



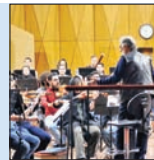
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Putin envoy visits Tehran for Syria talks

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Russian President Putin's special envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentiev traveled to Tehran on Saturday and sat down for talks with Iran's Syria negotiator, Hossein Jaber Ansari.

These two diplomats preside over Iran and Russia's delegations in the Astana talks on Syria.

The United Nations special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura will hold talks with senior officials from Iran, Russia and Turkey, as guarantors of the Syria peace process, in Geneva early next week, a UN statement said on Friday.

The upcoming talks will serve setting up a committee to draft a new Syrian constitution and usher in elections.

Top MP: EU has lost Iranians' trust for SPV delay

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Kazem Jalali, chairman of the Parliament Research Center, said on Saturday that Europe has lost the Iranian nation's trust owing to the prolonged delay in establishing the special purpose vehicle (SPV), which is aimed to keep trade flowing with Iran.

Jalali said, "Unfortunately, we have not heard any particular news

regarding the operation and implementation of the so-called SPV to facilitate trade with Iran," Mehr reported.

The Europeans have had enough time to put the mechanism in place, but they have not yet fulfilled their obligations seven months after America's unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal, he lamented.

Palestinians slam Australia's recognition of al-Quds as Israel capital

The Palestinian leadership has denounced the latest decision by the Australian government to recognize al-Quds (Jerusalem) as the capital of the Israeli regime, describing the move as "irresponsible" and in violation of international law.

Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), called on Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to reverse his decision on occupied al-Quds

(Jerusalem), and to ensure his country's firm adherence to its obligations under international law.

Ashrawi noted that such a measure "would be unilateral, illegal, and would jeopardize the chances for peace."

She pointed out that the dramatic shift in Canberra's policy on al-Quds (Jerusalem) would constitute a violation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. ➔13



ARTICLE
Abdouallah Shahbazi
Political analyst

Macron, Trump and Iran's future

The incident of the city of Strasbourg in France was a very primitive scenario for facing the deep social and political crisis that the Macron government is facing.

As predicted, French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner announced that the "terrorist", who "apparently" was responsible for the shooting in Strasbourg, at 9 pm on Thursday, December 13th, was killed in a street clash with three policemen. Shortly thereafter, ISIS released a statement, claiming responsibility for the shooting and killing of Strasbourg.

The extent and depth of the crisis in France is such that it does not allow the creation of a tense security and repression under the pretext of "terrorism". Contrary, the scenario of Macron and Castaner, which, regardless of its tragic human dimensions, resembles Louis de Funès comedies, adds to the severity of the crisis.

On the other hand, on Thursday, the United States Senate unanimously condemned Mohamed bin Salman for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and called on Trump to end support for the Saudi war in Yemen.

This is a major change in the U.S. policy that occurred in the final days of the 115th Congress, a congress that is run by both the Senate and the House of Representatives under the control of the Republican Party. The incident shows that Trump will be greatly affected by the start of the 116th Congressional Congress on January 3, 2019, where the House of Representatives will be controlled by the Democratic Party.

Robert Muller's investigation on Russia's role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is also underway.

In addition, there is concern over the U.S. stock market. The current Inverted Yield Curve shows that the number of short-term bank deposits is more than long-term deposits. Financial analysts consider the Inverted Yield Curve a serious indication of the probability of a recession and a financial crisis, because it reflects lack of confidence of Americans in the future of their bank savings.

Accordingly, some conservative analysts, such as Michael Wilson, senior strategist at Morgan Stanley Bank, predicted a 50 percent market downturn in 2019. ➔7

Forcible repatriation of Rohingya dangerous

By Nay San Lwin

ISLAMABAD — Just a little more than a year ago, at least ten thousand Rohingya were killed in northern Rakhine state, at least 350 villages were burnt to the ground. As a result, about 750,000 had to flee to neighboring Bangladesh.

I, on behalf of all Rohingyas, would like to thank the Bangladesh government and public for hosting more than a million Rohingya refugees. We appreciate all the efforts made by Bangladesh.

However, Rohingya refugees have again faced the threat of forced repatriation. If you visit the camps of Bangladesh, you will find elderly people for whom this is the third time they have had to flee to Bangladesh.

The world has seen this cycle of persecution and killings in Myanmar resulting in hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing to Bangladesh. These refugees are then forced back to Myanmar and again they meet the same fate of persecution and catastrophic violence. This vicious and murderous cycle has been going on since 1978.

Bangladesh signed a bilateral agreement with Myanmar on November 23, 2017 and tried to start repatriation on January 23, 2018 but failed. Again just recently on November 15, 2018, they tried to repatriate a first batch of 2,260 Rohingya but failed again.

The reasons why the refugees are refusing to be repatriated are crystal clear. Marzuki Darusman, the chair of Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, summed it up at UN Security Council

on October 24. He said that genocide is ongoing in Myanmar.

Almost 130,000 Rohingya have been in concentration camps in Sittwe for more than 6 years now. These internally displaced people (IDPs) are trapped in the camps and live under difficult circumstances. They are dependent on food distribution by WFP or ICRC. Life is intolerable and they have been taking risky journeys to Malaysia by boat.

In last two months, at least four boats carrying Rohingya while fleeing to Malaysia were detained in Myanmar water territories and were sent back to original departure points and they were forced to accept the National Verification Card which we called Genocide Card. In the past, these attempts to reach Malaysia have led to drowning of thousands. ➔6

Election results in India show huge drop in support for BJP and revival for Congress

By Syed Zafar Mehdi

TEHRAN — The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India suffered a major setback last week after losing three key states to the main opposition party Indian National Congress (INC).

The results, which come barely four months before the general elections in India, have handed an opportunity for Congress to bounce back and recoup the political space from right-wing nationalists.

Sanjay Hegde is a senior lawyer in the Supreme Court of India and a noted political commentator. In an interview to Tehran Times, he spoke about last weeks assembly elections in India, and how its outcome can influence the results of general elections in India early next year.

Excerpts from the interview:

■ The results of assembly polls in India have dealt a big blow to the ruling Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP). How much impact will these results have on the general elections in 2019?

A. The assembly elections, in crucial heartland Indian states, where Narendra Modi scored huge majorities in 2014, their results today show that 2019 is not a foregone conclusion. They show a huge drop in support for the BJP and a revival for the Congress.

■ Is it true that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is overwhelmingly dependent on PM Narendra Modi to win elections? Why didn't Modi factor work in these elections?

A. The BJP is seen as having been transformed into a one man party from a cadre based institution. The man himself is now over exposed and has under delivered. There is a huge fatigue factor as far as he is concerned.

■ BJP ministers have dismissed the argument

that anti-incumbency factor led to the party's drubbing in these state elections. BJP leader and minister Arun Jaitley said it could have been the fatigue factor. What's your take on it?

A. Yes people are getting fatigued with Modi overexposure. But there was anti-incumbency at work. Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh Chief Ministers had served 15 years, people did get bored.

■ Rahul Gandhi completed one year as Congress president on the day of results and he couldn't have asked for better results. How do you rate him as the leader of India's oldest political party? Has he grown as a politician since 2014?

A. Rahul Gandhi has certainly grown post 2014 defeat. He has internalised the harsh things said about him, but not let them bring him down. Most importantly, he has moved out of his mother's shadow and is seen as the future of the Congress. ➔6



© Tehran Times/ Behnam Tofighi

Motorcycle racing held in Tehran's Azadi Stadium

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — The second round of Iran's motorcycle racing was held at the Azadi Stadium on Friday.

The competition was held in four classes.

The third round will be held on Jan. 4. Motorcycle racing is the motorcycle sport of racing motorcycles.

Major genres include motorcycle road racing and off-road racing, both either on circuits or open courses, and track racing.

Other categories include hill climbs, drag racing and land speed record trials.



REPORT
Ramin Hossein Abadian
Mehr News Agency
journalist

Yemen agreement and Riyadh's double standards

The Yemen peace talks began with the attendance UN envoy Martin Griffiths on Dec. 13, 2018 in Stockholm and led to an agreement between the two sides, the Sana'a delegation and the Saudi-backed Hadi's outgoing government representatives.

The agreement came about as Saudi Arabia stepped up its aggressive attacks in various parts of Yemen so that the current peace talks in Stockholm. The Saudis apparently wanted the talks to fail. However, the seriousness of the Sana'a delegation made it impossible for the other party to scuttle the talks and a bilateral agreement was the result.

In the course of the talks that began on Thursday last week, the Hadi aligned delegation often raised irrational, impossible conditions, but to no avail.

The warring parties in Yemen have agreed to a ceasefire in the strategic port city of Hudaydah, Al Salif and Ras Issa. They are the main entry points for food and aid shipments to Yemen. The parties must abstain from dispatching any military reinforcements to the city and port of Hudaydah. The accord also calls for the creation of a joint committee, supervised by the UN, to oversee redeployment and de-mining, which will occur in three ports. The committee chair will report weekly to the UN Security Council.

The agreement places the Red Sea port city under the control of local forces recognized by the Yemeni government. Meanwhile, the UN will also play a "leading role" in supporting management and inspections at the ports.

The document also said that all revenues gathered from the port would be transferred to Yemen's central bank in Hudaydah which would then start paying the salaries of civil servants.

The security of Hodeidah city and the ports of Hudaydah, Salih and Ras Issa are the responsibility of the security forces, in accordance with Yemeni law. The legal tracks of the Authority must be respected and any obstacles or impediments to the functioning of local institutions, including Houthi supervisors, should be eliminated. ➔7

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



Alavi meets
Azerbaijan's
Aliyev in Baku

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iranian Intelligence Minister d e s k Mahmoud Alavi met on Friday with Azeri President Ilham Aliyev in a visit to Baku, Tasnim reported.

During the meeting, Aliyev hailed the growing ties between Tehran and Baku, saying reciprocal visits by the presidents and senior officials would play an important role in strengthening ties between the two neighbors.

Pointing to the historical affinities between Iran and Azerbaijan, Aliyev said the two "friendly and brotherly" nations enjoy close ties and the documents signed by the two sides are being implemented successfully.

Aliyev has paid several official visits to Tehran over the past few years.



'Expediency
Council to decide
on CFT based on
national interests'

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Mohsen Rezaee, secretary of d e s k the Expediency Council, said on Saturday the council will decide about the bill on Iran's accession to the convention against the funding of terrorism (CFT) based on its own national interests.

Speaking to reporters, Rezaee said the bill has not yet been received by the council, adding that the council will consider the views of experts before making a decision on the bill, Tasnim reported.

He also said the Expediency Council focused on details of the bill on combating money laundering in Saturday's session.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has given Iran a February deadline to complete the necessary reforms regarding its removal from the task force's blacklist.



Naval fleet back
home after
53-day mission

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — The Iranian Navy's 58th d e s k flotilla of warships docked at the southern port city of Bandar Abbas on Saturday after a 53-day mission in international waters.

The flotilla, comprising Bayandor destroyer and Tonb logistical warship, had been deployed to high seas as part of an intelligence-operational mission, Tasnim reported.

It travelled a total of 3,970 nautical miles during its overseas journey, which took it also to Oman's port city of Salalah.

Iran's naval forces have in recent years increased their presence in international waters to protect naval routes and provide security for trade vessels and oil tankers.



Iranian light
planes equipped
with glide bombs

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — New glide bombs dubbed d e s k "Jamarat" were mounted on light planes and helicopters to attack ground targets.

According to Fars, the glide bombs lack any booster and engine and hit the target with the help of their aerodynamic shape and gravity and without any need to propulsion power.

Jamarat, with a radius of 125mm, weighs 15kg and is one meter long.

It can be mounted on different types of flying objects, including helicopters, drones and gyro planes. It is dropped over from an altitude of 500 meters and has a maximum range of 6km.



FATF tougher to
Iran after Israel
accession: ISNA

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Following the accession d e s k of Israel to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as the 38th member of the task force, the situation has become tougher for Iran, ISNA said in a commentary on Saturday.

One reason that the government insisted on the passing of FATF-related bills was its concern about the accession of new members to this group, which unfortunately happened with Israel's accession to the task force and became a concerning reality for Iran, ISNA added.

Shlomit Wagman-Ratner, head of Israeli Justice Ministry's anti-money laundering and terrorism financing department, said earlier that joining the FATF was a national strategic objective.



Russia to
continue
defending Iran's
interests: envoy

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Moscow will continue to d e s k defend the interests of Tehran as a strategic partner, a special envoy for the Russian president has said, IRNA reported on Saturday.

Iran is Russia's historical partner, said Ramazan Abdulatipov, adding that Russians have good ties with Iranians, and the heads of state of the two countries enjoy very good relationship as well.

Abdulatipov also said there are many possibilities to promote cooperation between the two nations.

He further said that his country and Iran cooperate in oil, gas and economic issues.

Our missiles are 'non-negotiable': Zarif



POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Foreign Minister Mo- d e s k hammad Javad Zarif has said Iran's missiles are for defensive purposes, reiterating that the country's missile program is "not negotiable", IRNA reported, citing Al Jazeera.

On U.S. claims about Iran's missile tests, Zarif said, "First, Iran's missiles are defensive. We need them for deterrence. We use far less for military than anybody else in the region and that is why we have said from the beginning that our missiles are not negotiable."

The second point is that the United States is in clear violation of resolution 2231 of the Security Council by withdrawing from the JCPOA, he said, adding, "So, they are in no position to talk about that resolution because they have tried to destroy the resolution."

The third point, Zarif continued, is that the resolution very clearly does not prohibit Iran from testing missiles,



referring to missiles that are designed to be capable of carrying nuclear warheads, while the JCPOA and resolution 2231 verify that Iran does not seek nuclear weapons.

"Iran's missiles are defensive. We need them for deterrence. We use far less for military than anybody else in the region and that is why we have said from the beginning that our missiles are not negotiable."



Commenting on the future of the JCPOA, he said "I think this agreement is a major diplomatic achievement in which the entire international community believes and which the entire international community wants to uphold."

The United States has done its best to undermine and destroy the deal but the rest of the world don't seem to be prepared to accept U.S. bullying, he added.

Zarif left Tehran for Qatar on Saturday to attend Doha Forum 2018. The event is scheduled to be held with the attendance of prominent figures on December 15-16.

The foreign minister on Saturday met with Qatari Prime Minister Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani to discuss a range of issues, including ways to boost relations between the two neighboring countries.

Zarif and Al Thani also voiced their support for the UN-brokered peace talks on Yemen, which was recently held in Stockholm, Sweden.

Erdogan pushes for stronger ties with Iran

POLITICS **TEHRAN** —Turkish President Recep d e s k Tayyip Erdogan said late on Friday that his government is willing to strengthen tie with Iran, especially in economic sphere.

"Development of ties with Iran is of strategic significance for Turkey," Erdogan said in a meeting with Iranian presidential chief of staff Mahmoud Vaezi, Tasnim reported.

Vaezi made a visit to Ankara on Thursday and Friday to prepare the ground for a trip by President Hassan Rouhani to Turkey. He was heading a high-ranking political and economic delegation.

Erdogan said the visit by Rouhani to Turkey would provide a good opportunity for stronger ties.

During Rouhani's trip, the two countries will hold the fifth round of high council strategic cooperation.

Erdogan also stressed the need to promote cooperation



between the two neighbors and support private businesses.

For his part, Vaezi said Iran is ready to boost the rela-

Iran, Russia, Turkey to meet UN envoy on Syria next week: UN statement

The United Nations special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura will hold talks with senior officials from Iran, Russia and Turkey, as guarantors of the Syria peace process, in Geneva early next week, a UN statement says.

According to the Friday statement, talks among the UN diplomat and high-level officials from the three countries will focus on setting up a "credible, balanced, and inclusive" committee to draft a new constitution for Syria and usher in elections.

It added that the meeting will take place ahead of de Mistura's monthly presentation to the UN Security Council set for December 20.

Late in November, the guarantor states of the Astana peace process ended their 11th round of talks in the Kazakh capital, reiterating their strong commitment to Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Iran, Russia and Turkey also rejected "all desperate attempts" by foreign-backed militant groups to undermine the sovereignty of the Syrian nation.

At the end of the tenth round of the two-day International Meeting on Syria in the Black Sea resort of Sochi on July 31, Tehran, Moscow and Ankara expressed their firm determination to



counter any plot aimed at partitioning the Arab country.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey confirmed their strong adherence to the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of Syria," Russian Special Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentiev said while reading a joint statement issued by representatives of the three countries.

The Astana talks have so far resulted in the return of a succession of militant bastions to the government fold, the establishment of safe zones across Syria and the movement of civilians to those regions.

(Source: Press TV)

Trump's Iran sanctions create a triple threat to the West

From its years of laboring under Western economic sanctions, Iran has also gained experience in how to flout them.

sovereign interests or those of our allies." The Iran deal is Exhibit A in that policy, Trump advisers say. But Cold War 2.0 is very different from Washington's standoff with the Soviets. Unlike the leaden state-dominated Soviet economy, whose weakness was a critical factor in the USSR's demise, China's economy is the second largest after the U.S., and the country has close to world-class capabilities in industries from technology to manufacturing to oil and gas. Today, goods made by scores of medium-sized Chinese exporters are found all over Iran. Secondary sanctions mean nothing to these companies; they do no business with the U.S. Russia is also in the process of boosting its direct investment in Iran, by \$50 billion in the oil and gas sector alone, with additional funding to help Tehran upgrade a dilapidated electricity grid and other infrastructure. The Russian companies also "have nothing to lose," says Igor Delanoe, an analyst at the Franco-Russian Observatory group, a Moscow-based think tank.

From its years of laboring under Western economic sanctions, Iran has also gained experience in how to flout them. In November, less than two weeks after the Trump administration's new sanctions went into effect, Tehran's Iran Energy Exchange did two large-scale oil deals, each involving over 700,000 barrels of crude. The exchange has

In November, less than two weeks after the Trump administration's new sanctions went into effect, Tehran's Iran Energy Exchange did two large-scale oil deals, each involving over 700,000 barrels of crude.

setup a system that enables customers to remain anonymous when they buy oil from Iran. "The sales were a victory [for Iran] in that sanctions busters around the world can now see a possible way around U.S. restrictions," says Saeed Ghasseminejad, an adviser on Iran to the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a U.S. think tank supporting stricter Tehran sanctions.

The Trump administration itself is part of the reason its new sanctions regime may not be as effective as it desires. After what administration sources say "was intense debate," Trump issued waivers to eight countries—mainly, but not exclusively, to allies. They include Turkey—who in October released U.S. evangelical pastor Andrew Brunson, as Trump had sought—as well as South Korea, Japan and India, all big buyers of Iranian oil. After a bitter debate, the Trump administration also granted China an exemption, hoping the move might make Beijing more amenable to an overall deal on trade. Iran hawks in the Trump administration, led by Pompeo and national security adviser John Bolton, also worry that exemptions granted to a few Iranian banks to conduct international wire transfers expose an additional weakness. The exemptions are supposed to be for "humanitarian" transactions, but Iran has used such waivers in the past to run massive sanctions-busting schemes. To be sure, the new sanctions have had some impact: Iran's foreign exchange reserves are shrinking, as is its access to hard currency. At the same time, though, the value of Iran's currency, the rial, has increased relative to the dollar, and its stock market is actually up. Contrary to the Trump administration's desire, the efforts so far "are not sufficient to change the Iranian regime's behavior," says Ghasseminejad. Privately, administration hawks agree. They are already seeking further sanctions and stepped-up enforcement of those now in place. Bolton said in November that oil sanction waivers are "temporary" and he expects allies like Japan and South Korea to make other arrangements for their crude supply. "Easier said than done," says a Japanese trading company executive, noting that contracts are in place and it's not clear where else Japan can go for supply; a recent Russia-Saudi agreement to cut production means higher crude prices. Meanwhile, diplomats in the U.S., Europe and East Asia expect China and Russia to continue to invest in Iran. And that's no matter what the U.S. says.

(Source: Newsweek)

‘No teeth’: Qatar FM says PGCC needs to enforce its own rules

Qatar has said it is committed to the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) but that the bloc needed to enforce its own rules, signaling that a reformed alliance could help end the Persian Gulf crisis.

Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said on Saturday that Qatar was still counting on Kuwait and regional powers to help end the crisis.

“We believe that we are more relevant as a bloc” for the West than as separate and fragmented countries, he told the annual Doha Forum, but said the PGCC had “no teeth” and needed a dispute resolution mechanism.

“They have mechanisms in place and never trigger them [to hold people accountable] because some countries believe they are non-binding, so we need to make sure all the rules we are submitting to are binding to everyone in this region.”

The remarks come amid an ongoing blockade on Qatar imposed in June 2017, by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt.

The quartet has accused Qatar of sup-



porting “terrorism”. Qatar has denied the charges and said the boycott aims to impinge on its sovereignty.

■ Call for dialogue
Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani called on the House of Saud regime-led

alliance boycotting the Persian Gulf tiny state to start a dialogue, in order to resolve the dispute.

Kuwait, a traditional mediator in the region, has been attempting to resolve the diplomatic spat over the past year and a half, but to no avail.

The issue of the Persian Gulf crisis had not taken precedence during a one-day PGCC summit on Sunday, held in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

The PGCC, a political and economic alliance of countries in the Arabian Peninsula, was established in 1981 to foster socioeconomic, security, and cultural cooperation.

Meanwhile, Romania's Foreign Minister Teodor-Viorel Melescanu told the Doha Forum that the European Union (EU) is currently working on organizing a conference to help solve the ongoing Persian Gulf crisis.

The southeastern European country is set to take over the rotating presidency role of the council of the EU for a period of six months, starting January 2019.

(Source: Al Jazeera)

British PM May is becoming stubborn, obstinate: MP

A senior member of the British parliament has warned that Prime Minister Theresa May is nearly becoming obstinate and stubborn with her way of ignoring widespread criticism about a European Union withdrawal agreement that she is trying to sell to the parliament.

Jo Johnson, a former member of May's Conservative-led government who resigned over the premier's Brexit strategy in November, said May was deliberately delaying a parliamentary vote on her Brexit deal “until the very last minute” to force the lawmakers in the House of Commons to accept the deal. “I am concerned that Number 10 is running down the clock,” said Johnson in an interview with the BBC Radio on Saturday, while making a reference to official seat of the British government.

Johnson, himself a Remainer who is known for opposing views of his brother and fierce Brexiteer Boris Johnson, said May's obstinacy and stubbornness was forcing the lawmakers into a situation in which they would be forced to endorse her Brexit deal or face a prospect of a no-deal Brexit on March 29, 2019. “Resilience is an admirable quality and the Prime Minister has displayed it in abundance,” he said, adding, “But there comes a point where resilience starts to border on stubbornness and obstinacy and I'm worried that we are reaching that point.”

May announced after a trip to Brussels to attend an European Union (EU) summit in the weekend that she would submit her Brexit deal to the parliament, with alleged legal improvements she would gain from Brussels, sometime next month and before the January 21 deadline imposed by the Commons.

The embattled premier shocked everyone last week when she came to Commons to defer a planned vote on the deal. She said the postponement was necessary to gain assurances from the EU on a controversial clause in the deal that sets broad conditions for handling the two sides' only land border on the island of Ireland.

■ May's ministers think her Brexit plan is dead, seek other options

Meantime, senior British ministers in May's cabinet believe

her Brexit plan is dead and are contemplating alternatives, including a second referendum, according to a report.

May said on Friday that she hoped to secure further assurances about her plan from European Union leaders despite an unproductive trip to Brussels. The embattled premier is expected to face opposing demands from ministers next week, The Times newspaper reported.

May's cabinet is divided over the way Britain should approach its departure from the EU after more than 40 years of membership.

Some ministers, including Work and Pensions Minister Amber Rudd and Finance Minister Philip Hammond, are prepared to back a second referendum if all other options are exhausted, the report said. Another group, including Environment Minister Michael Gove and Interior Minister Sajid Javid, was opposed to the idea, it added.

Other ministers such as Jeremy Hunt, the foreign secretary, were willing to risk leaving the EU without a deal, according to The Times.

Many members of parliament, including Conservative MPs, are also opposed to the prime minister's plan, which she struck with EU leaders last month.

May has warned that rejection of her plan would risk a chaotic exit from the EU or not leaving at all. She is having a hard time selling her plan to skeptical MPs especially as EU leaders have indicated that the agreement is “not open for renegotiation.”

The premier traveled to Brussels earlier this week to talk with EU leaders after delaying a Commons vote on the deal, in anticipation of a heavy defeat.

However, European leaders rebuffed May's pleas, toughening their stance as they stepped up planning for a no-deal Brexit.

“Theresa May has led a courageous fight but unfortunately we are not seeing the results,” European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker told reporters on Friday.

“Our UK friends need to say what they want instead of asking us to say what we want,” Juncker said. “We would like within a few weeks our UK friends to set out their ex-

pectations for us because this debate is sometimes nebulous and imprecise. And I would like clarifications.”

