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Envoy hails Airbus deal as dramatic end to oldest sanctions on Iran

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'Japan seeking to transfer knowledge, experience to Iran'

By Negar Asadi & Ali Kushi

The Japan International Cooperation Agency is seeking to transfer knowledge and experience to the Iranians, Kohei Sato, the chief of JICA office in Iran, has said.

"So far, we have sent Japanese experts to your country and we have invited your officials to Japan to transfer the Japanese knowledge and experience to your government officials," he told Tehran Times in an exclusive interview.

"Since 1957, we have sent more than one thousand Japanese experts to Iran to transfer their knowledge to the Iranian people and also more than three hundreds of the Iranian officials have been invited to Japan to be provided with certain training programs and courses for receiving Japanese knowledge and experience," he added.

Elaborating on JICA's activities, Sato said, "We provide the developing countries with financial and technical cooperation and supports."

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ARTICLE

Harun Yahya
political analyst

The Moscow summit and the great alliance

During the time when the Syrian civil war was beginning to escalate to grave levels, I expressed many times, both in my columns on international media and on TV interviews, that a permanent solution can only be possible through the Turkey-Iran-Russia alliance. I mentioned that the tripartite alliance would establish a substantial power in the region, that it would bring a definitive, effective and logical solution for Syria, and that it would guarantee Syria's, hence Turkey's territorial integrity.

The tripartite summit held by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the three countries on December 20th is a manifestation of this important wish. In the joint declaration issued after the meeting, decisions were reached on basic issues such as declaring a ceasefire in Syria that will encompass the whole country, the initiation of the peace negotiations between the government and the dissidents, and the protection of Syrian territorial integrity. And Russia, Iran and Turkey will be the guarantors of the implementation of the declaration.

The said declaration expressed "respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria without regard to ethnic origin, religion and denomination," and promised "uninterrupted, safe and reliable evacuation for the civilians and the armed opposition from Aleppo". This decision concerning Aleppo constitutes a significant response to the unfair criticisms of some circles directed at Iran.

The fact that the assassination of the Russian ambassador to Ankara in Turkey right before the meeting did not discourage all the parties is undoubtedly the most important indicator of the determination against terrorism. This treacherous assassination is an evidence of the distress of certain deep powers that have been against a Turkish-Russian-Iranian alliance in the region for a long time. ➔13

Tehran Auction grosses over \$3 million at second sale

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Tehran Auction employees hold a triptych painting by Farah Osuli at the second annual sale on December 23, 2016.

Iran welcomes UN resolution condemning Israeli settlements

POLITICS TEHRAN — On Saturday, Iran welcomed the newest UN Security Council resolution that condemns Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories as illegal, ISNA reported.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said the move is a sign of the international community's determination in ending the Zionist regime's occupation and restoring the rights of the Palestinian people.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran would welcome any measure that supports the legitimate demands of Palestinians, strengthens the international status of Palestine and opposes the Zionist regime's occupation and its expansionist policies," Qassemi said in a statement.

He further said that the Islamic Republic has on numerous occasions emphasized that the Israeli settlement expansion is a "flagrant violation of international law."

Expressing satisfaction with growing international awareness regarding Israeli crimes against Palestinians, Qassemi said, "As far as we are concerned, the resolution of the Palestinian issue requires serious and decisive measures by the interna-

tional community to fulfill the rights of the innocent Palestinian people and to fight the Zionist regime's expansionist policies."

He also called on the United Nations to take major steps in this regard.

Qassemi's remarks came a day after the United States refused to veto a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement expansion.

The body approved the resolution with 14 votes in favor and one abstention — being the U.S. — on Friday.

The resolution was initially drafted by Egypt, but following extraordinary pressure from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu through the U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, Egypt withdrew from pursuing the case.

On Friday, however, Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal and Venezuela put the resolution forward again.

The resolution calls on Israel to "immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem al-Quds."

It also says that Israeli settlement construction has "no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law."

The real power of OPEC will be revealed in Q1 2017

For traders who like to simplify the markets to a game of supply vs. demand, the oil market in Q1 2017 should be their World Cup. Heading into the New Year, the OPEC and non-OPEC members will cut supply to the agreed upon amounts.

Given this intent, the International Energy Agency (IEA) says recent OPEC action would place the oil market into a supply deficit. The deficit would be engineered on a mixture of consistent demand combined with OPEC and other producers following through on their pledge to cut supply starting January 1.

In Vienna, OPEC announced they anticipate around 600,000 fewer barrels per day of production in H1, 2017. Along with this, the IEA also increased its forecast for global oil demand in 2017 by 100k bpd, stating consumption is likely to rise by 1.4% to 97.6 million barrels a day.

In mid-December when non-OPEC

producers like Russia, Mexico, and others aligned with OPEC to help balance the over-supply imbalance, Saudi Oil Minister Khalid Al-Falih said at the post-meeting press conference in Vienna that he is willing to cut the Saudi's production even deeper than already promised.

OPEC has agreed to reduce output by 1.2mn bpd from next year with Saudi cutting as much as 486k bpd.

With the IEA forecasted balance of supply and demand moving from H2 2017 to H1 2017, many will look to U.S. shale production to see if they can negate much of what OPEC is attempting to accomplish.

While many are looking for prices to move aggressively higher, it is worth noting OPEC is not specifically targeting higher price levels, but rather market balance.

(Source: NASDAQ)

UNSC passes resolution to end Israeli settlements

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has passed a resolution censuring Israel for its settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories after the United States refused to veto it, reversing its longstanding policy of shielding the Israeli regime from condemnatory resolutions at the world body.

The Egyptian-drafted resolution was passed with 14 votes in favor and one abstention on Friday.

Egypt had withdrawn the measure after the Israeli regime asked the U.S. President-elect Donald Trump to pressure the North African country to delay voting on the draft resolution.

Israel, wary of indications that the U.S. might veto the resolution, turned to Trump for support, who has defended Israel against condemnation for the settlement construction, and slammed the Obama administration for the "shameful move" against Tel Aviv.

It is the first resolution on Israel and the Palestinians that the 15-member body has passed in about eight years.

The Security Council was initially scheduled to vote on the resolution on Thursday.

However, on Friday, Malaysia, New Zealand, Senegal and Venezuela put forward the draft again, which called on Israel to "immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem (al-Quds)". ➔13



Season's greetings with all good wishes for the new year



MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



President: Time ripe for reviewing ties with friendly nations

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — Having got back from his Eurasian tour late on Friday, President Rouhani said time is ripe for Iran to review its ties with friendly countries in the past-sanctions era.

"Our situation in the post-sanctions era is such that we can establish close economic relations with our friendly countries," he said upon arrival in Tehran.

However, for this to happen the groundwork needs to be laid, he added, stressing good consultation on banking issues with the three countries of Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan.



Larijani congratulates new Christian year

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — Iranian Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani issued a message on Saturday congratulating the parliament speakers on the new Christian year and birth anniversary of Jesus Christ.

"Teachings of the divine prophets promise peace, justice and salvation of the human society which is needed in the current world more than anytime else," he wrote in the message.

Pointing to the principle of dialogue and interaction among the divine religions, he said Iran's parliament is ready for any "joint cooperation" and "interaction".



'Iran waiting for Iraq's response to waive visa requirement'

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — Tehran's Ambassador to Iraq Hassan Danaee said on Saturday that Iran is waiting for the Iraqi government's response to the visa waiver proposal.

"We have presented our demand for visa waiver (requirements) to the Iraqi government and we are waiting for their response; however, we are pursuing the issue," he told Tasnim news agency.

The Iraqi officials are also pursuing the issue, he added.



Commander sends New Year congrats to foreign counterparts

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — The Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Major General Mohammad Baqeri, has sent New Year messages to his foreign counterparts, wishing a year of peace and justice for the world.

"I hope that we no longer witness terrorism, war and aggressors' oppression, and crime in the world in the New Year," he said.

"I ask from God peace and justice, and wish Your Excellencies and your armed forces well-being and prosperity," part of the message read.



National Trust Party deputy chief resigns

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — Rasoul Montajabnia has resigned as the deputy secretary general of the National Trust Party, a member of party said on Saturday.

"The central council of the party will make a decision in this respect during the current week," Mohammad Sadeq Javadihesar said.

He added the resignation followed an intolerance of different viewpoints.

Efforts are being made to convince Montajabnia to change his mind, he said.



'Iran has stood beside Turkey in difficult times'

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — Iranian Ambassador to Ankara Ebrahim Taherianfard said on Friday that Iran has stood beside the Turkish people during the most difficult times.

Iran has spared no effort in helping establish stability and security in the region, he said during a meeting with Mehmet Gormez, the head of Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate.

He added Iran supports the countries' territorial integrity.

Gormez expressed regret over spread of extremism and called religious division "chronic disease".

JCPOA signatories to convene on U.S. sanctions bill

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — Representatives from Iran and six signatories to an international nuclear deal will convene on January 10 in Vienna at Iran's request to consider renewal of sanctions against Tehran by Washington for another ten years.

"The meeting will review the implementation of the agreement and discuss the issues raised in the letter [Iranian] Foreign Minister [Mohammad Javad] Zarif addressed on 16 December to (Mogherini)," a short statement from the EU said on Saturday.

Iran says the Iran Sanctions Act approved by the U.S. Congress will breach the terms of the nuclear deal that guaranteed Iran relief from sanctions in exchange for it pursuing a limited nuclear program, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in a letter on December 16 to EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini asked for a session on the issue.

The expert-level meeting will probably be the last one during the outgoing Obama administration, coming ten days before President-elect Donald Trump will take office.

Trump has said he will show a more



antagonistic face to the deal, which Obama hails as a legacy foreign policy achievement.

The two sides have already met five times with the last one being held in New York in September.

The meetings are in line with a dispute resolution mechanism depicted in the nuclear deal to consider a compliance issue raised by any of signatories to the deal.

Under the first scenario, a Joint Commission consisting of the E3/EU+3 and Iran will monitor and address issues arising from the implementation of the deal.

The Joint Commission would have 15 days to resolve the issue, unless the time period was extended by consensus. After Joint Commission consideration, any participant could refer the issue to Ministers of Foreign Affairs, if it believed the compliance issue had not been resolved.

Ministers would have 15 days to resolve the issue, unless the time period was extended by consensus. After Joint Commission consideration, in parallel with (or in lieu of) review at the Ministerial level, either the complaining participant or the participant whose performance is in question could request that the issue be considered by an Advisory Board, which would consist of three members (one each appointed by the participants in the dispute and a third independent member).

The Advisory Board should provide a non-binding opinion on the compliance issue within 15 days. If, after this 30-day process the issue is not resolved, the Joint Commission would consider the opinion of the Advisory Board for no more than 5 days in order to resolve the issue.

If the issue still has not been resolved to the satisfaction of the complaining participant, and if the complaining participant deems the issue to constitute significant non-performance, then that participant could treat the unresolved issue as grounds to cease performing its commitments under the JCPOA in whole or in part and/or notify the UN Security Council that it believes the issue constitutes significant non-performance.

Envoy hails Airbus deal as dramatic end to oldest sanctions on Iran

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — The Iranian ambassador to London said in an Instagram message Saturday the recent deal between Iran and Airbus is more than a "usual trade agreement," hailing it as a dramatic end to the most long-standing sanctions program against the country.

"The Airbus contract is not a usual trade agreement," Hamid Baedinejad said, citing four reasons.

Initially, as an outcome of an international deal between Iran and six world powers, this is first time Iran has clinched a deal directly with Airbus in nearly four decades.

Secondly, over a very short period of time Iran will be

taking delivery of a number of airplanes in 2017.

Iran Air will receive seven or eight planes from Airbus in 2017, according to Farhad Parvaresh, the managing director of the airliner.

Moreover, the agreement is expected to prosper Iran's aviation industry, the ambassador underscored, adding, "Last year, the Iranians spent nearly \$5 billion on trips with foreign airlines."

Last but not least, conclusion of the deal will contribute to flourishing trade with Germany, France, and England as main Airbus stakeholders.

This, in turn, works toward banking and financial ties with key European countries, he concluded.

Iran and Airbus signed a deal during a visit to Paris by President Hassan Rouhani in January 2106.

Under the initial contract, Iran had ordered 118 Airbus planes worth \$25 billion, trimming it to 100 planes worth not more than \$10 billion this time, partly by dropping superjumbo A380s.

Also, Iran signed a \$16.6 billion deal for 80 Boeing passenger on December 11.

Iranian airlines need to buy around 500 planes over the next ten years to replace their ageing fleets and to take advantage of the expected growth in air travel in the coming years.

Iranian carriers currently own a 250-strong fleet, but at least 100 of their planes have either broken down or been stripped for spare parts.

'Japan seeking to transfer knowledge, experience to Iran'

IT d e s k He said that JICA is cooperating with Iran in the areas of construction, development and also infrastructure.

"Our mission is supporting your people and your country," he explained.

Sato said that JICA is a governmental agency being supervised by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This is a kind of Japanese government's activity to make good relations with the Iranian people and government, he noted.

"So, this is our goal to find how to make good relations with Iran."

On areas of Iran-JICA cooperation, he said the Japanese agency is working in Iran in various fields of environmental conservation, water resources management, reduction of urban and rural community income disparities, disaster management, promotion of domestic industries, health, transportation, and reconstruction of Afghanistan

He also said, "Disaster management is one of our priorities... So, in Tehran we are helping build capacity for reducing risks in case an earthquake occurs."

Sato said JICA has conducted one project related to earthquake preparedness management.

"It has been for 15 years that we are working on a master plan. We have divided Tehran into different zones and have identified zones which are weaker when an earthquake occurs," he said, adding, "We have put instruments that once the earthquake takes place send message to head office of Tehran municipality."

Sato attached great importance to identifying roads for emergency evacuation, saying JICA is cooperating



"We constantly hold talks with the Iranian officials and people to find out the country's needs in order to conduct projects and we also brief those participating to know how to manage the projects."

with Tehran municipality in this respect.

He noted that Japanese engineers hold training courses for the Iranians to construct buildings which are strong against earthquake.

■ JICA conducts projects to save Lake Urmia

Sato said that JICA conducts projects on saving underground and surface water resources in line with saving Lake Urmia.

Lake Urmia in northwestern Iran was once the largest lake in the Middle East and the sixth-largest saltwater lake on Earth with a surface area of approximately 5,200 square kilometers. The lake has shrunk to 10 percent of its former size mostly due to damming of the rivers that flow into it and pumping of groundwater from the area.

■ 'Participatory approach is very important for our activities'

Sato also said adopting participatory approach is very important for activities of JICA in Iran.

"We constantly hold talks with the Iranian officials and people to find out the country's needs in order to conduct projects and we also brief those participating to know how to manage the projects," he stated.

He cited Anzali Wetland Ecological Management Project as an example in which JICA asked the locals to join the project to transfer knowledge and experience.

On JICA plans for cooperation with Iran, he said that the agency is focusing on infrastructure for the future.

"We seek to expand our activities beyond environmental issues and disaster management based on the Iranians' needs," the chief of JICA office in Iran pointed out.

Elsewhere, Sato highlighted the importance of human resources to develop a country and its progress.

He said, "We invite the Iranian officials to Japan to provide them with training in this regard."

Resistance economy associated with Iranian nation: Rahmani Fazli

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli has said that resistance economy is not restricted to any specific administration, noting it is associated with the Iranian nation and state.

"Since the beginning of the revolution until now, many economic systems were recommended for the country and all of them have been tested, but the resistance economy is among the new systems that is approved by everyone," ISNA quoted

Rahmani Fazli as saying on Friday.

He also stressed that having faith in the resistance economy is a determining factor for the success of economy.

He also said that sustainable security requires a strong economy.

Emphasizing that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is a staunch supporter of resistance economy, Rahmani Fazli said the Iranian nation has the ability to reach any

step through resistance.

"Today, as the country faces many obstacles, we are witnessing the numerous successes that the Iranian nation has achieved," he said.

The senior official further said that the current administration is determined in pursuing resistance economy, due to its faith in the approach.

He also said that in order to realize the resistance economy, Iran needs domestic capabilities and resources

as well as foreign market, technology and investment.

This, in turn, can open more paths to development, he added.

The interior minister further noted that the current administration is attempting to accelerate economic development.

He also expressed satisfaction with the current harmony between the three branches of the government, hoping that it would lead to prosperity and economic opportunities for the country.

Upgrading naval scientific research essential: Navy chief

IT d e s k **POLITICS TEHRAN** — It is essential to promote the Navy's scientific studies along with strategic research, its commander Habibollah Sayyari said on Friday.

In a ceremony held to appreciate the performance researchers at Imam Khomeini Naval University of Noshahr, the rear admiral said that the Iranian Navy is a political, international and also scientific force.

"The university's staff is comprised of those who build destroyer and missile cruiser... are sources of pride for the country's Navy," the admiral stated.

He attached great importance to educating and training Navy commanders.

The commanders should be well aware of their duties in order to fulfill their responsibilities well, the navy chief pointed out.

He also noted the presence in international waters is essential to protect Iran's interests.

The rear admiral insisted that the country's pre-emptive power should be maintained.

Elsewhere, he highlighted the importance of conducting research programs by the Navy.

A university receives credit by educational programs along with research ones, he explained.

Trump vows changes at the UN after Israel vote

United States President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to change things at the United Nations when he takes over at the White House next month, after the UN Security Council's vote in favor of a resolution demanding the halt of settlement activity by Israel in occupied Palestinian territory.

The resolution was put forward at the 15-member council for a vote on Friday by New Zealand, Malaysia, Venezuela and Senegal a day after Egypt withdrew it under pressure from Israel and US president-elect Trump.

Israel and Trump had called on the U.S. to veto the measure but it ended up abstaining, resulting in the resolution being adopted with 14 votes in favor to a resounding round of applause.

It is the first resolution the Security Council has adopted on Israel and the Palestinians in nearly eight years.

"This is a day of victory for international law, a victory for civilized language and negotiation and a total rejection of extremist forces in Israel," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told Reuters news agency.

"The international community has told the people of Israel that the way to security and peace is not going to be done through occupation ... but rather through peace, ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state to live side by side with the state of Israel on the



1967 line," Erekat said.

