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State, defense departments want to preserve JCPOA: ex-WH official

By Javad Heirannia

TEHRAN — Frank N. von Hippel, a former assistant director for national security in the White House Office of Science and Technology says U.S. State Department and Pentagon as well as the American people want to "preserve" the Iran nuclear agreement, officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

"The Departments of State and Defense want to preserve the JCPOA and so does the public," N. von Hippel tells the Tehran Times in an exclusive interview.

Speaking in his Senate confirmation hearing on January 11, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said he would recommend a "full review" of the nuclear deal with Iran. However, N. von Hippel, now a professor of Princeton University, says he does not "think the White House has any real ideas on this".

Following is the full text of the interview:

Donald Trump has said the nuclear should be renegotiated. What is your opinion?

A: I don't think the White House has any real ideas on this. Perhaps to require Iran to have no enrichment at all as the Bush Administration wanted? That idea failed. →2

Rouhani boasts low health costs

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© Tehran Times/ Majid Hashdoust

Iran-Indonesia trade expected to rise 25% in 2017

ECONOMY desk

TEHRAN — Iran's Communications and Information Technology Minister Mahmoud Vaezi has predicted that trade between Iran and Indonesia will witness a 25-percent increase in 2017 to surpass $1.2 billion.

Vaezi, who also serves as the chairman of the Iran-Indonesia joint economic committee, met in Tehran on Sunday with the Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Darmin Nasution.

During the meeting, Vaezi announced that the required preparations for expansion of bilateral economic ties between the two countries will be provided via signing related MOUs, IRNA reported.

The Iranian minister voiced his country's readiness for inking a cooperation agreement on customs affairs with Indonesia and noted that signing a preferential trade agreement between the two sides can enhance mutual trade volume.

Vaezi named telecommunications, health, tourism, aerospace, air transportation, agriculture, and natural resources as possible sectors for cooperation of the two countries.

Nasution, for his turn, referred to agriculture, oil and gas, tourism, commerce, investment, customs affair, culture and technology as suitable fields for increasing mutual ties.

Caspian seals encounter steep population decline

INTERVIEW
By Farnaz Heidari

Caspian seal are considered as a relict species that are now confined to the Caspian Sea. Seals has been the subject of major international controversy due to the harvesting of its attractive white pups.

Seals spend a lot of their time hauling out to bask in sunshine. They like to use sandbanks along sheltered coasts, but also sometimes perch themselves on rocky islets as the tide goes out. They normally live in small groups but occasionally hundred may gather at a good place. Groups may include both sexes.

The Tehran Times conducted an interview with Simon J. Goodman from institute of Integrative and Comparative Biology, University of Leeds, United Kingdom. Dr. Goodman research focuses on investigating how patterns of genetic variation relate to disease susceptibility, and the mechanisms by which disease acts as major conservation threat. Pathogens are a major driving force in evolution and are intimately linked with much of the biological diversity we see around us.

He also works with Institutions in five Caspian states to develop solutions for conservation of the Caspian seal, which recently demonstrated to have declined by more than 90% since the start of the 20th century. Caspian seal is endangered as International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) said.

Q: How changes in population of seals may have affected the Caspian ecosystem?

A: This is actually a very complex issue, and to be honest I don't think the scientific data exists to answer this question conclusively. However, we can draw parallels with several other ecosystems such as the Baltic, Caribbean, and Antarctica, where human driven declines of once numerous marine mammals have changed the overall structure of the ecosystems. Removal of top predators such as seals in the Baltic and Caribbean, and rorqual whales in Antarctica, caused expansion of other predatory species e.g. cod in the Baltic and fur seals in Antarctica. These sorts of changes are often hard to reverse making it difficult for the ecosystem to recover to its original state. In the Caspian there are so many changes due to invasive species, and overfishing of resources, that it is extremely difficult to disentangle effects from declines in seals from other human impacts. The main point is that the Caspian is now a much less diverse and less productive ecosystem than it was at the start of the 20th Century. →12

Euro zone economy: real recovery or another Sirens' song?

BY Jeremy Gaunt

Over the years, euro zone economic growth has been a bit like the Sirens in Homer's Odyssey: singing a song of promise, only to end up pulling you onto the rocks. Will it be different this time?

The strong growth registered in numerous data releases and surveys at the beginning of this year has surprised many.

One eye-opening example was the release of flash purchasing managers' indices for France, Germany and the euro zone on Feb 21. Of nine indexes, eight registered growth and six did so at a higher level than any economist polled by Reuters had imagined.

Not surprisingly, economists and policy-makers are now looking for firm proof that the euro zone's apparent rebound this year is sustainable, as well as noting a variety of potentially destructive economic and political hazards ahead.

There has not been, they say, a specific inflexion point at which it can be said that the euro zone has recovered and is off on a growth tear. Rather it has been a slow simmer.

"The euro zone has been recovering steadily for three years now, helped by monetary policy stimulus, an end to fiscal austerity and a healthier financial sector," said James McCann, OECD economist at Standard Life Investments.

"(It's) a steady recovery which has been trundling on."

The numbers confirm this. The European Commission notes that real GDP in the euro zone has grown for 15 consecutive quarters - a sign of steady improvement. →4

© Tasnim/ Erfan Samanfar

Migrating birds flocking to southern Iran

Various animals namely flamingos, herons, ducks, cranes, and pelicans have migrated to a wetland located in Fars province, southern Iran, for mating and breeding.

ARTICLE

Katya Bohdan
Freelance Journalist

'It is Europe that will decide the fate of the world'

The future of Europe, it seems, has always been a compelling topic to discuss, amongst the most diverse circles of society. Shifts in political power, the surge in nationalism, EU-skepticism, Donald Trump's unforeseen win of U.S. presidency – all contribute to a growing disillusionment with the future of a stable and prosperous Europe.

In the wake of the latest hysteria – Trump's presidency – many have expressed concerns regarding the prospects of the European Union. Citizens' trust in the EU and its institutions has declined strongly since a peak in 2007. The United Kingdom in a historic referendum even voted to leave the bloc.

The issue of immigration has gained ground significantly in all member states, but the Eurobarometer also points to terrorism, economic situation, unemployment, inflation and the cost of living, as issues that seem to worry Europeans.

The EU is one of the most complex and intergovernmental institutions in the world, established on the ruins of World War II, assembled from weak and beaten down countries, tainted by war. Now, 60 years after the signing of the Treaty of Rome that established the European Economic Community, the EU has developed and evolved into a strong political, social and economic union consisting of 28 member states and attracting others.

The fact that fractions in certain member states have expressed the will to leave the EU and the rise of the far right in some countries don't necessarily indicate Europe's capitulation. It's important to remember that Europe has faced far worse issues and challenges on its own soil and from abroad. France alone has so far endured 11 terrorist attacks with deadly outcomes in the 21st century. Tiny Belgium was bombed just last year, not to speak of the Berlin truck attack last December. →13

Combating terrorism tops Geneva talks agenda: Syria

Syria's ambassador to the United Nations and head of the Syrian delegation to the intra-Syrian peace talks in Geneva says fighting terrorism should top the agenda of the ongoing negotiations, shortly after bomb attacks killed dozens of people in the country's western city of Homs.

Bashar al-Ja'afari made the remarks at a press conference at the UN headquarters in the Swiss city of Geneva on Saturday, following a 2.5-hour meeting with the UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura and a few hours after the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Victory Front for the People of the Levant) Takfiri terrorist group, formerly known as al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra), launched simultaneous bombings targeting separate areas across the government-controlled Homs, killing over 50 people.

The Syrian senior official said the attacks had not been "just a military terrorist act" but a "political" one aimed at derailing the peace discussions.

"This is the main reason that drives us to have the article of fighting terrorism as a priority in our agenda for the Geneva talks," Ja'afari further added in the third day of the peace negotiations between the Syrian government and the so-called High Negotiations Committee (HNC), which serves as an umbrella group for militants and opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

He said any party, which falls short of denouncing the bombings, would be considered as "an accomplice of terrorism." Ja'afari also requested De Mistura, the moderator of the talks, to issue a statement condemning the bomb attacks and to ask all the parties participating in the Geneva peace process to make the same statement censuring the bombings.

"How can we talk with anyone about anything if they don't condemn terrorism," Ja'afari further said.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the head of Syrian delegation also touched upon the issue of assistance provided by some regional countries to the terrorist organizations operating inside Syria, particularly the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) Takfiri terrorist group. →13

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

Bombings in Homs intended to derail Syria talks: Iran

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN –** The Iranian Foreign Ministry has strongly condemned a Sunday bombing series in Homs, Syria, calling it an act to derail the current political talks over the conflict in the country.

The incident makes it necessary that all Syrian sides be vigilant under such circumstances, spokesman Bahram Qassemi said, ISNA reported.

General Hassan Daabul, head of military intelligence for Homs, was among at least 32 people killed in a series of suicide attacks on military installations in the government-held western city of Homs.

Rouhani to run in May presidential election

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN —** A senior official has said that President Hassan Rouhani has decided to run in the May presidential polls.

"Mr. Rouhani, over recent weeks, came to conclusion to run for the presidential election," IRNA news agency quoted Hosseinali Amiri, the vice-president for parliamentary affairs, as saying on Sunday.

The 12th round of presidential elections is scheduled to be held on May 19. According to the constitution Rouhani is eligible to run for president for a second term.

IRGC establishes 'drone organization'

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN —** The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Ground Force has established a "drone organization" that specializes in using drones in military operations, its commander has announced.

Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour said in an interview with Tasnim that the organization will be responsible for carrying out drone missions.

Last week, the IRGC Ground Force staged massive military drills in central and eastern Iran, where drones were also employed.

Rouhani due in Pakistan for ECO summit

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN —** President Hassan Rouhani is slated to visit Pakistan on Tuesday to attend the 13th meeting of the Economic Cooperation Organization.

Parviz Esmaeili, the deputy for communications and information at the president's office, said on Sunday that Rouhani's two-day trip will come at the invitation of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, President.ir reported.

Esmaeili added that Rouhani is planned to deliver a speech at the summit, which will be held in Islamabad on March 1.

Majlis orders $60m to go against Trump's executive order

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN —** On Sunday, the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) Sunday included an article in the country's next year national budget plan to take a certain action against U.S. President Donald Trump's recent executive order on banning visa for Iranian nationals.

According to the article, 2 trillion rials (over $60 million) will go to the Ministry of Science to help attract Iranian scientists who currently live in the U.S. back to their homeland, Mehr reported.

Iranian delegation to visit Latin America

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN —** An Iranian delegation is going to visit Latin America, the Iranian deputy foreign minister for Americas said in an interview with ISNA published on Sunday.

Mohammad Keshavarzzadeh did not provide any details about the time of the visit or the makeup of the Iranian delegation.

Answering a question about a prospective trip by Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs Luis Videgaray Caso to Iran, Keshavarzzadeh said the time of the would-be trip is not clear because "Mexico is currently dealing with a number of issues."

Iran to launch advanced destroyer soon

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN —** Iran's navy will soon launch its most advanced destroyer, Sahand, as the third home-grown watercraft, its commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari said on Saturday.

"We will unveil Sahand destroyer in the near future," Sayyari stated in a live TV program aired on Saturday night.

He noted that following the Supreme Leader's order to build watercraft destroyers nearly 19 years ago, the navy started working on developing such warships.

"Our first destroyer, called Jamaran, joined the navy in the [Persian] year 1388 (2009)," he said. "After that, our second destroyer, Damavand, joined the naval fleet in the Caspian Sea last year (March 2015-March 2016), and God willing, Sahand will be unveiled in the near future."

The top commander described Sahand as the most advanced destroyer ever built by the country, saying that the navy has made great progress in building the new watercraft and managed to make it more capable of carrying helicopters.

He also said that the navy holds nearly 25 drills each year, adding that all of the naval achievements will be once again showcased during the concluding war game, dubbed Velayat, which takes place at the end of the Persian year, which ends on March 20.

The commander's announcement comes as the final stage of this year's concluding naval drills, codenamed Velayat 95, has started in the Strait of Hormuz, the Sea of Oman and north of the Indian Ocean.

During the drills, different naval units, including submarine missile-launching destroyers, surface and subsurface units, missile and electronic warfare systems, drones, fighter jets and marines are used.

Velayat 95, which covers an area of 2 million square kilometers, started on February 13 and will continue until March 1.

Iran's Armed Forces hold military exercises regularly throughout the year. The country's officials say the drills are intended to act as a deterrent to enemies.

Earlier this month, Sayyari said Iran has never planned aggression against any country, stressing that the Islamic Republic is determined to boost its military power, which as he stated, is of defensive nature.

"Our strategy and doctrine is enhancement of defense power based on deterrence and we are not and will not at all think about aggression against others," he was quoted by Fars news agency as saying. "But if a country thinks of aggression against Iran, it will receive such a response that will make it regret its deeds."

He also said Iran's defensive capability is conducive to security in the region.

Rouhani boasts low costs of healthcare in his administration

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN –** President Rouhani has hailed the low prices of medicine and medical treatment in his administration compared to those of previous administrations, describing the measures taken by his Health Ministry as a "source of pride", ISNA reported.

Speaking at the 1st National Forum on Health in Tehran on Sunday, Rouhani said, "Expanding insurance by 11 million people and other measures taken in the field of health are among the government's greatest sources of pride."

"Some people seem to be suffering from political Alzheimer's disease and forget the [previous] conditions of treatment, the prices of medicine, and medical equipment," he noted.

He further described healthcare as a very important issue, saying, "Health has priority over treatment."

The president also said now medicine is being supplied to citizens 20% cheaper and medical equipment 40% in comparison to time before he took the presidential post.

"The most important part of health is to improve [our] culture and lifestyle," he explained, underlining that Islam presents guidelines on how to live healthy.

Referring to the dust problem in Khuzestan Province, Rouhani said serious measures should be taken to resolve the situation which has created a lot of difficulties for the Khuzestanis.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Rouhani criticized the state TV for its stance on his administration. An example, he said, "If meat prices increase for two days, it becomes the top and official news of the television."

"One must not dash people's hope for the future of the country," he said. "To solve issues, we need to join hands."

"We rely on God and trust Him, and with people's support we will continue along the path of the country's development with all our power," he said.

Russia Duma: Enmity with Iran will harm Persian Gulf Arab states

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN —** Vice Speaker of the Russian State Duma Sergey Nikolayevich Baburin has said that hostility against Tehran will be harmful to the Persian Gulf Arab states.

"The Persian Gulf littoral states will be harmed by hostility against Iran and they should replace conflicts with cooperation, because Tehran is ready for friendship," he told IRNA in an interview published on Sunday.

The Duma official said that claims about Iran's interference in Yemen's affairs is "unfounded", noting Iran is making efforts to help stabilize the region.

Baburin said that the West is spreading Iranophobia to speed up infiltration into the region and sell arms to Arab countries.

Heavy arms sales to these countries have even caused economic problems in Saudi Arabia, he pointed out.

The ranking Duma member also said that some countries in the region provide the terrorists and extremist groups with supports to achieve their geopolitical objectives.

He suggested that terrorism in the region can be countered by stopping such approaches, he added.

Baburin called on the Arab countries to adopt a more realistic position.

Elsewhere, he said that friendly relations with Iran will be beneficial for the Persian Gulf littoral states.

Reuters reported in September, 2016 that Barack Obama, the former U.S. president, offered Saudi Arabia more than $115 billion in weapons, other military equipment and training, the most of any U.S. administration in the 71-year U.S.-Saudi alliance.

State, defense departments want to preserve JCPOA: ex-WH official

1 →

The White House is critical of everything that the Obama Administration accomplished. But the Administration is not united on this. The Departments of State and Defense want to preserve the JCPOA and so does the public. The U.S. public is not interested in another war.

Q: Can the Trump administration violate the agreement unilaterally?

A: The JCPOA is an Executive Agreement endorsed by the UN Security Council. The Trump Administration could withdraw the U.S. but that would isolate the U.S. diplomatically.

Q: Some scholars such as Gary Samore have made arguments that the nuclear deal is fragile. What do you think of such arguments?

A: To the extent that there is any White House strategy at this point, I think it could be to provoke Iran to withdraw from the JCPOA with sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile program and its activities in Yemen and other countries in the Middle East. I hope Iran will not respond to such provocations and thereby isolate itself. The great accomplishment of the JCPOA must be preserved and built upon.

Frank N. von Hippel,

Iran expresses empathy with Syrians

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN —** Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Jaberi Ansari said on Sunday that Iran considers the Syrian people's pain and suffering as its own.

For this reason Iran will continue making "diplomatic efforts" in line with alleviating the Syrians' suffering, he said during a meeting with Hussein Ragheb al-Hussein, a Syrian MP and deputy head of the Syrian National Dialogue Forum.

Jaberi Ansari also said allaying the sufferings of the civilians in Al-Fu'ah and Kafraya and holding consultations to settle of Syrian crisis are top priorities.

The Syrian MP gave a report about the latest developments in Al-Fu'ah and Kafraya, saying the people in the two cities are suffering from lack of food and medicine and terrorists prevent sending humanitarian aid to them.

Iran's Jaberi Ansari (right) talking to Hussein Ragheb al-Hussein, the Syrian MP and deputy chief of the Syrian National Dialogue Forum.

He urged the UN to take action in helping the people in the two cities.

In February, a senior UN relief official called on all parties to come to an agreement and allow immediate and unfettered humanitarian access to more than 60,000 civilians trapped in four Syrian towns of Al-Zabadani, Al-Fu'ah, Kafraya and Madaya.

"The unfair and totally unjustified besiegement is compounded by the tit-for-tat arrangement between the Four Towns, which makes humanitarian access prone to painstaking negotiations that are not based on humanitarian principles," UN News Center quoted Ali Al-Za'tari, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, as saying in a news release.

Iran asks int'l community to show reaction to humanitarian tragedy in Yemen

TEHRAN (FNA) — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif warned of the dire humanitarian situation in Yemen, and called on the international bodies to end the crisis in the poor Arab country.

"It is necessary for the international community to increase its sensitivity about the humanitarian disaster in Yemen a little more and find an effective solution to end the regretable situation in Yemen," Zarif told the Iranian media on Sunday.

In relevant remarks in December, Iran's Judiciary Chief Sadeq Amoli Larijani lashed out at the western states for supporting the human rights violations and war crimes committed by Saudi Arabia against the innocent Yemeni people.

"Despite committing all these crimes in Yemen against women, men, the elderly and the youth and embarking on acts which are considered as war crimes based on the international norms, Saudi Arabia is supported by the West," Amoli Larijani said, addressing high-ranking judiciary officials in Tehran.

"Therefore, we should say that human rights is today an instrument to pressure the independent and right-seeking countries," he added.

Saudi Arabia has been striking Yemen since March 2015 to restore power to fugitive president Mansour Hadi, a close ally of Riyadh. The Saudi-led aggression has so far killed at least 13,100 Yemenis, including hundreds of women and children.

Despite Riyadh's claims that it is bombing the positions of the Ansarullah fighters, Saudi bombers are flattening residential areas and civilian infrastructures.

According to several reports, the Saudi-led air campaign against Yemen has drove the impoverished country towards humanitarian disaster.

Drunken driver injures 28 at New Orleans Mardi Gras parade

A pickup truck driven by a man who appeared to be "highly intoxicated" plowed into a crowd of spectators watching the main Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans, sending more than 20 people to the hospital, police said.

The truck, traveling along the side of the street open to traffic along the Mid-City parade route, struck three other vehicles, including a dump truck, before veering onto the median where a crowd of people stood watching the procession, according to New Orleans police.

Five people were being treated at hospital trauma centers, and an investigation is ongoing, police said.

Police immediately apprehended the pickup driver, who according to eyewitnesses interviewed by Fox television affiliate WVEU-TV appeared disheveled, glassy-eyed and under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Mayor Mitch Landrieu in a statement referred to the suspect as a "drunk driver."

Video footage from the scene showed pandemonium immediately following the early evening incident, but the Krewe of Endymion parade, the largest and most popular of numerous Mardi Gras season parades in New Orleans, continued with little or no interruption.

A total of 28 people were injured, 21 of whom were taken to local hospitals, including one police officer. Seven others who were hurt declined transport, Police Chief Michael Harrison told a news conference.

Local media reports said 12 people were initially listed as critically injured.

Harrison said police believed the motorist who was arrested was "highly intoxicated" and was being questioned at the police department's drunken-driving office.

Mardi Gras, also called Shrove Tuesday, or Fat Tuesday, in English, refers to events of the Carnival celebrations, beginning on or after the Christian feasts of the Epiphany (Three Kings Day) and culminating on the day before Ash Wednesday. Mardi Gras is French for "Fat Tuesday", reflecting the practice of the last night of eating richer, fatty foods before the ritual fasting of the Lenten season.

(Source: agencies)

Indonesia and Australia restore full military ties

Indonesia and Australia have restored full military relations, weeks after Jakarta suspended cooperation because of "insulting" teaching material found at an Australian army center.

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull made the announcement on Sunday alongside Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who arrived in Australia on Saturday for his first visit as president.

"President Widodo and I have agreed to full restoration of defense cooperation, training exchanges and activities," Turnbull told reporters in Sydney.

Military cooperation between the two countries has ranged from joint training and counterterrorism cooperation to border protection.

It was suspended in January after an Indonesian officer saw references which he deemed derogatory to Indonesia's state ideology Pancasila in training materials used at a Special Forces base in the west Australian city of Perth.

