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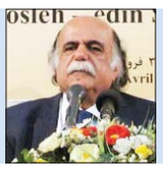
TEHRAN TIMES

16 Pages | Price 10,000 Rials | 38th year | No.12809 | Thursday | **APRIL 20, 2017** | Farvardin 31, 1396 | Rajab 22, 1438

Iran-EU trade up 171% in Jan. 4

Ethnics set off journey to celebrate Persian Gulf national day 12

Persepolis lift Iran Professional League trophy 15



Affinities between Sadi and Victor Hugo discussed at Tehran meeting 16

Leader calls for spirited, healthy election

See page 2

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U.S. says Iran complying with nuclear deal, yet vows interagency review

POLITICS desk

TEHRAN — In a press statement on Tuesday, the U.S. Department of State notified the Congress that Iran is complying with the nuclear deal, the very first such notification under the Trump administration.

"The U.S. Department of State certified to U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan today that Iran is compliant through April 18th with its commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in a letter to Paul D. Ryan, speaker of the House of Representatives.

Iran and the 5+1 group - the U.S., Britain, France, China and Russia plus Germany - finalized the text of the nuclear deal in Vienna in July 2015. It went into effect in January 16, 2016.

The accord put some limits on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of economic and financial sanctions against the country.

Under the deal, the State Department must notify Congress every 90 days on Iran›s compliance under the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the official name for the nuclear accord. →2

IPF to bring world of petrochemicals together

By Mahnaz Abdi

TEHRAN — The 13th edition of Iran Petrochemical Forum (IPF) will play host to 101 participants, representing 74 foreign companies from 18 countries.

With the motto of "Bringing the World of Petrochemicals Together" the two-day event will open in Tehran on April 22, Farnaz Alavi, the manager of event, announced in a press conference on Wednesday.

Alavi, who is the director for planning and development in the National Petrochemical Company (NPC), went on to say that the foreign participants will be from European and Asian countries including France, Britain, Denmark, Germany, India, Bahrain, Lebanon, Norway, Romania, Turkey, Singapore, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, Taiwan, Italy, and the United Arab Emirates.

The official mentioned Total and Air Liquide Group from France, Infraleuna from Germany, Nexant, Honeywell UOP and Johnson Matthey from UK, Haldor Topsoe from Denmark, Norner from Norway and ICIS from Singapore as some top participants of the forum.

She also said that 1360 participants, representing 385 Iranian companies, will participate in the forum. →4

Iran urges Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor launch

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has stressed the importance of launching a new transport corridor connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea, saying it would strengthen relations among regional countries.

"If implemented, the corridor connecting the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea is an opportunity which will bring regional countries closer to each other and decrease transportation costs of commodities," Zarif said at a meeting on Iran-Georgia economy in Tbilisi on Tuesday.

He added that the project will also lead to cooperation between Iran, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Meanwhile, in a meeting with Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili, the Iranian foreign minister expressed Tehran's keenness to improve relations with Tbilisi.

Margvelashvili, for his part, said the two countries have managed to step up their cooperation since the establishment of relations some past 25 years ago and added that his country is interested in further expansion of ties.

He also called for bolstering cooperation in different cultural sectors given Iran's rich culture.

Zarif was on a tour of Central Asia and the Caucasus countries. He wrapped up his visit to Georgia and left Tbilisi for the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek on Tuesday on the last leg of his three-leg trip which him to Turkmenistan as well.

During his stay in Tbilisi, the top Iranian diplomat held separate meetings with his Georgian counterpart, Mikheil Janelidze, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze.

In meeting with his Kyrgyz counterpart Erlan Abdyldaev on Wednesday, Zarif said Iran is ready to help Bishkek with the construction of hydropower plants.

"Iran is ready to construct small and big hydropower plants in Kyrgyzstan," Zarif said at a joint press conference with Erlan Abdyldaev.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has a great deal of experience in the construction of dams and plants, and can provide valuable assistance to the Bishkek government in this regard," he added.

Expert predicts Erdogan will become more engaged in Mideast after referendum

By Javad Heirannia

TEHRAN — Shireen Tahmaasb Hunter, a professor of political science at Georgetown University, predicts that after the referendum in Turkey which gave President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sweeping powers Turkey will become more involved in the Middle East and even Central Asia.

"Now that his behavior and policies have further undermined the prospects of Turkey's EU membership, he will most likely become more engaged in the Middle East and possibly in Central Asia," Hunter tells the Tehran Times.

Hunter, who was with the Iranian Foreign Service from 1965 to 1979 serving in London and Geneva, also says "Turkey-Iran relations have always been a combination of competition and accommodation."

Following is the text the interview:

■ Turkish constitutional referendum ended up in Erdogan's victory by the slimmest margins. What message does the weak result convey to Erdogan?

A: The results of the Turkish referendum show that Turkish society is divided in many respects. Clearly, the results indicate that a substantial number of Turkish citizens—nearly half of all voters—disapprove of Erdogan's vision for Turkey's future. They certainly do not want a kind of imperial presidency, with the president yielding near absolute power. They also do not approve of Erdogan's more socially conservative policies and his more adventurous foreign policy, including his turning away from Europe.

■ What might be the effects of "yes" vote victory on Erdogan's domestic policy?

A: Most likely, in the wake of the referendum, Erdogan would push with his more socially conservative policies, and he could also do away with certain Kemalist policies, especially in regard to religion's place in the public sphere. He has already relaxed many rules on the public display of religious symbols, such as women's Hijab. He may further eliminate remaining restrictions. →13

IMF raises growth forecast for the global economy

The International Monetary Fund raised its 2017 global growth forecast due to manufacturing and trade gains in Europe, Japan, and China, but warned that protectionist policies threaten to choke a broad-based recovery.

The IMF, whose spring meetings with the World Bank get underway in Washington this week, forecast that the global economy would grow 3.5% in 2017, up from its previous forecast of 3.4% in January.

In its latest World Economic Outlook, the Fund said that chronically weak advanced economies are expected to benefit from a cyclical recovery in global manufacturing and trade that started to gain momentum last summer.

"The economic upswing that we have expected for some time seems to be materializing," IMF chief economist Maurice Obstfeld wrote in the report.

The IMF lifted Japan's 2017 growth projection by 0.4 percentage point from January, to 1.2%, while the eurozone and China both saw a 0.1 percentage point growth forecast increase to 1.7% and 6.6%, respectively.

Meanwhile, the IMF held its 2017 U.S. growth forecast steady at 2.3%, which still represents a substantial jump from 1.6% growth in 2016, partly due to expectations that President Donald Trump will cut taxes and increase government spending.

The IMF also revised Britain's growth forecast to 2.0% for 2017, up a half percentage point from January.

Obstfeld said an anticipated pullback in consumer spending after last year's UK vote to leave the European Union had so far failed to materialize. He added that uncertainty over Britain's snap elections announced on Tuesday would not necessarily change the outlook, but a clear mandate from the British people could help Brexit negotiations. →4

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Fishing season wraps up in southern Caspian Sea

Iranian fishermen standing on a trailer hauling a massive net on the Caspian Sea coast, April 18, 2017. The net is expected to be chockfull with various bony fish as the countdown to end the six-month fishing season for catching such aquatic animals has just commenced.

As Trump warned North Korea, his 'armada' was headed toward Australia

When the United States President Donald Trump boasted early last week that he had sent an "armada" as a warning to North Korea, the aircraft carrier strike group he spoke of was still far from the Korean peninsula, and headed in the opposite direction.

It was even farther away over the weekend, moving through the Sunda Strait and then into the Indian Ocean, as North Korea displayed what appeared to be new missiles at a parade and staged a failed missile test.

The U.S. military's Pacific Command explained on Tuesday that the strike group first had to complete a shorter-than-initially planned period of training with Australia. But it was now "proceeding to the Western Pacific as ordered," it said.

The perceived communications mix-up has raised eyebrows among Korea experts, who wonder whether it erodes the Trump administration's credibility at a time when U.S. rhetoric about the North's advancing nuclear and missile capabilities are raising concerns about a potential conflict.

The U.S. military initially said in a statement dated April 10 that Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of Pacific Command, directed the Carl Vinson strike group "to sail north and report on station in the Western Pacific."

Reuters and other news outlets reported on April 11 that the movement would take more than a week. The Navy, for security reasons, says it does not report future operational locations of its ships.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis initially appeared to play down the deployment on April 11, saying the Vinson was "just on her way up there because that's where we thought it was most prudent to have her at this time."

"There's not a specific demand signal or specific reason why we're sending her up there," he said.

But even Mattis initially misspoke about the strike group's itinerary, telling a news conference that the Vinson had pulled out of an exercise with Australia. →13

ELECTION COUNTDOWN

Interior minister launches anti-electoral crime committee

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — The Interior Ministry has launched a special committee to deal with electoral crimes over the coming weeks, the interior minister said on Wednesday.

Speaking to ISNA, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli said the body will monitor the activities of the candidates, their fans, political parties, as well as printed and online media.

He also said there have been numerous reports on electoral crime in the past few days, adding the committee is investigating them.

Raisi: President should be vocal in anti-corruption fight

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — The main principlist presidential candidate Ebrahim Raisi, who currently is the custodian of the Mashhad Holy Shrine, said on Wednesday that more than anyone else the president as the head of the government should push for fight against corruption.

"The grounds for corruption should be eliminated," Raisi said, Fars reported.

He added, "I am not paid as much as 1 rial for being custodian [of the Mashhad Holy Shrine]."

"Our program is to save the country's management and economy," the candidate said, adding, "The country's banking system can and should be revamped."

Bank Melli prints 200 million voting ballots

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — Bank Melli of Iran has printed 200 million ballots to be used in the upcoming elections, the bank's printing and publication director Reza Mansuri said on Wednesday.

The ballots have the highest security parameters and contain anti-counterfeiting print elements, Mansuri said, according to the BMI website.

The security elements have been used in the paper pulp, printed figures, as well as the ink used for printing so that the ballots cannot be printed anywhere else, the official said.

Larijani to Guardian Council: Law does not bar minorities from councils

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — The Majlis on Wednesday put a brake on the Guardian Council's attempt to bar religious minorities from running council seats in constituencies where Muslims are in great majority.

Guardian Council secretary Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati had published an announcement in Wednesday newspapers saying the religious scholars in the 12-member Guardian Council had voted to bar minorities from the councils.

Majlis speaker Ali Larijani, however, corresponded with the council election monitoring headquarters saying they do as the law says: include minorities. He pointed out that any amendment to the law would require an approval by the Majlis.

New group announces support for Raisi candidacy

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — A group calling itself "the Popular Staff for Serving Nation" announced its formation on Wednesday and said it backs Ebrahim Raisi in the presidential election of May 19.

Meysam Khakbaz, the group's chief, told Tasnim the group has launched headquarters in some provinces and will continue to cooperate with other Raisi-backing popular currents.

He added the group will make announcements through Reza Nejabatzadeh, a student activist. According to Khakbaz, Nejabatzadeh will hold his first press conference in a few days.

Clergy association to back a candidate after Guardian Council confirmations

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — The Combatant Clergy Association will endorse a presidential candidate only after the qualification process by the Guardian Council has been completed and final candidates are known, the association's spokesman said.

Asked about the association's position regarding the most well-known candidates, Qolamreza Mesbahi Moqaddam told ISNA on Wednesday that the issue was hotly debated in the clerical body's most recent meeting.

"In the end we agreed to leave announcing our position when qualification results are announced by the Guardian Council."

Leader calls for enthusiastic, healthy election

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday warned against plots by enemies to disrupt the results of the May 19 presidential election, calling for an enthusiastic and healthy election.

Ayatollah Khamenei made the remarks on Wednesday in a meeting with Army commanders and personnel.

"Despite how the enemies and the mainstream media try to spoil the results of the elections, in some way or another — if the Iranian nation continues to take part in the elections with vigilance and awareness, as they always have, then a massive election, coupled with enthusiasm and eagerness... will be held, and this will be a significant asset for the country," he said.

He added a massive turnout in the election would safeguard the country against plots by the enemies.

The Leader further urged the Iranian nation to appreciate the elections, saying, "We should commemorate the elections.

The elections should be healthy, safe, enthusiastic and massive."

The twelfth presidential election and council elections are scheduled to be held on 19 May.

Ayatollah Khamenei further said that if the officials look at the enemy's motives, they may gain motivation to work harder.

"When we hear what the enemies say and examine their words, we realize that they insist on the same points, so that they can use weaknesses and flaws to sabotage others and inflict harm," he said.

The superpowers always threaten and bully other countries, he noted. "They want to interfere everywhere."

He also lauded Iranian nation for their resistance against different plots against the country over the past decades.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Ayatollah Khamenei pointed to the economic situation in Iran, saying, "I highlighted economic slogans over the past two-three years, because I felt the enemy sought to strike a blow against this great system by targeting our economy."

"When we have economic problems, various sectors of the establishment will not be able to carry out their tasks properly; hence, we need to see what the top priorities are in order to address them adequately, one at a time, when it comes to the officials' set of duties."

Portugal says to remove banking obstacles with Iran

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — Portuguese Secretary of State for Internationalization Jorge Costa Oliveira said on Tuesday that his country is seeking to remove banking obstacles to expand cooperation with Iran in various areas, especially economic sphere.

"Portugal supports expansion of cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran which is an influential country at the international stage," he said during a meeting with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for European and American Affairs Majid Takht-Ravanchi in Tehran.

The Portuguese official also said Lisbon attaches great importance to consultation with Iran on fighting terrorism.

For his part, Takht-Ravanchi said that Iran welcomes expansion of relations with Portugal in various areas.

He also condemned the U.S. airstrike on Syria and called on the international community to take proper action in this respect.

On April 7, the U.S. launched cruise missiles at the Shayrat airfield from which President Donald Trump claimed a chemical weapons attack had been launched on April 4.

Iran warns America against bullying other countries

POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — Defense Minister Hossein Dehqan has warned the American leaders against bullying other countries and intervening in their internal affairs, saying "such era has come to an end."

Dehqan's remarks came amidst growing tension between Tehran and Washington as they increasingly accuse each other of sponsoring terrorism.

On Tuesday, U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis accused Iran of creating chaos in the region.

"Iran has been spreading chaos and havoc in several regional countries, including Yemen. The Houthis and ousted Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh are like puppets controlled by Iran; they do what the Iranians tell them to do," Mattis claimed Tuesday during his visit to Saudi Arabia.

Responding to the his comments, the Iranian defense minister said, "I advise the American defense minister to first study the history of American administrations' military conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, and more recently Syria and Yemen."

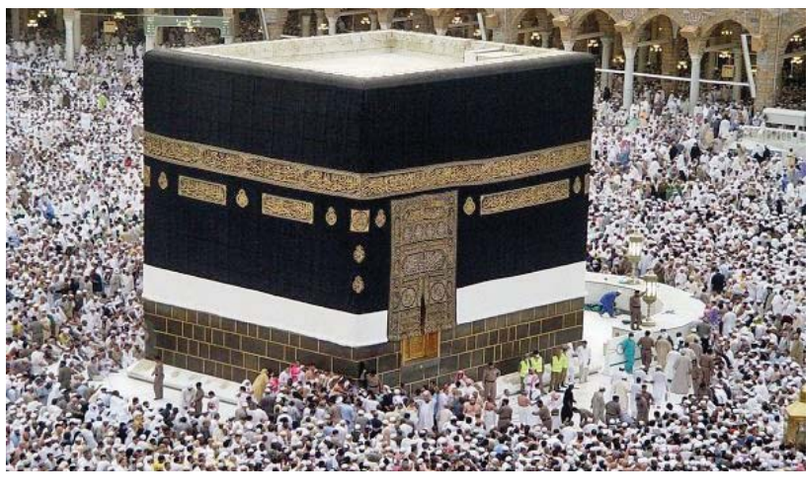
And then, Dehqan said, they will discover the root cause of their accusations.

"Today, Takfiri-Wahhabi terrorists are committing atrocities across the globe, especially in Syria and Iraq, with American weapons and ammunition," he said.

He also criticized the role that the United States plays in supporting Saudi Arabia's aggression against Yemen.

Innocent Yemeni people are fighting against the Saudi-led coalition which has the full support of the Washington, Dehqan said.

S. Arabia accepts Iran's conditions for Hajj pilgrimage: MP



POLITICS desk **TEHRAN** — A member of the parliament presiding board said on Wednesday that Saudi Arabia has accepted Iran's conditions for sending pilgrims to Hajj.

After a stampede in Mina on September 24, 2015, in which 464 Iranian pilgrims lost their lives Tehran said it would not send pilgrims to Hajj otherwise their safety is guaranteed.

"Saudi Arabia had announced that Iran could dispatch pilgrims like the other countries, but the Islamic Republic of Iran refused to accept it and at the end Saudi Arabia accepted our conditions to dispatch pilgrims," Akbar Ranjbarzadeh told reporters on the sidelines of a closed session of the parliament.

Iran's conditions have been "health, dignity and security of the pilgrims", he said.

The Hajj stampede in 2015 led to death of about 2000 pilgrims. Most of the victims were Iranians. Saudi health Minister Khaled al-Falih blamed victims for the disaster for failing to follow instructions. He claimed, "This type of accident could have been avoided. However, this is God's will." But pilgrims and Muslim groups hit back angrily at the claims, accusing Saudi officials of closing two key roads so dignitaries could reach a palace.

Also on September 11, 2015, a crawler crane toppled over onto the Masjid al-Haram, the Grand Mosque in Mecca, killing 111 people and injuring 394.

U.S. says Iran complying with nuclear deal, yet vows interagency review

1 →

While admitting that Tehran has honored the accord fully, Tillerson noted that

"President Donald J. Trump has directed a National Security Council-led interagency review of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that will evaluate whether suspension of sanctions related to Iran pursuant to the JCPOA is vital to the national security interests of the United States," Tillerson further said, giving no more details.

During his presidential trail, Trump attacked the deal vehemently, branding it the agreement "the worst deal ever negotiated" and vowed to "rip up" it.

In an apparent reversal, later on Trump softened his tone, saying that he would "police that contract so tough they don't have a chance."

As part of the nuclear accord, the U.S. has committed to provide sanctions relief if Iran meets its obligations and the secretary of state will retain the authority to waive all nuclear-related sanctions authorized by the legislation.

If the Trump administration tries to alter the deal or to re-impose sanctions, it could prompt Iran to violate a range of obligations, like the disabling of nuclear facilities and the sharp limits on reprocessing uranium. That, in turn, could unwind the deal, and with it, President Obama's signature foreign policy achievement.

For Trump, the nuclear agreement will pose an early

test between the pull of his campaign statements and the push of political realities.

In an interview with the BBC, former CIA director, John O. Brennan, said that ending the agreement would be "disastrous" and "the height of folly."

Soon, President Trump must decide whether to extend executive order waivers the Obama administration used to suspend some of the non-nuclear sanctions imposed on Iran and how scrupulously to hold Iran to account for infractions of the JCPOA.

The test of that will come on May 19, when the president must decide whether to extend executive waivers that the Obama administration used to suspend some sanctions."

On March 1, 2017, Laurence Norman of the Wall Street Journal reported that European officials are growing in confidence President Trump will not shred the nuclear accord.

Positive signs are emerging, which make it costly for the U.S. to unwind the deal.

Early April, the American plane maker Boing said it had agreed to sell $3 billion in airplanes to an Iranian airline, deepening the American manufacturer's bet on the Iranian market following the lifting of sanctions.

The company agreed to sell 30 units of the 737 MAX aircraft to Aseman Airlines, which also acquired the rights to buy another 30 at a later date.

Days before, media outlets said the first new Boeing commercial jetliner could be delivered in a month.

People familiar with the issue say the Boeing deal will be one reason they think Trump will be forced to honor the deal given the number of jobs it creates in the U.S.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, an aerospace sale of this magnitude creates or sustains approximately 18,000 jobs in the United States.

In February, Trump toured a Boeing plant in February and touted the firm's work as proof of a coming American manufacturing renaissance.

Russia PM: U.S. strike on Syria gave ISIL terrorists free rein

BY staff & agencies

The Russian prime minister has denounced Washington's missile attack on a Syrian military airbase earlier this month, saying the strike gave the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist group free rein to continue its terror campaign.

Dmitry Medvedev made the remarks in an address to the State Duma, the lower house of the parliament, in Moscow on Wednesday.

He stressed that the April 7 United States missile strike against Shayrat Airfield in Syria's Homs province was "an act of military aggression" as it was not authorized by the United Nations and violated international law.

"We do not know what may happen next. But I know for sure who benefited from this act of aggression — Daesh, because [the attack] gave them [terrorists] a free rein," he said.

The Russian premier further accused the U.S. administration of fighting the Damascus government instead of terrorism.

Medvedev also warned that further escalation of the conflict gripping Syria would result in "the destruction of the Syrian state, its disintegration and a partial victory of terrorists."

Washington claimed that Shayrat Airfield had been used to conduct a chemical attack on the town of Khan Shaykhun in Syria's Idlib province on April 4. Over 80 people were killed in the town due to the attack

The West held Damascus responsible for the purported gas attack, but Syria denied the accusation and stressed that the casualties in Khan Shaykhun were caused when a conventional airstrike hit a depot where militants stored chemical weapons.

Well-planned provocation

Elsewhere in his comments, Medvedev said that what happened in Khan Shaykhun was a "well-planned provocation from which, probably, the U.S. administration benefited."

He also called for a thorough investigation into the incident and warned against pointing the finger of blame at the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Russian foreign minister questions OPCW's Syria probes

Separately, Russian Foreign Minister Segei Lavrov has questioned the impartiality of probes being carried out by an international organization into accusations of a chemical attack in Syria.