On Saturday, Israel refused to recognize the UN resolution and retaliated by recalling its ambassador to New Zealand

and Senegal.

"Israel rejects this shameful anti-Israel resolution at the UN and will not abide by its terms," said Netanyahu.

"At a time when the Security Council does nothing to stop the slaughter of half-a-million people in Syria, it disgracefully gangs up on the one true democracy in the Middle East, Israel, and calls the Western Wall 'occupied territory'."

New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully said the decision should have been no surprise to Israel which knew Wellington's position long before the UN vote.

"Israel has informed us of their decision to recall their ambassador to New Zealand for consultations," McCully told AFP news agency in a statement.

"We have been very open about our view that the [Security Council] should be doing more to support the Middle East peace process and the position we adopted today is totally in line with our long established policy on the Palestinian question."

"The vote today should not come as a surprise to anyone and we look forward to continuing to engage constructively with all parties on this issue."

The resolution demands that "Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem (al-Quds)."

Malaysia and Venezuela also sponsored the UN resolution but do not have diplomatic relations with Israel.

(Source: agencies)

Turkey arrests 1,656 social media users since summer

Turkey's Interior Ministry says authorities have formally arrested 1,656 people in the past six months for allegedly supporting terrorist organizations or insulting officials on social media - and are investigating at least 10,000 others.

In a statement on Saturday, the ministry said legal

action had been taken against 3,710 people identified by police. Besides those arrested, 1,203 people were released on probation, 767 were released and 84 others are still in detention. Additionally, investigations and legal procedures are underway against an additional 10,000 people reported to public prosecutors.

Turkey has cracked down on dissent following a failed coup in July, with thousands detained over alleged ties to outlawed groups. Authorities also frequently restrict access to social media platforms to prevent the spread of material authorities say would harm public security.

(Source: AP)

Trump ally sparks outrage for offensive barbs aimed at Obamas

An ally of the United States President-elect Donald Trump ally has ignited widespread outrage after wishing for U.S. President Barack Obama's death and making racially charged comments about the first lady.

Carl Paladino -- a businessman who served as a co-chairman of the president-elect's New York State election campaign -- made the incendiary jabs in a year-end feature published Friday in Artvoice, a weekly newspaper in upstate New York.

Asked what he would "most like to see happen" in 2017, the former Republican candidate for governor of New York state said he hoped Obama "catches mad cow disease after being caught having relations" with a type of beef cattle and "dies before his trial."

When questioned what he would "most like to see go" next year, Paladino replied "Michelle Obama."

"I'd like her to return to being a male and let loose in the outback of Zimbabwe where she lives comfortably in a cave with Maxie, the gorilla."

Paladino's remarks quickly spurred angry reaction on social media and drew the ire of elected officials.

Andrew Cuomo -- current New York

governor who beat Paladino in 2010 -- slammed his ex-rival's comments as "racist, ugly and reprehensible."

"Paladino has a long history of racist and incendiary comments," Cuomo said in a statement. "His remarks do not reflect the sentiments or opinions of any real New Yorker."

"He has embarrassed the good people of the state with his latest hate-filled rage."

Trump did not personally defend or call out his political ally, though a spokeswoman for the president-elect said the comments "are absolutely reprehensible, and they serve no place in our public discourse," according to the New York Times.

Facing broad condemnation, Paladino published an open letter that his remarks had "nothing to do with race." In the statement he went on to call Obama "a yellow-bellied coward" and said the first lady should "leave and go someplace she will be happy."

Paladino -- a developer in the city of Buffalo, New York -- visited Trump Tower earlier this month, a meeting he described to The Buffalo News as "very warm."

(Source: AFP)

South Koreans protest for ninth straight weekend for Park to step down

A large crowd of South Koreans took to the streets of central Seoul on Saturday for the ninth weekend in a row to demand the immediate resignation of President Park Geun-hye, who has been impeached by parliament over a corruption scandal.

About 200 young people dressed as Santa Claus gave out gifts to some of around 200,000 people taking part in the rally, many of whom brought their children.

Like previous rallies, the event was held in a festive mood, with music and speeches from a stage set up in a large square a few blocks from the presidential Blue House.

"It'll be a Merry Christmas if Park Geun-hye steps down!" the crowd chanted.

Park's impeachment, for violating her constitutional duty as leader, is being reviewed by the Constitutional Court which has up to 180 days from the Dec. 9 impeachment to decide whether to uphold it or reinstate Park.

Earlier on Saturday, a special prosecutor probing the scandal summoned a friend of Park at the center of the crisis, Choi Soon-sil, for questioning on charges including bribery and embezzlement, according to an official.

(Source: Reuters)

Kabila deal hangs by thread after marathon meeting

Hopes of a deal to end Democratic Republic of Congo's dangerous political crisis before Christmas were fast dissipating on Saturday after fruitless all-night talks over President Joseph Kabila's refusal to quit power.

Kabila's second and final five-year term ended on December 20, but he has shown no intention of leaving office soon, sparking violent protests that have left at least 40 people dead this week, according to the United Nations.

The influential Catholic Church has been brokering talks between the government and opposition and hopes rose this week of an imminent deal, with a draft seen by AFP news agency outlining plans for fresh elections at the end of next year, when Kabila would step down.

But that optimism has been slipping, and negotiators from the two camps left church offices in Kinshasa just before 5:30am local time without a deal to prevent a fresh descent into a new political crisis.

"The work is practically finished - the final touches are all that is left to do before the deal is signed," insisted Marcel Utembi, president of the Congo National Episcopal Conference (CENCO), who had pushed for a deal before Christmas.

But others indicated there was still a long way to go. "Everything is still blocked on how (public affairs) will be managed during the transition period," said opposition delegate Francois Muamba.

Two opposition delegates said the squabbling sides could return to the table later on Saturday, but there was no confirmation from CENCO. Negotiators from Kabila's political alliance were remaining tight-lipped.

A frustrated CENCO official, speaking on condition of anonymity, blasted DR Congo's political class for "serious mediocrity" in their inability to reach a deal.

"They have called into question everything we arranged the day before," the official said as talks stretched into the night.

Time is pressing as the bishops overseeing the talks are due to quit the capital on Saturday afternoon to return to their congregations in time for Christmas Eve mass.

Tensions are still running high, with security forces spraying live ammunition at a string of anti-Kabila protests in Kinshasa and other towns this week, killing at least 40 civilians, according to the United Nations.

Congolese police put the toll at 20 dead, saying they had largely been killed in "looting" or by "stray bullets".

Other sources say somewhere between 56 and 125 people have been killed in a week of clashes, not counting the unknown toll from fighting between security forces and an anti-government militia in the central town of Kananga.

Kabila, 45, has been in power since the 2001 assassination of his father Laurent at the height of the Second Congo War.

He was confirmed as leader of the DRC in 2006 during the first free elections since independence from Belgium in 1960, and re-elected for a second term in 2011 in a vote marred by allegations of massive fraud.

Constitutionally banned from seeking a third term, he obtained a controversial court ruling in May stating that he could remain in power until a successor was chosen.

Two decades ago, the country collapsed into the deadliest conflict in modern African history.

Its two wars in the late 1990s and early 2000s pulled in at least six African armies and left more than three million dead.

(Source: agencies)

UN calls on Bahrain to release prominent human rights activist

The United Nations has called on the Bahraini regime to "immediately and unconditionally" release the country's prominent human rights campaigner Nabeel Rajab, after Manama grilled the imprisoned activist over criticizing the government and the Wahhabi ideology.

"We are seriously concerned about the ongoing prosecution of Nabeel Rajab," said Liz Throssell, the spokeswoman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, in Geneva, Switzerland, on Friday, adding that criticizing the government "should not be the grounds for detention or prosecution."

The 52-year-old activist, who chairs the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was accused by Bahraini officials on Thursday of making comments that "harm the interests" of the Manama regime and other Persian Gulf kingdoms through an article attributed to him and published by Le Monde on Tuesday.

The article slammed the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) Takfiri terrorist group for their crimes against humanity and Persian Gulf Arab states for their failure to stop the spread of the violent Wahhabi ideology.

Wahhabism, the radical ideology dominating Saudi Arabia and freely preached by its clerics, fuels the ideological engine of such terror organizations as ISIL and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of the Levant), al-Qaeda's Syrian branch formerly known as al-Nusra Front. Takfiri terrorists use the ideology to declare people of other faiths "infidels," justifying the killing of their victims.

Rajab, who was detained on June 13 for tweets that criticized Manama's role in the deadly House of Saud regime-led military campaign against Yemen, could face up to 15 years in jail. Throssell said in her statement that Rajab was arrested for "exercising his right to freedom of expression."

On September 5, he was further charged with spreading false information aimed at "impairing the prestige" of the Manama government. The charges were brought by Bahrain's prosecutor general a day after the New York Times published a scathing article by Rajab.

On November 24, the rights campaigner was taken to hospital from prison due to heart problems after being held in solitary confinement for three months.

(Source: Press TV)

Trump releases 'very nice letter' from Putin

The United States President-elect Donald Trump has released what he says is a "very nice" letter from Russia's President Vladimir Putin calling for a thaw in ties between the rival powers.

Trump's transition team said late on Friday that the president-elect received the letter from Putin urging him to act "in a constructive and pragmatic manner" to "re-store the framework of bilateral cooperation".

The letter, dated December 15, also noted that serious global and regional challenges "show that the relations between Russia and the U.S. remain an important factor in ensuring stability and security in the modern world".

In response, Trump agreed with Putin, adding that he hopes "we do not have to travel an alternate path".

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov confirmed on Saturday that Putin sent the letter, "voicing hope for an improvement of bilateral ties," according to the Interfax news agency.

The exchange comes on the heels of comments by Trump and Putin about the need to strengthen their countries' nuclear arsenals.

Trump tweeted on Thursday that the U.S. should "greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability". He said the nation must do so until the rest of the world



- as he put it -- "comes to its senses" regarding nuclear weapons.

Those comments echoed an earlier statement by Putin, who said that strengthening his country's nuclear capabilities should be a chief military objective in the coming year.

Putin said he saw "nothing unusual" in Trump's pledge to strengthen the U.S. nuclear forces, and claimed that his country's military is stronger than that of any potential aggressor, but acknowledged that the U.S. military is bigger.

He also cast the modernization of Russia's nuclear arsenal as a necessary response to a U.S. missile defense system.

The U.S. currently has an estimated arsenal of about 7,000 nuclear warheads, second only to Russia, which has a few hundred more.

During the next decade, U.S. ballistic missile submarines, bombers, and land-based missiles - the three legs of the nuclear triad - are expected to reach the end of their useful lives.

Maintaining and modernizing the arsenal is expected to cost at about \$1 trillion over 30 years.

(Source: agencies)

New Azerbaijan-Iran train to start running soon

The Nakhchivan-Mashhad train route between Azerbaijan and Iran will start running on December 29.

The launch of the railway communication will promote further development of tourism between the two countries.

Tickets will be put up for sale in Azerbaijan and Iran. One-way train cost from Nakhchivan to Mashhad will be 40 Swiss francs (about \$38 on Dec. 23).

Being located in the northeast of Iran, Mashhad is the second most populous city in the Islamic Republic. *(Source: Azernews)*

Bitcoin surges above \$900 on geopolitical risks, Fed tightening

Bitcoin headed for its biggest weekly jump since June as rising geopolitical risks boosted demand for alternative assets.

The cryptocurrency surged 15 percent this week to \$900.40 as of 2:38 p.m. in Hong Kong, taking its gain this year to 107 percent, data compiled by Bloomberg show. The last time it was at such levels was in January 2014, when bitcoin was tumbling from its record price of \$1,137 following the implosion of the MtGox exchange and tightening Chinese controls.



Bitcoin is extending a rally that's beaten every major currency, stock index and commodity contract in 2016. Buyers sought alternative assets this week amid the killing of Russia's envoy to Turkey and a separate attack that left 12 people dead in Berlin. Weakening pressure on the yuan, which intensified this month as the U.S. projected a faster pace of tightening next year following Donald Trump's election win, is also increasing demand for bitcoin in China, where the majority of trading occurs.

"Terrorist attacks in Europe boosted haven demand in capital markets, and gold has been falling since Trump was elected," said Le Xiaotian, an analyst at Huobi, a Chinese exchange. "Global instability has to a large extent directed funds to the bitcoin market."

Bitcoin, which trades in cyberspace and is mined by code-cracking computers, is gaining popularity among some investors as an alternative safe haven because it's deemed to be less influenced by government regulations and changes to monetary policy. Gold, which tends to trade in tandem with bitcoin when haven demand is strong, has fallen this quarter as U.S. rates rise, narrowing its premium over bitcoin to the least in three years.

"The Fed's rate hike announcement has probably spooked a lot of emerging-market investors, particularly those in China, who are now flocking to bitcoin as a refuge from weak fiat currency assets," said Thomas Glucksmann, head of marketing at Gatecoin Ltd. in Hong Kong. "As we've passed the \$800 bitcoin price, a strong resistance point in the past, and move closer towards the psychological \$1000 stratosphere, anything seems possible."

(Source: Bloomberg)

U.S. consumer sentiment at highest level since Jan. 2004

A measure of consumers' attitudes rose to its highest level since January 2004.

The Index of Consumer Sentiment hit 98.2 in December, the University of Michigan reported on Friday. The figure is up from 93.8 in November's final reading.

Economists expected the consumer sentiment index to hit 98 in December's final reading, according to a Thomson Reuters consensus estimate.

The surge in confidence following President-elect Donald Trump's surprise election aided in the numbers, the report said.

"Compared with the rapid gains made in late November and early December, the Sentiment Index was barely higher than at mid month and barely higher than the January 2015 peak — in both cases, just two-tenths of a point — but that small difference was enough to establish a twelve year peak," said Richard Curtin, the Surveys of Consumers chief economist, in a press release.

Curtin said 18 percent of consumers mentioned the expected favorable impact of Trump's policies on the economy. That's twice as high as the prior peak of 9 percent in 1981 when Ronald Reagan took office, he added.

The monthly survey of 500 consumers measures attitudes toward topics like personal finances, inflation, unemployment, government policies, and interest rates.

(source: CNBC)

Stocks could suffer as Trump trade policy takes shape

The year-end stocks rally on the heels of the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president was built on expectations of reduced regulations, big tax cuts and a large fiscal stimulus.

Now signs are emerging from the Trump camp that harsher trade policies that could jeopardize the honeymoon are likely in the offing, and investors would be well advised to give those prospects more weight when gauging how much further an already pricey market has to run.

By naming China hawk Peter Navarro as head of a newly formed White House National Trade Council, the incoming administration is signaling Trump's campaign promises to revisit trade deals and even impose a tax on all imports are very much alive.

Among the policies favored by Navarro and Trump's pick for commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, who has the president-elect's ear on a range of economic issues, is a so-called border adjustment tax that is also included in House Speaker Paul Ryan's "Better Way" tax-reform blueprint.

If implemented, economists at Deutsche Bank estimate the tax could send inflation far above the Federal Reserve's 2 percent target and drive a 15 percent surge in the dollar.

Analysts calculate that, all else being equal, a 5 percent increase in the dollar translates into about a 3 percent negative earnings revision for the S&P 500 .SPX and a half-point drag on gross domestic product growth. The dollar index .DXY has already gained more than 5 percent since the U.S. election.



Harsher trade policies may not cause a full economic slowdown, "but I'd expect a localized recession in manufacturing and smaller gains in factory employment as well," said Brian Jacobsen, chief portfolio strategist at Wells Fargo Funds Management in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin.

He said the border tax could trigger retaliation, pouring uncertainty into the market.

"Even if the drafters of the legislation have pure intentions, other countries could use this as a pretext for propping up or subsidizing their own favorite industries."

■ Top economy risk

Stocks have rallied broadly since Nov. 8, with the S&P 500 advancing by 5.7

percent and the Dow Jones Industrial Average .DJI surging nearly 9 percent to brush up against the 20,000 mark. Some sectors, such as banks .SPXBK, have shot up nearly 25 percent in the post-election run.

U.S. equities have gotten substantially pricier from a valuation vantage as well. The forward price-to-earnings ratio on the S&P 500 has risen by a full point since Election Day, from 16.6 to 17.6, Thomson Reuters data shows. That makes stocks about 17 percent more expensive, relative to their earnings potential, than their long-term average multiple of around 15.

Small caps have gotten pricier still. The forward multiple on the Russell 2000 has risen to 26 from 22 on Nov. 8,

up 18 percent, while the index price has climbed 14 percent.

S&P 500 earnings are expected to rise 12.5 percent next year, according to Thomson Reuters Proprietary Research estimates. Anything that impedes companies from achieving that target, such as a bump from a trade spat or further dollar appreciation in anticipation of new trade barriers, would undermine equity valuations.

In the latest Reuters poll of U.S. primary dealers, economists at Wall Street's top banks cited Trump's evolving trade policies over other factors, such as fiscal policy, a strong dollar and higher interest rates, as the greatest risk to the near-term economic outlook.

The idea of a tax on imports "should alarm people," according to Michael O'Rourke, chief market strategist at JonesTrading in Greenwich, Connecticut.

"If we do have a trade war that's going to be a major negative" for stocks, he said, adding that the upward momentum in equities, alongside the lack of participation due to the upcoming holidays, have so far prevented a repricing but "we could cap the rally here, that could very well happen."

O'Rourke said technology, a sector that represents the globalization trade, would be among the hardest hit by taxing imports.

Deutsche Bank's auto sector equities analyst estimated the border tax could slam other industries that rely on global supply chains, with the cost of a new car, for instance, jumping by as much as 10 percent.

(Source: Reuters)

Italy's bank rescue is a precarious balancing act

The Italian government has a clever plan to bail out its sickest bank while avoiding an uproar from small investors and abiding by untested European rules on bailouts.

This balancing act will be difficult at best. It will have important implications for other weak banks in Italy and the rest of Europe however it turns out.

The Italian plan would protect retail savers who own junior debt in Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena, the country's third largest by assets. That debt must be converted into equity as part of the lender's €5 billion (\$5.22 billion) rescue.