A minor diplomatic spat ensued, followed by an apology from Australia's army chief in February.

Indonesia and Australia have a history of patchy ties, but both leaders were keen on Sunday to emphasize their commitment to a strong relationship.

The two leaders also witnessed the signing of an agreement on maritime cooperation that includes strengthening maritime security and border protection as well as combating crime and improving efficiency of shipping.

The leaders stopped short of announcing joint patrols, but stressed the importance of resolving disputes peacefully and in accordance to international law.

Collaboration on counterterrorism, especially the return of foreign fighters from the Syrian and Iraq conflict zone, would continue, Turnbull said.

While the primary focus of the visit was on security and economic issues, talks also touched on tourism, cyber-security and social links.

Two-way trade between Australia and Indonesia was worth $15.3bn in 2015-16, according to Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Earlier this week, Widodo told The Australian newspaper that he would like to see joint patrols with Australia in the South China Sea if they did not further inflame tensions with China.

(Source: agencies)

Saudi king begins month-long Asia tour amid economic woes

The House of Saud regime King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud arrived in Malaysia on the first leg of his month-long Asian tour as the kingdom seeks to attract investment in a bid to save its ailing economy hit by low oil prices and rising military expenditure.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak welcomed King Salman, who is said to have been accompanied by a 600-strong delegation, in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday.

The trip is the first by a Saudi king to Malaysia in more than a decade. Informed sources said that cooperation on energy developments will be on the agenda of King Salman's visit to the Southeast Asian state.

Malaysia's state oil firm Petronas and Saudi oil giant Aramco are expected to sign a deal to collaborate in Malaysia's Refinery and Petrochemical Integrated Development (RAPID) project.

A statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) said King Salman also plans to visit Indonesia, Brunei, Japan, China, the Maldives and Jordan "to meet with the leaders of those countries to discuss bilateral relations and regional and international issues of common concern."

Back in 2015, the House of Saud regime was dragged into a corruption scandal at Malaysian state fund 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), founded by Najib. It was further revealed that the House of Saud regime had transferred $681 million into Najib's personal bank account in 2013.

In January 2016, however, Malaysia's attorney general cleared Najib of graft allegations, ruling that the money was a donation from the Saudi royal family and most of it was returned.

The finances of Saudi regime have been hit by falling oil prices. The Saudi economy is also reeling from the costs of its military aggression against neighboring Yemen, where thousands of people have been killed and many more injured.

Last December, King Salman acknowledged that some of the economic measures adopted by the Riyadh regime were "painful," but they were needed to avert more complicated financial woes.

(Source: AP)

Thousands march in Moscow two years after Putin foe killed

Thousands of Russians marched through central Moscow on Sunday in memory of slain opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, two years after he was shot dead near the Kremlin.

The assassination of the former deputy prime minister on February 27, 2015 was the highest-profile killing of a critic of President Vladimir Putin since the ex-KGB officer took charge in 2000.

Five Chechen men from Russia's volatile North Caucasus are currently on trial for carrying out a contract hit, but those who ordered the killing have not been brought to justice.

"We came to pay tribute to the honesty and bravery of Boris Nemtsov," pensioner Galina Zolina told AFP, clutching a bunch of red carnations.

"We want to show the authorities that we haven't forgotten."

Charismatic Nemtsov -- who went from Kremlin insider under Boris Yeltsin to one of Putin's fiercest foes -- was hit in the back by four fatal shots as he walked home across a bridge by the Kremlin with his girlfriend.

The march on Sunday was permitted by the authorities but not allowed to include a makeshift memorial officials have repeatedly sought to dismantle at the spot Nemstov was killed.

Some 15,000 demonstrators, organizers and AFP estimated, surrounded by a heavy police presence waved Russian flags and posters criticizing the Kremlin and Moscow's intervention in Ukraine, which Nemtsov had fiercely opposed right up to his death.

Masterminds untouched

Last October five men -- including a member of an elite interior ministry unit in Chechnya -- went on trial in a military court in Moscow for carrying out the contract killing for 15 million rubles (currently $250,000, 240,000 euros).

But despite claims from officials that the case has been solved Nemtsov's family and allies insist that the probe into his death has left the masterminds untouched.

They insist he was killed to stop his political activities and the murder trail leads to those close to Chechnya's Kremlin-loyal strongman Ramzan Kadyrov.

"The investigation stopped at the level of those who carried out the murder but nothing has been done to find those who ordered it," Vadim Prokhorov, the lawyer for Nemtsov's family, told AFP.

Nemtsov's slaying sent a chill through Russia's marginalized opposition, which has already been sidelined under Putin's authoritarian rule.

The march -- which was accompanied by events in other Russian cities -- came as authorities released prominent activist Ildar Dadin from jail in Siberia.

Dadin, who spent 15 months behind bars, was the only person to be convicted under a controversial law against public protests that has helped snuff out demonstrations against the Kremlin.

(Source: AFP)

Democrats pick Perez to lead party against Trump

The United States Democrats elected former Labor Secretary Tom Perez as chairman, choosing a veteran of the Obama administration to lead the daunting task of rebuilding the party and heading the opposition to Republican President Donald Trump.

Members of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the administrative and fundraising arm of the party, picked Perez on the second round of voting over U.S. Representative Keith Ellison, a liberal from Minnesota.

Following one of the most crowded and competitive party leadership elections in decades, Perez faces a challenge in unifying and rejuvenating a party still reeling from the Nov. 8 loss of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. He immediately made Ellison his deputy.

After losing the presidency and failing to recapture majorities in Congress, party leaders are anxious to channel the growing grassroots resistance to Trump into political support for Democrats at all levels of government across the country.

"We are suffering from a crisis of confidence, a crisis of relevance," Perez, a favorite of former Obama administration officials, told DNC members. He promised to lead the fight against Trump and change the DNC's culture to make it a more grassroots operation.

Perez, the son of Dominican immigrants who was considered a potential running mate for Clinton, overcame a strong challenge from Ellison and prevailed on a 235-200 second-round vote. Ellison, who is the first Muslim elected to the U.S. Congress, was backed by liberal leader U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

The showdown between candidates backed by the establishment and progressive wings of the party echoed the bitter 2016 primary between Clinton and Sanders, a rift Democrats will try to put behind them as they turn their focus to fighting Trump.

Those divisions persisted through the months-long race for chair, as many in the party's liberal wing were suspicious of Perez's ties to the establishment and some Democrats raised questions about possible anti-Semitism in Ellison's past.

Some Ellison supporters chanted "Not big money, party for the people" after the result was announced.

But both Perez and Ellison moved quickly to bring the rival factions together. At Perez's urging, the DNC suspended the rules after the vote and appointed Ellison the deputy chairman of the party.

"I am asking you to give everything you've got to support Chairman Perez," Ellison told DNC members after the vote. "We don't have the luxury, folks, to walk out of this room divided."

Perez said the party would come together.

"We are one family, and I know we will leave here united today," Perez said. "A united Democratic Party is not only our best hope, it is Donald Trump's nightmare."

Trump took a dig at Perez and Democrats in a tweet offering his congratulations on the election.

"I could not be happier for him, or for the Republican Party!" Trump said.

Perez and Ellison wore each other's campaign buttons and stood shoulder-to-shoulder at a news conference after the vote. Perez said the two had talked "for some time" about teaming up, and Ellison said they had "good synergy."

Sanders issued a statement congratulating Perez and urging changes at the DNC.

The election offered the DNC a fresh start after last year's forced resignation of chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who stepped aside when the release of hacked emails appeared to show DNC officials trying to help Clinton defeat Sanders in the primaries.

Both Perez and Ellison have pledged to focus on a bottom-up reconstruction of the party, which has lost hundreds of statehouse seats under Obama and faces an uphill task in trying to reclaim majorities in Congress in next year's midterm elections.

Perez said he would redefine the role of the DNC to make it work not just to elect Democrats to the White House but in races ranging from local school boards to the U.S. Senate, pledging to "organize, organize, organize."

Perez fell one vote short of the simple majority of 214.5 votes needed for election in the first round of voting, getting 213.5 votes to Ellison's 200. Also on the first ballot were four other candidates -- Idaho Democratic Party Executive Director Sally Boynton Brown, election lawyer Peter Peckarsky, and activists Jehmu Greene and Sam Ronan.

Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, withdrew just before the voting, while Brown, Greene and Ronan dropped out after the first round.

(Source: Reuters)

No debt relief for Greece, Germany's deputy fin. min. says

Greece must not be granted a "bail in" that would involve creditors taking a loss on their loans, Germany's deputy finance minister said in an interview broadcast on Sunday, reiterating the German government's opposition to debt relief for Athens.

"There must not be a bail-in," Jens Spahn told German broadcaster Deutschlandfunk, according to a written transcript of the interview.

"We think it is very, very likely that we will come to an agreement with the International Monetary Fund that does not require a haircut," he said, referring to losses that Greece's creditors would have to take if debt was written off.

The IMF has called for Greece to be granted substantial debt relief, but this is opposed by Germany, which makes the largest contribution to the budget of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the euro zone's bailout fund.

Greece and its creditors agreed on Monday to further reforms by Athens to ease a logjam in talks with creditors that has held up additional funding for the troubled euro zone country.

Inspectors from the European Commission, the ESM, the IMF and the European Central Bank are due to return to Athens this week.

Spahn, a senior member of Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives, said Greece's problem was a lack of growth rather than debt and giving Athens debt relief would upset other euro zone countries such as Spain that had to deliver tough reforms.

"Our Spanish friends, for example, say: 'Hang on - that wouldn't be fair: we carry out reforms and get no haircut and now you're talking about giving Greece one?!'"

Spahn said Germany was campaigning hard to keep the IMF on board in Greece's bailout because of its expertise in helping countries that need to deliver reforms in return for aid.

Manfred Weber, who leads the conservative bloc in the European Parliament, said this month that if the IMF insisted on debt relief for Greece, it should no longer participate in the bailout, breaking ranks with Berlin's official line that the program would end if the IMF pulled out.

A survey published on Friday showed around half of people in Germany, Europe's paymaster, are against granting debt relief to Greece.

(Source: Reuters)

Euro zone economy: real recovery or another Sirens' song?

1 → But putting aside some of the latest data, it has been steady rather than spectacular. Economic growth is still running at only around 1.6 percent annually, and most forecasters - from economists polled by Reuters to the Commission itself, reckon it will be about the same this year.

So the question is whether the recent data has turned this on its head. Even before considering whether Greece's debt problems will come back to bite the euro zone, there are two main strands: inflation and elections.

Of politics and inflation

While the repetition of positive January and February data in the month ahead - for example, German industrial orders soaring again - would fuel the euro zone takeoff story, inflation may hold the key.

"The risk of disappointment is that higher headline inflation decelerates real income growth and consumption," said Paul Mortimer-Lee, global head of market economics at BNP Paribas.

The preliminary reading of February euro zone inflation, to be reported on Wednesday, is expected to come in at 2.0 percent year-on-year, rising to the European Central Bank's target on the back of monetary stimulus and economic growth.

While far from hyper, such a level has not been seen for four years, and there has been a strong inverse path taken between inflation and retail sales over the last five years.

In other words, rising prices can hurt consumer spending, which in turn drives economies.

Unemployment during the financial crisis accounts for some of the dive in retail sales seen on and off since 2008. But joblessness, though improved, is still twice that of, say, the United States.

So if euro zone inflation were to overshoot in the coming year, it may well stifle the very growth that engendered it.

Economists, however, also see a growth killer in the bloc's politics.

Many have long argued that the euro zone cannot compete as a leading economy without substantial structural reform - particularly in the number two and three economies after Germany.

"It comes down to France and Italy stepping up a gear," said Florian Hense, European economist at Berenberg private bank.

But it is exactly in those two countries where politics is threatening to delay or derail the type of pro-growth structural reforms advocated by the European Central Bank and many private sector economists.

In Italy, the chances of an election this year have diminished, but the political turmoil surrounding the resignation of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi is likely to set back major reforms until an election takes place.

It is France, however, that is seen providing the biggest risk. Two of the top three candidates are viewed as economic reformists, but they are up against Marine Le Pen, the far-right National Front candidate whose pledge to put France's EU membership to a referendum could de-stabilize the region's economy for years.

Le Pen is not supposed to win, according to polls. But neither was U.S. President Donald Trump or those in Britain wanting to leave the Europe Union.

"If a rising France joins a still strong Germany at the core of Europe, the economic and political outlook for the euro zone as a whole could improve considerably," Berenberg economists told clients.

"(But) a President Le Pen would spell the end of reform hopes for France and the EU for the next five years."

(source: Reuters)

Meeting of ECO senior officials kicks off on Sunday

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)'s senior officials' meeting (SOM) with Pakistani Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry in the chair, started operation in Islamabad on Sunday to discuss improvement of cooperation and trade linkage among the member countries, IRNA reported.

Director General for International Economic Corporation of Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Majid Bizmark represents Iran in the two-day meeting, the report said.

The 13th ECO Summit will be held in Islamabad on Wednesday, and would be preceded by the two-day SOM and the 22nd Meeting of the ECO Council of Foreign Ministers (COM) on Tuesday.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif is planned to take part in the COM and grant its periodical chairmanship to Pakistan's Advisor to Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani will also attend the ECO summit on Wednesday.

The Summit will deliberate and decide on ways and means to augment cooperation in the areas of connectivity, trade, energy, tourism, investment, industry, economic growth, productivity, social welfare and environment.

ECO is an intergovernmental regional organization established in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey for the purpose of promoting economic, technical and cultural cooperation among the member states.

In 1992, the organization was expanded to include seven new members, namely Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Republic of Uzbekistan.

Over the past years the member states have been collaborating to accelerate the pace of regional development through their common endeavors.

Intl. real estate, property expo opens in Tehran

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** The fourth International Exhibition of Real Estate and Property kicked off in Tehran on Sunday, IRIB reported.

The four-day event will be hosting 107 domestic companies as well as 23 exhibitors from foreign countries including Britain, Italy, Oman, Turkey, France, Greece, Georgia, Cyprus and Kazakhstan.

The participants will showcase their latest achievements in this industry.

The exhibition aims for attracting investment, to create a prosperous atmosphere in the property market and also to push the country's real estate industry out of the recent downturns.

Pistachio exports to Europe up 5% in 2016: Eurostat

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** Iran has exported €232 million worth of pistachios to the European markets in 2016 to register a five percent rise compared to 2015, the European Union's statistics agency Eurostat was cited by Tasnim news agency on Saturday.

The country had exported €220 million worth of the commodity to Europe in 2015; Germany, Spain and Greece have been the leading importers of Iran's pistachios.

The U.S. was the top exporter of pistachio to Europe in 2016 with €370 million worth of the product being exported from the country to the European markets.

Australia's 2016 gold output highest since 1999

Australian gold output hit a 17-year high of 298 tons in 2016 as higher bullion prices drove mining companies to dig deeper, a sector survey released on Sunday showed.

A robust world gold price and favorable foreign exchange rates for most of the year that boosted prices for local producers were the factors behind the increase, according to the survey by Australian mining consultancy Surbiton Associates.

"Overall, the Australian dollar gold price has continued to be attractive, thanks to the combination of the U.S. dollar gold price and favorable exchange rates," said Surbiton director Sandra Close.

"This has encouraged the redevelopment of previously mined areas and the refurbishment of mothballed plants, thereby pushing Australian gold output higher," Close said.

Australia produced a record 314 tons of gold in 1997, according to Close.

A weaker Australian currency against the U.S. dollar lifted the local gold price to a high of A$1,856.48 an ounce in June, Reuters data showed.

Prices have since recoiled to around A$1,623 an ounce - compared to about $1,250 in U.S. dollars - but still high enough to deliver strong profit margins for miners.

Australia's gold miners' index on Friday reached its highest level since Nov. 11.

But heavy rainfall in far Western Australia - the country's main gold mining region - has been affecting mine

work and could curb first-quarter output, getting 2017 off to a slower start, according to Close.

(Source: Reuters)

'Big Profits' justify new bank measures, Swedish govt. says

Sweden's government is putting forward a new proposal for a financial industry tax and will require banks to contribute more to a crisis fund as the administration argues lenders are making more than enough money to absorb the extra cost.

"Now that times are good and the banks are making big profits, we also have an opportunity to build defenses for the future and potentially worse times, and strengthen the financial system," Financial Markets Minister Per Bolund said at a press conference in Stockholm on Saturday.

The government plans to unveil a new bank tax proposal before elections in September next year, marking its latest attempt to impose a levy that doesn't collide with European Union rules. The Social Democrat-led coalition's previous efforts, which also targeted life insurers, met broad and vocal opposition, including from Sweden's competition authority and the tax agency that would have enforced the rule, sending the administration back to the drawing board.

"We will go forward with a tax that focuses more on the banks and will start working on that at the finance ministry now, but we're also increasing the fee for the resolution fee," Finance Minister Magdalena Andersson said during the same press conference.

The financial industry said the previously planned 15 percent payroll tax would kill about 16,000 jobs while Nordea Bank AB Chairman Bjorn Wahlroos cautioned that banks would be tempted to move some operations abroad to avoid the levy.

Andersson said the plan now is to push through a revised and "tighter" bank tax proposal, which will affect fewer companies and comply with EU law. She underscored the administration's commitment to such a levy, as it works on a model it can get past Brussels.

We will "continue our work with a tighter bank tax with the aim to decrease the tax advantage that the bank sector has since they don't pay VAT, but also find a bank tax that complies with EU law," she said.

Separately from the proposed tax, the government wants to raise the fee banks pay into Sweden's resolution fund, to 0.125 percent next year from today's 0.09 percent of debts minus guaranteed deposits. The measure means banks will have to pay about 3 billion kronor ($332 million) more next year.

But Sweden's bank lobby signaled it will also fight the latest proposal, questioning the government's assertion that financial profits were fatter than in other industries. The Swedish Bankers' Association noted that return on equity was lower than the average for the 40 largest listed Swedish companies in four of the past five years, in an op-ed published by Svenska Dagbladet.

"The question we're asking ourselves is on what grounds a myth seems to have been established about banks making excessive profits," the association wrote.

Bolund said the government is eager to ensure "that there are enough resources to manage banks if they were to end up in a crisis."

(Source: Bloomberg)

Tunisia to accelerate reforms as IMF freezes loan

Tunisia plans to sell stakes in three state-owned banks this year and cut up to 10,000 public sector jobs as part of reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has frozen the second tranche of a loan, the finance minister said.

Six years after its 2011 pro-democracy uprising, Tunisia is struggling to make economic progress. Last June, the IMF released the first tranche of a loan worth $320 million.

Finance Minister Lamia Zribi told Reuters in an interview a second payment had not been made.

"The IMF froze a second tranche worth $350 million scheduled last December because of lack of progress in reforms, including public sector wage bill, the public finances and state banks," the minister said.

Zribi said an IMF delegation had been expected in Tunisia next month to discuss reforms and the third tranche of the loan, but the team will not come if they did not see reform progress.

Any official suspension of IMF installments of the loan could push other international partners to retreat from lending to the North African state.

Zribi said the government was ready to launch a new push on the reforms package in the public sector, the banking sector, state companies and taxes.

The minister said the government would immediately begin plans for a voluntary layoff program for state employees by encouraging early retirement, aiming to cut at least 10,000 public sector jobs in 2017 through the program.

Spending cuts, layoffs

Since 2011, Tunisia has been backed by foreign partners and multilateral lenders keen to see the new democracy succeed. But economic reforms have lagged behind political changes.

"The wage bill in Tunisia rose to 14.4 percent so far and is among the highest level in the world. We will cut it to 14 percent by the end of 2017 and about 12.5 percent in 2020," Zribi said, referring to the public wage bill as a proportion of GDP.

The reform of three state banks, Societe Tunisienne de Bank (STB), Bank National Agricol (BNA) and Bank Habitat (BH) are among urgent steps demanded by the IMF.

In 2015 the Tunisian government injected 800 million Tunisian dinars ($350 million) to recapitalize STB, BNA and BH, but the banks still struggle with large deficits.

"We are studying options, including the fusion of the three into one bank, but this actually does not seem realistic. The other option is to sell stakes to strategic partners," the minister said.

The government also plans to sell a number of companies confiscated from former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's family in telecommunications, media and service sectors.

Zribi said Tunisia expects to earn less than $300 million from the sale of these companies.

But the minister said there are also positive indicators for the return of growth this year with higher tourist bookings for the peak summer season and a higher level of phosphate production in the first two months of 2017.

Islamist militant attacks against foreigners in 2015 hit the tourism sector hard. Tourism makes up 8 percent of Tunisia's gross domestic product. Protests over jobs also disrupted state phosphate production, another key revenue earner.

Tunisia's government expected 2.5 percent growth this year, but Zribi believes it could achieve 3 percent, with the continuation of those positive indicators and forecasts of a good agriculture season.

Since autocrat Ben Ali was overthrown, Tunisia has managed free elections, introduced a new constitution and harnessed a spirit of compromise between secular and Islamist parties to become a model of political change for the region.

But popular protests over the lack of jobs, labor union resistance and political squabbling have held back plans to cut state spending and improve the legal framework for banking and investment to help job creation.

(Source: Reuters)

Iran's installed renewable capacity exceeds 340MW

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN** — The managing director of Renewable Energy Organization of Iran (known as SUNA) announced that the country's total installed capacity of renewable power plants has exceeded 340 megawatts (MW), ILNA reported.