A fact-finding mission was set up by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) into allegations that a Syrian government gas attack killed over 80 people in the town of Khan Shaykhun in Idlib Province on April 4. Damascus has denied the allegation, explaining that it gave up its entire chemical arms stockpile as part of a U.S.-Russia deal in 2014.

The single mission later split into two separate groups. One is now being led by Steven Wallis, a citizen of Britain, who works in contact with the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and the other is being headed by Wallis' fellow countryman Leonard Phillips, according to Russia's Permanent Representative at the OPCW, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin.

The latter group deals with the claims filed by Syrian militant groups, who are fighting to overthrow Assad.

Both groups interview survivors and gather bio-metric samples from the site of the April 4 incident.

On Tuesday, Lavrov said the fact that both groups were being headed by British citizens raised questions of bias.

"I would like to remind you that we have pointed out a very strange coincidence: that the two groups of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) on the potential use of chemical weapons in Syria are chaired by UK citizens."

He questioned the "strange coincidence" and described it as "contrary to the principles of an international organization, the structures of which must be maximally balanced."

The impartiality of the OPCW's investigatory work had been questioned by Russia before, too. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said last Friday that "Moscow believes that the conclusions formulated by the fact-finding mission in Syria are politically motivated, biased and requiring further clarification." He said Russia was "very skeptical" of the work they did.

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said on Tuesday that London would most probably support the U.S. if it decided to launch further attacks on Syrian government positions.

Lavrov further said in his Tuesday remarks that "many players in Syria, among the external opposition and in many countries in and outside the region" were trying to use the situation "to place the blame squarely on Bashar al-Assad."

People killed in separate air raids across Syria

Elsewhere, in Deir Az Zor, a suspected U.S.-led coalition air raid on Monday targeted the town of Al Bukamal on the Iraqi border and killed at least 15 people, including five children, the monitor said on Tuesday.

Earlier on Monday, a U.S.-led coalition air raid targeted Al Husseiniyeh in the western suburbs of Deir Az Zor and killed at least seven people, including one child.

As the Syrian foreign backed conflict enters its seventh year, more than 465,000 people have been killed in the fighting, more than a million injured and over 12 million Syrians - half the country's prewar population - have been displaced from their homes.

Evacuation of four Syria towns resumes after deadly bombing

The developments follow as evacuations of four areas in Syria have resumed days after the process, which is part of a deal between Damascus and militant groups, was interrupted by a bloody attack on a bus convoy carrying people from two Shia-majority villages in Idlib Province.

Some 45 buses carrying 3,000 civilians left the militant-besieged Shia villages of al-Foua and Kefraya near the northwestern city of Idlib on Wednesday morning, Syria's Central Military Media reported.

A convoy of 11 buses also moved armed men and their families from the town of al-Zabadani in Rif Dimashq Province.

Under the deal reached between the Syrian government and militants in late March, the residents of Foua and Kefraya will be taken to the outskirts of Aleppo City, while the militants and their families will be transferred from Zabadani and Madaya near Damascus to militant-held territory in Idlib.

The evacuation process kicked off on Friday following a brief delay, but it came to a halt a day later when a bomber blew up an explosives-laden car ripping through several buses carrying evacuees from Kefraya and Foua.

The terrorist attack killed at least 126 people, including 68 children, and injured dozens of others.

On Wednesday, three buses also carried the wounded as well as the bodies of the attack's victims.

The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) is supervising the evacuations, which is described as the biggest population swap of its kind.

The agreement also includes a prisoner swap, a ceasefire covering areas south of Damascus and aid deliveries.

Aleppo under attack

Hours after the evacuations resumed, Syrian state television said a bomb explosion ripped through the Salah al-din district in Aleppo City, killing six people and wounding some 32 others.

The report gave no further details of the incident.

The district, located west of Aleppo's Old City, was part of the last militant enclave in the area until it was liberated by the Syrian army in December 2016.

Syrian bus convoy attack is a war crime: OHCHR

Meantime, the UN says that a deadly attack on a bus convoy carrying people from two Shia-majority villages in the Idlib province amounts to a war crime.

"We add our voice to the condemnation of the attack near Rashideen near western rural Aleppo Governorate that hit a convoy carrying people from the besieged Syrian towns of Kefraya and Foua villages to government-controlled areas, killing dozens of people. It is an attack which likely amounts to a war crime," said a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Rupert Colville, on Tuesday.

He added that the UN has still not been able to determine who was behind the Saturday attack that killed over 100 people and injured many more, in which a bomber blew up an explosive-laden car.

Colville noted that the OHCHR has been informed that a number of the civilians injured in the attacks are still missing.

Earlier in the day, the UN Security Council also condemned the attack as a "barbaric and cowardly" action, expressing sympathies and condolences to the victim's families.

Iraq needs more camps for people fleeing ISIL in Mosul

An Iraqi official says that more camps are required to accommodate the flow of people fleeing the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist group in west Mosul.

"Food is available and medical services are being offered by the organizations, but what we really need is more camps. We call for a quick opening of the new camps currently under construction in Salamiya, Bartella and other areas to accommodate more people," said Iraqi Army Brigadier General Jabbar Hassona.

According to the United Nations, nearly half a million civilians had fled the area since the offensive to retake Mosul from ISIL terrorists started on October 17, 2016.

Hassona added that the flow of displaced persons goes up and down in accordance with the military operations in the city. "(It is) going up and down in accordance with the military operation and advancement made by our troops and the opening of safe passages for them," he said.

Meanwhile, the UN has warned that the civilian situation in west Mosul could become the worst during the entire conflict.

"If there is a siege and hundreds of thousands of people don't have water and don't have food, they will be at enormous risk," said Lisa Grande, the deputy special representative of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). "We could be facing a humanitarian catastrophe, perhaps the worst in the entire conflict," she added.

Iraqi army soldiers and pro-government fighters from Popular Mobilization Units (Hashd al-Sha'abi), have made sweeping gains against the Takfiri elements since launching the operation to retake Mosul.

The Iraqi forces took control of eastern Mosul in January after 100 days of fighting, and launched the battle in the west on February 19.

ISIL territory limited

Elsewhere, a high-ranking Iraqi military figure says ISIL Takfiri terrorists are only in control of six neighborhoods in the western part of Mosul as government forces, backed by volunteer fighters from Popular Mobilization Units, are battling to expel the extremists out of the country' second largest city.

The commander of the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), Lieutenant General Talib Shaghati, said on Tuesday that military forces continue to gain ground against ISIL terrorists, and are steadily liberating the remaining militant-held areas in western Mosul, Arabic-language and official al-Sabaah (The Morning) daily newspaper reported.

Shaghati added that Iraqi forces and their allies have already purged the Takfiris from 32 districts out of the total 38 in addition to the strategic Mosul International Airport and Ghazlani military base.

The remarks came a day after Hossam al-Abbar, a member of the Nineveh provincial council, also said in a statement that security forces had been in control of 75 percent of the western side of Mosul.

He said battles were concentrated around the centuries-old Grand al-Nuri Mosque, and troops were preparing to storm the area with snipers, hand grenades and assault rifles.

Abbar stressed that government forces would not use artillery units and airstrikes during the forthcoming offensive in order to prevent civilian casualties.

(Source: agencies)

Erdogan to meet Trump in May

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet the U.S. President Donald Trump in May, the Turkish foreign minister said on Wednesday, after the U.S. president congratulated the Turkish leader for winning a referendum on enhancing his powers.

"We will determine a date for the two presidents to meet in May before the NATO summit as previously confirmed by the leaders," Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters in Ankara.

The NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) summit is scheduled to be held in late May in Brussels and Trump is due to attend. Cavusoglu did not specify if the meeting would take place on the sidelines of the summit or at another venue.

After Erdogan's narrow win in Sunday's referendum on creating an executive presidency, Trump congratulated the Turkish leader in a phone call Monday, in contrast to the muted reaction of European leaders to the result, which has been challenged by the opposition.

Cavusoglu said that during their call the two leaders had expressed a common desire to meet in Washington "to improve bilateral relations".

Turkey hopes ties with the Trump administration will improve after relations soured between the NATO allies during Barack Obama's term over Syria and Turkey's calls for U.S.-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen to be extradited.

Gulen is accused of ordering last July's failed coup and Ankara has repeatedly called for his extradition. The preacher vehemently denies Turkey's accusations.

Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson became the most senior American official to visit Turkey since Trump took office in January.

Tillerson met Turkish leaders and discussed the six-year Syrian civil war and the fight against the Islamic States in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist group.

The U.S. believes Kurdish militia are the most effective fighting force against ISIL in Syria but Ankara claims they are terrorists linked to outlawed Kurdish militants waging an insurgency inside Turkey.

These tensions have cast a shadow over the relationship and also raised questions over whether Turkey would take part in any U.S.-led operation to oust ISIL terrorists from their de-facto capital of Raqqa.

In an interview with CNN, Erdogan was upbeat on the new U.S. administration, as tensions rise between Ankara and the European Union.

"The way president Trump is approaching these matters makes us happy," he said.

"We can resolve significant problems. We do not have any difficulties on that front," Erdogan added.

(Source: AFP)

Britain's parliament votes in favor of early national election

Britain's parliament voted by 522 to 13 on Wednesday in favor of Prime Minister Theresa May's plan to hold an early national election.

Britain had not been due to hold a national election until 2020 but May said on Tuesday she wanted to bring that forward to June 8 this year in order to strengthen her hand in Brexit negotiations with the European Union.

She needed to win the backing of more than two thirds of parliament's 650 members in order to hold an early election.

(Source: Reuters)

Italy urges Turkey to release jailed reporter

Italy on Wednesday called on Turkey to release a journalist arrested this month near the Syrian border while he was researching refugees.

Gabriele Del Grande, 34, was clapped in cuffs by Turkish police on April 9 during interviews with people who had fled the war-torn neighboring country for a book he is writing on the conflict and the birth of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISISL/Daesh) terrorist group.

The foreign ministry in Rome said in a statement that the journalist had managed to speak to his relatives by telephone on Tuesday but that "this is obviously not enough".

European Parliament President Antonio Tajani, an Italian politician, also called for Del Grande's immediate release.

He tweeted: "I call for the immediate release of #DelGrande and all journalists unjustly detained in Turkey. No democracy without freedom of expression."

Del Grande, who is also a blogger, writer and human rights activist, was detained at an identification center in Hatay in southern Turkey before being transferred to Mugla in the country's southwest, Italian media reported.

"My documents are in order, but I have not been able to nominate a lawyer, nor have I been told when I will be released," he was quoted as telling his family.

While he said he had not been harmed, the reporter said his telephone and other personal belongings had been confiscated and he had been "interrogated" on the content of his research.

Del Grande, who comes from Lucca in Tuscany, was a co-author and co-director of a documentary on Syrian and Palestinian refugees, "Io sto con la sposa" ("On the Bride's Side") that was presented at the Venice Film Festival in 2014.

(Source: AFP)

NEWS IN BRIEF

Tehran, Helsinki sign MOU on customs co-op

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** Head of Islamic Republic of Iran's Customs Administration (IRICA) Masoud Karbasian and Director General of Finnish Customs Antti Hartikainen signed an MOU on customs cooperation in Helsinki, IRNA reported on Wednesday.

The MOU is Iran's first agreement of kind with a European country since the implementation of JCPOA.

Under the terms of the inked MOU, Iran and Finland's customs organizations will cooperate on customs regulations, value of goods, commodity classification, transportation regulations, as well as countering narcotics.

Iran inks MOU with major Portuguese insurer co.

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** Export Guarantee Fund of Iran (EGFI), signed a cooperation MOU with Companhia de Seguro de Créditos S.A. (COSEC), the leading insurer in Portugal for credit and bond insurance, Tasnim news agency reported on Wednesday.

According to the penned MOU, the two sides will collaborate on transferring economic data, commerce, banking, expansion of insurance coverage, and etc.

The MOU signing ceremony was reportedly attended by the Portuguese Secretary of State of Internationalization Jorge Costa Oliveira as well as the two companies' managing directors.

Australian economy set to prosper as commodities recover, says IMF

The global economy is gaining momentum which should be good news for Australia's commodities-based economy.

But the International Monetary Fund has again raised concerns about a growing shift towards trade protectionism and a breakdown of international economic collaboration which took root after the second world war.

In its latest world economic outlook released In Washington overnight, the IMF has raised its global growth forecast for 2017 to 3.5% after expanding by 3.1% last year.

Australian growth is predicted to rise to 3.1% this year after 2.5% in 2016, which should see the unemployment rate shrink to 5.2% from 5.9% now.

The IMF says commodity-exporting economies such as Australia are set to recover, especially given the average 20% increase in coal prices.

"The acceleration in activity will be supported by accommodative monetary policies, supportive fiscal policies or infrastructure investment, improving sentiment following the upturn in commodity prices, and less drag from declining investment in the commodity sector," it says in the report.

But IMF economic counsellor Maurice Obstfeld said while there is a chance economic growth will exceed expectations, significant downside risks continue to cloud the medium-term outlook.

"One salient threat is a turn toward protectionism, leading to trade warfare," he says.

"The global economy seems to be gaining momentum – we could be at a turning point – but even as things look up, the postwar system of international economic relations is under severe strain despite the aggregate benefits it has delivered." *(Source: The Guardian)*

IMF raises growth forecast for the global economy

1 → "There was already uncertainty on how the negotiation would go and what its final outlines would be. So, it may be that this is a tradeoff of a little more uncertainty before June 8 for less uncertainty later," Obstfeld told a news conference.

Although growth looks to be strengthening broadly among advanced and emerging market economies as well oil and commodity exporters that are starting to benefit from a commodity price recovery, including Russia and Brazil, the IMF said the recovery remains fragile.

The outlook faces headwinds from chronically weak productivity growth and policies that could constrict trade, the IMF said. It did not specifically mention the Trump administration's "America First" trade agenda aimed at reducing U.S. trade deficits and turning away more imports.

"One salient threat is a turn toward protectionism, leading to trade warfare," Obstfeld said, adding this "would result in a self-inflicted wound that would lead to higher prices for consumers, lower productivity and therefore, lower overall real income for households."

The case against trade protectionism is expected to be a major theme of the semi-annual gathering of finance officials from the IMF, the World Bank and the Group of 20 major economies later this week. IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde warned last week that a "sword of protectionism" hung over a brightening global outlook.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross pushed back in a Financial Times interview, saying such warnings were aimed at the Trump administration and were "rubbish," because the United States was less protectionist than its trading partners.

The IMF also said that risks to the global outlook also could come from a faster-than-expected pace of interest rate hikes in the United States, which could trigger a sharp rise in the dollar and disruptive capital outflows from emerging markets. The Fund also said China's strong growth was clouded in the medium term by "growing vulnerabilities" associated with its reliance credit-fueled growth. *(Source: The Fortune)*

IPF to bring world of petrochemicals together

1 → "The motto of this edition of IPF is 'Bringing the World of Petrochemicals Together', in a way that we bring main players of petrochemical industry in the world together to benefit from their experiences," Alavi further stated.

In this due, some specialized sessions and panels, a workshop and an exhibition will be also held on the sidelines of the forum, she said adding that 20 foreigners and 12 Iranians will deliver speech in the event.

The official mentioned market and technology trends in petrochemical industry, petrochemical feedstock in Iran and development potentials, outlook of petrochemical industry in Iran and in the world, chain of value in petrochemical industry, and technological development in petrochemical industry as the subjects of specialized sessions, and petrochemical projects, investment and finance, modern technology, development and transfer of technology as the subjects of panels to be held on the sidelines of the IPF.

She said a risk management workshop will be also held by The Global Institute for Risk Management Standards of Belgium.

The IPF manager named Marziyeh Shahdaie, the managing director of NPC, Mohammad-Hossein Adeli, the secretary general of Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), Ali Tayyebnia, Iranian finance minister, Mohammad Khazaei, deputy finance minister as well as the head of Organization for Investment, Economic and Technical Assistance of Iran, Amir-Hossein Zamaninia, deputy oil minister for trade and international affairs, Mehdi Karbasian, the managing director of Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO), and Adel Nejad Salim, the managing director of Persian Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company as some Iranian spokespersons of the event.

Director for Planning and Development in the National Petrochemical Company (NPC) Farnaz Alavi (Photo: Asghar Khamseh, Tehran Times)

'Investment attraction main goal of IPF'

Alavi further mentioned attraction of investment to the petrochemical industry the main objective of IPF and said laying the ground in this due, for example providing related insurances, is one of the main items paid attention by the NPC.

"The other important goal is to create an opportunity for our specialized companies, consultation companies, manufacturers and equipment suppliers to showcase their capabilities", she said and referred to introducing domestic achievements in the field of technology as the other significant goal.

Developments in upstream sector of oil industry which has resulted in stable supply of feedstock to the petrochemical complexes is the other objective of IPF, she mentioned, adding factors for invigorating petrochemical industry both in Iran and in the region is another objective.

Given the policies of Oil Ministry for development of petrochemical industry, NPC has identified some areas for development and in this due introducing the regions projected to be petrochemical hubs in the country is another goal of the event, the official added.

'Many negotiations with foreigners since 12th IPF'

"Since the previous edition of IPF (which was held on December 13-14, 2015) We have had many negotiations with foreign companies, with many of them we have set up some specialized groups to investigate the economic requirements for preparing the investment condition in Iran and these groups have been conducting related studies since many months ago", the NPC director told the Tehran Times.

"We hope that the barriers in this due will be removed in near future", she added.

Elsewhere in her remarks, the official said, "As investment attraction is a determining factor for us, we have also negotiated with some international banks and insurance institutes since the previous edition to remove the barriers in terms of transferring money."

Iran's Sixth Five-Year National Development Plan (2016-2021) has envisaged attraction of $40 billion investment to the petrochemical sector. In this regard, NPC and private petrochemical companies are making their most efforts to take necessary measures for attracting foreign companies to investment making in the country, she added.

Value of Iran's foodstuff exports up 8% yr/yr

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** Iran's exports of foodstuffs during the last Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20, 2017) stood at $2.77 billion to register an 8 percent rise compared to the preceding year, Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPO) announced.

According to Tasnim news agency, TPO put the weight of exported goods in this category at 1.178 million tons during the mentioned time span.

Oils, essences and extracts, various food products, grain products, biscuits,

bread, pastries, dairy products, food pastes, pasta and yeast, tomato paste, sugar and its products have been announced as the main contributors to the increase in exports in this area.

Iran-EU trade up 171% in Jan.

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** The European Union's trade with Iran amounted to €1.55 billion in January 2017, a 171 percent rise compared to the first month of 2016, based on the latest figures released by the European Union's statistics agency Eurostat.

The figure was €572 million in January 2016, Tasnim news agency reported.

Iran's exports to the EU stood at €772 million in the said time, with 6.5-fold rise from €120 million in the same period in the preceding year. The noticeable increase is due to the EU's resumption of oil

imports from Iran.

After the lifting of sanctions against the country in January 2016, Iran's been trying to regain its traditional European clients.

IMF sees Iran's GDP growth at 3.3% in 2017

ECONOMY desk **TEHRAN —** The International Monetary Fund (IMF) in its latest World Economic Outlook titled "Gaining Momentum?" predicted a 3.3 percent real GDP growth for the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2017.

According to the report, Iran's GDP will experience a 3.3 percent fall in 2017 compared to the preceding year, while the country's consumer price inflation will stand at 11.2 percent in 2017 to register a 1.3 percent increase compared to 2016.

Current account balance in Iran which has been 6.5 percent of GDP in 2016 will ease at 5.3 percent of GDP in the current year.

For oil exporters of the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (MENAP) on average, IMF foresees 5.8 percent inflation in 2017.

Current account balance in MENAP oil exporting countries will reach 0.4 percent in 2017 and 0.6 percent in 2018.

Real GDP growth for MENAP oil exporters will stand at 1.9 percent in 2017 and 2.9 percent in the following year. The figures will be 4.0 percent and 4.4 percent for MENAP oil importers in 2017 and 2018, respectively.

Based on the report, oil prices remain the key driver of the outlook for MENAP oil exporters given their high dependence on hydrocarbon budget revenues and exports.

Iran Air opens a new chapter in its history with ATR

The contract with Iran Air enables ATR to welcome a new operator and introduce the most modern version of its aircraft in a market poised for significant growth, the official website of ATR announced on Wednesday.

ATR is proud to confirm the signing of a contract with Iran Air for the introduction of 20 ATR 72-600 aircraft between now and the end of next year. The Iranian national airline is about to open a new chapter in its history, by seizing the opportunity to grow its business and modernize its regional network.

Iran is expected to require 500 new aircraft in the next 10 years, including over 100 replacements for regional aircraft that are over 20 years old. Another key factor is that over a third of

Iranian domestic flights cover routes of less than 300 nautical miles - distances for which ATR offers the best solution, in terms of comfort as well as flexibility, reliability and operational costs.

The first ATR-600 aircraft operated by Iran Air are scheduled to take off for Tehran within the next weeks. The contract also includes options for 20 additional aircraft.

(Source: ATR website)

Lufthansa in talks with Iran Air over catering, maintenance deals

Lufthansa is in talks with Iran Air over providing catering, maintenance and pilot training services as it seeks to take advantage of new business opportunities in the country, executives from the German carrier said on Wednesday.

"We are in very, very intense discussions, actually almost on a weekly basis," Lufthansa Group's regional director for Persian Gulf, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Karsten Zang, said at an event in Dubai.

He said any agreement could take time though given the upcoming elections in Iran in May.

"We are talking with Iran Air because their new aircraft is coming. They need training, of course, and we have the experience in all of these fields but we can't give timelines," he added.

Lufthansa last year agreed a limited code share deal with Etihad and in February strengthened the cooperation with a catering deal and a tentative plan to look at cooperation on maintenance.