The idea is to give ordinary investors safe senior bonds instead. That is clever, but it could run afoul of European rules banning state aid or face a legal challenge from disgruntled institutional creditors who don't get the same treatment.

MPS failed to raise the €5 billion it needs and on Friday applied for support from a €20 billion fund the Italian government established on Thursday. The bank has asked for liquidity support and a precautionary recapitalization with new equity from the state-backed fund.

It is up to the European Commission and the European Central Bank's supervision arm to approve the plan.

The rules around this kind of rescue are untested as they only came fully into force at the start of 2016.



However, several specific provisions are clear: The bank receiving the money must be solvent (which means not failing), unable to raise money privately, and must impose losses on holders of equity and junior bonds. Crucially, the money must not be needed to cover losses recently or likely to be incurred.

MPS only needs recapitalizing because the ECB has ordered it to cut its bad-loan pile, which entails big write-downs. The rescue rules might excuse these losses because they are imposed by the regulator rather than being operating losses.

Business as usual for UK economy – but where will it go in 2017?

So far, so good. That sums up the performance of the UK economy in the first three months after the Brexit referendum in June.

In normal times, a quarterly growth rate of 0.6 percent would be wholly unexceptional for Britain and hardly worthy of comment. The economy has tended to expand by about 2.0 percent to 2.5 percent a year, so 0.6 percent over three months is about par for the course.

These, though, were not normal times. The expectation of the Bank of England, the International Monetary Fund, the Treasury and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation was that a vote

to leave the EU would result in instant economic carnage. Threadneedle Street predicted that the economy would barely grow in the third quarter. George Osborne talked about a year-long DIY recession.

As it happens, the economy grew at precisely the same rate in the third quarter as in the second quarter. Not only was there no recession, there was no slowdown either.

By and large it was business as usual, with the economy displaying all its traditional strengths and weaknesses. Consumers carried on spending as if nothing had happened and imports were sucked in as

a result, leading to a deterioration in the balance of payments. Manufacturing performed badly but financial and business services did well. In the circumstances, the small rise in business investment was both surprising and encouraging.

The signs are that the final three months of 2016 will see more of the same. Retail sales have remained strong, the service sector continues to expand while industry struggles. Between 2015 and 2016 the economy will grow by about 2 percent.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this data. One is that the economy would probably have grown even faster had it not been for the referendum. In-

stead of cutting interest rates, the Bank would probably have raised them by now.

A second is that there is no guarantee that the solid performance in the second half of the year will continue. Inflation is poised to rise sharply early in 2017 and that will lead to a slowdown in consumer spending.

Finally, any satisfaction to be gleaned from the economy outperforming the expectations of the IMF, the Treasury et al has to be tempered by the fact that the UK is still running a quarterly balance of payments deficit of 5 percent of gross domestic product. That's far too high for comfort. *(Source: The Guardian)*

NEWS IN BRIEF



Bank of Ireland moves to reduce credit risk



Canada Pension Board sells NYC building stake for \$1.03b



Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia sign currency settlement MoU

Bank of Ireland's core tier one capital has taken a marginal hit as it reassessed the quality of its mortgage book and took out an insurance policy against future losses.

The bank announced the transactions in a release to the Irish Stock Exchange yesterday.

Bank of Ireland has undertaken a credit risk transfer in relation to roughly €3 billion of loans from its corporate and business banking units. The transaction will reduce the bank's credit risk exposure to these loans through a €185 million credit default swap, which will cost €21 million in annual interest payments.

Canada Pension Plan Investment Board sold its 45 percent stake in the former McGraw-Hill Building, part of the Rockefeller Center complex in midtown Manhattan, for \$1.03 billion.

The buyer was a global institutional investor that wasn't named. Rockefeller Group will keep the remaining 55 percent of 1221 Avenue of the Americas, and will continue to manage the 50-story, 2.6 million-square-foot (241,500-square-meter) tower, the pension fund said in a statement Friday. The transaction values the building at \$2.29 billion. "We feel this is an opportune time to monetize our position in the property," Hilary Spann, managing director and head of U.S. real estate investments for the board, said in the statement.

Bank Indonesia, Bank Negara Malaysia, and the Bank of Thailand yesterday concluded the signing of two bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) on using local currencies for trade, a key milestone in regional central banking cooperation, Thai News Agency (TNA) reported. Bank Negara Malaysia and the Bank of Thailand, respectively, signed MoU with Bank Indonesia on a framework of cooperation to promote the settlement of bilateral trade and direct investment in their local currencies. Following the successful implementation of a similar arrangement between Bank Negara Malaysia and the Bank of Thailand earlier this year, these bilateral arrangements will efficiently facilitate economic and financial activities among the three countries.

Iran's weekly oil price up \$1.04 per barrel

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Iran sold its light crude oil at \$51.86 per barrel in the week ended on December 16, registering a \$1.04 rise, Shana reported on Saturday.

According to the report, Iran's average light crude price stood at \$40.60 since the beginning of the current year until December 16.

Meanwhile the country's heavy crude price witnessed a \$2.02 increase to reach \$51.7 for each barrel; Iran has sold its heavy crude for \$38.68 per ballers on average year to date.

OPEC which accounts for a third of global oil supply, agreed in Vienna on November 30 to cut production from January by around 1.2 million barrels per day (bpd), or over three percent, to 32.5 million bpd.

The cut will put production at the low end of a preliminary agreement struck in Algiers in September, and will reduce output from a current 33.64 million bpd.



Kyrgyzstan invites Iran to invest in the country's power industry

Kyrgyzstan's National Energy Holding Company has invited Iran to invest into Upper Naryn Cascade hydropower plants, Kambar-Ata-1 HPP, specialists of the Energy Holding Company said during Kyrgyzstan-Iran business forum on December 23.

Kyrgyzstan's hydropower capacity is estimated at 142 billion kWh of electricity, they said.

"Today we use no more than 10 percent of this capacity. The Naryn

River is the main water artery. Its use started with construction of the Uch-Kurgan hydropower plant. Kyrgyzstan has 17 hydropower plants in total," they added.

During presentation of Kyrgyzstan's hydropower potential, such projects as Upper Naryn Cascade and Kambar-Ata-2 hydropower plants were prioritized.

"Construction of these hydropower plants is an important part of devel-

opment of the country's resources. The feasibility study has been prepared for the Kambar-Ata-1 hydropower plant. Electricity generated by the Kambar-Ata-1 HPP could be sold throughout the year. In summer time, its electricity can be exported as part of the CASA-1000 Project," the specialists added.

Upper Naryn Cascade HPP was named as another promising project, which includes a chain of four hydro-

power plants with the total capacity of 230 MW.

"Generation of electricity at the Upper Naryn Cascade hydropower plants is possible around the year. Besides, a part of infrastructure is ready and construction of primary facilities was started," they said.

63 small hydropower plants could be built in Kyrgyzstan with the overall capacity of 257 MW, they underlined. (Source: akipress.com)

U.S. to sell sweet oil from emergency reserve, delivery in March

The U.S. Department of Energy expects to begin sales of roughly eight million barrels of sweet crude from the country's emergency oil reserve in early to mid-January, according to a notice sent to potential bidders and seen by Reuters.

The Strategic Petroleum Reserve oil will come from the Big Hill and Bryan Mound, Texas storage sites, and West Hackberry, Louisiana facility, the notice said.

Delivery of the oil will begin on March first but buyers can take the oil as early as February, the notice said.

The Energy Department said earlier this month it would sell \$375 million worth of crude oil, or about eight million barrels at today's prices, from the emergency reserve this winter after Congress passed a temporary spending bill authorizing the sale. It is the first of several planned sales over the coming years that could total up to \$2 billion worth of oil, intended to raise funds to modernize the reserve.

Congress would have to approve annual sales for the next three years to reach the up to \$2 billion plan. It remains to be seen whether President-elect Donald Trump would urge Congress for the annual authorizations.

There are roughly 695 million barrels of oil in the reserve, a string of heavily guarded salt caverns on the Louisiana and Texas coasts. It was developed to protect the U.S. economy from oil supply disruptions following the 1973 to 1974 Arab oil embargo. (Source: Reuters)

PICTURE OF THE DAY SHANA/Hassan Hosseini



Started on Wednesday Wednesday in the southwestern city of Ahwaz, the 14th edition of Iran's specialized exhibition of equipment for drilling wrapped up on Saturday. Companies active in the fields of drilling equipment and services showcased their latest products and services in this event.

Investors betting on oil price drop flee as production cuts near

Oil investors seem to have less reason to doubt that OPEC and other producers will make the cuts needed to balance the market.

Money managers trimmed bets on falling West Texas Intermediate crude prices to the lowest level since August 2014 as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and other crude-exporters prepare to start curbing output in January. Oil market volatility dropped to the lowest level in more than two years on Dec. 20 and futures settled at a 17-month high on Friday.

"People are excited that OPEC is going to hold firm and there will be a substantial reduction in inventories,"

Michael Lynch, president of Strategic Energy & Economic Research in Winchester, Massachusetts, said by phone. "The market should rebalance in 2017."

Hedge funds reduced short positions, or wagers WTI will drop, by 10 percent in the week ended Dec. 20, U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission data show. WTI declined 1.4 percent to \$52.23 a barrel in the report week. Prices settled at \$53.02 a barrel in New York on Friday, the highest close since July 2015.

OPEC agreed to reduce its supplies by 1.2 million barrels a day, while 11 non-members including Russia and

Kazakhstan pledged to curb output by almost 600,000 a day.

"The market is fully embracing the OPEC, non-OPEC agreement," John Kilduff, a partner at Again Capital LLC, a New York-based hedge fund that focuses on energy, said by phone. "They are being given the benefit of the doubt now. The big test will come with the new year when we'll see if they make the promised cuts."

Confident ministers

Oil prices are set to recover next year as OPEC fulfills its output agreement, Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih said in Riyadh on Dec. 22. Al-Falih's outlook was echoed by comments made by his counterpart from the United Arab Emirates, Energy Minister Suhail Al Mazrouei, who also predicted the same day from Abu Dhabi that OPEC's actions will result in higher prices in 2017.

Money managers' short position in WTI dropped by 5,699 futures and options to 50,613, a fifth week of decreases. Longs, or bets the benchmark will rise, slipped 0.8 percent. The resulting net-long position climbed 1 percent to the highest level since July 2014.

"This represents the market being in an overbought situation," Tim

Evans, an energy analyst at Citi Futures Perspective in New York, said by phone. "They are very well prepared for a rise in prices, but are left vulnerable for any negative shocks."

Fuel markets

In fuel markets, net-bullish bets on gasoline rose 11 percent to 42,879 contracts, the highest since February 2015, as futures advanced 2.8 percent in the report week. Money managers increased net-bullish wagers on ultra-low sulfur diesel by 1.6 percent to 27,406 contracts, the highest since July 2014, as futures slipped 0.4 percent.

U.S. oil companies had been using the rally to hedge their price risk for the next two years, potentially boosting output next year. Producers' short positions, protecting against a drop in prices, decreased to 622,395 contracts, the first decline in four weeks. The number of bearish wagers had climbed to the highest since August 2007 in the prior week.

"The shale producers rushed in at the first sign of viability," Kilduff said. "That's played out. They locked in their profits and are now waiting to see what happens before hedging more." (Source: Bloomberg)

Iran's Jan.-Sep. oil output up by 19%: EIA

Iran's oil production increased by 18.8 percent to 3.92 million barrels per day (mbpd) during January-September 2016, the US Energy Information Agency reported Dec. 23.

According to the report, Iran's oil output, including gas condensate, stood at 4.170 mbpd in September, about 20,000 bpd more than November and 870,000 bpd more than September 2015.

Iran's September oil production was the highest since late 1980s.

The report didn't mention the volume of crude oil and gas condensate separately, but according to OPEC and International Energy Agency's reports, Iran's crude oil production was around 3.65 mbpd in September.

Iran also says it produces about 560,000 bpd of gas condensate. (Source: Trend)

Azerbaijan extends BP's deal for giant oilfields until 2050

Oil major BP has agreed with Azerbaijan to extend a contract to develop the country's biggest fields by a quarter of a century to 2050 in a move to unlock billions of dollars of fresh investments in the Caspian Sea deposits.

The existing production sharing deal was due to expire in 2024 and talks to extend it have been slow because of disagreements between partners in the BP-led consortium, sources told Reuters earlier this year.

The extension of the Azeri contracts adds to the flurry of deals BP signed in recent weeks, including buying stakes in gas exploration areas off the coast of Mauritania and Senegal, and renewing an onshore oil concession in Abu Dhabi.

BP said the consortium and Azeri state oil firm SOCAR on Friday signed a letter of intent to continue developing the giant Azeri-Chirag-Guneshly (ACG) offshore fields until 2050.

It said it had agreed the key commercial terms for the future development while the deal was due to be finalized in the next few months.

The shareholders in the consortium include BP, Chevron, INPEX, Statoil, ExxonMobil, TPAO, ITOCHU and ONGC Videsh.

"ACG is known as the 'Contract of the Century'. It is very important to Azerbaijan ... We can now look ahead to many more years of ACG's success," the statement quoted SOCAR's president Rovnag Abdullayev as saying.

The existing deal was signed in 1994 and became the first successful agreement between a former Soviet Union republic and oil majors to develop energy resources. BP said the new deal will bring many thousands of jobs in the years ahead.

BP came under fire from Azeri President Ilham Aliyev earlier this decade when the country's leader criticized the oil firm for lower than promised output levels.

With current output of 620,000 barrels per day, the fields have produced a total of over 3 billion barrels of oil since the start of the project, with around \$33 billion of investment. Their remaining reserves are estimated to contain several more billions of barrels of oil.

(Source: Reuters)

Dubai plans pumped storage hydro facility powered by solar

The Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) has announced that it will build the (Persian) Gulf Cooperating Council region's first hydroelectric power station — a 250-MW pumped storage hydro plant that will be powered by solar PV.



The new facility is one of several new projects announced by DEWA as part of the Hattat Comprehensive Development Plan.

According to DEWA, the pumped storage hydro plant will be completed within five years.

DEWA's other projects include installing electric vehicle charging stations in Hatta and solar PV panels on rooftops to produce electricity from solar power.

"[These] projects will create 200 permanent technical, administrative and operational jobs in Hatta. Another 300 jobs are expected to be created by the Visitor Centre, and other outdoor activities and tourist facilities associated with the project. Over 2,000 jobs will be available during the implementation phase," HE Saeed Mohammed Al Tayer CEO of DEWA, said in a statement.

The new projects are part of DEWA's effort to fulfill the Dubai Clean Energy Strategy 2050, which was launched by HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The strategy aims to provide seven percent of Dubai's total power output from clean energy by 2020, 25 percent by 2030, and 75 percent by 2050. (Source: renewableenergyworld.com)





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Mobile: +98912 924 7199
Z.M@negineabzian.com
www.negineabzian.com

Life is about Choices, Choose Wisely

Can Merkel calm German nerves after the Berlin attack?

By Robin Simcox

Several plots have been planned by refugees recently settled in Germany.

Before this year, Germany was not used to terrorists striking on its home soil. A lot has changed since.

The terror threat that haunts Germany seemingly culminated—at least for 2016—in the outrage that occurred in Berlin last week. At present, 12 are dead and dozens more were injured in a truck attack that mirrored the one that took place in Nice, France, this past summer.



It comes as no surprise that ISIL has claimed credit for the attack in Berlin, although the actual perpetrator is yet to be arrested. Intelligence services clearly had an idea that something like this was possibly coming.

A State Department travel alert from November warned of a "heightened risk of terrorist attacks throughout Europe, particularly during the holiday season."

The travel alert went on to say, "U.S. citizens should exercise caution at holiday festivals, events and outdoor markets." It stated that "credible information" indicated that ISIL or Al-Qaeda could be likely perpetrators of an attack.

Such target-rich environments appeal to terrorist groups aiming to cause death and carnage during the holiday season. Even before the plot targeting Berlin, a 12-year-old boy radicalized by an ISIL operative tried to blow up a Christmas market in Ludwigshafen on November 26.

Fortunately, his bomb failed to detonate. On the same day, arrests were made in Strasbourg and Marseille, which disrupted an ISIL plot targeting a Christmas market in Champs-Élysées, Paris.

Yet the threat does not begin and end with ISIL. Those trained by Al-Qaeda have also planned to attack a Christmas market in Strasbourg. That plot was disrupted in December 2000 and four Algerians were subsequently jailed for between 10 and 12 years.

Al-Qaeda has also launched terrorist attacks on aviation during the holiday season—in 2001, via shoe bomber Richard Reid, and in 2009, via underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab.

→13

Obama's anti-Israel tantrum

The UN resolution is a defining act of Obama's presidency

The decision by the United States to abstain from a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Israel over its settlements on the West Bank is one of the most significant, defining moments of the Obama Presidency.

It defines this President's extraordinary ability to transform matters of public policy into personal pique at adversaries. And it defines the reality of the international left's implacable opposition to the Israeli state.

Earlier in the week, Egypt withdrew the Security Council resolution under pressure from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. President-elect Donald Trump also intervened, speaking with Egypt's government and, via Twitter, urging Obama to block the resolution, as have past U.S. Administrations and Obama himself in 2011.

As was widely reported Friday after the UN vote, the White House decided to abstain—thereby allowing the pro-Palestinian resolution to pass—in retaliation against the intervention by Netanyahu and Trump.

Obama's animus toward Prime Minister Netanyahu is well known. Apparently Obama took it as an affront that the President-elect would express an opinion about this week's UN resolution.



It is important, though, to see this U.S. abstention as more significant than merely Obama's petulance. What it reveals clearly is the Obama Administration's animus against Israel itself.

■ Obama's petulance

It is important, though, to see this U.S. abstention as more significant than merely Obama's petulance. What it reveals clearly is the Obama Administration's

animus against the state of Israel itself. No longer needing Jewish votes, Obama was free, finally, to punish the Jewish state in a way no previous President has done.

No effort to rescind the resolution,

which calls the settlements a violation of "international law," will succeed because of Russia's and China's vetoes.

Instead, the resolution will live on as Barack Obama's cat's paw, offering support in every European capital, international institution and U.S. university campus to bully Israel with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer implored the Administration to veto the resolution, noting rightly that it represents nothing more than the "Zionism is racism" bias at the UN. Let Senator Schumer note the true nature of his party's left wing.