Seyed Mohammad Sadeqzadeh made the remarks on the sidelines of the 9th International Renewable Energy and Energy Saving Exhibition in Tehran.

According to the official, the country is aiming to install some 100 MW capacity of renewable power plants during the current Iranian calendar year (which ends on March 20, 2017) and the Energy Ministry has it on agenda to install over 500 MW capacity of renewable plants in the upcoming Iranian calendar year of 1396 (March 2017-March 2018).

"Hopefully by the Iranian calendar year of 1397 (March 2018-March 2019) 1000-1200 MW will annually be added to the country's generation capacity of renewable energy," he said.

For the time being, supplying five percent of the country's electricity need from renewable energies is a priority for Iran's energy industry but 10 or even 20 percent would be out of consideration.

After the removal of the West-imposed sanction against Iran foreign companies have been flocking to the country to contribute to its renewable energy sector.

German company EAB NEW ENERGY GMBH, South Korea's KTC co., and some leading companies from Denmark, Hungary, Turkey, as well as China are just a few of the companies interested in Iran's energy sector.

Is the renewable transition harming the U.S. economy?

Recent data from the 2017 Sustainable Energy in America Factbook suggests that sectors of America's energy market are quickly shifting towards greener energy, while also dispelling the myth that such shifts will hurt the economy. Despite a GDP growth of 12 percent since 2007, America's usage of energy has fallen by 3.6 percent. Analysts believe this to be indicative of a new stage of American history in which energy productivity is improving, while increasingly less energy is needed to sustain growth.

These movements are overlapped by dramatic decreases in greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, 2016 marked a 25-year low – emissions have dropped 12 percent since 2007. As part of the original Paris Agreement, the U.S. has pledged to reduce national greenhouse gasses by over 25 percent by 2025 – these new numbers mean we are nearly halfway there.

These numbers are supplemented by the fact that consumers spent less than 4 percent of their annual household income on energy. This is the smallest estimate ever collected in America. Further, retail rates for electricity have fallen nationally by 3 percent. But in some regions, Texas for example, retail prices have fallen by as much as 29 percent. Moreover, since its peak in 2014, demand for electricity has fallen 1.2 percent. During the same period of time, GDP has grown 4.2 percent.

These numbers seem to contradict the widely-held belief that if America shifts away from carbon-based energy, we will either face economic deceleration, or radical price increases.

Further details concerning 2016 show that renewable energy sources have also spiked. Last year, the U.S. created 22 gigawatts of new renewable-energy-generating capacity. 12.5 of these gigawatts were generated from the solar industry. The wind industry contributed 8.5 gigawatts, and the remainder was comprised of additions from hydropower, biomass, biogas and waste-to-energy.

Renewable energy itself has grown to become 15 percent of total energy production in the U.S., up from 9 percent in 2007. Most of these successes are the result of declining prices in the renewables sector. The original barrier to entry for these renewable energy sources was the lack of competitive pricing compared to carbon-based fuel. However, these two price-points have been slowly converging.

Coal plants are also becoming less efficient, so that 7 gigawatts of capacity normally derived from coal have been eliminated from the U.S. supply of energy. This is after a record breaking 15 gigawatts were disconnected in 2015. Coal provides a smaller share of all U.S. electricity than it ever has before.

However, these changes seem to be limited to retail energy, and a possible detractor of these changes is transportation. Electric vehicles, for example, make up only 0.9 percent of all vehicles sold in the U.S. This is supplemented by gasoline purchases, which are up over 3 percent year over year.

These trends are expected to continue in coming years, despite the mandates from the EPA and the new Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards. CAFE standards were initially created in an attempt to curb inefficient gas usage by consumer vehicles; they force automobile makers to increase the fuel economy of their vehicle fleet every year. Current standards mandate that by model-year 2025, fuel economy must be increased by approximately 10 mpg collectively. Whether or not this is achievable, however, remains to be seen – while these specific CAFE standards dramatically improved fuel economy when first implemented in 2012, the growth has plateaued for the last three years at 25.1 mpg. This is in conjunction with increased sales in large SUV vehicles and trucks.

These indicators further support the notion that despite continued improvement in the retail electricity sector, the shift to renewable energy as a whole can be dramatically offset by the continued growth in the transportation sector, and the lack of improvement concerning fuel economy.

(Source: oilprice.com)

Petchem exports from Iran hit $10b since last March

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN** — Iran has exported 19 million tons of petrochemical products worth $10 billion since the beginning of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2016), National Petrochemical Company (NPC) Managing Director Marziyeh Shahdaie announced on Sunday.

The official also announced that five new petrochemical projects will come on stream in the country in the upcoming calendar year (which will start on March 21, 2017), Mehr news agency reported.

Iran is producing 65 million tons of petrochemical products annually and the country plans to triple its installed capacity of petrochemical complexes in the next ten years, according to Shahdaie.

"Iran has reached 70 percent self-sufficiency in manufacturing equipment needed in petrochemical industry," the NPC managing director has said.

After the implementation of Iran's nuclear deal, NPC has received high willingness from European companies for cooperation with Iran in the petrochemical sector both in financing and licensing.

111 bcm of gas injected to national grid in 11 months

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN** — According to an Iranian gas official, some 111 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas has been injected to the national grid during the first 11 months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2016-February 18, 2017), Shana reported.

Masoud Hassani, the managing director of the South Pars Gas Complex (SPGC), told the news agency that on average about 132 bcm of natural gas has been extracted from the SP platforms in the mentioned time span.

"The gas field has also produced some 177.166 million barrels of gas condensate and about 2.426 million tons of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) during the said period," he said.

Nigeria needs the world's assistance in responding to the Boko Haram crisis

By Ayoade Olatunbosun-Alakija

Some 250 delegates have gathered in the Norwegian capital Oslo on Friday to draw attention to the world's forgotten humanitarian crisis — that of northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, where Boko Haram once dominated and have left destruction in their wake.

Beleaguered region

The humanitarian crisis in northeast Nigeria is one of the most underreported disasters in the world — only recently have people turned their attentions to this beleaguered region. Over the last seven years, Boko Haram, one of the most brutal terrorist groups the world has ever seen, has caused untold loss of life and liberty across northeastern Nigeria and parts of Niger, Chad and Cameroon in and around the Lake Chad Region.

Governor Kashim Shettima of Borno State, the epicenter of the insurgency, estimates that the destruction caused by Boko Haram in Borno alone amounts to about $6 billion. At the height of the insurgency, Boko Haram sowed its destruction across the entire northern Nigeria, hitting targets as far away as the country's capital Abuja, some 430 miles from Maiduguri, the Borno state capital.

The Nigerian government has been unwavering in its determination to bring a speedy resolution to the insurgency. President Muhammadu Buhari has consistently made it clear, as a presidential candidate in early 2015 and as elected president since May 2015, that one of his foremost priorities is defeating the terrorists. And the Nigerian military has relentlessly taken the battle to the enemy's strongholds, routing it, reclaiming lost territory, and liberating tens of thousands of people. Now well on the back foot, Boko Haram has mostly resorted to suicide bombings on mosques and motor-parks and other soft targets.

A new set of challenges

The admirable successes of the military have produced a new set of challenges: how to deal with the flood of civilians uprooted and traumatized by the insurgency. In Nigeria alone, 26 million people have been affected, including host communities where refuge has been sought and given. With voluntary returns to date, the current number of recorded internally displaced persons (IDPs) stands at 1.9 million, only a fraction of the total number affected by the humanitarian crisis. Clearly, it would be a mistake to talk of this as an IDP or refugee crisis alone. Relief efforts are currently, understandably, focusing on those in greatest need, but the impact of the insurgency and the ensuing humanitarian crisis is much more widely felt.

For its part, the Nigerian government is making budgetary provision through its ministries, departments and agencies, for just over half of the 14 million in need in the six most affected states in 2017. The goal is to deliver life-saving assistance and to advance the recovery and rebuilding process. But these are difficult financial times for the country.

Nigeria hopes world powers will supplement the government's efforts to fix the destruction Boko Haram left behind.

We cannot do this alone. Meeting the needs as set out in the 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan for Nigeria will cost $1.054 billion and currently, less than 10 percent of the plan has been funded, thus highlighting the need for rigorous resource mobilization in order to meet targets. We anticipate that this pledging conference will go some way to closing the funding gap.

We are optimistic that this conference, apart from helping closing the funding gap, will also provide a platform to forge the enduring friendships and partnerships required to navigate the challenging months and years ahead.

The highlight of the conference will be the increased political will and attention, as well as pledges by the governments and donor agencies attending — pledges that, when redeemed, will augment the efforts of the Nigerian government. When the throng of foreign ministers, diplomats, donors, activists and civil society organizations make their way from Oslo back to their various bases this weekend, it will be with the firm belief that we have succeeded in taking the first bold step in pulling the world's forgotten crisis out of the shadows. And that by doing so we are preventing a protracted crisis, and helping avert a nightmare scenario that would make Boko Haram's brutality seem insignificant in comparison.

(Source: Newsweek)

Families of ISIL members evicted from liberated areas in Iraq

By Omar Sattar

Hussam Abbar, a member of Ninevah's provincial council, says: "If a family member joined ISIL, the rest of the family should not be held responsible for his actions, especially when the family is part of a clan and has many relatives, which could later result in revenge crimes and affect the social fabric."

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said Feb. 22 that his government is ready to start the implementation of national reconciliation in the very near future. The plan includes returning the displaced families to their hometowns and building an inclusive political and social setting in the liberated areas.

During a Feb. 14 speech on Al-Iraqiya TV, he gave more details about his plan for national reconciliation. Abadi said the families of Islamic State (ISIL) members should not be punished for the acts committed by ISIL members if the family members had no involvement. He said that no matter the severity of the criminal act, the family should not be held responsible for the acts of one of its members.

However, no official policy has yet been adopted when it comes to dealing with the families of ISIL members, and they are being evicted from the liberated areas, particularly in Qayyarah, Sharqat and some neighborhoods in the eastern part of Mosul, amid disagreements over the implications and repercussions of this "eviction."

The "families of ISIL members" has become a common term in the liberated areas to identify families who supported and helped ISIL, or those who have a member affiliated with the extremist group.

The provincial council of Salahuddin was the first to decide to evict the families of ISIL members in August 2016. The decision included all families "involved with or supporting or promoting this group." A special committee was in charge of implementing evictions, which would "last for no less than 10 years, during which the decision can be reconsidered every six months."

Local authorities in the cities of Hit and Sharqat have taken similar steps to eliminate ISIL-supporting environments.

On Jan. 26, NRT aired a video showing a woman who goes by the name of Umm Hanadi leading a group of gunmen along with members of the 60th Brigade from Squad 17 and evicting a number of families whose sons were accused of supporting and joining ISIL, in Sharqat in northern Salahuddin province. The local and central authorities did not specify the party Umm Hanadi is affiliated with.

Today, a similar scene is reproduced on Mosul's liberated eastern part. However, the decision to evict families was not made by the local authorities there.

In this context, Hussam Abbar, a member of Ninevah's provincial council, told Al-Monitor that the decision was taken by the joint security forces, saying, "Only in Hit and Sharqat families of ISIL members were evicted and to unknown destinations. We, as a provincial council, have a different vision on how to handle these families."

He explained, "If a family member joined ISIL, the rest of the family should not be held responsible for his actions, especially when the family is part of a clan and has many relatives, which could later result in revenge crimes and affect the social fabric."

Abbar also called on "dealing with individuals accused of joining ISIL according to the law and without holding their families responsible for one member's actions."

Although no official party has disclosed the destination to which families of ISIL members are being evicted, member of parliament Ahmad al-Jarba told Al-Monitor, "Salahuddin authorities have allocated camps outside the cities for families of ISIL members and individuals who have supported or promoted this group."

Confidential informants

However, Jarba, who is a deputy for Ninevah province, said that some of the deputies for the Sunni provinces intend to "discuss the issue of eviction with the parliament because [they believe] it could lead to creating a new generation of ISIL from among the children who will be raised in these isolated camps."

He added, "We will handle this issue from all legal and judicial aspects to avoid serious repercussions that may be caused by resorting once again to telltales and 'confidential informants.'"

Confidential informants who would report on the whereabouts of ISIL members anonymously over the phone, brought about numerous conflicts between Sunni and Shia parliamentary blocs. Malicious rumors led to the wrongful imprisonment of thousands of people before the judiciary stopped relying on confidential informants on March 26, 2013, by virtue of a decision issued by the Iraqi Council of Ministers.

But on the other hand, leaving these families in the liberated areas is a big risk, and their lives could be in danger, as those who were harmed by ISIL could take revenge. This is why guaranteeing their safety is essential but no easy task.

Khaled al-Saray, the head of the Media Monitoring Center, told Al-Muraqeb Al-Iraqi that evicting families of ISIL members was "a necessity to save the liberated provinces from tribal revenge crimes," and that "some villages and areas refuse to allow the families involved in supporting criminals to come back and vow to kill them if they do." He said, "Families of guilty individuals are shunned as part of tribal customs, to avoid revenge crimes and establish peace and calm."

Meanwhile, eyewitnesses in the eastern part of Mosul told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity that they believe there is an ISIL-affiliated network working on destabilizing security in the liberated areas. This network is reported to be spreading malicious rumors to stir hatred and conflicts between the residents and the security forces.

According to these witnesses, many known ISIL members are roaming freely in eastern Mosul without being arrested because "their names are not included in the arrest lists or for lack of evidence."

This controversy over the families of ISIL members could obstruct the work of the security forces or result in punishing innocent people. The right thing to do would be to keep tabs on them and work on their rehabilitation, instead of turning them into enemies of the Iraqi society, ready to jump on the first opportunity to take revenge.

(Source: Al Monitor)

Steve Bannon lifted his mask of death at CPAC

By Richard Wolffe

There's a reason why political operators like Steve Bannon have never sat on the national Security Council that effectively decides whether the United States should go to war. It's the same reason why Bannon's new seat on the NSC is such a threat to the security of the United States and its allies: because he's permanently at war.

"I can run a little hot on occasions," he admitted at the conservative freak show known as the CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference). Judging from his rare public outing on Thursday, that would be an unusual example of diplomatic understatement.

The opposition party

Bannon spoke disdainfully and at length about the real threat he identified facing the nation: a critical media that he likes to call "the opposition party". "They are the corporatist, globalist media that are adamantly opposed to the economic nationalist agenda that Donald Trump has," Bannon yelled.

Bannon clearly shares Trump's burning sense of resentment at being excluded from the establishment. For his boss, that reached a peak with the humiliation of President Obama's jokes at the White House Correspondents Dinner.

For Bannon, now safely inside the West Wing, that means still seeing the world through the lens of the Breitbart website that shocked the media conscience with so much alt-right trash. At one point on Thursday, Bannon even used the phrase "we at Breitbart", as if there were no real difference between his old job in digital far-right media and his new job as a presidential adviser.

Bannon predicted the media would fight "every day" against the Trump agenda, and that the fight would not ease off, as Reince Priebus, the White House chief of staff, had just suggested. "It's going to get worse," he intoned.

Dumpster fire of fake news

Priebus was sitting alongside Bannon on stage, doing his best to pretend that the news reports about their

At a rare public address, Bannon let us peek at the darkness that resides inside the West Wing. The power behind Donald Trump's throne was a spectral presence.

rivalry were just some dumpster fire of fake news. But the need to needle each other was irresistible. "He's not so bad," Reince stated about Bannon. "Most of the time."

When asked the softest of softball questions, about what they like about one another, Priebus pretended to admire Bannon's wardrobe, which appeared to combine The Gap with The Godfather. "I love how many colors he wears," Priebus said, transfixed by Bannon's gargantuan old khakis. "An interesting look."

Priebus went on to praise Bannon's consistency, loyalty and friendship. Which made him sound like a well-trained pitbull. Bannon praised Priebus for his indefatigable steadiness, which made him sound like a donkey.

Only one of these animals looked and sounded like the boss. Bannon hailed Trump's stump speeches – all those rambling lists of poll numbers and personal grievances – for having "a tremendous amount of content". That's like praising a teenager's texts for the sheer breadth of vocabulary.

Bannon also described Trump as "the greatest public speaker … since William Jennings Bryan". After four years of this kind of bluster, American history may never be the same again. Never mind that Bryan was a Democrat and a pacifist; he was also known as a great orator who preferred silver to gold. Then again, this is a White House that appears to think the career of Frederick Douglass has some ways to go.

New political order

For his part, Bannon opened a window into the darkness that resides inside the West Wing. He said that Trump was "maniacally focused" on his campaign agenda, which he hailed as "a new political order". For would-be fascists the world over, this was no doubt immensely reassuring.

"The mainstream media better understand," Bannon declared, "all those promises are going to be implemented." So much for the theory that the media was stupid to take Trump literally.

For so long we have fixated on so little. The power behind Donald Trump's throne was a spectral presence.

President Steve Bannon was a nice slogan for town hall hecklers and street protesters – and his dour face was a nice target for cartoonists. But without a voice, we had no character. Bannon was less a human being than a caricature.

For Saturday Night Live, that meant casting him as the grim reaper, orchestrating death and destruction behind a clueless and childish Trump. But with his speech at the CPAC conference, at last the SNL satirists now have some new material to play with: a living, speaking Bannon.

The only challenge is that what lies underneath is as grim as the surface. When you lift Bannon's mask of death, all you see is a pallid soul who clearly loathes the sunshine.

(Source: The Guardian)

Iran regaining OPEC's market share

By Mina Ahmadi

The recent reports indicate that the Islamic Republic of Iran has already been able to escalate its oil exports to levels that existed before sanctions were imposed on the country in 2011.

Iran's exports of oil stood at 2.35 million bpd before the sanctions were imposed against the country in 2011.

One of the main reasons for the increase in output has been a gradual increase in production from the South Azadegan field, in the strategic West Karun region, according to sources and Oil Ministry officials.

In recent months, Iran has signed a number of upstream development deals as part of its plans to increase oil and gas exports to pre-sanctions level of four mbd.

January oil exports rise

Iran's crude oil and condensate exports rose three percent month-on-month in January as it continued to regain market share, widening its appeal among refiners around the globe in the process.

Iran was the only Middle Eastern producer to see exports rise in January, as others, like Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, saw a fall in loadings, in line with agreed OPEC-led output cuts by crude producers. Unlike its peers under the landmark OPEC-led agreement, Iran has wiggle room to boost production to 3.8 mbd.

Iranian crude is similar in quality to barrels from other the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) countries in its region, meaning this is an ideal time for it to broaden its customer base, sources said.

Iran, along with Libya and Nigeria, is allowed to produce "at maximum levels that make sense" as part of any output limits in a surprise deal reached last week by the OPEC.

Export of petroleum products

In February, Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh said that the export of petroleum products is an approach adopted by the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum, adding Iran is currently meeting most of its energy needs by natural gas which would allow raising export of petroleum products.

Zangeneh further announced that the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum is bent on raising export of petroleum products, adding gasoil and petrol will be the only main liquids consumed in Iran's energy mix by next year.

Iran can currently refine 1.7 mb/d of crude oil by its refineries.

According to Zangeneh, Iran's crude oil output is at 3.9 million barrels per day, adding the country is now pumping 3.9 million barrels of oil per day.

Asia crude export up

New official data show top four Asian buyers of Iran's crude oil more than doubled their imports from the country in December compared with the same month a year earlier, for the third straight month.

The date from governments and ship-racking services also said the buyers – China, India, South Korea and Japan- imported 1.89mn barrels per day.

According to data by International Energy Agency, in absolute terms, imports slipped for a second consecutive month, from a peak of just under 2mn bpd in October, which was the highest since at least 2010.

During the first full year since the sanctions were lifted, Iran has boosted exports to its biggest Asian customers by nearly 60 percent to 1.63mn bpd.

Post-sanctions recapture

Europe represents Iran's biggest post-sanctions recapture of the lost market, where the continent currently receives more than 700,000 barrels per day of Iranian crude oil.

US-based oilfield services company Schlumberger signed last year an initial deal with an Iranian oil company for data-sharing. European energy companies like Austria's OMV and France's Total also signed memorandums of understanding of their own, Press TV wrote.

Trade data released by Japan's Ministry of Finance on Monday showed Iran's crude oil imports cost Japan an average $43.87 a barrel for December, the third cheapest after Ecuador and Columbia.

According to Japan's Trade Ministry, the country's imports jumped more than 40 percent from a year earlier to 246,243 bpd last month.

China's imports rose 30 percent to 689,530 bpd, meaning the country regained top spot among consumers after buying less than India for three consecutive months.

India's imports grew to 546,600 bpd, while South Korea's purchases rocketed to 410,387 bpd.

Old customers back

Last month, the International Group of P&I Clubs said it will soon provide nearly full coverage of reinsurance of around $7.8 billion per tanker for shipping Iranian oil, in addition to resuming reinsurance coverage for the National Iranian Tanker Co.'s oil tankers.

That can boost Iran's already increasing oil exports as ongoing US sanctions had created hurdles on the availability of ships to carry Iranian barrels.

With it now easier for a wider pool of charterers and shipowners to transport and trade Iranian oil, the past month saw some old buyers returning. In the next few days, two Iranian VLCCs — the Huge and the Snow — will discharge a mix of Iranian heavy and light crude grades in the Rotterdam refining hub for the first time in five years.

National Iranian Oil Company sold a cargo of Iranian Light crude to Indonesia's state-owned Pertamina for February loading as a test sale, the first direct crude sale between NIOC and Pertamina for around 15 years, according to sources close to the matter.