Lufthansa sales executive Heike Birlenbach said the two were discussing the next steps on the maintenance memorandum of understanding, though no timeline had been set.

(Source: Reuters)

UK 'sleepwalking into becoming low-value, low-skilled economy, CIPD says

The UK is sleepwalking into becoming a low-value, low-skills economy which leaves the nation ill-prepared for its post-Brexit future, a respected body has warned.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel Development criticized Government and businesses for "two decades of underinvestment" that have left the UK lagging well behind its competitors on at least four key measures including literacy and numeracy, learning and development, and digital skills.

The damning analysis comes in response to the Government's Industrial Strategy Green Paper and highlights multiple failings in the UK's skills system.

England and Northern Ireland together rank in the bottom four OECD countries for literacy and numeracy among 16-24 year olds, while the UK as a whole comes bottom of the class of 19 countries on young peoples' computer problem-solving skills.

UK employers spend less on training than other major economies and the gap has widened since 2005. In 2010, the cost per employee was €266 in the UK, just over half the average of €511 across the EU, the CIPD found.

The UK is also fourth from the bottom on the EU league table for adult job-related training, with evidence showing a marked deterioration since 2007.

The CIPD called on the Government to increase funding for workplace training, put skills at the heart of the industrial strategy and broaden the scope of the Apprenticeship Levy to make it a training levy.

Lizzie Crowley, skills adviser for the CIPD and co-author of the report said: "This is a sobering analysis of the state of skills in the UK. Our report should serve as a real wake-up call for the Government to break with the past two decades of failed skills policy and set the UK on a new course that delivers the right results for individuals, organizations and the economy as a whole.

"While more efforts are being made to reform education, it's clear that there needs to be a much greater emphasis on learning and development in the workplace. As we move towards Brexit, and possible restrictions on overseas talent, it's crucial that government works in partnership with education providers and businesses to address these deep-rooted issues that continue to blight individual and business potential." *(Source: The Independent)*

Iran may keep same oil output if others extend cuts, Kuwait says

Iran will probably be allowed to keep its oil production unchanged if OPEC decides to extend its six-month agreement on output cuts beyond June, Kuwaiti Oil Minister Issam Almarzooq said.

"I think they will keep the same level if the deal is extended," Almarzooq, who chairs the committee monitoring the cuts, said Wednesday in an interview in Abu Dhabi. Kuwait was the first country to call for extending the production cuts beyond June. Oil prices will increase as demand improves, chipping away at oil inventories in the second half, he said.

Iran was allowed to increase its output under the deal as the nation rebuilds from international sanctions that crippled its energy industry. Since sanctions were eased in January 2016, Iran's oil production has climbed 35 percent, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. It has stabilized this year, gaining less than 2 percent, the data show. Iran pumped just near its 3.8 million barrels a day allowed under the deal in the first quarter, according to the International Energy Agency.

"They are not cutting, but they aren't increasing output from what was agreed on," Almarzooq said on the sidelines of a conference in the U.A.E. capital. Iran is showing "good cooperation with OPEC" under the deal, he said.

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries will decide at its meeting on May 25 whether to prolong the cuts, Secretary General Mohammad Barkindo said.

It's too soon to talk about Iran, Libya and Nigeria joining the cuts if the output reduction agreement is extended beyond June, Barkindo and United Arab Emirates Energy Minister Suhail Al Mazrouei said at the Abu Dhabi conference. Nigeria and Libya were exempt from any obligation to cut as both countries continue to suffer production losses from militant attacks and political instability.

(Source: Bloomberg)

IMF sharply cuts Mideast oil exporters' economic growth forecasts

The IMF said on Tuesday it had cut its forecast for Persian Gulf oil producers' economic growth this year, as their output cut deal is expected to wipe out any gains from higher oil prices in terms of government revenue.

The gloomy regional prediction is in contrast to a slightly brighter outlook for the world economy as a whole, which the IMF projects will grow by 3.5 percent this year, up 0.1 percent from its previous update and up from a growth rate of 3.1 percent last year. It left its forecast for next year at 3.6 percent.

"The expected growth improvements in 2017 and 2018 are broadly based," said Maurice Obstfeld, the IMF's head of research, but he added that "growth remains tepid in many advanced economies, and commodity exporters continue to struggle".

The IMF also said there is a downside threat to broad economic growth from protectionist trade policies that have been gaining political traction in the more advanced economies, especially the U.S., under President Donald Trump, as well as the UK and some parts of Europe, which have turned anti-globalist.

The IMF said it expects real GDP growth for the seven oil-exporting countries in the Middle East of 1.9 percent this year, which is a full percentage point lower than the 2.9 percent growth it forecast for the group in October.

Saudi Arabia's growth is forecast to grow at just 0.4 percent this year, compared with last October's projection of 2 percent. The UAE's forecast has been cut to 1.5 percent from 2.5 percent forecast in October.

The hardest hit within the group is Iraq, where 0.5 percent growth had been expected, but it is now forecast to contract by 3.1 percent. Also forecast to contract is Kuwait, by 0.2 percent, compared with a previous forecast of 2.6 percent growth.

"Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are bearing the brunt of the cuts," the IMF said, referring to the deal reached in November to cut OPEC production by 1.2 million barrels per day (bpd) to 32.5 million bpd. Saudi Arabia agreed to make up about half of the total cut and has been producing at a rate of about 10 million bpd since the deal took effect in January, compared with record production of about 10.7 million bpd last autumn.

OPEC was joined by 11 other producers from outside the group, led by Russia, the world's largest oil producer, and the deal was to run for an initial six months, but it is widely expected to be extended at least until the end of the year.

While the deal is credited with a rise of about 20 percent in oil prices over the past few months, the lost production is biting on those bearing the heaviest load. The lower forecast for Saudi Arabia brings the IMF into line with many other economic forecasters.

"It seems the IMF has finally come around to the view that the kingdom's growth is going to be weak for sometime in this 'lower for longer' oil price environment," said Jason Tuvey, a regional analyst at Capital Economics.

(Source: thenational.ae)

China's record crude imports, refinery output are somewhat deceptive: Russell

Record crude imports and refinery processing in the first quarter give China's oil sector the appearance of exceptional strength, but in this case looks can be a little deceiving.

This isn't to say that China's crude demand and refinery throughput is weak in any shape or form, rather that there are factors that make it look stronger than it actually is on a fundamental basis.

Looking at the refining sector first, March saw 11.19 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude being processed, just below the record high for December and 5.9 percent above the same month last year.

In the first quarter, official figures show that 11.21 million bpd of crude was processed, up about 590,000 bpd, or 4.5 percent, from the same period last year.

But not all of that extra 590,000 bpd of fuel production has been consumed, with customs data showing some of the increase in refinery throughput has been exported.

Exports of refined products were 11.96 million tons in the first quarter, up 22 percent from the same period in 2016.

Using the BP Plc conversion factor of 8 barrels per ton of products, it works out that China's fuel exports in the first quarter were about 1.06 million bpd.

This is about 203,000 bpd more than the 857,000 bpd exported in the first quarter of last year.

This means that of the 590,000 bpd increase in refinery production in the first quarter of 2017, about 390,000 bpd was available on the domestic market, with the balance being exported.

It's also the case that China's inventories of refined products have been growing, with commercial stocks gaining 15.3 percent in February from the prior month to reach the highest since at least 2014.

These higher inventories are likely the result of lower growth in domestic fuel consumption.

Overall, what the numbers show is that China's domestic fuel demand is growing, but just not as strongly as implied by the record refinery throughput in the first quarter.

Crude imports boosted by storage

It's much the same story for crude oil, with China importing record volumes in both March and the first quarter

March imports were 9.17 million bpd, well above December's previous record of 8.57 million bpd, while first-quarter imports reached 8.49 million bpd, up 15 percent on the same period last year.

With crude oil imports at an all-time high, it certainly suggests robust demand, but there are a few factors that temper the bullish picture.

The first is that higher imports are partly replacing lower domestic crude production, with official figure showing output was 3.89 million bpd in the first quarter, down 6.8 percent from the same period in 2016.

Another factor is the amount of crude being placed in either commercial or strategic storages.

Exact volumes aren't disclosed by the authorities in Beijing but an estimate can be made by adding crude imports to domestic output, and then subtracting the amount processed by refiners.

On this basis, 12.38 million bpd of crude was available for refining in the first quarter, but only 11.21 million bpd was actually processed, leaving a surplus of 1.17 million bpd.

This 1.17 million bpd of surplus crude is most likely to have flowed into both commercial and strategic storages.

It's also a higher figure than the 805,400 bpd of surplus crude from the first quarter of 2016, meaning that the pace of inventory building has picked up in the first quarter of this year.

While the outlook for inventory builds in coming quarters is uncertain, it does seem more likely that exports of refined products may ease, given that the authorities have lowered the amount of fuel that can be exported under the quota system.

This may lead to a moderation in growth in crude oil imports and refinery throughput in coming quarters.

(Source: Reuters)

Oil stable as OPEC says it is committed to rebalance markets

Oil prices were stable on Wednesday as OPEC said it was committed to draw down a global supply overhang that has dogged markets since 2014, although bloated U.S. output and inventories still weighed on crude.

Brent crude futures were at $54.92 per barrel at 0741 GMT (3:41 a.m. ET), close to its last close.

U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures were also almost unchanged at $52.43 a barrel.

Traders said prices were supported by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) secretary general, who said the group was committed to restoring market stability by bringing global inventories down to the industry's five-year average.

OPEC, together with other producers like Russia, has agreed to cut output by almost 1.8 million barrels per day (bpd) during the first half of the year to rein in a global fuel supply overhang that has dragged on markets since mid-2014.

A fall in shipments from top exporter Saudi Arabia also lent the market some support.

Saudi crude exports fell to 6.96 million bpd in February, from 7.7 million bpd in January, according to the Joint Organizations Data Initiative (Jodi). Its production, however, rose to 10 million bpd in February, up from 9.75 million bpd in January, as domestic refiners processed more oil.

In politics, U.S. President Donald Trump ordered a review of whether the lifting of sanctions against Iran under a 2015 nuclear deal was in the United States' national security interests.

Many U.S. sanctions against Iran were lifted in late 2015, allowing Tehran to more than double its crude oil exports over 2016, adding to the existing global glut.

Data from the American Petroleum Institute (API) on Tuesday showed that U.S. markets remained bloated.

Although crude inventories fell by 840,000 barrels in the week to April 14 to 531.6 million barrels, they still held near record highs, while gasoline stocks rose by 1.4 million barrels as refinery runs increased by 334,000 bpd, the API said.

The API reported surprisingly that gasoline inventories increased, while crude oil stocks fell by less than expected, said Sukrit Vijayakar, director of energy consultancy Trifecta.

"Unless the (EIA) data shows something drastically different, this report should cause a severe dent in the bullish case (for oil prices)," Vijayakar said.

Official U.S. oil data is expected to be published later on Wednesday by the Energy Information Administration (EIA).

(Source: Reuters)

10 European countries that are going big on renewable energy

(10) Romania – 24.8 percent

Nearly a quarter of Romania's gross final consumption comes from renewable energy, beating its national target of 24 percent and far exceeding the European target of 20 percent.

(9) Lithuania – 25.8 percent

Lithuania's ministry of Energy says that the sustainable development of energy from renewables is "an important pillar" of its energy policy.

In January 2017, the ministry said that Lithuania was home to more than 2,500 power plants holding permits to produce electricity from renewable sources such as wind, solar and hydro.

(8) Portugal – 28.0 percent

In 2016, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said that renewable energy in Portugal had made "strong progress" over the past decade and that the country had become "one of Europe's leaders in terms of use of renewable energy sources ... Such as wind and micro-generation."

(7) Estonia – 28.6 percent

According to Estonia's ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications, the country's energy needs are, in large part, met by oil shale and renewable fuels.

The ministry has said that as renewable energy technologies develop and become cheaper, a range of "renewable energy generation plants are becoming more competitive and available."

(6) Croatia – 29.0 percent

At more than 2.1 gigawatts, hydropower represents a large chunk of Croatia's installed renewable capacity, according to the World Energy Council, with wind and solar following on behind.

(5) Denmark – 30.8 percent

Denmark is a big player when it comes to wind energy. According to the Danish Wind Industry Association, more than 31,000 people worked in the industry in 2015.

(4) Austria – 33.0 percent

Hydropower is a big deal in Austria. According to the World Energy Council, it is home to more than 13 gigawatts of installed hydropower capacity.

Austria is also home to more than 2.4 gigawatts of installed wind capacity and 900 megawatts of installed solar capacity.

(3) Latvia – 37.6 percent

A 2015 report from the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia stated that hydropower and gas were providing the majority of domestic electricity supply, with wind and biomass also "contributing to the mix in recent years."

Hydroelectric plants produced 39 percent of the country's total electricity generation in 2014.

(2) Finland – 39.3 percent

Finland's ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment says that bioenergy, hydropower, wind power and ground heat are among its most important sources of renewable energy.

(1) Sweden – 53.9 percent

Sweden leads the way with over half its energy coming from renewables in its gross final consumption.

According to Swedish authorities, in 1970 oil accounted for over 75 percent of its energy supplies, with that figure falling to roughly 20 percent today.

(Source: CNBC)

Saudi oil exports drop to 2015 low as kingdom sticks to cuts

Saudi Arabia, the world's largest crude shipper, trimmed exports to a 21-month low in February as local refineries took advantage of more abundant supplies and processed a record amount of crude.

Oil exports fell to 6.95 million barrels a day, the lowest since May 2015, from 7.7 million a day in January, according to data published Tuesday on the Riyadh-based Joint Organizations Data Initiative website. The kingdom boosted production to 10 million barrels a day from 9.7 million a day, the data show.

Saudi Arabia is bearing the brunt of the output cuts that members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries pledged to make in the first six months of this year. It committed to pump no more than 10.058 million barrels a day, as OPEC and other major producers sought to rein in global oversupply and support prices.

Saudi refineries increased the amount of crude they processed in the month by 26 percent to 2.67 million barrels a day, the highest in JODI data going back to January 2002. The amount of crude used directly as fuel in power plants and other facilities also rose, as did volume in storage. Stockpiles increased to 264.7 million barrels at the end of February from almost 262 million barrels in January.

(Source: Bloomberg)

Britain›s energy minister wants UK to stay in EU internal energy market

Britain should continue to participate in the European Union's internal energy market when it leaves the 28-nation bloc, the UK's Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Greg Clark told a parliamentary committee on Wednesday.

"It is very much in our interest to continue to participate in the energy market and expand those interconnections, especially in Ireland," Clark said.

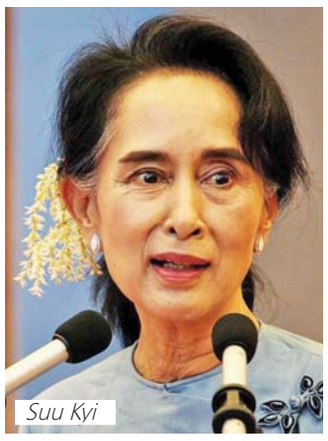
"I think it would be better if we continue (in it) and a bad thing if that were to be disrupted," he added.

(Source: Reuters)

Ending Myanmar's blame game

By José Ramos-Horta

Human rights abuses in Myanmar's Rakhine state have led to mounting international condemnation and calls for a United Nations commission of inquiry. The atrocities there must be investigated, and their perpetrators held to account. But the situation in Rakhine is now fueling criticism of Myanmar's de facto head of government, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, in a way that is obscuring the military's responsibility in the crisis.


Suu Kyi

Condemning Suu Kyi, a former dissident and Nobel Peace Prize winner, for not using her position as a megaphone to address the problem may be emotionally satisfying, but it does not help those most in need. It is simply wrong to say that Suu Kyi has done nothing in the face of the horrors being perpetrated in Rakhine. One must remember that Myanmar is undergoing a fragile political transition, under a constitution that gives the military a leading role in national politics, while constraining Suu Kyi.

Myanmar's leaders

Given that atrocities are still being committed, it would be premature to excuse or defend any of Myanmar's leaders. But we should identify the right targets for criticism. Suu Kyi has been hung out to dry while Myanmar's generals – who misruled the country for decades – have been allowed to step back as the conflict escalates.

And Suu Kyi's critics should recognize that the generals have reserved the capacity to step back in, should she suffer too much political damage. Myanmar's 2008 military-decreed constitution allows them to stage a coup d'etat whenever they deem it necessary to restore order. The international community should not let itself be held hostage by this possibility, but it must be borne in mind.

Although Suu Kyi led the National League for Democracy to an overwhelming victory in the 2015 parliamentary election, she does not have complete authority over the government or the state. The fact that she was barred from occupying the presidency, and forced to accept the title of "state counselor," speaks to the inadequacies of Myanmar's constitution. The generals never intended to let a civilian government hold them to account.

As state counselor, Suu Kyi has the same responsibilities as other heads of state, but not nearly as much power. The military's commander-in-chief, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, meanwhile, has little responsibility, but far more power than Suu Kyi.

So, rather than focusing solely on Suu Kyi, the international community should be pressing the military and the Rakhine state Parliament to work alongside the government and other parties toward peace. They can start by helping to implement the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Suu Kyi has already committed her government to enacting the commission's recommendations, and it is now time for the military and Rakhine officials to do the same.

There is also an urgent need for stronger commitments at the international level: to help provide services, defend the rule of law – in Rakhine and in Myanmar generally – and search for lasting solutions to the crisis. Curtailing development aid, as some of Suu Kyi's critics have proposed, would only serve the military's interests. Simply put, creating a culture that respects human rights and the rule of law – long ignored and violated in Myanmar – won't happen overnight.

That is why the international community should back a long-term strategy of support for Myanmar, while condemning abuses when they occur. International inquiries and fact-finding missions will not put an end to the violence, and could even inflame an already volatile situation.

Dangerous turn

According to the International Crisis Group, developments in Rakhine took a "dangerous turn" in October 2016, when Rohingya militants – who have been radicalized, armed and funded from abroad – launched a series of attacks against border-guard outposts.

Among all of the stakeholders, Myanmar's military has the most power to end the conflict. An armed insurgency was allowed to radicalize and foment strife and division in Rakhine on the generals' watch. If the generals cannot move beyond their traditional modus operandi of command, control and, in this case, containment, they should bear the blame for the crisis.

Myanmar's government, despite having far less power than the military, has taken action to find long-term solutions that will secure a lasting peace. But achieving peace will be a long, painful process. Rakhine state has not experienced peace or prosperity for more than half a century. After decades of colonization, military rule, ethnic and religious conflict, and civil wars, Rakhine has been left in a state of abject poverty and division.

This grim history includes the Japanese occupation during World War II, which precipitated the 1942 Arakan massacres – a period of communal violence between British V Force-armed Kamam Muslims (today's Rohingya) and Buddhist Rakhine villagers. Today, against the backdrop of the North Arakan Muslim League's demand for annexation to Pakistan to secure an autonomous state within Rakhine, a separatist Arakanese Independence Movement has been actively, and often violently, pursuing independence.

No UN commission of inquiry can unpack this history. Creating a peaceful, prosperous state and society in Rakhine will take slow, deliberate actions that are aimed specifically at building trust and a culture of respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Only Hlaing, the military's commander-in-chief, has the power to launch a genuine reconciliation effort. He would do well to ignore Suu Kyi's critics, and to listen to those who are calling on him to work collaboratively with her government. There is no other path to peace.

(Source: The Daily Star)

It's time to break off EU membership talks with Turkey

By Markus Becker

With Turkey's vote on Sunday for sweeping constitutional reforms, autocratic President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has consolidated his power and divided the country. The referendum on the Turkish Constitution is just one further example in the year of Brexit of the dubious value of referenda. There is likely to be much talk in the coming days of a majority vote, regardless how narrow it was (51.4-48.8), and how it must be respected.

For the European Union, however, there can only be one outcome: Membership negotiations with Turkey should be terminated.

The Turks have voted for autocracy, for the repression of political opponents and likely also for the introduction of the death penalty. None of these can be reconciled with membership in the EU. For Brussels now, at the very latest, the time has come to call the accession process what it is: dead.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Feburary

Turks have voted to give their autocratic president even more power, with few checks and balances. By doing so, they have cast their ballot against the values of the European Union. It's time for the EU to take action by ending membership talks with Turkey.

The counter arguments

One popular counter argument is that the EU will lose any of the influence it has in Ankara by breaking off negotiations. But where was that influence in 2013 when Erdogan beat down the protests in Gezi Park? Where was it when Erdogan deliberately escalated the conflict with the Kurds as part of a domestic power play? And where was that EU influence when, right after last summer's military coup attempt, Erdogan had tens of thousands of people rounded up and thrown into jail, including numerous journalists? And where was it when Erdogan stirred up hatred against EU countries to win his constitutional referendum?

A further argument against breaking off negotiations is that it would even further weaken democratic forces inside Turkey. That could, of course, happen. But the EU ought to be paying closer attention to the democracies within Europe that are already imperiled. Autocrats are currently in power in Hungary and Poland, both member states, and the EU has done little to show that it can stand up to the in part openly anti-EU and anti-democratic polices of Viktor Orbán and Jaroslaw Kaczynski. If they now buckle in the face of a Turkish autocrat, they will further damage their credibility while at the same time weakening those who have been fighting to force Poland and Hungary to preserve a free democratic order.

Even the third argument against stopping negotiations has little traction -- namely ensuring that Erdogan doesn't withdraw from the refugee deal with Europe. One reason this argument doesn't work is that the closure to a large degree of the West Balkan route used by refugees to get to Central Europe has contributed at least as much to the reduction in refugees and migrants as has the deal the EU reached with Erdogan. Second, the deal comes with billions of euros in aid that are advantageous enough for Turkey that it wouldn't likely just walk away from the deal.