House Speaker Paul Ryan called the Administration's action "shameful." Senator Lindsey Graham said he will form a bipartisan coalition to suspend or reduce U.S. financial support for the UN. That should proceed.

For Donald Trump, meet your State Department. This is what State's permanent bureaucrats believe, this is what they want, and Barack Obama delivered it to them.

Tweets won't change this now-inbred hostility to America's oldest democratic ally in the Middle East. Obama's pique, however, has made it crystal clear to the new Administration where the lines in the sand are drawn.

(Source: The WSJ)

Congo's and Gambia's power-hungry presidents

This year saw another steady rollback of democracy around the globe. The lights go out when no one is looking: An editor is jailed, an election is postponed, a bookseller or lawyer disappears. Right now, two leaders in Africa are clinging to power, hoping to resist the forces of democracy. They must not be allowed to succeed.

In Congo, Dec. 19 was supposed to be the last day in office for President Joseph Kabila, who is prohibited by the constitution from a third term. He failed to organize a new election, did not step down and reportedly is increasingly isolated in the capital, Kinshasa, staying up late with his Sony PlayStation 4 and pondering how to protect the wealth he and his family have accumulated.

At the same time, Congo is drifting toward an explosion.

The nation is vast and only loosely controlled by security forces and armed militias. Opposition forces have been growing ever more restive under Kabila's boot. According to Human Rights Watch, over the past two years, the authorities in Congo have arbitrarily arrested scores of activists and opposition leaders, holding some incommunicado and mistreating or torturing them, while trying others on trumped-up charges. Kabila named a new cabinet last week, but opposition street protests are intensifying, and security forces killed at least 26 demonstrators on Tuesday.

Separately, in Gambia, the smallest nation on the continent, President Yahya Jammeh, who has been in power for 22 years, clings to office. He was defeated in Dec. 1 elections by opposition leader Adama Barrow, and his initial decision to

step down and accede to the will of the voters offered a rare glimmer of hope. But it didn't last. On Dec. 9, Jammeh changed his mind and called for a new vote, refusing to budge.

There is only one nation that has overwhelming influence as a beacon for democracy, the United States. But it has not always spoken out as strongly as it should against strongmen in Africa. Clearly, Kabila and Jammeh are calculating that they can hang on, even if they destroy democracy in their countries. Perhaps they know President-elect Donald Trump has shown little interest in the topic. "Sad," as Trump likes to say, because if the flame of freedom doesn't burn brightly from the United States, then next year the path for democracy will be darker for millions of people elsewhere.

(Source: The Washington Post)

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By Mohammad Ghaderi

Beyond assassination of Russian amb.; West implicated

Assassination of Andrey Karlov in Ankara has been a major enigma; but it is far clear that it had not been the product of an isolated case of overflow of sentimentality.

For the time being, it is assumed that it had been purposeful and there is a method behind the madness. We will collect what is evident in a set to come to an overall image of the situation, just as the detectives in a crime case do.

The scene is well-preserved by the media. An apparently fanatic Muslim young police officer shoots Russian ambassador to Turkey when he was addressing a meeting in a gallery. The young police succeeds to implement the plan neatly by virtue of being a police officer in the venue; however, his hysteric words after shooting the ambassador communicate the similitude of a young sympathizer of the people in Aleppo trying to take revenge by his own hands. The media in the west and those supporting Takfirists would rejoice to propagate such an image of a lone wolf acting on his own. Simple

as that.

But the scene is replete with evidence to the contrary, especially with the Aleppo liberated; the young assassin clearly declares that he seeks to take revenge of Aleppo on Russia by killing the ambassador. This would be plausible, but only when we ignore the important image of the west now frustrated and angered by the events in Aleppo; that alone would precipitate the harsh reaction in violent attire of an assassination.

The second evident issue is that the west at large and Zionist regime along with their allies in reactionary Arab regimes of the region had been despairing in the prospect of Aleppo. The common denominator of the assassin and Takfirists and their supporters is their consternation of the defeat in Aleppo.



The young assassin clearly declares that he seeks to take revenge of Aleppo on Russia by killing the ambassador. This would be plausible, but only when we ignore the important image of the west now frustrated and angered by the events in Aleppo.

This should not be downplayed as a potential contributing factor.

Vladimir Putin of Russia however kept exemplary equanimity upon hearing the news of the assassination; "this assassination manifestly is a provocative act to weaken the nascent process of détente with Turkey and to undermine the peace process in Syria; our response will however be to intensify the battle against terrorism, and the assassins will taste the bitterness of the response," Mr. Putin said resolutely.

The assassination, particularly just days after Syrian army along with Russian support, brought some solace to Aleppo by evicting terrorist fighters, sends clear messages by Washington and its allies to Moscow, albeit with a tinge of violence. The message was received by Kremlin with utmost care. Putin asked Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to have

the possible forces behind the scenario identified; he would be naïve if he accepted the lone-wolf scenario, which is at best flimsy in this case. And he did not in practice.

The 'truth-finding' committee of security and intelligence agents are in Ankara to scrutinize the case of Karlov assassination and will definitely shed more light to the some of the darker interiors of the case.

Still in the same vein, the trilateral meeting in Moscow which has a novelty of participating Turkey as one of the staunch supporters of terrorist factions in Syria to a meeting to hit the exact play the west had been performing on Syria; to lure Turkey to a scenario which would bring stability to Syria, where Iran is also a player with better position on the ground, would be a possible potential cause of the decision to undermine

the whole scene in one way or the other. The assassination would serve the assassin and his clique of supporters and ideologues in improving the moral of the terrorists, now in a desperate situation on the brink of annihilation, and also through to hit the improving relations of Turkey and Russia and its possible workings in changing the situation in Syria.

Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria, Staffan de Mistura will attend a conference the next month; the assassination would be intended to undermine this conference, with the objective being to mount pressures on Moscow to make more concessions on the negotiation table.

The last point which would contribute to the assassination (and probably the most plausible cause) is infiltration

in Turkey's police and intelligence forces by Takfirist sympathizers, which has virtually rendered the system weak in responding more agilely to pitfalls and the gaps; the same weakness made perforated borders with Syria for fresh recruited terrorists easy way to infiltrate the country and challenge the security arrangements not quite infrequently.

Aleppo is now fully liberated and Syrian Army has gained control of the second most important city of the country, promising the people of the country more victories and achievements in their fight against terrorism and resistance against external pressures. This will also translate into more anger in west and among their regional allies who are against Assad being in power and may lead to more similar acts of terrorism or warmongering policies.

The upcoming days will be tough for Russia and Syrian government, since the western supporters of Takfirists would be restless to enter action to counteract the Aleppo defeat, with even more effrontery. Only time will show us.



The common denominator of the assassin and Takfirists and their supporters is their consternation of the defeat in Aleppo. This should not be downplayed as a potential contributing factor.



The trilateral meeting in Moscow which has a novelty of participating Turkey as one of the staunch supporters of terrorist factions in Syria to a meeting to hit the exact play the west had been performing on Syria.



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9 super simple ways to declutter your space (and life) for good

You think you're a clean person. You don't leave dirty dishes in the sink—well, at least not often. You sweep occasionally. Heck, sometimes you even make your bed. But still the clutter piles up—whether it's mail, books, or clothes. And it quickly becomes so overwhelming that it's hard to know where to start.

Which is why we asked professional organizers for their top tips to get rid of clutter (for good!). They're all super simple and won't leave you picking up for hours on end.

1. Nip procrastination in the bud

"Procrastination is what causes clutter. Clutter is nothing more than postponed decisions. Set a modest goal to deal with the clutter in your life, and congratulate yourself on your success. Success will breed success. And if you keep making decisions, this time next year, getting organized won't be one of your resolutions." — Laurie Martin, Simplicity Organizers

2. Start small

"Many people get discouraged because the job is just too big. Choose one drawer, take everything out, look at each

"Procrastination is what causes clutter. Clutter is nothing more than postponed decisions. Set a modest goal to deal with the clutter in your life."

item with a critical eye, and ask yourself: 'What is this doing here?' If you know the answer (and it's a good one), the item gets to stay. If you don't, the item needs a new home. Put back only what actually belongs. Every time you open that draw-



er, you'll feel proud of your work, which is great motivation to tackle another drawer and then maybe a whole closet!" — Rachel Siegel, Spruce Girls

3. Ask: Would you buy this today?

"If the answer is no, throw it in the toss or donate pile. If you're upset about the money that you paid for something that you never wear, deciding to keep it in your closet won't put money back in your pocket. It will only frustrate you and clog up the works!" — Jeni Aron, Clutter Cowgirl

4. Use your hangers to your advantage

"As you wear things, put them back in your closet with the hanger backward, so you can keep track of what you're actually wearing. You'll be amazed at how many things you wear over and over—and what you never touch. It may even encourage you to expand your options and use pieces you may have passed over." — Anjie Cho, author, 108 Ways to Create

Holistic Spaces

5. Follow the one in, one out rule

"For each item that comes into your home, remove a similar item. For example, if you buy a new sweater, sell, donate, or discard one of your older sweaters." — Nancy Haworth, OnTask Organizing

6. Don't worry about perfection

"I remember wanting my home to be like the pages of a magazine. I thought if things were perfect, I would be more inclined to maintain order. About twice a year I would pull everything out of my drawers and closet and attempt to organize. It was usually about a quarter of the way through when I'd burn out, give up, and shove everything back in. Forget about perfection, and take a hard look at what and where things are piling up and causing clutter." — Shara Koplowitz, O.P.E.N.

7. Stop feeling obligated to keep things

"Just because mom gave you a gift,

passed on a family treasure, or showed up with a giant box of your old school papers doesn't mean you have to hang on to them. All of those items retained out of guilt end up filling your valuable storage and weighing you down, when someone else might really need or enjoy them. Learning to gently say no (or donating what you don't want, need, or use) will go a long way toward a clutter-free existence." — Sara Skillen, SkillSet Organizing

8. Keep only what you can store

"Clothing should fit into closets and dressers. Make sure cleaning and toiletry supplies can fit into your cabinets or closets. If there isn't room, review what is stored, and purge excess by discarding things that are expired or worn and donating what you know you no longer use." — Annette Reyman, All Right Organizing

9. Clean up mental clutter

"Most of us are living anywhere but the present moment. We are either stuck in the past or anxious about the future. My number one tip for releasing mental clutter is to meditate. While there are lots of

"My number one tip for releasing mental clutter is to meditate. If you're calming your mind, you are headed in the right direction."

traditional meditation practices, I always tell clients to begin where they can and think outside the box. If you're calming your mind, you are headed in the right direction. I love to mow the lawn—that's meditation for me." — Julie Coraccio, Reawaken Your Brilliance

(Source: greatist.com)

How to reduce your risk of accidents

When asked to name their greatest health risks, people rarely mention accidents. Yet accidental injuries are the fourth leading cause of death in the United States, claiming more than 136,000 lives annually. And if you're under 45, you're more likely to die from an accidental injury than from any other cause.

Three types of accidents —poisonings, motor vehicle crashes, and falls — account for about two-thirds of these deaths, according to the Harvard Special Health Report Women's Health: Fifty and Forward. Poisoning is the leading cause of death due to injury in the United States, bridging all age groups. Car crashes are more likely to claim the lives of younger people, while falls are a more common cause of death for seniors.

Lower your risk of accidents at home

The leading cause of home-injury fatalities, falls were responsible for the deaths of about 32,000 people in 2014. Falling is more than a way to get hurt; it may also be a sign that you're losing skills needed to maintain mobility, explains Dr. Jonathan Bean, an associate professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School. "That's why falls are part of a larger concern, because they can set people down the path to disability," he says.

Spills aren't an inevitable consequence of aging. There are several things you can do for yourself and your home to reduce the risk of accidental injuries, including the following:

- Build your core strength. It may be natural to assume that a sturdy pair of legs will shore you up, but having a robust torso is even more important. Work on strengthening your abdomen, back, and hip girdle by doing exercises that work on several muscle groups at a time.
- Make sure you can see properly. Wearing reading glasses or new multifocal lenses when walking can increase your risk of falls by affecting your depth perception. Have a vision exam annually, and consider single-vision lenses if you need to have your distance vision corrected.

Accidental injuries are a leading cause of disability and death, but they are almost always preventable.

Remove home hazards. Tack or tape down loose rugs, install handrails or grab bars if necessary, and ensure that you have proper lighting so you can see obstacles clearly.

Take precautions to prevent poisoning

Poisoning ranks high on the list of accidental injuries, accounting for almost 40,000 deaths in 2014. Drugs—both pharmaceutical and illicit—were responsible for most poisoning deaths.

It goes without saying that recreational drug use raises your risk of accidental poisoning. However, therapeutic drugs used improperly can also have toxic effects, especially if taken with alcohol.

Tell your doctor about all the medications you are taking, so you can make substitutions for those most likely to cause drug interactions or overdoses. It's especially important to minimize your use of opioid pain relievers like hydrocodone (Vicodin) and oxycodone (Oxycontin), which are involved in an increasing proportion of drug-poisoning deaths. Always take your medications exactly as prescribed.

Reduce your risk of accidents on the road

In 2014, about 35,000 people were killed in traffic accidents, ending a years-long decline in U.S. highway fatalities. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reported that almost 50% of people who died in wrecks weren't wearing seat belts. Per NHTSA data, about 30% of fatalities were attributed to drunken driving or speeding, and distracted drivers—particularly those texting—were implicated in 10%.

It's clear that buckling up, staying sober, observing the speed limits, and turning off your cellphone can go a long way in lowering the likelihood you'll be involved in a car crash. Some additional measures can also help:

- Make sure you're fit to drive. You should have near-normal corrected vision, including peripheral vision. You should be able to hear a car horn or siren easily. You should be able to rotate your neck to look over your shoulder and have good sensation in your feet.
- Keep your vehicle roadworthy. See that wipers and defrosters are working, tires are properly inflated, and windows and mirrors are clean.
- Be a cautious pedestrian. Distracted walking can also lead to accidental injuries. Don't talk on your cell phone while you're crossing the street. Always use marked crosswalks and obey crossing signals.

(Source: health.harvard.edu)

Proper food portion sizes for weight loss

By Malia Frey

Do you eat the proper food portion sizes to lose weight? When you fill your plate at meal time how do you decide the right amount of food to eat? These questions bother every dieter and even those trying to maintain a healthy weight. Finding the best answer is the key to successful weight loss. Unfortunately, many dieters get it wrong.

Portion size vs. serving size

If you check the Nutrition Facts label to find the correct portion sizes of food, you might be in trouble.

The serving size listed on food packages is not the recommended serving size. In fact, it is not the portion size, either. Serving size is simply the amount of food that is typically consumed in a single eating occasion, according to guidelines provided by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The definition of portion size is different. Your portion size is the amount of food that you actually eat. Your portion size may be larger or smaller than the FDA serving size printed on the food label.

For example, let's say you snack on low-calorie microwavable popcorn. A serving size, according to the Nutrition Facts Label is four (4) cups. There are two servings in each full size bag. So if you eat the whole bag, your portion size was eight (8) cups—double the serving size.

Or what if you eat a bowl of grapes? The recommended serving size of grapes is one cup or about 16 grapes. How many cups are in a bowl?

It really depends on the size of the bowl, but if you eat a bowl of grapes, your portion size is probably more than a cup, probably around 2 to 3 cups of grapes.

Why portion sizes matter for weight loss

Adding the correct portion size to your daily food journal is critical when you are trying to lose weight.

If you confuse serving size and portion size, your calorie counts will be wrong for the day and you might not lose weight.

For example, let's say that you use a diet app to record that microwavable popcorn snack. When you find the food in the app's food database, you'll probably see that it lists a single serving (4 cups) as the default portion size. If you don't personalize your portion size (you consumed 8 cups) the wrong number of calories will be added to your daily intake. The inaccurate calorie count may cause you to eat more and you may not lose weight as a result.

Correct portion sizes to lose weight

There is no right or wrong amount of food to eat when you want to lose weight. The proper portion sizes of food are the portions that allow you fuel your body with energy and nutrients, feel satisfied and remain within your calorie limit for the day. Correct portion sizes depend on your age, your weight, your activity level and in some cases your medical history.

So how do you know how much food to eat?

You can use recommended serving sizes as a guide. These guidelines are developed by different health organizations and they vary slightly from agency to agency.

But the recommendations are not personalized for you.

To get personalized guidelines for the amount of food to eat, visit the USDA SuperTracker website. After you enter your size and weight goals, you are provided with personalized eating plan with food group targets. With this plan, you'll know how much fruit, vegetables, protein, grains and dairy to eat each day. You'll also get specific information about how to make sure you're eating the right amount.

Tips to control portion sizes

Once you know how much to eat, you may need to take steps to control portion sizes to reach your goals. You can use these tips to eat the proper portion sizes at meal time.

Use portion control dishes. You'll find portion control plates, serving spoons and even beverage or wine glasses online and in some department stores. The dishes usually have clever designs that help dieters eat the right amount of each food group.

Measure food with a scale. Throughout your diet, but especially in the beginning, it's helpful to use a digital scale to measure your food. That way you know exactly how much food you're eating. You can also use other methods to measure food portions if a scale is not handy.

Be wary of portion pitfalls. Certain foods are easy to overeat. Cereal, for example, can be a weight loss disaster for many hungry dieters. Figure out what your target foods are and make a decision to always measure these foods before you eat them.

(Sources: verywell.com)

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Iran to host Intl. Festival of Tribes Culture

HERITAGE TEHRAN — The 10th International Festival of Tribes Culture will be held in the Iranian city of Gorgan from December 28, 2016 to January 1, 2017.

The event will convene diplomats, cultural officials, as well as regional performers, craftspeople, and artists from Iran and its neighboring countries such as Armenia, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The festival will embrace a wide range of regional arts, handicrafts, souvenirs, and tourist attraction exhibits, as well as dramatic, musical and ritual live performances.

It will revolve around Noruz celebrations, chosen as its central theme.

Back in November, UNESCO inscribed Noruz celebration as a collective feast of 12 nations on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Noruz marks the beginning of spring across a vast geographical area. It is celebrated on March 21st every year.

