global housing boom and bust

Fueled by historically low interest rates over the last few years, countries like Canada, Sweden, and the U.K. have seen rapid increases in home prices. Now, there are valid concerns that homes are significantly overvalued in these areas and ripe for a sudden housing bust.

Measuring home prices compared to rents (a substitute for buying a home) shows these ratios are at record highs since at least the 1980s in Canada, Sweden, and the U.K., said Catherine Mann, the OECD's chief economist in a press briefing.

That's meaningful, she said, because it could mean these markets will be in for a shock as central banks start raising rates more rapidly over the next few years.

Overall, the world economy is still "too slow."

The OECD expects the world economy to grow 3.3% in 2017 and 3.6% in 2018, both marking an improvement over mere 3% last year. But that's still "too slow" by historic standards, the OECD said.

The global economy averaged around 4% growth in the two decades before the 2007 financial crisis. "The reason why this matters is because many of the fiscal stances and expectations of both consumers and businesses are predicated on this 4% more robust growth climate," Mann said. "Even though it's an improved pickup, it still remains modest and falls short of what we need to have in order to make good on our promises to our citizens."

(Source: The Fortune)

Diaz: Argentina-Chile rivalry is very exciting

The game's fiercest rivalries usually involve neighbouring countries and teams. And when played out on the biggest stages, such rivalries only gather in intensity. A case in point is Argentina and Chile, who have been involved in some high-stakes encounters in recent years.

The two nations faced off in the final of the 2015 Copa America and again in the final of the 2016 Copa America Centenario, with Chile emerging victorious on both occasions. And there will be plenty at stake again when they square off at the Estadio Monumental in Buenos Aires on Thursday 23 March, in a vital South American qualifier for the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia™.



"It's going to be a very challenging match because we both need the points," said Chilean midfielder Marcelo Diaz in an exclusive interview with FIFA.com. "Argentina are in the play-off place at the moment and they need to win." Edgardo Bauza's side lie fifth in the table, one place and one point behind the Chileans, who are clinging on to the last automatic qualification slot. With only six match-days remaining, neither side has any margin for error.

"Playing at River Plate's Estadio Monumental is going to be very exciting for everyone, especially with the rivalry we've had with Argentina in the last few years," continued the Celta Vigo player. "It's going to be a really tough match for both sides, but obviously I hope Chile can come out on top."

Pointing to an added difficulty he will face, Diaz added: "The best player I've ever come up against is [Lionel] Messi. There's no one else like him. He's the best in the world and he'll continue to be so for a long time to come." Diaz knows what he is talking about, having been on the wrong end of the Argentinian's inspiration when Celta went down 5-0 in a recent league match at the Camp Nou.

Despite what the current standings say, the man they call Carepato (Duck Face) has no doubts about who will be going through to Russia 2018: "For me it's obvious that Argentina and Brazil will be going straight to the World Cup. Forget about how they're doing at this moment in time; they're both great sides with fantastic players and I just can't see Messi and Neymar missing out on the World Cup."

Rounding off his predictions, he added: "Colombia are a very good side and I think they'll qualify. The other side who should go through to my mind is Chile, obviously. Uruguay are very strong and Ecuador have been doing well too. The battle for the rest of the qualification places will be between these four teams."

Finding his feet

At the age of 30, Diaz is currently enjoying one of the best spells of his career. After tasting success with the "glorious" Universidad de Chile – as he describes the club closest to his heart – he made the move to Europe, gaining valuable experience in Switzerland and Germany.

"I learned a lot from the physical demands of both leagues," said Diaz, who at only 5'5" (1.66m) tall had to use his skill to negotiate the challenges he faced on the pitch. "The players there are so big you feel a bit weak when you come up against them, but I managed to find my way. I survived by keeping the ball at my feet, which is what I like and what I do best. I'm not a battler. I never have been and never will be, so I had to find another way, which was to stay on the ball and stand out that way."

Following stints with Basel in the Swiss league and Hamburg in the Bundesliga, El Chelo moved to Spain in January 2016, signing for a Celta side coached by Eduardo Berizzo, who was an assistant to the then Chile boss Marcelo Bielsa at South Africa 2010.