The Philippines' PNOC has also recently signaled it was seeking to resume crude oil imports from Iran. PNOC president and CEO Pedro Aquino said recently his company and NIOC were in negotiations for the long-term sale of four million barrels of Iranian crude oil per month to the Philippines.

The sanctions restricted the country's oil exports to around 1 million bpd among other economic bans – already described by analysts as the toughest the world has ever seen.

The sanctions were lifted in January 2016 after a deal that Iran reached with the P5+1 – the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany – over the Iranian nuclear energy program became effective.

The JCPOA – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – which achieved between Iran and the Sextet of world powers envisaged the removal of a series of economic sanctions against Iran in return for steps by the country to restrict certain aspects of its nuclear energy activities

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Foul Play? Four dead Russian diplomats in three months

By Adam Garrie

Russia's long time ambassador to the UN has died suddenly in New York – this is the fourth Russian diplomat who has died in the last 3 months. Vitaly Churkin was one of the wisest voices in international diplomacy. His voice will no longer echo in the halls of the United Nations. Articulate, polite yet commanding, wise yet affable, he oversaw some of Russia's and the world's most important events in a position he occupied since 2006.

Churkin had to face a great deal of hostile criticism from both the Bush and Obama administrations during his time at the UN, but he always did so with grace. He never failed to explain the Russian position with the utmost clarity.

Standing next to some of his colleagues, he often looked like a titan in a room full of school children.

His death, a day before his 65th birthday, is a tragedy first and foremost for his family, friends and colleagues. It is also a deeply sad day for the cause of justice, international law and all of the principles of the UN Charter which Churkin admirably upheld in the face of great obstacles.

His death however raises many uncomfortable questions...

Here are 5 things that must be considered:

1. A Macabre pattern has emerged

Beginning in 2015, there were several deaths within the Russian Diplomatic corps and a special Russian Presidential adviser.

LESIN

First there was Russia's RT founder and special adviser to President Putin, Mikhail Lesin. He died in November of 2015 in his hotel room. Reports said that he appeared discombobulated during his last sighting before he died. Later it emerged that he died of a blunt head trauma. Drinking was blamed, but many questions were left unanswered.

MALANIN

Earlier last month, Andrei Malanin, a Senior Russian Diplomat to Greece was found dead in his bathroom. The causes of death remain unknown.

KADAKIN

Just last month, Russia's Ambassador to India, Alexander Kadakin, an always prestigious role, died of a heart attack, although no one was aware of any previous health issues.

KARLOV

In December of last year Russia's Ambassador to Turkey was assassinated by a lone jihadi gunman in an art gallery. There was no effective security as the killer simply walked up to Ambassador Andrei Karlov and shot him multiple times in the back.

CHURKIN

Vitaly Chirkin is the highest profile member of Russia's diplomatic corps to die in recent years.

2. A motive for Foul Play?

Each of the recently deceased Russian Ambassadors were high profile targets for miscreants and criminals, whether state actors, mercenaries or fanatics.

Lesin was an instrumental in the creation of RT, a news outlet which has come under constant attack from the western establishment.

Malanin had overseen a period of warming fraternal relations between Greece and Russia at a time when Greece is feeling increasingly alienated from both the EU and NATO.

Karlov is said to be responsible for helping to facilitate the rapprochement between Presidents Erdogan and Putin.

Kadakin oversaw a period of renewed tensions between India and Pakistan at a time when Russia was trying to continue its good relations with India whilst building good relations with Pakistan.

On the 31st of December, 2016, Churkin's resolution on a ceasefire in Syria passed in the UN Security Council after months of deadlock. The resolution is still in force.

Anyone who wanted to derail the diplomatic successes that the aforementioned men achieved for Russia would have a clear motive to extract vengeance.

3. Who stands to gain?

In the matter of Karlov, any derailment of restored Russo-Turkish relations would be good for those happy for Turkey to continue her support of jihadists in Syria rather than moving towards accepting a Russian and indeed Iranian brokered peace process which respects the sovereignty of Syria as Russia and Iran always have, but Turkey has not.

In the case of Lesin, anyone wanting 'vengeance' for RT's popularity would be able to say that a kind of former media boss was taken down.

For Malanin, many fear that if 'Grexit' happens, Russia will become an increasingly important partner for Greece. The EU would not like one of its vassal states enjoying fruitful relations with Russia, a country still under sanctions from Brussels.

For Kadakin, it is a matter of interest for those wanting Pakistan to continue favouring western powers and not wanting Russia to be able to mediate in conflict resolutions between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Churkin had come to dominate the UN in ways that his counterparts on the Security Council simply could not. No one really stood a chance in a debate with Churkin. His absence leaves open the possibility for a power vacuum that would makes other peoples' jobs easier.

4. Where the deaths took place

Each death took place on foreign soil. Mr. Karlov's killing in particular, exposed the weakness of his security contingent. If security was that weak in a comparatively volatile place like Turkey, it goes without saying that security in states considered more politically stable would be even more lax.

Again it must be said that a non-biased detective might say that the only pattern which has emerged is that many people in the Russian diplomatic corps and related institutions have heart attacks. Maybe they eat fatty foods every day and drink and smoke too much. But if this was this case, why are the heart attacks all on foreign soil?

If all of the former Ambassadors except Karlov were really in bad health, is it really just a coincidence that none of these men had a health scare on Russian soil? Again, a pattern has emerged.

5. The ethics of speculation?

Many will say that it is too early to suspect foul play. Indeed, I must make it clear that this is simply speculation based on a pattern of tragic and at times unexplained events, combined with the objective reality that because of Russia's recently elevated profile as a born-again geopolitical superpower, Russia is a bigger target for international criminals than it was in the broken 1990s or the more quiet early 2000s.

When such events happen, one's duty is to speculate so that better health and safety precautions are taken to ensure the wellbeing of Russia's important diplomats. Furthermore, if foul play is a factor, it means that such seemingly unrelated events must be investigated more thoroughly.

Russia has historically suffered from invasion, revolution and more recently from immense international pressure. The Russian people, like Russia's ambassadors are entitled to the peace and long lives deserved by any member of a country that has suffered for too long.

Beginning in 2015, there were several deaths within the Russian Diplomatic corps and a special Russian Presidential adviser.

Churkin had to face a great deal of hostile criticism from both the Bush and Obama administrations during his time at the UN, but he always did so with grace.

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What is scoliosis and what causes it?

If you look at someone's back, you'll see that the spine runs straight down the middle. When a person has scoliosis, their backbone curves to the side.

The angle of the curve may be small, large or somewhere in between. But anything that measures more than 10 degrees is considered scoliosis. Doctors may use the letters "C" and "S" to describe the curve of the backbone.

You probably don't look directly at too many spines, but what you might notice about someone with scoliosis is the way they stand. They may lean a little or have shoulders or hips that look uneven.

What causes scoliosis?

In as many as 80% of cases, doctors don't find the exact reason for a curved spine. Scoliosis without a known cause is what doctors call "idiopathic."

Some kinds of scoliosis do have clear causes. Doctors divide those curves into two types -- structural and nonstructural.

In nonstructural scoliosis, the spine works normally, but looks curved. Why does this happen? There are a number of reasons, such as one leg's being longer than the other, muscle spasms, and inflammations like appendicitis. When these problems are treated, this type of scoliosis often goes away.

In structural scoliosis, the curve of the spine is rigid and can't be reversed.

Causes include:

- Cerebral palsy
- Muscular dystrophy
- Birth defects
- Infections
- Tumors
- Genetic conditions like Marfan syndrome and Down syndrome

Congenital scoliosis begins as a baby's back develops before birth. Problems with the tiny bones in the back, called vertebrae, can cause the spine to curve. The vertebrae may be incomplete or fail to divide properly. Doctors may detect this condition when the child is born. Or, they may not find it until the teen years.

Family history and genetics can also be risk factors for idiopathic scoliosis. If you or one of your children has this condition, make sure your other kids are screened regularly.

Scoliosis shows up most often during growth spurts, usually when kids are between 10 and 15 years old. About the same number of boys and girls are diagnosed with minor idiopathic scoliosis. But curves in girls are 10 times more likely to get worse and may need to be treated.

Scoliosis diagnosed during the teen years can continue into adulthood. The greater the angle of the spine curve, the more likely it is to increase over time. If you had scoliosis in the past, have your doctor check your back regularly.

Degenerative scoliosis affects adults. It usually develops in the lower back as the disks and joints of the spine begin to wear out as you age.

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of scoliosis may include:

- Uneven shoulders
- One shoulder blade that appears more prominent than the other
- Uneven waist
- One hip higher than the other

If a scoliosis curve gets worse, the spine will also rotate or twist, in addition to curving side to side. This causes the ribs on one side of the body to stick out farther than on the other side.

Can it be prevented?

No. So forget the rumors you may have heard, such as, "Childhood sports injuries can cause scoliosis." Not true.

Likewise, if your kids are in school, you may be concerned about the weight of the textbooks they carry. While heavy backpacks may cause back, shoulder, and neck pain, they don't lead to scoliosis.

And what about poor posture? The way a person stands or sits doesn't affect their chances for scoliosis. But a curved spine may cause a noticeable lean. If your child isn't able to stand upright, ask your doctor to look at her spine.

(Source: webmd.com)

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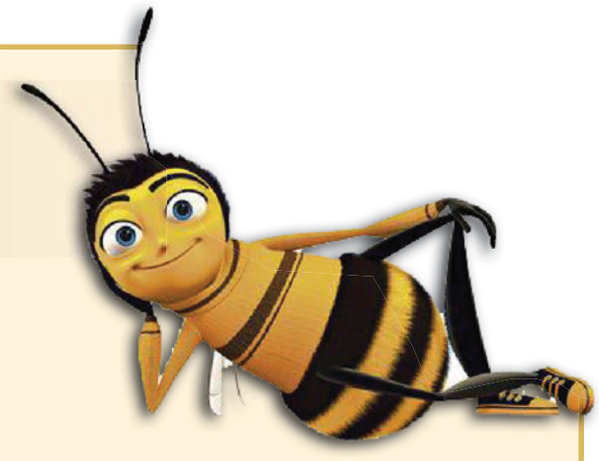
Mehrnoosh Honey
Asal Baran Baghro International Trading Company Reg. No. 9922



For the First Time in Iran:
Natural Honey with Sucrose Below 2-Gr.
Produced by Asal Baran Baghro International Trading Co.

For the first time in the country, natural honey with sucrose below two grams was produced by Asal Baran Baghro International Trading Company. Relying upon the assistance of the Almighty God, Asal Baran Baghro International Trading Company (Private Joint Stock) was established in 2012, under Reg. No. 9922, under the wise management of Seyyed Fardin Safavi who is one of prominent beekeepers and suppliers of pure and natural honey in Ardebil Province.

In the beginning, the company was tasked with meeting demands of honey production firms and packaging honey in the country as wholesale. After that, the company managed to establish cooperation and collaboration with most prestigious honey production companies in the country. After awhile, the company managed to equip one of the best laboratories for analyzing honey in the workshop and purchase necessary equipment and machinery for packaging natural honey as wholesale. After many ups and downs, the company managed to export its high-quality honey to the target markets. After receiving the license, the company started exporting its high- quality honey to Arabic countries and neighboring Turkey.

Nowadays, the company has got the lion's share of honey production in the country. Providing a pure and natural product from virgin and untapped regions in evergreen land and territory of the country with therapeutic and treatment property for patients suffering from diabetes has been the major concern of management of the company. Benefitted from the most experienced and skilled manpower, the company managed to launch a production line for producing natural honey with sucrose below two grams which is unprecedented in the country. It should be noted that products of the company have been welcomed by all walks of life in the country especially patients suffering from diabetes.

Gaining satisfaction of customers has been taken into consideration by the management of the company and for this purpose; the company has taken effective steps in line with meeting demands of dear customers to its products.

The main activity of the company includes as follows: buying, selling and transacting honey with wax, natural honey (nectar), pollen, royal jelly as retail and wholesale. Moreover, the management of the company has expressed its readiness to grant agency to applicants in cities of the country.

The company is always honored to offer quality services to the noble nation of Islamic Iran and has focused on gaining satisfaction of customers in the best form possible.

"We believe in quality and being truthful in our job, so we make sure that we do the both for our costumers. Our company with experiences and technology followed by teamwork provides the best Honey for the costumers with their need. Laboratory specialized for testing Honey enables us to make sure of its value before buying and selling it. We do what we believe is great work, so it would be our honor to be working and building a great friendship with You in every place that you are in this beautiful world. You can have more information about us by contacting us and following us in our Facebook page and soon in our website."

Summary of Activity:

- Licensed by: Standard Department, Food and Drug Deputy Office, Iranian Veterinary Medicine Organization and World's "HALAL"
- Concluding contract with Post Company of the Islamic Republic of Iran for distributing products across the country,
- Introduced as selected provincial company in a Festival dubbed "From Science to Practice" by the Presidential Office's Scientific and technology Deputy,
- Obtaining necessary licenses from the concerned departments for producing and packaging natural honey,
- Participating in food exhibition held both in state and provincial level,
- Obtaining symbol dubbed "Electronic Trust" for online selling of products,
- Exemplary exporter of natural honey for exporting honey to Saudi Arabia, Yemen, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Turkey,
- Sponsoring sports teams such as football and wrestling in Ardebil Province,
- Meeting demands of pharmaceutical companies to natural honey,
- Licensed by Ardebil Province Veterinary Medicine Organization,
- Online selling of honey
- From production to the consumption

Honors:

- Member f Board of Directors of Nation al Iranian Honey Association,
- Head of Ardebil Province Beekeepers Agricultural Cooperative Company,
- Chairman of Board od Directors of Ardebil Province Beekeepers Agricultural Cooperative Company,
- Selected as one of the top entrepreneurs in Ardebil Province

Prof. Akbarzadeh Member of Tehran Pasteur Institute visits Asal Baran Baghro International Trading Company and participation of the company in an exhibition of Chinese capital Beijing

Central Shop Address:
MEHRNOOSH Honey Grand Store, Adjacent to Askariyeh Credit Institution, To Jandarmeri Cross, Imam Hussein (New Square) Intersection, Emam St., Ardebil – IRAN
Tel: (+98)045 – 3333684, Fax: (+98)045 – 33335374
Workshop Address:
(MEHRNOOSH Honey), Asal Baran Baghro International Trading Company, Karafarinan (Entrepreneurs) Workshop Complex, Karegar Boulevard, Industrial Park Phase 1, Ardebil – Iran
Tel: (+98)045- 336292313, Fax: (+98)045 – 33629214
Branch Office of Company in Rasht: Opposite Daneshjoo Park, Yakhsazi (Ice Manufacturing) Fork, Rasht, Gilan Province, Tel: (+98)0914 – 1519559

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10 hot titles of IT world

By Alireza Khorasani

Here are high rated IT titles in the world that reviewed by savvy tech users:

1 In May 2016, Google launched Spaces, a service (and app) aimed at providing "a better group sharing experience." Basically, Spaces was meant to be a neat product for small groups of people united by the same interests, offering an easy way to share links, photos, or videos. Now, apparently after seeing that the service is far from being popular, Google is getting ready to shut it down starting March 3.

2 U.S Cellular unveiled its new unlimited data plan. The latter is charging $60 a month for unlimited service, which requires that subscribers sign up for Auto Pay and paperless billing.

3 Apple is enlarging its Seattle engineering center to focus on machine learning and AI.
Carlos Guestrin, a University of Washington professor, former Turi CEO, and now director of machine learning at Apple, announced that the company will be expanding its offices in Seattl

4 The latest update for Google Play Music brings a handful of new things to the table, including a "Recents" tab in the app's menu, an animated visualizer while playing songs, and slims down the overall size of the music storefront to around 18 MB.

5 Samsung's Secure Folder is now available for Galaxy S7/S7 edge.
Samsung's Secure Folder is an excellent tool for creating a private and secure space to store files that you don't want accessible from anywhere else on your device.

6 Following the recent arrest of Samsung Electronics' vice chairman Jay Y. Lee, the company has pledged to ramp up control for any future donations or financial support made to third-parties.

7 Samsung will start testing gigabit 5G fixed broadband in London and 11 US areas.
Samsung Electronics is starting trials with Arqiva in the UK and Verizon in the USA to offer 5G fixed wireless broadband at gigabit-per-second speeds

8 Apple is 'looking into' video of an exploding iPhone 7 Plus.
According to Mashable, 18-year-old Brianna Olivas posted this video of a smoking iPhone 7 Plus.
An Apple spokesperson said Apple is "in touch with the customer and looking into it".

9 The U.S. Federal Communications Commission will block some Obama administration rules that subject broadband providers to stricter scrutiny than websites, in a victory for internet providers such as AT&T, Comcast and Verizon.

10 Microsoft released a new Windows 10 preview for PCs with an updated Cortana persona and Edge improvements. This is the latest build of the company's upcoming Windows 10 Creators Update, which is slated for release in "early 2017."

Security error leaves NY airport servers unprotected for a year

In this day and age, hacks and subsequent leaks of user data would seemingly shock everyone into keeping their security up to date. Not so for New York's Stewart International Airport, located 60 miles north of Manhattan, which left its server backup drives exposed to the internet. They were apparently misconfigured back in April 2016 and were left wide open without password protection until now.

The 760 GB of exposed data included TSA letters of investigation, social security numbers, internal airport schematics and emails, according to Chris Vickery, lead researcher from MacKeeper Security Center. He'd discovered the lapse, noting that the backup drive "was, in essence, acting as a public web server." If someone had found their way in, they could access a particular file with usernames and passwords for various devices and systems, which security experts confirmed to ZDNet would open up every component of the airport's internal network to a malicious user.

Apparently, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey contracts out management of Stewart Airport to a private company called AvPORTS, which uses a single IT professional to set up and maintain its networks. Obviously, having one person show up twice a month per location to make sure each IT setup is watertight presents opportunities for lapses that go unnoticed. A Port Authority spokesperson noted that an investigation was ongoing, but that no information was believed to have been compromised during the near year-long exposure.

(Source: zdnet)

The BlackBerry KeyOne resurrects the keyboard with style

The first big phone announcement of Mobile World Congress goes to TCL and BlackBerry, with the two companies unveiling the BlackBerry KeyOne tonight here in Barcelona. The KeyOne is the final version of the device codenamed "Mercury" that we saw at CES last month, and it's by far the most interesting and enticing BlackBerry phone since TCL started licensing the name.

That is admittedly a low bar. But let's look at what TCL has achieved here. The KeyOne is an attractive phone with solid fit and finish, hewn from aluminum and covered in Gorilla Glass 4 on the front. The 4.5-inch LCD has a 3:2 aspect ratio and resolution of 1620 x 1080, meaning it's as sharp as it needs to be. The camera is 12 megapixels and uses a Sony sensor with 1.55-micron pixels.

But the real story is clearly the physical keyboard that sits below the screen. Like the one seen on BlackBerry's last hurrah as an independent hardware manufacturer, 2015's expensive and temperamental Priv, it's touch-sensitive and does a ton of neat tricks. You can use it to scroll without touching the screen; you can assign each key a shortcut, like "I for Instagram" app speed-dial; you can just start typing to start searching Google. There's also a fingerprint sensor

on the space bar.

Combined with the fairly narrow screen, the keyboard makes the KeyOne feel really good to use one-handed. I personally doubt I would ever be anywhere near as fast typing on this keyboard as I am with a touchscreen, but I can't deny that it feels a thousand times better. It's also surprisingly useful when multitasking — you can run two apps on the screen at once and enter information without having to obscure one of them with a software keyboard.

This focus on productivity extends to the KeyOne's internal components. TCL has chosen Qualcomm's Snapdragon 625 processor, which isn't by any means the fastest around but is proven to be power-efficient — you can't get much work done if your phone's dead by 3PM, after all. Given the pairing with a large 3505mAh battery, then, we'd expect the KeyOne to last longer than most Android phones out there. (For comparison, Lenovo's Moto Z Play had impressive endurance with the same processor, a bigger screen, and a very slightly larger 3510mAh battery.)

BlackBerry is also concentrating on security with the KeyOne, launching the phone with Android 7.1 and committing to issuing Google's monthly security patches. Among BlackBerry mainstays like BBM and the BlackBerry Hub, the KeyOne comes with the same BlackBerry DTEK software pre-loaded on TCL's earlier BlackBerry devices; it monitors the phone's status, analyzes how secure it is, and gives you granular control over how services are able to use its functions.

Who needs a physical smartphone keyboard in 2017? No-one, really. But if you want a physical smartphone keyboard, I fully understand, and the BlackBerry KeyOne is here for you. At $549 when it ships in April, it's cheaper than the Priv, but will probably still be a hard sell to most. If you yearn for that tactile feedback, though, it's kind of your only option. We look forward to finding out just how good an option it is.

(Source: theverge)

Kyocera announces military-grade Torque X01 clamshell

The smartphone industry has been quite unforgiving with clamshell phones. We're rarely in the position to report the launch of such devices these days, let alone talk about a good clamshell handset.

Kyocera is one of the companies that are not afraid to bring the past into our lives. The Japanese company has just announced the ultra-tough Torque X01 clamshell, which features Military Standard 810G certification.

MIL-STD-810G has been defined by the US Department of Defense, and the Torque X01 is compliant with 18 categories of the durability testing. On top of that, Kyocera's clamshell is certified as IPX5/IPX8 waterproof and IPX6 dustproof. Moreover, it has passed a proprietary Kyocera drop test from a height of 1.8 meters onto a steel plate and concrete.