It is a common tradition for Iran, Azerbaijan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Iraq.

Qatar Airways introduces new premium amenity kits

DOHA (Travel Daily News) — Qatar Airways has signed an exclusive three-year partnership with premium purveyors BRICS and Castello Monte Vibiano Vecchio to elevate the airline's premium cabin experience.

The BRICS Business Class amenity kit is inspired by the Sintesis line of trolley bags, is an asymmetrical shape, also in four colors: black, grey, burgundy and white, featuring innovative lightweight materials that provide functionality with style.

Qatar Airways has partnered with BRICS in an exclusive three-year term to provide its premium travelers with the finest keepsake amenity kits. The amenity kits also exclusively feature products from Italy's Castello Monte Vibiano Vecchio, the environmentally friendly olive oil company, including lip balm, hydrating facial mist and City Cream anti-ageing moisturiser in Business Class, with the added Night recovery cream for First Class kits.

ROUND THE GLOBE Minaret and archaeological remains of Jam

At 1,900 m above sea level and far from any town in Afghanistan, the 65m-tall Minaret of Jam located in Afghanistan is a graceful, soaring structure, which dates back to the 12th century.

The minaret, which has been inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage list, rises within a rugged valley along the Hari-rud River at its junction with the river Jam around 215km-east of Herat.



A view of the 12th-century Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan

It is covered in elaborate brickwork with a blue tile inscription at the top, it is noteworthy for the quality of its architecture and decoration, which represent the culmination of an architectural and artistic tradition in this region.

Its impact is heightened by its dramatic setting, a deep river valley between towering mountains in the heart of Ghur Province.

Built in 1194 by the great Ghurid Sultan Ghiyas-od-din (1153-1203), its emplacement probably marks the site of the ancient city of Firuzkuh, believed to have been the summer capital of the Ghurid dynasty.

Surrounding remains include a group of stones with Hebrew inscriptions from the 11th to 12th centuries on the Kushkak hill, and vestiges of castles and towers of the Ghurid settlements on the banks of the Hari River as well as to the east of the Minaret.

The Minaret of Jam is one of the few well-preserved monuments representing the exceptional artistic creativity and mastery of structural engineering of the time.

Its architecture and ornamentation are outstanding from the point of view of art history, fusing together elements from earlier developments in the region in an exceptional way and exerting a strong influence on later architecture in the region.

This graceful soaring structure is an outstanding example of the architecture and ornamentation of the Islamic period in Central Asia and played a significant role in their further dissemination as far as India as demonstrated by the Qutb Minar, Delhi, begun in 1202 and completed in the early 14th century. (Source: UNESCO)

Tehran, Yerevan set to deepen tourism, museum ties

TOURISM TEHRAN — Iran and Armenia signed two memorandums of understanding to expand cooperation in the areas related to tourism and museum, Mehr news agency reported.

An MOU was signed by Iran's Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization (CHTHO) Director Zahra Ahmadipour and Armenian Minister of Culture Armen Amirian in the presence of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sargsyan in Yerevan on Wednesday.

Holding scientific conferences and joint exhibits, exchanging experts, information and know-how on museum-related affairs and the conservation of historic relics were among the items of agreement reached between the National Museum of Iran and the History Museum of Armenia.

Ahmadipour inked another MOU with Armenian Minister of Economic Development and Investments Suren Karayan on the expansion of tourism ties and construction of hotels.



(left to right) Iran's CHTHO Director Zahra Ahmadipour signs MOUs with Armenian Minister of Culture Armen Amirian and Minister of Economic Development and Investments Suren Karayan in Yerevan on December 21, 2017. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sargsyan are seen in the pictures as well.

struction of hotels.

Meanwhile, Rouhani and Sargsyan welcomed the idea of visa-free regime between the two countries which can help promote bilateral economic and investment projects.

In June, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his Armenian

counterpart Edward Nalbandian signed an MOU in Tehran for lifting visa regime.

Tehran, Yerevan share fragments of history

Iran and Armenia share fragments of intertwined history, culture and arts as the two neighboring states have been in close interactions for thousands of years,

starting with the Median Empire (c. 678 BC–549 BC).

Inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage list, Armenian Monastic Ensembles of Iran composed of St. Thaddeus, St. Stepanos and the Chapel of Dzordzor, are amongst exemplar Armenian architectural and decorative traditions in the country.

Seljuqs great patrons of arts and architecture in Iran

The art of the Seljuqs (ca. 1040–1196)

The Seljuqs, a Turkic dynasty of Central Asian nomadic origins, became the new rulers of the eastern Islamic lands following their defeat of the powerful Ghaznavids at the Battle of Dandanakan (1040).

By 1055, the Seljuqs had reached and taken over Baghdad, which put an end to Buyid rule, and established themselves as the new protectors of the Abbasid caliphate and Sunni Islam.

Within fifty years, the Seljuqs created a vast though relatively short-lived empire, encompassing all of Iran, Iraq, and much of Anatolia. By the close of the eleventh century, as the Seljuq realm became troubled due to internal conflicts and the division of the realm among heirs, the empire dissolved into separate territories governed by different branches of the dynasty.

The main branch of the Seljuq house, the so-called Great Seljuqs, maintained control over Iran. Under the Seljuq sultanate, Iran enjoyed a period of material and cultural prosperity, and the ingenuity in architecture and the arts during this period had a notable impact on later artistic developments.

The Seljuq cultural and artistic efflorescence continued well beyond the sultanate's political influence. In fact, as there are few surviving dated examples of Iranian art from the Seljuq period proper, works of art dating to the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries are frequently labeled "Seljuq" even though they might have been produced under the patronage of one of several local dynasties.

Turkic Seljuq rulers adopted and supported local



This bird-shaped oil lamp -- attributed to Khorasan region, northeast Iran -- is on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The cast object made of bronze is partly engraved and also inlaid with silver and copper. It dates from the late 12th or early 13th century.

Perso-Islamic traditions, and Seljuq art is recognized for weaving together Persian, Islamic, and Central Asian-Turkic elements. During this period, the arts of Iran gained distinction in the Islamic world.

Important developments and innovations contributed to the renown of Seljuq art. Beginning in the second half of the twelfth century, the art of inlaying bronze or brass objects with precious metals such as copper, silver, and gold became prominent in the eastern Iranian prov-

ince of Khorasan. Such objects were often decorated with Arabic inscriptions written in the "animated" script, developed during this period, in which the letters were transformed into human and animal figures.

The same shapes known in metalwork were also produced in contemporary pottery. These ceramic wares demonstrate the advancement of new techniques or the further refinement of existing ones. Especially notable were the works produced in Kashan, in the luster and mina'i techniques. Also significant, though little known today due to few surviving examples, were the arts of the book.

The Seljuqs were also great patrons of architecture. An unprecedented number of madrasas (institutions of higher learning) were erected throughout the Seljuq realm. Most notable, however, was the Madrasa Nizamiya, founded in Baghdad by the great Seljuq vizier Nizam al-Mulk (r. 1063–92) to support Orthodox Sunni education (1067).

In mosque architecture, the courtyard with four vaulted halls (iwans) on each side became prevalent. The transformed congregational mosque in Isfahan whose additions were commissioned by Nizam al-Mulk and Taj al-Mulk, two Seljuq administrators, for Sultan Malikshah (r. 1073–92) and his wife Terkan Khatun, was the most celebrated and influential Seljuq monument. Also important during this period were funerary monuments, the most prominent being the immense Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar in Merv (r. ca. 1096–1157), in modern Turkmenistan. (Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art)

UNWTO to hold 3rd world forum on gastronomy tourism

The United Nations World Tourism Organization plans to host the 3rd UNWTO World Forum on Gastronomy Tourism in Donostia-San Sebastian, Spain, on 8-9 May 2017.

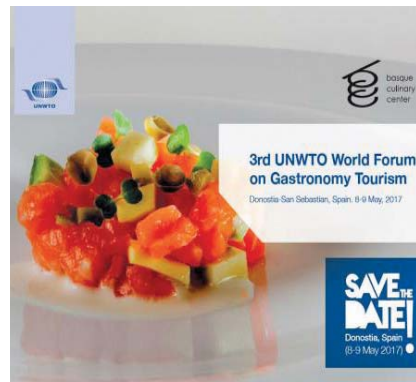
The biennial will be dedicated to the links between gastronomy tourism and sustainability in the framework of the 2017 International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development.

The first edition of the forum took place in Donostia-San Sebastian, the second edition in 2016 in Lima, Peru.

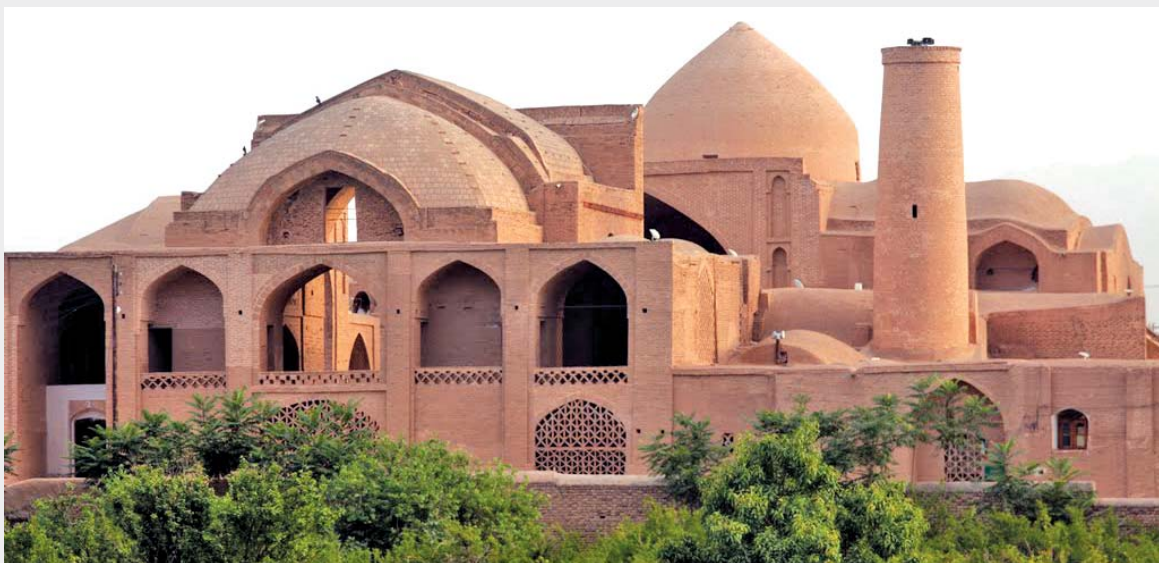
"The relation between food and culture has become a major motivation for travelers, but also a great catalyst of sustainable tourism as gastronomy tourism brings out the most authentic features of each destination" said UNWTO Secretary-General,

Taleb Rifai earlier on December 19.

The event will bring together leading experts in gastronomy tourism to discuss latest trends and to share case studies and innovative products. Topics will include the so-called 'farm to table' processes, sustainable product development, successful public policies and the benefits of gastronomy tourism. (Source: unwto.org)



IN FOCUS



Jameh Mosque of Ardestan

HERITAGE TEHRAN — The Jameh Mosque of Ardestan, in central Iran, is of high historical importance as it incorporates successive architectural styles of the Sassanids, Buyids, Seljuks and Safavids.

However, a majority of what visitors to the mosque see dates from the Seljuq era (ca. 1040–1196).

Located in a city of the same name in Isfahan Province, the two-story hypostyle mosque has a four-portico (iwan) courtyard surrounded by encircling arcades.

The mosque is part of a larger premises that also includes other mudbrick structures such as a cistern, a caravanserai, a marketplace, a bathhouse, and a madrasa.

According to Isfahan Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Department, the mosque was inscribed on the national heritage list in 1931. Jameh means congregational.

One of Earth’s most dangerous supervolcanoes is rumbling

A long-quiet yet huge supervolcano that lies under 500,000 people in Italy may be waking up and approaching a “critical state,” scientists report this week in the journal Nature Communications.

Based on physical measurements and computer modeling, “we propose that magma could be approaching the CDP (critical degassing pressure) at Campi Flegrei, a volcano in the metropolitan area of Naples, one of the most densely inhabited areas in the world, and where accelerating deformation and heating are currently being observed,” wrote the scientists — who are led by Giovanni Chiodini of the Italian National Institute of Geophysics in Rome.

A sudden release of hot magmatic gasses is possible in the near future, which could trigger a large eruption, the scientists warn.

In response to the news, Italy’s government has raised the volcano’s threat level from green to yellow, or from quiet to requires scientific monitoring. In other words, the government is urging a measured response to the study, followed by additional scientific work.

Burning fields

Campi Flegrei means “burning fields” in Italian. The volcanic region is also known as the Phlegraean Fields. Like oth-



er supervolcanoes — such as the one responsible for the geothermal features of Yellowstone — it is not a single volcanic cone. Rather, it’s a large complex, much of it underground or under the Mediterranean Sea, that includes 24 craters, as well as various geysers and vents that can release hot gas.

Supervolcanoes are usually charac-

terized by a large caldera, or depression, that formed from past explosive eruptions. Campi Flegrei’s depression, just west of Naples, is more than seven miles across.

Campi Flegrei is thought to have formed hundreds of thousands of years ago. A massive eruption 200,000 years ago spewed so much ash that it darkened

the skies around the planet, triggering a “volcanic winter.” That event is thought to have been the largest volcanic episode in the history of Europe over that time.

The volcano erupted again 35,000 and 12,000 years ago. An eruption about 40,000 years ago might have contributed to the extinction of the Neanderthals, a 2010 study suggested, although that report has been debated. The volcanic area was also known by the ancient Greeks.

Smaller but sizeable eruption

A smaller but still sizable eruption was observed at the supervolcano in 1538. That event lasted eight days and created the mountain Monte Nuovo. But since then, the volcano has been quiet, slumbering for more than 500 years.

The scientists caution that it’s possible nothing will happen in our lifetimes. They say it’s impossible to say with any certainty when an eruption might actually take place. More monitoring and study are needed, they say.

The scars of another supervolcano were recently found in the Sesia Valley in the Italian Alps. That eight-mile-wide caldera likely last erupted 280 million years ago, when it blasted out a thousand times more material than Mount St. Helens spewed during its infamous 1980 eruption.

(Source: National Geographic)

A sudden release of hot magmatic gasses is possible in the near future, which could trigger a large eruption, the scientists warn.

‘Ant-like’ bees among new desert species

Though declines in bee populations have heightened awareness of the importance of pollinating insects to the world’s food supply, numerous bee species remain undescribed or poorly understood.

Utah State University entomologist Zach Portman studies a diverse group of solitary, desert bees that aren’t major pollinators of agricultural crops, but fill an important role in natural ecosystems of the American Southwest, including the sizzling sand dunes of California’s Death Valley.

With Terry Griswold of the USDA-ARS Pollinating Insects Research Unit at Utah State and John Neff of the Central Texas Melittological Institute in Austin, Portman reports nine, newly identified species of the genus Perdita in the December 23, 2016, issue of Zootaxa. His research was supported by a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship awarded in 2011 and a Desert Legacy Grant from the Community Foundation.

Ant-like males

Unexpected finds include the curious ant-like males of two of the species, which are completely different in appearance from their mates.

“It’s unclear why these males have this unique form, but it could indicate they spend a lot of time in the nest,” Portman says. “We may find more information as we

learn more about their nesting biology.”

Some of these bees, found exclusively in North America, sport scientific names inspired by Shakespearean characters, such as Perdita titania, named for the fairy queen from A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Elusive and tiny, Portman tracks the bees by watching for their buzzing shadows in the blinding, midday sunlight the diminutive insects tend to favor.

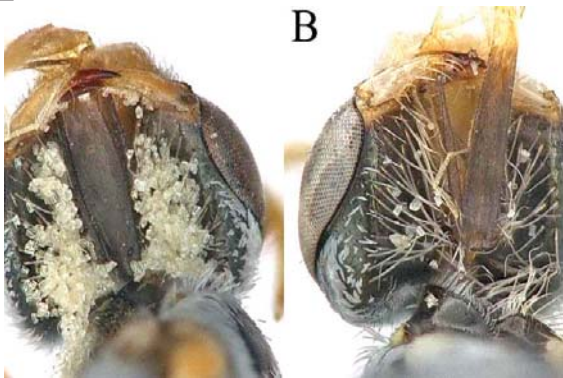
“Their activity during the hottest part of the day may be a way of avoiding predators,” says the doctoral candidate in USU’s Department of Biology and the USU Ecology Center. “They appear to be important pollinators of desert plants commonly known as ‘Cricklemats.’”

Cricklemats, flowering plants of the genus Tiquilia, grow low to the ground and feature ridged, hairy leaves and small, trumpet-shaped blue blossoms.

“Like the bees, Tiquilia flowers are very small,” Portman says. The “bees must squeeze into the long, narrow corollas and dunk their heads into the flowers to extract the pollen.”

Female bees

The scientists report the female bees use pollen collected from the flowers to build up a supply to nourish their young. Once they have completed a pollen provision, the bees lay their eggs on the stash and leave their offspring to fend for themselves.



Portman says the bees have developed a special adaptation called a “hair basket,” with inward-facing, hooked hairs, that allows them to collect pollen as they dive into a flower.

“We don’t yet know if the bees use their legs to scoop pollen into the basket or if they simply collect it using their heads,” he says. “There’s still a lot of unknowns.”

Portman says understanding more about these adaptations between the bees and the flowers they pollinate may be critical to the preservation of their surrounding environment.

(Source: EurekAlert)

The Arctic is showing stunning winter warmth, scientists say

Last month, temperatures in the high Arctic spiked dramatically, some 36 degrees Fahrenheit above normal — a move that corresponded with record low levels of Arctic sea ice during a time of year when this ice is supposed to be expanding during the freezing polar night.

And now this week, as you can see above, we’re seeing another huge burst of Arctic warmth. A buoy close to the North Pole just reported temperatures close to the freezing point of 32 degrees Fahrenheit (0 Celsius), which is 10s of degrees warmer than normal for this time of year. Although it isn’t clear yet, we could now be in for another period when sea ice either pauses its spread across the Arctic Ocean, or reverses course entirely.