The switch has proved to be a smooth one, with Berizzo's side playing a similar style of football to La Roja: "Yes, there are some very obvious connections. Berizzo's from the same school and works in a very similar way to Bielsa and [Jorge] Sampaoli, who both left their mark on Chile. The formations are the same and the methods too," explained Diaz, who has become one of the mainstays of the Chile midfield since Sampaoli handed him his debut in 2011, in the qualifiers for Brazil 2014. His status in the side remains unchanged under current Roja coach Juan Antonio Pizzi.

"Physically I feel very good," continued Diaz, who suffered a string of injuries not so long ago. "Things are going well for me, which makes me relaxed and confident about what I can do. When you have a bad run with injuries you start to get a bit worried because you don't want to miss a game and you want to keep playing. That's all done with now, though. I've had a good run without any further problems."

The midfielder attributes his new-found ability to stay injury-free to changes in training and diet and to plenty of rest, this despite the fact that he has just become a father for the second time. His children, Colomba and Maximiliano, help him switch off from the game, as does tennis, his other passion. That said, football still plays a very large part in his daily routine. "I watch it all day long," he explained. "I like it and I need it. I want to know what's happening and keep tabs on the players. Football is my life and I need to be involved in it."

While Diaz intends to move into coaching one day, he is focused on nothing but playing the game at this moment in time and on working hard to become even better at what he does. "I'd really like to improve the defensive side of my game and the only way I can do that is to keep on working," explained the midfielder, whose advice to youngsters looking to succeed in the game is to be dedicated to their craft.

An admirer of Xavi, El Chelo also has nothing but praise for the great Chilean striker Marcelo Salas: "He was also my idol. I used to watch him play for Universidad de Chile and I was amazed by what he could do. I loved him as a player and then I had the good fortune to play with him just after starting my career. It was a pleasure to meet him and share a dressing room with him. I saw for myself just how humble he was. He'd show you things without even talking. When he returned to Chile at end of his career he kept training and training, more so than the youngsters, which really caught my eye."

Diaz is keen to set the same example, by working hard to achieve his goals, the next of which is Russia 2018: "We're confident we can qualify for the World Cup, and we'll go there determined to make up for what happened in Brazil. Going out like that really hurt and it made us want revenge. Russia will be a great opportunity for this latest Chilean generation." (Source: FIFA)

No Rooney, no goals, Manchester United seek European salvation in Russia

(AFP) — With no Wayne Rooney and a squad looking for confidence, Manchester United head for the uneven Olimp-2 stadium surface to take on Rostov on Thursday and keep alive hopes of becoming one of the few teams to have won all three European cups.

United fans have been told not to wear their team's red colours in the Russian city to avoid re-igniting hooligan violence and Rostov coach Ivan Daniliants promised a "classy performance" against the illustrious English side.

United won the European Cup in 1968, the Cup Winners' Cup in 1991 and Champions League in 1999 and 2008. But they have never won the Europa League nor the old UEFA Cup.

If successful this year, United would join Juventus, Ajax, Bayern Munich and Chelsea, who have already lifted all three European club trophies.

Having won their first trophy under Jose Mourinho with a 3-2 win over Southampton in the League Cup final, United need a strong performance in the first leg in Rostov to open the road to the quarter-finals.

That would take them into the draw with the winners from key ties such as Lyon v Roma, the all-German Schalke v Borussia Monchengladbach, Copenhagen v Ajax and Olympiakos v Besiktas.

Mourinho never lost in Russia with his previous clubs (Chelsea, Inter Milan and Real Madrid), but he is not happy going to Rostov, last season's Russian league runners-up, to play on the bumpy pitch.

Rostov warning

"It's a bad draw in every aspect. It's far and it's difficult," Mourinho told Man United official site.

"It's far and comes in a very bad period for us, difficult because they're a very difficult team."

United won their first trophy under Mourinho when they took the English League Cup final 3-2 against Southampton. But Mourinho admitted they were lucky and at the weekend saw his side held 1-1 by unfancied Bournemouth.

United are far from the Champions



League qualifying places and Mourinho has expressed his disappointment at United's low scoring rate.

"We need to score goals – other teams with less chances score goals," Mourinho told his club's official site.

"Against Southampton in the League Cup final, we had five chances and scored three but, against Bournemouth with more than 10 chances, we scored one goal."

On Thursday the Reds will be without Eric Bailly, who was sent off in their round of 32 1-0 win at Saint-Etienne.

United midfielder Juan Mata said it would be "a long trip that is going to test the strength of the team in every sense. The Russian side is particularly strong at home: this season they have defeated Bayern Munich and Ajax, for instance. That gives

you an idea of how tough they are."