If May fails to persuade MPs to back her plan, Britain will be on course to crash out of the EU in just over three months, unleashing political and economic chaos. Parliament may also force the prime minister to abandon her plan or even agree to a second referendum.

Many MPs are concerned that the controversial “backstop” plan in the divorce agreement, which is aimed at preventing a hard border in Northern Ireland, would keep Britain tied to EU rules indefinitely and limit its ability to work out new trade deals.

May survived an attempt by members of her own party in parliament to remove her from power this week.

The opposition Labour Party has said the Brexit deal is now “dead in the water.”

■ Farage denounces Jean-Claude Juncker's ‘nebulous’ Brexit comment

Elsewhere, former UKIP (UK Independence Party) leader Nigel Farage accused President of the EU Commission Jean-Claude Juncker of bullying at a Leave Means Leave rally in London on Friday, for a comment he made about “nebulous” Brexit negotiations during a Brussels summit.

“The abuse that was going on last night, the arrogance that was going on last night, the bullying that was going on last night, the thuggery that was going on last night was coming from unelected bureaucrats, people like Jean-Claude Juncker,” Farage emphasized to a jeering crowd, accusing the President of the EU Commission of using “a variety of terms of abuse about the British Prime Minister and her negotiating position.”

Juncker since clarified what he meant by the term “nebulous,” claiming he was not referring to May, but the general state of the Brexit debate in Britain.

Farage also warned his supporters of the possibility of a second Brexit referendum, and urged them to prepare for that scenario.

(Source: agencies)

U.S. airstrike kills 20 civilians in Afghanistan's eastern province of Kunar

At least 20 women and children have been killed in an airstrike conducted by the United States warplanes in Afghanistan's eastern province of Kunar, local officials say.

The deadly aerial aggression occurred late on Friday and claimed the lives of eight women and 12 children, Abdul Latif Fazly, a member of the provincial council, said on Saturday, adding that the airstrike also wounded more than 15 other civilians.

Kunargovernor Abdul Satar Mirzakwal said an operation by Afghan forces in Sheltan district killed 38 members of the Taliban militant group and a number of terrorists belonging to the Takfiri al-Qaeda terrorist group, including four foreign nationals, and wounded 12 more. He also said that the operation had targeted Sharif Mawiya, a Taliban commander believed to be a facilitator with al-Qaeda terrorists.

Mirzakwal, however, added that an unspecified number of civilians had been hit in the airstrike. He gave no details regarding the casualties. “We know that a number of civilians, including women and children, have also been killed but we are sending a fact finding team,” he said.



Back in October, the United Nations said the number of civilians killed or injured by airstrikes in Afghanistan in the first nine months of the year had been already higher than in any entire year since at least 2009. According to the UN figures, 313 civilians

were killed and 336 wounded in airstrikes by the U.S. and Afghan forces in the nine months to the end of September, showing a 39-percent increase compared to the same period last year.

The United States has stepped up its air

operations in an attempt to exert pressure on the Taliban to force them to accept a negotiated end to the 17-year war.

The U.S., along with a number of fellow-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) members, invaded Afghanistan in 2001, toppling a Taliban regime in control of most of the country at the time, but it has failed to restore security in a country plagued by militancy and terrorism.

The administration of the U.S. President Donald Trump is now negotiating with the Taliban terrorist group, excluding the Kabul government.

Over 8,000 people lost their lives or were wounded in Afghanistan between January and September this year, with the country on track to be deadlier than Syria in 2018. Kabul blames the Taliban for the bulk of the deaths.

In 2017, Washington added thousands of additional troops to its forces in Afghanistan. It claims the American troops are deployed in Afghanistan to train Afghan forces and conduct counter-terrorism missions against militant groups.

(Source: Press TV)

Turkey to keep attacking PKK in Iraq

Turkey will keep striking Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK/Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê) fighters in northern Iraq, the foreign ministry said on Saturday, a day after Baghdad formally complained that repeated Turkish air strikes violated its sovereignty and endangered civilians.

The Turkish military said on Friday it killed eight PKK militants, prompting Iraqi authorities to summon the Turkish ambassador in Baghdad.

Turkey regularly hits PKK bases across its southern border, saying the militants use the remote and mountainous northern Iraqi region as a base for deadly attacks inside Turkey, where the outlawed group has waged an insurgency since the 1980s.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan threatened to launch a ground offensive in northern Iraq earlier this year. This week he also announced an imminent operation against a Kurdish militia in neighboring Syria.

The United States-backed People's Protection Units (Yekineyên Parastina Gel/YPG) militia, which has been fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist group in Syria, controls Syria's northeastern border with Turkey. Ankara says it is an extension of the PKK and poses a direct threat to Turkey.

“The activities of the PKK terrorist organization in the territory of Iraq and Syria have become a national security issue for Turkey,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said.

He said the government in Baghdad had a duty to prevent Iraqi land being used as a base for attacks on neighbors, and described Friday's air strikes as an act of self-defense which Turkey carried out because Iraq would not act.

“These operations in the fight against terrorism will continue as long as terror organizations nest on Iraqi soil and as long as Turkey's security needs require it to,” Aksoy said.

The PKK is designated a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States and the European Union. It has waged a three-decade insurgency in Turkey's largely Kurdish south-east that has killed about 40,000 people.

(Source: Daily Star)

Turkey won't ‘give up’ on Khashoggi murder probe



Turkey's foreign minister said Saturday that his country would “not give up” on finding out the truth about the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul.

“We haven't received any new information or outcome of the investigation from the Saudi side,” Mevlut Cavusoglu said on the sidelines of a conference in Turkish ally Qatar.

“Turkey will not give up on this – we will go to the end.”

Earlier this month, the minister said Turkey was in talks over a possible United Nations investigation into the Oct. 2 murder, which has provoked global outrage.

The 59-year-old Khashoggi, a palace insider turned critic of the Saudi regime, was strangled and his body cut into pieces by a 15-strong Saudi hit squad, according to Turkish officials.

The United States Senate gave its unopposed backing Thursday to a resolution holding the kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, responsible for the murder after the Central Intelligence Agency reportedly concluded that he gave the orders.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said that the killing was ordered at the highest levels of the Saudi government, although he has repeatedly absolved the aging King Salman.

(Source: AFP)

Cohen: Trump is lying, he ordered hush payments

The United States President Donald Trump directed the payment of hush money to two women shortly before the 2016 U.S. presidential election and knew that doing so was wrong, his former personal lawyer Michael Cohen said in a television interview aired Friday. “He directed me to make the payments. He directed me to become involved in these matters,” Cohen told the ABC program “Good Morning America,” referring to the \$150,000 paid to former Playboy model Karen McDougal and the \$130,000 paid to adult film star Stormy Daniels.

Both women have said they had sexual relationships more than a decade ago with Trump, which the president and his representatives have denied.

Cohen, a former member of Trump's inner circle who in the past called himself the president's “fixer,” was sentenced on Wednesday in federal court in New York to three years in prison for campaign finance law violations related to the payments and other crimes to which he pleaded guilty.

Asked whether Trump knew that payments were wrong, Cohen said, “Of course.” And he bristled at Trump's accusation that he was trying to embarrass the president and protect his own family.

“Here is the truth: The people of the United States of America, the people of the world don't believe what he's saying. The man doesn't tell the truth, and it's sad that I should take responsibility for his dirty deeds,” Cohen said.

“I gave loyalty to someone who truthfully does not deserve loyalty,” Cohen added.

Trump has lashed out at Cohen as “weak” and accused him of lying.

The Republican president told Fox News on Thursday Cohen did only “low-level work” for him, mostly in public relations.

Cohen, in his first televised interview since he was sentenced, said Trump was worried about the potential impact on the election if voters learned about the two women's account of the alleged affairs.

Cohen said Trump told him to pay them to keep quiet.

The payments were made “about two weeks or so before the election” following the release of a recording of Trump boasting to celebrity interviewer Billy Bush years earlier about grabbing the genitals of women, Cohen said.

Trump's explanations of the payments have shifted over time. After earlier saying he knew nothing of the payments, Trump on Thursday said he never told Cohen to break the law.

The Cohen criminal cases have intensified the legal pressure on Trump, whose presidency has been clouded by multiple investigations and lawsuits including a U.S. special counsel probe into Russia's role in the 2016 election and whether the president's team conspired with Moscow to help him win. Trump has denied collusion and Russia has similarly denied meddling in the election. Trump previously acknowledged repaying Cohen for the \$130,000 paid to Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford.

In a deal with prosecutors, American Media Inc. (AMI), the publisher of the National Enquirer tabloid newspaper, said on Wednesday it paid the \$150,000 in hush money to McDougal “in concert” with Trump's campaign. AMI's Chief Executive David Pecker was a long-time friend of Trump. Trump told Fox News he did not think a payment was made to the National Enquirer.

Federal law requires the disclosure of contributions of “anything of value” to a campaign, and limits individual donations to no more than \$2,700.

Cohen was sentenced to prison for the payments to the women as well as separate crimes of tax evasion, misleading banks and lying to Congress about a proposed Trump Tower project in Russia.

Cohen has said he is continuing to cooperate with investigators in the Russia probe, which the president has repeatedly called a “witch hunt.”

White House spokesman Hogan Gidley faulted the news media for “giving credence to a convicted criminal,” and called Cohen “a self-admitted liar.”

(Source: agencies)

STOCK MARKET

TEDPIX	164485.9
IFX	1851.22

Sources: tse.ir, Ifb.ir

CURRENCIES

USD	42,000 rials
EUR	47,998 rials
GBP	53,871 rials
AED	11,380 rials

Source: iribnews.ir

COMMODITIES

WTI	\$51.20/b
Brent	\$60.28/b
OPEC Basket	\$58.67/b
Gold	\$1,239.95/oz
Silver	\$14.61/oz
Platinum	\$792.30/oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

NEWS IN BRIEF



Monthly car output stands at 57,627

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Iranian carmakers manufactured 57,627 vehicles in the eight Iranian calendar month, Aban (October 23-November 21), ISNA reported on Saturday.

The number of manufactured cars in Aban indicates a 57-percent decrease from 135,402 cars manufactured in the same month of the preceding year.

During the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21 – November 21), the country's car production also decreased by 24.9 percent and dropped to 721,363 units from 960,003 units in the same time span of the past year.



New IMIDRO head appointed

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Khodadad Gharibpour is appointed as the new deputy industry minister and the head of Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO), IRIB reported.

Industry, Mining and Trade Minister Reza Rahmani appointed Gharibpour to the post replacing Mehdi Karbasian. Gharibpour is the previous head of National Development Investment Group and the ex-head of Shazand Petrochemical Company.

IMIDRO is a major state-owned holding company active in the mining sector in Iran. It has eight major companies and 55 operational subsidiaries active in steel, aluminum, copper, cement and mineral exploitation fields.

Japanese refiners will resume Iran crude purchases next month

Japanese refiners will start buying Iranian crude oil in January, but will only continue buying until March to make sure they don't get on the bad side of Washington in case the 180-day sanction waivers are not extended, S&P Global Platts reports, citing the head of the country's Petroleum Association.



"We aim to lift as much as possible over January-March to keep our hope for the next [period]," Takashi Tsukioka said. Japan is one of Iran's largest oil importers, but it is also the United States' staunchest ally in Asia—and the combination of the two has not worked to Tokyo's advantage. Earlier this year, while the government tried to secure a waiver from the U.S. State Department, local refiners stopped all purchases of Iranian oil ahead of the sanctions that came into effect on November 5.

The Trump administration has made it clear the ultimate goal of the sanctions was to bring Iranian oil exports down to zero, which puts a question mark over any extensions. On the other hand, Japan, like China, India, and South Korea, may find it hard to secure alternative supplies in amounts and for prices that would justify them, hence the three-month buying spree Japanese refiners are preparing to embark on.

(Source: oilprice.com)

South Pars daily gas production to reach over 630 mcm by March 2019

ENERGY **TEHRAN** — The daily production of gas in Iran's South Pars gas field will reach over 630 million cubic meters (mcm) by the end of current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2019), the managing director of Pars Oil and Gas Company (POGC), which is in charge of developing the field, announced.

Mohammad Meshkinfam further referred to boosting gas production in order to meet the current and future demand

and said approaching the cold season and the necessity of stable gas production, implementation of South Pars underway development projects has been expedited, Public Relations Department of POGC reported on Saturday.

Meshkinfam put Iran's current production of gas from South Pars field at 580 mcm per day.

South Pars is divided into 24 standard phases of development in the first stage. Most of the phases are fully operational

Over 313m tons of commodities worth \$309m traded in IME in a week

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**— During weekdays ending up to December 13, while, 313,311 million tons (MT) of commodities worth over \$309.5 million were traded on Iran Mercantile Exchange, the trading volume and value experienced a growth of 50 and 35 percent, respectively.

According to the report from IME International Affairs and Public Relations Department, last week, on the domestic and export metal and mineral trading floor of IME, 3,739 MT of various products worth close to \$31 million were traded.

On this trading floor, 220 MT of steel, 1,800 MT of copper, 1,500 MT of aluminum, 100 MT of zinc, 110 MT of molybdenum concentrates, 9 MT of precious metal concentrates as well as 1 kg of gold bullion were traded by customers.

The report declares that on domestic and export oil and petrochemical trading floors of IME, 269,023 MT of different commodities with the total value of \$262 million were traded.

On this trading floor, 64,260 MT of



VB feed stock, 120,055 MT of bitumen, 55,192 MT of polymer products, 27,023 MT of chemical products, 790 MT of sulfur, 2,000 MT of slaps waxes as well as 130 MT of insulation were traded.

Moreover, on the agricultural trading floor of IME witnessed trading 40,000 MT of wheat was traded by customers.

Furthermore, 549 MT of various commodities including polyester threads and metal scraps were traded on the side market of IME.

Boeing opens first 737 plant in China amid U.S.-Sino trade war

Boeing Co (BA.N) opened its first 737 completion plant in China on Saturday, a strategic investment aimed at building a sales lead over arch-rival Airbus (AIR.PA) in one of the world's top travel markets that has been overshadowed by the U.S-China trade war.

The world's largest planemaker also delivered the first of its top-selling 737s completed at the facility in Zhoushan, about 290 km (180 miles) southeast of Shanghai, to state carrier Air China (601111.SS) (0753.HK) during a ceremony on Saturday with top executives from both companies.

The executives, alongside representatives from China's state planner and aviation regulator, unveiled the plane at an event attended by hundreds of people.

Boeing and Airbus have been expanding their footprint in China as they vie for orders in the fast-growing aviation market, which is expected to overtake the United States as the world's largest in the next decade.

Boeing invested \$33 million last year to take a majority stake in a joint venture with state-owned Commercial Aircraft Corp of China (COMAC) to build the completion center, which installs interiors and paints liveries.

Chicago-based Boeing calls itself the top U.S. exporter and delivered more than one out of every four jetliners it made last year to customers in China, where it forecasts demand for 7,700 new airplanes over the next 20 years valued at \$1.2 trillion.

However, the plant's inaugural ceremony was overshadowed by tensions between the United States and China as they engage in a bruising tit-for-tat tariff war. The world's two largest economies are in a 90-day detente to negotiate a trade deal.

"Am I nervous about the situation? Yeah, of course. It's a challenging environment," John Bruns, President of Boeing China, told reporters on a conference call earlier on Saturday.

"We have to keep our eye on the long game in China. Long term, I'm optimistic we will work our way through this," he said.

While the trade frictions have hurt businesses such as U.S. soy bean farmers and Chinese manufacturers, their impact on Boeing has been unclear. U.S.-made aircraft have so far escaped Beijing's tariffs.

Bruns said he remained optimistic about the outcome of trade talks between the United States and China and described aviation as a "bright spot" amid tensions between the two countries.

Asked about the possibility of technology transfer agreements between Boeing and COMAC, Bruns stressed that the purpose of the plant was for installing seats, painting vehicles, and completing the planes' final delivery.

"That's only a part of what we do in the production of airplanes," he said.

(Source: Reuters)



at the moment.

The huge offshore field, shared with Qatar, covers an area of 9,700 square kilometers, 3,700 square kilometers of which, called South Pars, are in Iran's territorial waters in the Persian Gulf. The remaining 6,000 square kilometers, called

North Dome, are situated in Qatar's territorial waters.

The field is estimated to contain a significant amount of natural gas, accounting for about eight percent of the world's reserves, and approximately 18 billion barrels of condensate.

U.S. sets new March 2 date for China tariff increases amid talks

The U.S. Trade Representative's office on Friday officially changed the scheduled date of a tariff rate increase on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods to 12:01 a.m. EST (0501 GMT) on March 2, 2019 as the United States and China pursue talks on trade and intellectual property.

The change was made in a Federal Register filing from a previously scheduled effective date of Jan. 1, 2019 for the increase to 25 percent from 10 percent.

The notice does not affect the 25 percent tariff rate already in place on \$50 billion worth of Chinese technology items, including semiconductors, printed circuit boards and other electronic components, machinery and vehicles.

The filing was added to documents associated with USTR's "Section 301" investigation into China's intellectual property practices, which has been the basis of U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods that led to tit-for-tat retaliation from Beijing.

It attributed the change to new U.S.-Chinese engagement "with the goal of obtaining the elimination of the acts, policies, and practices covered in the investigation" following a Dec.

1 meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Buenos Aires.

The USTR statement did not specify any expected outcomes of the negotiation. It made reference to goals set forth in a statement issued by the White House to negotiate over a 90-day period structural changes by China on forced technology transfer, intellectual property protection, non-tariff barriers, cyber intrusions and theft, services and agriculture.

USTR's notice made no mention of China's steps this week to resume suspended purchases of U.S. soybeans or suspend a punitive 25 percent tariff on American-made vehicles and auto parts.

The official delay of the tariff rate increase was of little comfort to the U.S. tech sector.

The Consumer Technology Association said on Friday that U.S. tariffs on technology-related imports from China were now costing \$1 billion per month, with duties on fifth-generation mobile technology goods reaching \$122 million in October, compared with \$65,000 a year earlier.

(Source: Reuters)

First Announcement



IN THE NAME OF GOD
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN BROADCASTING

EXTENSION OF INTERNATIONAL TENDER NO. 97-05/162

Tender Holder:

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN BROADCASTING (IRIB)

Subject of Two-Stage Tender:

(Feeding of the System Supplying Refrigeration of the Chillers) according to the tender documents

Deadline of Receiving Documents:

As of publishing second announcement of advertisement latest by the business hour dated on **Saturday December 22, 2018.**

Place of Receiving Documents:

Secretariat of Tenders' Commission, Technical Purchasing (KALA) Dept., Media Technology and Development Deputy Office, Bldg. No. 2, IRIB, Jam-e Jam St., Vali-e Asr Ave., Tehran

Type and Amount of Guarantee for Participating in Tender:

The amount of **USD 17,857** which should be in the form of extendable bank guarantee

Time and Place of Delivering Priced Bid:

The sealed A, B & C packages/envelopes should be submitted within one main envelope marked with tender number no later than **15 p.m.** on **Monday January 21, 2019** and submitted to the Secretariat of Commission of Tenders.

Time and Place of Opening Envelopes

The date of opening envelopes A&B is at **8:30 a.m.** on **Wednesday January 23, 2019** in the office of Vice President of IRIB Planning and Financial Resources and opening of envelope C will be after technical evaluation.

It should be noted that bidders should hold license from the authorized bodies.

For more information, please contact the following phone numbers: **0098-21-22166313**

It is obvious that cost of publishing two advertisements shall be borne by the winner of tender.

Public Relations Dept. of IRIB

Oil is headed higher even as shale messes with forecasts, says Andy Hall

Shale producers are much more responsive to oil market swings than traditional drillers, says the man nicknamed "God" for his historically spot-on oil calls. That may be good for their business model, but can torment market watchers trying to nail down forecasts.

It's not easy to determine how "thousands" of individual drilling decisions will impact global supply, Andy Hall told Bloomberg TV. Traders face big gaps in determining well and rig productivity, key factors going forward for the Permian Basin of West Texas and New Mexico, especially, Hall said in the interview.

"It used to be, on the supply side of the equation, you could predict with some confidence what future supply was going to be, outside of global political events. [Now] everyone is groping. There are a lot of variables that we don't have a good handle on."

Still, he's betting on a price rise from here, after the 30 percent plunge for West Texas Intermediate crude during the month of November that knocked prices from the



more than four-year highs scored as recently as early October.

The WTI contract for January delivery

CLF9, -2.57 percent traded at \$51.74 a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange Friday afternoon, down about 1.6 percent for the

day and the week, but up 1.6 percent for the month so far.

In addition to affecting shale production, the lower prices since earlier in the fall are likely to boost demand, including from big customer, China, Hall said.

"With prices hovering at a little over \$50 a barrel, I think you have to have a pretty negative outlook on the global economy to believe the prices will continue their downward trajectory," he said, adding he doesn't think that will be the case.

Hall, whose trading resume begins in the 1970s and included a \$100 million payout from energy markets during the 2008-2009 financial crisis, closed his flagship Astenbeck Master Commodities Fund II in 2017 after reportedly losing almost 30 percent in the first half of that year, Bloomberg said. He still invests and now advises Orbital Insight, which translates satellite and aerial images into data.

(Source: Market Watch)

Brazil's Ouro Preto cuts bid for Petrobras oilfield clusters: sources

Ouro Preto has cut its bid for two shallow water mature oilfield clusters from Brazil's state-run oil company Petroleo Brasileiro, flagging a drop in oil prices in recent months, three sources with knowledge of the matter said.

Ouro Preto, a Brazilian energy company backed by private equity giant EIG Global Energy Partners, entered exclusive talks with Petrobras in July after presenting the highest offer for the Pampo and Enchova clusters, located in the Campos basin off the coast of Rio de Janeiro state. At the time, the

fields were seen fetching around \$1 billion.

But the consortium cut its bid for the area, citing a fall in oil prices of around 20 percent since the end of July, on growing U.S. supply and risks of slowing global demand amid economic woes tied to the U.S.-China trade spat.

Lower oil prices could hamper efforts by Petrobras, the world's most-indebted listed oil company, to offload some other assets it intends to sell. It is seeking to raise up to \$26.9 billion via asset sales and partnerships by 2023 after falling short of a goal of selling

off \$21 billion in the 2017-18 period.

Reuters could not verify Ouro Preto's latest bid amount, made after Petrobras last week reopened bidding for the oilfields with rules set by Brazilian audit court TCU. The move cleared the way for other investors to bid under the same contractual terms agreed with the winning consortium.

One of the three sources said Petrobras received additional bids on Dec. 7, without disclosing the names of the bidders. Despite the fall in oil prices, the additional bids were still within Petrobras's target price range for

selling the cluster, the person said.

A fourth source said that Brazilian oil and gas company Petro Rio SA was considering bidding, but Reuters could not determine whether a bid was ultimately made.

Other oilfields, such as Baúna in the Santos Basin, are among the assets the company has put up for sale.

Petrobras and Ouro Preto declined to comment on the matter and EIG did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

(Source: Reuters)

Libya's NOC won't pay 'ransom' for biggest oil field



Libya's National Oil Corporation said it would not pay a "ransom" to have the armed militants that shut down the field last week lift their blockade, the company's chairman said in a statement.

NOC's chairman said if the Libyan Ministry of Finance paid the militants, this would set a dangerous precedent that would endanger Libya's economic recovery. A day earlier, Mustafa Sanalla said in a letter to the Prime Minister of the UN-recognized government of Libya that if a ransom was paid, NOC would not restart production at Sharara or lift the force majeure on the Zawiya export terminal and refinery, where the crude from Sharara goes.

Militants claiming they were members of the Petroleum Facilities Guard seized control of the field at the end of last week and are now demanding payment to release it. This harks back to the days when the PFG held control over all of Libya's export terminals and using them to extract money

from NOC and the government.

Sharara is Libya's largest producing field, with daily production at more than 300,000 bpd. Earlier this week, Sanalla warned the shutdown of the field, which followed a rough weather spell that also took its toll on oil production, would bring Libya's oil industry to the brink of a crisis. A shutdown of Sharara immediately affects production at neighboring field El Feel, which pumps 73,000 bpd, as the smaller field relies on power supplies from the bigger one.

"I want to be clear, this militia has to leave the field immediately," Sanalla said in an earlier statement this week. "We stand wholeheartedly with the people of the south and understand their concerns. At NOC we are doing all we can to improve the living conditions of the residents. Their legitimate demands and grievances however have been used by criminals who are only in pursuit of self-interest."

(Source: oilprice.com)

Russia oil exports down 36.65m barrels in first 10 months



Russia exported 36.65 million barrels (5 million tons) less crude oil in the first ten months of the year, not least because of its participation in the OPEC+ pact to reduce global supply. This is what the head of Russia's oil pipeline monopoly Transneft said in an interview with a TV channel, as quoted by TASS news agency. The cuts worked, however, raising oil prices substantially enough that Russia booked a hefty increase in the value of its oil shipped abroad. According to customs data cited by TASS, this rose by 38.6 percent to reach \$106.59 billion.