But these bursts of Arctic warmth don’t stand alone — last month, extremely warm North Pole temperatures corresponded with extremely cold temperatures over Siberia. This week, mean-



while, there are large bursts of unseasonally cold air over Alaska and Siberia once again.

Climate change

It is all looking rather consistent with an outlook that has been dubbed “Warm Arctic, Cold Continents” — a notion that remains scientifically contentious but, if accurate, is deeply consequential for how climate change could unfold in the Northern Hemisphere winter.

The core idea here begins with the fact that the Arctic is warming up faster than the mid-latitudes and the equator, and losing its characteristic floating sea ice cover in the process. This also changes the Arctic atmosphere, the theory goes, and these changes interact with large scale atmospheric patterns that affect our weather (phenomena like the jet stream and the polar vortex). We won’t get into the details yet, but in essence, the result

can be a kind of swapping of the cold air masses of the Arctic with the warm air masses to the south of them. The Arctic then gets hot (relatively), and the mid-latitudes — including sometimes, as during the infamous “polar vortex” event of 2013-2014, the United States — get cold.

Here’s an animation, provided by Jason Box of the Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland, of what this might look like. It shows that both during the November major Arctic warming event, and again this week, temperatures over the Arctic Ocean spiked far above their average, while temperatures over some high or mid-latitude land surfaces in the Northern Hemisphere fell well below average.

The image, Box explained by email, “underscores the distinction between ocean and land and thus points to there being something to the pattern” of “Warm Arctic, Cold Continents.”

(Source: The Washington Post)

Mazandaran Regional Power Co. Wins Top 3rd Rank in Evaluation of Energy Ministry’s Performance

In the evaluation of performance of the Ministry of Energy in 1394 (ended March 19, 2016), Mazandaran Regional Power Company managed to win 3rd rank among regional power companies across the country.

For this purpose, Minister of Energy Eng. Chitchian expressed his special thanks to the industrious staff, personnel and managers of the company.

The text of Plaque of Honor awarded to the senior management of the company is read as follows:

Supplying power is one of the basic infrastructures of development in the country, so that hardworking manpower of power industry in the country are honored to announce that they are ready to offer high-quality services to the noble nation of Islamic Iran in the best form possible.

Given that the result of all-out efforts of the company in materialization of annual objectives and programs led to winning 3rd rank in assessment of performance of the companies in the last Iranian calendar year in 1394 (end-

ed March 19, 2016), I deem it necessary to express my special thanks to the unsparing and unflinching efforts of the respective company. Salient achievement of the company in this respect is highly appreciated.

In the end, I wish evermore success for the company from the Almighty God in promoting pertinent services qualitatively and quantitatively.

Signed and sealed by Hamid Chitchian Minister of Energy.

Preparing 2nd Credit Package between Iran and China, Worth €30b: IMIDRO Chief

Managing Director of Iranian Mines & Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO) Mehdi Karbasian revealed the preparation of 2nd credit-based package between Iran and China, worth €30 billion.

He pointed to Joint Economic Forum between Iran and China and presence of Chinese companies in Iran’s mines and mineral sector and put the value of

projects implemented between the two countries in the past three years at more than €20 billion.

Of total €20 billion, €4 billion rials of which is related to the mines and mineral sector, he maintained.

Elsewhere in his remarks, he pointed to the largest aluminum project named “South Aluminum Company dubbed “SALCO” and said: “Construction oper-

ation of this giant project started with a Chinese company in the past two years as joint venture (JV) with significant physical progress.”

Given the above issue, economic growth has been predicted at eight percent (8%) in 6th Five-Year Socioeconomic and Cultural Development Plan which will start as of March 21, 2017, the IMIDRO chief observed.

Moreover, it has been predicted that worth of \$50 billion foreign capital will be attached in the 6th Development Plan, he said, adding: “Of total \$50 billion envisioned, 30, 10 and 10 billion dollars of which will be invested in the fields of steel, downstream and upstream industries, aluminum sector and other sectors in mines and mineral sector respectively.”

Scientists track humongous number of flying bugs

Counting the number of bugs whizzing high overhead annually may seem all but impossible, but researchers in Britain have completed the most comprehensive tally ever conducted. And the headcount they came up with was almost un-bee-lievable.

A total of 3.5 trillion insects weighing a combined 3,200 tons annually migrated annually over a region in south-central England monitored with specialized radar and a balloon-supported aerial netting system, the scientists said on Thursday.

“High-altitude aerial migration of insects is enormous,” said University of Exeter entomologist Jason Chapman, whose research was published in the journal Science. “These aerial flows are an unappreciated aspect of terrestrial ecosystems, equivalent to the oceanic movements of plankton which power the oceanic food chains.”

The researchers tracked the migration of insects at altitudes between 492 feet and 3,937 feet (150-1,200-meters) over a 10-year period. They suspect even more migrating bugs could be found elsewhere.

In terms of biomass, the insects greatly exceeded migratory birds in Britain. Their biomass was seven times that of the 30 million songbirds flying from Britain to Africa each autumn.

While the study did not plot the departure and destination points for the migrating bugs, they were thought to be traveling back and forth numerous miles (km), and sometimes over the English Channel and North Sea.

“Some of the butterflies and moths we studied migrate hundreds of kilometers (miles) in each generation, and thousands of kilometers (miles) over the course of the year, which may include six generations,” Chapman said.

Insects play important roles, pollinating plants, facilitating productive soil through decomposing, serving as food sources for birds and bats, spreading disease, and serving both as crop pests and predators of crop pests.

(Source: Reuters)

When water balloons hit a bed of nails and don’t pop

In a study published this month in The European Journal of Physics, scientists dropped water balloons on a grid of 256 nails and filmed them bouncing off in slow motion.

What’s the point, you ask? In this GIF science lesson, we learn about the pancake bounce effect and how making tiny things giant can sometimes make them easier to comprehend.

Researchers demonstrated in a slow-motion recording how a water balloon hitting a bed of nails responded with a “pancake bounce.” The video pauses at the moment the balloon achieves the pancake-like state. Moevius, et al.

Tina Hecksher, a physicist at Roskilde University in Denmark assigned this task as a project for some of her students after learning how water droplets bounced off super-water-repelling surfaces in a 2014 study by Julia Yeomans, a physicist at the University of Oxford, and her colleagues.

Normally, a drop of water hitting a flat, repellent surface at low speed will deform slightly and return to its original shape before bouncing. At higher speeds, the drop will flatten like a pancake then retract into a cigarlike shape before leaving the surface. But when microscopic spikes or some other structure is added to the surface, the water droplet undergoes what physicists call maximal deformation and ends up spending less time on the surface.

“It’s a quite counterintuitive bounce,” Dr. Hecksher said. “You come down, you spread out, and then you jump off immediately after spreading out without retracting.” It would be like jumping off a table, landing in a flat squat and then bouncing back up still in the squat position.

“Pancake bouncing,” as it was called in the 2014 study, was made possible when the water, held together by surface tension, interacted with those tiny spikes, or microstructure.

(Source: nytimes.com)

Hubble Telescope captures stunning new view of stars being born

There’s lots of awesome sights out there in the universe that we never get to see from our vantage point here on Earth, but thanks to tools like the Hubble Space Telescope, we can enjoy a whole lot more of it than ever before. Recently, NASA pointed its gaze towards the Canes Venatici constellation and snapped an absolutely gorgeous shot that includes a number of interesting sights, including the birth of new stars.

The photo — viewable in its full resolution here — shows a galaxy called NGC 4707, which is the bright middle area. What it lacks in a sexy name it makes up for in unique characteristics. NGC 4707 doesn’t have a defined shape like many of its peers, but instead appears as a massive collection of stars with very little pattern.

What’s particularly cool about the photo is the bright blue bursts you see dotting the area. According to NASA, those eye-catching flashes of color are “recent or ongoing star formation.” So what you’re really seeing here is the birth of new stars — or, more accurately, the light that those newborn stars gave off when they were created, which has finally made it all the way here to Earth.

NGC 4707 was first described way back in 1789 by astronomer William Herschel, and his notes at the time match up well with what we see today. Of course, Herschel could never have imagined that we’d eventually get a view of the galaxy as detailed and jaw-dropping as the ones that our mega-powerful space telescope can provide.

(Source: BGR News)



Sweaty Santa: North Pole temperatures forecast to be 20 degrees warmer than average this Christmas

Santa Claus may have to shed some layers of clothing as he sets off around the world this Christmas.

The North Pole is expected to see a record-breaking heat wave, with temperatures at the North Pole forecast to reach 20 degrees higher than average on Christmas Eve.

Temperatures are forecast to peak at near-freezing as warm air from the North Atlantic flows all the way to the North Pole via Spitsbergen, producing cloud cover that will trap the heat.



This winter has already seen unusually warmer weather, with temperatures throughout November and December around 5C higher than average.

It comes after Arctic sea ice reached the second-lowest extent ever recorded by satellites during the summer.

Such sharp increases in Arctic temperatures “are becoming more frequent because we have a declining sea ice cover - the water below is warmer,” said Jesper Eriksen, a forecaster at the Danish Meteorological Institute.

Arctic sea ice is at a record low for the time of year, according to measurements by the US National Snow and Ice Data Centre on December 20.

Worldwide, this year is set to be the warmest on record, driven up by man-made greenhouse gas emissions and a powerful El Nino weather event in the Pacific Ocean.

The Arctic region is warming at twice the global average, disrupting the hunting livelihoods of indigenous people and threatening creatures such as polar bears while opening the region to more shipping and exploration for oil and gas.

Such winter temperature surges have typically happened once or twice a decade stretching back to a first recorded event in 1959, according to a study in the journal Scientific Reports this month by G.W.K. Moore of the University of Toronto.

The Norwegian Meteorological Institute issued a tweet this week showing that Father Christmas’s sleigh would be able to take off without a risk of getting bogged down in slush.

Asked if the weather conditions could hamper Santa’s crucial journey on Christmas Eve night, Dr. Thorsten Markus, chief of Nasa’s Cryospheric Sciences Laboratory, told the BBC he was confident he would cope - albeit with slightly less clothing perhaps.

“Santa is most likely overdressed, he said. “Maybe in the future we’ll see him in a light jacket or plastic mac.”

(Source: The Telegraph)

LEARN ENGLISH

Calling In Sick

A: Hello, Daniel speaking, how may I help you?

B: Hi, Daniel, Julie here.

A: Hi, Julie, how are you?

B: Actually, I’m feeling **quite ill** today.

A: I’m sorry to hear that. What’s wrong?

B: I think I’m **coming down** with the **flu**. I have a headache, a sore throat a runny nose and I’m feeling **slightly feverish**.

A: I see... so you’re **calling in sick**?

B: Yes, I was **hoping** to take the **day off** to **recover**.

A: OK, then. Try and get some rest.

■ Key Vocabulary

quite ill: very sick

coming down: getting, acquiring

flu: a common illness that makes you feel very tired and weak, gives you a sore throat, and makes you cough and have to clear your nose a lot; influenza

runny nose: when liquid is coming out of your nose

slightly: a little

feverish: suffering from a fever

call in sick: report that you will not go to work because you are sick

was hoping: to kindly expect

day off: a day when you do not go to work, school etc. because you have a holiday or because you are sick

recover: to get better after an illness

■ Supplementary Vocabulary

impolite: rude

permission: allow

symptom: a sign, indication

sick day: day off because you’re

make it into work: go to work

(Source: irlanguage.com)



Every action has a reaction. We have one planet; one chance.

World’s first solar panel road opens in Normandy village

France has opened what it claims to be the world’s first solar panel road, in a Normandy village.

A 1km (0.6-mile) route in the small village of Tourouvre-au-Perche covered with 2,800 sq m of electricity-generating panels, was inaugurated on Thursday by the ecology minister, Ségolène Royal.

It cost €5m (£4.2m) to construct and will be used by about 2,000 motorists a day during a two-year test period to establish if it can generate enough energy to power street lighting in the village of 3,400 residents.

In 2014, a solar-powered cycle path opened in Krommenie in the Netherlands and, despite teething problems, has generated 3,000kWh of energy – enough to power an average family home for a year. The cost of building the cycle path, however, could have paid for 520,000kWh.

Before the solar-powered road – called Wattway – was opened on the RD5 road, the panels were tested at four car parks across France. The constructor was Colas,



part of giant telecoms group Bouygues, and financed by the state.

Normandy is not known for its surfeit of sunshine: Caen, the region’s political capital, enjoys just 44 days of strong sunshine a

year compared with 170 in Marseilles.

Royal has said she would like to see solar panels installed on one in every 1,000km of French highway – France has a total of 1m km of roads – but panels laid on

flat surfaces have been found to be less efficient than those installed on sloping areas such as roofs.

Critics say it is not a cost-effective use of public money. Marc Jedliczka, vice-president of Network for Energetic Transition (CLER) told Le Monde: “It’s without doubt a technical advance, but in order to develop renewables there are other priorities than a gadget of which we are more certain that it’s very expensive than the fact it works.”

Jean-Louis Bal, president of renewable energy union SER, said: “We have to look at the cost, the production [of electricity] and its lifespan. For now I don’t have the answers.”

Colas said the panels have been covered with a resin containing fine sheets of silicon, making them tough enough to withstand all traffic, including HGVs. The company says it hopes to reduce the costs of producing the solar panels and has about 100 other projects for solar-panelled roads – half in France and half abroad.

(Source: The Verge)

7-year-old Santa’s helper wipes tables to buy toys for kids

A 7-year-old Indiana boy has been earning money to buy Christmas toys for other children as an honorary employee at McDonald’s.

The youngster, Trenton Gardner, tells WTHI-TV that wiping tables at the fast food restaurant in Bicknell, Indiana, is the “coolest job” he’s ever done. His mother, Lindsey Gardner, says her son’s inspiration came from learning some children’s families couldn’t afford toys.

He wanted to earn money so he could help. It took time to convince McDonald’s general manager Rhonda Butler. She says the boy was so determined she made him an honorary employee and gave him his own apron, name tag and hat. The restaurant donated toys to his effort.

Earlier this week, the 7-year-old and his family dropped off a truckload of toys to a local charity.

(Source: Yahoo News)

IN FOCUS 📷 Tehran Times/ Maryam Davarnia



Families and friends have taken the opportunity for snow tubing, an exhilarating experience, in snow covered heights of Bojnourd, northeastern Iran.



ENGLISH IN USE

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A ↔ ع

Child laborers to celebrate Children’s Day in Tehran

A joyous ceremony to mark Children’s Day will be held today for 1,500 child laborers in Tehran, the director of Tehran’s Municipality social services organization has said.

The day, which falls on October 8 in the national calendar, is coincided this year with the mourning month of Muharram (October 3-31). So, it is decided to celebrate the event a week earlier, Reza Qadimi said, Mehr news agency reported on Tuesday.

Child laborers are extremely vulnerable and such events are occasions to direct special attention to these lovely children, Qadimi noted.

کودکان کارپایتخت روز جهانی کودک را جشن می‌گیرند

مدیرعامل سازمان خدمات اجتماعی شهرداری تهران از برگزاری مراسم شاد روز جهانی کودک و با حضور بیش از ۱۵۰۰ کودک کار امروز در تهران خبر داد.

به گزارش روز سه شنبه خبرگزاری مهر رضا قدیمی اعلام کرد این جشن، به دلیل تقارن روز جهانی کودک با ایام محرم، حدود یک هفته زود تر از روز رسمی آن برگزار می شود. قدیمی خاطرنشان کرد: کودکان کار به عنوان قشری در معرض آسیب هستند و البته روز جهانی کودک بهترین بهانه برای پرداختن به این کودکان دوست داشتنی است.

ENGLISH PROVERB

A stitch in time saves nine

■ **Explanation**: if you fix a small problem right away, it will not become a bigger problem later

■ **For example**: Let’s patch the roof before that hole gets bigger. A stitch in time saves nine.

PHRASAL VERB

Build something around something

■ **Meaning**: to base something on an idea or thing and develop it from there

■ **For example**: Successful businesses are built around good personal relationships.

ENGLISH IDIOM

Ball is in your court

■ **Explanation**: if the ball is in your court, it is your turn to speak or act next

■ **For example**: We gave the manager a list of complaints, so the ball is in his court now.

UNSC passes resolution to end Israeli settlements

Palestinians hail landmark vote; Israel furious

Landmark vote

Meanwhile, Palestinians have collectively welcomed a United Nations Security Council resolution that censured Israel for its settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Officials from the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad hailed the Friday decision, which was made possible as the United States uncharacteristically decided to abstain rather than veto it.

Palestinian Authority spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeinah described the resolution as "a major blow to Israeli policy, a unanimous international condemnation of settlements, and strong support for the two-state solution."

Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki described the vote as a "victory for the Palestinian people."

"It confirms the illegitimacy of settlements which form a clear violation of international law and obstacle to achieving a two-state solution," he said.

Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian ambassador to the UN, expressed optimism that the resolution could pave the ground for the restoration of peace in the occupied Palestinian territories.

He hinted, however, that the resolution may be too little, too late.

"After years of allowing the law to be trampled and the situation to spiral downward, today's resolution may rightly be seen as a last attempt to preserve the two-state solution and revive the path for peace," Mansour said.

Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum issued a statement on the movement's official website praising the resolution, which he said "rejected the hostile Israeli settlements policy."

"We welcome this important transformation and development in international positions supporting Palestinian rights in international forums... as we call for more of these positions," the statement read.

Hamas also voiced support for the Palestinian leadership's international strategy to achieve statehood but reiterated the need to continue resistance against Israel.

Islamic Jihad spokesman Daoud Shahab separately described the resolution as a clear denunciation of "the occupation's policies."

"There is an international public opin-



ion against Israel and its policies and it has become possible to isolate, boycott, and pursue Israel in international forums for the crimes and aggression it commits," Shahab said.

"We know the decision itself will not deter Israel," he cautioned, adding, "There are two factors that will deter Israel, which are the continuation of our resistance and the pursuit and boycott of Israel."

Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon also welcomed the Security Council's adoption of the resolution.