Mourinho left Rooney and leftback Luke Shaw at home along with Bastian Schweinsteiger. Armenian forward Henrik Mkhitaryan returns to the 20-man squad after recovering from an injury incurred just after scoring the St Etienne winner.

Rostov sent a clear warning to the Red Devils when they routed Tomsk 6-0 on Friday.

Rostov showed no signs of rustiness in their first domestic match after the long winter break.

But head coach Daniliants said he and his men realised that Manchester United will be a completely different story.

"Man United are a top-class team and to oppose them is an honourable and a pleasant task," he told the press.

"It demands full mobilisation and colossal responsibility. Hopefully, we will come into this match on top, both physically and mentally. The match is sold out and we're set to give our fans a classy performance."

Rostov will likely be at full-strength except for doubts over injured first-choice goalkeeper Soslan Dzhanayev.

Europa League last 16 fixtures
Celta Vigo (ESP) v Krasnodar (RUS)
Apoel Nicosia (CYP) v Anderlecht (BEL)
Schalke 04 (GER) v Borussia Monchengladbach (GER)

Lyon (FRA) v Roma (ITA)
Rostov (RUS) v Manchester United (ENG)
Olympiakos (GRE) v Besiktas (TUR)
Genk (BEL) v Genk (BEL)
FC Copenhagen (DEN) v Ajax (NED)
1st leg, March 9; 2nd leg, March 16

Arsene Wenger did drop Alexis Sanchez after training row - Pires



Robert Pires has told beIN SPORTS that Arsene Wenger dropped Alexis Sanchez for Arsenal's 3-1 Premier League defeat against Liverpool on Saturday as a punishment for a training ground incident.

Following the game at Anfield, Wenger said Sanchez had started the game on the bench as he had wanted to play a more direct style ill-suited to the former Barcelona forward. It was widely reported, however, that Sanchez had been sanctioned for his attitude on the training ground and following a row with Wenger.

Pires, who played for Arsenal between 2000 and 2006 and still regularly trains with the first team despite having retired from competitive football in 2015, told a different version of events.

"I want to be clear regarding the

English media," he said ahead of Arsenal's Champions League round-of-16 second-leg defeat to Bayern Munich, for which Sanchez returned to the team. "There was no fight or brawl as was written. I was there. I was at the training session and in the dressing room afterwards. Yes, there was an argument on the pitch, a bad tackle on Alexis Sanchez. He decided to leave the pitch, something that he shouldn't have done."

"After that, certain players, among them Laurent Koscielny because he's the captain, went to talk. But it was a verbal exchange, there were only words. They didn't come to blows, because they are adults. They're professionals and in the same boat."

(Source: Soccernet)

Frank Lampard names Steven Gerrard as best midfielder he faced



Frank Lampard says Liverpool counterpart Steven Gerrard was the toughest midfielder he faced during his 20-year Premier League career.

The pair faced each other on numerous occasions when Liverpool and Chelsea squared off both on the domestic and European stages, and they played together in the England national team for 14 years.

Gerrard, who now works as a coach at Liverpool's academy, announced his retirement from football in November, with Lampard deciding to hang up his boots last month.

When asked by Sky Sports for his top three midfielders, Lampard said: "Steven Gerrard, in the Premier League. He had everything."

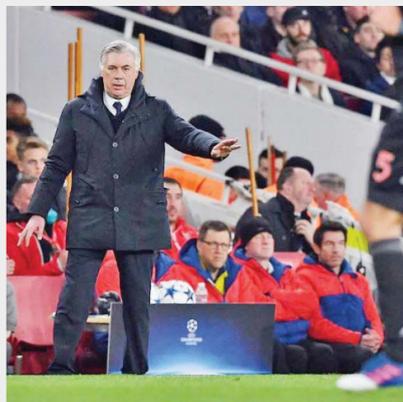
"If you got him on his day, you can almost forget about it because he was so powerful. Particularly when you used to go up to Anfield, you knew whether Stevie was on his game in the first three minutes because he'd crash through someone."

"But he had everything ... other than the aggressive side, obviously he had top ability. He was a great midfielder player."

Lampard believes Barcelona pair Xavi Hernandez and Andres Iniesta were the two best players in their position outside of England.

"Going to the Nou Camp and attempting to get near them for 90 minutes was very tough," he added. "They were absolute naturals on the ball."