None of this means that the EU should suspend all efforts in working together with Turkey. But it should be more honest in the way it does so by communicating to Turkey that it is interested in deeper economic ties rather than EU membership for the country. That would likely create greater opportunities for the EU to assert political influence over Turkey, because Erdogan is in fact dependent on having good economic relations with Europe.

EU membership for Turkey is also inconceivable in the longer term. The European states need to speak openly about this once and for all -- if for no other reason than to prevent the EU's further disintegration.

(Source: Spiegel)

How the U.S. and China can find common ground on North Korea

For the moment, fear of U.S. retaliation appears to have dissuaded North Korea from conducting another nuclear test. But the respite is only temporary. Lasting progress will require something more than saying a U.S. "armada" will be diverted toward the Korean Peninsula.

To its credit, the U.S. also seems to be redoubling its efforts to get cooperation from the one country that has the most leverage with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un: China. But if the U.S. is to work with China, then it's important to be realistic.

Unilaterally levying sanctions on Chinese banks and companies that do business with the North would probably only drive the two countries closer together. Instead, U.S. officials should be conferring with their Chinese counterparts on specific measures that would both impose pain on the Pyongyang regime and disrupt the flow of money and technology that sustains its illicit weapons programs. The goal wouldn't be to bring down Kim Jong Un, but to ensure he and those around him think twice about how much support they can continue to expect from Beijing.

The U.S. can offer China a couple things in return, beyond the unspecified trade concessions Trump has already hinted at. First, U.S. officials should be willing to address Chinese concerns about the future of a reunified Korean Peninsula. This might mean promising never to deploy U.S. troops above the 38th parallel, or even to remove them from the peninsula entirely, although any commitments will have to take into account the interests

The U.S. should make clear to Chinese leaders that if their pressure seems to be having an impact on the North's behavior, it will be prepared to hold bilateral talks with the North without demanding that they lead to full and immediate denuclearization.

of U.S. allies South Korea and Japan as well.

To this point, China hasn't shown much interest in such a dialogue, not least because it has little reason to trust U.S. promises. Even the hint of such talks, though, would have the added benefit of unsettling Kim and his cronies.

Second, the U.S. should make clear to Chinese leaders that if their pressure seems to be having an impact on the North's behavior, it will be prepared to hold bilateral talks with the North without demanding that they lead to full and immediate denuclearization. At best, such negotiations would produce a freeze of North Korea's missile and nuclear programs. It would be difficult to verify compliance; the risk of proliferation would remain.

Yet preventing proliferation is one of the obligations of a superpower. Kim cannot be allowed to develop and test a nuclear-tipped ICBM. Anything that furthers that goal is worth pursuing. Even if talks fail, they could provide the U.S. with essential information about the North's weapons programs, and help convince China of the need for tougher measures.

A successful deal, on the other hand, would buy the world more time to deal with the North Korean threat, expose the isolated country to more outside influences and, ideally, undermine the regime from within. President Donald Trump may not like it -- few people do -- but talking to your enemy is generally preferable to fighting.

(Source: Bloomberg)

Does Nigeria's Boko Haram execution video mean the fight is still on?

By Ludovica Iaccino

An execution video released by a faction of Nigerian terror group Boko Haram is signalling the fight against the group is not over yet, some analysts have claimed. The faction loyal to contested leader Abubaka Shekau is seen killing three men accused of being military spies in a footage surfaced on 14 March.

The video follows Nigerian army's repeated claims that the fight against the terrorists, blamed for the death of thousands of people, was over.

Last December, the army claimed it had stormed Boko Haram's last known stronghold in Sambisa Forest, in the restive Borno state. However, the group's contested leader, Abubakar Shekau, denied the claims in a recording.

In 2016, Boko Haram's ally, the ISIL terror group, replaced Shekau with Abu Musab al-Barnawi, a former Boko Haram spokesperson. The split has created friction among the group's factions, estimated to be at least three.

Barnawi was appointed as the new leader of the faction loyal to ISIL, the Islamic State of West Africa province (ISWAP), while Shekau retained his original group popularly known as Boko Haram.

"[The video] aims to indicate they are still around and not finished. Second, it shows the internal struggle of Boko Haram and the growing discontent within the group," Rev Atta Barkindo, a researcher who has translated several Boko Haram videos and audio messages from Hausa and Arabic into English, told IBTimes UK.

"Prior to this video, Shekau released an audio recording clearly explaining the internal rift and defending himself against all allegations, both material and ideological."

Security analyst David Otto believes Shekau's faction might be trying to get closer to ISIL as al-Barnawi "has been very quiet" since his appointment, leading to speculations he could have been arrested by Nigerian security services.

"The six minutes gruesome execution style video from the Shekau faction has the pattern and tactics of ISIL propaganda videos. A possible demonstration that despite his replacement, JAS has maintained loyalty to ISIL tactics and core values against internal and external government spies," Otto, a counter-terrorism expert at UK-based TGS Intelligence Consultants, told IBTimes UK.

Is the fight against Boko Haram over?

Boko Haram used to control territories the size of Belgium. However, Nigeria's ongoing military operation, Lafiya Dole, and a regional offensive – consisting of 8,700 troops from Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin – have scored some success, with soldiers recapturing key territories and releasing thousands of civilians held captive by the group.

The Nigerian army did not comment on whether the men executed were military spies.

"We are focusing on stabilization and consolidating our counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations," army spokesman Sani Usman told Reuters. "Let them mention that part of Nigerian territory they are holding," he said.

Security analysts have pointed out that declaring a victory over the group is premature, given that Boko Haram is still able to carry out attacks and recruit people.

Experts also warned that underlying issues such as disenfranchisement, poverty and strong links with ISIL would continue to pose major threats to stability in the region.

(Source: IBTimes UK)

On America's pursuit of global war and selling Syria to sectarian exclusionism

By Catherine Shakdam

Right on the heels of America's military intervention against Syria and hawkish allegations President Bashar Assad employed chemical agents to flush out Wahhabi-inspired militants in Idlib, ISIS reverted to its religious cleansing activities.

A car bomb concealed in aid van targeted families stranded at a transit point during a planned evacuation.

The blast hit the Rashidin area on the outskirts of Aleppo, where dozens of buses carrying mostly Shia Muslim families were waiting to enter the city. An estimated 70 innocent lives were lost in the vicious attack.

On that heinous crime, the Western complex has remained more or less quiet ... outrage nowadays has become a disposable commodity played out to the tune of the public's indifference.

All hail the United States of America for allowing the bad, the ugly and the worst to gain yet another lease on life on account regime change still picks its curiosity. I have said it before, and I feel I must say it again, regardless of what anyone may think of President Assad, regardless of what anyone may wish even for Syria's future, we need to consider the rule of law and admit that such decisions lie not within our hands.

All that matters, all that ever mattered, is that political present and future Syrians want to see manifest within the borders of their homeland.

Any argument that will, therefore, posit "change" against Syria's sovereignty sits a crime against not only international law but the very definition of democracy.

More importantly still, we cannot, and I mean we absolutely cannot, wave the flag of exceptionalism in the name of an elusive greater good when such action requires innocent blood is spilled, and people are denied those very rights we claim to want to offer them.

For all those parties still under the farfetched and downright phantasmagorical impression that Syria would be better off without its current administration, allow me to point out that if not for President Assad Syria - and most likely the entire Levant region would have fallen to ISIS. Which part of that reality sounds like a good idea to you?

And no, I flat out refuse, reject and altogether refute the idiotic theory some Western neocon mouthpieces have floated around - one hint: it rhymes with New York Times, that the US should allow for ISIS militants to bleed out Syria to better disappear President Assad's government.

Now, factor in the fact that Syria has been earmarked by a grand terror takeover and one mighty religious cleansing and you may want to rethink your outrage away from Damascus and back onto those parties promoting that agenda terror hellhounds have carried since they first came out of their pitiful ditch.

Syria is bleeding again, and surprise, surprise, no grand cries of outrage came to disturb Western capitals' slumber this Easter weekend. Syria is bleeding, children are lying face down on the ground, and the world still argues pictures, allegations, and military interventionism against the one army that has managed to keep the darkness at bay.

Why Is Trump Fighting ISIS in Syria?

Thomas L. Friedman APRIL 12, 2017

President Trump arriving at the White House on Sunday. Al Drago/The New York Times

Who has spoken for Foua and Kefraya evacuees? For those poor souls, no rally was organized, and no tears were shed on the floor of the United Nations ... What about those "innocent babies" Mr. Trump?

Yes, darkness ... how else would you want to define the Black Flag Army but under those adjectives that best describe evil?

Who has spoken for Foua and Kefraya evacuees? For those poor souls, no rally was organized, and no tears were shed on the floor of the United Nations ... What about those "innocent babies" Mr. Trump?

Here we are again staring in the face of absolute hypocrisy, dumbfounded by the Western capitals' propensity to manipulate and twist every fact, and every pain so that their rhetoric could be reinforced - to hell with facts, the rule of law and due process.

Let me play now a little game of what-ifs ... because to be perfectly honest with you it is long overdue. I am personally sick and tired of tiptoeing around the issue of religious genocide and pretend that America is not fanning such agenda so that it could justify military interventionism ad vitam eternam across the Greater Middle Eastern region.

As they say: if the shoe fits. In this particular case it is not so much the shoe but the narrative that does.

Sectarian much ladies and gentlemen of the West?

Whatever do I mean? To put it kindly I believe the West and its well-to-do moral liberalism is playing right into the hands of Wahhabist-exclusionists by framing the Greater Middle East as a sectarian flashpoint.

The West and its well-to-do moral liberalism is playing right into the hands of Wahhabist-exclusionists by framing the Greater Middle East as a sectarian flashpoint.

No? What about those sickening sectarian adjectives that Western media feel compelled to use, and abuse so that their readers would imprint on the idea that Shia Islam rhymes with illegitimate and nefarious?

Allow me to demonstrate by quoting Mr. Friedman from the New York Times: "Not only will virtual ISIS, which has nodes all over the world, not go away even if territorial ISIS is defeated, I believe virtual ISIS will become yet more virulent to disguise the fact that it has lost the territorial caliphate to its archenemies: Shiite Iran, Hezbollah, pro-Shiite militias in Iraq, the pro-Shiite Assad regime in Damascus and Russia, not to mention America."

How many times can you write the word: Shia with such bile and not transform into a Daesh spokesperson?

Is it what irks Washington and its allies in the region: the fact that Shia Islam and the principles it stands for: religious pluralism, social justice, and patriotism ... among a few other things, have gained traction of late?

Now, to my game:

What if Mr. Trump's selective outrage before President Assad's alleged and unsubstantiated chemical attack on ISIS stronghold was really a ploy to offer the terrorist organization's army the opportunity of a military comeback? Because from where I'm standing America's rhetoric aligns eerily with that of terror - only with more sophistication. By that, I mean the US is playing passive aggressive sectarianism rather than outright genocidal ... Why lean so heavily on parties' religious affiliations and tones if not to promote that very religious hatred Wahhabism has claimed as its birthright?

What if America's military intervention in Syria and the pitiful show it has since rolled out against Syria's legitimacy was really to save America's very own geopolitical assets in the region, regardless of the human cost, irrespective of the consequences.

Who really benefited from that chemical attack, the West so keenly blamed on President Assad?

Who ended up dying in their dozens if not those communities ISIS militants and ideologues have yearned to genocide? As it happens, those civilian radicals butchered were Shia Muslims ... Are we still wondering whose ideology and whose side US war hawks sit on?

If America neocons can theorize an alliance with ISIS to forward their agenda, why smite Russia and Iran for siding with Syria against terror on the basis of international law? Can we agree that Washington's argument has no leg to stand on except those terror militants have constructed?

What is so very bad about choosing to defend a land, people, and a system of governance that reject the exclusionism of Wahhabism? Have we lost our minds so completely that out of political spite we are willing to consider the slaughter of millions and still call it good and fair?

Trump's political suicide pushes China, Iran and Russia closer

By Federico Pieraccini

Part two

Until a few weeks ago, Moscow, Beijing and Tehran aimed at a resolution of problems with Washington in order to find a strategic balance in international relations. At this point in time, it should be clear that this strategy will not work. We are in a multipolar world that is synonymous with instability. The ideal conditions for a balance of political forces lie in a joint duopoly that recalls the situation that obtained during the Cold War. Even the unipolar moment guaranteed greater stability in a certain sense, given the unfortunate disproportion of force that the US enjoyed throughout the 1990s. What Trump finds hard to understand is that in a multipolar reality, the chances of clashes increase significantly.

Trump is meddling directly or indirectly in a lot of situations, ranging from Iran's involvement in Syria, threatened by American partners such as Saudi Arabia; to the use of Russian forces in Syria; passing by the perennial crisis in Ukraine; and instability in the Caucasus and Central Asia. In China we have the autonomous region of Xinjiang, the South China Sea, and not to forget tensions with New Delhi as well as the explosive situation in the DPRK. If Trump is confident in being able to test the waters in each of these situations, even with the use of the military, to arrive at better negotiating positions, it is best that we all prepare for a nuclear winter.

The key issue for China, Russia and Iran must necessarily be to place emphasis on increasing cooperation in several areas, such as finance, the economy, the military, and politics. Up until a month ago, as a result of Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton, all three of these nations aspired for cooperation in the field of international relations with the US on equal terms. After what happened in Syria, they have fully understood that this opportunity is now threatened by a clear desire by Trump to risk everything in order to improve his negotiating position. This is the reckless attitude of an unprepared POTUS.

Only a strong unity of purpose, under the economic umbrella of a jettisoning of the dollar as a reserve currency, can change the situation dramatically. In addition to this, the US dollar must be excluded in trade deals between cooperating nations. Another important effort lies with stocking up as much gold as possible. With these methods, it will be possible to stand up to the US's pressure without it leading to a military conflict. Organizations such as the BRICS, SCO, Eurasian Union and One Belt, One Road must necessarily take up the challenge thrown down by Trump with the launch of 59 missiles on Syria, and show what consequences Trump has brought on himself through his rash actions. Moscow, Tehran and Beijing have an impetus to finally overcome any lingering hesitation and to completely disengage from the western system. Instead of creating alternative ways to operate in the economic and financial sphere, they should try to replace the current one, making it irrelevant and inconvenient for other nations.

The primary objective for these three nations must be from now on to resolve every dispute between them and form an alliance that goes beyond the mere question of economic or financial convenience. The goal should be to create a cultural and social system that can represent an opportunity for other third countries vis-a-vis a predatory capitalism and a rampant imperialistic approach that Trump appears to have signed onto.

Trump's actions ultimately worsened the US State of the World. The failure of the military operation involving the launch of the Tomahawks showed the US to be more of a paper tiger today than the unbeatable war machine it depicts itself to be. Decades of corruption at the highest levels of the military-industrial complex have finally started to affect the United States' ability to wage war. It is an observation that is a taboo amongst the US and its allies, who need to maintain the illusion for deterrence, as well as to allow for the gravy train to continue to line the pockets of those who profit from this corrupt system. Reality shows us that in any real conflict, the United States vulnerability and lack of combat readiness shows.

In a situation like this, the strategy of Moscow and its allies is to produce weapons systems capable of inflicting considerable damage to the United States at low cost, given that Moscow cannot simply print more money and pour debt on the rest of the world in order to finance its wars. A great example of this can be seen with the anti-ship missiles Moscow possesses, which are capable of destroying American aircraft carriers, considered the backbone of the US war strategy. A missile that costs hundreds of thousands of euros can cause damage to an aircraft carrier worth tens of billions of dollars, inflicting a mortal blow to the credibility of American military posture.

If Trump will continue down this destructive path, such as with encouraging the entrance of Montenegro into NATO after an election campaign where he labelled the Atlantic alliance obsolete, he will only get the opposite effect to the one desired, which is to say worse negotiating positions with peer American competitors like Moscow and Beijing. Maybe it is time to wonder whether Trump is really keen on a de-escalation model of international relations, aimed at brokering deals from positions of strength, or whether his ultimate aim is simply to preserve America's unipolar moment in any possible way, even with war. It is a perspective that should be discussed widely by nations such as Iran, Russia and China in order to find a perfect asymmetrical response through economic, financial, political and social means that avoid a direct conflict. The war between the American elites seems to have come to an end and the neoliberals and neocons seem to have won. Wars and chaos will continue, as with the last decades of US foreign policy. It is a sad prospect that the nations opposing Washington will have to deal with. *(Source: Strategic Culture Foundation)*

Referendum controversy: Why Turkey's weakness not in the interest of Russia

The Sunday referendum on shifting to a presidential system has split Turkey down the middle. Commenting on the potential consequences of Ankara's move, Russian academics told Sputnik that Moscow is interested in a strong and stable Turkey as its partner in the Middle East.

April witnessed a Turkish referendum on moving to a presidential system, with the "yes" camp winning 51.41 percent of the vote.

The narrow victory of the supporters of the changes has triggered concerns about the future of the country.

"#Turkeyreferendum result shows a highly polarised society. The marginal, doubtful win of [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan isn't enough to proclaim himself 'Sultan'," European Parliament Vice President Dimitrios Papadimoulis tweeted Sunday.

The Haberturk broadcaster reported Tuesday that Turkey's opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) is seeking to annul the results of the government-backed referendum with the Supreme Election Board (YSK).

"There are several possible scenarios of further developments in Turkey," Andrey Boldyrev, Senior Research Fellow at the Eastern Studies Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, told Sputnik Turkey.

"First, if the opposition parties fail to consolidate, there will not be mass protests [in the country]. But at the same time, the political tension in the country will increase. Second, the country will be engulfed by mass protests, either organized by opposition forces or spontaneous," he said.

For her part, Elena Suponina, an expert at the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, said that after obtaining more powers, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will try to consolidate the society, which is currently divided over the referendum results.

"As a result of the referendum, Erdogan has concentrated considerable power in his hands. Now the president will try to consolidate Turkish society, divided into two parts," Suponina told Sputnik.

"In response to a number of critical statements I want to emphasize one crucial point: the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is not a radical one. Recep Tayyip Erdogan is a wise politician who understands the importance of maintaining relations with both Russia and the United States," she believes.

Commenting on the possible consequences of the referendum for Russo-Turkish relations, Suponina highlighted that Russia, in contrast to the EU, is not in the habit of meddling in Turkish domestic affairs.

"Europeans like to interfere in Turkey's internal affairs. Russia, on its part, should avoid it. We [Russia] need Turkey as a partner, both in the economic sphere and in the Syrian peace process. The development of Russian-Turkish cooperation is of great importance for both sides," Suponina stressed.

"As a result of the referendum, Erdogan has concentrated considerable power in his hands. Now the president will try to consolidate Turkish society, divided into two parts."

Alexey Fenenko, Associate Professor at Moscow State University's World Politics Department, echoes Suponina. According to the academic, Russia is interested in strong and stable Turkey.

"Turkey needs to strengthen its relations with Russia. It is in Russia's interest to have a strong Turkey as its partner. Conversely, the weakening of Turkey in the region contradicts strategic interests of our country, because an unstable Turkey will create problems for Russia in the Black Sea region," Fenenko told Sputnik.

"As a result of the constitutional referendum which took place in Turkey, a strong presidential system of power will be formed in the country," he continued, "Russia needs to maintain cooperation with this system."

"One shouldn't forget that any tension in the relations between Russia and Turkey will play into the hands of the West," the Russian academic highlighted.

At the same time, Nigyar Masumova, Associate Professor of the World Economy Department at Moscow State International Relations University, called attention to the fact that the constitutional changes may have a positive impact on Turkey's economy.

"The results of the referendum will give impetus to the development of the country's economy," Masumova believes, "The Turkish economy has recently demonstrated a serious leap forward in comparison with the 1990s."

"Recently, the Turkish authorities have implemented programs aimed at developing the economy, attracting investment, and launching large-scale infrastructure projects. This is the factor that causes the growth of popular support for Erdogan," she assumed.

"I believe that Erdogan will continue to take steps in this direction, and the period following the referendum will be marked with modernization and progressive changes in Turkey's economy," Masumova told Sputnik. *(Source: Sputnik)*

The real gamble for Theresa May would have been to wait until 2020

By Jonathan Freedland

The standard way of describing a move such as the one Theresa May made on Tuesday morning is to call it a "gamble". A prime minister with a Commons majority and three years left to run on her parliamentary term does not throw that away without risk. In that sense, May has gambled – but as gambles go, it's about the surest bet any politician could ever place.

The polls show May and the Conservatives stretching so far ahead of their opponents that their lead over Labour is about the same size as Labour's total vote. One survey on Monday showed Labour at 23%, with the Tories on 44%. At that rate, Labour could be on course for a performance worse than their trouncing in 1983. Some have been dusting off the record books to look at 1935, when Labour won just 154 seats.

The polling guru John Curtice may well be right that that lead could narrow in the heat of a campaign – especially one that, at 50 days, is relatively long by British standards. There is also a risk that calling a snap vote will irritate an electorate weary of being summoned to the polling booths so often. But even if the Conservative lead shrinks by five or even 10 points May will still win, and win big.

Given all that, the real gamble for May would have been to pass up this chance and sit it out until 2020. When asked who would make the best prime minister, 50% of Britons name May, compared with just 14% who pick Jeremy Corbyn. As May spent the Easter holiday hiking in Snowdonia with her husband, the temptation must have gnawed away at her. When again would the odds be so much in her favor?

And bear in mind that until now the Tories have barely had to lay a glove on Corbyn: they've left that job to the Labour leader's internal opponents. But Conservative strategists all but slaver at the juiciness of the prey they will now hunt. I've heard Tories speak with delight at the prospect of reminding voters that, for example, Corbyn was prepared to see a marriage break up rather than sanction his child going to a selective school. They think such titbits mark Corbyn out as a "weirdo", utterly out of step with mainstream, aspirational Britons. Think what the Tories and their press allies did to Ed Miliband, Neil Kinnock and Michael Foot. Then consider how they will feast on Corbyn.