The Torque X01 is not a smartphone, so don't expect any advanced features to come inside. The feature phone sports a rather small 3.4-inch FWVGA LCD screen, and packs a 1.1GHz quad-core Qualcomm Snapdragon processor.

Unlike many dumb phones, Kyocera's Torque X01 comes with Wi-Fi support. It also features a 13-megapixel camera with PDAF (phase detection autofocus) and HD (720p) video recording. A microSD card slot that allows users to expand internal memory is available too.

Kyocera Torque X01 will be available starting this month in Japan, and customers will be able to choose between the silver and red colors. Since Kyocera sells its rugged handsets in the United States as well, there's always a chance to see the Torque X01 being picked by a US-based carrier.

(Source: Kyocera)

Augmented reality may save you from road rage

When you're driving, it's all too easy to rage at fellow motorists who are either in a hurry or taking their sweet time. After all, you don't know the context. Are they in a real predicament, or just careless? If TUe researchers have their way, though, you'll know when to cut some slack. They've developed a mobile app, CarNote, that uses augmented reality (displayed in front of you through a periscope lens add-on) to let fellow drivers signal their intents and feelings. If you're in a rush to the hospital, for instance, you can notify commuters behind you so they don't honk their horns or chase you down. There are limits to how often you can use it, so habitual speeders can't just leave it on to excuse their behavior.

The project even has a "like" system that lets drivers say what they think about the cars ahead. It's potentially more effective than honking -- if one driver is routinely cutting people off, all their victims can register their displeasure. The CarNote team even suggests that insurance companies could use an excessive number of dislikes to hike someone's rates. It's hard to say if drivers would agree to that (what if an honest mistake angers a bunch of drivers and ruins your rating?), but it might discourage reckless driving.

It's a clever idea, and early tests suggest that it does lead drivers to be more understanding. However, there are a few challenges to face. At the least, you'd need to build this into most cars to be effective. What good would your built-in AR system be if the person blitzing through traffic is driving a classic car? Also, it'd have to be implemented quickly to make a difference. While we're still years away from fully autonomous cars, they're close enough that CarNote might only be a stopgap that lasts until most cars are smart enough to talk to each other. Still, it's promising -- and it could be worthwhile if it prevents even a few road rage incidents before they start.

(Source: New Scientist)

Chronology of ICT ventures fulfilled in 2013-2017

By Shataw Naseri

Connecting over 4,000 villages to the high speed Internet, upgrading mobile operators' license to 3G and higher, unveiling Parsijoo Search Engine, and launching phases I and II of National Information Network are some projects implemented by ICT Ministry, ISNA reported.

Concluding a memorandum of understanding (MoU) by Iran's Postbank and Deputy Rural Development and launching monitoring websites in 12 cities across the country were some projects launched by ICT Ministry in 2013-2014.

Operating distributed cloud networking, launching data centers in 7 provinces, increasing the capacity of Tehran-Isfahan optical fiber communication route, strengthening Europe-Persia Express Gateway (EPEG), boosting the capacity of Tehran-Isfahan optical fiber communication route via domestic equipment, and connecting 4,100 villages to the high speed Internet were some other measures taken by Rouhani's administration in early 2014.

Furthermore, concluding national roaming project, upgrading Irancell's license to 3G and higher, upgrading Hamrahe Aval's license to 3G and higher aimed at removing monopoly as well as operating 5,000 km of optical fiber in 77 routes were some other ventures taken by the Iranian government in 2014-2015.

Moreover, inaugurating four construction projects, unveiling five new services alongside 100 postal services, launching Yooz Search Engine, holding National Space Technology Day, and launching phase I of Iraq's data transit through Iran were other ICT projects implemented in 2014-2015.

Launching data center in East Azerbaijan Province as the first data center in Iran's North West, developing broadband network in Qom Province, and launching Iran-Pakistan optical fiber project in Sistan and Baluchestan Province were some ventures taken by Iran's ICT Ministry in 2015-2016.

Furthermore, concluding MoU on transportability by Iran's Communications Regulatory Authority (CRA) and three mobile operators, inaugurating Iran's Satellite Hub Project, unveiling the first cloud computing services, upgrading RighTel's license to 4G, and launching phase I of the first smart card laboratory were some other ICT quests experienced by Rouhani's government in 2015-2016.

Also, granting FCP license, inaugurating Parsijoo Search Engine, launching IXP center in Fars Province, unveiling Iran's space accomplishments along with test laboratory, integrating space systems of Iran's Space Agency, launching Fajr Project as well as national Video on Demand (VOD) system were some other measures taken last year.

Launching e-government's port for national services, inaugurating Tehran's Center for data Traffic Exchange in National Information Network, and concluding a MoU by the Internet operators to reduce domestic data traffic tariff for the final users were some ventures taken by Rouhani's government in this year.

Also, creating centers for data traffic exchange on National Information Network in provinces Fars, Khorasan Razavi, and East Azerbaijan, launching measurement software to monitor qualitative indicators of layer III in domestic network of Telecommunication Infrastructure Company, transportability of mobile phone, and launching phase I of National Information Network were other ICT projects implemented in 2016-2017.

Furthermore, launching IX Center in Qum Province, finishing construction of Nahid-1 Satellite, designing and constructing Nahid-2 Satellite, and inaugurating phase II of National Information Network were other ICT important steps in this year.

Scientists to protect olive trees from being ravaged by deadly pathogen

Expert ecologists at the UK-based Center for Ecology & Hydrology (CEH) have devised a scientific model which could help predict the spread of the deadly Xylella fastidiosa which is threatening to destroy Europe's olive trees.

The CEH scientists have created a model which is able to qualitatively and quantitatively predict how the deadly bacterial pathogen may spread as well as offer guidance on how buffer zones should be arranged to protect uninfected olive trees.

The research, published in the journal Biological Invasions, highlights how Xylella fastidiosa is influenced by a range of insects - including spittlebugs - and the rate to which these vectors contribute to the potential spread of the disease across Europe and beyond.

Xylella fastidiosa was once restricted to the Americas but was discovered near Lecce, Italy, in 2013. Since the initial outbreak it has invaded over 23,000 ha of olives in the Apulian Region of southern Italy, and is of great concern throughout the olive production areas of the Mediterranean basin.

Control zones

The study modelled control zones currently employed in Apulia, Italy, and found that increasing buffer widths decreased infection risk beyond the control zone but may not stop the spread completely.

This was due to the ability of the disease-spreading insects to transport themselves between sites.

Lead author Dr. Steven White, a Theoretical Ecologist at the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, said the model indicates the importance of control strategies reducing the risk of the disease-spreading insects infecting healthy trees through the use of wider buffer zones.

Dr. White said, "At these early stages of Xylella fastidiosa invasion, little is known about the rates of spread of this terrible disease of olive trees and how best to control it. This is largely due to biological and environmental differences between where the strain is invading and where it has originated.

Scientists have created a model which is able to qualitatively and quantitatively predict how the deadly bacterial pathogen may spread as well as offer guidance on how buffer zones should be arranged to protect uninfected olive trees.

Current surveillance

"Based on current surveillance work in Apulia, Italy, we have constructed a simple mechanistic model which attempts to replicate the pattern of disease spread. Then, building upon this model, we investigated the efficacy of the buffer zone control program.

"In doing so, this work provides policy makers with scientific information about how the disease might progress and how the control strategies imposed by the European Union may reduce the risk of spread to the rest of Italy and beyond."

Co-author, Dr. Daniel Chapman, a Plant Community Ecologist at the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, said, "The emergence of novel invasive plant diseases such as Xylella fastidiosa in olives is an increasing threat. Our study shows that simple models can help to plan disease management strategies in the early stages of an epidemic.

"Thanks to new funding from the European Union, we will be further developing the approach to provide specific guidance on surveillance, containment and even eradication of new outbreaks."

(Source: EurekAlert)

NASA weighing risk of adding crew to megarocket's first flight

NASA is weighing the risk of adding astronauts to the first flight of its new megarocket, designed to eventually send crews to Mars.

The space agency's human exploration chief said Friday that his boss and the Trump administration asked for the feasibility study. The objective is to see what it would take to speed up a manned mission; under the current plan, astronauts wouldn't climb aboard until 2021— at best.

The Space Launch System, known as SLS, will be the most powerful rocket when it flies.

NASA is shooting for an unmanned test flight for late next year. Putting people on board would delay the mission and require extra money. The space agency's William Gerstenmaier said if adding astronauts postpones the first flight beyond 2019, it would probably be better to stick with the original plan.

Under that plan, Gerstenmaier said, nearly three years are needed between an unmanned flight test and a crewed mission to make launch platform changes at Kennedy Space Center.

Increased risk

"We recognize this will be an increased risk" to put astronauts on the initial flight, Gerstenmaier said.

Astronauts are taking part in the study, which will weigh the extra risk against the benefits.

On Thursday, an independent safety panel cautioned that NASA needs a compelling reason to put astronauts on the initial flight, given the risk. The Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel was formed in the wake of the Apollo 1 fire that killed three astronauts in a countdown test 50 years ago last month.

Orbit of Earth

The capsule that will carry the astronauts — NASA's new Orion — already has flown on a space demo. Containing memorabilia and toys but no people, the capsule was launched into an extremely long orbit of Earth in 2014 by a Delta IV rocket, and splashed down into the Pacific.

NASA normally prefers testing rockets without people, although for the inaugural space shuttle flight in 1981, two pilots were on board. A small crew of two also is planned for the 2021 SLS mission, which could fly to

the vicinity of the moon.

An inaugural flight with astronauts would grab more attention. But Gerstenmaier said the public aspect won't be taken into consideration.

"There are pros and cons both ways, and it's hard to judge that (public) aspect," he told reporters. "But I look at it more kind of matter-of-factly. What do I gain technically by putting crew on?"

(Source: phys.org)

DNA research shows modern humans benefit from Neanderthal DNA

Recent DNA studies indicate that sexual encounters between Neanderthals and early Homo sapiens may have shaped modern man's health and well-being for generations to come.

There, on the sheer southeastern face of the rock, just feet away from the Mediterranean Sea, you find several caves.

Once inside, up catwalks and narrow ladders, archaeologists can be found busy at work, unearthing artifacts from the Neanderthals who once lived there.

While these primitive beings died out tens of thousands of years ago, a growing body of genetic evidence shows they have not vanished.

"Neanderthals are not totally extinct," explained Professor Svante Paabo, a Swedish biologist specializing in evolutionary genetics. Paabo is the director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany.

Descendants of Neanderthals

"Many people are the descendants of Neanderthals," remarked Professor Ed Green. Green runs the Paleogenomics Lab at UC Santa Cruz.

"It changed our view of human history and who we are," exclaimed Professor Rasmus Nielsen. Nielsen is an integrative biologist at UC Berkeley.

What Paabo, Green, and Nielsen are referring to is a shocking discovery in which each scientist participated. Through their scholarship and research, it is clear: many modern day humans are walking around carrying DNA from an extinct people.

The research details how roughly 1 to 5 percent of a person's genome — whether they are of European or Asian descent — comes from the Neanderthals.

"It just became assimilated into the human species, they are part of us today," said Nielsen.

"We are all Neanderthals," joked Green in agreement.

In special "clean" labs, like the one headed up by Green at UC Santa Cruz, scientists can extract Neanderthal DNA from tiny bits of fossilized bone.

"It's an amazing thing that we can get DNA of our ancestors who are now extinct," marveled Green.

Advances in technology

He said advances in technology allows experts to quickly sift through and locate ancient DNA.

How did this mashup occur? Chalk it up to a little prehistoric hanky panky. "It came by some Neanderthals and some modern humans having sex," said Nielson.

Half a billion years ago, Neanderthals and the ancient ancestors of modern day humans split.

(Source: cbslocal.com)

MGCECO Honored as Leading Exporter of Technical and Engineering Services

In 2nd Annual Iran Technical and Executive Seminar, salient achievements of Mahab Ghodss Consulting Engineering Company (MGCECO) was appreciated as a leading and exemplary company in the field of exporting technical and engineering services.

Vice President and Head of Iran Plan and Budget Organization Dr. Nobakht was the first speaker in this seminar who said: "Many infrastructures in the country need making hefty investment in order to remove problems in the field of dilapidation of facilities."

He put the cost needed for the completion of construction operation of more than 2,000 semi-finished projects in the country at approx. 400,000 to 500,000 billion tomans.

Since the government cannot afford the procurement of huge fund, "We have decided to publish bonds, worth 8,500 billion tomans."

At the initiative taken by Technical and Development Deputy Office of Iran Plan and Budget Organization, this prestigious Seminar was held on Feb. 21 in the presence of Vice President and Head of Iran Plan and Budget Organization in order to introduce the salient achievements of leading consulting engineering companies in the field of exporting technical and engineering services, the report ended.

Bank Pasargad Wins Iran Financial Management Golden Statue Award

For third consecutive year, Bank Pasargad received Iran Financial Management Golden Statue Award, the Public Relations Department of the Bank reported.

The 7th Iran Financial Management Award and 10th Accountants and Financial Managers Conference were held on Feb. 25 at OIC Summit in the presence of Dr. Akhundi Minister of Roads and Urban Development and his deputies, Dr. Najafi Economic Advisor to Bank Pasargad Management Bureaus and also senior managers of the bank for commemorating salient achievements of "Dr. Gholam-Reza Eslami Bidgoli" in this respect.

Considering the salient achievements of the bank in terms of transparency of its economic and financial activities, Bank Pasargad managed to win the most prestigious award, the report added.

Dr. Ghassemi Managing Director of Bank Pasargad was the first speaker who commemorated the glorious name and memory of Dr. Gholam-Reza Eslami Bidgoli and said: "Credibility, scientific and artistic characteristics of Dr. Eslami is the most important factor behind the establishing of this grand prize."

In the end, he pointed to paying special attention to financial issues in upstream industries and also policies taken in "resistance economy" and called on bankers to make their utmost efforts in line with materialization of objectives of resistance economy.

WalkCar electric vehicle is like a laptop that you ride

We've seen some highly-portable electric vehicles before, including diminutive scooters and skateboards. Cocoa Motors' new WalkCar, however, makes those gizmos look huge. It's used more or less like a Segway, but it's not much bigger than a laptop.

The WalkCar has four tiny wheels, an aluminum body, and is intended to be carried in an included bag when not in use.

Steering is achieved by shifting your weight, while acceleration and braking happen automatically when you step on or off. Its top speed is 10 km/h (6.2 mph) and its built-in battery takes three hours to charge via USB, providing a range of 12 km (7.5 miles).

Although it looks pretty puny, the WalkCar is reportedly powerful enough to push a person in a wheelchair up an incline, and it can handle payloads weighing up to 120 kg (265 lb).

We've reached out to its Japan-based designer for more details, but are still waiting to hear back. One thing we do know, however, is that it's slated to be the subject of a Kickstarter campaign beginning in October. It's hoped that a production model will be out by next spring (Northern Hemisphere), priced at around 100,000 yen (about US$800).

(Source: newatlas.com)

Can neural nets usher in a new era of optical astronomy?

Neural networks — systems patterned after the arrangement and operation of neurons in the human brain — have driven some of the greatest breakthroughs in the field of artificial intelligence in recent years. AI powered by neural nets have not only excelled at tasks that require pattern recognition, they have also succeeded in performing tasks that require basic logic and reasoning — areas that have conventionally been computers' Achilles' heel.

In this backdrop, the question is, can neural networks be exploited to usher in an era of data-driven astronomy and create some of the sharpest ever images of celestial objects? The answer, according to a new study published in the Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society, is yes.

In the paper, a group of researchers from the Swiss university ETH Zurich describe a neural net-enabled system that can recognize and reconstruct astronomical features that telescopes could not resolve, including star-forming regions, bars and streams of dust in galaxies.

In order to create this system, the researchers used an adversarial learning technique, wherein two neural networks compete and try to outsmart each other. By doing so, and by checking the images created by the neural nets against the original high-resolution image, the teaching program was able to drastically improve images captured in the early years of the Hubble Space Telescope.

A similar approach has, in the past, been used by researchers at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to create a deep-learning algorithm that can, given a still image from a scene, create a video that simulates the most likely future of that scene.

(Source: IBT)

Common cold cure a step closer after scientists 'crack' genetic code

A cure for the common cold has moved a step closer after scientists claimed to have "cracked" the genetic code which underpins the illness's many strains.

Developing vaccines to tackle colds is considered largely futile because the virus mutates.

However, researchers now say a simple gene-targeting drug able to cure all examples of the virus may be available within ten years.

Until now, scientists studying the Human Parechovirus had believed that the signals regulating the assembly of a virus were located in a small area of the genome.

But now a British-Finnish team has established that the virus forms as a result of multiple dispersed sites in the genome acting together

They found that details of the decoding mechanism appeared identical in all strains of the virus, potentially allowing a single drug to treat them all, something that is not possible with a vaccine.

The next stage is to screen for potential anti-viral drugs that target this decoding mechanism which could potentially see drug development results within the next ten years.

"We now need a drug that has the same effect as pouring sand into the watch; every part of the viral mechanism could be disabled.

"We need to move away from a vaccine approach, which is what we have for flu and polio."

He added that protecting against infection by the use of vaccines was "both very expensive and logistically difficult".

Professor Sarah Butcher, from Helsinki, said: "This new research means that treatment would be less likely to trigger drug resistance, which is currently one of the major problems in anti-viral therapy.

(Source: The Telegraph)

Iran, Italy renew environmental agreements

ENVIRONMENT desk **TEHRAN** — Iran and Italy inked a memorandum of understanding to extend environmental cooperation agreements previously signed between the two countries.

The chief of Iran's Department of Environment Masoumeh Ebtekar and Italian Minister of the Environment Gian Luca Galletti inked the MOU in Tehran on Saturday, the Department of Environment official website reported.

"Nations and governments that value the environment would try to protect it on international scale by strengthening global cooperation," Ebtekar said.

In 2014, when Iran and Italy negotiated the possibility of initiating environmental cooperation for the first time Italy used to hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union and was determined to develop and foster environmental cooperation, she highlighted.

Minister Galletti , for his part, pointed out that "Over my two-day trip to Iran I have got satisfactory results and I hope we can step towards better environment both in Iran and the whole world,".

That the previously signed memorandum of understanding went into effect is only because of efforts Iranian chief of Department of Environment have expended, Galletti added.

Iran and Italy signed a memorandum of understanding for the first time in April 2015. A joint committee was formed to follow up on implementation of 10 projects such as setting up solar plants, mitigating air pollution, waste and wastewater management, etc. eventually three of the projects got approved by the committee and went into effect.

A group of European officials namely Daniel Calleja Crespo, Director-General for the Directorate-General for Environment [the European Commission department responsible for EU policy on the environment], United Nations Environment Program Executive Director Erik Solheim, Italian Minister of the Environment Gian Luca Galletti paid a visit to Iran to take part in the opening ceremony of 16th International Environment Exhibition on Friday.

UNEP's Solheim offers Iran help to address dust storms

ENVIRONMENT desk TEHRAN — United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) Executive Director Erik Solheim has posted two videos on his Instagram account addressing the people of Khuzestan, southwestern Iran, who have sought help for the recurrent sand and dust storms in the region.

What comes next is the transcript of videos he shared on Saturday while visiting Lake Urmia, northwest of the country, which is also suffering from environmental challenges as well.

"A big thanks to all you from the great city of Ahwaz who have written to me to alert me to the horrible sand and dust storm which hit your city last week. I couldn't visit you this time because of I've long agreed to go here to Lake Urmia which also is severely hit by the phenomenon of sand and dust storms. But rest assured that I've used every opportunity to discuss sand and dust storms with Iranian authorities and rest also assured that Iranian authorities and the UN have agreed to do whatever we can to approve this national agenda and stop and reduce [dust storms] in the years to come."

"And for sure I know that all you good people in Ahwaz and Khuzestan really want to know what we can do to avoid future sand and dust storms."

"I have two suggestions: [For] one Iran manage wetland, do tree planting, manage water better than you are able to do today and I know that the government of Iran is really adamant to make sure these happen."

"Added building a broad coalition with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq [and] all those other nations who also impact upon the situation right here in Iran. And together I'm sure we can have enormous progress and thank you for all you are doing and please for sure don't hesitate to contact us in the United Nations to suggest to us that what we can do better."

LEARN ENGLISH

Cheer Up

A: Ok... I'll talk to you later. Bye
B: Carrie, are you ok? You seem a bit **down**.
A: I just got off the phone with my friend. He is always getting upset and **losing his temper** over nothing. It's so hard to talk to him at times.
B: Maybe it's just that he is **stressed out** from work or something. He does have a pretty **nerve wracking** job you know.
A: Yeah but, he is always **in a really foul mood**. I try to find out what's bothering him or get him to talk about his day but, he always shuts down and **brushes me off**.
B: Men are like that you know. They can feel nervous, anxious or on edge and the only way they can express it is by trying to hide it through **aggressiveness**.
A: I guess you are right. What do you think I should do? He wasn't always this **grouchy** you know...
B: Talk to him, try to **cheer him up** when he is down and if that doesn't work, I say get rid of him and get a new one!