(Source: ESPN)



@mrancelotti Excellent work from my team!! Now let's face the quarter-finals!! @fcbayern



@marcinho11 Congratulations legend!



@_r19 Legend

Esteghlal leave it late to beat Saipa

SPORTS Brazilian defender Leandro de Siqueira Padovani struck in added time to give Esteghlal a 2-1 victory against Saipa in the 24th week of Iran Professional League in front of more than 5,000 fans at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on Wednesday.

Five minute before the half time Farshid Esmaili converted Omid Ebrahimi's cross with a wonderful header to give Esteghlal the lead.

Ezzatollah Pourghaz scored the equalizer in the 89th minute but it was not the end as Brazilian defender Leandro Padovani scored another header to give his side a valuable three points.

"We deserved the three points. It was an intense game and we conceded on our defense mistakes but we can't afford to make mistakes again. I'm completely satisfied with my player's performance and I hope we could continue this run," Esteghlal coach Alireza Mansourian told reporters in the post-match press conference.

This week's other games will resume on Thursday and Friday as follows:

Thursday

Machine Sazi – Sanat Naft
Persepolis – Esteghlal Khuzestan
Zob Ahan – Naft Tehran

Friday

Gostaresh Foolad – Saba Qom
Siah Jamegan – Sepahan
Paykan – Padideh
Foolad – Tractor Sazi



Iran beats Uzbekistan in Asian Girls' U18 Volleyball Championship

Iran defeated Uzbekistan in the 11th Asian Girls' U18 Volleyball Championship on Wednesday.

The Iranian team edged past Uzbekistan 3-2 (23-25, 25-23, 21-25, 25-22, 15-11) in Chongqing No. 8 Secondary School Yubei Campus.

Majda Cacic's girls had already suffered two successive defeats against powerhouse China (3-0) and Hong Kong (3-1) in the tournament underway in China. Iran will face Samoa for 9th place on Friday.

The tournament has brought a total of 11 teams including reigning champion Japan, China, Iran, Thailand, Korea, Chinese Taipei, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Uzbekistan, Australia and Samoa together.

The top four teams in the tournament will advance to the 2017 FIVB Girls' U18 World Championship, which is due to take place in Argentina from August 18 to 27.

(Source: Tasnim)



Sardar Azmoun Rostov's star player: Manutd.com



SPORTS Manchester United website has warned the Red Devils of Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun's threat.

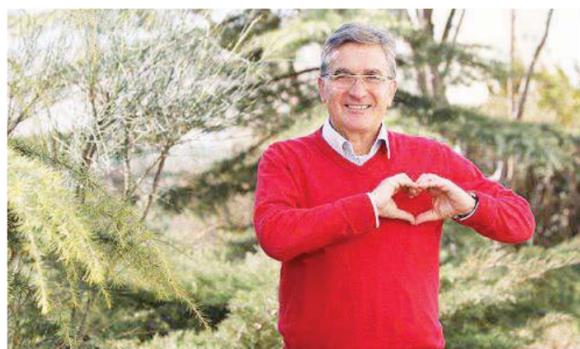
Manchester United will face FC Rostov in the Europa League Round of 16 on Thursday in Old Trafford.

According to the manutd.com, Azmoun hit a brace at the weekend and also scored against Bayern and Atletico in the UEFA

Champions League group stages, as well as contributing to his side's 4-0 home win over Sparta in the last round.

Dubbed the 'Iranian Messi' by fans after moving to Rostov on an initial loan from Rubin in 2015, he was linked with a move to Premier League rival Liverpool in January after helping himself to nine league goals last campaign.

Persepolis to extend Branko Ivankovic's contract



SPORTS Iranian popular football team Persepolis have started negotiations with Branko Ivankovic to extend his contract.

On 5 April 2015, the Croat took charge of Persepolis, signing a one-and-a-half-year contract with the Reds.

After good performances with the club, Ivankovic extended his contract until the end of the 2017-18 season.

Under Ivankovic, Persepolis lead the Iran Professional League table and are

favorite to win the title.

Persepolis also have a good chance to qualify for the AFC Champions League knockout stage.

The 63-year-old was appointed as Iran's U23 football team and inspired the team to win the 2002 Asian Games in Pusan.

He also led Iran national football team to the 2006 World Cup, where Team Melli lost to Mexico and Portugal and drew with Angola.