Russia first agreed to cut its production alongside OPEC in late 2016, when it became clear that global oil prices would not reverse their decline without help. At the time, Russia committed to cuts amounting to 300,000 bpd from its record-high at the time output rate of over 11.2 million bpd.

This year, after the OPEC+ club struck an agreement to once again begin reducing

global supply in response to a price drop determined by weaker demand projections and oversupply worries, Russia said it will contribute a little over 200,000 bpd of the total 1.2-million-barrel cut.

Soon after the cut agreement was reported, Russia's Energy Minister Alexander Novak said it would take Russian oil companies months to reduce their production to the desired level. Novak cited seasonal factors, which made it difficult to implement the cuts quickly.

Yet Russia hasn't got so much to worry about even if prices stay where they are: before the meeting in Vienna, Russia made it clear it does not mind Brent at \$60 a barrel. Indeed, prices refused to move much in the aftermath of a tense meeting between OPEC members and their partners. Now prices are moving up, after the International Energy Agency said in its latest monthly report it expected tightened supply next year when the cuts' effect began to be felt.

(Source: Tass)

China's Unipac set to resume U.S. crude oil imports 'very soon': executive

Chinese state-owned Unipac, the country's biggest importer of U.S. crude, will resume imports from the U.S. "very soon" and the volumes will likely be significant, a senior executive told S&P Global Platts.

"[We] will resume imports from U.S. very soon, and now we are in talks with relative [Chinese government] ministries about the matter," the executive, who declined to be named, said.

The executive did not provide details but said that once the purchases begin the volumes will likely be significant.

Unipac -- the trading arm of Sinopec, the world's biggest refiner by capacity and throughput -- is the state-owned enterprise (SOE) entrusted with implementing the government's side of the China-U.S. trade deal to increase purchases of U.S. crude.

When asked how Unipac plans to import more U.S. crude by March 1, the end of the 90-day window that the countries have agreed upon, the senior executive said: "We have our own plan."

Although the 90-day trade war truce was announced by the Trump administration at

the beginning of December, the Chinese government has yet to finalize the specifics with the respective SOEs in charge of different commodities.

This week, Chinese SOEs made their first sizable purchases of 500,000 mt of U.S. soybeans since the government imposed a 25 percent tariff in July, according to traders. That was followed by reports citing the U.S. Soybean Export Council that China had bought up to 2 million mt of U.S. soybeans in recent days.

However, key U.S. energy exports like

crude and LNG have yet to see a surge in Chinese buying interest.

"China and U.S. have met agreements on agriculture, energy and automobile [trade]. More details will be released," Gao Feng, a spokesman with China's ministry of commerce, said in a media briefing on Thursday.

Vice-premier Liu He got in touch with the U.S. government on Tuesday to exchange ideas about the next round of trade talks, and the communication between the trade teams was smooth, Feng said.

(Source: oilprice.com)

German govt. hasn't changed position on Nord stream 2 after EU resolution: rep.

The European Parliament has voted for a resolution condemning the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as a threat to European energy security and urging to cancel the project. Since the resolution was non-binding, EU states can safely ignore its provisions.

Berlin's stance on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project remains unchanged following the EU parliament's resolution, which was adopted on 13 December, a German government official told Sputnik. The official stressed that the pipeline is an economy-based project, although admitted that it has a political dimension.

"The German position remains unchanged. Nord Stream 2 is first of all an economic project, which the

German government has repeatedly stressed. But there is a political aspect to the project as well", the official said.

Additionally, Berlin underscored the importance of clarity on the issue of Ukraine remaining a gas transit country after 2019, when the Nord Stream 2 pipeline goes live.

Earlier, Finland also stated that its position on the Nord Stream 2 project remained unchanged in light of the EU parliament's resolution. A Finnish government councillor at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, told Sputnik that the pipeline is a "large-scale project" that affects international "energy supply issues".

The European Parliament voted on 13 December to

adopt a non-binding resolution calling for the Nord Stream 2 project to be cancelled. The resolution praised Ukraine's role as a transit state for energy resources and labelled the new Russian pipeline as "a political project that poses a threat to European energy security".

The Russian Foreign Ministry has lambasted the European Parliament's resolution as politically motivated, adding that it has nothing to do with the economy. The ministry's spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that attempts to curb energy cooperation between Russia and the EU is "crazy for Europe, which needs energy resources."

(Source: Sputnik)

Potential largest offshore wind farm in the world auctioned off for record price

The rights to establish wind farms off the Massachusetts coast sold for a record-setting \$405 million total on Friday, according to federal officials.

Potential construction is still at least nearly a decade away, but if the project were completed today, it would be by far the world's largest offshore wind farm.

The three leases offered for auction by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management on Thursday fetched \$135 million apiece by the time bidding closed on Friday. The previous record for such a lease was \$42.5 million, set in 2016 for the rights off New York's coast.

Numbers from the Interior Department, which oversaw the process, showed the area could become the world's most prolific offshore source of wind energy. It projected the area could generate up to 4.1 gigawatts, enough electricity to potentially power nearly 1.5 million homes.

Currently, the largest offshore wind farm in the world is what's known as the "Walney Extension," off the coast of the United Kingdom. It has a capacity of roughly 700 megawatts, less than one-sixth the maximum capacity the U.S. government is estimating could result from the Massachusetts deal.

That prediction is a best-case scenario, not without its caveats. The 4.1 gigawatt figure comes from a 2016 Energy Department estimate of the potential wind power per square kilometer offshore, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management spokesman Stephen Boutwell said. It has not been adjusted based on the area's geography and weather patterns, and the 2016 report notes the full "nameplate power capacity is not the best indicator of potential from an energy production or economic perspective."

Nancy Sopko, director of offshore wind policy and siting for the American Wind Energy Association, said her organization is confident the three new leases would produce a minimum of 800 megawatts each, or 2.4 gigawatts total. That would still make the new Massachusetts wind farms the world's largest offshore project. "This is an unprecedented day for offshore energy development," Sopko said. "It's smashed every expectation."

Wind power developers have long had an eye on Massachusetts but have not yet successfully brought a project to fruition. A 2001 proposal for 130 wind turbines off Cape Cod sunk under opposition from the fishing industry and the peninsula's tony landowners, such as the Kennedys, who feared obstructed views. The developer called it quits on the project in 2017.

In the meantime, the nation's first offshore wind farm opened near neighboring Rhode Island in 2016. It produces enough electricity to power the entire community of Block Island.

The leases auctioned off this week face a long road to development, Boutwell said. Over the next year, the winning bidders will develop plans to assess the area's wind using meteorological towers and buoys. They'll then have five years to conduct the testing, after which they will submit plans to federal officials, who will conduct an environmental review.

Sopko, the wind energy association executive, said the Massachusetts auctions show the desire of large oil and gas companies to get into offshore wind power. She said there are few firms with as much expertise in operating large offshore rigs.

"The marrying of these two industries is going to create a lot of opportunities," Sopko said.

Republican Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker is a supporter of wind power.

President Donald Trump, however, has voiced opposition to wind turbines.

"The wind kills all your birds. All your birds, killed," he said on the campaign trail. "You know, the environmentalists never talk about that."

(Source: CNN)

Dutch giant buys 29% stake in Pakistani LNG terminal

Dutch giant Royal Vopak has acquired 29 percent shareholding in Engro Corporation's liquefied natural gas (LNG) import terminal -- Elengy Terminal Pakistan Limited (ETPL) -- at a price of \$31.4 million.

"Engro and Vopak have completed the transaction in accordance with the share purchase agreement dated July 19, 2018," Engro General Counsel and Company Secretary Faiz Chapra said in a notification to the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX).

"The corporation has sold 24 percent and IFC (International Finance Corporation of the World Bank Group) has sold 5% shares in ETPL to Vopak LNG Holding BV," Engro said in a statement issued separately to the media.

Engro's share price increased 4.14 percent, or Rs12.22, and closed at Rs307.13 with trading in 820,700 shares at the PSX on Friday.

The stake sale fetched \$31.4 million in foreign direct investment (FDI) into Pakistan. In the previous fiscal year 2017-18, the country had received a total of \$2.76 billion in FDI.

Royal Vopak has become the second Dutch company that has invested in Engro's businesses within a short span of two years. Earlier, FrieslandCampina Pakistan BV acquired 51 percent stake in Engro Foods at a price of \$446.81 million in December 2016.

"Engro will reinvest the sale proceeds (\$31.4 million) in Pakistan's economy," a company official told The Express Tribune in July.

"Our investment strategy team is considering a wide variety of new businesses and new sectors for reinvestment...with focus on agriculture, renewable energy, digital and logistics technology," he added.

ETPL's wholly owned subsidiary, EETPL, owns an LNG facility at Port Qasim, adjacent to the Engro Vopak chemical terminal on the mainland side of the channel into the port.

The facility has been in operation since March 2015 and is the first LNG import facility in Pakistan. "It has re-gasified 590 billion cubic feet of gas since inception and has met all contractual commitments and obligations to date," the statement added.

The facility consists of an LNG jetty including a 7.5km high-pressure gas pipeline. This pipeline is connected to the grid of EETPL's sole customer Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC), a government-owned entity.

EETPL holds a 15-year charter for a Floating Storage and Regasification Unit (FSRU). Gas is mainly used in power production for the growing population of over 200 million, industries and as feedstock for fertiliser production.

"Vopak and IFC have separately agreed that the remainder of IFC's shares will be acquired by Vopak pending certain regulatory consents and approvals," the statement added. "After completion of this transaction, the shareholders in ETPL will be Engro (56 percent) and Royal Vopak (44 percent)."

(Source: Tribune)

NEWS IN BRIEF

**Afghanistan opens new trade route**

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — In a significant move that will spur trade and commerce in the war-torn country, Afghanistan has opened a new international trade route, known as Lapis Lazuli corridor.

Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani inaugurated the route at a ceremony in the western province of Herat earlier this week. The route is aimed at establishing direct access to Central Asia and Europe as Afghanistan seeks to build up an economy wrecked by decades of U.S.-imposed war.

The corridor is the latest in a series of energy and transport projects aimed at opening Afghanistan up as a hub at the heart of Central Asia. The new corridor which includes stretches of road, rail and maritime routes runs from Afghanistan to Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia before crossing the Black Sea to Turkey and eventually Europe.

Ghani-led government in Kabul has been trying to reduce land-locked Afghanistans dependence on its estranged Pakistan, with which it has long had complicated relations.

Last month, Afghanistan inaugurated an air cargo service to China by sending 20 tons of pine nuts. It has a similar cargo link with India.

**Economic manifesto released in India**

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — Top Indian economists, including former Reserve Bank of India governor Raghuram Rajan, have released an economic manifesto for India, meant to spur debate and discussion.

According to these 13 economists, the agenda of the manifesto is to address key problems India is facing and propose possible solutions. Current policies in the country, the authors argue, have not yielded inclusive and sustainable growth.

Without stronger, sustainable, and inclusive growth we simply do not have the resources to expand our welfare schemes significantly, but if we do generate that growth, not only will there be less demand for welfare but there will be more resources to service any demand, says the manifesto.

Rajan, while releasing the manifesto, said Indian economy is not creating enough jobs and that growth is not benefiting everyone. Growth clearly is not creating enough jobs. You can see that in the kind of numbers...25 million people applying for 90,000 railway jobs...and these are not priced jobs, he said.

Though calling Indias 7 percent growth for 25 years quite incredible, Rajan said that there are some people who are doing very well, some who are falling behind.

**Pakistan reaffirms commitment to CPEC**

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — Pakistan has reaffirmed its commitment to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a mega economic project, by pledging to complete it as a national priority.

The statement was made by Pakistans foreign office and conveyed to the Chinese side during the inaugural round of bilateral political consultations between the two sides.

Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Tehmina Janjua led the Pakistani delegation at the meeting, while the Chinese side was headed by Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kong Xuanyou, said reports.

The reiteration comes ahead of the upcoming meeting of the Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) of the CPEC in Beijing next week. The officials of the two sides are likely to review the progress of work on the ambitious project during the meeting.

Pakistan and China have bolstered their economic partnership with CPEC in recent years, despite reservations from the U.S., which is seen as fiercely anti-China engagement in Pakistan.

Last week, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan paid his maiden visit to China during which the two countries reaffirmed commitment to strengthen ties.

**Total distrust between Kashmir and Delhi**

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** - The former chief minister of Jammu & Kashmir and president of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Mehbooba Mufti claims that there is total distrust and disconnect between people of Kashmir and New Delhi.

During a talk on Kashmir: The Way Forward at a New Delhi based think tank Observer Research Foundation, Mufti referred to the 2002-05 era of joint diplomacy as the golden period of Kashmir.

Mufti, whose party parted ways with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in J&K, has been critical of the way BJP government in New Delhi has handled Kashmir. She expressed her displeasure about Prime Minister Narendra Modis inability in restoring peace in the troubled Kashmir valley.

She called her partys alliance with BJP in 2014 a suicide, which was done in the hope that PM Modi will pick up where former Indian prime minister and BJP veteran Atal Bihari Vajpayee left.

Mufti asked to replace the idea of Azad Kashmir with a constructive idea within the framework of the Indian Constitution. She pitched the idea of unifying all SAARC nations in making Jammu & Kashmir an ideal model of cooperation and peace.

She further said it is important for Kashmirs future to be included in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), arguing that Kashmirs inclusion in the corridor will be an opportunity for the state and not a security threat as perceived by the security experts and policy makers.

Pakistan, China, Afghanistan hold second trilateral dialogue in Kabul

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — Pakistan, China and Afghanistan held second round of trilateral dialogue in Kabul on Wednesday, in an attempt to facilitate the peace process and help end the protracted U.S.-imposed war in Afghanistan.

The three countries were represented by their respective foreign ministers in the high-profile meeting. Pakistans foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi was accompanied by foreign secretary Tehmina Janjua and other senior officials, said reports.

One of the three sessions of the daylong conference was dedicated to security. The other two sessions pertained to the political settlement of the Afghan conflict and regional cooperation.

Under the trilateral mechanism, the three countries had previously agreed to strengthen anti-terrorism and security cooperation with special emphasis on war-ravaged Afghanistan. The three sides said they highly valued the trilateral cooperation mechanism and were committed to strengthen communication, enhance mutual trust and deepen cooperation under its framework.

It should be recalled that the first ministerial meeting held in Beijing in December last year had helped Islamabad and Kabul make progress on the establishment of Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS), which then became the new



framework for steering the bilateral relations.

The cooperation under APAPPS was affected in the aftermath of the October 18 Kandahar attack that killed top Afghan police official Gen. Abdul Raziq and other key government officials, but the two sides have again come together to streamline efforts towards peace in Afghanistan and the region.

Talking to media before heading to Beijing, Qureshi welcomed the Chinese initiative of holding the trilateral dialogue. He said both

Pakistan and China desire peace, stability, prosperity and development in Afghanistan.

He stressed that peace is imperative to take forward the region on the path of sustainable development.

Since the new government took over in Islamabad, Pakistan has been more proactive in addressing the issue of war in Afghanistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan has strongly advocated dialogue and said that peace could not be established in the war-torn country

through military power.

Last week, in an important development, Pakistan said that Indias cooperation would be needed for bringing peace to war-torn Afghanistan.

Qureshi said Pakistan was committed to facilitate a negotiated end to the 17-year-old Afghan war, and needed help of other regional countries, including India, Dawn reported.

Meanwhile, PM Khan on Friday revealed that Pakistan has arranged direct talks between the United States and Afghan Taliban on December 17.

The same U.S. that had been asking us to do more is now asking Pakistan to facilitate its talks with the Afghan Taliban, PM Imran said while addressing a ceremony to mark the 100-day ceremony of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government.

When I used to say this matter cannot be resolved without dialogue, [they] would term me Taliban Khan, said the PM.

Earlier, in response to the allegations of U.S. that Pakistan had done nothing in war against terrorism, PM Khan responded with a strong tweet: Instead of making Pakistan a scapegoat for their failures, the US should do a serious assessment of why, despite 140000 NATO troops plus 250,000 Afghan troops & reportedly \$1 trillion spent on war in Afghanistan, the Taliban today are stronger than before.

Election results in India show huge drop in support for BJP and revival for Congress

1 → Older politicians may be more comfortable with Sonia Gandhi, but now they have to take Rahul on board as an equal.

■ BJP government has come under criticism for economic mismanagement and we have also seen two RBI governors resigning recently. Do you think the criticism is warranted?

A. Modi came in 2014, promising growth with equity. He has not delivered and has not been able to keep talented people at the job.

He likes to surround himself with Yes men and second raters who bow before him. Now even those people are moving away, fearing further loss of their own credibility. So criticism of Modi's lack of economic knowledge is entirely



warranted.

■ Why hasn't Modi government's demonetization plan worked?

A. Demonetization of the Modi type is destined to fail. Any honest economist would have told him so. In fact Raghuram Rajan certainly told him so. Despite that it was Modi's love of the grand gesture that cost the nation untold misery. Over 100 people lost their lives.

■ With just 4-5 months left for the general elections in India, do you think Congress will fancy real chance of mounting a strong challenge to BJP, especially after these assembly results?

A. Congress is well and truly in the 2019 game, either by itself or in a coalition.

Forcible repatriation of Rohingya dangerous

1 → Those who are not in IDP camps effectively live in an open-air prison. There are restrictions on every aspect of normal life. The Rohingya need to obtain permission from the village authority to travel from one village to another even if other village is just a couple of minutes walking distance. Since late 2016, Rohingya are not allowed to travel from one town to another. They need permission to seek emergency health care and many die because of the lack of proper medical facilities

The mosques in the Northern Arakan State are closed since 2012. There is no freedom of religion. Many religious scholars were being targeted, arbitrarily arrested and killed.

The Rohingya still need permission for marriage. Most of the new born babies are not allowed to register. The Rohingya are subjected to killings, extortion and marginalization in every sphere of life. People live in perpetual fear.

From January until now, more than 15,000 have fled to Bangladesh. As the genocide is ongoing, Rohingya are continuously fleeing to safer pastures.

The reasons why the survivors and refugees in Bangladesh are refusing to be repatriated include:



1. There is no security whatsoever and organisations of every type have said this repeatedly this year.

2. Rohingya will be herded into so-called transit camps which are effectively the concentration camps we have seen since 2012.

3. They will be forced to accept a National Verification Card yet they were once recognized as full citizens and their ethnic identity

was officially recognized too. And everyone knows that the National Verification Card is tantamount to labeling Rohingya as illegal Bengali migrants and it is a Genocide Card as I mentioned earlier.

4. There is no guarantee that Rohingya will be allowed to go back to their original villages. The people who are already inside the country are not allowed to go back and

live in their own lands in their villages.

5. If Myanmar is genuine about repatriation, they must dismantle the huge array of apartheid and discriminatory laws and regulations affecting Rohingya. Myanmar must stop denying its crimes, preventing humanitarian access, preventing every single international initiative to investigate what happened and continuously protecting its generals.

Every politician from every country after visiting the Bangladeshi camps declared that the Rohingya should be able to return. We Rohingya agree. And so we appeal to everyone to ensure the conditions are appropriate for safe return and without any fear of another round of massacres and burnings.

Provide us with international protection in our homeland Rakhine state. Ensure that the generals who are committing these crimes can no longer do so with impunity. Call for repatriation without the necessary international protection and without the changes I have listed, then you will be sending Rohingya survivors to the killing fields of Myanmar.

Nay San Lwin is the Campaign and Media Relations Coordinator for Free Rohingya Coalition. This article is exclusively written for Tehran Times.

Xi announces 'overwhelming victory' in his anti-corruption campaign

China's President Xi Jinping has declared victory in his anti-graft fight, saying that the campaign to root out inherent corruption within the ruling Communist Party will continue.

Xi announced at a meeting of the party's Politburo on Friday that the campaign had now achieved an "overwhelming victory," state broadcaster CCTV reported.

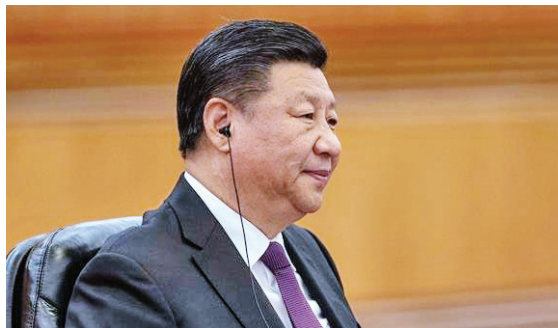
The report further quoted a politburo statement as saying, "We must forcefully reduce the number of cases and effectively stop them from growing."

The Chinese president underlined that efforts to overhaul China's extensive anti-graft architecture must continue to modernize the systems of oversight for party members as well as state employees.

Xi proclaimed during a twice-a-decade meeting of senior Communist Party leadership back in October 2017 that his battle against corruption had attained "overwhelming momentum."

The Chinese broadcaster further emphasized that the shift from "momentum" to "victory" reflects a significant judgment from the party leadership.

Xi had previously vowed to wage war on graft until corruption of all kinds has been expunged at all levels of the



The Chinese broadcaster further emphasized that the shift from "momentum" to "victory" reflects a significant judgment from the party leadership.

ruling party, from high-level "tigers" to low-level "flies."

Beijing's powerful graft investigators have reportedly handled 464,000 cases and punished 406,000 people in the first nine months of 2018.

Back in October, China's Public Security Ministry announced that the former head of the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) had been placed under investigation on suspicion of bribery.

The ministry further added in a statement that Meng Hongwei had "accepted bribes and is suspected of violating the law," describing the investigation as "very timely, absolutely correct and rather wise."

In an earlier statement, Beijing's anti-corruption watchdog, the National Supervisory Commission, had also noted that Meng -- who was also China's vice minister for public security -- is under probe on suspicion of "violating the law."

The newly established commission was officially launched in March, expanding the anti-graft campaign to all state employees and granting legal support to Communist Party's internal investigation and incarceration measures.

(Source: Press TV)

Macron's forced withdrawal before the Yellow Vests

By Hanif Ghaffari

TEHRAN — Finally, Emmanuel Macron, the French President, had no way but to withdraw from his previous positions in the face of Paris recent riots, declaring an “economic and social state of emergency”. Macron ordered the government and parliament to take immediate steps to change tax rules and other policies that hit the French citizens.

He also promised to pay attention to the protesters' demands. Macron's reforming measures include:

- A government-funded 100-euro increase in the minimum wage starting at the beginning of the new year
- The abolition of taxes on overtime pay in 2019
- Asking profit-making companies to give workers tax-free year-end bonuses
- Slashing a tax hike on small pensions, acknowledging it was “unjust.”

In a 15-minute speech from the Elysee Palace which was covered by the media, Macron told the French people that he accepted his share of responsibility for the crisis. The French young President struck a rather humble in his remarks, which wasn't usual for him.

The “Gilets jaunes” protests, which have seen the worst riots in France for decades, began on 17 November over the government's plan to raise taxes on diesel and gasoline, but by the time Macron bowed to four weeks of violence and abandoned the new fuel tax, protesters were demanding much more.

It's to be noted that according to polls results, Emmanuel Macron's popularity has hit new lows. The French President has been called the “president of the rich” by critics.



Many of French workers and low-income citizens are severely discontent over the combination of low wages, high taxes and high unemployment that made lots of financial troubles in their lives.

In his televised remarks, Macron said; “We will respond to the economic and social urgency with strong measures, by cutting taxes more rapidly, by keeping our spending under control, but not with U-turns”.

After Macron's concession, Jacqueline Mouraud, one of the spokespeople for the yellow vest movement, said that it “comes much too late, unfortunately”.

“It's on the right path, but in my opinion it will not fundamentally change the move-

ment,” she said.

The fact is that France is stuck in long-standing social and political problems. Unemployment rate is high, and Macron's policies couldn't satisfy the French about solving this critical problem. Sheri Berman, the professor of political science at Barnard College, points out to this issue, says; “Macron came to power promising to deal with these and other problems, but the reforms thus far led many to dismiss him as another member of an out-of-touch elite.

His aloof personal style — and several well-publicized disparaging remarks to those less well-off, including that they should “stop whining” and simply “cross the street to find

a job” — lead growing numbers of citizens to view him the “president of the rich.” As the protests swelled, the yellow vests' anger became increasingly aimed at Macron and, more generally, at an establishment that seems unwilling or unable to address their needs.”

She continues; “Macron faces the most serious crisis of his presidency, with popularity numbers at a new low — matching the worst figures achieved by his predecessor, François Hollande. The yellow vests, on the other hand, have approval ratings of over 80 percent.”

The Yellow Vests movement highlights tensions and weaknesses which are remarkable in into Macron's approach. Macron should admit that in a country suffering economically, his so-called reforming goals will naturally run into opposition. One of the protesters pointed to this issue and said; “We are talking about cost of living and Macron is talking ecology. ... [Macron's] solution for people who can't afford food by the end of the month is to buy solar panels and electric cars.”