Key vocabulary
down: sad or unhappy
lose your temper: to suddenly become very angry so that you cannot control yourself
stress out: to feel very worried or anxious
nerve wracking: causing a person to feel very nervous
in a foul mood: in a very bad temper and likely to get angry
be on edge: to be behaving in a way that makes it seem as if you are going crazy
aggressiveness: hostile or violent behavior
grouchy: in a bad temper, especially because you are tired; bad-tempered
brush me off: refuse to talk about something with someone
cheer up: to make (someone) happier

Supplementary vocabulary
down in the dumps: feeling sad, not happy
have the blues: having sad feelings or emotions
rattled: to fluster, unnerve
grinds my gears: makes me angry, upsets me
pissed off: upset, very angry

(Source: irlanguage.com)

Caspian seals encounter steep population decline

Simon J. Goodman

1 →

Why Pusa caspica depicted as a key stone species in Caspian Sea?

A: The Caspian seal is considered a key stone species because it is a top level predator that feeds on a very diverse range of fish and crustaceans. So changes in the seal population can potentially affect many other species.

Are scientists at Leeds University interested in expanding their case study range into southern boundaries of Caspian Sea?

A: Caspian seals are a transboundary species, ranging throughout the Caspian. Therefore we always have to consider Caspian seal conservation at the level of the whole Caspian Sea. At the moment we primarily work in Kazakhstan because seal haul out sites are easily accessible there making it easier to study the seals. In Iran at present there are no places where seals haul out on land in large numbers on a regular basis. We do have colleagues in Iran and previously worked with them on changing attitudes towards seals among fishermen, trying to help them understand that seals are not dangerous or threat to them, and hopefully to make it less likely that fishermen would kill seals. This work needs to continue and I would love to do more work like this in Iran.

The covert nature of illegal fishery is a big challenge for any assessment. In your opinion how much strategies such as self-reporting in formal environmental websites could help to break these limitations? How could we make it easier for volunteer reports and public assistants?

A: Again a complex topic. As a researcher, getting information about any illegal activity is extremely difficult and time consuming. The main point is to gain the trust of the people you want to engage with. How you do that will depend very much on the logistical and cultural context and the people involved. So basically you should use a range of different solutions as required, be that personal interviews or websites. Whatever you use, surveys need to be very carefully designed with cross referencing questions, so as far as possible you can check that you are getting consistent information from respondents.

Can you point out some of major threats that cause significant population declines of Pusa caspica in this region?

A: The main threats, and the ones we understand best, are mortality from human activities, particularly hunting, and accidental catch in fishing gear, along with habitat loss. The Caspian seal was hunted commercially up until the mid-1990s, sometimes with 100s of thousands of animals hunted each year. That was the main reason for the decline of more than 1 million animals at the start of the 20th Century to around 100 thousand today. Today there is still occasional commercial hunting, and at least several thousand seals are caught in (mostly illegal) fishing nets each year.

The second half of the 20th Century saw growth of the human population around the Caspian, a lot of urban and industrial development, and expansion of fishing. Together this has meant the Caspian seal has seen a lot of its habitat disappear or become disturbed because of human activities. Today there are only a handful of places where seals regularly haul out on land, whereas this used to be a common occurrence even up to 10 years ago. Less habitat may decrease the reproductive output of the population, and can make it more sensitive to other threats.

Pollution, disease, and changes in the rest of the Caspian ecosystem because of invasive species and overfishing are also of concern, but we don't have enough information to quantify their impact directly. Investigating these issues in more detail should be a priority for further research, but they are difficult questions to answer, requiring data collected by many different types of scientist over many years.

Finally climate change is another big concern, since this may cause a reduction in the northern ice sheet which the seals use for breeding. In future this could well be a really critical problem.

Why Pusa caspica is vulnerable to diseases such as Canine Distemper virus?

A: Canine Distemper and related viruses cause disease outbreaks in many seal species and other carnivores, so Caspian seals are not particularly unusual in this respect. What was a little unusual was that this happened as large outbreaks, and so was very visible, rather than as a continual slow process with a lower incidence. Generally outbreaks like this happen when there is a large population with limited prior exposure, and the disease crosses over from a reservoir species. In the case of Caspian seals there are still lots of questions to be answered about the CDV outbreaks, but it may be that the disease jumped into the seals via feral dogs, jackals or wolves. Some people have speculated that pollution may have exacerbated the effects of the epidemic. The data on pollution levels in Caspian seals is quite limited, but as far as we can say, only a very small fraction of the population have pollutant levels high enough where it may affect immunity, and overall there was no difference in pollutant levels between animals which died from CDV versus and other causes. Therefore I do not think that at present there is any evidence for pollution playing a role in the CDV outbreaks.

Have your team ever made any research about mass mortality of Caspian seals in 1997, 2000 and 2001?

A: Members of our team were part of the World Bank funded Ecotox project which ran the investigation of the outbreaks 1997-2001. In particular Dr. Sue Wilson who led that research is part of the current Caspian seal project team.

Please tell me about the techniques that have been used to identify the reasons for mass mortality events.

A: The investigations into the 1997-2001 outbreaks were done by world specialists in marine mammal pathology. They conducted necropsies on dead seals, and then used a wide range of pathology tests to identify the disease causing agent. In the end it was mainly a combination of techniques known as serology, immunohistchemistry, and rt-PCR which conclusively identified CDV as the disease responsible.

The invasion of Mnemiopsis leidyi has done significant harm to commercial fishing but how could this phenomena threaten Pusa caspica?

A: Potentially Mnemiopsis could affect the amount of prey species available to Caspian seals, thereby reducing food sources for them. However, we really don't have enough information about how exactly Mnemiopsis impacts the fish that seals eat, or how flexible seal diet is (and therefore if they can switch to other things). So for now I think this is a big unknown, but a very important topic that should be a priority for future research.

How much control efforts such as introduction of specialist predators of comb jellies are important in this case?

A: Controlling Mnemiopsis is likely to be of benefit for the whole Caspian ecosystem, but exactly how to best do this is outside my area of expertise.

Why life history of Caspian seals is important? Please tell me about hind-casting models and their importance.

A: By life history we mean some of the key properties of species which influence how their populations may grow or decline, such as for how long they live, at what age they start reproducing, how often they have offspring, and how many offspring are produced, and so on. Understanding these parameters helps scientists make mathematical models that let us project how populations behaved in the past, how they may grow in future, or how they might be impacted by hunting.

A hind-casting model is a population model which is projected into the past, to estimate the size of the population a particular number of generations back. We did a study using a hind-casting model and official hunting statistics going back to 1869. This allowed us to estimate that there must have been more than 1 million Caspian seals at the start of the 20th Century. Having an estimate of how many seals there were in the past lets quantify how much the population has declined based on the current population census. Quantifying the scale of the decline is very important for deciding how the species should be rated in the IUCN Red List, and providing conservation objectives for restoring the population.

We already know the most important steps that are needed to protect Caspian seals. These are to reduce mortality from human sources by stopping commercial hunting (at least temporarily), and to tackle the problems about seals getting caught in fishing gear. The latter mainly happens in illegal fishing, so steps taken to deal with illegal fishing will have the knock on benefit of helping seals. The other key action is to set up protected areas for seals around critical parts of their habitat.

All these issues and more are covered in a conservation action plan that was developed by the Caspian Environment Program and officially accepted by all the Caspian countries in 2007. None of the Caspian countries have put the action plan into practice yet. There has been some consultation on the development of protected areas through the Caspian Environment Program, but it remains unclear when or if any of this will be implemented.

Welsh oak could be the first British winner of European Tree of the Year

It is old, squat, and bent a bypass. Now an ancient oak saved from being destroyed by a new road has become the first British tree with a cracking chance of winning the European Tree of the Year competition.

The Brimmon oak led the contest in the early stages, polling more than 10,000 votes. Three days before the end of the voting period, the Welsh tree was in third place, just behind the hot favorite, an oak tree from Poland, and a lime tree in the Czech Republic.

"It's the only tree that has bent a bypass, it's the only tree that has moved a motorway – it's just a tremendous tree," said Rob McBride, a campaigner for historic trees known as the Treehunter.

He urged people to vote for the Brimmon oak, the Welsh entrant in the increasingly popular online competition which is usually won by eastern European trees. Last year, the Welsh entry polled just 237 votes.

"The Brimmon oak is a symbol of hope," said McBride. "It shows how we can live with nature, with just tiny adjustments to our thinking and our planning."

The 500-year-old oak grows on a Welsh farm and was earmarked for destruction when a bypass was planned for Newtown.

"It's had three death threats," said its owner, farmer Mervyn Jones. "First they were going to chop it down. Then they were going to pick it up and replant it. Then they wanted the new road to go 3.5 meters from the trunk, which would have cut through its roots and killed it."

Jones campaigned for years to save the tree, which his family has tended to for generations. His great-aunt had her wedding portraits taken under its boughs in 1901.

When McBride spotted the tree by chance one day, he registered it as an ancient tree with the Woodland Trust and later launched a petition with Jones which went to the Welsh Assembly. A year ago, the Welsh administration was finally persuaded to shift the bypass by 15 meters, saving the tree. The oak is currently surrounded by fences, protecting it from the road-building.

The Brimmon oak faces stiff competition from the Polish entrant, a hollow oak which was the hiding place for a Jewish family fleeing persecution during the Second World War.

Heini Evans of the Woodland Trust said: "The support for the Brimmon oak in the European Tree of The Year contest has been the best of any UK tree in the history of the competition but the lead is slipping away. We still have a shot at winning if the entire UK now supports the ancient Brimmon oak and votes."

"This historic tree has survived for hundreds of years, and throughout its long life has created habitat for other animals and organisms and produced acorns to become trees of the future. The Brimmon oak is a treasured part of the Jones family and wider community and is a true advocate for the need to protect all ancient trees."

"This competition is a bonus," added Jones. "One minute you're fighting alone to save a tree and now it could become European Tree of the Year. It's like a dream come true."

What would Jones do if the Brimmon oak won? "I'd walk to Brussels," he declared. *(Source: The Guardian)*

No legal let up as French candidates face probes

France's presidential frontrunners Francois Fillon and far-right Leader Marine Le Pen can expect no pause in legal investigations targeting them ahead of elections in April, the justice minister said on Sunday.

The independence and neutrality of the justice system is under scrutiny ahead of a two-stage presidential election only nine weeks away amid several high-profile probes into Fillon and Le Pen.

Both are accused of misusing public money by using fake parliamentary aides, while Le Pen faces a separate investigation into the funding of election campaigns in 2014 and 2015.

They deny wrong-doing and have sought to portray the investigations as politically-motivated attacks which should be delayed or abandoned altogether.

"Imagine that during the presidential campaign you can't investigate?" Justice Minister Jean-Jacques Urvoas told the Journal du Dimanche newspaper.

He said that in the past judges had sometimes taken into account the electoral calendar when fixing trial dates, but that judicial investigations had never been put on ice.

"There is no law allowing a suspension like that. What would be the reason? In the name of what exception? In my opinion, nothing could justify it," he said.

He again denied accusations that Socialist President Francois Hollande was behind the investigations as has been

alleged by Fillon, whose campaign has been thrown into turmoil by the case.

"To imagine that investigations could have been ordered on Fillon or Marine Le Pen is completely absurd because it's illegal," he added.

Polls currently show anti-EU, anti-immigrant Le Pen winning the first round of the two-stage election on April 23, with either Fillon or centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron coming second.

In a run-off vote on May 7 between the top two candidates, Le Pen would lose to both of her rivals if the vote were held today, polls show.

Legal woes

On Saturday, legal sources told AFP that a confidant of Le Pen has been charged with making an illegal loan to her far-right National Front party.

Le Pen's personal assistant Catherine Griset was charged on Wednesday with breach of trust in a probe into allegations the party defrauded the European Parliament of about 340,000 euros ($360,000).

Fillon meanwhile faces a fraught two months ahead of the vote after French prosecutors' decided on Friday to launch a full judicial inquiry into claims he paid his family for fake parliamentary jobs.

Fillon, who was previously leading the race as the rightwing standard-bearer, will be investigated by three magistrates over allegations of embezzling public funds and misappropriating corporate assets.

An editorial in Le Parisien newspaper on Saturday said the move from a preliminary probe to a full investigation represented a "surge in the pressure" on the 62-year-old former prime minister.

The devout Catholic won the conservative nomination by campaigning as a "clean" candidate unsullied by the scandals of his rivals.

Since January he has been fighting claims by Le Canard Enchaine newspaper that he used allowances to pay his British-born wife Penelope at least 680,000 euros ($720,000) over some 15 years as a parliamentary aide.

Although French lawmakers are allowed to employ family members, it is unclear what work Penelope did and she did not have a pass for the parliament building.

Lawyers for the couple said they were confident the investigators would find them "innocent, at last".

Fillon's lawyers have called the probe an abuse of process and the candidate himself has attacked Hollande in harsh language, accusing him of being behind an "institutional coup."

(Source: AFP)

Donald Trump to skip White House correspondents' dinner

The United States President Donald Trump has announced he will not attend a century-old annual correspondents' dinner, a day after a fierce fight erupted over press access to the White House.

In a post on Twitter on Saturday, Trump wrote: "I will not be attending the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner this year. Please wish everyone well and have a great evening!"

He made the announcement just a day after a speech to conservative activists, wherein he reiterated his criticism of journalists as "the enemy of the people", and a decision by his spokesman to exclude major news organizations from a media briefing.

The reporters' group said it would go ahead with its April 29 dinner despite Trump's decision, which breaks with an annual tradition in which the U.S. president is the guest of honor at a light-hearted roast held by journalists and typically studded with movie stars, politicians and business leaders.

The dinner "has been and will continue to be a celebration of the First Amendment and the important role played by an independent news media in a healthy republic", said Jeff Mason, a Reuters White House correspondent who heads the association this year.

Ronald Reagan was the last president to miss the event after he was shot in 1981.

Some news outlets such as Bloomberg News and the New Yorker have said that they will not host the lavish after-parties that have been a fixture of past events.

The dinner occasionally makes news: in 2011, President Barack Obama delivered a scathing evisceration of Trump, joking that the mogul, who sat stone-faced in the audience, would move on from questioning Obama's citizenship to figuring out "did we fake the Moon landing".

This was after Trump appeared on several networks questioning the legitimacy of Obama's presidency, and promoting the conspiracy that the 43rd president was born in Kenya, not the U.S. state of Hawaii.

Critics of the correspondents' say the event encourages journalists to cosy up to politicians they should cover aggressively.

News outlets blocked

Trump built his campaign on criticizing the mainstream U.S. press - many of whose editorial boards opposed his election - and has intensified his rhetoric since taking office, routinely accusing the media of bias in overstating his setbacks and downplaying his accomplishments.

On Friday, the White House excluded several news outlets from covering a question-and-answer session with spokesman Sean Spicer held in place of the daily press briefing.

Media organizations including The New York Times, CNN, Politico and Al Jazeera were blocked from joining the informal, on-the-record, off-camera press briefing on Friday, referred to as a "gaggle".

Spicer invited only a pool of news organizations that represents and shares reporting with the larger press corps.

Journalists from several right-leaning outlets were also allowed into Spicer's office, including the website Breitbart News, whose former executive chairman, Steve Bannon, is Trump's chief strategist.

(Source: agencies)

Kyrgyz opposition leader Almazbek Atambayev detained

Authorities in Kyrgyzstan have detained a prominent opposition leader on charges of fraud and corruption, claims that his supporters say are politically motivated in advance of a presidential poll.

Omurbek Tekebayev, leader of the nominally socialist Ata Meken party and one of the most outspoken critics of President Almazbek Atambayev, was detained on Sunday after landing at Bishkek airport.

In a statement, the prosecutor general's office said it suspected Tekebayev of taking a $1m bribe from a Russian investor in 2010.

Tekebayev, who was then a senior member of the provisional government, promised the investor he would be able to take over a local telecommunications company, prosecutors said.

Supporters held demonstrations to protest the arrest across the country as it may eliminate him as a contender for the upcoming presidential election on November 19.

Kanybek Imanaliyev, a member of parliament who belongs to Tekebayev's Ata Meken faction, said he denied any wrongdoing.

Atambayev, whose term ends this year, cannot run for re-election under the Kyrgyz constitution, but his allies in parliament successfully pushed through a referendum on a package of amendments significantly boosting the powers of the prime minister.

This has prompted speculation the president may either become a powerful cabinet head - although Atambayev denies having such plans - or install a loyal figure as prime minister in order to retain power in the country of six million.

(Source: agencies)

'It is Europe that will decide the fate of the world'

1 → The far right parties have seized these tragic opportunities to attract voters by defying the EU and its policies concerning immigration and European integration. And even though their supporters are numerous, more than six out of ten Europeans consider that they have a "good" quality of life in their country, indicating that the far right is still viewed marginally by the average European. Yes, the concerns about immigration and terrorism rise, but these issues seem confidently small against the backdrop of a devastating European history.

Charles de Gaulle's famous words resonate amidst the growing apprehension: "Yes, it is Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals, it is Europe, it is the whole of Europe, that will decide the fate of the world."

The founder of the French Fifth Republic and its president until 1969 had plans for creating a strong European Confederation that would overcome any dependence and any need for links with the United States or the Soviet Union, a "Free Europe".

Unfortunately, at that time Europe was simply not strong enough to be independent militarily and economically. Now, however, it is. Europe favors progressive economic and political ties with countries the U.S. improvidently excludes. Europe opens its borders to refugees and migrants while the U.S. speaks of building walls and puts up a travel ban targeting Muslim countries.

Europe establishes itself more and more as a reliable partner and leader, shakes off its dependence on the U.S., and takes bold initiatives in different matters, from economic to military solutions.

The far right's hostility towards the EU is, most of the time, misplaced. The shortsightedness of this rhetoric indicates an unusual ignorance and failure to assess EU's accomplishments since the moment it was established. From a war-torn continent to one of the world's most influential political and economic blocs, it is not on the brink of collapse, contrary to Eurosceptic belief.

Trump's victory has encouraged far right and Eurosceptic leaders that their time has come to challenge what they call the political ruling elite of Europe. They believe that his unexpected triumph has launched a political vendetta against everything that is European. Yes, Trump might be Eurosceptic, but quite a lot of the time, he sounds more European than he himself realizes.

He pledges to lower taxes and deregulate businesses. Then he backs ideas beloved by the left when he says that the government should offer health insurance "for everybody". Is he a liberal or a conservative? Or more importantly, is he a nationalist or a socialist? "Our country is being absolutely devastated by trade deals... So actually I like Bernie," he said, supporting a fellow protectionist, Bernie Sanders, a self-proclaimed socialist in the U.S. Senate.

Many of Trump's ideas do not venture far from European policies. And even though far right leaders such as Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands feel inspired and motivated by his presidential win, the average Trump supporter has a median age of 57, is predominantly white, and doesn't have a college degree.

The EU, having one of the most advanced and available educational systems that do not require life-long loans from those wishing to obtain a university degree, differentiates in many aspects from the American story. Europeans, with their high minimum wages, good education, open-mindedness, and growing political commitment, are not that easy to fool. Marine Le Pen's desired victory is being heavily challenged by the progressive candidate Emmanuel Macron, who speaks to the liberal-minded and the educated, and the left as well as the right.

Trump in the White House is not a projection of Europe's future. He indicates degeneration in American politics; his protectionist views exclude mutual economic cooperation and challenge the global market. At the same time, Europe seals trade deals with other nations and expands its economic influence in the world. 73 years after World War II, Europe does no longer need America to help solve its domestic problems.

Europe is difficult to break. Its complex structure provides stability and security for all its member nations. This union has raised generations and will continue to do so with future generations. These generations will live in an open community that encourages a positive outlook on the world, open-mindedness, tolerance, and democracy. The demolition of a union would lead to an unseen crisis, condemning generations to instability and insecurity. In other words, the stronger a union, the more stability and assistance it can offer to a world in need. And the world has no need in a weak EU.

Winston Churchill, Britain's wartime prime minister, had a positive view of Europe. He said: "We hope to see a Europe where men of every country will think of being a European as of belonging to their native land, and wherever they go in this wide domain will truly feel, 'Here I am at home.'"

We will never know whether Winston Churchill, were he alive at this moment, would be in support of the United Kingdom retreating from the EU. The situation in the world has changed significantly in the past decades. But one thing is sure: he would not tolerate it to see Europe quiver before Trump's America.

Iraqi forces, allies make new gains in west Mosul battle

Iraqi forces make further gains against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist group in western Mosul as tens of thousands of fighters are punching through the defenses of the extremists to expel them from their last major urban stronghold in the country.

Major General Haider al-Maturi of the Federal Police Commandos Division has said that the Tayaran neighborhood in western Mosul was captured on Sunday morning and is now under full control of Iraqi forces.

According to Maturi, ISIL terrorists deployed 10 car bombs, one of which killed two policemen and wounded five.

Earlier, commander of Federal Police Forces Lieutenant General Raed Shaker Jawdat told Arabic-language al-Sumaria television network that Iraqi rapid response teams had managed to regain full control of Hawi al-Jawsaq area on the western outskirts of Mosul on Saturday morning.

Also on Saturday, the media bureau of Popular Mobilization Units – also known as Hashd al-Sha'abi – announced in a statement that the pro-government fighters, supported by numerous army brigades and air force fighter jets, had liberated eight villages expanding as vast as 40 square kilometers west of Mosul.

The statement added that Hashd al-Sha'abi fighters had established full control over the villages of al-Aziziyah, Tal al-Zalat, Umm al-Masayid, Greater al-Abra and four others near the city of Tal Afar, located 63 kilometers west of Mosul.

It further noted that as many as 1,200 civilians had been freed in the aftermath of the operations.