USA Weightlifting to analyze Trump travel ban before IWF World Championships

USA Weightlifting will seek "to determine what impact" President Donald Trump's new Executive Order, placing a 90-day travel ban on people from six mainly Muslim nations, might have on the this year's World Championships in Anaheim.

Iraq - covered in President Trump's previous Order - has been removed from the latest version after agreeing to additional visa vetting measures.

That leaves visitors from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen unable to enter the United States.

The directive, which also includes a 120-day ban on all refugees, is set to come into action on March 16.

The previous Order, which divided the nation, was blocked by a Federal court and further legal challenges are expected.

Anaheim in California is due host the International Weightlifting Federation's (IWF) World Championships from November 29 to December 6 this year, so after the 90 days has expired.

But in a statement, USA Weightlifting chief executive Phil Andrews said it was still something they would be taking into account.

"Sport is universal in its ability to unite the world under the banners of peace and inclusion," said Andrews.

"The global weightlifting community is tight-knit and we, as a community, celebrate our ability to meet and compete with athletes from around the globe.

"USA Weightlifting maintains our position that politics



and sport be separate.

"We continue to work with our partners at the United States Olympic Committee to determine what impact this action may have beyond the initial 90-day travel restriction.

"As hosts of the 2017 IWF World Championships, the United States hopes to welcome athletes from around the world - including those from the six countries mentioned in the US Government action."

Trump's previous Order led to repercussions in the sporting world, with American participation at the United World Wrestling (UWW) Freestyle World Cup in Iran placed in jeopardy due to retaliatory measures.

After the policy was blocked in the courts, Iranian

Foreign Minister Javed Zarif vowed that visas would be given to American wrestlers and they went on to compete.

Zarif said requests from the Iranian Wrestling Federation and UWW had been contributing factors for the decision.

Britain's four-time Olympic gold medallist Sir Mo Farah was also a critic, claiming the American President had made him an "alien".

The Somali-born Sir Mo described the order as "crazy and unfair" and admitted he was concerned about returning to his home in Portland in Oregon.

Two members of the Iranian delegation for the Indoor Archery World Cup Final in Las Vegas were also prevented from travelling to the US after they were unable to secure visas in time.

Anaheim stepped in to replace Penang as hosts of the 2017 World Championships in October after the Malaysian state encountered financial difficulties.

It means that for the first time in history two successive editions of the event will be staged in the US after Houston in Texas hosted the 2015 competition.

The Anaheim Convention Centre will be the venue for the competition.

Of the nations mentioned in the Executive Order, only seven Iranian weightlifters competed at the 2015 IWF World Championships.

(Source: insidethegames.biz)

Iranian biker blazes trail for women

Behnaz Shafiei, Iran's path-breaking female motorbike champion, lands a spectacular 15-metre jump on a track near Tehran -- all the more astonishing given that this would have been illegal a year ago.

At 27, Shafiei has become a symbol of the shifting social norms for women in Iran, realizing her dream of becoming a professional biker despite living in a country where she is not allowed to ride on public roads.



It was only around six months ago that the government allowed women to train on private circuits, and only a couple of months since this female-only track opened outside the capital.

"Before it was illegal, but today there are around a dozen women that ride professionally," she said proudly, leaning on her Suzuki 250X.

The track might be segregated -- with large banners reminding men they are not allowed -- but Shafiei still trains with a man: motocross veteran Javad Zanjani.

"It's great that women are riding," he said. "It's been 35 years that I've been doing motocross and I never thought it would get so much interest from women."

There have already been two female-only competitions -- Shafiei won the first -- but they also organized a training day that attracted some 50 women.

"They came from all over Tehran and the region. There was a 60-year-old woman who came with her 40-year-old daughter to train," he said.

Shafiei was 15 when she first saw a woman riding a motorbike in a small village near Zanjan in northern Iran.

"I was surprised and asked her if women had the right to ride motorbikes. She showed me how to do it and I liked it immediately," she recalled.

She bought her first bike when she was 22 but had to be sneaky about using it.

"For two years, I rode my bike in the evenings behind the house dressed as a boy.

"When people realized I was a woman, most were encouraging, but some men said my place was in front of the washing machine or in the kitchen," she said, laughing.

She decided to go full-time with the motocross, and along with Zanjani, badgered the ministry of sport until her perseverance finally won her the permission to train openly.

"Many Iranian women complain about the restrictions which stop them doing lots of things in this country, but it's not the whole truth, because many can still shine in spite of the constraints," she says.