While Macron had previously noted that he wouldn't be swayed by street protests, in an initial attempt to quell the riots, he agreed last week to cancel a planned increase in anti-pollution fuel taxes. But this measure was considered as too little, too late by the protesters who are trying to press for further concessions on reducing inequality.

Almost 136,000 people took to the streets last weekend — the same number as a week earlier. Over 4,500 people have been detained across France, police said. Protesters torched cars and stormed the Arc de Triumph, one of the most recognizable Paris landmarks, smashing the lower floors before ascending to the roof.

Yemen agreement and Riyadh's double standards

1 → The agreements over the province of al-Hudaydah and its harbors seem to be the most important achievement of the Stockholm peace talks. It was the alertness of the Sana'a delegation that paved the way for the agreement on al-Hudaydah, which included the withdrawal of foreign forces from the province. Responsibility for the security of al-Hudaydah and the ports of al-Hudaydah, Saleef and Ras Isa is the job of the security forces of Yemen according to Yemeni law, which means that no foreign troops, no external forces, can be deployed in al-Hudaydah. And this means that no external force can be deployed in al-Hudaydah. Therefore, it may be said that with this clause in the agreement, the Saudi-UAE dream of occupying al-Hudaydah has been lost.

The head of the Houthi delegation, Mohammad Abdul Salam, said: “We made great concessions for the sake of the Yemeni people because Hudaydah is the last remaining corridor to save the country from famine”. “We proposed that civilian aircraft go to Jordan and Egypt before heading to Sanaa airport,” he added. “We called for UN surveillance on imports, but the opposition was opposed. But the agreement was positive and we hope that the exchange of prisoners will be done in full and on the basis of an agreed



upon mechanism.”

Despite the agreement of the Yemeni parties in the Stockholm talks in Sweden and the official support of the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Gutierrez of this agreement, Saudi Arabia has adopted a double standard policy with regard to what has happened in Sweden. “We hope that the Houthis accept a comprehensive political solution, in

accordance with relevant UN resolutions, that serves the interests of Yemen and its people rather than working on behalf of the Iranian regime's interests,” the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., Khalid bin Salman, said.

These hostile statements by the Saudi ambassador indicate that Riyadh is still not committed to peace in Yemen and it is unlikely that, in light of the current agreement, the Saudis would cease its military aggression against the defenseless and innocent people of Yemen.

After the Yemeni side announced at the end of the talks the ceasefire in al-Hudaydah, coalition bombers fled the city and targeted the al-Adha area. It's clear that the Saudi aggression against the Yemeni people is still on their agenda even after the accords in Stockholm.

It's important to mention two key points: first, the United Nations is committed its responsibility to protect the agreement. This marks less of a passive role for the UN. Secondly, after the talks the Saudi-backed Hadi's outgoing government and its allies are in limbo. In any case, the failure of this agreement, if it should occur, cannot be condemned as a failure by the Sanaa government because the Yemenis have shown that they are struggling for peace.

Time for Europe to launch SPV, show some autonomy: Italian analyst

TEHRAN (Tasnim) — A senior fellow with the Transatlantic Program of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) said it is time for Europe to once and for all be independent, establish its proposed special purpose vehicle (SPV) and show “some important margins of autonomy” in face of the U.S.

“So the defense of the JCPOA or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is really critical for Europe. Whether Europe can do something about that, it is going to be critical for Europe's ability to preserve some important margins of autonomy from other countries, in this case the United States. If the Europeans fail to set up the SPV, for instance because no one wants the SPV to be placed in their own country, Trump's point that brute power is the only thing that matters in international relations and that the allied countries are in fact vassal states will have been validated,” Riccardo Alcaro told Tasnim.

Riccardo Alcaro was a nonresident fellow in the Center on the United States and Europe. He is an expert in transatlantic political and security relations with a focus on U.S.-European cooperation in Europe's neighboring regions, including the Middle East and North Africa, Iran and the Persian Gulf, the Sahel, Eastern Europe, and Russia.

Following is the text of the interview:

■ As you know, recently U.S. President Donald Trump imposed a new wave of sanctions against Tehran despite opposition both from inside the U.S. and European countries. What is your take on the sanctions?

A: Well, it is a very significant consequential move by the U.S. president with several dimensions. One dimension is certainly the relationship between the United States and Iran. This is clearly a hostile act depicted as a response to Iran's “irresponsible” the (U.S.) administration likes using the term “malign” activities in the region. The administration has not been able to claim that Iran was not fulfilling its obligations under the nuclear deal. Because, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency's reports, Iran has been fulfilling its obligations but the Trump

administration has seized on the preamble of the agreement where it stated that this agreement should serve as a platform for further engagement and constructive relations so argues that Iran is violating the spirit, not as far as its nuclear behavior is concerned but as far as its regional behavior is concerned. In addition, the Trump administration has argued that the nuclear deal is too soft on Iran; it does not re-define Iran not to pursue the nuclear weapons action, if not temporarily because the Trump administration has popularized this idea, which is certainly not accurate, that Iran would be free to get a nuclear weapon between 2025 and 2030, which is when the main limit on Iran's ability to enrich uranium expires.

In fact, the Trump administration has from the beginning taken a very, very confrontational stance on Iran, and its Middle East policy and particularly Iran policy is run by a group of persons who are convinced that the United States' interests in region are to contain Iran. They have made a number of demands to Iran for the sanctions to be lifted. They have actually even promised more benefits than a nuclear deal includes, but in order to get those benefits Iran would have to abide by much more limits in terms of nuclear development and also do a number of things that if you combine them together, will eventually amount to capitulation and also fundamental retreat by Iran from its fundamental security policy pillars, including the ballistic program, its support for proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. So this is the first dimension.

The second dimension is a transatlantic dimension. This is really, really critical. The nuclear deal was mostly a result of a multilateral effort in which the transatlantic dimension was critical. By re-imposing sanctions against Iran and against the will of the Europeans who are parties to the deal, Trump has shown no regard for Europeans' sensitivities, interests and requests. Trump has also threatened to use the sanctions that are being re-imposed, the so-called secondary

sanctions, against EU companies and banks willing (to continue) trade and investment in Iran. So, basically, Trump is betting on America's superiority and dominance on financial markets to compel other countries, including America's allies, to align with a regime, not jointly agreed upon, not legitimated by the security council of the United Nations, but decided entirely in Washington and in isolation.

■ What is your idea about a special purpose vehicle proposed by Europe to streamline trade transactions between Iran and the EU? What country would finally host the payment system?

A: We do not know that either. This special purpose vehicle is critical in many respects. The first one is that if enacted, it should enable a minimum level at least of trade and investment between European companies and Iran, but actually not only European companies because companies from extra EU countries can also use that, including China and Russia. Of course, even if it becomes operational, this instrument would be absolutely incapable of compensating for the loss of the United States but it will still assure a certain amount of trade particularly oil, humanitarian trade, medicine and stuff like that. But politically, it would have a huge importance because it would signal that the European Union and its member states are willing to put their money to defend the deal with deeds and not just words, and to keep a channel of communication and engagement with Iran open because the European Union, particularly France, Germany and Britain along with High Representative for EU's Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini have repeatedly stated that the deal is in Europe's security interests, non-proliferation interests, and economic interests.

So the defense of the JCPOA or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is really critical for Europe. Whether Europe can do something about that, it is going to be critical for Europe's ability to preserve some important



margins of autonomy from other countries, in this case the United States. If the Europeans fail to set up the SPV, for instance because no one wants the SPV to be placed in their own country, Trump's point that brute power is the only thing that matters in international relations and that the allied countries are in fact vassal states will have been validated.

■ The Trump administration has said that it would be able to cut Iran's oil exports to zero. However, eight countries have been given exemptions. Do you think it would be possible to do that?

A: Let me start by the exemptions. This is not an exemption. These eight countries among them China, India, South Korea and also Italy are main importers of Iran (s oil). They have not been exempted; they have been given an extension. They can continue importing oil from Iran for about six months, but in six-month time they are expected to assign with U.S. sanctions, otherwise they will be punished. Not the countries, the companies of course. The U.S. sanctions, the secondary sanctions, do not target other countries. They target just Iran. But in order to target Iran, they actually threaten companies from other countries with fines and restrictions if they do business with Iran.

Senate votes to end U.S. support for Saudi war on Yemen: What next?

TEHRAN (FNA) — On Thursday, December 13, the United States Senate passed S.J. Resolution 54.

The resolution is a War Powers Act challenge to the unauthorized U.S. involvement in the failed Saudi-led war on Yemen, and would require the U.S. to cease its military support - if a complementary bill passes in the House.

The bill includes a prohibition on refuelling Saudi warplanes, as both the Trump administration and opponents argue that doesn't count as war! The political class in Washington claims the success of this challenge is historic. Indeed, it would be if:

1- The sound minds on the Capitol Hill wouldn't allow the Republican leadership to challenge or derail the new vote, as the Yemen War has repeatedly been derailed in the past changing rules at the last minute to deny it a proper vote. This almost certainly means no House version will be entertained until January at the earliest, when the new Congress takes over. But not all hope is lost.

2- The Trump administration, which argues that the Saudi-led war and arms transfers “create American jobs”, has loudly opposed this challenge to the Yemen War, arguing simultaneously that it's not really a war and that U.S. support for Saudi Arabia is so critical that it shouldn't matter how bad the war is or how many innocent civilians it has killed. The rising number of civilian casualties, the famine, the humanitarian crisis, as well as the growing international anger and outcry at the Saudis over the grisly murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2 should be enough to drive further support for this bill.

3- Fresh off of the Yemen War vote on Thursday, the Senate unanimously and without objection passed a resolution condemning Saudi Arabia's murder of Khashoggi as well, expressing the Senate's sense that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is responsible for that murder.

This particular resolution shouldn't just rebuke Saudi Arabia and MBS for the murder, or worse, see negotiations trying to compromise on it. The Trump White House refuses to criticize the Saudis and blame MBS over the murder, much less hold them to account - despite the CIA expressing “strong confidence” that MBS ordered the murder.

It is about time the Trump administration made such a statement and the Congress acted and made its own position known through deeds and not just words. This is the least they could do for justice to be served.

4- The Pentagon regime plans to bill Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates \$331 million after undercharging them for U.S. aerial refuelling of their aircraft in the Yemen War. This is not about “reviewing Pentagon records and finding errors in accounting where they failed to charge the Saudis and Emiratis adequately for fuelling and refuelling services,” as Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich, a Pentagon spokeswoman, would like to suggest. This is about U.S. forces being complicit in Saudi-Emirati war crimes in Yemen. By refuelling their warplanes, the Americans helped the Saudi-led despots murder thousands of innocent civilians, including school children. They should acknowledge their direct involvement and be held to account, including paying compensation for their victims.

5- The Yemeni peace talks in Sweden ended on a high note on Thursday, with an agreement for more talks in January, and most importantly, a deal for a ceasefire in the vital aid port of Hodeidah. Under the deal, both sides have agreed to withdraw all fighters from the area around Hodeidah within the next 21 days. The UN will oversee the withdrawal and is expected to play a role in monitoring the port.

The U.S. should respect this deal as it proves beyond any doubt that the people of Yemen don't want to see a continuation to the U.S.-Saudi-Emirati atrocities in the war-torn country. They want to determine their own fate and come up with a framework for a political settlement of the war.

This round of talks got a lot more done than anyone expected, and has many hopeful about the next round. Both the Saudis and their American masters should refrain from derailing this important process which is destined to also put an end to the ongoing humanitarian crisis that is affecting millions.

6- According to a new report by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, the continued U.S.-backed, Saudi-led violence has killed over 60,000 killed, including a staggering 28,182 killed so far in 2018.

The toll has been rising calamitously in recent months, but without official acknowledgement in Washington, it's largely gone unacknowledged. This needs to change too, as no more innocent lives need to be lost for the Saudis and Emiratis' hegemonic agenda.

Those who have the final say on the Senate's S.J. Resolution 54, therefore, should take note.

This new figure is, incidentally, only those killed violently, and doesn't include the even larger number of deaths from the Saudi-led naval blockade and the deliberate mass starvation that is still ongoing. Save the Children has estimated 85,000 starvation deaths since 2016, and the number is rapidly rising.

It is not, then, an overstatement to say that the official class on the Capitol Hill will have Yemeni blood on their hands: (a) if they don't challenge the unauthorized U.S. involvement in the Saudi-led atrocities; (b) if they don't require the U.S. government to cease its criminal involvement in the worst humanitarian crisis on Earth today; (c) and if they don't pass a complementary bill in the House that includes a prohibition on refuelling Saudi warplanes. The world is watching the House and history will judge them harshly.

Macron, Trump and Iran's future

1 → If so, the “golden age”, which began in the second semester of 2009, with the first year of the Obama administration, ended in the first two years of the Trump administration. Such conditions will have serious implications for U.S. foreign policy.

In the turn of events, this incident will once again provide Iran with an historic opportunity to work alongside its dynamic and tactful foreign policy, with the advent of fundamental domestic reforms, to modernize the economic system that was launched forty years ago.

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Next year’s health budget set at \$8.3b

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — According to the budget bill proposed for the next fiscal year (starting March 21), 350 trillion rials (about \$8.3 billion) will be allocated to the health sector, announced Health Ministry Spokesperson Iraj Harirchi.

Out of the proposed budget, he said, \$5.2 billion is assigned to the universities of medical sciences which have 460,000 employees, IRIB reported on December 11.

“The remaining resources are set to support healthcare reform plan, family doctor scheme and population policies as well as measures to lower medicine prices and prevent exchange rate fluctuations’ impact on prices,” Harirchi added.

“Unfortunately, Salamat health insurance organization has been facing serious budget deficit over the last 20 years and we occasionally had to draw on foreign exchange reserves to address the shortage, so our proposal for the next year is that the legal budget of Salamat health insurance organization will be completely allocated to them, solving the organization’s long-lasting issue once and for all,” Harirchi remarked.

“This is particularly important because with current inflation, Salamat health insurance organization and Social Security Organization as well as other insurers should play a vital role in meeting peoples’ needs, removing



Health Ministry spokesperson Iraj Harirchi in an undated photo

“Health Ministry’s budget will have the same rise as other ministries and any added allocations will be spent on the employees’ wages as the salaries of government employees are supposed to increase by 20% next year.”

some of the financial pressure they are dealing with,” he further noticed.

“Health Ministry’s budget will have the same rise as other ministries and any added allocations will be spent on the employees’ wages as the salaries of government employees are supposed to increase by 20% next year,” he said.

“We have also came up with two strategies to cover the costs of healthcare reform plan; one is the lawful increase in budget allocated to this plan and the other is to optimize our usage of current resources with better management,” Harirchi added.

“Even though we have been dealing with budget shortage in implementing healthcare reform plan over the years, we haven’t made any substantial changes in the quality of health packages and we hope with the help of the government and the Majlis [Iranian parliament] we don’t have to do it in the next year either,” the Health Ministry’s official concluded.

Last week, Harirchi said healthcare inflation rate was 19% at the first half of current Iranian calendar year (March 21-September 22), standing below general inflation which averaged 36%.

According to Harirchi, the government has assigned \$3.5 billion worth of foreign exchange to the health sector to control the price of medicine and medical equipment.

‘19% of pregnancies in Iran over the age of 35’

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — Some 19 percent of pregnancies in Iran are over the age of 35, said Hamed Barekati, the head of population, family and schools department at the Ministry of Health.

Currently, pregnant women who are over 35 receive special care, and if they have Diabetes or high blood pressure, they will be particularly examined, said Barekati in an interview with IRNA on Saturday.

“We advise there be at least a three-year gap between consecutive pregnancies but the gap shouldn’t be larger than five years because the mothers’ physical readiness for pregnancy will be reduced,” Barekati noted.

■ Caesarian delivery at 50%

“In early stages of healthcare reform plan, cesarean section rate was around 5 percent but with the remedial measures we took it has now lowered to 50 percent,” Barekati remarked.

Making natural child delivery cost-free and devising special labor, delivery, and recovery rooms (LDR) have been some measures taken to promote natural childbirth, he added.

Natural childbirth promotion package was part of the



healthcare reform plan and began in the Iranian calendar year of 1384 (March 2005-March 2006).

Training courses preparing mothers for vaginal delivery was part of this promotion package, aiming to inform mothers the differences between the normal delivery and the caesarean section.

■ Caesarean section rate across the world

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), since 1985, the international healthcare community has considered the ideal rate for caesarean sections to be between 10-15 percent. Since then, caesarean sections have become increasingly common in both developed and developing countries.

When medically necessary, a caesarean section can effectively prevent maternal and newborn mortality. Two new HRP studies show that when caesarean section rates rise towards 10 percent across a population, the number of maternal and newborn deaths decreases. When the rate goes above 10 percent, there is no evidence that mortality rates improve.

How meditation impacts the way we learn

Many anecdotes and some studies suggest that meditation can be a powerful tool for mental and physical health. New research shows that it may have yet another benefit: to help us learn faster from past experiences.

According to new findings, meditation alters the way in which we learn.

In a new study, researchers from the University of Surrey in the United Kingdom focused on one particular type of meditation — “focused attention meditation” — and whether it affects how a person learns.

This meditation practice requires a person to focus their attention on a particular object — a burning candle or one’s own breath, for instance — and maintain that focus for a period of time.

People often use focused attention meditation as a gateway into other types of meditation, as it is easier to learn and to practice.

“Meditation is a powerful tool for the body and the mind; it can reduce stress and improve immune function,” says study co-author Prof. Bertram Opitz.

But can it also help us train our minds to learn faster from feedback or information acquired through past experiences?

Prof. Opitz and Paul Knytl, who is a doctoral student at the University of Surrey, suggest that the answer to that question is “yes.”

The two explain their research findings in a paper now featured in the Journal of Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience.

■ Learning from positive vs. negative feedback

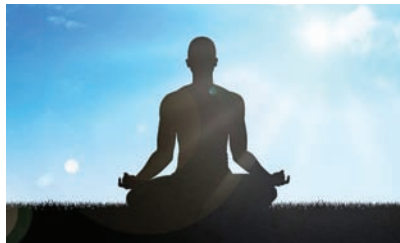
The researchers worked with people who were meditators and people who did not meditate. There were 35 participants in total, of which nine identified as Buddhist meditators, 12 practiced meditation in a secular context, two practiced Qi Gong, and the rest non-meditators.

For the purpose of this study, the investigators trained the participants to do well in an activity in which they had to select images that were most likely to bring them a particular reward.

In this exercise, the participants saw pairs of images, each with different probabilities of bringing a reward if selected.

The researchers noticed that those who practiced meditation had a higher success rate in choosing reward-associated images compared with their non-meditating peers.

This, Prof. Opitz and Knytl explain, suggests that meditators tend to learn from positive outcomes, while non-meditators



most likely learn from negative outcomes.

“Humans have been meditating for over 2,000 years, but the neural mechanisms of this practice are still relatively unknown,” says Knytl, who is specializing in the neurological mechanisms associated with focused attention meditation.

“[Our current] findings demonstrate that, on a deep level, meditators respond to feedback in a more even-handed way than non-meditators, which may help to explain some of the psychological benefits they experience from the practice,” he adds.

■ Meditation’s effect on the brain

In the new study, the team also measured the participants’ brain activity during their tasks by using electroencephalograms (EEGs), a method that records the electrical activity in a person’s brain.

The EEGs showed that while all the participants responded in the same way to positive feedback during the exercise, those who did not meditate had a more intense response to negative feedback than meditators.

Among participants who meditated, those with the weakest response to negative feedback were the most experienced practitioners.

Knytl and Prof. Opitz believe that regular meditation may impact levels of dopamine, which is a neurotransmitter that plays an important role in mood regulation and physical ability, among other things. This, in turn, may render meditators less responsive to negative feedback.

The scientists also note that previous research has found that people with Parkinson’s disease — who have much lower levels of dopamine than normal — tended not to perform well on learning tasks that required them to respond to positive feedback.

“What we have found is that [meditation] can [...] impact on how we receive feedback, i.e. if we quickly learn from our mistakes or if we need to keep making them before we find the right answer.”

(Source: medical news today)

Mediterranean diet reduces cardiovascular risk by a quarter

A recent study has put the Mediterranean diet to the test once more, attempting to unpick the molecular mechanisms that produce its benefits.

More good news for advocates of the Mediterranean diet.

Inspired by the traditional eating patterns of people from Greece, Italy, and Spain, the Mediterranean diet can seemingly do no wrong.

In a nutshell, the diet is rich in plants and olive oil but low in meat and sugary products.

Over the years, studies have concluded that this eating pattern lowers the risk of various health issues, including coronary heart disease and stroke.

Studies have even concluded that the Mediterranean diet might extend lifespan in older adults as well as reduce the risk of Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s.

Evidence is mounting for its health benefits, but scientists still do not know exactly how these benefits come about.

■ The Mediterranean black box

A new study published in JAMA Network Open asks the following question: “Is the Mediterranean diet [...] associated with lower risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) events in a [United States] population, and, if so, what are the underlying mechanisms?”

As corresponding study author Dr. Samia Mora explains, “While prior studies have shown benefit for the Mediterranean diet on reducing cardiovascular events and improving cardiovascular risk factors, it has been a black box regarding the extent to which improvements in known and novel risk factors contribute to these effects.”

To investigate, the scientists took data from the Women’s Health Study. Lead study author Shafqat Ahmad, Ph.D., led researchers from Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Harvard Medical School, and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health — all in Boston, MA.

In all, they had access to the health records and dietary habits of 25,994 women, all of whom were healthy at the start of the study. The researchers followed them for a maximum of 12 years.

The researchers measured the levels of 40 biomarkers, including lipids, inflammation, glucose metabolism, and lipoproteins. They split the participants into three groups — low, middle, and upper intake — depending on how strictly they adhered to the Mediterranean diet.

They were particularly interested in cardiovascular events, such as stroke



and heart attack. They found that:

* In the low intake group, 4.2 percent of women had a cardiovascular event.

* In the middle intake group, 3.8 percent of women had a cardiovascular event.

* In the upper intake group, 3.8 percent of women had a cardiovascular event.

This marks the first long-term study in a U.S. population to explore the impact of the Mediterranean diet on CVD. The authors conclude:

“[H]igher [Mediterranean diet] intake was associated with approximately one-quarter lower risk of CVD events over a 12-year follow-up period.”

The authors also note that this effect size is equivalent to that present in people who take statins, which are common drugs that doctors prescribe to lower cardiovascular risk.

■ Mediterranean metabolites

Next, they dived into the metabolic data to see if they could find any patterns. They discovered that variation in metabolites related to inflammation accounted for 29 percent of the reduction in CVD risk.

Glucose metabolism and insulin resistance accounted for 27.9 percent, body mass index (BMI) for 27.3 percent, and blood pressure for 26.6 percent.

The team also noted relationships between a number of other metabolites, including lipids, but these were less pronounced.

Dr. Mora says, “In this large study, we found that modest differences in biomarkers contributed in a multifactorial way to this cardiovascular benefit that was seen over the long-term.”

Once again, the Mediterranean eating pattern seems to have come up trumps; and now we know that its benefits are most likely due to the way it interacts with inflammation pathways, glucose metabolism, and insulin resistance.

Of course, there are some limitations to the study. For instance, as the authors explain, CVD risk could have been influenced by as-yet-unknown metabolic factors that the scientists did not measure in this study.

(Source: medical news today)

Medical device manufacturers with CE marking to receive loans

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — Medical device manufacturers who have applied for CE (Conformité Européenne) marking will receive low-interest loans from Non-Governmental Research and Technology Medical Equipment Fund, the Fund’s director announced.

CE marking is a certification mark that indicates conformity with health, safety, and environmental protection standards for products sold within the European Economic Area (EEA).

According to Hossein Salmani, the maximum of loans’ principle is \$47,619 which can be repaid in around two years with an interest rate of around 8 to 10 percent, Mehr news agency reported on Friday.

The Non-Governmental Research and Technology Medical Equipment Fund has signed an agreement with the Health Ministry’s National Medical Device Directorate to collaborate in facilitating national production of medical device, Salmani explained.

Last week, the Health Ministry’s Spokesperson, Iraj Harirchi announced that some one third of the country’s knowledge-based companies, i.e. 1,211 out of a total of 3,700 companies, are working in the health sector; 225 of them work on medicine, 156 work on medical equipment and 646 work on laboratory equipment.

Breast cancer and osteoporosis

The National Cancer Institute reports that 1 in 8 women in the United States (approximately 13 percent) will develop breast cancer in her lifetime. In fact, next to skin cancer, breast cancer is the most common type of cancer among U.S. women.

While the exact cause of breast cancer is not known, the risk of developing it increases with age. The risk is particularly high in women over the age of 60. Because of their age, these women are already at increased risk for osteoporosis. Given the rising incidence of breast cancer and the improvement of long-term survival rates, bone health and fracture prevention have become important health issues among breast cancer survivors.