The greatest downside for May

So this was a gamble for those who like their wagers ultra-low-risk. The greatest downside for May is in undermining her brand as a political straight-shooter, one who eschews the playing of Westminster games. In her Downing Street statement she nodded to that, speaking of her "reluctance" in breaking her earlier pledge to call no snap election. But she will have calculated that the benefits heavily outweigh that cost.

And what are those benefits? The most obvious relate to leaving the EU. Brexit will now have a double mandate. Not content with the referendum of 2016, May has decided to buttress that verdict with a general election victory. She will claim the anticipated win on 8 June as an endorsement of her Brexit strategy.

Remainers will have to face the fact that quitting the EU will have been approved by the British people twice in a single year. As May put it: "Britain is leaving the European Union and there can be no turning back."

Personal mandate

The advantages for her are obvious. That enhanced and personal mandate will give her extra muscle in negotiations with the remaining 27 EU states. True, it will also cut short the already absurdly brief time span for those talks. But it does mean she will have more leeway than she might otherwise have enjoyed. If she is forced to accept, say, a hefty divorce bill from the EU, she can do it without worrying about paying an imminent electoral price. On 8 June she expects to receive a large chunk of political capital, which she can spend over the next two years.

Better still for her, she will have broken the link between the article 50 and UK electoral timetables. Previously, she faced a two-year talks deadline, which would expire in 2019, followed by a general election a year later. Now she has ensured that day of judgment from the electorate is postponed to 2022. She has bought herself crucial time.

At home, too, this helps. All prime ministers yearn for their own mandate: it weakened Gordon Brown not to have one. Now May will have hers. If she wins a serious majority, she will reduce the leverage her backbench ultras currently hold over her (that too will give her more leeway in the Brexit talks).

And she'll be free of the 2015 manifesto of David Cameron and George Osborne. Increasingly, May and her ministers were treating that document as if it were a historical artefact, one that no longer applied. But it was awkward – as the chancellor, Philip Hammond, found when he had to drop his proposed change to national insurance on the self-employed because he had broken a promise in a manifesto he manifestly no longer believed in. Now May will be able to set out her own stall, knowing what most gamblers can never know – that she is almost certain to win.

(Source: The Guardian)

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Iranian, German archeologists begin surveys in southern Iran

HERITAGE desk **TEHRAN —** A team of Iranian and German archeologists and researchers on Wednesday commenced research at Hasanabad-e Tall Kamin, a prehistoric site located on the outskirts of Marvdasht in the southern province of Fars.

The one-month project aims at shedding a new light on the history of the region upon an agreement signed by Goethe University and the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization, CHTN reported.

Hasanabad-e Tall Kamin is a village in Naqsh-e Rostam rural district near Persepolis. The region embraces rich vestiges of Achaemenes and Sasanian monuments and arts amongst relics associated with other Iranian dynasties.

Maku seeks World Heritage listing for historic sites

HERITAGE desk **TEHRAN —** Maku, a northwestern Iranian city teemed with abundant historical places and natural beauties, keeps an eye on possible inscription of its sites on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2021.

Earlier this month, Maku Free Trade Zone Organization secured a memorandum of understanding with the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Organization to safeguard the historical and cultural features of the region.

A key article in the MOU obliges the sides to make arrangements and prepare a dossier in a bid to inscribe "Maku cultural landscape" on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Maku is a picturesque city in West Azarbaijan Province. The Monastery of Saint Thaddeus on the outskirts of the city is on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Tourists flock to Canadian town after large icebergs spotted

Tourists have flocked to a Canadian town in the hope of seeing one of the first icebergs of the season.

Over the Easter weekend, large icebergs washed up near Newfoundland, also known as "iceberg alley" thanks to the large number of ice blocks that drift down from the arctic each spring.

The icebergs are floating near the coastline making them visible for tourists and locals.

Icebergs hold most of their mass underwater, with just the tip of the iceberg protruding, meaning that many run aground when they veer near the coast.

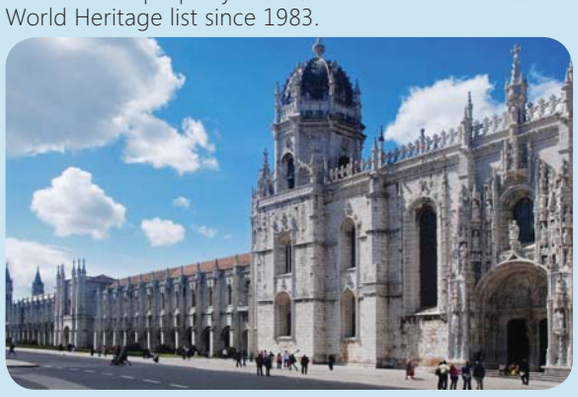
Local business told CBC Radio that tourism has soared since the arrival of the icebergs. *(Source: Independent)*

ROUND THE GLOBE

Monastery of the Hieronymites and Tower of Belem in Lisbon

Standing at the entrance to Lisbon harbor, the Monastery of the Hieronymites – construction of which began in 1502 – exemplifies Portuguese art at its best. The nearby Tower of Belem, built to commemorate Vasco da Gama's expedition, is a reminder of the great maritime discoveries that laid the foundations of the modern world.

The serial property has been inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage list since 1983.



Monastery of the Hieronymites in Lisbon, Portugal

The Monastery of the Hieronymites is a royal foundation that dates back to the late 15th century. It was commissioned by King D. Manuel I and donated to the monks of Saint Hieronymus so that they would pray for the King, and pay spiritual assistance to seafarers that left the shores of Lisbon in quest for the new world.

The monastery was also built to perpetuate the memory of Prince Henry the Navigator. Its very rich ornamentation derives from the exuberance typical of Manueline art. Being symbolically linked to the Age of Discoveries, the monastery still preserves most of its magnificent structures, including its 16th-century Cloister, the friars' former Refectory, and the Library.

Created by the royal dynasty of Avis at its height, the complex of Belem is one of the most representative examples of Portuguese power during the Age of Discoveries.

(Source: UNESCO)

Visa-free agreement valid for all Russian cities, Iran says

TOURISM desk **TEHRAN —** The recently secured visa-free treaty between Tehran and Moscow is valid for the entire Russia, an Iranian tourism official said in reaction to some reports that assume the privilege for the Russian Far East.

Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization Deputy Director Morteza Rahmani-Movahed on Tuesday rejected reports by some media outlets saying the visa waiver program excludes Moscow and other cities.

"Whenever the matter of a visa-free agreement for a country takes into account, it would be valid for all parts it and impossible to be classified," IRNA quoted Rahmani-Movahed as saying.

On April 17, Russia Beyond the Headlines and some other websites quoted Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev as saying that tourists and businessmen from 18 nations including Iran can visit the Russian Far East without visas.

"I have recently approved the list of countries, whose nationals can take advantage of the preferential regime. Businessmen and tourists will not need to undergo the traditional procedure of Russian visas receipt," Medvedev said.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin inked a visa-free agreement for tourist groups on March 28, 2017. Based on the agreement tour groups of 5 to 50 people heading to Russia from Iran or vice versa will be granted a visa-free stay of up to 15 days.

A general view of Vladivostok, a Russian city located at the head of the Golden Horn Bay, adjacent to China and North Korea.

According to the official site of the Russian Cabinet, the list of 18 countries comprises Algeria, Bahrain, Brunei, India, Iran, Qatar, China, North Korea, Kuwait, Morocco, Mexico, UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Tunisia, Turkey, and Japan.

The Russian Far East is situated between Lake Baikal in Eastern Siberia and the Pacific Ocean in the extreme east parts of the country.

Zarif urges Georgia to recommit respect for Iranian tourists

TOURISM desk **TEHRAN —** Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Tuesday that Georgia should recommit to the respect for Iranian tourists.

He made the remarks during a meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi, after reports began circulating that an Iranian Muslim woman has been forced to take away her hijab by Tbilisi airport security for frisking.

Respecting Iranian tourists and treating Muslim women in general, and Iranian women in particular, with dignity is an absolute necessity for the growth of tourism industry in Georgia, Tasnim quoted Zarif as saying.

Kvirikashvili expressed surprise when he first learned of such offensive behavior, saying he would order an immediate investigation into the incident.

"I cannot imagine that Muslim women are offended in Georgia," Khabaronline quoted Kvirikashvili as saying.

The officials also explored avenues to deepen bilateral ties in various fields, such as banking, agriculture, energy, and construction projects.

Georgia and Iran signed an agreement on visa-free travel in November 2010, according to Georgia Today. The agreement came into effect in January 2011 and envisaged reciprocal visa-free travel for up to 45 days for both Georgian and Iranian citizens.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (L) shakes hands with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi on April 18, 2017.

UAE's new visa rules lead to huge influx of visitors

The UAE government's decision to grant visas on arrival for Chinese and Russian visitors has sparked a huge influx of tourists to Dubai, with hoteliers reporting they're nearly fully booked.

During the first three months of the year, hotels across the emirate recorded an occupancy level of 86.3 percent, showing a 2.7 percent increase compared to the same period last year.

The increase in bookings was more significant in affordable properties than in posh, high-end hotels, with Dubai's "mid-scale and economy classes" experiencing a combined 7.2 percent year-over-year growth in room uptake and luxury hotels posting a rather moderate increase of 0.7 percent.

However, the average cost of rooms per night fell 6.4 percent to Dh795, while the revenue per available room (RevPAR), which has consistently been on a decline for two years, dropped 3.9 percent to Dh686.

According to STR, hotel operators' revenue per available room did continue to fall during the first quarter of the year, but the takeaway from the preliminary data is that the hospitality sector is on track for a recovery.

"Because Dubai has seen two years with consistent RevPAR declines, STR analysts see the [first quarter] occupancy growth as an indicator of performance recovery," the company said in a statement.

Philip Wooller, STR's area director for the Middle East and Africa, said the strong demand is apparently driven by the recent visa policies issued by the UAE government.

"A factor likely played a big role in Dubai's occupancy growth was the UAE government's recent decisions to grant visas on arrival for Chinese and Russian nationals," Wooller said.

"While Dubai continues to add new supply, it also continues to add new leisure attractions, and expanding the market's range of potential visitors can only help drive hotel demand and profitability."

Early this year, the UAE government issued a decree granting visas on arrival to travelers from Russia, a major source market for the country's hospitality industry. For the past two years, the UAE welcomed 600,000 Russian visitors and the number is forecast to grow with the new visa policy.

A similar decree was issued by the government in 2016, granting Chinese tourists entry permits on arrival. The new policy has encouraged more Chinese tourists to visit the emirate, with the number of guests from China reaching more than 300,000 between November 2016 and March 2017.

Dubai still has a huge inventory issue to face, though. There are more than 42,000 rooms currently under contract in Dubai, the largest pipeline of any city in the world, according to Robin Rossmann, STR's managing director.

"The market faces several challenges over the next few years in maintaining a demand level that can offset some of this supply growth. On the positive side, Dubai continues to attract substantial leisure business, so this is definitely one of the top markets in the industry to keep an eye on from both a supply development and performance perspective."

(Source: Zawya)

6 reasons why everyone should travel

Any avid traveler will know, that while traveling is about exploring new places and taking a break from routine, beneath the surface it is so much more. Not only does it enable you to experience new cultures, cuisines and landscapes but traveling fundamentally transforms you from within.

Travel fiends will agree that traveling is not just about ticking things off the bucket list, but about being able to recount how traveling changes you as a person, how it impacts your interactions with others and how it enables you to make a positive impact on the world. If you're still not convinced, we've put together six reasons why traveling in important.

■ It enables you to leave your comfort zone

Whether you choose to travel solo or with a group of friends, you will still be stepping out of your comfort zone. For first time travelers, taking the plunge can be daunting but the transformation that follows will surprise you.

You'll find out things about yourself that you never knew, you'll gain confidence and you'll be able to tackle challenges you never thought you could.

■ Traveling builds confidence

Traveling to a foreign country enables you to adapt to different situations. Whether it's asking for directions, conversing with someone who doesn't speak the same language as you or simply becoming accustomed to local cultural norms; traveling will boost your confidence.

■ Connects you to other cultures and traditions

Traveling is one of the best ways to immerse yourself in new cultures and exploring the different ways in which people live. From new cuisines, to weddings and traditions, to lifestyles, traveling will open your eyes to unique ways in which people celebrate life and how their lives are governed by different customs and traditions.

■ It puts life into perspective

Many of us take for granted all the comforts of the modern world including the opportunity to go to school and university. Very seldom do we stop to think that this isn't the case for everyone in the world.

Modern day appliances, education, and even amenities like hot running water are among the things we take for granted. Traveling to different countries, especially developing ones, can help put your life into perspective and will more often than not help you appreciate the things and opportunities you have.

■ You'll taste unique cuisines you didn't know existed

There is no doubt that one of the best things about traveling to a new destination is discovering new cuisines.

Be it China's fried insects, or Thailand's creamy coconut curries, indulging in traditional delicacies from different corners of the globe will introduce your taste buds to unique flavors and cooking techniques.

■ It changes the way you relate to others

During your travels, you have the opportunity to make friends and interact with people from all walks of life. Doing so will teach you to build relationships with people who are nothing like you and have had different life experiences.

It will also teach you the importance of communication and enhance your language skills.

(Source: The Express Tribune)

Scientists create fluid that moves forward when you push it back

Physicists in the U.S. have created a fluid with "negative mass" — meaning that when you push it away, it accelerates towards you. That means researchers can now use this bizarre phenomenon will now be used to study some of the universe's biggest mysteries, including dark energy and black holes.

Negative mass is a hypothetical concept that says matter can exist with a mass opposite to normal matter. Instead of having a positive weight—1kg, for example — negative mass would weigh minus 1kg. This works in the same way that an electric charge can be either positive or negative.

In 2014, a team of Canadian cosmologists announced negative matter could indeed exist in the universe without violating our laws of physics. They said as long as negative mass was being produced in a certain way, it could exist according to Einstein's theory of general relativity.

Now, Michael Forbes and his team from Washington State University have managed to create negative mass in a laboratory. Their results are published in the journal Physical Review Letters.

Newton's Second Law of Motion says that if you push something with a given force it will move away at a given speed — depending on the object's mass, the force and friction. "That's what most things that we're used to do," Forbes explains in a statement. "With negative mass, if you push something, it accelerates toward you."

The creation of a fluid with negative mass could help scientists answer questions about dark energy, the force that is thought to drive the expansion of the universe.

Rubidium atoms

To create these conditions, the team used rubidium atoms that had been cooled down to just above absolute zero using lasers. In this state of matter—known as a Bose-Einstein condensate — particles move very slowly and start behaving like waves. The particles move in unison and flow without losing energy, becoming what is known as a superfluid. At this point, the cooled rubidium has a regular mass.

The Milky Way seen from the White Desert outside Cairo. The creation of a fluid with negative mass could help scientists answer questions about dark energy, the force that is thought to drive the expansion of the universe.

To create the negative mass, the team shot the rubidium with another set of lasers that pushed the atoms back and forth and changed the way they spun. When the "bowl" holding the rubidium they had created smashed, it appeared to have a negative mass.

"Once you push, it accelerates backwards," Forbes says. "It looks like the rubidium hits an invisible wall. What's a first here is the exquisite control we have over the nature of this negative mass, without any other complications."

Because of this control, scientists can now use it to come up with experiments to test theories relating to extreme astrophysics, such as dark energy and black holes.

(Source: Newsweek)

How climate change dried up a Canadian glacier river in a matter of days

Last August, a small group of scientists set out for some routine fieldwork at Slims River, which feeds Kluane Lake, the largest glacially fed body of water in northwest Canada's Yukon Territory. When they arrived at the site of the fieldwork, however, the 15-mile long river had all but vanished, with only a thin trickle of water remaining where 10-foot depths had been common only a month before.

The scientists reviewed satellite data and other measurements and found that the river had vanished over a stunningly fast four days – between May 26 and 29 – in an unprecedented modern example of a geological phenomenon known as "river piracy."

The scientists determined that the climate-change related receding of the Kaskawulsh Glacier, the source of Slims River, was responsible for the sudden disappearance. In a study released Tuesday, the researchers noted that the glacier had shrunk to a point where its water was entirely redirected towards the Kaskawulsh River, which was usually fed by the glacier along with Slims.

"River piracy in this context means one river taking water from another in some unplanned sort of way," Mark Davis, senior research fellow and director of the Tulane Institute on Water Resources Law and Policy in New Orleans, tells The Christian Science Monitor via email. "It is a metaphor," he adds.

Mr. Davis tells the Monitor that this kind of sudden shift is probably not unprecedented, since glaciers and rivers are naturally dynamic, responding to the ebb and flow of weather patterns and temperatures. Still, the disappearance of a whole river in less than a week took the researchers by surprise.

At its widest points, Slims River spanned 150 meters (492 feet), carrying water from the glacier into the Kluane Lake, which then eventually flowed into the Yukon River toward the Bering Sea. This pattern remained unchanged for centuries, until Kaskawulsh Glacier retreated under a period of intense melting during the record-breaking temperatures of 2016.

Terminus of glacier

"What we found was the glacial lake that fed Slims River had actually changed its outlet," Dr. Shugar said in the statement. "A 30-meter (100-foot) canyon had been carved through the terminus of the glacier. Meltwater was flowing through that canyon from one lake into another glacial lake, almost like when you see champagne poured into glasses that are stacked in a pyramid."

The abrupt shift in water flow has already had significant environmental repercussions. The now nearly dry riverbed has exposed once-watery sediment to the open air, causing dust storms in the region. Kluane Lake has also seen a drop in water level, leaving vacation cabin docks high and dry in the Yukon's largest lake, a popular tourist destination.

According to the study, which was published in the journal Nature Geoscience, the research team used satellite data to determine that the sudden river piracy was a direct effect of climate change driven by the addition of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere from industrial sources, accelerating the glacier's continuous retreat since the end of the Little Ice Age the 1800s.

(Source: The CSM)

Bubbles form 'magic islands' on Saturn moon Titan

A vanishing act on Saturn's largest moon Titan that forms "magic islands" may be streams of nitrogen bubbles that appear and disappear at random, a new study revealed.

Previous studies have found that some of Titan's large seas and lakes are quite combustible, and they usually appear dark. In 2013, NASA's Cassini orbiter sent back radar images showing mysterious bright anomalies on the surface of Titan's Ligeia Mare Sea.

Since then, scientists have wondered what makes these magic islands wink out of existence and re-emerge. Past studies suggested the existence of potential floating solids or gas bubbles. In March 2017, experts revealed seas of Titan may erupt occasionally with patches of bubbles.

Scientific evidence

Now, a research team has provided scientific evidence that bubbles that contain a mix of ethane, nitrogen, and methane may be to blame for this strange phenomenon.

Experts from France's University of Reims analyzed conditions observed on Titan and concluded that specific temperatures and pressures in the depths of this hydrocarbon sea may destabilize, causing nitrogen bubbles to appear on the surface.

Led by planetary scientist Daniel Cordier, the team developed computer models of how liquids and gases might act in Titan's frigid seas. These computer models were partly based on experimental data previously gathered by the oil and gas industry about how similar fluids behave under pressure in deep underground.

The new study suggests that on Titan, fluids on the surface are richer in methane, while fluids deep underground are richer in ethane. The surface fluids interact with the Saturn moon's nitrogen-rich atmosphere, and as a result, these fluids are also rich in nitrogen.

Effects of cooling, heating

Factors such as tides, winds, or the effects of cooling and heating may force these surface fluids to flow downward and sink. These mixtures separate because of the pressure at the lowered depths, and the nitrogen bubbles released by these mixtures rise back up to the surface.

Because nitrogen bubbles are reflective to radio waves, they appear bright under radio scans, the study said. These bubbles can reach at least 4.6 centimeters (1.8 inches) in width and can form at depths of about 100 to 200 meters (330 to 660 feet).

Furthermore, the Cassini spacecraft did not directly see the bubbles because the fizzing is only temporary, scientists said.

Cordier said future missions that plan to deploy

submarines to the Saturn moon's seas should study these strange characteristics.

"Possible instabilities of the liquid at the sea bottom have to be taken into account," he said.

The findings of the report are published in the journal Nature Astronomy.

(Source: Tech Times)

Strengthening Economic Foundations and Backing "Production" and "Employment", Top Priority of AYANDEH Bank

In the current Iranian calendar year 1396 (started March 21, 2017), AYANDEH Bank took effective steps in line with materializing objectives of "resistance economy", "production" and "employment", Public Relations Dept. of the bank reported.

In the first gathering of senior managers and directors of the bank, held in Tehran on Tuesday April 18, ways of backing effective and actual fields of economy, constructive and effective strategies with regard to helping increasing domestic production coupled with generating more employment opportunities in the country were exchanged, the report added.

Of the other topics discussed in this grand gathering, it should be referred to the provision of financial resources in order to meet demand of economic activists.

It should be noted that the first industrial and production unit in the current Iranian calendar year 1396 (started March 21, 2017) was inaugurated in Amirabad, Mazandaran Province at the unsparing financial support of AYANDEH Bank last week in the presence of Iranian President Dr. Rouhani, implementation of which generated more employment opportunities to job-seeking people of this province.

It is hoped that the bank senior officials will make their utmost efforts in line with materializing most economic objectives of the government, the report ended.

BMI's London PLC Branch Ready to Offer Banking and Brokerage Services

PLC London Branch of Bank Melli Iran (BMI) is ready to offer quality banking and brokerage services.