The Hashd al-Sha'abi fighters also destroyed seven car bombs, and seized military equipment and several weapons from ISIL terrorists, who fled the areas.

(Source: Press TV)

ISIL planning attacks in Britain: anti-terrorism lawyer

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist group are planning "indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians" in Britain on a scale similar to those staged by the Irish Republican Army 40 years ago, the head of the country's new terrorism watchdog said.

In an interview with the Sunday Telegraph published on Sunday, Max Hill, the lawyer tasked with overseeing British laws on terrorism, said the militants were targeting cities and posed "an enormous ongoing risk which none of us can ignore".

"In terms of the threat that's represented, I think the intensity and the potential frequency of serious plot planning - with a view to indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians of whatever race or color in metropolitan areas - represents an enormous ongoing risk that none of us can ignore," he said.

"So I think that there is undoubtedly significant ongoing risk which is at least as great as the threat to London in the 70s when the IRA were active on the mainland."

The IRA abandoned its armed struggle for an end to British control of Northern Ireland and unification with Ireland in a 1998 peace deal. More than 3,600 people were killed, including more than 1,000 members of the British security forces, during a sectarian conflict that began in the late 1960s.

British security officials have repeatedly said that ISIL terrorists, who are losing ground in Iraq and Syria, will target Britain.

(Source: Reuters)

Combating terrorism tops Geneva talks agenda: Syria

1 → "We asked a Security Council sub-committee for fighting terrorism to investigate the fate of 32,000 new Toyota cars that were sold from Toyota Company to Daesh. How did these cars reach Daesh? After a year of asking that question, the answer was that Toyota sold these cars to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Turkey," he said, urging the UN to deal with these state sponsors of terrorism.

Ja'afari also reminded the audience of the aerial photos taken by Russian satellites of hundreds of oil and gas trucks that were stealing oil and gas from Syria and made their ways to "Turkey and from Turkey to Israel," adding, "These were Daesh trucks."

According to al-Ja'afari, the next session of the talks is scheduled for Tuesday by De Mistura.

Before holding the meeting with the Syrian delegation, De Mistura, for his part, said that Homs terrorist attacks were aimed at "spoiling" the peace talks, adding that every time there were talks, they were spoilers, who want to spoil the process.

The new round of the UN-brokered intra-Syrian talks come shortly after the conclusion of the second round of the Syria peace negotiations, mediated by Russia, Turkey and Iran, in the Kazakh capital city of Astana on February 15 and 16. Astana talks, which were held in a closed-door setting, sought to pave the way for the negotiations in Geneva.

Since 2011, Syria has been fighting foreign-sponsored militancy. The UN special envoy to the country estimated in August last year that more than 400,000 people had been killed in the crisis until then. The world body stopped its official casualty count in the war-torn country, citing its inability to verify the figures it received from various sources.

(Source: Press TV)

Farah coach used prohibited drug infusions, says newspaper

Britain's Olympic champion Mo Farah's coach has been accused of using prohibited drug infusions to improve the performance of his runners, the Sunday Times reported citing a leaked United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) report.

The newspaper said the 2016 report also accused coach Alberto Salazar of abusing prescription medicines for his athletes at the Nike training center in Oregon.

Attempts by Reuters to reach Salazar for comment were unsuccessful. Salazar issued a lengthy and detailed denial of similar allegations in 2015.

The Sunday Times said the report had been leaked by the 'Fancy Bears' hacking group which has previously leaked medical and doping-related documents.

USADA on Saturday confirmed to Reuters the documented cited by the Sunday Times appeared to have been leaked but would not comment on the report's conclusions or any accusations against Salazar.

"USADA can confirm that it has prepared a report in response to a subpoena from a state medical licensing body regarding care given by a physician to athletes associated with the Nike Oregon Project," USADA Communications Manager Ryan Madden said in an email to Reuters.

"It appears that a draft of this report was leaked to the Sunday Times by the Russian state-affiliated hacker group known as Fancy Bears.

"We understand that the licensing body is still deciding its case and as we continue to investigate whether anti-doping rules were broken, no further comment will be made at this time."

The Sunday Times said that Farah and other athletes coached by Salazar were given infusions of a research supplement based on the chemical L-carnitine and that one coach who was given a high dosage said that it was as effective as illegal blood doping, according to the report.

It said Salazar also emailed disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong touting the benefits of L-carnitine.

Salazar, a Cuban-born American marathoner who has worked with Farah since 2011, was accused of violating anti-doping rules in a BBC documentary in 2015, including allegations he had given 2012 Olympic 10,000m silver medalist Galen Rupp the banned anabolic steroid testosterone.

Farah was exonerated by UK Athletics who found no impropriety on his part after receiving the initial findings of a review into his relationship with Salazar.

The current Sunday Times article says that, according to the leaked document, Salazar took "egregious risks" and abused prescription rules by persuading Farah to take potentially dangerous doses of permitted vitamin D prescription drugs believing it would boost his performance through increased testosterone levels.

Farah's British doctors intervened because they were concerned about the effects on his health, the paper said, citing the leaked USADA report.

At last year's Rio Games, Farah became only the second man to retain the 5,000m and 10,000m Olympic titles.

The hackers have previously published data on athletes gained from the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) administration and management system via an account for the Rio Games.

In October, USADA chief executive Travis Tygart labeled Fancy Bears "con artists" and said their aim was to "distract from the real issue of (Russia's) state-sponsored doping".

Fancy Bears is one of two hacking groups accused in June of hacking the Democratic National Committee's (DNC) computer network in the United States.

CrowdStrike, a firm hired by the DNC to respond to those attacks, said in June that Fancy Bears was probably working on behalf of the Russian military.

(Source: Reuters)

Pacquiao to fight Britain's Khan in 'super fight'

Multiple world champion Manny Pacquiao has agreed to fight Britain's Olympic silver medalist Amir Khan on April 23, both boxers said on Sunday.

The 38-year-old Pacquiao had said four days ago that he and Khan's management were in discussions for the fight, despite an earlier announcement the Filipino's next bout would be against Australia's Jeff Horn in Brisbane.

Pacquiao, however, had said that Horn was one of many possible opponents.

"Negotiations between team Pacquiao and team Khan have come to terms for the April 23 bout as this is what the fans wanted," Pacquiao tweeted.

The 30-year-old Khan, who won silver as a lightweight at the Athens Olympics, has not fought since last May when he moved up two weight classes to fight middleweight Canelo Alvarez.

The much bigger Mexican proved too powerful and the Briton was knocked out in the sixth round and he is likely to drop back to welterweight to fight Pacquiao, who holds the World Boxing Organization title at the weight.

"My team and I have agreed terms with Manny Pacquiao and his team for a super fight," Khan said on his Twitter page.

Pacquiao won the WBO welterweight title last November against American Jessie Vargas in Las Vegas with an unanimous decision.

No venue for the fight was announced.

(Source: Reuters)

Retirement? Roger Federer, still celebrating, says he's not done yet

With his 18th and most unexpected Grand Slam singles title in hand, it was not unreasonable to wonder if Roger Federer might steal a move from his friend and one-time tennis role model Pete Sampras and call it a career on the highest possible note.

Federer told me on Monday that the thought did briefly flit through his brain.

"I guess in a faraway place it did cross my mind: How could I ever top this?" he said by telephone from Prague. "But then again, the joy was so big, and I kept on watching the reaction of my team when I won the match point in Australia and how they were jumping for joy. Unbelievable. So much fun. I feel like I want to go through it again."

Sampras never played another tour-level match after winning his 14th and final major singles title at age 31 at the 2002 United States Open, formalizing his retirement less than a year later.

But Federer has other plans, and after winning the Australian Open on Jan. 29 by defeating his tennis yang Rafael Nadal in a transcendent five-set final, he said that he has every intention of playing on.

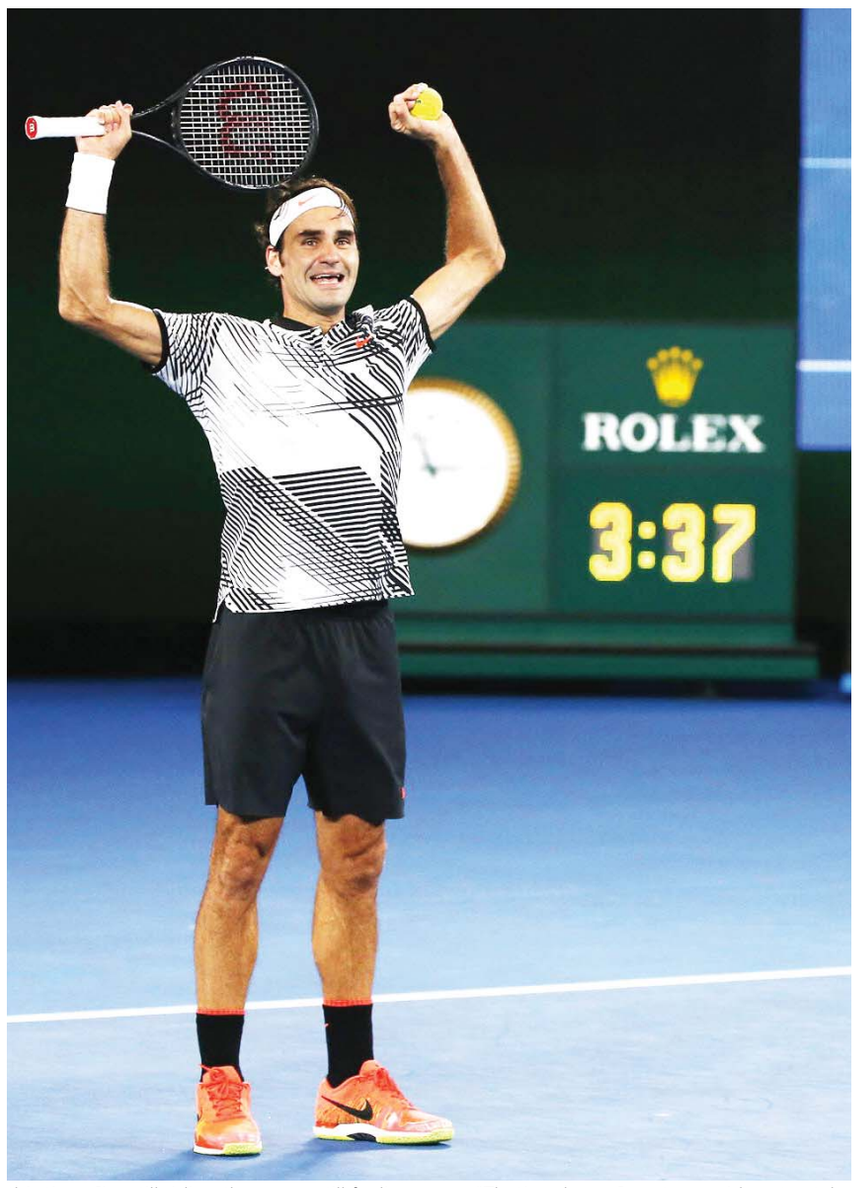
That is why he was in Prague on Monday exchanging half-earnest shots with the Czech star Tomas Berdych in the middle of winter on the deck of a boat on the Vltava River. The idea was to promote the first edition of the Laver Cup, the team tennis competition between Europe and an International squad that will be staged in Prague in September and in which Federer wants to play a major role after helping to create the event.

On Tuesday, he was to fly to Dubai to prepare for his return to tour competition at next week's Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championship, a tournament he has won seven times. After that, he has the hardcourt events in Indian Wells, Calif., and Miami on his schedule in March, but only if his 35-year-old body cooperates.

Federer said the upper leg injury that troubled him throughout much of the Australian Open — requiring treatment on and off the court — remains a concern. "I'm still not back in practice at 100 percent," he said, adding, "I have to be careful."

That has been the rare downbeat note in his particularly upbeat month as he has celebrated his first major singles title in nearly five years.

"This one definitely has had maybe the longest effect of any of the Grand Slam wins in my career," he said. "I'm so happy because I didn't have to play in the following weeks. It's really allowed me to reflect and enjoy. In the past in 2003, when I won Wimbledon for the first time, I was in Gstaad the next day practicing and stuff. It's very different



this time. I'm still riding the wave, still feeling like I'm on cloud nine."

He gained some more altitude last week during his vacation in Switzerland, taking a day trip high into the mountains near his holiday home in Lenzerheide with his replica copy of the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup, the trophy awarded to the Australian Open men's singles champion.

"I call it Norman," he said of the trophy. "I've had dinner with Norman, spent a lot of time with Norman. I know it's just a replica, but that's all right."

In 2003, when the Swiss billionaire Ernesto Bertarelli won the America's Cup sailing competition for Switzerland (while using a crew full of hired New Zealanders in New Zealand), Bertarelli vowed to celebrate by taking the America's Cup to the top of the Matterhorn.

"That's where I got my idea to take Norman into the mountains," Federer said. "I don't know if Ernesto ever did it, but I thought it was such a cool idea. To come from a faraway place like New Zealand or Australia and bring the trophy all the way back to the most important part of your homeland."

There would be no Matterhorn visit in this case, but Federer did take a series of ski lifts and one snowmobile ride to a mountaintop chalet where he and his wife, Mirka, and their friends had fondue and Federer sneaked outside into the snow with Norman for a series of Alpine group photos (Federer and Norman being the group).

"We tried a few different things up there, with the racket and a ball and Norman," Federer said, laughing. "I just thought it was super fun. I know it was super cheesy, but the fans just love it."

Federer is still not skiing himself, not wanting to risk an injury that could derail his tennis career.

"I don't dare do it," he said. "I take the kids and watch them and help them. I've got to be patient."

Skiing presumably will be one reward when his playing career finally ends. In light of his commitments and priorities and current form, it is difficult to see that happening until the end of 2017 at the earliest. But the question Federer asked himself however briefly — how can I ever top this? — definitely hangs in the air. A great number of things had to fall his way in Melbourne for him to win No. 18, including the early defeats of Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray and his own five-set victories over Kei Nishikori, Stan Wawrinka and Nadal.

There was also the fact that Federer felt unusually fresh in his legs and his head after six months away from tournament tennis — a forced break as he recovered from recurring left knee problems.

Does he feel now that this victory was meant to be?

"Honestly, I felt the French Open was more meant to be," he said referring to his first and still-only French Open title in 2009. "I had to work for this one."

When Federer won in Paris, Nadal, who was the overwhelming favorite to win any French Open at that stage, stunningly lost in the fourth round to Robin Soderling.

"There were tough matches with DelPo and Haas of course," Federer said, referring to his five-set French Open victories over Juan Martin del Potro and Tommy Haas in 2009. "But this one didn't feel like it was meant to be in that same way. I felt I was too fresh in the mind, wanted it too badly in the end, felt too good in the end about everything and riding that wave of the comeback with nothing to lose. I felt it was more one of those things. It was such a surprise. Meant to be doesn't come with nothing to lose. This one was different than any other one I've ever experienced."

Though the chances are all too good that Melbourne will remain a singular experience, he will very soon be back on the baseline in Dubai or elsewhere, ripping one-handed backhands against younger men with so much more left to prove.

"The goal, when I took my break of six months, was doing this for the next couple years, not just for one tournament," Federer said. "I understand people who say, 'Oh, this would be a perfect moment to go.' But I feel like I've put in so much work, and I love it so much, and I still have so much in the tank."

(Source: nytimes)

This may hurt, says Hamilton as F1 gets back on track

Triple world champion Lewis Hamilton is expecting to feel the pain, no matter how much he has worked out over the winter break, when Formula One's first pre-season test starts on Monday.

Aching backs and stiff necks are likely to keep the team physios busy as drivers get up to speed at Barcelona's Circuit de Catalunya and begin to rack up the miles in the shiny new cars.

The gym work and outdoor training, and the kilos of extra muscle added to cope with new regulations bringing significantly faster cornering speeds and greater G-forces, will be put to the test over four days this week.

"After the first day I'll know exactly where I'm weak," Hamilton told reporters at the launch of his Mercedes team's W08 car at Silverstone on Thursday.

"Whoever it is, it doesn't matter how fit you are and how hard you trained. You get in that car and it beats the crap out of you. It just does," added the 32-year-old Briton. "There's just no simulation for it.

"So whether you feel it in the neck -- there'll be a muscle you didn't even know you had, deep down under your rib cage, and you're like 'what the hell?' -- through those testing days you figure those weak areas out."

Hamilton will be in the car on Monday afternoon, with new team mate Valtteri Bottas taking care of the morning laps after replacing retired world champion Nico Rosberg.

All 10 teams, one less than last year due to the demise of Manor, will be out on track once the pit lane lights go green on Monday.

RENAULT CONFIDENT

The technical boffins will be taking a closer look at what their rivals have come up with, and any innovations they might have missed, as well as watching out for signs the pecking order might be about to change.

Renault, ninth last year with a car inherited from Lotus but confident in their new engine and chassis, could be early contenders to move up the grid.

"That was really fun," said Renault's Jolyon Palmer after a filming session in the RS17 at the track on Saturday. "Loads of downforce, loads of grip, a few laps, no hiccups and a big smile on my face."

"The new beast is FAST!!" the Briton, who will be back in the car on Tuesday, with Nico Hulkenberg testing on Monday, added on Twitter.

Formula One's new motorsport supremo Ross Brawn, the former Ferrari technical head and ex-Mercedes team boss, will be in Barcelona as the sport enters a new era of fatter tyres and wider, lower cars.

Just how successful the revised rules are in creating more entertainment for the fans remains to be seen.

The new aerodynamic 'shark fin' features leading off the airbox have already triggered some ripples of concern, and particularly the angular solution seen on the Williams when images of that car were posted online on Saturday.

The season starts in Australia on March 26.

(Source: Reuters)

Instagram

@ghiguain20_9 Good Day

@asamoah_gyan3 Happy birthday bro @e_adebayor. Enjoy to the fullest

@esmuellert 8:0 against @hsv - fantastic game of @fcbayern. Have a nice weekend!

Carlos Queiroz among five candidates to coach South Africa

SPORTS desk Carlos Queiroz is among five candidates who have been shortlisted to take charge of South Africa football team.

Iran current coach, Roy Hodgson, Hervé Renard, Hugo Broos and Stuart Baxter have made the short list for the Bafana Bafana coaching job.

Compared with other contenders, Queiroz's and Hodgson's CVs do not come close to those of Hervé Renard, Hugo Broos and Stuart Baxter, if the SA Football Association (Safa) criteria for the job are to be followed to the letter.

But the fact that Queiroz is close to the association's leadership makes him a favorite for the job. The former Portugal coach last coached on the continent back in 2000 when he was in charge of Bafana Bafana and his knowledge of the country and players could be misguided.

With two Africa Cup of Nations titles under his belt, Renard should automatically get the nod ahead of the others on the short list.

The Frenchman has already proven himself on the continent after winning the championship with Zambia and Côte d'Ivoire, sport 24 reported.

Broos, who has just won the Nations Cup with Cameroon, also fits the bill and should be considered if Renard is not available.

The Belgian showed his shrewdness when he guided the unfancied Indomitable Lions against all odds. Unless he wants to go to the FIFA Confederations Cup in Russia in June, he should be a serious contender.

Then there is Baxter, who is not new to the position. Having been there, done that and left unceremoniously, Baxter finds himself in the mix of things, and rightfully so. The SuperSport United coach knows South African players inside out and should fancy his chances – if his club agrees to release him.

The new coach could be announced before the end of the week.

The new coach should be in charge of Bafana's friendly games against Angola and Guinea-Bissau next month.

Zadaliasghari confident 2017 will be a success for Iran

The football 5-a-side player is confident the Asian team will build on their silver medal performance at Rio 2016 and continue improving in the lead-up to Tokyo 2020.

Behzad Zadaliasghari's outstanding goal for Iran in their win over Morocco in the football 5-a-side group stage at Rio 2016 had people talking for many days. The player received the ball in his own half, dribbled past the entire African team and shot past the goalkeeper to score one of the best goals ever seen.

The 28-year-old went on to lead Iran to their first-ever Paralympic podium in the sport, claiming silver after eliminating strong favourites Argentina along the way and only losing out to hosts and multiple-Paralympic and world champions Brazil 1-0 in the final.

With the 2016 Paralympics part of the team's bright past, Zadaliasghari is now hoping Iran can continue improving in the lead-up to the next events and, further ahead, the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games.

"I am excited about the competitions in 2017 and sure that it will be the best year of my football career," he said.

"I am developing my skills because my training sessions are longer and harder than before. The exercises I have added to my routine make me believe that my progress is even faster than last year."

A series of training camps in March will kick off the football 5-a-side season in Iran. The national football league will start after that, with the Iranian players seeking to excel to be called up to the national team.

Zadaliasghari said that talent identification is possible thanks to this competitive national league.

"The level of the league is increasing because new and young talented players are emerging," he said.

"I believe some new players will be called up to the national team for the upcoming competitions. That is good because it keeps the team fresh and ready if the usual players suffer injuries."

From 17-23 September 2017, Iran will participate in the ASEAN Games in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which will serve as preparation for next year's IBSA Blind Football World Championships in Madrid, Spain.

Further ahead, Zadaliasghari knows that the big goal is to dethrone the seemingly invincible Brazilian team at the next Paralympic Games in Tokyo, Japan, in 2020.

"We need to focus on our tactics. Once we have evaluated the other teams, our head coach might change the playing system, because many teams already know how we play," he said.