■ Facts about Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a condition in which the bones become less dense and more likely to fracture. Fractures from osteoporosis can result in significant pain and disability. It is a major health threat for an estimated 44 million Americans, 68 percent of whom are women.

Risk factors for developing osteoporosis include:

- * being thin or having a small frame
- * having a family history of the disease
- * for women, being postmenopausal, having an early menopause, or not having menstrual periods (amenorrhea)
- * using certain medications, such as glucocorticoids
- * not getting enough calcium
- * not getting enough physical activity
- * smoking
- * drinking too much alcohol.

Osteoporosis is a silent disease that can often be prevented. However, if undetected, it can progress for many years without symptoms until a fracture occurs. It has been called “a pediatric disease with geriatric consequences” because building healthy bones in one’s youth is important to help prevent osteoporosis and fractures later in life.

■ The breast cancer – osteoporosis link

Women who have had breast cancer treatment may be at increased risk for osteoporosis and fracture for several reasons. First, estrogen has a protective effect on bone, and reduced levels of the hormone trigger bone loss. Because of chemotherapy or surgery, many breast cancer survivors experience a loss of ovarian function, and consequently, a drop in estrogen levels. Women who were premenopausal prior to their cancer treatment tend to go through menopause earlier than those who have not had the disease.

Studies also suggest that chemotherapy may have a direct negative effect on bone. In addition, the breast cancer itself may stimulate the production of osteoclasts, the cells that break down bone.

■ Osteoporosis management strategies

Several strategies can reduce one’s risk for osteoporosis or lessen the effects of the disease in women who have already been diagnosed.

■ **Nutrition:** Some studies have found a link between diet and breast cancer. However, it is not yet clear which foods or supplements may play a role in reducing breast cancer risk. As far as bone health is concerned, a well-balanced diet rich in calcium and vitamin D is important. Good sources of calcium include low-fat dairy products; dark green, leafy vegetables; and calcium-fortified foods and beverages. Also, supplements can help ensure that the calcium requirement is met each day. The Institute of Medicine recommends a daily calcium intake of 1,000 mg (milligrams) for men and women between the ages of 19 and 50, increasing to 1,200 mg for those over 50.

Vitamin D plays an important role in calcium absorption and bone health. It is synthesized in the skin through exposure to sunlight. Some individuals may require vitamin D supplements in order to achieve the recommended intake of 400 to 800 IU (International Units) each day.

■ **Exercise:** Like muscle, bone is living tissue that responds to exercise by becoming stronger. The best exercise for bones is weight-bearing exercise that forces you to work against gravity. Some examples include walking, climbing stairs, lifting weights, and dancing. Regular exercise such as walking may help prevent bone loss and provide many other health benefits. Recent research suggests that exercise may also reduce breast cancer risk in younger women.

■ **Healthy lifestyle:** Smoking is bad for bones as well as the heart and lungs. In addition, smokers may absorb less calcium from their diets. Some studies have found a slightly higher risk of breast cancer in women who drink alcohol, and evidence also suggests that alcohol can negatively affect bone health. Those who drink heavily are more prone to bone loss and fracture, because of both poor nutrition and an increased risk of falling.

■ **Bone density test:** Specialized tests known as bone mineral density (BMD) tests measure bone density at various sites of the body. These tests can detect osteoporosis before a fracture occurs and predict one’s chances of fracturing in the future. A woman recovering from breast cancer should ask her doctor whether she might be a candidate for a bone density test.

■ **Medication:** There is no cure for osteoporosis. However, medications are available to prevent and treat this disease. Bisphosphonates, a class of osteoporosis treatment medications, are being studied and have demonstrated some success in their ability to treat breast cancers that have spread to bone.

Another osteoporosis treatment medication, raloxifene, is currently being evaluated for its ability to decrease breast cancer risk. Raloxifene is a selective estrogen receptor modulator (SERM) that has been shown to reduce the risk of breast cancer in women with osteoporosis. The National Institutes of Health is currently sponsoring the Study of Tamoxifen and Raloxifene, known by the acronym STAR. The study compares the effectiveness of raloxifene with that of tamoxifen in preventing breast cancer in postmenopausal women who have a high risk of developing the disease.

(source: WebMD)

Europeans topmost travelers to Shahdad desert



TOURISM **TEHRAN** — Europeans have constituted the highest number of arrivals in Iran’s Shahdad desert since the beginning of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21), ISNA reported.

Shahdad - a major part of the Lut desert in southeastern Kerman province - is home to massive sand pyramids created by wind and water. The “Lut” plain is a natural landscape of Iran which is a UNESCO registered site.

Over 2,300 foreign nationals stayed in eco-lodges across Shahdad during the aforementioned period, which shows 25 percent rise year on year, said Gholamreza Farrokhi, the provincial tourism chief.

Most of foreign visitors to Shahdad are from European countries including Germany, Italy, Spain and France, the official said.

The big and sprawling Kerman province has been a cultural melting pot since antiquity, blending Persians with subcontinental tribe dwellers. It is home to myriad historical sites and scenic landscapes such as Bazaar-e Sartasari, Jabalieh Dome, Ganjali Khan Bathhouse, Malek Jameh Mosque and Shahdad Desert to name a few.

What chewed-up gum reveals about life in the Stone Age

Chewed tar is an unexpectedly great source of ancient DNA.

No one today quite understands how they did it, but people in the Stone Age could turn ribbons of birch bark into sticky, black tar. They used this tar to make tools, fixing arrowheads onto arrows and blades onto axes. And they chewed it, as evidenced by teeth marks in some lumps.

These unassuming lumps of chewed birch-bark tar turn out to be an extraordinary source of ancient DNA. This month, two separate research groups posted preprints describing DNA from the tar in Stone Age Scandinavia. The two papers have not yet been peer reviewed, but they are already generating excitement about what they herald.

“It’s really amazing,” says Pontus Skoglund, an ancient-DNA researcher at Francis Crick Institute who was not involved with either study. Ancient DNA from human bones and teeth have recently revolutionized the study of the past, but many cultures over time did not bury their dead and left no remains to analyze. Chewing gum could fill in some of the gaps. It could also reveal a wealth of additional information, such as who helped make the Stone Age tools, what they ate, and what bacteria lived in their teeth.

The first new paper describes human DNA from three 10,000-year-old pieces of birch-bark tar, all found at a site called Huseby Klev in western Sweden. Having never extracted DNA from tar before, the team tried a protocol originally designed to extract DNA from feces—and it worked. Each piece of tar appears to have been chewed by just one person. In total, the tar pieces captured the DNA of two females and one male.

(Source: *The Atlantic*)



ROUND THE GLOBE

Ephesus

Located within what was once the estuary of the River Kaystros in Turkey, Ephesus comprises successive Hellenistic and Roman settlements founded on new locations, which followed the coastline as it retreated westward.

Excavations have revealed grand monuments of the Roman Imperial period including the Library of Celsus and the Great Theatre. Little remains of the famous Temple of Artemis, one of the “Seven Wonders of the World,” which drew pilgrims from all around the Mediterranean.



The Library of Celsus in Ephesus, Turkey

Since the 5th century, the House of the Virgin Mary, a domed cruciform chapel seven kilometers from Ephesus, became a major place of Christian pilgrimage. The Ancient City of Ephesus is an outstanding example of a Roman port city, with sea channel and harbor basin.

Founded by the 2nd millennium BC, the sanctuary of the Ephesian Artemis, originally an Anatolian mother goddess, became one of the largest and most powerful sanctuaries of the ancient world.

When Asia Minor was incorporated into the Roman Empire in 133 BC, Ephesus was designated as the capital of the new province Asia.

Excavations and conservation over the past 150 years have revealed grand monuments of the Roman Imperial period lining the old processional way through the ancient city including the Library of Celsus and terrace houses.

(Source: *UNESCO*)

Thousands of Achaemenid-era clay tablets to be back home

HERITAGE **TEHRAN** — Over 11,000 flawless [Achaemenid-era] clay tablets and a large number of fragments of their kind will be back home, Iran tourism chief said on Wednesday.

“Of the cited number, 1784 clay tablets have been endorsed by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in order to be shipped to Iran, in the first stage,” Ali-Asghar Mounesan said, CHTN reported.

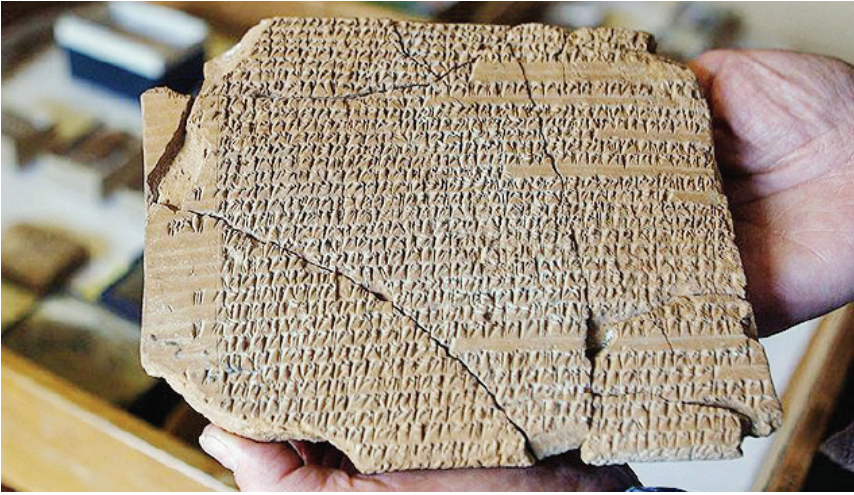
“They are currently being packed by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago,” the official added.

Back in February and following years of ups and downs, the fate of some ancient Persian artifacts, on loan from Iran to the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago since the 1930s, was left in the hands of a U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of Iran.

Archaeologists affiliated with the University of Chicago discovered the tablets in 1930s while excavating in Persepolis, the ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire. However, the institute has resumed work in collaboration with colleagues in Iran, and the return of the tablets is part of a broadening of contacts between scholars in the two countries, said Gil Stein, director of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago.

The tablets reveal economic, social and religious history of the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BC) and the larger Near Eastern region in the fifth century BC.

The Persian Empire was the largest and most durable empire of its time. The empire stretched from Ethiopia, through Egypt, to Greece, to Anatolia (modern Turkey), Central Asia and to India.



An Achaemenid-era clay tablet

Which countries do Iranians visit the most?

TOURISM **TEHRAN** — Which countries did Iranians travel to the most during the first seven months of the current Iranian calendar year started on March 21?

Are they mostly the neighbors to the north, west, east and south? Western and European ones? The answer is an amalgam of all of the above, but Iraq holds a greater share than any other country.

Iraq hosted the biggest portion of Iranian outbound passengers [ones taken part in mass pilgrimage of Arbaeen], followed by Turkey, the UAE, Georgia, Germany, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia as the most popular destinations, according to data provided by the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization.

Over 4.7 million Iranian nationals traveled abroad over the seven-month period and destinations were mostly to pilgrimage sites, countries of transit, or cheaper countries to visit, said CHHTO Deputy Director Vali Teymouri, ISNA reported on Saturday.

The official said that Iran’s outbound travels has showed a year-on-year severe slump [in seven months] as he put



the number of Iranian foreign travels at over 10.5 million in the past Iranian year 1396.

“According to statistics provided by travel agencies, Iranian foreign travels have been cut by half during the seven-month period in comparison to the year before. Amongst the rea-

sons are rising prices of departure tax, foreign currencies, and air tickets.”

The number of Air travels has fallen by nearly 67 percent during the past month of Mehr (Sep. 23 – Oct. 22) in comparison to the same month last year, he added.

Earlier this month, Teymouri announced that Iraq tops Iran’s visiting tourists list, saying some two million Iraqi nationals visited the country during the seven-month period.

People from Iraq, Republic of Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Turkey and Pakistan constituted the highest travelers to Iran respectively that visited the country for medical, pilgrimage and cultural heritage purposes, Teymouri explained.

“The number of Western travelers declined by the end of Shahrivar month [Sept. 22], which is a low season for foreign tourism. However, statistics show their arrivals are getting boost over Mehr and Aban months [Sept. 23 to Nov. 21].”

The 2019 Travel Risk Map, which shows the risk level around the world, puts Iran among countries with “insignificant risk”, a category where the UK, Denmark, Switzerland, Norway, and Finland are placed in.

Exhibit displaying Tehran archaeological discoveries

HERITAGE **TEHRAN** — An exhibition, featuring archaeological discoveries of ancient relics in Tehran, has opened its doors to the public at the National Museum of Iran.

The opening ceremony took place on Friday, attended by Tehran Mayor Pirouz Hanachi, Tehran City Council member Ahmad Masjed-Jamei, and Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization deputy director Mohammad-Hassan Talebian, Mehr reported.

“The exhibition you see is important because it shows a history of civilization in the urban area of Tehran that goes down to 8,000 years ago... and this figure is not an estimate but it is what records of [displaying] objects indicate,” said Hanachi, speaking to media.

“Available documents confirm history of Tehran going back to the time of [the Saffavid king] Tahmasp I (1514 – 1576), but these excavated objects indicate that settlement in Tehran dates from 8,000 years before present and these relics are not of little importance.”

The Municipality of Tehran is seeking to



establish a museum dedicated to history of this city, he added.

Recent archaeological studies shed new light on the history of Tehran that may go down in time some 6,600 years more than previously thought, ISNA reported in November.

An initial finding came in 2014 when a mysterious skeleton of a woman was unearthed in Molavi Street, south of the Iranian capital. Initial surveys on the skeleton, which dates back to the 5th millennium BC, suggested that Tehran may date back to 7000 years ago but the assumption was later ruled out by saying that she was only a passenger not a resident.

The other discovery, according to archaeologist Qadir Afrovand, comes from pieces of pottery which in 2014 were excavated beneath a shop in Tehran grand bazaar.

Encyclopedia Britannica says that the enigmatic evidence of human presence on the Iranian plateau as early as Lower Paleolithic times comes from a surface found in the Bakhtaran valley.

A new engine could bring back supersonic air-travel

Every morning, time once was, a giant roar from Heathrow Airport would announce the departure of flight ba001 to New York. The roar was caused by the injection into the aircraft’s four afterburners of the fuel which provided the extra thrust that it needed to take off. Soon afterwards, the pilot lit the afterburners again—this time to accelerate his charge beyond the speed of sound for the three-and-a-half hour trip to jfk. The plane was Concorde.

No more. Supersonic passenger travel came to an end in 2003. The crash three years earlier of a French Concorde had not helped, but the main reasons were wider. One was the aircraft’s Rolls-Royce/Snecma Olympus engines, afterburners and all, which gobbled up too much fuel for its flights to be paying propositions. The second was the boom-causing shock wave it generated when travelling supersonically. That meant the overland sections of its route had to be flown below Mach 1. For the Olympus, an engine optimized for travel far beyond the sound barrier, this was commercial death.

That, however, was then. And this is now. Materials are lighter and stronger. Aerodynamics and the physics of sonic booms are better understood. There is also a more realistic appreciation of the market. As a result, several groups of aircraft engineers are dipping their toes back into the supersonic pool. Some see potential for planes with about half Concorde’s 100-seat capacity. Others plan to start even smaller, with business jets that carry around a dozen passengers.

The chances of such aircraft getting airborne have recently increased substantially. General Electric (ge), one of the world’s biggest makers of jet engines, has teamed up with one of the groups of engineers, at Aerion, a company based in Reno, Nevada, to design an engine called Affinity. This, the two firms hope, will be the first civil supersonic jet engine to enter service since the Olympus, designed originally for a British bomber, was adapted for Concorde half a century ago.

The plan for Affinity, once prototypes have been built and tested, is that Aerion’s as2, a 12-seat supersonic business jet, will be powered by three of them. The as2 (maiden flight scheduled for 2023) will have a top speed of Mach 1.4. That is slower than Concorde, which could belt along at just over Mach 2. But ge reckons that, unlike the Olympus, Affinity will be efficient at subsonic as well as supersonic speeds, and

will meet existing and forthcoming noise and environmental regulations at airports. Under present rules, however, it too would be required to fly subsonically over land, although in time that might change. The design could also be scaled up, which Aerion says would allow business jets to fly at Mach 1.8 or more, and permit the construction of bigger supersonic passenger aircraft, should demand emerge.

■ Force majeure

Like all jet engines, Affinity relies for its propulsion on Newton’s third law of motion (to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction). The action comes from the mass of air drawn into the engine’s front opening being thrust out of the back at far greater velocity. The reaction against this action propels the engine, and anything attached to it, in the opposite direction—ie, forward.

In a simple jet the ingested air is first squeezed by a compressor, and then mixed with fuel and ignited in the engine’s core to create a fast-moving exhaust. Modern fan jets, however, use some of the exhaust energy to drive a shaft which turns a fan near the engine’s intake. That fan pushes a proportion of the incoming air, known as the “bypass”, around the engine’s hot core and out of the back, thus providing additional thrust. Bypass thrust is more economical to create than core thrust, but it is slower moving. A supersonic aircraft can therefore afford only a small bypass ratio (1:1 in the case of many military jets). In a civil airliner the bypass ratio (which, if high, brings not only efficiency but also quietude) may be as great as 10:1.

Affinity is a compromise between the two approaches, combining technologies from military and civil engines. Though its designers have not revealed the actual ratio (and much else, too, is secret at the moment), they describe it as a “medium bypass” engine, and have said that it has a bigger fan than any other supersonic engine. Nor does it require a thirsty afterburner.

Achieving all this has been made possible by advances in thermal coatings, engine acoustics and materials such as lightweight carbon fibre. Novel production methods like 3d printing have helped as well—as has the involvement of other partner firms, including Lockheed Martin, a giant aerospace company, and Honeywell, a producer of avionics.

A particular design challenge, observes Brad Mottier,

one of the ge executives leading the project, was that unlike conventional civil jet engines, which hang from an aircraft’s wings, Affinity has to blend into a plane’s airframe. The laws of aerodynamics require this if it is to perform efficiently. Blending also helps damp down the generation of a sonic boom. Sonic booms are caused by air piling up in front of various parts of the plane, particularly its nose, wings and engine inlets. This air turns into a shock wave that contains a huge amount of energy, which offends the ears when it reaches the ground. Blending engine and body, together with design tweaks such as a specially shaped long, thin nose, can muffle a sonic boom before it gets going.

To mute it after it has happened, and thus strengthen still further the case for letting the as2 fly supersonically over land, the aircraft’s control systems will constantly monitor nearby atmospheric conditions. By tracking these, aerospace engineers believe they can take advantage of a phenomenon called Mach cut-off. This involves directing the sonic boom in such a way as to refract it through layers of thicker air at lower altitude. Refract it enough and it will, in effect, be reflected—never arriving at ground level. Feeding the autopilot information about where the relevant layers are would let the plane steer itself in a way which maximized Mach cut-off.

Experts are now testing these ideas. In November, an f/a-18 fighter performed a series of supersonic dives over Galveston, Texas, at the behest of NASA, America’s aerospace agency. The agency was attempting to simulate the sort of muted boom that might be expected as a result of Mach cut-off. It installed sound-measuring equipment on the ground, and asked more than 400 residents to note down anything they heard. Some said they heard nothing, others that they noticed what sounded like a car door slamming.

In coming years, NASA hopes to fly an experimental supersonic jet aircraft around America in a further test of ways of moderating the intensity of booms at ground level. If successful, this might lead to changes in the rules to let future supersonic jets, like those planned by Aerion, cut yet more of a dash across the land. If they can do so cheaply as well as quietly, these new speedbirds should face a rosier future than that afforded to Concorde.

(Source: *Economist*)

Scientists creating a laser so powerful it could get a probe to Mars in days

An initiative called Breakthrough Starshot wants to explore another star system using ultra-powerful laser beams and wafer-thin spaceships.

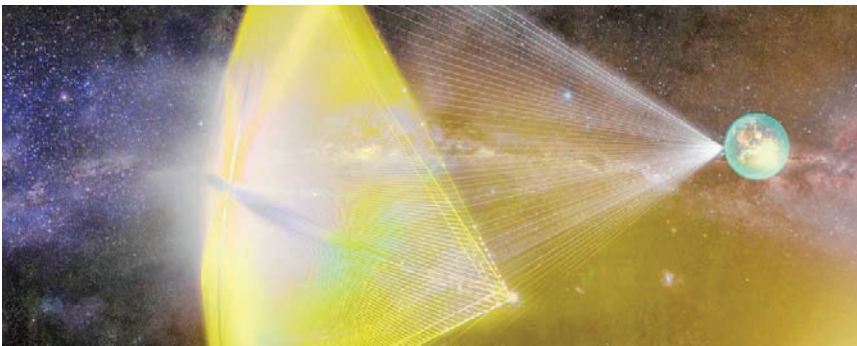
It's a goal that sounds so fantastic, you'd be forgiven for dismissing it as science fiction. But it's no joke, and the project's chief engineer says millions of dollars' worth of work is moving along without any major snags.

Starshot's founders and collaborators include the late Stephen Hawking, Harvard University astronomer Avi Loeb, and Russian-American billionaire Yuri Milner. The concept is based on more than 80 scientific studies about interstellar travel.

Milner and other Silicon Valley investors have even paid US\$100 million to cover the first 10 years of research and development.

Range of different approaches
"They had us go and study a whole range of different approaches of how would we send an object to (another star)," Peter Klupar, the engineering director of the nonprofit Breakthrough Foundation and its Starshot initiative, told an audience at the Economist's Space Summit on November 1. "We ended up deciding that the only credible way to do it today was building a large laser based in probably Chile."

The project hopes to propel roughly



1,000 tiny "StarChip" spacecraft toward Alpha Centauri, the second-closest star system to Earth, at 20% of light-speed (about 134 million mph). Each "chip" would weigh 1 gram or less.

Another destination under consideration is Proxima Centauri, which is even closer to Earth and may have a habitable planet. In either case, StarChips may start

careening out of the Solar System in the mid-2030s. Each one would accelerate to its insane cruising speed within minutes, thanks to the mighty laser blast beamed into space from Earth.

But Klupar noted that a 100-gigawatt laser "beamer" would be powerful enough to "ignite an entire city in minutes" if it were reflected off a mirror in space and

back to Earth.

Rather, if the plan works out, camera-wielding Starships could send humanity the first close-up photos of Earth-size worlds by the 2060s.

Starshot was unveiled in 2016, and Klupar said work on the project since then has moved right along.

This is all impossible
"You would think that this is all impossible, but we have folks at Caltech and the University of Southampton and Exeter University working on about 50 contracts on making all (of) this happen," Klupar said.

Some of the internal research frets about the potentially untenable cost of building a laser facility. Other papers analyze the concept of a "light sail": the device that would need to "catch" the laser beam and convert its energy into motion.

Some researchers question whether such a sail would fall apart when faced with the heat or mind-numbing acceleration (about 60,000 times the force of gravity on Earth's surface). There's also a risk that the sail could steer a StarChip wildly off-course.

The "sail is very thin. It's about 400 atoms thick, it weighs about a half a gram, and it's four meters in diameter," Klupar said. "I think of it as 'reflective smoke.'"

(Source: sciencealert.com)

StarChips may start careening out of the Solar System in the mid-2030s. Each one would accelerate to its insane cruising speed within minutes, thanks to the mighty laser blast beamed into space from Earth.

One of nature's smallest flowering plants can survive inside of a duck



If one duckweed lands where a bird relieves itself, it's capable of eventually creating a dense mat of duckweeds where there were none before.

Duckweeds are humble-looking plants whose tiny, brilliant green globules spangle ponds all over the world. Some duckweeds are the smallest flowering plants in nature.

Scientists working in Brazil have just discovered that one duckweed, *Wolffia columbiana*, has a surprising talent. In Biology Letters this Wednesday, the authors report that this duckweed can likely hop entirely intact from wetland to wetland by hitching a ride in the feces of birds.

Duckweeds can reproduce by copying themselves, so if one duckweed lands where a duck relieves itself, it's capable of eventually creating a dense mat of duckweeds where there were none before. Understanding how this little plant travels may help scientists develop strategies for containing forms of duckweed that have become invasive species in some environments.

To study how ducks and geese might be spreading seeds or pieces of plants between bodies of water, graduate student Giliandro Silva at the Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos in southern Brazil had been collecting and freezing their feces to examine later on. However, when he took a look inside, he was shocked to see the globes of whole duckweed plants, intact after having been swallowed and passing through the birds' digestive systems.

The salvaged duckweeds
Another sampling run to get fresh, un-

frozen duck feces allowed Mr. Silva and his colleagues to test whether the plants were alive. They placed duckweeds salvaged from three separate birds' feces in Petri dishes and waited to see whether they would grow.