Member of Board of Directors and Deputy Chief Executive of Bank Melli Iran (BMI) for Foreign Exchange and Intl. Affairs Gholam-Reza Panahi announced the above statement and said: "With the coordination made in this regard, giant steps will be taken by the bank's branch office in London in the field of offering brokerage services to Iranian traders and merchants."

Considering the history and high potential of the bank in London besides its connection to Europe Target No. 2 system especially after the implementation of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), suitable ways have been paved for the bank in the field of offering quality banking services to euro such as issuance of Letters of Credit (L/Cs), money orders, short-term financing, admitting and notifying Letters of Credit (L/Cs) to the trade and commercial parities in Europe, he maintained.

In the end, Member of Board of Directors and Deputy Chief Executive of Bank Melli Iran (BMI) for Foreign Exchange and Intl. Affairs Gholam-Reza Panahi said: "With the establishment of brokerage ties with BMI's branch in London PLC, Iranian banks can take advantages of the quality banking services of the bank as mentioned in above."

Megafaunal extinctions driven by too much moisture

Studies of bones from Ice Age megafaunal animals across Eurasia and the Americas have revealed that major increases in environmental moisture occurred just before many species suddenly became extinct around 11-15,000 years ago. The persistent moisture resulting from melting permafrost and glaciers caused widespread glacial-age grasslands to be rapidly replaced by peatlands and bogs, fragmenting populations of large herbivore grazers.

Research led by the Australian Center for Ancient DNA (ACAD) at the University of Adelaide, published today in Nature Ecology and Evolution, has revealed that the ancient bones preserve direct biochemical evidence of the environmental upheavals, which can be traced through time.

Using 511 radiocarbon dated bones from animals such as bison, horse, and llamas the team was able to investigate the role of environmental change in the mysterious megafaunal extinctions, which claimed the vast majority of existing large land animals such as giant sloths and sabre-toothed cats.

"We didn't expect to find such clear signals of moisture increases occurring so widely across all of Europe, Siberia and the Americas," says study leader Professor Alan Cooper, ACAD Director. "The timing varied between regions, but matches the collapse of glaciers and permafrost and occurs just before most species go extinct.

The international team of researchers, including the University of Alaska Fairbanks, University of Oslo, the Yukon Government, and palaeontologists across Russia and Canada, measured nitrogen isotopes preserved in dated ancient animal bones and teeth recovered from permafrost areas and caves across Europe, Siberia, North and South America. They found distinctive biochemical signals reflecting massive increases of moisture on the landscape.

"Grassland megafauna were critical to the food chains. They acted like giant pumps that shifted nutrients around the landscape", says lead author Dr. Tim Rabanus-Wallace, from the University of Adelaide.

(Source: EurekAlert)

Serene underwater footage shows whale's-eye view of Antarctica

Scientists are diving deep off the coast of Antarctica to help protect whale feeding areas.

But they're not jumping into the frigid Southern Ocean themselves. Instead, a team of researchers has attached non-invasive sensors and cameras to the backs of humpback and minke whales.

The project, supported by World Wildlife Fund's Australia office, has gathered a bounty of information so far, including when, where, and how whales eat krill; what their social lives are like; and how they're able to blow through sea ice so they can breathe.

Whales in the Southern Ocean face two main threats to their food supply: overfishing of krill, and climate change. Warming ocean temperatures are causing ice to shrink, which is altering Antarctic ecosystems.

In the whale study, each whale wears the suction-cup cameras for between 24 and 48 hours at a time. Scientists then retrieve the "whale cams" and apply them to other whales.

"We have been able to show that whales spend a great deal of time during the days socializing and resting, and then feeding largely throughout the evening and night time," said Ari Friedlander, lead scientist on the whale study and an associate professor from Oregon State University.

"Whales are aggregating in a number of bays — including Wilhelmina Bay, Cierva Cove, Fournier Bay, Errera Channel — in high numbers and are feeding there for weeks at a time," he said in a news release. "Every time we deploy a tag or collect a sample, we learn something new about whales in the Antarctic."

(Source: Mashable)

Scientists create mind-reading device for people who can't communicate

Scientists in Japan have developed a device that can read people's thoughts by monitoring their brainwaves. The system is capable of translating brain activity into numbers and syllables and could be used to create a telepathic 'typewriter' for people who are unable to communicate.

Researchers at Toyohashi University of Technology claim the system can recognize the numbers zero to nine with a 90% accuracy rate and also recognizes 18 types of Japanese monosyllables with an accuracy of 60%.

An "easily operated" version of the device connected to a smartphones could be developed within the next five years, the research group said.

To develop the device, scientists used an electroencephalogram (EEG) connected to electrodes that to monitor people's brain waves while they spoke aloud. Brain activity data was then mapped to numbers and syllables though machine learning, eventually enabling the system to automatically recognize what was being said.

The group now plans to create a brain-computer interface capable of recognizing words based on thoughts alone, which could materialize in the form of an "EEG-activated typewriter in the near future" and offer a "natural interface without any limitation". *(Source: IBT)*

Phenylketonuria patients to receive online care

SOCIETY desk **TEHRAN** — A newly developed system called "Hami" (literary meaning supporter) has been designed to provide patients suffering from phenylketonuria (PKU) with online care and provision.

PKU is an inborn error of metabolism that results in decreased metabolism of the amino acid phenylalanine.

Untreated PKU can lead to intellectual disability, seizures, behavioral problems, and mental disorder. It may also result in a musty smell and lighter skin. Babies born to mothers who have poorly treated PKU may have heart problems, a small head, and low birth weight.

The online care system would be helping in providing diagnosis, food stuff in accordance with the patients' strict diet and medications using postal services, Tasnim news agency quoted Amir-Hossein Jamshidi, an official with Food and Drug Administration, as saying on Wednesday.

"All prescriptions will be published online and each patient's treatment process and medical history would be accessible through this system nationwide," Jamshidi explained.

Owing to the arrangements made with the post office patients would be provided with their medications in three days tops, he added.

Ethnics set off journey to celebrate Persian Gulf national day

SOCIETY desk **TEHRAN** — Representatives from different Iranian ethnics started a 600-kilometer journey on Tuesday to mark the Persian Gulf national day, which falls on April 30 this year.

The 12-day event started in the city of Shiraz and will end in the port city of Bandar Abbas, neighboring the Persian Gulf.

Representatives from Sistani, Baluchi, Azari, Kord, Turkmen, Taleshi, and Qashqai ethnics have taken part in the program so far, Fars news agency quoted the event's manager Qolam-Ali Kazemi Qashqai as saying.

It is a non-government annual event which was initiated two years ago. Last year, it covered a 400 km distance from Shiraz to the Persian Gulf port city of Bushehr, he said.

The event aims to highlight the unity between Iranian ethnics, who live in peace in different parts of the country and always defend Iran's borders, he added.

Kazemi Qashqai noted that the wedding ceremony of a Qashqai couple will be held on this day as well.

The Persian Gulf day was registered on the Iranian calendar in 2004.

Boston Marathon: First woman to compete in race 50 years ago runs again

The first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon has marked five decades since her achievement by running it again – at the age of 70.

Kathrine Switzer completed the race under the qualifying time in 4 hours 44 minutes 31 seconds.

She made sporting history by completing the 1967 marathon despite being attacked by the race director at the time for being a woman.

Ms. Switzer's determination to finish the race won her plaudits and paved the way to equality for women in running.

Despite campaigning extensively for female participation in the sport, Ms. Switzer has not run a marathon since 2011.

For the 121st Boston Marathon, race organizers have retired bib 261, in honor of the number Ms. Switzer wore during the race in 1967. The Boston Marathon has only retired one other number in its history: 61, for 61 races begun by athlete Johnny Kelly.

Ms. Switzer – who has been running since she was 12 years old – decided to enter the race aged 20 after encouragement from her coach. Before entering, she had to prove to him she was capable of completing the race's 26 miles.

"There were no real rules in 1967 stating that the Marathon was for men only," Ms. Switzer said.

"Nor was there anything indicating gender on the entry form. But almost all sports were for men. Women rarely participated. Most people assumed that women could not run the marathon distance and if they tried they would hurt themselves."

Signing up using her initials KV Switzer – which didn't identify her as female – she was allocated the number 261 for the marathon.

Because of the cold weather on the morning of the race, Ms. Switzer and the rest of the runners stayed dressed in their warm up tracksuits, which she believes helped her blend in unnoticed by race organizers.

But she wasn't hiding: "I was very proud of being a woman. I had long hair, wore lipstick and eyeliner to the start line. All the men around me knew that I was a woman."

Two miles into the marathon, Ms. Switzer was attacked by a race official.

"I jerked my head around quickly and looked square into the most vicious face I'd ever seen," she recalled in her memoir.

"A big man, a huge man, with bared teeth was set to pounce, and before I could react he grabbed my shoulder and flung me back, screaming, 'Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers!'"

Her boyfriend, who was running with her, managed to shove the official out of the way and Ms Switzer kept running.

"I knew if I dropped out no one would believe women could run distances and deserved to be in the Boston Marathon. They would just think that I was a clown, and that women were barging into events where they had no ability.

"I was serious about my running and I could not let fear stop me."

Ms. Switzer went on to campaign for women's running and was pivotal in gaining the introduction of the women's marathon to the 1984 Olympic Games. She now runs a campaign named 261 Fearless, which encourages women to run.

Geoffrey Kirui won the men's race, pulling away from three-time US Olympian Galen Rupp with two miles to go to give Kenya its first men's victory in five years. Edna Kiplagat won the women's race to complete the Kenyan sweep.

(Source: Independent)

Govt. to expand, equip women-only parks in Tehran

SOCIETY desk **TEHRAN** — The presidential office for women and family affairs has allotted 1 billion rials (around $25,000) to expand and equip women-only parks in the province of Tehran.

Underscoring the importance of bringing joy to women's life and making arrangement for achieving this goal, Sorayya Shareqi, director general for women's affairs of Tehran governor general's office, explained that women-only parks have so far been developed and built in most cities of the province.

"All 16 cities of Tehran province will be soon provided with women-only parks," YJC quoted Shareqi as saying.

It is mandatory both for families and schools to create a positive and happy atmosphere for girls and women, Shareqi suggested.

LEARN ENGLISH

Calling Tech Support

Tech guy: Hello, thanks for calling 123 Tech Help, I'm Todd. How can I help you?
Client: Hello? Can you help me? My computer! **Oh man**...
Todd: It's okay sir, **calm down**. What happened?
Client: I turned on my **laptop** and it broke! **I mean**, the **monitor** went black!
Todd: Ok, sir, it sounds like you might have a **virus**.
Client: I don't feel sick,...let me check... **Nope**! No fever, I'm fine.
Todd: No, your computer might have a virus, I mean, it has a bad **program** on it. Maybe that's why it **crashed**. I recommend that you **run** an **antivirus** program in order to safely remove any unwanted spyware or Trojans.
Client: Phew! . . . . .Wait a minute, CRASH??!! **Spyware**? Trojans! What? where? when?!

Key vocabulary

oh man: to express emotion or feeling, like God, Jesus
calm down: become quiet or calm, relax
laptop: a small computer which is easily carried
I mean: to express one's own opinion, meaning
monitor: an electronic display that shows images
virus: a program designed to harm a computer
nope: no
program: a set of instructions to perform
crash: stop working or functioning properly
run: to work or be in operation
antivirus: a program designed to identify and remove computer viruses
spyware: software that secretly gathers information

Supplementary vocabulary

hotline: a telephone line that gives quick and direct access to a source of information or help
phishing: to request con?dential information over the Internet under false pretenses in order to fraudulently obtain credit card numbers, passwords, or other personal data
crack: to break open or into something such as a safe or a computer system
format: to divide (a disk) into marked sectors so that it may store data

(Source: irlanguage.com)

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

Anzali to host meetings on protection of Caspian Sea's marine environment

The Iranian city of Anzali will play host to the meetings of Framework Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Caspian Sea (Tehran Convention) from April 16 to 20.
Participants to the meetings are to discuss the implementation of the protocol concerning regional preparedness, response and cooperation in combating oil pollution incidents (Aktau Protocol), the working group on monitoring and assessment and for the protocol on monitoring, assessment, access to and exchange of information and the draft protocol on monitoring, assessment and information exchange.

برگزاری اجلاس منطقه‌ای کنوانسیون تهران در بندر انزلی

اجلاس منطقه‌ای کنوانسیون تهران با شرکت کارشناسان و متخصصان کشورهای حاشیه دریای خزر به میزبانی معاونت محیط زیست دریایی سازمان حفاظت محیط زیست از ۲۷ فروردین ماه در بندر انزلی برگزار می شود.
این اجلاس با همکاری سازمان بنادر و دریانوردی با عنوان «پروتکل آمادگی، واکنش و همکاری منطقه ای در مبارزه با سوانح آلودگی نفتی» موسوم به پروتکل آکتائو برگزار می شود. پروتکل مذکور، الحاقی به کنوانسیون تهران است.

ENGLISH PROVERB

When in Rome, do as the Romans do

Explanation: you should adopt the customs of the people or country you are visiting and behave in the same way
For example: Everyone in my new office dresses so casually. Should I dress that way, too? Jane: By all means. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

PHRASAL VERB

Chill out

Meaning: to relax completely instead of feeling angry, tired, or nervous
For example: I spent the afternoon chilling out in front of the TV.

ENGLISH IDIOM

Beat/flog a dead horse

Explanation: to say that someone is beating a dead horse means that they are wasting time and effort trying to do or achieve something that is impossible.
For example: Mark is beating a dead horse trying to get his money reimbursed. The company has gone bankrupt!

Second Announcement

PERMIT NO.: 1396.213
TENDER NO .: 31-32-09999-9009-6
National Iranian South Oilfields Company intends to purchase the following goods:

N.I.S.O.C
Invitation For Prequalification

Item	DESCRIPTION	Quantity
01	27/8" OD DRILL PIPE,AS BELOW SPEC: 1 ½" TOOL JOINT ID , 2.151" BODY ID ,S -135 GRADE, PSL -2, WT 10.4 PPF,2-7/8"HT-PAC CONNECTION,31/8" OD TOOL JOINT ,RANGE2,BOX TAPER:18 DEGREE, PIN TAOER:35DEGREE,BOX TONG LT :13" PIN TONG LT:9" INTERNAL upset (IU) ,31-32FT JOINT LT,TK -34 INTERNAL COATING, ACCORDING API 5D	31/000FT

vendors who intend to participate in the A/M tender are requested to send their resume & tendency letter via fax / mail to the following address not later than 14 days after the second announcement.
The applicants should have relevant background in supplying the required goods and capability to provide a bid bond of Euro 46,562 / Rls 1,604,976,000 in favor of NISOC.
Iranian vendors shall submit their resume acc . to forms nos . 01,02 and 03 which are Available at www.shana.ir and www.nisoc.ir

Foreign Purchasing Dept.
Kouy – e – Fadaeian Islam (New site) Bldg No. 104, ahwaz Iran
Tel / Fax No.: +98-61-34457437,2263256

Public Relations
WWW.NISOC.IR WWW.SHANA.IR http://IETS.MPORG IR

Mike Pence fires a fresh warning to North Korea

The United States will counter any North Korean attack with an "overwhelming and effective" response, Vice President Mike Pence has said.

He sounded the warning on Wednesday from the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, docked in Yokosuka, Japan.

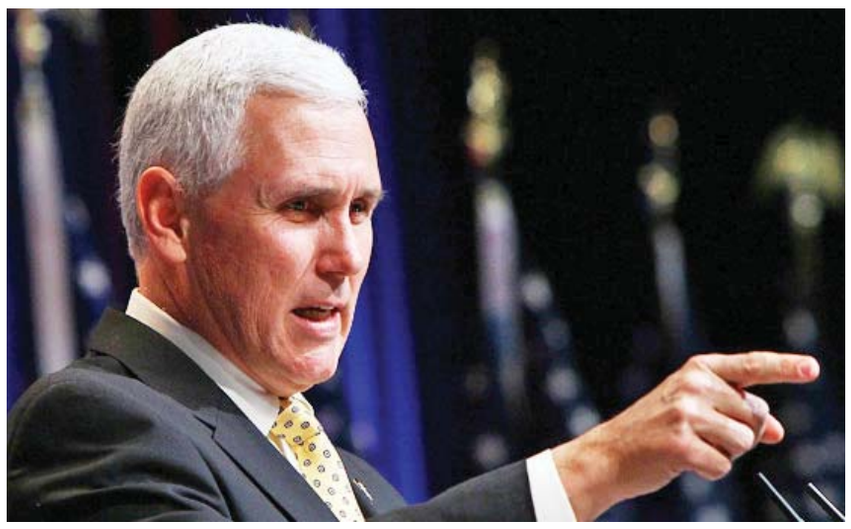
Pence is in the region to reassure U.S. allies unnerved by North Korea's ongoing missile program, and its apparent readiness to carry out another banned nuclear test in its quest to develop an atomic weapon that can hit the U.S. mainland.

Pence, whose Asia visit started in South Korea on Sunday, just hours after the reportedly failed launch by North Korea of what analysts said could have been a new missile, said the threat from North Korea was growing.

"North Korea is the most dangerous and urgent threat to peace and security in the Asia-Pacific," he told the audience of American and Japanese military personnel.

He pledged to "defeat any attack and meet any use of conventional or nuclear weapons with an overwhelming and effective American response".

Pence's comments come after a warning by a senior North Korean official that his government plans weekly tests and an "all-out war" if the U.S. takes any action against it, and has no intention of going slow on its missile program.



In an exclusive interview to Al Jazeera on Monday, Sin Hong-chol, North Korea's deputy foreign minister, said: "The time of dictating orders by brandishing the U.S. military might has gone."

"If those businessmen in power in the U.S. thought of intimidating us by any military or sanction threats - as the [Barack] Obama administration used to do and failed - they will soon find out such threats are useless."

"If we notice any sign of assault on our sovereignty, our army will launch merciless military strikes against the U.S. aggressors, wherever they may exist, from the remote U.S. lands to the American military bases on the Korean Peninsula, such as those of Japan and elsewhere."

That kind of rhetoric has unnerved allies in Japan and South Korea. Seoul, the South Korean capital, is within easy range of North Korean long-range artillery.

The diplomatic developments come amid much confusion surrounding the path of the USS Carl Vinson.

The U.S. navy has said another aircraft carrier intended as a show of force to North Korea will arrive in the Sea of Japan next week.

The navy had said on April 8 that it was directing a naval strike group headed by the Vinson to "sail north," as a "prudent measure" to deter North Korea.

And on April 11, Jim Mattis, the Pentagon chief, said the Vinson was "on her way up" to the peninsula.

The next day President Donald Trump said: "We are sending an armada. Very powerful."

But at the time of the announcements, the ships had temporarily headed in the opposite direction, to the Indian Ocean, for military exercises with Australia.

In his remarks in Japan on Wednesday, Pence also issued a warning to China regarding the South China Sea, where it has built reefs and islets into fortified islands capable of hosting military assets to bolster its claim to sovereignty over the sea.

"Our treaty [with Japan] covers all the territory administered by Japan, including the Senkaku Islands," he said, referring to an archipelago in the East China Sea that is controlled by Japan but claimed by China.

Pence said the U.S. would defend the right to freedom of navigation through the waterway, one of the most important shipping channels on the planet.

He also said more of the U.S. most advanced military assets would be deployed to the Asia-Pacific.

Approximately 47,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Japan and a further 28,000 in South Korea.

(Source: agencies)

Leading BJP figures to face trial in India's Babri mosque case

India's Supreme Court has ordered that the co-founder of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), LK Advani, and other leaders be tried for criminal conspiracy in the demolition of a 16th century mosque about 25 years ago.

The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, in the northern Uttar Pradesh state, was pulled down by Hindu activists on December 6, 1992, leading to widespread riots in which more than 2,000 people died.

Advani, 89, along with Murli Manohar Joshi and Uma Bharti, has previously been charged with making inflammatory speeches which incited the activists to demolish the structure.

The Supreme Court's ruling on Wednesday came after a lower court dropped the charges brought against them by India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), kicking off a series of appeals and counter-appeals.

"We have allowed the CBI appeal against the Allahabad High Court judgment with certain directions," the Press Trust of India news agency quoted the Supreme Court judges as saying.

The court ruled that the leaders will face the more serious charge of conspiracy and be tried by a special court in Lucknow city dealing with the actual demolition of the mosque, Zafaryab Jilani, a lawyer for the petitioner, said on Wednesday.

"The judges set aside previous court orders that dropped conspiracy charges against these leaders. It accepted appeals by the prosecution and on our behalf to revive the charges," Jilani said.

While combining the trials, the Supreme Court ordered daily hearings to ensure the verdict is delivered in two years' time.

The Supreme Court ruled that a fourth senior BJP politician, Kalyan Singh, who was chief minister of Uttar Pradesh at the time of the incident, should face criminal conspiracy charges.

His trial, however, will be delayed until his stint as governor of Rajasthan state is over because the position gives him immunity from prosecution.

The site where the Babri mosque was demolished has remained a flashpoint of religious tensions for decades.

Some Hindus say a temple to their god Ram predated the mosque and want to build a temple at the site, while Muslim groups want a new mosque.

Some in the BJP, which recently won elections in Uttar Pradesh, want to build a temple to Ram on the ruins of the razed Babri mosque - an idea that horrifies the state's significant Muslim minority.

Indian new media reports said the charges would ruin the chances of Advani, a former prime minister, of becoming India's next president when the role becomes vacant later this year.

He was present on the day of the demolition. The ensuing nationwide riots and deaths came to define his political career.

However, in a later interview with the BBC, he said the incident had hurt him "tremendously" and should never have happened.

There was no immediate reaction from the BJP, to which Narendra Modi, India's prime minister, belongs.