(Source: AFP)

Iran to meet Japan in AFC Beach Soccer semis

Islamic Republic of Iran's 5-2 win over Bahrain and Japan finishing as the best second-placed side in the AFC Beach Soccer Championship Malaysia 2017 Group Stage completed the lineup for the semi-finals which will take place in Kuala Terengganu on Friday.

Iran's fourth straight victory against the Bahrainis in Group A on Wednesday booked their semi-final match against Japan, who earlier lost to eventual Group C winners the United Arab Emirates 5-4.

The UAE will in the other semi-final play surprise package Lebanon who handed defending champions Oman a 4-3 upset in Group B's last game.

Bahrain strongly opened the account through a hard strike by Abdulla Al Abdulla during a melee on four minutes before keeper Sayed Abbas delivered an impressive strike from his post into Iran's goal to double their advantage.

Iran then almost cut the deficit when a Mohammadali Mokhtari volley hit the bar and then cut the deficit they did when skipper Mohammad Ahmadzadeh struck home a free-kick before the buzzer.

It is then Iran's turn to make the keeper's goal through Saleh Mohamed's unstoppable strike from his area at the restart before Iran took over the lead with Ahmadzadeh's second after a neat interplay.

Al Abdulla then came close to Bahrain's third but his header went sailing before Iran added to their tally with a beautiful Seyed Nazem volley.

Iran keeper Syed Hosseini then gave Bahrain a scare as his end-to-end throw caught his opposite number unaware but it hit the woodwork as the second period ended.

Mohamed Ashoor then opened the third period with a mighty bicycle kick but missed as the Bahrainis desperately looked to cut their deficit.

Mohammadali Mokhtari's short-range strike then narrowly missed before his header later scored Iran's fifth to put the closely fought match to bed.

The top three finishers at the AFC Beach Soccer Championship will represent Asia at the 2017 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup, which is scheduled to be held in Nassau, Bahamas from April 27 to May 7.

INTERNATIONAL DAILY
www.tehrantimes.com

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» Subscription & Distribution Dept.: Tel: (+98 21) 43051603
» www.eshterak.ir Distributor: Padideh Novin Co. Tel: 88911433
» Webmaster: webmaster@tehrantimes.com
» Printed at: Kayhan - ISSN: 1017-94

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Leader offers condolences over death of poet Ahmad Azizi

CULTURE TEHRAN — Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has offered his condolences over the death of poet Ahmad Azizi.



In a message published on Tuesday, the Leader wrote "I offer my condolences over the death of the revolutionary and skillful poet Ahmad Azizi, who died following a long and painful hospitalization, to the literary community and artists of the country and especially to the lovely people of Kermanshah Province and his respectable family who were involved in the

nine-year affliction."

Azizi who mostly known for his works on the household of Prophet Muhammad (S) and religious themes, died on Monday nine years after falling into a coma following a stroke. He was 59.

In his travel to the western Iranian city of Kermanshah in October 2011, Ayatollah Khamenei paid a visit to Azizi at the Imam Reza Hospital.

NEWS IN BRIEF



"Adrienne Mesurat" comes to Iranian bookstores

CULTURE TEHRAN — France-based American writer Julien Green's 1927 novel "Adrienne Mesurat" has recently been released in Persian by Farhang-e Arash Publications in Tehran.

Translated by Maryam Sepehri, the book is about a young girl, Adrienne, who lives with her grouchy father and sick sister, and is in love with the town's middle-aged Doctor.

Blinded by her passion, she decides to destroy anyone that gets in her way, so she sends her sister to a hospital and kills her father.



National Orchestra to give concert in Khorramabad

A R T TEHRAN — Iran's National Orchestra is scheduled to give a concert today in Khorramabad, the capital of Lorestan Province.

The orchestra performs under the baton of conductor Fereidun Shahbazian.

Singer Alireza Eftekhari is scheduled to accompany the orchestra during the concerts that will feature works by Shahbazian, Abbas Khoshdel and Hossein Dehlavi.

In addition, Shahbazian and Eftekhari will hold a workshop during their sojourn in Khorramabad.



Saless Gallery showcases works by op artist Victor Vasarely

A R T TEHRAN — An exhibition of serigraphs created by Hungarian-French op artist Victor Vasarely from 1971 to 1975 is currently underway at Saless Gallery.