The duckweeds soon began to replicate themselves. Seven duckweed globules were soon discovered in one dish where only one had been before, leading the scientists to conclude that they were unharmed by the corrosive acids of the birds' stomachs and perfectly able to grow. That means that researchers and conservation groups interested in how this duckweed spreads in its native environment and in places where it's an invader will have to take into account this unexpected mode of travel.

The traditional wisdom is that only seeds can be spread in bird feces because their tough outer casings can protect them from the dangers of digestion. But in recent years, Andy Green, a professor at the Estacion Biologica de Donana in Spain and one of the paper's authors, and his collaborators have found that the spores of ferns and even fragments of moss taken from bird feces are still viable, suggesting the phenomenon may be more general than previously thought.

He speculates that small round objects may have a leg up, as they have less of a chance of getting stuck in a bird's gizzard, and also that rapid digestion is key. If the duckweeds spent days in the bird, for instance, they might not still be viable when they emerge.

(Source: The NYT)

Scientists find stalagmites that could be 'Holy Grail' of carbon dating



Scientists found a pair of stalagmites that push the limits of radiocarbon dating. The stalagmites were found to be 54,000 years old and offered an unbroken atmospheric record.

Stalagmites found in a cave in China is being hailed as the "Holy Grail" for accurate radiocarbon dating by scientists.

A new study revealed that a pair of stalagmites inside the Hulu Cave near Nanjing, China has a seamless, chronological atmospheric record dating back from the last Ice Age. The stalagmites can refine the calibration of carbon-14, making dating of artifacts a lot more precise.

Radiocarbon dating, a method developed in the 50s, is used by archaeologists to date organic compounds accurately. It is based on radioactive carbon-14 which is continuously created.

While reliable, radiocarbon dating needs calibrating based on the level of carbon-14 in the atmosphere that varies from year to year. Trees and stalagmites can be used to calibrate, but the former only goes back to around 13,000 years ago and the latter can be a little unreliable. Sometimes, the measurement of carbon-14 in stalagmites are skewed by "dead carbon" that dilutes the substance.

Stalagmites discovered
However, scientists led by Hai Cheng of Xi'an Jiaotong University discovered stalagmites that have unusually low levels of dead carbon, allowing an accurate carbon-14 calibration way beyond the limits

of tree rings.

The "Hulu carbon-14 dataset provides a robust reconstruction of the atmospheric carbon-14 history beyond the current tree ring limit of around 14,000 years before present," explained Cheng. "This is a substantial contribution toward the refinement of the carbon-14 calibration curve."

The stalagmites have an unbroken record from 54,000 years ago. The team used a highly reliable technique called thorium-230 dating to analyze hundreds of layers within the stalagmites and establish a chronological baseline for a more precise radiocarbon dating.

Larry Edwards, a geologist from UC Berkeley, co-author of the study, and one of the people who developed the thorium-230 technique shared to Gizmodo that the stalagmites also contain carbon derived from limestones inside the cave. To make an accurate analysis, the team had to make corrections for limestone-derived carbon but found that the stalagmites have very little of the substance.

The "new Hulu record has less uncertainty and resolves previously unknown fine-scale structure," added Cheng.

For archaeologists, the discovery means they can date the organic compounds from 14,000 to 54,000 years ago more accurately and confidently. The data could also be of use to climate scientists who wanted to gauge atmospheric changes from thousands of years ago.

(Source: Tech Times)

Researchers use jiggly Jell-O to make powerful new hydrogen fuel catalyst

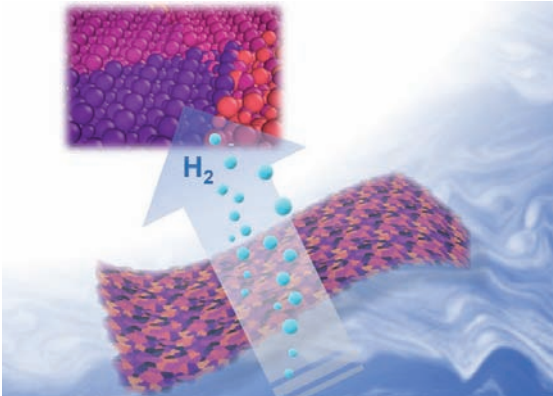
A cheap and effective new catalyst developed by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, can generate hydrogen fuel from water just as efficiently as platinum, currently the best -- but also most expensive -- water-splitting catalyst out there.

The catalyst, which is composed of nanometer-thin sheets of metal carbide, is manufactured using a self-assembly process that relies on a surprising ingredient: gelatin, the material that gives Jell-O its jiggle.

"Platinum is expensive, so it would be desirable to find other alternative materials to replace it," said senior author Liwei Lin, professor of mechanical engineering at UC Berkeley. "We are actually using something similar to the Jell-O that you can eat as the foundation, and mixing it with some of the abundant earth elements to create an inexpensive new material for important catalytic reactions."

Zap of electricity
A zap of electricity can break apart the strong bonds that tie water molecules together, creating oxygen and hydrogen gas, the latter of which is an extremely valuable source of energy for powering hydrogen fuel cells. Hydrogen gas can also be used to help store energy from renewable yet intermittent energy sources like solar and wind power, which produce excess electricity when the sun shines or when the wind blows, but which go dormant on rainy or calm days.

But simply sticking an electrode in a glass of water is



an extremely inefficient method of generating hydrogen gas. For the past 20 years, scientists have been searching for catalysts that can speed up this reaction, making it practical for large-scale use.

The "traditional way of using water gas to generate hydrogen still dominates in industry. However, this method produces carbon dioxide as byproduct," said first author Xining Zang, who conducted the research as a graduate student in mechanical engineering at UC Berkeley.

To create the catalyst, the researchers followed a recipe nearly as simple as making Jell-O from a box. They mixed

gelatin and a metal ion -- either molybdenum, tungsten or cobalt -- with water, and then let the mixture dry.

"We believe that as gelatin dries, it self-assembles layer by layer," Lin said. The "metal ion is carried by the gelatin, so when the gelatin self-assembles, your metal ion is also arranged into these flat layers, and these flat sheets are what give Jell-O its characteristic mirror-like surface."

Sheets of metal carbide
Heating the mixture to 600 degrees Celsius triggers the metal ion to react with the carbon atoms in the gelatin, forming large, nanometer-thin sheets of metal carbide. The unreacted gelatin burns away.

The researchers tested the efficiency of the catalysts by placing them in water and running an electric current through them. When stacked up against each other, molybdenum carbide split water the most efficiently, followed by tungsten carbide and then cobalt carbide, which didn't form thin layers as well as the other two. Mixing molybdenum ions with a small amount of cobalt boosted the performance even more.

"It is possible that other forms of carbide may provide even better performance," Lin said.

The two-dimensional shape of the catalyst is one of the reasons why it is so successful. That is because the water has to be in contact with the surface of the catalyst in order to do its job, and the large surface area of the sheets mean that the metal carbides are extremely efficient for their weight.

(Source: eurekaalert.org)

See a passing comet today

Today, December 16, the comet known as 46P/Wirtanen will make one of the 10 closest comet flybys of Earth in 70 years, and you may even be able to see it without a telescope.

Although the approach will be a distant 7.1 million miles (11.4 million kilometers, or 30 lunar distances) from Earth, it's still a fairly rare opportunity. "This will be the closest comet Wirtanen has come to Earth for centuries and the closest it will come to Earth for centuries," said Paul Chodas, manager of the Center for Near-Earth Object Studies at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California. What's more, Chodas said, "This could be one of the brightest comets in years, offering astronomers an important opportunity to study a comet up close with ground-based telescopes, both optical and radar."



Comet Wirtanen has already been visible in larger amateur telescopes, and while the brightness of comets is notoriously difficult to predict, there is the possibility that during its close approach comet Wirtanen could be visible with binoculars or to the naked eye.

Astronomer Carl Wirtanen discovered the comet in 1948 at Lick Observatory on Mt. Hamilton in Santa Clara County, California. With a width of 0.7 miles (1.1 kilometers), 46P/Wirtanen orbits the Sun fairly quickly for a comet - once every 5.4 years - making it a short-period comet. (Long-period comets, on the other hand, have orbital periods greater than 200 years.) At the time of closest approach, the comet will appear to be located in the constellation Taurus close to the Pleiades.

An observation campaign is underway to take advantage of the close approach for detailed scientific study of the properties of this "hyperactive" comet, which emits more water than expected, given its relatively small nucleus. The campaign, led by the University of Maryland, has worldwide participation across the professional and amateur astronomical communities.

(Source: phys.org)

Parker solar probe beams back data from the sun's corona

NASA's Parker Solar Probe set a record when it launched earlier this year as the fastest spacecraft in history with a top speed of around 430,000 miles per hour. It's not done making history, though. Parker has already completed its first flyby of the sun's corona, and NASA says the probe's early performance is everything the team could have hoped for.

Parker is an important step for NASA, which has wanted to study the sun's corona up-close for decades. However, the technology to protect a probe in that environment didn't exist until recently. It's counterintuitive, but the corona of ionized plasma around the sun is much hotter than the surface of the star itself. NASA estimates the corona is around one million Kelvin, 300 times hotter than the surface.

NASA developed an advanced heat shield consisting of 4.5-inch carbon composite foam between two carbon fiber sheets to keep Parker safe, but it was impossible to know with complete certainty how it would perform until the probe reached our local star. Nour Raouafi, Parker Solar Probe project scientist at Johns Hopkins University says the spacecraft is performing "better than expected" after its first pass through the corona.

Parker made the pass through the corona between Oct. 31st and Nov. 11th. Researchers were happy to see that Parker could remain in the same pocket of plasma for several days during its transit, which means it can gather more data than we can on Earth. As the sun rotates, the plasma around it gets dragged along with it, so remotely monitoring the structures over time is tricky. The heat shield that kept Parker from melting also interferes with its data transmission, so it will take another few orbits for Parker to return all its new data.

(Source: extremetech.com)

Ingestible capsule can be controlled wirelessly, scientist suggests

Researchers have designed an ingestible capsule that can be controlled using Bluetooth wireless technology. Their capsule, which can be customized to deliver drugs, sense environmental conditions, or a combination of those functions, can reside in the stomach for at least a month, transmitting information and responding to instructions from a user's smartphone.

Researchers at MIT, Draper, and Brigham and Women's Hospital have designed an ingestible capsule that can be controlled using Bluetooth wireless technology. The capsule, which can be customized to deliver drugs, sense environmental conditions, or both, can reside in the stomach for at least a month, transmitting information and responding to instructions from a user's smartphone.

The capsules, manufactured using 3-D-printing technology, could be deployed to deliver drugs to treat a variety of diseases, particularly in cases where drugs must be taken over a long period of time. They could also be designed to sense infections, allergic reactions, or other events, and then release a drug in response.

"Our system could provide closed-loop monitoring and treatment, whereby a signal can help guide the delivery of a drug or tuning the dose of a drug," says Giovanni Traverso, a visiting scientist in MIT's Department of Mechanical Engineering, where he will be joining the faculty in 2019.

These devices could also be used to communicate with other wearable and implantable medical devices, which could pool information to be communicated to the patient's or doctor's smartphone.

"We are excited about this demonstration of 3-D printing and of how ingestible technologies can help people through novel devices that facilitate mobile health applications," says Robert Langer, the David H. Koch Institute Professor and a member of MIT's Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research.

Langer and Traverso are the senior authors of the study, which appears in the Dec. 13 issue of Advanced Materials Technologies. Yong Lin Kong, a former MIT postdoc who is now an assistant professor at the University of Utah, is the paper's lead author.

(Source: sciencedaily.com)

Need for insect pollinator conservation to secure future of global agriculture forestry, apiculture industries, food security

By S. K. Basu and P. Zandi

Insect pollinators (honeybees, native bees, moths and butterflies, some species of beetles and flies) helping in the natural (biological cross pollination of crops around the globe are showing an alarming sign of population decline.

The worst impacted groups being the honeybees and native bees (indigenous bees). Several natural and anthropogenic factors are responsible for this gradual decline in the natural insect pollinator populations and include



different biotic and abiotic diseases of the insects (particularly honeybees), unrestricted and non-judicious over application of agricultural chemicals, industrial pollution, climate change, lack of adequate and suitable melliferous flora for pollinator insects to forage and collect nectar and pollens throughout the year to mention only a handful.

Since a vast majority of our food and industrial crops, vegetables and forest tree species are exclusively dependent on natural insect pollinators for their pollination services; the loss of insect pollinators is alarming news with respect to global food security. Furthermore, both global crop production (agriculture), ecosystem management (forestry) and honey production (apiculture) are dependent on a wide diversity of natural insect pollinators.

Loss of valuable, farmer friendly pollinator insects are therefore a serious blow both to our natural ecosystems as well as economy. Conserving honeybees will help stabilizing the global apiculture industry without rapid fluctuations in pricing, expansion of global market share and provide customers with quality honey and value added products like organic honey, flavoured honey, neutraceutical honey and commercial beeswax that can be used industrially for manufacturing other products dependent on these natural resources.

Establishing bee/pollinator habitats around bee farm with diverse pollinator attracting indigenous melliferous plants and/or crops can help building sustainable populations of honeybees, native bees and other friendly pollinator insects by providing them with crops for foraging and nutritive purposes. Therefore, conservation of natural insect pollinators should be a global priority to secure the future of agriculture, forestry and apiculture industries; and to ensure global food security to prevent yield loss in crops pollinating food crops around the globe.

LEARN ENGLISH

I Need More Time

A: So, Casey, how are things going with the photos for the **press kit**?

B: Yeah, **I've been meaning** to talk to you about that. I might need to ask for an **extension** on that **deadline**.

A: You've had over a month to get this **finalized**! Why are things **delayed**?

B: Well, the thing is, we **ran into** a lot of problems...

A: I'm not looking for excuses here. I just want to get this finished on time!

B: I know, and I apologize for the delay. But some things were just **beyond my control**. I had trouble booking the photographer, and then Michael was sick for three weeks, so I couldn't include him in the photos, and the design team lost all the files, so I had to redo the pictures.

A: I'm not going to **put this off** any longer, Casey! I want those photos ASAP!

■ Key vocabulary

press kit: group of photos, documents, articles, and information about a company given to reporters, newspapers, magazines, etc.

I've been meaning to: intend, plan to do something

extension: make a deadline longer, extra time to do something

deadline: the date when something must be finished

finalize: finish, decide on all the details

delay: late

run into: meet or encounter

beyond someone's control: not able to control something

put (something) off: plan to do something later

■ Supplementary vocabulary

due: the date when something must be finished or happen

postpone: not do something now that should be done; do something later procrastinate

behind: late with a project or things you have to do

hold up: delay or slow something

tight deadline: a deadline that is really difficult to meet
(Source: rlanguage.com)



Without water,
everything
withers

Iran imposing stricter rules on GM foods

ENVIRONMENT d e s k **TEHRAN** — Iran's Food and Drug Administration is forcing harsher rules on labelling genetically modified (GM) food products, ISNA news agency reported on Saturday.

As per a new regulation issued by the National Council of Biosafety in the [Iranian calendar] month of Aban (October 23-November 21) all GM ingredients in food products must be mentioned on the labels, Vahid Mofid an official with the Food and Drug Administration has said.

Therefore, from now on food products such as soya, corn, rapeseed and cottonseed which are normally GM should be labeled, Mofid explained.

Those producers who claims to manufacture non-GM organisms should fill out special form and in order to validate their claim health and safety inspector will randomly test their products from time to time, he added.

GM products are the subject of heated, growing debate which have sparked a lot of controversies over the past few years in the country.

On December 12, chief of Department of Environment Issa Kalantari over a session at National Council of Biosafety criticized the "unfair objections" against genetically modifies products claiming that there are no definitive studies proving the dangerous effects of genetically modifies organisms on people's health.

Kalantari went on to say that "we should not intimidate people" with some articles and worrying them.

He also explained that insisting on do-



DOE chief explained that insisting on domestic production of crops would place a great pressure on natural resources such as water and soil and that's even more dangerous than consuming GM food products.

mestic production of crops would place a great pressure on natural resources such as water and soil and that's even more dangerous than consuming GM food products.

■ GM foods in the future

GM foods stem mostly from plants, but in the future foods derived from GM micro-

organisms or GM animals are likely to be introduced on the market. Most existing GM crops have been developed to improve yield, according to World Health Organization.

In the future, genetic modification could be aimed at altering the nutrient content of food, reducing its allergenic potential, or

improving the efficiency of food production systems. All GM foods should be assessed before being allowed on the market. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and WHO Codex guidelines exist for risk analysis of GM food.

GM foods are being produced at a lower price than organic foods and are believed to have a greater benefit in terms of durability and nutritional values.

Answering to the question whether GM foods are safe or not WHO explains that foods currently available on the international market have passed safety assessments and are not likely to present risks for human health.

In addition, no effects on human health have been shown as a result of the consumption of such foods by the general population in the countries where they have been approved. Continuous application of safety assessments based on the Codex Alimentarius principles and, where appropriate, adequate post market monitoring, should form the basis for ensuring the safety of GM foods.

It is quite natural to have a fear of what's unknown as not knowing how the genetic materials are actually being modified fuel the fear. Despite all existing guidelines it is not still possible to prove that GM foods are safe, however, the fear is also still theoretical.

Nonetheless, those consumers who are concerned with the health hazards of such products can choose organic products or at least try to learn more about genetic engineering and decide what's best for them and their families.

Iran's Rescue and Relief Organization to join INSARAG

SOCIETY d e s k **TEHRAN** — The Iranian Red Crescent Society's Rescue and Relief Organization will join the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG), the organization's deputy director Shahin Fat'hi has said.

INSARAG is a global network of more than 80 countries and organizations under the United Nations umbrella. INSARAG deals with urban search and rescue (USAR) related issues, aiming to establish minimum international standards for USAR teams and methodology for international coordination in earthquake response based on the INSARAG Guidelines.

In a collaborative attempt between the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Iran office, the National Disaster Management Organization, and the Embassy of Austria and with regard to the overriding need for training urban search



and rescue teams the first training program is underway at managerial levels in Iran, ISNA quoted Fat'hi as saying on Saturday.

Over the 4-day programs some 45 managers at Iranian Red Crescent Society, National Disaster Management Organization, and fire department will receive trainings, he added.

Mobile testing teams to run HIV/AIDS tests in high-risk neighborhoods

SOCIETY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Sixteen mobile testing teams will perform HIV/AIDS tests in high-risk neighborhoods, deputy health Minister Alireza Raeisi has said.

We have prepared a map of high risk neighborhoods in all provinces nationwide and identified places packed with drug addicts and people with high-risk behaviors, ISNA news agency quoted Raeisi as saying on Saturday.

People diagnosed with HIV/AIDS can also receive services at drop-in centers, he highlighted.

A drop-in center is a service agency for either the mentally ill, homeless people, teenagers, or other communities that offers a place where people can go to obtain food and other services.

He also went on to say that diagnosing women who are infected with HIV/AIDS virus is also a priority.

By identifying people who have caught the virus they will receive free of charge services, he said, adding that "we have identified 113 pregnant women with

HIV/AIDS virus in outskirts of the cities and with timely preventive measure 111 of them gave birth to healthy babies."

"We are also planning on running HIV/AIDS tests in 7,000 centers providing methadone maintenance treatment (MMT), so that 1.5 million people will be trained about HIV and we can also identify those who are also infected with the diseases," he highlighted.

MMT is a comprehensive treatment program that involves the long-term prescribing of methadone as an alternative to the opioid on which the client was dependent. Central to MMT is the provision of counselling, case management and other medical and psychosocial services.

Based on the latest data by UNAIDS 36.9 million people globally were living with HIV in 2017. However, about 9.4 million people did not know that they were living with HIV. 75% of all people living with HIV knew their HIV status in 2017.

In April, the chairwoman of HIV/AIDS depart-



ment at the Health Ministry Parvin Afsar Kazerouni explained that some 36,571 were diagnosed with HIV virus up to late December 2017. She further regretted that the number only constitute 40 percent of those who are actually suffering the disease and the rest are still undiagnosed while they might not even know they are having the infection.

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

A ← → ع

HIV/AIDS tests prior to football match scheduled

Prior to a football match between Persepolis of Tehran and Tractor Sazi of Tabriz at Tehran's Azadi stadium on Sunday afternoon, mobile clinics were scheduled to run rapid HIV/AIDS tests, IRNA reported.

Tehran Adolescents' Well-being Club for boys CEO Vahid Jahanmiri has explained that prior to the football match special vans, parked outside Azadi complex were scheduled to run tests on the spectators who volunteer to take the tests from 11 a.m. to 13 p.m..

The tests are free of charge and the results will be kept confidential, Jahanmiri added.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“-escence”

■ **Meaning**: state or process

■ **For example**: During **adolescence**, boys are sometimes very shy and lacking in self-confidence.

PHRASAL VERB

Have something against somebody

■ **Meaning**: to dislike or be opposed to someone or something for a particular reason

■ **For example**: I don't know what it is, but Roger seems to have something against women.

IDIOM

Not (one's) cup of tea

■ **Explanation**: not something one prefers, desires, enjoys, or cares about

■ **For example**: Thank you for the invitation, but long-distance cycling just isn't really my cup of tea.

آزمایش HIV قبل از بازی پرسپولیس و تراکتورسازی

به گزارش خبرگزاری ایرنا یکشنبه ۴ آذر قبل از بازی پرسپولیس و تراکتورسازی تماشاگران می توانند با مراجعه به کلینیک های سیار حاضر در محوطه ورزشگاه آزادی به صورت رایگان تست HIV بدهند.

وحید جهانمیری، مدیر عامل باشگاه سلامت نوجوانان پسر تهران گفت: قرار است فردا قبل از بازی پرسپولیس و تراکتورسازی، ۱۰ خودروی ون با عنوان (موبایل کلینیک) از ساعت ۱۱ صبح تا ۱۳ در فضای ورزشگاه آزادی مستقر شوند. جهانمیری افزود: تماشاگران می توانند به صورت داوطلبانه، رایگان و محرمانه داخل موبایل کلینیک ها تست HIV بدهند.

Paris in chaos as ‘Yellow Vest’ demonstrations rage into 5th week

Thousands of protesters took to the streets of French cities on Saturday in the fifth weekend of nationwide demonstrations against French President Emmanuel Macron's government, despite calls to hold off after a gun attack in Strasbourg earlier this week.

In Paris, police were out in force to contain possible outbursts of violence. But several major stores, such as the Galeries Lafayette, were open to welcome Christmas shoppers.

Numbers were down compared to Saturday last week, a police source said.

Teargas was fired at small groups of protesters in brief clashes with riot police near the Champs-Élysées.

Close by, a handful of topless activists from the feminist protest group Femen faced security forces a few meters away from the Élysée Palace, the president's residence.

The ‘yellow vest’ movement started in mid-November with protests at junctions and roundabouts against fuel tax increases, but quickly became a wider mobilization against Macron's economic policies.

Successive weekends of protests in Paris have led to vandalism and violent clashes



with security forces.

The Interior Minister said around 69,000 police were active on Saturday with a reinforced presence in the cities of Toulouse, Bordeaux and Saint-Etienne.

A police source told Reuters some 16,000 protesters had been counted in France, excluding Paris, by 1100 GMT, compared to 22,000 at the same time on Dec. 8.

In Paris, where groups of hundreds of

protesters marched in splintered groups in several neighborhoods, 85 had been arrested by around midday, according to a Paris police official.

On Friday, President Macron called for a return to calm in France after nearly a month of protests by the so-called ‘yellow vest’ movement against his government's policies. The demonstrations have hit growth and caused widespread disruption.

“France needs calm, order and a return to normal,” Macron said, after a meeting of European Union (EU) leaders in Brussels.

In a televised address to the nation on Monday, Macron announced wage rises for the poorest workers and tax cuts for pensioners in further concessions meant to end the movement but many said they would maintain pressure.

The government, as well as several unions and opposition politicians called on protesters to stay off the streets on Saturday, after four people were killed in a gun attack at a Christmas market in the historic city of Strasbourg.

(Source: Reuters)

Palestinians slam Australia's recognition of al-Quds as Israel capital

➔ The secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization Saeb Erekat also spoke out against the move.

“From the beginning, we've perceived the Australian government's decision to recognize al-Quds as Israel's capital as one wherein petty domestic politics steer irresponsible policies that contradict world peace and security,” he said in a statement.

“All of al-Quds remains a final status issue for negotiations, while East al-Quds, under international law, is an integral part of the occupied Palestinian territory,” he added.

Earlier on Saturday, the Australian government followed the United States President Donald Trump's lead and recognized the contested holy city of al-Quds (Jerusalem) as Israel's capital.

Trump announced his decision to recognize al-Quds (Jerusalem) as Israel's capital and relocate the U.S. embassy in the occupied territories from Tel Aviv to al-Quds (Jerusalem) on December 6 last year.

On December 21, 2017, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) overwhelmingly voted in favor of a resolution that calls on the US to withdraw its controversial policy shift.

Despite the vote, the U.S. went ahead with the embassy transfer on May 14, triggering demonstrations in the occupied Palestinian territories, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, Morocco and other Muslim countries.