However, the opposition Congress party said the BJP had "tried every trick in the book" to ensure that Advani, Bharti and Joshi did not face charges.

"What they [Supreme Court judges] have said today means there's clinching evidence that needs to be now argued out in the court," said Sanjay Jha, a Congress spokesperson.

The mosque demolition case has been languishing in India's sluggish legal system for almost 25 years.

(Source: AP)

Police targeted near Egypt's St Catherine's Monastery

At least one police officer has died after armed men attacked security forces near St Catherine's Monastery in Egypt's South Sinai governorate, according to the health ministry, just a week after two deadly church bombings killed 45.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) claimed responsibility for Tuesday's attack, which targeted a police checkpoint about 800 meters from the entrance to the monastery, one of the world's most important Christian sites.

The attack, which also injured four people, comes just 10 days before Pope Francis is scheduled to visit Egypt.

Egypt has for years been waging an armed campaign in the rugged and thinly populated north of Sinai, which gained pace after the military overthrew the elected president, Mohamed Morsi, in 2013 following mass protests against his rule.

Attacks in Egypt's South Sinai, a popular destination for tourists dotted with Red Sea resorts, are by contrast rare.

Security sources told Reuters news agency that security had been put on high alert at tourist facilities across South Sinai after Tuesday's attack.

St Catherine's Monastery, founded in the 6th century and located at the foot of Mount Sinai, is one of the oldest Christian monasteries in the world and a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage site.

It is part of the Eastern Orthodox church.

Egypt's Christian minority, which makes up about 10 percent of the country's 92 million people, has increasingly been targeted by ISIL and other groups.

The two deadly suicide bombings of Christian churches on April 9, later claimed by the ISIL terrorist group, marked one of the bloodiest days for the country's Christian minority in decades.

In February, scores of Christian families and students fled North Sinai governorate after a spate of targeted killings.

A successful assault on St Catherine's would be the latest challenge to President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has pledged to protect the religious minority.

The attack in South Sinai comes as Russia is expected to make a long-awaited decision on whether to restore flights to the Sharm el-Sheikh resort after a Russian airliner was downed in 2015, dealing a serious blow to the area's tourism industry, which relies heavily on Russian visitors.

Egypt's tourism industry, a crucial source of hard currency, has suffered in the years of turmoil that followed the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, as well as from the suspected bombing of the Russian plane, which killed all 224 on board.

Israel took the unusual step earlier this month of barring its citizens from crossing into the Sinai Peninsula, saying the threat of attacks in the area inspired by ISIL and other groups was high.

(Source: Reuters)

Expert predicts Erdogan will become more engaged in Mideast after referendum

1→

After the referendum shall we expect Erdogan to take a more aggressive approach in the Middle East?

A: In the last several years, Erdogan had been acting as a dictator in the conduct of Turkey's foreign policy. Similarly he had been pursuing a more Middle East oriented policy rather than seeking membership in the European Union. Now that his behavior and policies have further undermined the prospects of Turkey's EU membership, he will most likely become more engaged in the Middle East and possibly in Central Asia.

Can the referendum results affect Iran-Turkey relationship?

A: The referendum is unlikely to have significant effect on the state of Turkey-Iran relations. Problems in Turkey-Iran relations are structural. They derive from the two countries' history as well as from religious, ethnic and cultural factors. Turkey-Iran relations have always been a combination of competition and accommodation. This is likely to be the case in future as well, unless new regional and international developments adversely affect these relations. However, because of Erdogan's obsession with Turkey's Ottoman past and his anti-Shia and anti-Persian tendencies, Turkish-Iranian relations could experience some difficult periods in the coming months and years.

U.S. State Department spokesperson Mark Toner had a quite negative reaction to the referendum's result, saying the U.S is concerned over the level of democracy in its ally Turkey. What is your assessment?

A: In the post- Cold War and post ideological world, relations of global powers with their regional allies have become more complex and asymmetrical. Turkish -American relations have not escaped this basic pattern. Turkey and America in many respects pursue different interests and policies in the Middle East, including Iraq and Syria. Therefore, a return to a state of complete convergence of interest and policy between U.S. and Turkey is very unlikely. However, their basic alliance will survive in the foreseeable future, unless Erdogan adopts a totally reckless behavior.

UN says closely monitoring mass hunger strike in Israeli jails

The United Nations says it is keeping a close eye on the situation of more than a thousand Palestinian prisoners, who have gone on hunger strike honoring a call by a fellow inmate.

Unprecedented in scale, the protest action involves a reported number of 1,500 prisoners. It started on Monday to force Israeli prison authorities to provide more humane conditions for the inmates.

"We are obviously aware of the situation and following the developments closely," UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday. He said "as a matter of principle, wherever it may be, we always call for prisoners to be treated in a humane way."

The protest leader, Marwan Barghouti, who has been given four life terms for allegedly masterminding anti-Israeli attacks, was placed in solitary confinement following the initiation of the strike.

The Israel Prisons Service spokesman Assaf Librati said Barghouti had been transferred from Hadarim Prison to the Kishon Prison, near Haifa.

The move came after he published an opinion piece in The New York Times on the hunger strike.

Israeli authorities have ruled out negotiating with the striking Palestinian prisoners.

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan said the hunger strikers "are terrorists and incarcerated murderers who are getting what they deserve and we have no reason to negotiate with them."

Palestinians have rallied in the occupied West Bank in support of the hunger strikers. The protests led to clashes with Israeli forces.

The UN official further said the world body takes cognizance of the confrontations and added, "We call on all parties to exercise maximum restraint."

In The New York Times opinion peace, Barghouti vowed that Palestinians would not surrender in the face of Israel's "inhumane" occupation.

"Decades of experience have proved that Israel's inhumane system of colonial and military occupation aims to break the spirit of prisoners and the nation to which they belong, by inflicting suffering on their bodies, separating them from their families and communities, using humiliating measures to compel subjugation," Barghouti wrote. "In spite of such treatment, we will not surrender to it."

In a show of solidarity with their loved ones, the families and relatives of the protesting inmates launched a hunger strike in the West Bank on Tuesday, the Palestinian Ma'an news agency reported.

They have erected a "solidarity tent" in the city of Salfit.

Israeli prisons hold around 6,500 Palestinians, including 300 minors. Some of the inmates are held under Tel Aviv's policy of administrative detention, which enables confinement without charge.

(Source: Press TV)

Refugees free UN staff held hostage in DRC camp

The United Nations says 16 staff members held hostage at a UN camp in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have been released unharmed.

The UN peacekeeping department said in a statement late on Tuesday that "the camp is quiet and under full control" of its peacekeepers.

Unarmed South Sudanese refugees took the staff members hostage earlier on Tuesday at the Munigi base in Congo's North Kivu province, demanding they be sent to another East African country to avoid their forced return to South Sudan, the UN Mission in Congo said.

Negotiations had continued into the evening.

The UN peacekeeping department said: "All staff have returned safely to their homes. No casualties have been reported."

It said the mission is investigating the incident.

The captors were among 530 people who have been living in the Munigi base, outside Goma, since fleeing South Sudan last August, UN Goma bureau head Daniel Ruiz told the Reuters news agency.

Most of them are former fighters loyal to ex-Vice President Riek Machar, who have clashed with President Salva Kiir's forces since July 2016.

(Source: agencies)

As Trump warned North Korea, his 'armada' was headed toward Australia

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The Pentagon has since corrected the record, saying the ship's planned port visit to Fremantle, Australia, was canceled - not the exercise with Australia's navy.

On April 15, the U.S. Navy even published a photo showing the Vinson transiting the Sunda Strait.

From April 16-18, the website www.gonavy.jp/CVLocation.html reported that the Vinson was in the Indian Ocean.

A U.S. military official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Vinson carried out the exercises after passing through the Sunda Strait and wrapped them up this week.

(Source: Reuters)

Team Sharapova use deep waters of euphemism to wash away drug stain

One can only assume she doesn't realise it, but nothing widens the credibility gap with Maria Sharapova quite so much as the manner of her return. As always with the women's tour's most bankable star, who returns to tennis next week after a 15-month doping ban, not a single thing has been left to chance, and no moment of opportunity has been left unexploited.

Sharapova will appear on court at the Porsche Grand Prix in Stuttgart next week – a wildcard entry on the day her ban expires – and to coincide with this her management have coordinated a veritable blitzkrieg of micromanaged synergies. The carefully placed interviews, the speaking engagements, an announced development in her confectionery line, the release of the front cover of her forthcoming autobiography ... each day brings a new and meticulously planned announcement. And the more relentless it is, the more awesomely professional, the harder it is to believe these are the sort of people to make a doping cock-up. Why didn't they know? It was literally their business to know.

Maybe Team Sharapova have always been so busy giving interviews about how amazingly brand-focused they are that not one has the time for boring little emails from the World Anti-Doping Agency. Maybe. The alternative is to be reminded of the Team Sky/British Cycling set-up, where the very best of the best take care of every tiny little thing – except keeping basic medical records. Honestly, you go to all that trouble shaving milliseconds off here and there, then you plunge your set-up into a long-running, debilitating scandal that must wipe out every one of those gains and more. What are the chances? As with Sharapova, the public must decide whether such glaring oversights are amazingly unprofessional or simply incredible in context.

It is probably wise not to expect too much more daylight to be let in on magic when Maria's book hits the shelves this September. In the first teaser for Unstoppable – released this week, of course – Sharapova hints otherwise, declaring: "I talk to reporters but I never tell everything I know." On that we can all agree. "This is a story about sacrifice, about what you have to give up. But it's also just the story of a girl and her father and their crazy adventure." Does it turn out to be about not the glittering prize but instead about the friends they met along the way? No. Not if the simmering outrage about Sharapova's return from some quarters of the Women's Tennis Association locker room is anything to go by.

There is no direct mention in the blurb of Sharapova's doping ban or the circumstances around it – it is simply repackaged as "her recent fight to get back on the court". Which feels a little like characterising a spell at Her Majesty's pleasure as "a fight to get back home". It certainly underscores the line she took during a recent appearance at the ANA Inspiring Women in Sports Conference, where she said of her appeal against a lengthier ban for a doping offence: "that's why I fought so hard for the truth to be out".

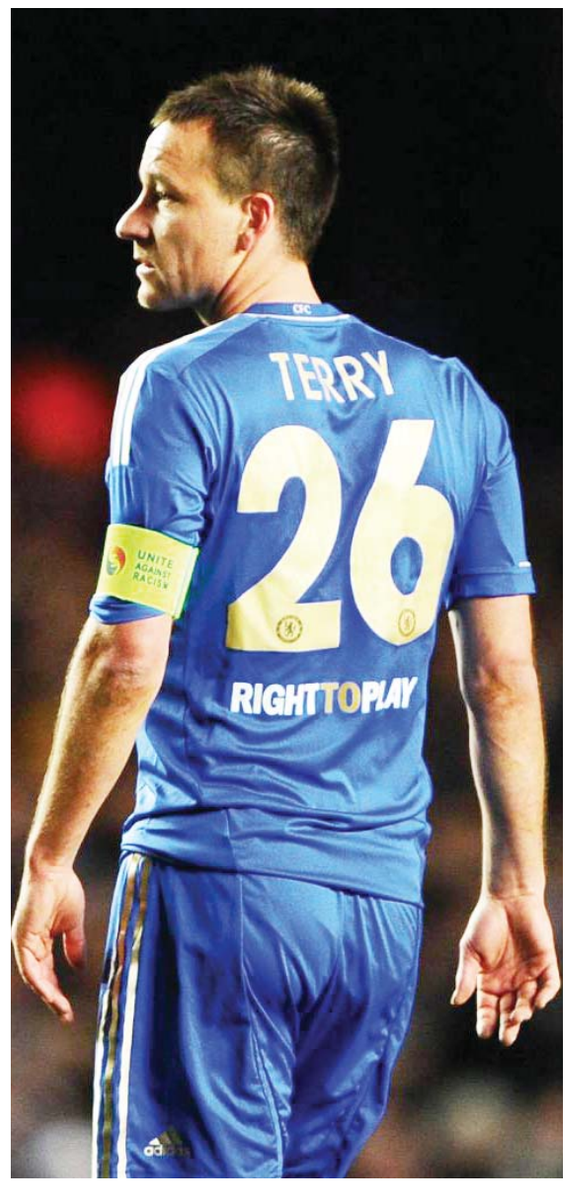
Thank you, Erin Brockovich. If you're resisting the idea that the 11-times world's highest-paid female athlete Maria Sharapova has to fight every inch against a system stacked against her, you should probably just chill out and submit. Unless you're the International Tennis Federation, at whose door she graciously decided to put some of the blame for her taking a banned substance. "Why didn't someone [from the ITF] come up to me and have a private conversation," she wondered in a Times interview at the weekend, "just an official to an athlete?" The ITF has responded it was unaware she took meldonium but will doubtless have been grateful for yet another reminder the business was all somehow its fault.

As far as Sharapova's management are concerned, though, the deep waters of euphemism have already closed over the phrase "drugs ban". It is now officially "a situation like that" or "that type of year." As her agent puts it: "I think it's a real credit to what we've done beforehand, to be able to sustain that type of year." The managing director of her sweets firm describes Team Sharapova's performance as "a textbook in years to come in how to credibly and honourably deal with a situation like that. And I think the results show how professionally they handled it." Well quite. They really couldn't have been more professional. You know, except with that one thing.

Still, their undoubted skill has been deployed to encourage many commentators to put the kindest possible interpretation on an unfortunate set of facts. Consider the glowing Times interview with Sharapova, which remarked: "To her credit, she didn't parcel out blame. No one got fired. And throughout this ban, all the principal members of her team have stayed with her." I can't help feeling there's more than one way to look at that, no matter how professionally they work to convince us otherwise.

(Source: Guardian)

John Terry pens emotional open letter thanking Chelsea supporters



John Terry has thanked Chelsea's supporters in an open letter, and has called the decision to depart "the toughest of my life."

Chelsea and the 36-year-old defender confirmed on Monday that he will end a 22-year association with the Blues when his contract expires this summer, having won 14 major honours at the club since making his first-team debut in 1998.

Terry will exit Stamford Bridge as the club's most successful ever captain, having won four Premier League titles, five FA Cups, three League Cups, the Champions League in 2012 and the Europa League a year later.

"It's with overwhelming emotion that earlier this week the club and I announced this will be my last season as a Chelsea player," club captain Terry said.

"This has been the toughest decision of my life for me and my family, but I always envisaged leaving on the right terms, in the right way and at the right time - and that is now.

"I feel I still have regular football in me but understand that opportunities here at Chelsea will be limited, it is therefore time for a new challenge.

"From joining as a schoolboy at 14, to signing my first professional contract at 17 and then making my first-team debut in the same year, to then being part of the transformation and evolution of this great football club, has inspired me to keep striving to be the very best I can be.

"For 22 years this club has been my life, it has given me the platform to compete against the best, break record after record, win trophy after trophy, and as we won more it only increased my desire to work harder and demand more from myself and the team. With this obsession, I've been able to become Chelsea's most successful captain and I'm immensely proud to be mentioned in the same company as Ron Harris, Peter Bonetti, Frank Lampard, John Hollins and many other greats as one of the highest appearance-makers for the club.

Thank you to all my team-mates and managers over the years. To have gone shoulder to shoulder in many a battle with you has been an honour.

"I'll never be able to put into words the love I have for you fans. The support you have always given me, both personally and to the team, is phenomenal. You've been instrumental in my success and have inspired me and the team to win so many trophies.

"Wearing the armband and being your captain has been without doubt one of the proudest achievements of my life. I only hope I've been able to repay you with my commitment and loyalty throughout my career, and I look forward to returning to this great club in some capacity in the future.

"I want to stress that the journey is not yet over. There is a long way to go and we are committed to ending this campaign on a high. I am fully focused on helping the team and manager in every way I can from now until the end of the season."

(Source: Skysports)

Pirates All-Star Marte banned 80 games for PEDs

Pittsburgh Pirates All-Star outfielder Starling Marte has been banned 80 games for violating Major League Baseball's policy against performance-enhancing drugs, the league said on Tuesday.

Marte, a two-time Gold Glove winner who last year played in his first All-Star Game, tested positive for nandrolone, MLB said in a statement.

The suspension of the 28-year-old Dominican, who has been with Pittsburgh since his MLB debut in 2012, is effective immediately.

Marte apologized and promised to learn from his mistake.

"Neglect and lack of knowledge have led me to this mistake with the high price to pay of being away from the field that I enjoy and love so much," Marte said in a translated statement.

"With much embarrassment and helplessness, I ask for forgiveness for unintentionally disrespecting so many people who have trusted in my work and have supported me so much."

MLB's policy on performance-enhancing drugs calls for an 80-game ban for a first offense, 162 games for a second positive test and a lifetime ban for a third offense.

Players who are banned under the PED policy are ineligible to participate in that year's postseason.

Marte, who was signed to a six-year, $31 million contract extension in 2014, was batting .241 through the first 13 games of the 162-game regular season.

(Source: Reuters)

Liverpool have no interest in bringing in Joe Hart from Man City - source

Liverpool are not interested in signing Joe Hart from Manchester City as they consider him inferior to their current goalkeeper options, a senior Reds source has told ESPN FC.

The Sun reported on Wednesday that Hart, who has spent the season on loan at Torino after falling out of favour at City, is set for a £20 million move to Liverpool.

The England international, 30, is due to return to City in the summer following the end of his loan spell with Torino, when he will reportedly move on from the Etihad Stadium. The Daily Mirror reports that Hart will turn down another season on loan at Torino to return to the Premier League.

However, the Liverpool source told ESPN FC that the club have no interest in the England international and that the speculation is "completely fictitious," with manager Jurgen Klopp rating Simon Mignolet and Loris Karius as better goalkeepers.

Hart has struggled at times during his spell with Torino, conceding almost 50 goals in 30 Serie A games, and the source said Klopp has not seen anything from the keeper this season to suggest he would improve his squad.

City, whose signing of Claudio Bravo from Barcelona last summer led to Hart's departure to Italy, refused to comment to ESPN FC on the speculation.

(Source: Soccernet)

Bayern Munich's Manuel Neuer out for eight weeks with a fractured foot

Four-time World's Best Goalkeeper Manuel Neuer has suffered a further injury to his left foot during FC Bayern Munich's UEFA Champions League elimination against Real Madrid and will miss the remainder of the season.

The Bayern and Germany No. 1 fractured his foot during the action that led to Cristiano Ronaldo's goal putting the Spaniards 3-2 ahead in extra-time.

He was diagnosed with a fracture shortly after the game, but will undergo further examination following the squad's return to Munich.

During the team's post-match banquet in Madrid, club chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge confirmed that the 31-year-old will be out of action for around eight weeks.

(Source: bundesliga.com)

Court names Sport Recife as 1987 Brazil title winner over Flamengo

Brazil's Supreme Court finally named Sport Recife the winner of the 1987 league title on Tuesday.

Sport -- a team that more often fights against relegation than for titles -- beat Rio de Janeiro giants Flamengo 3-1 in the ruling by a five-member panel.

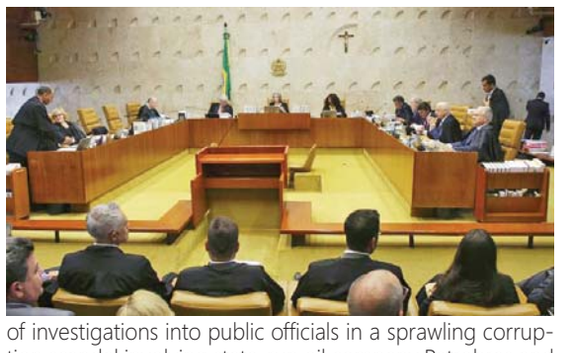
One member of the panel abstained because his son had worked as a Flamengo attorney in the case.

The long-running dispute began when Flamengo won the title in a league created by the clubs involved. However, Brazil's football confederation decided to organise a separate competition, which was won by Sport. The confederation then tried to get Flamengo to play Sport in a final, an offer that the Rio giants rejected.

Had the panel failed to decide, the case would have gone to the full 11-member Supreme Court.

"Football is passion, but the ideal is that sporting decisions do not come to court," Justice Rosa Maria Weber said.

Brazil's Supreme Court is currently clogged with dozens



of investigations into public officials in a sprawling corruption scandal involving state-run oil company Petrobras and major conglomerate Odebrecht, among others.

Justice Marco Aurelio Mello, a Flamengo fan that ruled against his club, said there will be no more appeals in the affair. "This will be the final score," Mello said during the session.

Also a Flamengo fan, Justice Luis Roberto Barroso said: "There is no place worse than the judicial system to discuss sports." He voted to split the title between the two clubs.

After the decision, Barroso said "40 million fans have their hearts shattered." Justice Mello added: "And that includes me."

Flamengo, the most popular team in Brazil, have always claimed the title and are unlikely to be swayed by the high-court ruling. But seconds after the decision, Sport Recife proudly announced the title on its website.

"[The title of] 87 is, undoubtedly, ours," Sport Recife said. "In court, once more, Sport beat those who ran away."

Flamengo used Twitter to answer Sport's comment. "On the pitch, on the ball, always Flamengo. Brazilian champion of 1987."

(Source: Soccernet)

Persepolis lift Iran Professional League trophy

SPORTS desk **TEHRAN** — Persepolis, who won Iran football league for the tenth time on Saturday with three games left, lifted the trophy in front of about 80,000 cheering fans in Tehran's Azadi Stadium.

The Reds won the title after nine years after they became runner-up last season on goal difference.

Persepolis thrashed Padideh 4-0 to celebrate their 20th win in the league.

Two teams observed a minute's silence to pay respects to the victims of the northwest Iran floods, which killed 48 persons last week.