Vasarely (1906-1997) was one of the leading figures of the Op art movement.

According to Britannica, most of his work is housed in the Vasarely Museum at the Château de Gourdes in southern France, and in the Vasarely Museum in Budapest.

The exhibition will be running until April 3 at the gallery, which can be found at 148 Karim Khan St.

Tehran museum displays collection once slated for exhibit in Berlin, Rome

A R T TEHRAN — A collection of Western artworks from the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMCA), which previously had been slated for shipment to exhibitions in Berlin and Rome, was put on display at the museum on Tuesday.

A great number of artists and literati including Gholamhossein Naami, Mehdi Hosseini, and Mahmud Dowlatabadi attended the opening ceremony of the exhibition.

Speaking at the event, Majid Mollanoruzi, head of the Center for Visual Arts, said that the exhibit has been set up to provide a chance for Iranian artists to see the original collection, which was to be sent for the shows in Berlin and Rome.

He also said that part of the catalogue of the show, which only contains the images of the prints, has been prepared by the Lajevardi Foundation, adding, "The catalogue of the entire show will also be prepared within weeks."

Mollanoruzi also remarked that the Western works have been selected by the directors of the museums of Berlin and Rome and the Iranian works being shown have been chosen by Mehdi Hosseini.

Secretary of the exhibit Gholamhossein Naami said, "If the exhibit had been opened in Berlin and Rome, it would have been to the benefit of Iranian art. However, we still believe that the exhibit might still be set up."

The exhibition was set to open at the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin in November 2016, and at the Maxxi Museum in Rome from March through August 2017. However, Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Reza Salehi-Amiri halted the plan for further investigation.



Art aficionados visit an exhibition of a collection of Western artworks, which previously had been slated for shipment to exhibitions in Berlin and Rome, at the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art on March 7, 2017. (Honaronline/Gatha Ziatabari)

"The exhibition was canceled due to the legal ambiguity hidden in the agreement, and I proposed that the exhibit be canceled pending further investigation," the minister said in his first press conference in February.

Fajr festival is first on Cinema Organization of Iran agenda: official

A R T TEHRAN — The new director of the Cinema Organization of Iran (COI) Mohammad-Mehdi Heidarian says that the priority of the organization is the 35th Fajr International Film Festival.

"All departments and institutes must help the organizers hold this festival the best way possible," Hiedarian said at the meeting with the COI officials and managers on Tuesday.

He thanked the former director Hojjatollah Ayyubi and said, "Ayyubi received the organization when cinema faced many problems and he was able to confront the problems with his wisdom."

"However, in order to achieve goals and priorities announced by the (culture) minister, cinema needs a great change and we need to have programs for this



change," he added.

He continued, "We should not be afraid of changes. It is natural that any changes might seem to have opponents, but we can remove the obstacles with better management."

"The country needs cultural justice and all the art and cultural facilities must be available for every individual across the country," he remarked.

Heidarian also emphasized on training more talented people for cinema and said, "There is a wide range of art and cultural potentials across the country, of which we can make the most use. The young cinema in other cities and provinces needs to be strengthened."

The 35th Fajr International Film Festival is scheduled to be held in Tehran from April 21 to 28.

Spy novelists keeping an eye on Trump-Russia allegations

NEW YORK (AP) — Jason Matthews is a retired CIA officer who now writes spy novels, focused on Russia. He was working on a book last year that ordinarily would seem a little far-fetched, but which proved too close to current events.

"The plot line was an American presidential candidate who has a secret that's so bad it would ensure his or her impeachment, and the only person who would know the secret is Vladimir Putin," says Matthews, a prize-winning author best known for his "Red Sparrow" thrillers. Matthews set the novel aside, but he's in no danger of running out of ideas.

With law enforcement and Congress looking into possible ties between Trump advisers and Russians during the 2016 campaign, spy novelists have been challenged, amused, angered and

inspired. The Cold War ended decades ago, but writers now see a new wave of possible plot twists and plots to avoid, whether the reported Russian contacts of such former Trump campaign officials as Paul Manafort and Carter Page, the Trump dossier compiled by British intelligence or the firing of National Security Adviser Michael Flynn over phone conversations with the Russian ambassador.

"I wake up every morning and I think, 'Thank heavens for Vladimir Putin,'" says Matthews, whose next book, "The Kremlin Candidate," will center on the "tried and true" story of a Russian asset in the CIA. "He's a great character and his national goals are the stuff for spy novels: weaken NATO, dissolve the Atlantic alliance, break up the European Union."