Israel's crackdown in Gaza left over 60 protesters dead in the impoverished coastal enclave on that day alone.

Angered by Trump's move, Palestinian President Mahmoud

Abbas boycotted his administration, saying Washington was no longer qualified to serve as the sole mediator in the decades-long conflict with Israel, and that an international mechanism should be devised to replace the U.S. in the so-called peace process.

Al-Quds (Jerusalem) remains at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Palestinians hoping that the eastern part of the city would eventually serve as the capital of a future independent Palestinian state.

■ **Israeli army razes home of five jailed Palestinian brothers**

Meantime, the Israeli army has demolished a residential building owned by a Palestinian woman whose five sons have all been imprisoned by Israel.

The building, owned by Latifa Abu Hmeid, is located in the Amari refugee camp near the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah.

According to an Anadolu news agency reporter based in the area, Israeli soldiers raided the camp early on Saturday, surrounding the building before bringing it down.

Before razing the four-storey structure, the army evicted dozens of journalists and solidarity activists who had been inside the building in a bid to prevent its destruction.

Following the demolition, confrontations broke out between local residents and Israeli troops, with the latter using tear gas, rubber-coated steel bullets and live ammunition to disperse the crowds.

At least 56 Palestinians have been injured in the protests against the demolition.



Abu Hmeid's five sons are all currently imprisoned in Israeli prisons.

Saeb Erekat, Chief Palestinian Negotiator, told Al Jazeera from the Doha Forum event that this demolition could lead to more violence in the occupied West Bank and al-Quds (Jerusalem).

In recent days, at least five Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces - and dozens more injured - across East al-Quds (Jerusalem) and the occupied West Bank. Three Israelis have also been killed including two soldiers in a drive-by shooting on Thursday.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has faced pressure from right-wing rivals and Jewish settlers for a strong response following the shooting.

(Source: Press TV)

Serbia slams U.S., threatens Kosovo with military action

Serbia has threatened a possible armed intervention in Kosovo whose parliament on Friday overwhelmingly approved the formation of an army.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic denounced the United States for its support of a Kosovo army and praised allies Russia and China for their opposition to the move.

Vucic visited Serbian troops near the border with Kosovo, saying the decision has brought Belgrade “to the edge” and left no choice for Serbia but to “defend” itself.

NATO's (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) chief also called the action by Kosovo “ill-timed,” but the U.S. approved it as “Kosovo's sovereign right” as an independent nation that unilaterally broke away from Serbia in 2008.

All 107 lawmakers present in the 120-seat Kosovo parliament on Friday voted to expand an existing 4,000 Kosovo Security Force and turn it into a regular, lightly armed army. Ethnic Serb lawmakers boycotted the vote.

“This vote today begins a new era for our country,” said parliamentary speaker Kadri Veseli. Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci said the vote was “the best gift for the end of the year season.”

A U.S. embassy statement in Pristina promised to support “the gradual transition” to a force with a territorial defense

mandate and urged Kosovo to continue “close coordination with NATO allies and partners.”

Though it will take years for the small Balkan country to build its own army, the move which is supported by the West, specially the United States and the United Kingdom, has infuriated Serbians.

President Vucic called Washington as the “sponsor” of the move, saying that the US administration aims to “quash” the Serbs but that he won't allow it.

An adviser to the president, Nikola Selakovic, also threatened that Belgrade could send in armed forces or declare Kosovo an occupied territory.

Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic said his country will seek an urgent session of the United Nations Security Council over the move.

Late Friday, the Security Council held closed consultations on the format of a meeting, possibly on Monday or Tuesday.

According to council diplomats, Russia — a close ally of Serbia — wants an open meeting to be addressed by Serbia's president, but European countries demanded a closed session.

■ **Russia calls on NATO to disarm any Kosovo army**

Meantime, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavro immediately reacted to the decision, calling on U.S.-led NATO alliance to “take urgent and exhaustive measures



to demilitarize and disband any armed Kosovar-Albanian formations.”

Muslim-majority Kosovo, which gained independence back in 2008, was a former Serbian province.

It is currently recognized by 117 countries as an independent state, including the United States and most members of the European Union. Five EU members, Serbia and Russia, however, refuse to recognize it as a sovereign nation.

The decision to create an independent army has even prompted reaction from NATO, which has already 4,000 troops, known as Kfor, in the country.

The Western alliance's chief Jens

Stoltenberg called the move as “ill-timed,” saying it “goes against the advice of many NATO allies and may have serious repercussions for Kosovo's future Euro-Atlantic integration.”

The NATO chief said the alliance remained committed “to a safe and secure environment in Kosovo” but that it would “re-examine the level of NATO's engagement with the Kosovo Security Force.”

Kosovo's authorities promised that the army would not threaten peace in the region. “Kosovo's army will never be used against them (Serbs),” said Prime Minister Ramus Haradinaj.

(Source: Press TV)

Somalia uproar continues after former al-Shabab No. 2 seized

A third day of protests began on Saturday in Somalia over the arrest of the former No. 2 leader of the al-Shabab terrorist group, who has been a leading candidate for a regional presidency. Officials said at least eight people have been killed so far as angry supporters take to the streets.

The African Union peacekeeping mission in Somalia in a statement released overnight called for “utmost restraint” after the gunfire-fueled uproar around Muhktar Robow's arrest on Thursday in Baidoa, and it denied playing any role.

His arrest is seen as a high-profile test of Somalia's treatment of defectors from the al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabab, Africa's most active extremist group. Somalia's government welcomed the defection last year by al-Shabab's former spokesman but not his popular candidacy to lead Southwest state, which took some officials by surprise.

Robow was seized by Ethiopian troops accompanied by Somali police, witnesses told The Associated Press. He was flown to the capital, Mogadishu, a Somali intelligence official said. All spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to reporters or for safety concerns.

Some Somali lawmakers had accused the AU mission



of being involved.

Ethiopia's military, which contributes troops to the AU mission, has not commented. Robow's arrest could re-ignite old tensions between Somalia and neighboring Ethiopia despite recent diplomatic breakthroughs in the Horn of Africa sparked by Ethiopia's reformist new prime minister.

Saudis violate Hudaydah truce 21 times in 24 hours: Yemen army

Yemen's army, which is allied with the Ansarullah (Houthi) movement, says Saudi Arabia and its allies have conducted 21 airstrikes on Hudaydah over the past 24 hours in violation of a truce reached on Thursday.

Yemen's army spokesman Brigadier Yahya Sare'e told al-Masirah TV on Saturday that the Saudi regime artillery had fired more than 100 mortar shells at Hudaydah's residential areas in violation of the ceasefire.

The Saudi regime mercenaries also tried to infiltrate Hudaydah from the west coast, but Yemeni fighters foiled their attempt, he added.

On Friday, one Hudaydah resident told AFP that artillery fire could be heard in Hudaydah's south, while another local in the city's eastern edge heard an exchange of fire every 15 minutes.

On Thursday, the United Nations chief Antonio Guterres announced that Yemen's Ansarullah movement and the country's former Saudi-backed regime had agreed to cease fighting and withdraw their forces from Hudaydah.

Guterres said the ceasefire agreement would see “a mutual redeployment of forces from the port and the city,” with the UN playing “a leading role” there to facilitate humanitarian access.

The truce came after week-long peace talks between delegations from Yemen's warring sides in Sweden.

Mohammad Abdulsalam, the head of the Ansarullah delegation, said they had “made great concessions for the sake of the Yemeni people because Hudaydah is the last remaining corridor to save the country from this impending famine.”

However, there is no sign that the Saudis are going to stop their aggression against the innocent people of Yemen despite the ceasefire deal, he added.

(Source: Press TV)

Arab Parliament urges Arab League to reinstate Syria

The Arab Parliament has called on the Arab League (AL) to end its suspension of Syria's membership at the 22-member pan-Arab body, Egypt's state news agency MENA reported on Friday.

The Cairo-based body suspended Syria's membership in November 2011 after a series of protests degenerated into a foreign-backed militancy which has plagued the country to this day.

“The decision to suspend the Syrian seat in the Arab League was, in my opinion, a very hasty decision,” Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit said in April.

Earlier this week, head of the Russian National Defense Management Center Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev said Syria should rejoin the Arab League in order to help support the process of a political solution to the ongoing crisis.

Some Arab countries have recently stepped up efforts to normalize ties with Syria as the country's troops have been making sweeping gains against foreign-backed terrorists.

In November, Russian daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported that the UAE (United Arab Emirates) was negotiating the reopening of its embassy in Syria and return of its envoy to Damascus.

A source in Damascus said Emirati officials had been meeting with the Syrian government over the issue.

An Emirati diplomat, the source said, was based permanently in Damascus, while other officials made regular visits to the Syrian capital.

Government forces and their allies now control most parts of Syria while anti-Damascus militants occupy just small pockets of territory on the country's fringes.

Idlib and its surroundings are now the only significant area still held by Takfiri elements, with the U.S. and its European allies sabotaging the Syrian army's plan to liberate it.

The U.S. and its allies have repeatedly warned of an imminent chemical attack which they have used in the past to attack government positions whenever the Syrian army has geared up to retake Idlib.

On Thursday, the U.S.-led coalition purportedly fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorists said it will continue its operations in Syria.

“The Coalition mission in northeast Syria remains unchanged. We continue our normal operations, including observation posts in the border region to address the security concerns of our NATO ally Turkey,” it said in a statement.

The alliance launched its aerial assaults in September 2014 without any authorization from the Damascus government or a UN mandate. The attacks have on many occasions resulted in civilian casualties and failed to fulfill their declared aim of countering terrorism.

■ **Syria humanitarian crisis should not be politicized**

On Friday, Syria's UN Ambassador Bashar al-Ja'afari called for an end to the politicization of the humanitarian situation in Syria through providing false information and turning a blind eye to realities on the ground.

“The humanitarian crisis emerged only in the areas where terrorist organizations are spread along with the illegitimate presence of foreign forces,” he told a UN Security Council session.

Ja'afari also demanded that the Security Council assume its responsibility to immediately halt the U.S.-led coalition's “illegitimate” attacks and systematic destruction of the infrastructure in Syria.

He further expressed Syria's determination to combat the remaining terrorist groups in Idlib and other areas and expel all foreign aggressors from the country.

“The Syrian government, people and army have a very clear image of who is an enemy and who is a friend as Syria realizes well that combating terrorism is a war imposed by the sponsors of terrorism,” he said.

The war, he said, was launched to drain Syria's energy and press the enemy's unjust schemes “at the forefront the Palestinian cause” and push “the peoples of the region into bloody darkness, in which the extremist Wahhabi thought is its fuel.”

“Syria will fail all these schemes,” Ja'afari added.

(Source: Press TV)

Boca coach Schelotto leaves after Libertadores final loss

Boca Juniors have parted company with manager Guillermo Barros Schelotto less than a week after their defeat in the Copa Libertadores final by arch-rivals River Plate.

Boca lost 3-1 after extra time in last Sunday's second leg in Madrid to go down 5-3 on aggregate. It was the first Copa Libertadores final between the Buenos Aires rivals.

The final was twice postponed and eventually played in Spain because of violence caused by River fans in Buenos Aires.

"The best thing for Boca is to start the year making a change — search for a new coaching staff and start all over from scratch," Boca president Daniel Angelici told a news conference.

Schelotto, whose contract was due to end on Dec. 31, spent the majority of his 16-year playing career at Boca, winning three Copa Libertadores titles and scoring 86 goals.

"Despite not winning the Copa Libertadores, I leave at peace knowing that I left it all on the field," the 45-year-old former striker said. "This is the best decision we could have taken."

Under Schelotto, Boca won the Argentine league title for the past two seasons and currently sit sixth in the standings.

Among the names already linked with the job are Gustavo Alfaro, coach at Huracan, ex-Manchester United defender Gabriel Heinze, currently in charge at Velez Sarsfield, and Miguel Angel Russo, who led Boca to their last Libertadores title in 2007.

"I know the world of Boca and that is key," Russo told Fox Sports. "It's a demanding job because the club is one of the biggest in the world. I am cautious but I'd be delighted if they called."

(Source: Reuters)

AEK Athens to reimburse Bayern for ticket-price violation, Greek FA fined

Greek champions AEK Athens were ordered to reimburse Bayern Munich 32,880 euros (\$37,144) for a ticket price violation in their Champions League Game in Athens in October, European soccer's governing body said on Friday.

UEFA said its control, ethics and disciplinary body had ordered AEK to pay Bayern 10 euros for each of the 3,288 tickets sold to away fans "for the difference of the ticket prices between home and away supporters."

It also warned AEK over the ticket price violation.

The Greek team were eliminated in the competition's group stage. They lost 2-0 to Bayern in Athens on Oct. 23.

In a separate case UEFA fined the Greek Football Federation 10,000 euros for racist behavior by Greece fans during their team's 1-0 defeat to Estonia in the Nations League last month.

Pictures from that match at Athens' Olympic stadium showed groups of home fans holding up a banner with a Nazi symbol while others burned a Turkish flag.

UEFA ordered parts of the stands closed for Greece's next match at Crete's Pankrition stadium and a banner to be displayed there with the wording "Equal Game", with the UEFA logo on it.

(Source: Mirror)

Super-sub Sterling scores with first touch as Manchester City beat Everton

Gabriel Jesus notched a brace and Raheem Sterling scored with his first touch as Manchester City moved back to the top of the Premier League table with a 3-1 victory over Everton at Etihad Stadium. The Brazilian registered his first league goals since August with a cool first-half finish and a bullet header, as the Citizens bounced back from their first league loss of the campaign at Chelsea last weekend.

Toffees boss Marco Silva opted for five at the back to try to stifle the hosts' attacking power, but they rarely managed to subdue Pep Guardiola's men, with Leroy Sane and Jesus particularly menacing. Dominic Calvert-Lewin did reduce the arrears for the visitors just past the hour, but substitute Raheem Sterling - who had endured a tough week in the spotlight off the pitch - put paid to the Toffees' hopes of rescuing a point when he nodded in within minutes of coming off the bench.

The result means City maintain their formidable home record in the league this term and move two points ahead of second-placed Liverpool, who host Manchester United on Sunday afternoon.

Everton stay seventh, but could end the weekend lower if results go against them.

The Citizens were well worth their victory and never looked like losing back-to-back league matches for the first time in two years. Guardiola would have expected his side to put in a performance after their defeat at Chelsea, and he will have been satisfied with how his players controlled the proceedings against a tricky opponent. The win was a must to crank up the heat on Liverpool ahead of their clash with Manchester United on Sunday, and they duly delivered.

(Source: Eurosport)

Alpine skier Luitz faces losing World Cup title over oxygen use

Alpine skier Stefan Luitz stands to be stripped of his giant slalom win at Beaver Creek after the International Ski Federation (FIS) recommended he be disqualified for using an oxygen mask, the German Ski Federation said Friday.

The FIS opened an investigation after Luitz, 26, was pictured inhaling oxygen between runs during the December 2 race, which saw him claim his maiden World Cup title.

The German Ski Federation (DSV) said it had been informed of the decision to disqualify Luitz in an email on Thursday evening. It has 15 days to respond to the move.

"We have two options. Either we accept it, or we appeal," DSV's Alpine director Wolfgang Maier said in comments to AFP's sports subsidiary SID. The practice of using oxygen cylinders in competition is not prohibited by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) but it has been banned by the FIS since June 2016, a point specified in the federation's anti-doping regulations.

(Source: AP)

How Liverpool left Man Utd trailing in their wake



England's two most successful clubs Liverpool and Manchester United head into their first meeting of the season on Sunday at Anfield in very different form after wildly contrasting campaigns to date.

Premier League leaders Liverpool boast a 16-point lead over their historic rivals at the top of the table just 16 games into the season, with United languishing down in sixth and already eight points off the top four.

Much has changed since the sides last met in March, where a 2-1 victory for United took Jose Mourinho's men five points ahead of Liverpool on their way to securing second-place to runaway winners Manchester City.

Liverpool finished 25 points behind City last season, but now lead the champions by a point thanks to their best ever start to a league season.

Here, AFP Sports looks at how United have been left behind by Liverpool on and off the pitch in recent months.

■ Shrewd spending

So often dwarfed by the wealth of City's Abu Dhabi owners and United's vast commercial revenue, Liverpool were this summer's biggest spenders in the transfer market.

The arrivals of goalkeeper Alisson Becker, Fabinho, Naby Keita and Xherdan Shaqiri added extra quality and depth to a squad that made the Champions League final last season and built on the £75 million (\$94.5 million) January acquisition of Virgil van

Dijk as the world's most expensive defender.

By contrast, United didn't get the central defender Mourinho wanted in the summer and the disparity in both sides' defensive records so far this season speaks volumes.

Only Fulham, Cardiff, Burnley, Huddersfield and Southampton have conceded more than the 26 goals United have shipped, a massive 20 more than Liverpool's water-tight defence.

"I don't see another team getting close to that level of investment, a team that was a finalist in the Champions League, you have to

WADA granted access to Moscow lab and secret data



The World Anti-Doping Agency said on Friday an inspection team will be given access to a Moscow laboratory and data it has long demanded thereby removing the final obstacle to the Russian Anti-Doping Agency's (RUSADA) full reinstatement.

A five-person WADA delegation will travel to Moscow and be allowed to enter the laboratory and have access to samples and other raw data that threatened to derail RUSADA's conditional reinstatement if not handed over by the end of the year.

Access to the lab and data within that timeframe was a condition of WADA's September decision to reinstate RUSADA.

The Russian authorities must also ensure that any re-analysis of samples required by WADA following the review of the laboratory data is completed no later than June 30 2019.

"Gaining full access to the laboratory and the data contained within it was the reason behind the 20 September decision (to reinstate RUSADA) and it is satisfying that we are another step closer to realizing that," WADA Director General Olivier Niggli said in a statement on Friday.

"The raw data is the missing piece of the puzzle that will complement the duplicate LIMS (Laboratory Information Management System) database that is already in WADA's possession and help conclude WADA's McLaren and Operation LIMS investigations."

The WADA team led by independent expert Jose Antonio Pascual, a Spanish

research scientist and academic with 30 years' experience in anti-doping, is expected to require three days to complete the data extraction.

That information will be used in conjunction with the re-analysis of samples to build cases against athletes who cheated.

■ DOPING SCANDAL

The decision to open up the Moscow lab could mark the end of the long-running doping scandal that began in 2015 and rocked the sporting world, preventing Russian athletes from competing in two Olympics and world championships.

RUSADA was suspended in 2015 after a WADA-commissioned report outlined evidence of massive state-backed, systematic doping in Russian athletics, allegations Moscow has denied.

WADA had set a Dec. 31 deadline for RUSADA to meet the condition or once again be found non-compliant and face even tougher sanctions laid out in the International Standard for Code Compliance by Signatories.

Russia was banned from this year's Pyeongchang Winter Games but some athletes were allowed to compete as an 'Olympic Athlete of Russia', as long as they satisfied strict conditions that showed they had a doping-free background.

The International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) has, however, yet to reinstate the Russian Athletics Federation (RusAF).

(Source: Eurosport)

say you are a big candidate. You have to win," Mourinho said of Liverpool's title credentials before the start of the season.

■ Star players step up

United have still spent significantly more than Liverpool in recent years, but the difference is Liverpool's big investments are paying dividends, while many of United's star signings are struggling to even make it into Mourinho's team.

Alisson's spectacular stoppage time save from Napoli's Arkadiusz Milik secured Liverpool's place in the last 16 of the Champions

Olympics: Bankruptcy for USOC not an option despite lawsuits



The United States Olympic Committee (USOC) will not consider bankruptcy protection as it prepares to face lawsuits for failing to protect young gymnasts from the sexual abuse of a team doctor, chairwoman-elect Susanne Lyons said on Friday.

Every other option, including settlements, would be on the table, Lyons said, as the USOC deals with the fallout from a sex abuse scandal involving Larry Nassar, the former USA Gymnastics (USAG) team doctor.

Nassar was sentenced to up to 300 years in prison in late 2017 and early 2018 after more than 350 women testified about abuse at his hands and lawyers for a number of his victims have filed lawsuits against both USAG and USOC.

Earlier this month the USAG filed for bankruptcy saying that it was staggering under the weight of lawsuits filed by hundreds of women who were sexually abused by Nassar.

"I think we discussed all the potential options but if you are asking about bankruptcy for the USOC, that option is not something that is on the table nor do we anticipate that it would be," Lyons said in a teleconference.

"We are looking at all options which would include at what time it might be appropriate to enter into discussions about settlements or not."

Despite months of turmoil and upheaval Larry Probst, who Lyon will replace at the end of the year, said that USOC finances

remained solid.

Mohamed Salah is back on form and joint top of the Premier League scoring charts, while Van Dijk is a rock at the heart of the defence.

United splashed over £160 million on Paul Pogba and Romelu Lukaku, but both have been benched routinely by Mourinho, while £50 million summer signing Fred didn't even make the squad for their recent 2-2 draw with Arsenal.

The 20-time English champions also spent big in January by handing Alexis Sanchez reportedly the most lucrative contract in Premier League history, but the Chilean, who will miss Sunday's clash through injury, has scored just once this season.

In trying to warn of the threat United still pose, Klopp arguably offered the most stinging criticism of all on Friday.

"Of course I'm aware of the criticism but when we make the analysis and switch off the sound, it's all quality," said the German.

"There's a lot of quality; there's speed, there's technique, there's physical strength, they have pretty much everything."

"They still have (David) De Gea in goal. It's unbelievable. They have strikers — they can switch between (Marcus) Rashford, Lukaku and others; they have (Jesse) Lingard, they have (Anthony) Martial.

(Source: AFP)

Warriors rally to beat Kings, Antetokounmpo dominates Cavaliers

Stephen Curry and Kevin Durant combined for 68 points as the Golden State Warriors rebounded from an embarrassing loss to the Toronto Raptors two nights earlier to beat the Sacramento Kings 130-125 on Friday.

Curry made four clutch free throws down the stretch and Klay Thompson drained the go-ahead three pointer with 38 seconds remaining as the Warriors closed the fourth with a big run after getting off to a slow start in the quarter.

"We made some adjustments on the defense side of the ball late in the fourth," said Durant. "We were down 10 points with three minutes to go after that it was a pickup game so you have to just try to get a bucket as fast as you can and we got stops."

Curry finished with 35 points, Durant had 33 and Thompson had 27 points and nine rebounds for the Warriors, who outscored Sacramento 17-2 over the final three minutes.

"We got to be better. We can't have lulls like that," Durant said.

Golden State came into Friday's contest stinging from a 20-point loss at home on Wednesday to the league-leading Toronto Raptors.

Draymond Green finished with 14 rebounds and 10 assists for the Warriors.

Hiield scored 27 points for the Kings. Fox had 25 points,



nine assists and six rebounds. Willie Cauley-Stein finished with 22 points and 11 rebounds.

Elsewhere, Giannis Antetokounmpo recovered from the worst game of his season to match his career high with 44 points and the Milwaukee Bucks beat the Cleveland Cavaliers 114-102.

Two nights after being held to a season-low 12 points in a loss to Indiana, he was 14 of 19 from the field and made 16 of 21 foul shots.

"You've got to put that game in the past," said Antetok-

ounmpo, who also had 14 rebounds. "You put it in the past and move forward."

Milwaukee was missing two key players -- Khris Middleton, who was out with a sprained right finger and Malcolm Brogdon, who didn't play because of a sore left hamstring.

Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer wasn't surprised Antetokounmpo was able to step up and carry the load.

"Obviously, a monster game for Giannis," he said. "We kind of rode him pretty hard tonight. He was ultra-aggressive. He's a competitor. He wants to be great."

Also, Thaddeus Young torched his former team for 26 points and 10 rebounds as the Indiana Pacers overcame a huge performance from Joel Embiid with a 113-101 win over the Philadelphia 76ers.

Embiid scored 40 points and added 21 rebounds to become the first player in the league this season with at least 40 points and 20 rebounds in a single game. He is the first 76ers player to finish with 30 points and 20 rebounds since Charles Barkley in December 1990.

Indiana's Victor Oladipo returned from missing 11 games with a knee injury to tally 14 points and nine assists in the battle of Eastern Conference contenders. Oladipo especially made his presence known in the fourth quarter by draining some clutch jump shots.

(Source: France24)

IPL leaders Sepahan held by rock-bottom Esteghlal Khuzestan

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Sepahan football team moved back top of Iran Professional League after a 1-1 draw against Esteghlal Khuzestan on Saturday.

In the match held at the Ghadir Stadium in Ahvaz, Sasan Ansari found the back of the net from a set-piece in the 24th minute.

Meysam Karimi levelled the match from the penalty spot nine minutes before the interval.

“We could have scored more goals but our strikers squandered their chances. I don’t want to talk about the referee but I think their goal was not correct,” Esteghlal Khuzestan coach Karim Bustani said.