He expressed hope on Friday that the decision would lead to the resumption of talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"The secretary-general takes this opportunity to encourage Israeli and Palestinian leaders to work with the international community to create a conducive environment for a return to meaningful negotiations," Ban's spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

■ A vote and a break with U.S. policy
Resolution 2334 was passed with 14 votes in favor and one abstention — by the U.S. — on Friday. It was the first resolution on Israel and the Palestinians that the 15-member body has passed in about eight years.

The text of the resolution had originally been drafted by Egypt, which decided to withdraw it under "intense pressure."

Israel had asked U.S. President-elect Donald Trump to pressure Cairo to delay voting on the draft resolution. Egyptian

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is believed to maintain good ties with Trump.

After Egypt's withdrawal, however, Senegal and New Zealand, two other members of the UN Security Council, forwarded a motion of their own for a vote on the text.

The U.S. administration decided to break with a long-time policy of vetoing condemnatory resolutions against Israel by abstaining.

■ Infuriated Israel looks to a Trump administration

The resolution described Israeli settlements as a "major obstacle" to peace and demanded an end to their expansion.

Israeli officials responded with rage at the resolution and Washington's abstention in particular.

Israeli Ambassador to the UN Danny Danon lashed out at the administration of President Barack Obama and expressed hope that both Trump and the incoming UN secretary general, António Guterres, would establish closer ties with Tel Aviv.

"It was to be expected that Israel's greatest ally would act in accordance with the values that we share and that they would have vetoed this disgraceful resolution," said Danon.

"I have no doubt that the new U.S. administration and the incoming UN secretary-general will usher in a new era in terms of the UN's relationship with Israel," he added.

In a post on Twitter, where he has found a platform through which to air his

views, Trump said after the vote that, "As to the UN, things will be different after Jan. 20th," referring to the date when he will be assuming office.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also rejected "this shameful anti-Israel resolution at the UN" and said the regime "will not abide by its terms." He said Obama had failed to "protect Israel." "Israel looks forward to working with President-elect Trump and with all our friends in [U.S.] Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, to negate the harmful effects of this absurd resolution," the statement read.

Netanyahu's office announced in the early hours of Saturday that Tel Aviv had recalled its envoys to Senegal and New Zealand for consultations, and had tasked the Foreign Ministry with cancelling a scheduled visit to Israel by Senegalese Foreign Minister Mankeur Ndiaye and scrapping an aid program for the West African country.

Israeli cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi said the U.S. abstention vote "spits in the face" of incoming Trump.

Grabbing Palestinian land

Resolution 2334 condemned Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem (al-Quds) and the occupied West Bank as a "flagrant violation under international law," which it said was "dangerously imperiling the viability" of peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Earlier this month, Israeli lawmakers approved a hugely-controversial bill legalizing some 4,000 settler units built on private Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank, in the first of three readings needed to turn it into law.

The United States, Israel's strongest ally, Germany, the country least critical of Tel Aviv in Europe, UN officials, and the European Union all strongly criticized the bill.

More than half a million Israelis live in over 230 illegal settlements built since the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East al-Quds. Built on occupied land, the settlements are internationally condemned as illegal.

The Palestinian Authority wants the West Bank as part of a future independent Palestinians state, with East al-Quds as its capital.

(Source: agencies)

Bombings, mortar attacks claim 10 lives across Iraq

Police and medical officials in Iraq say at least ten people have been killed in a series of bombings and mortar strikes across the country as government forces and allied fighters press ahead with a massive operation to flush the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) Takfiri terrorists out of the northern city of Mosul.

Sadiq al-Husseini, the chairman of the security committee in Diyala provincial council, told Arabic-language al-Sumaria television network that one policeman had lost his life and four others sustained injuries in a car bomb attack, which targeted security personnel in Mustafa Jawad Square near the entrance of Khalis town, located 80 kilometers northeast of the capital, Baghdad.

Another bomb struck refugee families as they were fleeing al-Hawijah district to the Turkmen-majority village of Turkalan in the southern part of the oil-rich province of Kirkuk.

Kirkuk's police chief, Brigadier General Sarhad Qadir, said the bombing had claimed the lives of five civilians and left 13 people injured.

Additionally, five civilians were killed and 13 others injured when a barrage of mortar shells slammed into al-Zahour neighborhood in eastern Mosul.

■ ISIL forces 250 Iraqi families to evacuate E. Mosul district

Meanwhile, ISIL terrorists have forced a total of 250 families in the al-Jazair district of eastern Mosul to leave the area, and seek refuge somewhere else.

Security forces also managed to wrest control over Zaytoun region and Qaryat Tawilah village east of Mosul. Five police officers were killed during the operations.

Furthermore, Iraq's Joint Operations Command (JOC) announced in a statement that Iraqi army forces

had retaken the police academy, motor vehicle registration office, cement factory and al-Hayakel district from ISIL Takfiris in Mosul, and raised national flags over them.

Pro-government fighters from Popular Mobilization Units, commonly known as Hashd al-Sha'abi, also thwarted an ISIL assault on al-Hathan village west of Mosul, and destroyed one of the extremists' battle tanks.

Lieutenant General Abdul Ghani al-Assadi, the commander of Iraq's counter-terrorism forces, said on Saturday that government troops had identified and arrested 27 ISIL terrorists. The terrorists had disguised themselves as internally-displaced people.

Moreover, Hashd al-Sha'abi fighters killed 30 ISIL terrorists and destroyed seven vehicles belonging to them during an operation southwest of Mosul.

(Source: Press TV)

The Moscow summit and the great alliance

It should not be forgotten that the aim of terrorism includes but is not limited to weakening the governments of only the countries facing terrorism, spreading fear among public and promoting discrimination. The purpose of terrorism is to change a country's image to dubious and unsafe in the eye of other countries and communities. This method has been repeatedly attempted, especially when it comes to the Iran-Turkey-Russia trio. Andrey Karlov, a person we know and love, being shot from back in a treacherous, insidious and coward manner, especially before such a critical meeting, is a clear indication that the same ploys are being played out once again. Russia and Iran have seen through this vile scheme and by proceeding with the meeting as scheduled, they did not give what the terrorists' want.

Lavrov's following words at the meeting are striking: "We believe that while even the UNSC fails to take a decision in this direction, our countries can play a role in the efforts of reviving solutions and humanitarian aid." This is an accurate verdict. It is a known fact that the UNSC has not taken any decision about Syria for a long time. As a matter of fact, the UNSC is intrinsically far from producing a solution for Syria. The Middle East policy of the West operates within a deep state policy that has been forcibly made dominant in the U.S. and Europe. The goals and intentions pursued by these deep state structures on Syria are different. The new Middle East map, which was drawn behind closed doors and tore many countries apart, was devised by these circles. These circles are planning to launch the project

of a divided Middle East first in Syria. Therefore, rather than solving the problems in Syria, they aim to separate it into various sections.

For this reason, three friendly countries that are influential in the region coming together and taking a rational, friendly and completely peaceful decision beyond profound plans is a very special and elating development for Syria. This is the reason why we have been pointing out right from the beginning to the three countries in question and laying great stress on the fact that the solution can only be possible through the consensus of these countries.

Another important point is that these three countries are all aware of the deep schemes pursued on the region. For this reason, these three states are consistently thwarting the treacherous plans on the region. This situation is impeding various circles that seek dissension in the region, and having fallen short on their goals. Then these circles find the solution in inciting turmoil within Turkey or Iran. But this scheme is not working. The parties have now realized that the effective solution of terrorism and foul schemes is through alliance and stronger friendship. It should not be forgotten that terrorism can intimidate the weak; but it strengthens the bonds between the rationalistic countries that are well-acquainted with the true nature of terrorism.

The agreement reached in Moscow will surely lead to favorable developments. However, the taken decision brings along some obstacles that need to be overcome. The most important of these obstacles is the cumber-

some political conception. From this stage on, Iran, Russia and Turkey should no longer act with a cumbersome and bureaucratic political conception, but rather with a swift sense of alliance. They have already shown that they were capable of doing this.

Friendship is a term that does not receive much recognition in politics. The materialist and dialectical conception, which is served to the world under the name of Clash of Civilizations, has turned the states into selfish masses that act only in self-interest. This is also the main reason the large majority is so indifferent to disasters in the world. Iran, Russia and Turkey have largely shattered this egoistical political conception and introduced friendship, the greatest need of diplomacy, to politics. Lavrov's statement on Russia, Turkey and Iran in favor of no alternative to political and diplomatic settlement of the crisis in Syria and does not see military solution to the problem, has crucial importance. This conception should be further reinforced and optimum cooperation and solidarity should be achieved by removing the bureaucratic obstacles.

Grieving Syria will be able to recover from its wounds thanks to the friendship and alliance between these three countries. There is nothing that can hinder us in this regard. Neither pressure, nor threats, nor terrorism manages to discourage us; no deep power is able to bring these three countries to their heels. It should not be forgotten that the alliance built upon friendship and peace means a great power, and this power will take the wind out of the sails of those who benefits from the war in Syria.

Syria reinforces Homs push after Aleppo win

Militants pollute Damascus water with diesel

The Syrian military, in high spirits after liberating Syria's second city of Aleppo from militants, has stepped up its counter-terrorism push in Homs Province farther to the south.

Government forces drove the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorists out of several strategic positions across the sprawling central province on Saturday.

Notable among the advances was the retaking of the Qubbah Hill and surrounding checkpoints in the provincial capital of Homs' countryside. The terrorists were pushed back to the nearby village of Khattab as a result. Military sources said up to 40 terrorists were killed in the operation.

A unit of the Syrian military also thwarted an attack by Takfiri terrorists against the Jubb al-Jarrah District, which lies 75 kilometers to the east of the city. The official Syrian Arab News Agency said the counteroffensive had killed 20 Takfiris, including a terrorist ringleader named Abu Bakr Halqaya.

The military also struck the positions of the Takfiri terrorist groups of Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of the Levant) formerly known as al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) in the city's northern suburbs, killing a number of the militants.

Additionally, the troops made advances in the periphery of the T4 Military Airport in the Homs Province's southeast after foiling an ISIL attack on the facility.

ISIL was recently flushed out of the ancient city of Palmyra in the province, but has staged a comeback.

On Thursday, the military announced that it had attained full control of the northwestern city of Aleppo, having completely cleansed its eastern side of militants for the first time since 2012. The victory came about despite military support for the militants by the United States, Turkey, and some Arab states in the Persian Gulf region.

Also on Saturday, the Syrian army found a number of bodies belonging to civilians, including children, in the Sukkari neighborhood of Aleppo after the exodus of the militants, the Syria al-Watan television channel reported. It described the dead as victims of a massacre, and said the corpses had had some body parts cut out and taken away.

Meanwhile, facing increasing losses, anti-Damascus militants earlier resorted to contaminating water supplies for the capital and its suburbs. Authorities in Damascus said that they had been forced to cut water supplies to the city for a couple of days because militants had contaminated drinking water supplies with diesel.

The al-Fija spring, which supplies the capital with water, is located in the militant-held Souq Wadi Barada Village, northwest of Damascus, in a mountainous terrain near the Lebanese border. Much of the surrounding areas are controlled by Syrian government troops.

But measures meant to retaliate against Syrian government victories have not been limited to the militants. In a separate development, the United States added several senior Syrian officials and the leadership of a Russian bank to its sanctions list for providing support to the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The United States Treasury Department announced on Friday that it had imposed sanctions on six Syrian officials, including the ministers of oil and finance and the governor of the Syrian central bank, as well as nine members of the board of the Russian Tempbank.

Those targeted on Friday will have their U.S. assets frozen and Americans will be barred from transacting with them.

Russia has been carrying out an aerial campaign against militants in Syria, including formerly in Aleppo, on a request from Damascus.

(Source: agencies)

Can Merkel calm German nerves after the Berlin attack?

With the Berlin assailant still on the loose (at the time of this writing), German authorities will be working with counterterrorism partners domestically and internationally to try to stop another attack from taking place. In the short term, this involves finding whoever was responsible, what networks they were connected to and any ties to foreign terrorist groups.

It may be that there were ties to terrorists based in Germany. For example, it is worth remembering that "Charfedinne T"—a 24-year-old Tunisian—was arrested just days ago on the suspicion that an attack was being planned in Berlin. Whether there are any ties is unknown, although the timing is worth noting. Presumably, whoever carried out the attack will be caught relatively quickly. Even so, there is much to reflect on for Chancellor Angela Merkel and for German society generally.

This is the fourth terrorist attack that has taken place there this year, and there have been a host of other attempted attacks thwarted. Several of these plots have been planned by refugees recently settled into the country.

Clearly the vast majority of the 1 million-plus refugees to have entered Germany are not terrorists. Yet the numbers that Germany took in were so large that even a small minority has led to a very big issue. So, the problem is clear. Whether the German political class has adequate solutions, much less so.

(Source: Newsweek)

Chinese Super League attraction is money - Liverpool's Jurgen Klopp

Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp has questioned the foot-balling logic behind transfers to the Chinese Super League and ruled out a move to China at some point in the future.

Oscar looks set to become Chelsea's record sale as he edges close to completing a £60 million move to Chinese Super League club Shanghai SIPG, while sources have told ESPN FC that Boca Juniors forward Carlos Tevez has been offered a world-record wage to join Shanghai Shenhua.

Klopp believes the money Chinese Super League clubs are spending is of no threat to the Premier League quite yet, but conceded that the lure of the money in China is now another "opportunity" for footballers.

"You know that a few clubs in the rest of Europe think similar things about England!" Klopp told a news conference on Friday afternoon. "The money in England could bring the best players to England.

"What can I say? In most parts of the world, it's a free world and we can make our own decisions. If a player decides to go there [China], usually it's in another part of your career.

"I think in this moment it's not a league where you actually want to play, but the only way to bring the players there is the money.

"If a player decides for himself then you have no real weapons to hold him here. That's how it is. I think in nearly all big European leagues, you can earn a lot of money and it should be enough at the end, especially for the top players.

"But I have no idea why people make decisions like this. For me, it's no option because I work a lot but I have kind of a private life and I like to have a surrounding which I'm kind of used to.

"I'm a very open person and maybe for a holiday I would [go there], but for me it's absolutely no option to go to China.

"How I said, [it is] individuals making different decisions and I don't know if we should say it's kind of a danger or whatever, but it's another opportunity for players and hopefully they can be happy there and everything is good.

"I think all generations following Oscar's family are happy about this decision! No money worries anymore."

Meanwhile, Klopp said that Liverpool "miss" Stoke City's Joe Allen as the midfielder looks set to return to Anfield on Tuesday for the first time since his £13m summer transfer.

The Wales international has adjusted to life well at the Potters, scoring five goals in 16 Premier League appearances from a slightly advanced midfield role.

"Do we miss Joe Allen? Yes," the Reds boss added. "Nice guy, unbelievably strong player.

"It was kind of a common decision. We had clear conversations and it was about what I can kind of guarantee, not that Joe asked me: 'how many games will I make?' or something like this.

"But it was clear after the last one or two years being not a fixed-line up player all the time -- and injuries were sometimes the reason of that.

"We all knew about his quality and when you see him playing now it's always a little bit like: 'Oh...'

"We are really happy for him that he scores that many goals and he has this big impact on the game at Stoke. That's how it is in life, you cannot have everything. We couldn't have everything."

Klopp did not disclose whether Liverpool have an interest in Wolfsburg's Julian Draxler.

The Times reported on Thursday that Liverpool were considering joining Paris Saint-Germain in the hunt to sign the Germany international.

"That's the same answer how I give always: No comments on transfers, names or something like this. Nothing to say about this," he said.

(Source: ESPN)

Guardiola: Messi is on another level

Pep Guardiola unshakably regards Lionel Messi as the top player on the planet. Messi has Cristiano Ronaldo and Antoine Griezmann for company in The Best FIFA Men's Player 2016 running.

"Messi is the best -- he is definitely the best," said the Manchester City manager. "He knows how to play, score, and make the other players play.

"He is always there. With all the respect to all the players -- first to Cristiano Ronaldo -- I think Messi is on another level."

Guardiola coached Messi for four years at Camp Nou. During that time Barcelona won three La Liga crowns, as well as the UEFA Champions League and FIFA Club World Cup twice apiece.

Messi helped Barcelona win La Liga and the Copa del Rey this year. La Pulga Atomica has scored 23 goals in 20 games for his club this season, while he netted eight goals in ten matches for Argentina in 2016, surpassing Gabriel Batistuta to become their all-time leading marksman in the process.

The Best FIFA Men's Player will be crowned at The Best FIFA Football Awards™ ceremony in Zurich on 9 January 2017.

(Source: FIFA)

Messi's remarkable rollercoaster year

2016 will go down as an extraordinary year in Lionel Messi's career, even by his standards. It started off on a highly positive note, with the diminutive forward in fine form and basking in the glory of winning the FIFA Club World Cup for the third time, and it also concluded on a high, with Messi once again crowned the most prolific goalscorer on the planet for the calendar year.

However, his journey between these two points was far from straightforward. Indeed, arguably the most significant events occurred in the interim, namely at the Copa America Centenario in the United States.

Up until that tournament, it had been business as usual for La Pulga. He had captured an eighth league title with Barcelona, scoring 20 goals along the way and laying on a further 16: the latter figure put him atop the 2015/16 La Liga assist charts alongside teammate Luis Suarez. Furthermore, by teeing up Suarez twice against Deportivo La Coruna, the Argentinian had become the all-time leading assist-provider in the history of the Spanish top flight, surpassing Real Madrid legend Michel's mark of 120.

As if that were not enough, although his side failed to retain their UEFA Champions League crown, falling in the quarter-finals, he also lifted the Copa del Rey and Spanish Super Cup.

■ Bearded wonder

It was a similar story at international level. After missing the opening four rounds of 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia™ CONMEBOL qualifiers through injury, he was back with a bang in the March double-header, inspiring Argentina to wins away to Chile and at home to Bolivia that left them well positioned in the automatic qualification places.

Then came June and the Copa America Centenario, where Messi caught the eye by showing up with a fledgling, flaming beard that would become not just a permanent fixture, but a sensation among both the Argentinian supporters and his fellow Albiceleste players -- some of whom began sporting replicas -- to the point that it even took on a talismanic status.