(Source: Paralympic.org)

We're ready to beat Al-Taawoun, says Esteghlal coach

SPORTS desk Esteghlal coach Alireza Mansourian believes that his side could make up the defeat against Al Ahli with a win against Al-Taawoun on Monday.

"We couldn't get a good result in our first game against Al Ahli as it was a shock start for us in this season's AFC Champions League. But we have forgotten the past as we're ready for the game against Al Taawoun. We know Al-Taawoun quite well as we have analyzed their previous games," Mansourian told reporters in the pre-match press conference.

"This is a home game for us but unfortunately we're not playing at home. This could've been perfect if we could play in front of our fans at Tehran's Azadi stadium.

Esteghlal suffered a 2-1 defeat against Al Ahli in the first matchday of AFC Champions League.

Akbar Misaghian takes charge of Iran's Siahjamegan

Akbar Misaghian has been appointed as new head coach of Iran's Siahjamegan football team.

The 63-year-old coach replaced Khodadad Azizi who stepped down from his role because of financial problems.

Siahjamegan started the Iran Professional League current season with Farhad Kazemi but parted company with him in December and Azizi was appointed as new head coach of Mashhad based team.

Misaghian, who is Siahjamegan's third coach in the season, took charge of the team until the end of the season.

The Iranian outfit is currently second bottom in the table, four points clear of the drop zone.

Siahjamegan has suffered 11 losses and just won three matches. The team has registered eight ties in the past 22 weeks in Iran Professional League (IPL).

(Source: Tasnim)

Iran collects four medals at 2017 Asian Canoe Slalom Championships

Iranian male and female rowers have featured remarkable levels of athletic skills and physical strength at the 2017 Asian Canoe Slalom Championships in Thailand, and managed to pick up four medals, including one gold, at the continental event.

On Saturday, junior Iranian sportswomen Donya Mohammadi and Faezeh Ronasi participated in the women's under-18 canoe double competitions at the Kundanprakarnchon Dam in the central Thai city of Nakhon Nayok, and did their best to gain the top position.

Additionally, Roksana Razeghian ranked third in the senior women's single canoe contests and settled for the bronze.

The Iranian outfit, comprised of Danial Khosravi, Mahan Edrisi and Reza Khalili, contested against opponents in the men's under-18 single kayak team competitions, and finished runner-ups to be awarded the silver.

Furthermore, Amir Mohammad Fattahpour, Mehdi Karimi and Homayoun Mohammadpour took part in the senior men's single canoe team event, and could clinch a bronze medal for the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The 2017 Asian Canoe Slalom Championships kicked off in Nakhon Nayok, Thailand, on February 24, and will wrap up on February 26, 2017.

(Source: PressTV)

Group A: Esteghlal v Al Taawoun preview

Esteghlal are aiming to end a run of three successive defeats to Saudi Arabian opposition when they take on debutants Al Taawoun in Group A of the 2017 AFC Champions League on Monday.

The Iranian side went down 2-1 to the United Arab Emirates' Al Ahli in their opening game of the tournament and have now failed to keep a clean sheet in nine of their previous 10 fixtures on the continent ahead of the encounter at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

Al Taawoun, meanwhile, will go into the fixture with confidence after Constantin Galca's side enjoyed a perfect start to their maiden AFC Champions League campaign as captain Talal Al Absi's second-half goal saw off Lokomotiv to delight a packed King Abdullah Stadium in Buraidah.

Opta Facts

- Al-Taawon pack for their first ever road game in the AFC Champions League after hosting Lokomotiv Tashkent in Matchday 1.
- Esteghlal have lost five of their last seven games against Saudi opposition (W2), including their last three in a row.
- Esteghlal have failed to keep a clean sheet in nine of their last 10 AFC Champions League matches.
- 23 of Esteghlal's last 26 goals scored in the AFC Champions League have come in the second half, including each of their last seven.
- Talal Al-Absi had three shots at goal on the opening match day, only one defender (Al Wahda's (UAE) Rom Chang-Woo) had more, while Al-Absi also managed to find the back of the net with one of those shots to find his side's lone goal.

(Source: AFC)

Group B: Al Jazira v Esteghlal Khouzestan preview

Al Jazira go into Monday's 2017 AFC Champions League Group B encounter with Esteghlal Khouzestan at Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium desperate to end a miserable run of form in the competition.

The Emirati side's 3-0 reversal to Lekhwiya on Matchday One was their 10th game without a win on the continent, while their record against Iranian opposition does not read much better, having lost three and drawn one of their past four matches.

No such worries for Esteghlal Khouzestan, however, as the debutants celebrated a 1-0 victory over Saudi Arabia's Al Fateh on their first ever AFC Champions League appearance as they joined Qatar's Lekhwiya as the early pace-setters in Group B.

Opta Facts

- This will be Esteghlal Khuzestan's first trip away from home in the tournament.
- Al Jazira are without a win in their last four matches against sides from Iran in this competition; losing the last three (D1).
- Al Jazira are winless in their last five group games on home turf (D1, L4), last winning a home group game in February 2014 against Al-Rayyan.
- Al Jazira have gone 16 matches without a clean sheet in this tournament and without a win in 10 games (D1 L9).
- Ali Ashouri (Esteghlal Khuzestan) recorded seven tackles in his side's opener; only one midfielder across the tournament managed more during the opening round of matches (Shanghai SIPG's Oscar, 8).

(Source: AFC)

Alpine skiing: Vonn pulls out of Alpine combined after crash

American former Olympic downhill champion Lindsey Vonn has pulled out of Sunday's World Cup Alpine combined event in Switzerland, she announced on Twitter.

Vonn, who crashed in Saturday's super-G World Cup race in the resort of Crans Montana, has also been hit by a bout of food poisoning.

The 32-year-old, who broke her right arm at the start of the season and still does not have full use of her hand, lost control early in her run and crashed into the safety netting.

After a worrying moment when Vonn sat still in the netting, she got to her feet in no obvious discomfort.

Vonn said she also had been sick.

"Unfortunately after getting food poisoning and crashing today I don't feel healthy enough to safely race tomorrow so I will not be starting," she tweeted on Saturday.

Slovenia's Ilka Stuhec won Saturday's race ahead of Elena Curtoni while several other leading contenders failed to reach the finish as the soft snow conditions again proved tricky.

It was Stuhec's sixth win of the season and helped her to close the gap on overall World Cup leader Mikaela Shiffrin who finished 11th, having pulled out of Friday's combined event along with team mate Vonn because of safety concerns about the course conditions. *(Source: Reuters)*

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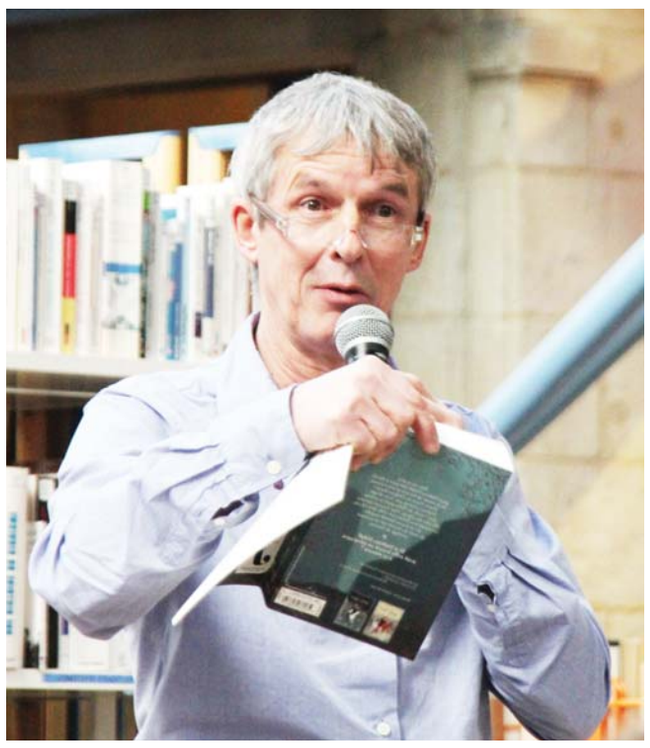

French writer Jean-Claude Mourlevat in an undated photo

Jean-Claude Mourlevat wins top prize at Flying Turtle Awards

TT CULTURE desk **TEHRAN** — French writer Jean-Claude Mourlevat won the golden prize at the Flying Turtle Awards, which are annually presented to top children's writers in Iran.

He received the prize for his "La Rivière à l'envers".

"This award is presented to Jean-Claude Mourlevat for the efforts he has made in the story to create a different peaceful and human fantasy, a dialogue between the East and West, an active participation of the adolescents, as well as to make a call for peace and love in the cruel world," the jury of the Flying Turtle Awards said in a statement read during the awards ceremony held the Book City Institute in Tehran on Saturday.

Two Persian translations of "La Rivière à l'envers" by Navid Atar-Sharqi and Zohreh Nateqi have been published in Iran. Atar-Sharqi and Nateqi also received honorable mentions.

The story is set in a time when there were no telephones in a village. It is about Tomek, a 13-year-old orphan who runs the small grocery store in his village. One evening a young girl enters his shop and asks if he sells sugar made from barley. A sequence of events causes Tomek to begin an incredible journey that will lead him to an uncharted island where an amazing river flows upside down.

The organizers also presented three silver awards, one of which was given to "Un-Scary Stories" by Nazanin Ayegani.

Another silver award went to "The Shadow of the Monster" by Abbas Jahangirian, and "Goody" by Samaneh Qasemi won the other one.

In addition, writer Ali-Ashraf Darvishian and illustrator Nayyereh Taqavi were honored with the Flying Turtle Special Medals for their lifetime achievements.

The Book City Institute and the Children's Literature Studies Periodical are the organizers of the Flying Turtle Awards event.

Istanbul festival honors Iranian director Reza Dormishian

ART desk **TEHRAN** — Iranian director Reza Dormishian was selected as the Most Inspiring Director of the Year for his acclaimed drama "Lanturi" at the 16th Istanbul International Independent Film Festival on Sunday.

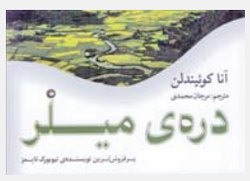
Iranian director Reza Dormishian speaks after accepting his award as the Most Inspiring Director of the Year for his drama "Lanturi" at the 16th Istanbul International Independent Film Festival on February 26, 2017.

"Lanturi" tells the story of a gang member named Pasha who runs amok because Maryam, a socially committed, self-confident journalist, does not reciprocate his feelings. The badly injured young woman demands lex talionis – the law, applicable in Iran, of "an eye for an eye".

"The War Show", a documentary by Andreas Dalsgaard and Obaidah Zytoon from Denmark, won the best film award of the Turkish festival.

In addition, "In the Last Days of the City" by Egyptian director Tamer Al Said received the special jury award.

NEWS IN BRIEF



"Miller's Valley" appears in Iranian bookstores

CULTURE desk **TEHRAN** — American author Anna Quindlen's 2016 novel "Miller's Valley" has recently been published in Persian by Nafir Publications in Tehran.

Translated by Marjan Mohammadi, the book is about the Miller family that has lived in Miller's Valley for generations. Mimi Miller, the youngest girl of the family, is narrating their story from the 1960s to the present.

Narges Abyar to promote "Breath" in Milan, Turin

ART desk **TEHRAN** — Iranian director Narges Abyar will be in the Italian cities of Milan and Turin during March to promote her latest movie, "Breath".

The film will first be screened at the Polytechnic University of Milan on March 3 and it will be on screen at Cinema Massimo in Turin on March 5.

The screenings will be followed by review sessions, which be attended by Abyar and the film's star, Pantea Panahiha.

"Breath" is about four children whose mother had died a few years ago and whose father decides to join the Iranian volunteers on the warfront following Iraq's attack in September 1980.

Meryl Streep accuses Karl Lagerfeld of spoiling her Oscars

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) — Meryl Streep on Saturday accused designer Karl Lagerfeld of spoiling her night at the Academy Awards ceremony by falsely accusing her of being paid to wear a gown on the Oscars red carpet.

Streep was responding to a claim earlier this week by Lagerfeld that the "Sophie's Choice" actress had decided against wearing a Chanel gown at Sunday's Oscar ceremony because she could get paid by wearing a dress from a different designer.

Lagerfeld's claims made headlines around the world.

"The story was picked up globally, and continues, globally, to overwhelm my appearance at the Oscars, on the occasion of my record breaking 20th nomination, and to eclipse this honor in the eyes of the media, my colleagues and the audience," Streep, 67, said in a statement.

Streep, the most admired and honored actress of her generation, is Oscar-nominated on Sunday for playing an eccentric opera singer in the comedy "Florence Foster Jenkins." She already has three Oscars for previous work.

She dismissed an apology earlier on Saturday from Lagerfeld, who admitted he had "misunderstood that Ms. Streep may have chosen another designer due to remuneration" and said he regretted the controversy.

Anthology of Persian poetry published in India

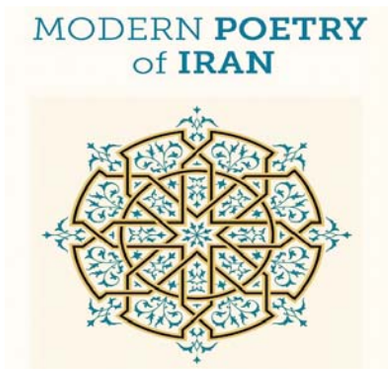
CULTURE desk **TEHRAN** — "Modern Poetry of Iran", an anthology of Persian poetry, has recently been published in English by Rupa Publications, an Indian publishing company in Kolkata.

The book comprises over 80 poems selected and translated into English by Aziz Mahdi from India, the publication has announced on its website.

The book carries works by Shahriar, Shamlu, Nima, Parvin, Sohrab, Akhavan, Forugh, Ahmadreza Ahmadi, Saed Baqeri, Soheil Mahmudi and dozens of other poets.

The collection gives powerful insights into Iranian society. These poems also touch upon the various aspects of human existence and emotions.

The Delhi-based Aziz Mahdi is a poet, writer and translator. A doctorate in Persian language and literature



from the University of Tehran, Mahdi is an expert on the Indo-Iranian linkages in literature and culture.

Mahdi has authored five books, three poetry collections and has translated ten books into Hindi, English and Urdu. He is closely associated with the Sadi Foundation and the Art Bureau in Tehran.

Japanese artist Chiba Miyamoto to display works in Gilan village

ART desk **TEHRAN** — Japanese artist Chiba Miyamoto will hang a selection of her paintings on the beautiful scenery of Iran's Gilan region in an exhibition, which will open at Kuchebagh Gallery in the village of Gurabjir Sahra near the northern Iranian city of Rasht on March 3.

"Gilan in the Eye of Chiba Miyamoto" is the name of the exhibit and features some works created using Sumi-e, the Japanese monochrome ink painting technique.

Poet Mohammadreza Shafiei Kadkani has expressed his interest in the land and art of Japan in the statement of the exhibit, which will run until March 10.

"I have always been fascinated by Japanese painting, although I have no specific knowledge about it. The feeling of love towards nature which is the main characteristic of my poetry has linked me with Japanese paintings," the poet has said.

"Several years ago I saw a few works by Ms. Chiba and asked her to hand me a slide of her works to use for my collection of poetry, and I can say her paintings are filled with Iranian natural elements offering a Japanese panorama," he added.

The artist displayed her collection in Tehran's Haft-Samar Gallery in 2011. She has also held several other exhibits in Iran and Japan.

Symphonic poem "Takhti" unveiled in Tehran

ART desk **TEHRAN** — The symphonic poem "Takhti" composed by Iranian musical prodigy Puria Khadem was unveiled during a ceremony at Tehran's Niavaran Cultural Center on Saturday.

"Takhti" was recorded in collaboration with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra in Czech last year.

The former conductor of the Tehran Symphony Orchestra and Iranian vocalist Mohammad Motamedi have collaborated in the project.

The 17-year-old Puria, the son of the Olympic gold medalist wrestler Rasul Khadem, has composed "Takhti" in memory of the legendary wrestler Gholamreza Takhti.

The unveiling ceremony was attended by a large number of prominent artists, cineastes and veteran sportsmen.

Alireza Heidari, the president of the International Pahlavani Wrestling Federation, in a short speech, praised Takhti and said, "We need to admire the name of Takhti and I am happy Takhti has risen from the family of the wrestlers."

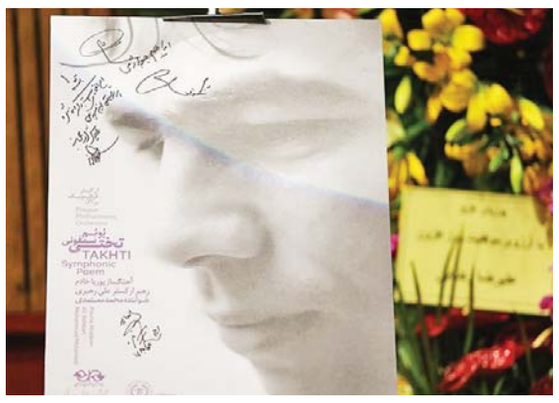
Actor Dariush Arjmand called Takhti a piece of tile works of the old mosques in Isfahan, which has been mingled with the art and culture of this land and said, "Takhti loved people and worked for people. Even many young people who do not know Takhti feel a great respect for the athlete."

Motamedi also called it a great honor to be working with Ali Rahbari and composer Khadem and said, "Working in this project is sure a positive point in my career."

The ceremony continued honoring the composer of the poetry Mehrdad Molavi, and part of the symphony was performed by Khadem and Motamedi for the audience.

Puria Khadem has also composed symphonic poem "Alamdar", which was performed in Vahdat Hall in 2015. The composition was also performed the same year by the Azerbaijan State Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Rauf Abdullayev in Baku.

"Alamdar" (The Standard-Bearer) is about Hazrat Abbas (AS), the brother of Imam Hussein (AS) and the standard-



A poster for "Takhti" is on display during the unveiling ceremony of the symphonic poem at Tehran's Niavaran Cultural Center on February 25, 2017. (Tasnim/Mohammad-Ali Marizad)

bearer of the Imam's group in the Ashura battle, during which the Imam and his companions were martyred.

Emma Thompson won't take part in short "Love Actually" sequel

Actor Emma Thompson poses for photographers at media event for the film Beauty and the Beast in London, Britain February 23, 2017. (Reuters/Neil Hall)

LONDON (Reuters) — Actress Emma Thompson has said she is not taking part in a short "Love Actually" sequel for Britain's Comic Relief charity appeal because it is "too soon" to reprise her role in the romantic comedy after the death last year of co-star Alan Rickman.

Thompson and Rickman played wife and husband Karen and Harry in the hit 2003 movie, which also starred Hugh Grant as the British prime minister and Bill Nighy as an ageing rock star, as well as Keira Knightley, Liam Neeson and Colin Firth.

A short film revisiting the characters is in the works for the annual charity appeal, which holds its fundraising Red Nose Day and televised evening of celebrity comedy sketches on March 24.

Speaking to the BBC last week, director Richard Curtis confirmed some of the big names would take part but added there was a question mark over Thompson's return. Rickman, also known for the "Harry Potter" films, died of cancer in January 2016, aged 69.

"Richard (Curtis) wrote to me and said ‹Darling I can't write anything for you because of Alan' and I said ‹No, of course you can't, it would be sad, too sad, it's too soon," Thompson told Reuters at the UK launch of Disney's new "Beauty and the Beast" film on Thursday night.

"It's absolutely right, it's supposed to be for Comic Relief and there isn't much comic relief in the loss of our dear friend really only just over a year ago... We thought and thought but it just seemed wrong."

The 2003 movie is set in the run-up to Christmas, with different stories of romance and love woes, like Rickman's character getting close to a female colleague. In one scene, Thompson's character tears up alone in the bedroom when she discovers a necklace he bought is not for her.

"Batman v Superman," "Hillary's America" win Razzie 'worst' films

Cast members Ben Affleck (L) and Henry Cavill attend New York premiere "Batman V Superman: Dawn Of Justice" at Radio City Music Hall in New York, March 20, 2016. Reuters/Eduardo Munoz/File Photo

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Even the Razzie Awards are getting political.

A documentary criticizing U.S. Democratic presidential contender Hillary Clinton tied on Saturday with superhero ensemble "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice" on a list of the year's worst achievements in film, winning four Razzies apiece.

The annual tongue-in-cheek Razzie awards, which serve as an antidote to Hollywood's Oscars ceremony, named Dinesh D'Souza's "Hillary's America: The Secret History of the Democratic Party" as the worst film of 2016.

D'Souza, a conservative commentator and best-selling author, was named worst actor for narrating his documentary and worst director alongside Bruce Schooley. Worst actress went to the person who portrayed Clinton in the film.

"Hillary's America" took in a modest $13 million at the North American box office last year.

The Razzies, or Golden Raspberry awards, follow a Hollywood awards season marked by outspoken speeches and protests against the policies and behavior of U.S. President Donald Trump. The season culminates with Sunday's Oscars ceremony.

"Batman v Superman" also won four Razzies, including worst screen combo for "Ben Affleck & His BFF (Baddest Foe Forever) Henry Cavill" and worst "remake, rip-off or sequel."

The annual Razzie Redeemer Award went to veteran actor-director Mel Gibson. Gibson has been welcomed back into the folds of Hollywood with his war drama "Hacksaw Ridge".

Winners of the Razzies are voted for online by around 1,000 Razzie members from 24 countries, who sign up online and pay a $40 membership fee.