“We are satisfied with the result because Sepahan are a strong team and their position in the table shows how powerful they are,” he added.

Sepahan finished the first half of the IPL season on top of the table with 31 points over Padideh and Persepolis on goal difference.

Esteghlal Khuzestan, in contrast, sit bottom of the table with two wins from 15 games played this season.

The Iran league resumes after the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

The competition was scheduled to take place from Jan. 5 to Feb. 1 in the UAE.



2018 in Review: unstoppable Iran sitting volleyball



The 2018 Sitting Volleyball World Championships were the sport’s most important competition of the year, but they were not the only highlight.

■ **Unstoppable Iran**

Led by 2.46m tall Morteza Mehrzadse-lakjani, reigning Paralympic champions Iran continued with their worldwide dominance. They won the inaugural men’s Super 6 on home soil in the city of Tabriz following a 3-0 (25-21, 25-23, 28-26) victory over Russia* in the gold-medal match.

They followed that by claiming their seventh World Championships title after defeating Bosnia and Herzegovina 3-0 (25-18, 25-13, 25-20) in the final.

Mehrzadse-lakjani was named Allianz Athlete of the Month for July after a superb performance in the Netherlands.

Iran followed that up with gold at the Asian Para Games in Jakarta, Indonesia.

■ **Russia make history**

Despite being the reigning women’s European champions, Russia were not the favorites for gold at the World Championships. World champions China and Rio 2016 gold medalists USA were the strongest on paper.

But they upset all odds and won their first Worlds title following a 3-1 victory (18-25, 27-25, 26-24, 26-24) over USA.

■ **Royal approval**

The IPC Honorary Member Royal Highness Princess Margriet paid a surprise visit to the World Championships and joined the many orange supporters in the Dutch women’s team 3-0 victory over Rwanda.

China win Women’s World Super 6

The Chinese women’s team won the competition which gathered six of the world’s best female teams: China, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine.

On home soil in Chengdu, they beat Russia 3-2 (29-27, 25-12, 27-29, 18-25, 15-13) in a thrilling final.

China also topped the podium at the Asian Para Games.

■ **World ParaVolley Foundation founded**

World ParaVolley announced the formation of the World ParaVolley Foundation, a global organization which aims to develop ParaVolley, positively impact the lives of people with impairment, contribute to equity for the disabled, build an inclusive society and inspire people with impairment to be role models in their community and become the leaders of tomorrow.

(Source: Paralympic.org)

Kashima beat Esperance 3-2 to set up Fifa Club World Cup semi-final



Kashima Antlers scored three second-half goals to beat Guadalajara at the Hazza bin Zayed Stadium in Al Ain, and advance to the Fifa Club World Cup semi-finals.

The side from Japan will now play Real Madrid in the last four in Abu Dhabi on Wednesday, in a repeat of the final of two years ago.

Guadalajara were ahead in the third minute, when striker Angel Zaldivar headed past Sun Tae Kwon in the Antlers goal, after a mazy dribble and cross by Isaac Brizeula.

The Mexican side might have been further ahead by half time. Zaldivar came close to doubling his and his team’s account, but saw his shot saved by Kwon, before Orbelin Pineda struck the bar on the stroke of the interval.

Kashima might have been lucky to still be in the game, but they struck back pluckily after the break.

They levelled four minutes after the restart, after a rapid breakaway resulted in midfielder Ryota Nagaki turning in after a fine cross by Shoma Doi.

The Asian champions were in the ascendant, and took the lead from the penalty spot with a little over 20 minutes left.

Doi, the tricky Kashima midfielder,

was adjudged to have been fouled inside the box by Michael Perez, and Serginho, the Brazilian midfielder, made no mistake from the spot.

With six minutes of the 90 remaining, Hiroki Abe, a second-half substitute, curled home Kashima’s third – barely a minute after he had been shown a yellow card for a foul.

Guadalajara were given a penalty of their own in stoppage time, after a video review, when Jair Pereira was fouled.

Alan Pulido saw his penalty saved by Kwon, but he bundled the rebound in, via a deflection off Hugo Leonardo, the Antlers midfielder, in the ensuing scramble. It counted for little more than consolation, though, as Kashima went through.

The 2018 FIFA Club World Cup is the 15th edition of the FIFA Club World Cup, a FIFA-organized international club football tournament between the champion clubs from each of the six continental confederations, as well as the national league champion from the host country.

The tournament is being hosted by the United Arab Emirates from 12 to 22 December 2018.

(Source: the national)

Iran could help Qatar to deliver a sustainable 2022 FIFA World Cup

TASNIM — Qatar will face a difficult task in term of expanding the 2022 World Cup to 48 teams but Iran could help its southern neighbor to host the prestigious event far better than the world’s expectations.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino has recently said a majority of national soccer federations are in favor of expanding the competition to 48 teams, however the Qatari officials have yet to accept the offer with four years remaining to the event.

Infantino said a decision would be made by March, although it was still not clear whether an enlarged tournament would be feasible as it would be “difficult” to stage in Qatar alone.

Qatar has been locked in a bitter dispute with its neighbors Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, that has complicated the prospect of sharing

matches in an expanded tournament, however the Arabian Peninsula country has a good relationship with Iran.

Nasser al-Khater, deputy-secretary general of the World Cup organizing committee, has told The Associated Press they have not held talks with any other countries to share football matches at the 2022 World Cup.

Those countries, as well as Egypt, began a diplomatic and trade boycott of Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of supporting terrorism. Qatar denies the claims.

Regardless of the tournament’s size, finding a place to sleep will be at a premium. Qatar has some 25,000 hotel rooms, according to government statistics. FIFA required Qatar to have at least 60,000 rooms by 2022.

There are plans to make as many as 6,000 rooms on cruise ships available while also opening up any unused dwellings in Doha for rent before play kicks off on Nov.

21, 2022.

Qatar Airways have two weekly flights to the existing Doha-Tehran route and add three weekly flights on their Shiraz service in January.

The state-owned airline can also launch flights to Isfahan, Kish and Tabriz as well and it will be a good opportunity for the fans to travel to the Iranian cities as a tourist and wait for their team’s next match. Indeed, they will kill two birds with one stone.

Qatar has forged closer economic ties with Iran since June 2017 when neighbors Saudi Arabia and the UAE cut political and economic ties with Doha.

It will also be a good opportunity for Iran to cement the relationship even further with Qatar by helping the country to deliver a sustainable and inclusive 2022 FIFA World Cup tournament.

Australia’s Arnold not giving up Mooy

Australia head coach Graham Arnold on Friday said he has not given up on injured Huddersfield star Aaron Mooy playing at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 despite the Premier League club announcing he will be out until February.

The Australian midfielder, who has been in fine form this season, suffered a tear to the medial collateral ligament in his right knee in the defeat at Arsenal last weekend.

This led to Huddersfield announcing on Wednesday he will be sidelined until February in a blow to the Socceroos who defend their AFC Asian Cup title in the United Arab Emirates in January.

Arnold said Mooy was such a significant player that he wanted a second opinion, with their own physiotherapist travelling to Huddersfield to review the situation.

“We have agreed on this plan with Huddersfield Town and know that they are doing everything they can to manage Aaron’s injury,” Arnold said.

“However, with such an important tournament coming up for Australia we want to explore every option available to



give Aaron the chance to feature for the Socceroos in the United Arab Emirates.

“Of course, Aaron’s long-term career and fitness remains our primary concern and we will not rush him to return to match play before he is safe and confident to do so.

“However, we are also committed to leaving no stone unturned in our attempt to have him available for us at the tournament.”

An assessment of Mooy’s injury is due by December 21 with Socceroos medical staff then making a final determination on whether he can play at the tournament.

Australia are drawn to face Jordan, Syria and Palestine in Group B.

(Source: AFP)

Alireza Jahanbakhsh eyes first test against Big Six

Albion’s record buy Alireza Jahanbakhsh is hoping for his first start against one of the ‘Big Six’ as Chris Hughton weighs up his wing options for Chelsea.

The Iran winger has been building his fitness back up in training after six weeks out with hamstring trouble.

He could return to the reckoning for Chelsea’s visit to the Amex on Sunday (1.30pm).

Jahanbakhsh, signed from AZ Alkmaar in the summer for £17 million, made substitute appearances earlier in the season against Liverpool, Spurs and Manchester City before his full debut against West Ham in October.

He was beginning to establish himself in Hughton’s starting line-up when he suffered the injury at Everton last month.

In-form Solly March is sure to occupy one of the wing spots against Chelsea.

That leaves Jahanbakhsh, Anthony Knockaert and Jose Izquierdo competing for the other place.

Izquierdo was struggling for form before a knee injury ruled him out of last Saturday’s 1-0 defeat at Burnley.

That prompted a recall for Knockaert,



who made little impact at Turf Moor and was substituted.

Jahanbakhsh has limited opportunities to force his way back into Hughton’s starting XI before heading off on international duty with Iran to the Asian Cup in Abu Dhabi in January.

Albion also lose Australian No.1 Mathew Ryan to Asian Cup duty.

Top scorer Glenn Murray is expected to spearhead the attack against Chelsea after Florin Andone took his place at Burnley.

Hughton also has to decide on the extent of the role for midfield regular Dale Stephens, who returned from suspension as a late substitute in Lancashire.

(Source: The Argus)

Khosravivafa re-elected as President of NPC Iran

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Mahmoud Khosravivafa will serve a further four-year term as President of Iran’s National Paralympic Committee (NPC) following the elections which was held on Saturday.

In the election held at the Iran’s Academy Olympic in Tehran, Khosravivafa secured 46 votes out of 50 votes and remained for four years more in his position.

He has been president of NPC Iran from 2001 and will serve as head of the committee until 2021.

“We want to sit among the top 10 countries in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. We finished in third place in the 2018 Asian Para Games and we will do our best to come second in the next edition,” Khosravivafa said after the election.

“NPC Iran has improved a lot over the past two decades. We want to continue keep going,” he added.

Ex-Iran captain Afshin Peyrovani attacks Carlos Queiroz

PLDC — Former Persepolis and Iran national football team captain Afshin Peyrovani has heavily attacked Team Melli coach Carlos Queiroz after Persepolis and Pars Jonoubi match.

Queiroz had accused Peyrovani of abusing his trust in the time he was Team Melli director, saying Peyrovani betrayed the trust put in him by transferring the players to Persepolis.

The Portuguese has recently revealed that when he fell asleep in the camp, Peyrovani has negotiated with some players like Jalal Hosseini and Vahid Amiri to convince them to join Persepolis.

Peyrovani, who was suspended from all football activities for five years by Iran Football Federation, is recently acquitted of all charges.

“Jalal Hosseini is very popular football player in Persepolis and we should not lie to the football fans. I never negotiated with him to join Persepolis club at that time. It has nothing to do with me negotiating with the players when I was serving as director of national football team,” Peyrovani told reporters.

“I think Queiroz went to his room to sleep after receiving his salary for next several months. I was under no obligation to negotiate with the players when I was Team Melli’s director but I will advise all players to join Persepolis at the moment since Persepolis is the best club in the world,” he added.

“As you know, Queiroz is not a person who doesn’t know what is happening around him. He wants to bring down credit of Persepolis. Mr. Hedayati (Persepolis rich fan) always was there at the dinner time and it’s a big lie we negotiated with the players when Queiroz fell asleep,” Peyrovani said.

Asked him what he expects about Team Melli in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup, Peyrovani said, “I hope that we win the title but I know that it will not be an easy task. If Team Melli win the title, it will be a great honor for whole of the Iranian people not for one person.”

Iranian breaks nat’l record in world’s swimming contests

IRNA — On the fifth day of Swimming World Championships in short distance, two Iranian swimming representatives on Saturday morning, competed with their opponents, who were able to upgrade Iran’s national record 8 seconds in a distance of 1,500 meters.

Amir Abbas Amrollahi, a young and talented swimmer of Iran’s national team, competed with his powerful opponents in the 1,500 m.

He broke the record again in the tournament. The national swimmer finished the distance of 1,500 meters at the time of 16: 29.26 and upgraded the national record by eight seconds.

The national record was already registered in the World Championships in Canada by 16:37.69 by the same swimmer.

On the first day of the tournament, Amrollahi managed to improve Iran’s national record in the 400 m.

Sina Gholampour, the other Iranian swimmer, on the fifth day of the championship, competed in 100 meters and ended up with 00:50.47.

Vietnam edge Malaysia for title

Nguyen Anh Duc’s sixth minute strike secured Vietnam their second AFF Cup crown as they defeated Malaysia 1-0 in the second leg of the final at the My Dinh Stadium on Saturday to lift the regional crown 3-2 on aggregate.

Vietnam deserved to win but Malaysia gave the second leg of the final their all despite the odds being stacked against them after the first leg ended 2-2 on Tuesday.

Vietnam created problems for Malaysia early on as the visitors were made to chase shadows in the opening minutes and the Golden Dragons were rewarded for their aggression.

Park Hang-seo’s men took advantage of the gaps in the Malaysian defense when Nguyen Quang Hai picked out an unmarked Nguyen Anh Duc in the six-yard box who scrambled the ball home to the delight of the home crowd.

Malaysia almost equalized four minutes later when Mohamadou Sumareh’s backheel beat Vietnam custodian Dang Van Lam but missed the target.

Vietnam could have doubled their advantage in the 33rd minute but Do Hung Dung’s effort from outside the box was dealt by Malaysia goalkeeper Farizal Marlias.

A minute before half-time, Harimau Malaya saw their best effort of the night denied by a top-drawer save from Dang following Syahmi Safari’s strike from inside the penalty box.

Malaysia started the second half with purpose, as they chased the equaliser but Dang showed why Vietnam had the best defence in the tournament when he kept out Sumareh’s header from close range in the 50th minute, following a corner.

Tan Cheng Hoe’s men threw everything the had but Dang was at his best again to deny Safawi Rasid’s free-kick four minutes later as Vietnam continued to frustrate their opponents.

Malaysia continued to press but the goal remained elusive for Cheng Hoe’s side as Vietnam stayed cool under pressure to hold on for the win.

Up next for Vietnam, who have enjoyed a stellar year after emerging runners-up in the AFC U23 Championship 2018, is the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019.

(Source: the-afc)

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GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Mix with people properly, so that they weep for you when you die, and show you affection and fight your enemy when you are alive.

Imam Ali (AS)

Sofia MENAR festival to review new Iranian cinema

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — Six Iranian films will be reviewed at the 11th edition of the Sofia MENAR Film Festival in a special section dedicated to modern Iranian cinema. “Appendix” by Hossein Namazi, “Leaf of Life” by Ebrahim Mokhtari and “Motherhood” by Roqayeh Tavakkoli will be screened in the section entitled “In Focus: New Iranian Cinema”, the organizers announced on Saturday.



This combination photo shows scenes from Iranian films “Leaf of Life” by Ebrahim Mokhtari (L) and “Motherhood” by Roqayeh Tavakkoli.

“Orange Days” by Arash Lahuti, “Sheeple” by Hooman Seyyedi and “The Dark Room” by Ruhollah Hejazi are also among the films. Iranian shorts “Chimney Man” by Meqdad Akhavan, “The American Bull” by Fatemeh Tusi and “Keder” by Abuzar Paknejad will also compete in the festival. MENAR stands for the Middle East and North Africa Region, and the festival spotlights top cinema productions from these areas. The festival will be held in the Bulgarian capital from January 15 to 31, 2019.

Tehran Quintet to perform works by Astor Piazzolla

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — Tehran Quintet will perform works by Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla during a concert at Tehran’s Vahdat Hall on December 22.



Piazzolla was a major Latin American composer of the 20th century who created a new tango that blended elements of jazz and classical music. The quintet features Soroush Sadeqi on piano, Mehrdad Mehdi on accordion, Alireza Chehreqani on violin, Mohammadreza Jabbar on contrabass and Farzan Falakdehi on electric guitar. The performance is organized in collaboration with Rooberoo Mansion, an art and cultural institute in Tehran.

Spain’s prosecutor accuses singer Shakira of tax fraud

MADRID (Reuters) — Spanish prosecutors filed charges against Colombian singer Shakira on Friday, accusing her of failing to pay 14.5 million euros in tax (\$16.3 million) in the country where her Spanish footballer partner plays. The charges were filed in the Catalonia region, where the singer is a regular presence at matches of her partner Gerard Pique’s team, Barcelona. She was accused of failing to pay tax on income earned from 2012-2014, when the prosecutors say she lived there. Representatives of Shakira said in a statement that the singer did not live in Spain until 2015, and has met all of her tax obligations to Spanish authorities. The “Hips Don’t Lie” singer and Pique have been a couple since the start of the decade and have two children. It is the latest case of a high-profile foreigner with links to top level Spanish soccer being accused of avoiding tax while living there. Earlier investigations looked into Pique’s Argentinian Barcelona teammate Lionel Messi and Portuguese international Cristiano Ronaldo, who left Real Madrid for Juventus this year.

National Orchestra to perform in memory of Ali Tajvidi

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — The National Orchestra will go on stage at Tehran’s Vahdat Hall on Thursday to perform a concert in memory of composer Ali Tajvidi (1919-2006).

Speaking to the reporters on Saturday, vocalist Ali-Asghar Shahzeidi said that he along with singer Hossein Alishapur will accompany the orchestra during the performance. “I’m very happy that the National Orchestra plans to put on a concert in memory of master Tajvidi,” said Shahzeidi who had worked with Tajvidi on several projects.

Shahzeidi, 70, added, “I’m currently in poor health, but I am deeply indebted master to Tajvidi and I feel very proud to have this opportunity to sing his compositions.”

“I hope I will not disappoint the audience [by my performance due to my poor health],” he noted. In 1998, the orchestra made its debut performance along with world-renowned Iranian vocalist Mohammadreza Shajarian as the founder, Farhad Fakhreddini, conducted it with works composed by Tajvidi.



Fereidun Shahbazian (C) conducts the National Orchestra along with vocalist Ali-Asghar Shahzeidi (L) during a rehearsal for the Ali Tajvidi memorial concert at Rudaki Hall in Tehran on December 15, 2018. (Honaronline/Mahdieh Babai)

Tehran Intl. Storytelling Festival to honor Mostafa Rahmandust, Ehteram Borumand

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — Children’s book writer Mostafa Rahmandust and veteran storyteller Ehteram Borumand will be honored with lifetime achievement awards at the 21st International Storytelling Festival in Tehran.

They will receive their awards during separate ceremonies on Monday and Wednesday, the organizers announced on Saturday.

Borumand, 71, who is also an actor, is the widow of actor Davud Rashidi. She began her career in storytelling on a children’s TV program in 1967 and worked as a storyteller and host of the TV program for 11 years. She left her job after the victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and recorded her stories in several albums.

She has also collaborated with director Rasul Sadr-Ameli in his



This combination photo shows storyteller Ehteram Borumand (L) and children’s book writer Mostafa Rahmandust.

2005 drama “I Saw Your Daddy Last Night, Aida”. Borumand made a cameo appearance in Asghar Farhadi’s Oscar-winning drama “The Salesman”.

Rahmandust, the author of “Zal and the Phoenix” who is also famous for his poem on the pomegranate, “100 Pieces of Ruby”, was born in Hamedan in 1950.

His credits include over 150 stories and poem collections such as “The Sky Also Smiled”, “I Like Children” and “The Story of Five Fingers”.

Fifteen storytellers, including Oliver Villanove from France, Flor Carnales Bastidas from Spain and Seyda Cevik from Turkey, will be performing at the festival, which will be running in Tehran from December 17 to 20.

The event is annually organized by the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults.

Movies from Iran to compete in Palm Springs festival

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — Three Iranian films will go on screen in the various sections of the 30th Palm Springs International Film Festival, which will be held in the U.S. city from January 3 to 14, 2019.

“Cold Sweat” by Soheil Beiraghi and “Orange Days” by Arash Lahuti will compete in the World Cinema Now section of the festival.

“Cold Sweat” tells the story of Iran’s national women’s futsal team that makes the Asian Games final in Malaysia. But at the airport on departure day, the team captain finds her husband hasn’t signed the document to permit her to exit from the country.

“Orange Days” is about Aban, the only female contractor in the cutthroat and male-dominated orange harvesting industry, who enters a competition to win a large contract.

Moreover, Asghar Farhadi’s Oscar-winning drama “A Separation” (2011) will be screened at the Palm Springs Canon section along with a number of the world’s celebrated movies, including “Amelie” by Jean-Pierre Jeunet from France, “Cache” by Michael Haneke from Austria “Cinema Paradiso” by Giuseppe Tornatore from Italy and “Memento” by Christopher Nolan from the U.S.

Over 200 movies from 78 countries will be screened at this year’s festival, which is one of the largest film festivals in North America.



This combination photo shows posters for “Orange Days” by Arash Lahuti (L) and “Cold Sweat” by Soheil Beiraghi.

Grammy Award-winning singer Nancy Wilson dies at 81



Jazz singer Nancy Wilson (L) and Oscar Peterson Quartet pianist Monty Alexander perform at the “Oscar Peterson - Simply the Best” memorial concert at Roy Thompson Hall in Toronto January 12, 2008. (Reuters/Mark Blinch/File Photo)

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) — Grammy award-winning singer Nancy Wilson, whose hits ranged from R&B to jazz and funk, died at her California home at age 81 on Thursday after a long illness, her publicist said.

Wilson, who came to fame as a torch singer in the 1960s, called herself a “song-stylist” and resisted labeling as a jazz singer for most of her career since she could cross many genres.

“She was one of those rare vocalists who could do it all,” longtime publicist Devra Hall Levy told Reuters. “Jazz, blues, pop and even funk. She did it all.”

Wilson’s “How Glad I Am” earned her a Grammy in 1965 for best R&B performance. She won more Grammys in 2005 and 2007 for jazz, along with a 2004 lifetime achievement award, the Jazz Masters

Fellowship, from the National Endowment for the Arts.

“Nancy gave her all for her fans,” Levy said.

A music critic once called Wilson the heir apparent to iconic jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald, and she was influenced by Nat King Cole and other legendary vocalists. Her first album “Like in Love” came out in 1959 to commercial success and she frequently topped the Billboard pop charts in the 1960s.

Jazz historian and author Ted Gioia told Reuters that the jazz world had lost a music giant whose supple talents brought her songs emotive heights.

“She was one of those rare vocalists who could sing any style, cross any genre but still put her unique imprint on the music. Her albums were full of gems,” Gioia said.

Musical “A Star is Born” leads film contenders for SAG awards

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) — Musical drama remake “A Star is Born” led a wide range of contenders for the Screen Actors Guild Awards on Wednesday, landing four nominations, including best movie ensemble.

The film will compete for SAG’s top movie prize in a diverse group that includes superhero movie “Black Panther,” romantic comedy “Crazy Rich Asians,” rock biopic “Bohemian Rhapsody” and director Spike Lee’s historical drama “BlacKkKlansman.” “A Star is Born,” released by AT&T Inc’s Warner Bros, features Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga in a classic story about a young woman trying to make it in the music business. Both actors were nominated for individual awards for their performances.

The SAG awards are closely watched as an indicator of likely Oscar success because actors form the largest voting group in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

In the last 23 years, only one film has won the best picture Oscar without being nominated for SAG’s top ensemble prize, last year’s “The Shape of Water.”

SAG award winners will be announced on Jan. 27 at a ceremony in Los Angeles.

“Black Panther” and “Crazy Rich Asians” were both heralded as milestones for diversity in Hollywood, which has faced criticism for under-representation of actors and filmmakers of color. “Black Panther” was the first big-budget superhero movie to star a predominantly black cast, while

“Crazy Rich Asians” was the first film with an all-Asian cast from a major Hollywood studio in 25 years.

“Vice,” which garnered the most Golden Globe nominations, earned SAG acting nods for Christian Bale and Amy Adams for their roles as former Vice President Dick Cheney and his wife, Lynne.

Other actors nominated for leading roles included Rami Malek for playing Queen lead singer Freddie Mercury in “Bohemian Rhapsody,” Viggo Mortensen for road-trip comedic drama “Green Book” and John David Washington for “BlacKkKlansman.”

In the running for lead actress were Emily Blunt in the musical sequel “Mary Poppins Returns,” Glenn Close for drama “The Wife,” Olivia Colman for British historical comedy “The Favourite” and Melissa McCarthy in “Can You Ever Forgive Me?”

Blunt scored a second acting nod for her supporting role in horror film “A Quiet Place.” Adams and Emma Stone also earned two acting nominations each.

In TV, Amazon.com Inc comedy “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” and Netflix Inc drama “Ozark” topped the list of SAG nominees with four nods each.

“Black Panther” and “Mary Poppins Returns” were released by Walt Disney Co. “Bohemian Rhapsody,” “The Favourite” and “Can You Ever Forgive Me?” were distributed by Twenty-First Century Fox Inc.

In addition to “A Star is Born,” Warner Bros released “Crazy Rich Asians,” while “The Wife” was distributed by Sony Corp.