Singer George Michael died of natural causes: coroner

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Singer George Michael died of natural causes, a British coroner said on Tuesday, finding that heart failure and liver disease caused the pop star's death on Christmas Day last year.

The coroner said that there was no need for further inquiries into the death of Michael, 53, who rose to stardom in the 1980s with Wham! before a successful solo career.

"As there is a confirmed natural cause of death, being Dilated Cardiomyopathy with Myocarditis and Fatty Liver, the investigation is being discontinued," Darren Salter, the Senior Coroner for Oxfordshire, said in a statement.

Dilated cardiomyopathy is a heart



Tributes to singer George Michael are displayed outside of his home in north London, Britain December 27, 2016. (Reuters/Neil Hall/File Photo)

condition that impairs the pumping of blood around the body.

The initial autopsy into the singer's death had been inconclusive, though his manager had said previously that he had died of heart failure.

Asghar Farhadi breaks silence on Oscar victory

Iranian director Asghar Farhadi gave a master class Tuesday at the Doha Film Institute's Qumra event and subsequently also spoke to a small group of journalists, all via Skype from Madrid where he is in pre-production on his untitled next project toplining Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem. In his first interview since recently winning his second Academy Award for best foreign language film for "The Salesman", the auteur spoke about his Oscar victory; his new Spanish-language film which will feature no Iranian actors; and his desire to make a comedy in Iran. Excerpts from the interview.

*** How do you feel about winning your second Oscar?**

"I had already won an Oscar for 'A Separation', but it was a little different this time. I have a different distributor, Amazon [and Cohen Media Group], and I had less reason to go to the U.S. to do promotion there. The film was already well known, people had already seen it. However I originally intended to go to the ceremony, that was my first intention. Then because of the travel ban I made a decision not to go and to watch the ceremony online."

*** It's been pointed out that political considerations [connected to the Trump travel ban] may have tarnished the value of your artistic accomplishment in winning a second Oscar. In other words, that Academy voters may have felt driven to vote for "The Salesman" to protest against the ban.**

"The film was on its own journey before all this happened. I have no control over what happened afterwards, and for myself I can say there was no calculation. I just reacted spontaneously to the travel ban, and to what I thought about it and that's why I decided not to go. As far as making conjectures on what criteria persuaded people to



Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

vote for it or not, it's quite complicated. I don't know how one could know why voters chose the film."

*** Can you talk about your decision to ask Iranian-American entrepreneur and space explorer Anousheh Ansari to represent you at the Oscars ceremony? Did you chose her?**

"Yes, I chose her and [former NASA engineer] Firouz Naderi carefully for two reasons: because they are Iranian immigrants who have achieved major success in the U.S. and also because I thought their profession was interesting because when you are high in the sky you no longer see all these borders and divisions that we have at ground level."

*** How did people in Iran react to the Oscar for "The Salesman"?**

"Generally speaking, people were very happy and welcomed this good news very warmly. But then there are some people, a minority, who see everything from a political angle, so they had some more bitter interpretations of the victory. But that's not what matters most."

*** You are now in Madrid, in pre-production on an**

untitled Spanish-language film starring Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem. Will working with these big non-Iranian stars change the experience for you?

"Well as you know I made 'The Past' in France, so I've already had an experience abroad. After that I was supposed to make this Spanish project. But all of a sudden I felt, for very personal and creative reasons, that I needed to go back home and make a film in Iran, and that's what happened with 'The Salesman'. Now I'm back on the Spanish project. I'm still working on the script. They are big stars, but I get along with them. We have a very easy, friendly, relaxed relationship and we happen to all be very enthusiastic about the script, so that's a good way to start the project."

*** I've read that it's a psychological thriller that revolves on a family of winemakers living in rural Spain. Can you say more?**

"It's about family, that's all I can say."

*** "The Past" was set in Paris, but it had Iranian elements. Will that also be the case with this film?**

"It's different from 'The Past'. This one is a hundred percent Spanish and all the actors and the characters are Spanish-speaking."

*** When will you start shooting?**

"We should start shooting this summer and it should be ready for next year."

*** Your films all seem to be about resiliency under pressure. Do you think you will ever make a comedy?**

"That is one of my biggest wishes, to make a film dealing with human reality through comedy. I hope to do that soon, when I go back to Iran."

(Source: Variety)