Kamal Kamyabinia gave Persepolis the lead in the 50th minute with a header. Ali Alipour made it 2-0 in the 68th minute and Mehdi Taremi was on target two minutes later.

Substitute Farshad Ahmadzadeh scored Persepolis's fourth goal in the 89th minute.

At the end of the match, Iranian Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs Masoud Soltanifar attended the medal ceremony.

Persepolis's legends including Ali Parvin, Ahmadreza Abedzadeh, Reza Shahroudi and Mohammad Panjali watched the match from the stands.

On Thursday, Tractor Sazi will host Esteghlal in a must-win match in Tabriz.

© Tehran Times/ Mohammad Reza Abbasi

Ex-Esteghlal striker Arash Borhani announces retirement

SPORTS desk Former Esteghlal striker Arash Borhani has announced his retirement from football after 15 years.

The 33-year-old forward, who currently plays for Paykan, started his playing career in 2002 with Pas and won Iran Professional League title in his four-year term in the Tehran based team.

Borhani joined Iranian popular team Esteghlal in 2007 and scored 114 goals for the Blues in 283 matches, making him the all-time top goal scorers of Esteghlal and also the second all-time top goal scorers in Iran's Premier Football League.

Borhani also made 37 matches for Iran national football team and scored 10 goals.

He won the bronze medal with Iran U-23 football team in the 2006 Asian Games.

Borhani penned an emotional open letter to Esteghlal fans as he prepares to hang up his but at the end of the season.

"I cannot find words to describe my gratitude towards Esteghlal fans. I would like to thank all of them and say that I cannot hide my sadness over the retirement.

"I hope I will be remembered as a player who has always fought for his club. I want also to thank those persons who played the role in my career progression in football," Borhani said.

Sepahan Brazilian goalkeeper extends his contract

Sepahan Brazilian goalkeeper Lee Winston Leandro da Silva Oliveira has extended his deal for another year.

Lee, who started his career with loan spells to Colo Colo-BA and Tigres do Brasil before he was handed his professional debut with Vitória, joined the Iranian club in last year's June from Academica on a one-year deal.

The 29-year-old keeper has also played at Atletico Mineiro along with former Barcelona midfielder Ronaldinho.

Sepahan is a favorite to win Iran Professional League (IPL) next season with its newly-appointed coach Zlatko Kranjcar.

The Isfahan based team is fifth in the table, 23 points adrift of IPL leader Persepolis.

(Source: Tasnim)

Persepolis reache agreement with Mensha, Khalilzadeh

Iran popular football team Persepolis dropped the bombshell, reveals it has reached an agreement with Godwin Mensha and Shoja Khalilzadeh.

Mensha joined Paykan in the summer of 2016 with a one-year contract and has scored 12 goals for the Tehran-based team in 20 matches.

Mensha started his career in Spain, playing for several clubs in the third and fourth division before moving to Malta to play for Balzan and Mosta.

Persepolis, who won Iran Professional League (IPL) title with three games to spare last week, has also reached an agreement with Sepahan free agent defender Shoja Khalilzadeh.

Khalilzadeh invited to Team Melli in 2012 by Carlos Queiroz and made his debut for Iran national team in 3–0 victory against Mozambique as a starter.

(Source: Tasnim)

Former NFL star Hernandez hangs self in jail cell: officials

Former New England Patriots football star Aaron Hernandez hanged himself in the jail cell where he was serving a life sentence for murder, just days after being acquitted of a second murder charge, state prison officials said on Wednesday.

Hernandez, 27, was a rising star in the National Football League when he was arrested in June 2013 and accused of murdering an acquaintance near his Massachusetts home. He was convicted of that killing and sentenced to life in prison in 2015, but on Friday he was found not guilty of a 2012 double murder.

Staff at the Souza Baranowski Correctional Center in Shirley, Massachusetts, found Hernandez hanging in his prison cell at 3:05 a.m. EDT (0705 GMT). He was taken to a nearby hospital, where he was pronounced dead an hour later.

"Mr. Hernandez hanged himself utilizing a bed sheet that he attached to his cell window," the state corrections commission said in a statement. "Mr. Hernandez also attempted to block his door from the inside by jamming the door with various items."

A lawyer for Hernandez, a former star tight end with a $41 million contract, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Massachusetts State Police are investigating the death.

More than a year after Hernandez was arrested and charged with murdering Odin Lloyd in an industrial park near his North Attleborough, Massachusetts, home, he was charged with gunning down two Cape Verdean nationals outside a Boston nightclub in 2012.

In his trial for that shooting this year, defense lawyer Jose Baez hammered the credibility of the prosecution's star witness, suggesting that he had killed the men and pinned it on Hernandez in exchange for immunity. Baez is best known for successfully defending Florida mother Casey Anthony in 2011 against charges of murdering her daughter.

Hernandez was cleared of all the charges he faced in the second case but one, a weapons possession count.

After that trial ended, the athlete was expected to appeal his sentence of life in prison without possibility of parole for Lloyd's killing.

(Source: Reuters)

Woods hits first public shots in months, no date for return

Tiger Woods took his first public golf shots in over two months during an event to announce his first public course on Tuesday but the former world number one remained noncommittal about his return to competitive action.

Woods, who has not played a tournament since pulling out of a European Tour event in February because of back spasms, took two swings into a par-three hole in front of a crowd that were on hand for his course design announcement in Missouri.

His first shot off a makeshift tee bounced off some rocks that will front the green on the still-to-be built course while his second landed about 10 feet from the hole.

"The back is progressing," said Woods. "I have good days and bad days. I've had three back operations and that's just kind of the nature of the business unfortunately. That's all I can say."

Woods returned to the PGA Tour in January after a 17-month absence following back surgery. He missed the cut at the Farmers Insurance Open and shot an opening-round 77 a week later in Dubai before withdrawing.

His course, which is scheduled to open in 2019, will honor late Missouri native and three-times major champion Payne Stewart and be called Payne's Valley.

(Source: Reuters)

Bayern exit not just ref's fault

Bayern Munich have never been the best of losers. Some might say their almost pathological intolerance to defeat is one of the reasons they tend to win so much.

Their self-conception as winners, their sense of entitlement, is so pronounced that the instinct after dramatic disappointments in the past has often been to focus on their own unforgivable mistakes and flaws rather than to accept the superiority of others. Brutal purges of managers, players or sporting directors deemed not good enough have usually followed.

On Tuesday night, however, culpability was found elsewhere. While centre-back Mats Hummels merely hinted at factors "beyond our control," Executive Chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge was much more blunt.

"For the first time, I feel this mad anger inside of me," the 61-year-old told the players and VIP guests at the midnight banquet in the team hotel.

"We've been cheated. We've been cheated, in the true sense of the word."

By whom? It didn't need spelling out. Referee Viktor Kassai had prevented Bayern finding just reward for their heroic performance at the Bernabeu by awarding two offside goals for Real Madrid and "a second yellow that wasn't a yellow for [Arturo] Vidal," Rummenigge alleged.

The audience applauded. They felt he had hit the nail on the head: Brave Bayern, undefeated on the field of battle, were knifed in the back by the man in black.

It's a familiar line in football, but you rarely hear it from the elite teams, mostly from those below. The clubs who dominate are also top of the food chain when it comes to refereeing mistakes. They tend to get the breaks. Many football fans in Germany, for example, believe Bayern get preferential treatment. Systematic bias is hard to prove but it would be strange if the combination of status (and the subtle pressure that comes with it), home advantage (the best teams play at the biggest grounds) and the simple mechanics of the game would not have a discernible effect on refereeing.

Even if the referee is 100 percent neutral and blows his every whistle with utmost integrity, both sides will not have the exact same chance to benefit from dubious or plain wrong decisions. They can't have. Bigger/better teams attack more. They create more tricky situations in the opposition box and more marginal offside decisions that can go in their favour. Lesser opponents are forced to foul them more often and are thus in bigger danger of having a man sent off. The good teams are not luckier in the strict sense of the word. They simply get to flip the coin more often. Bad luck, conversely, hurts them less because they have the means to keep on trying. "Coincidence is logical," Johan Cruyff once said.

When two evenly matched teams come up against each other, as happens in the latter stages of the Champions League, the number of coin flips is more even. The impact of luck -- in the form of favourable decisions -- becomes magnified. But as much as Bayern had a right to feel aggrieved on Tuesday, it would be wrong to pretend that everything went against them over the course of the two legs.

Both penalties they won were soft or borderline dubious. Sergio Ramos' own goal was preceded by offside, not given. Vidal was extremely lucky to have escaped a quicker dismissal after his second foul in the 48th minute. The tackle punished by Kassai five minutes from the end was not as cleanly executed as it looked at first sight either. Replays show the Chilean lifted his foot to make sure he connected with Marco Asensio after playing the ball. A harsh decision, granted, but not a scandalous one.

Once you add up the other things that went for Madrid on the night -- Casemiro staying on the pitch, another wrong offside call on Robert Lewandowski -- Zinedine Zidane's team did get lucky. But when the dust settles and Bayern will look at their elimination in a colder light, they will probably admit that Madrid did more to get lucky, too. Bayern were thoroughly outplayed in the second half at the Allianz Arena through no fault but their own and extremely lucky to escape with only a 2-1 deficit. In the Spanish capital, too, Madrid had the better individuals in the starting XI and on the bench, more clear-cut chances and just that extra bit of street-smartness and ability to manage the tie.

The Bayern bosses will continue to blame Kassai in public over the course of the next days, but an internal, honest inquest into their worst Champions League campaign since 2011 will start soon, too. It will uncover problems and shortcomings -- in performances, players' qualities and Carlo Ancelotti's coaching -- that had little to do with an assistant referee getting his angles wrong.

The Bavarians will think long and hard about the necessary enhancements. For as much as they hate being on the wrong end of an official's decision, they hate themselves for having been in that position in the first place even more.

(Source: Soccernet)

TEHRAN TIMES
INTERNATIONAL DAILY
www.tehrantimes.com
Managing Director: Ali Asgari
Editor-in-Chief: Hassan Lasjerdi
» Editorial Dept.: Fax: (+98(21) 88808214 editor@tehrantimes.com
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» Public Relations Office: Tel: (+98 21) 88805807
» Subscription & Distribution Dept.: Tel: (+98 21) 43051603
» www.eshterak.ir Distributor: Padideh Novin Co. Tel: 88911433
» Webmaster: webmaster@tehrantimes.com
» Printed at: Kayhan - ISSN: 1017-94
No. 18, Bimeh Alley, Nejatollahi St., Tehran, Iran
P.o. Box: 14155-4843
Zip Code: 1599814713

Affinities between Sadi and Victor Hugo discussed at Tehran meeting

CULTURE desk **TEHRAN —** A number of Persian scholars gathered in the Book City Institute in Tehran on Tuesday to discuss the commonalities between the Persian poet Sadi (C. 1213-1291) and French poet and novelist Victor Hugo (1802-1885).

Speaking at the meeting, scholar Mir Jalaleddin Kazzazi said that he believes those who have read books written by Hugo agree that Hugo can be called the Sadi of France.

"We might not find clear connections between the two since each belongs to a different culture and history. However, if we look deeply we can find connections and that they both have had the same attitudes towards mankind," he said.

"They both think of man and feel for him. Victor Hugo also liked people. He also wished that man could live a better life as he deserves. Those who read Hugo also agree with me that we can call Hugo the Sadi of France. His writings are not hard, he follows art to respect art; however, for him, art is to respect people," he added.

The Academy of Persian Language and Literature director Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel next said that all writers, poets and cultural figures have made great use of Sadi's Gulistan (The Rose Garden).

"The role of Gulistan in reinforcing the Persian language and literature in the minds and spirits of the Persian-speaking nations and especially Iranians is like the role of the breast milk of a mother. That is if an individual has not read Gulsitan in Persian literature, he is like a child who has not been fed with breast milk," he said.

Persian literature scholar Mir Jalaleddin Kazzazi (C) speaks during a meeting on Sadi and Victor Hugo at the Book City Institute in Tehran on April 18, 2017.

In his brief words the director of the Center for the Study of Sadi, Kurosh Kamali Sarvestani, said that what mostly has attracted the people of the West to Sadi are his moral teachings. "He is a world-famous poet who talks about the world's ideas," he remarked.

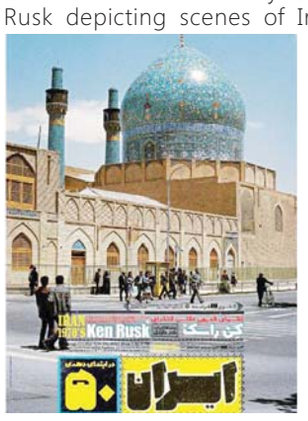
The two-day meeting was organized by the Sadi Foundation in Tehran and Iran's cultural office in France in collaboration with the Paris Diderot University to commemorate Iran's Sadi National Day (April 21).

Victor Hugo is considered one of the greatest and best-known French writers. He is mostly famous for his novels "Les Miserables" and "The Hunchback of Notre-Dame".

One of the greatest figures of classical Persian literature, Sheikh Muslih ud-Din Sadi Shirazi is famous worldwide for his Bustan (The Orchard) and Gulistan (The Rose Garden).

Ken Rusk's series to display 1970s Iran at Tehran exhibit

ART desk **TEHRAN —** The Fereshteh branch of the Book City Institute in Tehran will showcase a collection by Canadian photographer Ken Rusk depicting scenes of Iran's social life during the early years of the 1970s.



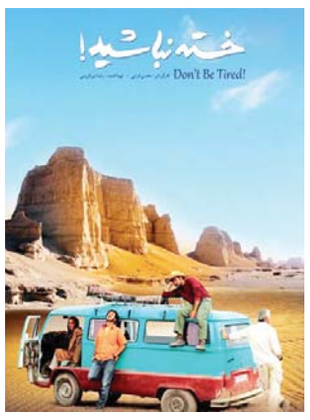
Iranian photojournalist Nader Davudi will be the curator of the exhibition, the institute announced in a press release on Wednesday.

Rusk photographed the collection between 1971 and 1973.

The photos have been selected from among more than 1,000 slides that have never been displayed in any exhibition before. Rusk has recently shared a number of the photos on the Internet.

Iranian films line up for Earth Day festival

ART desk **TEHRAN —** Five Iranian movies will go on screen in the various sections of the 3rd Earth Day Film Festival, which will be held in San Francisco from April 21 to 23.



"Don't Be Tired" co-directed by Afshin Hashemi and Mohsen Qarai will be screened in the feature film competition.

The film is about a tourist couple who faces several problems during their visit to Iran.

"Only Five Minutes" by Mohammad Mohammadian and "A Share of Share" by Kaveh Jahed will compete in the short films section while "Full Color" and "Red", both directed by Ario Saffarzadegan, will be shown in the animation section.

NEWS IN BRIEF

"A Nasty Story" comes to Iranian bookstores

ART desk **TEHRAN —** A Persian translation of Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1862 satirical novella "A Nasty Story" by Mitra Nazarian has recently been published in Tehran.

Mahi Publications is the publisher of the book, which tells the story of Pralinski, a forty-three-year-old pampered son of a general who attends a wedding of one of his colleagues uninvited.

Discovery to build $400 million theme park in Costa Rica

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Discovery Communications, owner of Discovery Channel and Animal Planet, will build a $400 million theme park in Costa Rica, the government said on Tuesday.

Local investment firm Sun Latin America will be responsible for developing the 800-hectare (1,977-acre) project in the province of Guanacaste, a beach tourism destination some 225 kilometers (139.81 miles) north of the capital, the government said.

The park, which will include hotels, eco-adventure activities, sports areas and restaurants, will generate some 2,000 jobs during its 2018-2020 construction, Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís told a news conference.

Discovery Communications and Sun Latin America did not provide details on their agreement.

Painter seeks to instil heavenly life on earth in new collection

ART desk **TEHRAN —** Veteran painter Hassan Yaquti has said that his new collection promotes a heavenly life on the earth.

"Clouds are the central theme of eight works from the collection," Yaquti told the Persian service of MNA on Tuesday at the Zemestan Gallery of the Iranian Artists Forum, which is displaying the collection in a solo exhibition.

"I drew the clouds closer to the earth to symbolically tell the visitors that the earth is not a place where we cannot live in a heavenly fashion," he added.

"If you take a look at the rest of the works, you will see that they also instil the same message in the visitors," he explained.

He named the exhibition "Desirousness and Isolation", which is the title of a book by contemporary Iranian philosophy scholar Mostafa Malekian. The collection also contains a portrait of Malekian.

The collection mainly focuses on nature. "I suppose that as much as we become closer to nature we still feel isolated from the truth," Yaquti said.

Painter Hassan Yaquti poses during an exhibition of his works at the Zemestan Gallery of the Iranian Artists Forum in Tehran on April 18, 2017. (Jamejamonline/Chavosh Homavandi)

"The collection generally is self-expression and I see my personality when I cast a glance at the works," he added.

Ten works from the series were sold on the opening day of the exhibition. "That is great when my works can attract customers and find their ways into people's homes," Yaquti stated.

The exhibition will run until April 25.

Veteran calligrapher Keikhosro Khorush honored

TEHRAN — Veteran calligrapher Keikhosro Khorush, who is mostly known for calligraphy works on Persian classical literature, was honored during a ceremony at the Andisheh Cultural Center on Tuesday evening.

The ceremony was organized in collaboration with the Iran Calligraphers Association and was attended by a large number of calligraphers and literati.

Calligrapher and poet Kaveh Teimuri praised Khorush for his influence on the art of calligraphy and said that his calligraphy work on the Divan of Hafez was one of the top selling books in its time.

"Master Khorush is a great lover of beauty. He painted a portrait of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Imam Khomeini in the early years of the (1979) Islamic Revolution that has been republished many times," he added.

Alireza Madadi, a veteran calligrapher said in his brief remarks that Master Khorush has given a personality to calligraphy and has helped elevate the status of calligraphy from its previous level.

Keikhosro Khorush attends a meeting the Andisheh Cultural Center organized on April 18, 2017 to honor the veteran calligrapher for his lifetime achievements. (Mehr/Shahab Qayyumi)

Davud Farshbaf, another calligrapher who has been a student of Khorush, said, "Honoring the master is honoring the art of Iran. Khorush has been a master in both calligraphy and painting."

Kamran Kuhestani said that the style of calligraphy of Khorush is like words by Sadi. "When we look closely we see his words are quite easy and simple but nobody can write like him," he added.

For his part master Khorush also thanked the organizers and his friends and calligraphers attending the ceremony.

Kevin Spacey to host Broadway's Tony Awards for first time

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Stage and screen actor Kevin Spacey will step up to host Broadway's Tony Awards, organizers said on Tuesday, less than two months before the national broadcast of the annual theater honors.

It will mark Spacey's first time hosting the Tonys, which will take place in New York on June 11, broadcaster CBS said.

Recent hosts Neil Patrick Harris, Hugh Jackman and James Corden all won raves from critics but apparently were unavailable to do the honors again this year, prompting a wry bit of self-depreciating humor from Spacey.

"I was their 2nd choice for 'Usual Suspects,' 4th choice for 'American Beauty,' and 15th choice to host this year's Tony Awards. I think my career is definitely going in the right direction," he said.

"Maybe I can get short-listed to host the Oscars if everyone else turns it down," he added.

British actor and talk show host Corden, who helmed the show a year ago, went on to host the Grammy Awards in February.

Actor and presenter Kevin Spacey arrives at the 86th Academy Awards in Hollywood, California March 2, 2014. (Reuters/Adrees Latif/File Photo)

Spacey, 57, himself a Tony winner for "Lost in Yonkers" as well as a two-time Oscar winner, currently stars in the Netflix political drama "House of Cards". He also served for 10 years as artistic director of London's Old Vic theater company.

"We can't wait to see the energy he brings to Radio City on Tony night," said Charlotte St. Martin, president of the Broadway League, and Heather Hitchens, president of the American Theatre Wing, in a reference Spacey's wry, sometimes sardonic humor.

Nominations for the Tony Awards, which cover plays, musicals, actors and creative teams on Broadway, will be announced on May 2. Hip-hop historical musical "Hamilton" swept the board last year with 11 wins.

Stars appearing on Broadway this season included Bette Midler in a hit revival of "Hello, Dolly!", as well as Sally Field, Jake Gyllenhaal, Nathan Lane, Glenn Close, Mark Ruffalo, Kevin Kline and Laura Linney.

The 71st Tony Awards will be broadcast live on CBS in a glittering three-hour show from Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan.

Soprano Nadine Sierra wins 2017 Richard Tucker Award

NEW YORK (AP) — Soprano Nadine Sierra has won the 2017 Richard Tucker Award, dubbed the Heisman Trophy of opera.

The 28-year-old Florida native is "an American singer at the threshold of a major international career," according to the Richard Tucker Music Foundation. That's the condition for the award honoring Tucker, a Brooklyn-born tenor who died in 1975.

Sierra says the opera bug first bit her when she was 10, after she borrowed a video of Puccini's "La Boheme" from a library in her hometown of Fort Lauderdale.

"When I watched the VHS for the first time, I was in awe that something so beautiful could exist," said Sierra, speaking from Venice, Italy, where she was rehearsing for a performance at the Teatro la Fenice.

Her whimsical afterthought on the still-checked-out-video: "I feel a little guilty for never returning it, although I don't regret it in the least."

That opera's soaring vocals inspired her own in a career that has taken her to New York's Metropolitan Opera, the Paris Opera and Milan's La Scala, among others. In September, she makes her debut at London's Royal Opera House - singing "La Boheme."

The annual award comes with a $50,000 prize plus a gala performance at Carnegie Hall.

Past winners include mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton, soprano Renee Fleming and tenor Lawrence Brownlee.