"Things have worked out this way and I'll keep it all the way to the end. I'll just give it the odd trim and touch it up a bit. If I shave it off, they'll kill me," Messi memorably said following the quarter-final victory over Venezuela. That day, the Barga star set up Gonzalo Higuain in sublime style and broke new ground in the process: it was his eighth-ever Copa America assist, a new record for the competition.

Yet, more history was to follow in the semi-finals against hosts USA, when Messi curled home a stunning free-kick to establish himself as Argentina's all-time top scorer, surpassing 44-goal Gabriel Batistuta. At that stage, it looked for all the world like the tournament would yield a long-awaited, elusive senior international trophy that would go some way towards exorcising the demons of the final defeats at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and the 2015 Copa America in Chile. "This group of players deserves it," he said after the semis.

■ Hammer blow and retirement

Seemingly weighed down by the pressure, Messi failed to make his mark over 120 minutes in the final against Chile. But the worst was still to come: he subsequently missed from the spot in a gut-wrenching penalty shoot-out loss. It was small wonder, then, that he cut a disconsolate figure in the immediate aftermath, and his decision that he could not take any more international heartbreak was understandable.



"That's it, my national-team career is over," he announced in the mixed zone, "I think it's in everyone's best interests. I've tried so hard to be a champion with Argentina. Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be and I leave without having achieved it."

This bombshell sent shockwaves around the football world and, more importantly, sparked a reaction from the Argentinian fans, not to mention several high-profile figures. Suddenly, the criticism -- which had questioned his leadership skills and asked why he could light up finals for Barcelona but not for his country -- gave way to a groundswell of affection and appreciation. Campaigns were launched on social media urging him to reverse his decision, many of which went viral.

Messi, for his part, gave off mixed signals. In one of his first public appearances after that fateful final, he caused a stir with his bleach-blonde hairdo, a first for him. He would go on to explain that he had needed a change following the "madness" of what had happened, calling it a "fresh start after losing the Copa America on penalties again".

■ Return and end-of-year euphoria

No sooner had he taken over from Gerardo Martino than new Argentina coach Edgardo Bauza also set about trying to change the little magician's mind. His efforts proved successful. Swayed by the shows of unconditional support, a revitalised Messi released a statement announcing his return to the international fold: "A lot of things ran through my head on the day of the [Copa America] final and I seriously considered quitting, but I love my shirt and my country too much. I'd like to thank everyone who wanted me to keep playing for Argentina."

So brief was his hiatus that Messi did not actually miss any matches in the interim, and he marked his first international appearance after the saga in trademark fashion by notching the winner against Uruguay.

However, the attacker's importance to La Albiceleste was laid bare for the umpteenth time when he was forced to sit out the following three qualifiers through injury. Argentina mustered a mere two points from a possible nine in his absence, being held to draws in Venezuela and Peru before being beaten at home by Paraguay for the very first time.

His latest international comeback, in time for the double-header in November, was accompanied by yet another new look: the tattoos on his left leg had been almost entirely blacked out. The mood was similarly dark following the 3-0 humbling by Brazil in Belo Horizonte, where Messi put in a muted display. However, with the alarm bells ringing, he responded emphatically with a goal and two assists in a win by the same scoreline against Colombia, a result which ensured that Argentina would end the year in the play-off berth in the South American qualifying standings.

After going back to his natural hair colour, Messi fittingly proved that he is back to his vintage best in the Catalan derby, in which he dazzled and scored the last of his 59 competitive goals in 2016 (51 for Barcelona and eight for Argentina), a tally that made him the calendar year's top marksman for the third time in his career.

Having been as inspirational and decisive as ever for both club and country, it is no surprise that Messi is one of the three The Best FIFA Men's Player 2016 finalists, even if his year was anything but plain sailing.

(Source: FIFA)

Allardyce says priority is plugging leaks at Palace



Plugging the leaks in Crystal Palace's porous defence will be the first priority for the south London club's new manager Sam Allardyce's as he looks ahead to a hectic Christmas period.

Former England boss Allardyce replaced the sacked Alan Pardew on Friday with Palace just above the relegation zone with the third-worst defensive record in the Premier League.

"We have a very important job of stopping the goals going in at the other end," Allardyce, said in a video on Palace's website (www.cpfcc.co.uk).

"Attacking players when you are in possession are fantastic this season. The strengthening in that area by the club and by Alan has brought a lot of flair to the team and I think that has brought quite a lot more goals.

"But the other side is that when we are not in possession we have got to stop conceding and make sure that those goals we score win us games. It sounds simple but it's not that easy."

Allardyce is seen as one of the best

managers in English football when it comes to surviving a relegation scrap.

The experienced 62-year-old was available to Palace after his short reign as England manager ended after just 67 days in September following comments he made in a newspaper sting about "getting around" FA rules on player transfers.

Allardyce is hoping to bolster the squad by signing some players in the January transfer window.

"We are certainly trying to make the squad a bit bigger with more strength in depth," he said. "The players here are good enough but if we can add to that let's try and do it."

Palace have been in the top flight since 2013 but only one win in their last 11 league matches has seen them slide into danger near the foot of the table.

They are fourth from bottom, one point above Allardyce's former club Sunderland, ahead of Monday's match at Watford.

(Source: Reuters)

United have moved away from traditions on transfers, says Moyes



David Moyes has questioned his former club Manchester United's transfer policy as he prepares Sunderland for Monday's Premier League clash at Old Trafford.

United have splurged about 500 million pounds (\$614.50 million) in the transfer market since Alex Ferguson ended his 26 trophy-laden years in charge in 2013.

Despite the vast outlay they have failed to add to their record 20 English league titles and are already 13 points off the pace this season under Jose Mourinho.

Moyes, who replaced Ferguson but lasted less than a season despite signing the likes of Chelsea midfielder Juan Mata for 37 million pounds and Marouane Fellaini for 27 million, said United have moved away from their traditions.

"They were a football club who enjoyed traditions with the way they spent," Moyes, whose Sunderland side are third from bottom, told the BBC.

"They didn't try to compete with all the other clubs. They did what they thought was the right thing to do and spent the right way.

"Maybe that has had to change because of the current situation. (But) Sir Alex (Ferguson) went out and bought wisely and correctly in the transfer market and what he thought he needed to do."

Mourinho's arrival at Old Trafford signalled another huge transfer outlay, with Paul Pogba arriving from Juventus for a world record 89 million pounds and the likes of Henrikh Mkhitaryan and Eric Bailly also joining for large fees.

"There have been a few changes at Manchester United but that's the way they have chosen to go," Moyes said.

The Scot added that one of the biggest regrets of his ill-fated stay at United was not signing Wales forward Gareth Bale from Tottenham Hotspur.

"When I first went in my real target was Gareth Bale," said Moyes. "I felt all along that Gareth Bale was a Manchester United player. I fought right until the last minute. We actually offered a bigger deal than Real Madrid. But Gareth had his mind made up on going to Real Madrid."

(Source: Reuters)

Iran to hold training camp in Dubai ahead of Qatar clash

SPORTS Iran will hold a one-day week training camp in Dubai, the UAE ahead of Qatar match in the 2018 World Cup Qualifier.

Team Melli will face Qatar in Doha on March 23.

Iran is going to get accustomed to the weather conditions in Doha.

A victory over the Arabian team can pave the way for the Persians to book a place at the 2018 World Cup.

Group A of the 2018 World Cup qualification is led by Iran on 11 points, ahead of South Korea on 10 points.

Qatar sits fifth with four points, two points ahead of rock bottom China.

Team Melli defeated Qatar 2-0 in its first qualifier in Tehran.

Carlos Queiroz's men will meet China five days later in Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

Iran has been scheduled to hold a training camp in the UAE in early January.

The team will face Morocco in a friendly in Dubai.



Persepolis defender Ansari on radar of Guizhou Hengfeng Zhicheng's radar

SPORTS Chinese Super League side Guizhou Hengfeng Zhicheng has made an official bid to sign Persepolis defender Mohammad Ansari.

The 25-year old player joined Iranian giant Persepolis from Azadegan League side Shahrdari Tabriz. Ansari quickly became a first team regular at the left back position and was one of the surprise performers of the 2015-16 season.

He has caught the eye of several clubs including the

Chinese side Guizhou Hengfeng Zhicheng, who has made a 650,000 USD offer for him.

Ansari was called up to the senior Iran squad by Carlos Queiroz for friendlies against Macedonia and Kyrgyzstan in June 2016. He made his debut on 10 November 2016 against Papua Guinea in a friendly match.

Persepolis has already lost Omid Alishah and Ahmad Norollahi due to their military services as they both will join Tractor Sazi in the winter transfer window.

Felix Magath linked with Iran's Esteghlal job: report



Chinese Super League team Shandong Luneng coach Felix Magath has reportedly become a target for Esteghlal and the German coach has not ruled out coaching the Iranian team.

Under guidance of current coach Alireza Mansourian, the Blues are seventh in Iran Professional League (IPL) table and they are not favorite to win the title.

Former Bayern Munich coach said that he has not received an offer from Esreghlal so far.

"No one has contacted me yet from Iran and Esteghlal football club. I have a contract with Shandong until the end of the season," Magath said.

"If I receive an offer from any team, I will take that into consideration," he added.

(Source: Tasnim)

Radostin Stoychev Iran volleyball federation's main option: Official



General Secretary of Iran's Volleyball Federation Mahmoud Afshardoost says that Radostin Stoychev is the main option to take charge of the country's national team.

Former Italy volleyball coach Mauro Berruto, Marcelo Mendez, Argentinean coach of Brazilian volleyball team Sada Cruzeiro, and Italian coach Andrea Anastasi were among the candidates but it seems the Bulgarian coach is the

only candidate of the Iranian federation.

"Stoychev is reviewing Iran's matches in the Olympic Games. He is in touch with us," Afshardoost said.

Stoychev will inform us next week, he add.Iran is not going to renew Raul Lozano's contract.

Under guidance of the Argentinean coach, Iran finished in fifth place in the 2016 Olympic Games.

(Source: Tasnim)

Julian Draxler to join Paris Saint-Germain from Wolfsburg in January

Wolfsburg attacker Julian Draxler will sign for French champions Paris Saint-Germain next month, the Bundesliga club have announced.

The 23-year-old Germany international has agreed terms on a four-and-a-half-year contract, and will make the move upon completion of a successful medical.

Wolfsburg said in a statement that both clubs would not disclose the value of the deal, but sources told ESPN FC earlier this week that the Ligue 1 giants and the Bundesliga strugglers have now struck a deal of €35 million with the potential to rise by another €10 million in bonuses.

Wolfsburg sporting director Olaf Rebbe told the club's official website: "We've had some very intense but constructive discussions with Paris Saint-Germain, Julian Draxler and his management over the past few days and we're confident to have reached a satisfactory conclusion for all parties."

Coach Valerien Ismael added: "Of course I'm sad to see Julian go, because he's an outstanding footballer. He gave everything in the recent matches against Frankfurt and Gladbach and once again showed how much this club meant to him. I hope his move to France provides him with a fresh challenge."

Draxler started his career with Schalke and enjoyed four promising years at the Veltins-Arena before, having being linked with several top clubs around Europe, making the move to Wolfsburg's Volkswagen Arena. But the German outfit's project has faltered, partly due to the financial impact of VW's emissions scandal, and they find themselves threatened with relegation.

Draxler, a member of Germany's 2014 World Cup-winning squad, had in the past been a target for Arsenal, only for a long-term injury to scupper any chance of a move to the Emirates Stadium.

(Source: ESPN)

Kei Nishikori: 'Against Nadal, my body starts shaking every time'

Kei Nishikori has never played a full season. Because of injuries, the Japanese player has always been forced to stop during the middle of the season. This year it happened in October when he had a gluteus injury in Tokyo.

He has ups and downs mentally during a match as well. 'That's my issue every year', Nishikori told the Japanese website Nikkei. 'I need to play more consistently during a match in order to increase my concentration. There are still many shots I need to improve technically, so if I have to say, (everything) is going to be something I need to work on. If I can be more stronger mentally, I can beat top players. I need to play much, much stronger tennis.'

Speaking about how hard it was to be focused all the time in such a long

season, Nishikori said. 'Even Murray and Djokovic cannot play at maximum level throughout the year. But they still make it to semi-finals and finals all the time and that's why they are at the top of the world. It's about not only recovering physically but also how you can stay fresh mentally facing each match. How you do not think too much of the matches and how you pump yourself up before the match but be relaxed once you are back to the hotel. It's very important to switch on and off like that.'

No player makes him feel nervous like Rafael Nadal does. 'It happens every time I play Nadal. He is the kind of opponent I cannot win unless I play aggressive,' said Nishikori, who's lost nine of the 11 matches he's played against the Spaniard player. At Rio Olympics, in the

bronze medal match, he was up 6-2 5-2 and won only in the third set.

'I know that if I play against him without taking risks, I will lose 100%. There is a pressure that I have to finish and win when I'm leading in the match. I think that's why my body starts shaking. He is such a fighter and never gives up. He hits balls with "super" topspins, so I have to come inside (the baseline) in order to hit well. His play style is unique. I usually can hit back fine if I have the right racket face angle, but with Nadal, I have to hit through otherwise the ball goes to somewhere.'

This year Nishikori also reached the final in Miami, Barcelona, Toronto and Basel, won Memphis title, but asked where he played the best match of this season, he said, 'Against Andy Murray at the US



Open'. In that match, the world no. 5, saved match points to win at the fifth set. 'I also had many matches I came back from match points down this year. It's interesting how big one point can be, like how one point can shift the momentum and change the outcome of the match. It was only a matter of a few centimeters when I made or missed the shot to win that one point.'

(Source: tennisworldusa)

Azmoun, Pulisic, Draxler, Brandt and Promes options for Liverpool

Liverpool are expected to be busy during the January transfer window after Jurgen Klopp admitted the squad is short of wingers.

The Liverpool manager said in November that he may be forced to dip into the upcoming transfer market due to injuries and Sadio Mane's participation at next month's African Nations Cup.Danny Ings' season-ending knee injury and the ankle ligament damage sustained to Philippe Coutinho have left Klopp short of options in the final third at times this season.

ESPN FC takes a look at five wide players who have been linked with a move to Anfield in recent months...

■ Sarder Azmoun

Liverpool are one of a number of European clubs monitoring the situation of FC Rostov's Iranian forward. It remains to be seen whether their interest goes beyond that with sources telling ESPN FC that Liverpool "constantly monitor high-performing young players" and that any deal would be difficult due to Azmoun's extremely close relationship to former Rostov boss Kurban Berdyev, who would likely have a significant say in any transfer. A source told ESPN FC in November that the 21-year-old would be keen a move to Anfield depending on the role in store for him. Azmoun played in the Champions League this season and would be unlikely to give that up for a bit-part role at the Merseyside outfit.

■ Christian Pulisic

Klopp planned a raid on his former side Borussia Dortmund in the summer, bidding €13 million for Pulisic. However, they were told in no uncertain terms that the 17-year-old winger was not for sale. Liverpool continue to have a long-standing interest in the player but face an extremely difficult battle to lure him away from the Bundesliga outfit, who keep insisting he is going nowhere. The U.S. international has played 18 times for Dortmund this season -- an achievement given their talent in the position. A source in Germany has told ESPN FC that people in football are trying to convince Mark Pulisic -- Christian's father and representative -- about a move to the Premier League.

■ Julian Brandt

Liverpool have been keen admirers of Bayer Leverkusen's 20-year-old winger for a considerable amount of time. A move in January would appear to be unlikely, with his father and agent, Papa, planning on holding talks with the Bundesliga side in the summer about what the future holds. Liverpool are reported to be joined by Manchester City, Juventus, AC Milan and Bayern Munich in those taking a look at Brandt. The four-time capped German international has all the attributes to adapt to what Klopp demands of his wide players, but the Reds boss is not one for short-term fixes and would be prepared to play the long game in his quest to sign Brandt.

■ Quincy Promes

Liverpool are reported to be circling around Spartak Moscow's Dutch winger ahead of a potential move in January. Promes has a contract with the Russian club until 2021 after recently penning a new deal. Promes joined Spartak in 2014 for £13m and any move away would well exceed that fee due to his fine form in Russia, scoring 37 goals in 70 appearances for the club. As an out-and-out winger, Promes could be a good option for Klopp on the flanks when further absences pop up.

(Source: ESPN)

Jose Mourinho: Zlatan Ibrahimovic will end career 'at the top of the top'

Jose Mourinho has indicated the in-form Zlatan Ibrahimovic will see out his career with Manchester United rather than embark on a swansong in America or China.

Ibrahimovic, 35, is United's top scorer having netted 16 times in 25 games, including 10 in his past nine, and in November Mourinho stated he intended to exercise the second-year option on the contract the Swede penned in the summer.

His immediate future may well be at Old Trafford and, beyond that, Mourinho does not expect the well-travelled striker to bow out with a lucrative stint in Major League Soccer or the Chinese Super League.

"I'm really happy for him," Mourinho said of Ibrahimovic. "Maybe some people could think [he was] a top scorer but not any more at 35 years old, not any more because the Premier League is not Ligue 1. But for him, 35 is the same as 25, Ligue 1 is the same as the Premier League.

"He scores goals, he plays well and I'm really happy for him because he will end his career on a high, which is amazing. He's not ending his career in America or in China, he's ending his career at the top of the top.

"I'm really pleased with him. His record is good and he can improve. With no penalties, which is amazing too because normally the other guys that are top scorers around the world, they score a lot of penalties. He has had one penalty in 17 Premier League matches so I couldn't be happier."

Meanwhile Mourinho, who has guided United on a 10-game unbeaten run, insists he has been comfortable embracing the task of taking charge of one of the world's biggest football teams.

"For me, it was easy -- it's a difficult job but easy to feel at home, easy to feel good in the club, easy to feel that the club wants to progress, the people want to be happy again," he added.

"I felt good immediately so five, six months here, but really feeling at home; for me it was quite easy.

"Obviously expectations are high, results... up and down and we are in a position that is not the position where we want to be. But in terms of passion for my work, passion for my new club, I'm feeling really happy here, yes."

(Source: ESPN)



