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\$215m to be earmarked for Anzali wetland nano bioremediation

SOCIETY TEHRAN — A total budget of 9 trillion rials (nearly \$215 million) will be allocated to implement a scheme on restoration of the endangered Anzali wetland in northern province of Gilan by removing contaminants using domestic bioremediation nano-technology, ISNA reported on Wednesday.

Bioremediation is a process used to treat contaminated water, soil and sub-surface material, by altering environmental conditions to stimulate growth of microorganisms and degrade the target pollutants. In many cases, bioremediation is less expensive and more sustainable than other remediation alternatives. The scheme was proposed by researchers at Isfahan Science and Technology Town and approved by the Department of Environment, so a memorandum of understanding has been signed to revive the wetland. **→12**

'Resistance only way for Palestinians to regain their rights'

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on Tuesday that resistance is the only way for Palestinians to fight the Zionist regime of Israel and regain their rights.

“Israelis have never accepted the Palestinian people's rights in spite of the Oslo and Madrid agreements. So the only way is to resist and fight to regain their rights,” he said during a meeting with Ziad al-Nakhala, secretary general of the Islamic Jihad movement, and his accompanying delegation.

Rouhani noted that all Muslims should get united to help Palestinians in their struggle for their rights. **→2**

Lebanon 'close to forming government early in new year'

Following a lengthy meeting with Lebanese President Michel Aoun, Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri says the two sides are “determined” to form a new government early in the New Year as part of efforts to end an eight-month political stalemate.

Hariri, who was speaking at the presidential palace on Tuesday evening, said that a national unity government needed to be established in order to combat the country's tough economic situation.

“We have fallen behind - we must form the government,” he said.

The prime minister-designate said only one issue remained in the process, and that the two officials were working to resolve it. **→13**

In a first, Iran, Taliban discuss 'post-occupation scenario' in Afghanistan

By Syed Zafar Mehdi
TEHRAN — Putting speculation to rest, it was finally confirmed this week that the government of Iran held talks with a Taliban delegation on “post-occupation situation” in Afghanistan.

The announcement assumes significance for several reasons. The security situation in the war-ravaged country has alarmingly deteriorated in recent years, and the foreign powers led by U.S. have finally admitted defeat after 17 years.

Today, as the war imposed by the U.S. stretches into its 18th year, Taliban controls or contests around half of the country and launches complex attacks on a daily basis.

Despite unconditional peace offers from the government in Kabul led by President Ashraf Ghani, the insurgent group has refused to talk to them. However, it has been open for talks with important regional powers.

Taliban has maintained that the first condition for ending the war in Afghanistan is the withdrawal of U.S.-led coalition forces from the country. Although Donald Trump announced the partial withdrawal of U.S. forces recently, around 7,000 U.S. troops are still stationed there.

In recent months, after Trump appointed former diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad as a ‘peace envoy’, hectic negotiations have been reported between the Taliban and the U.S. in Qatar and UAE. However, the ‘talks’ have failed to produce a breakthrough.

Moscow also hosted a historic summit on Afghanistan last month which saw participation of representatives of many countries, besides a high-profile Taliban delegation. Countries like

India, which had maintained ambiguous stand on ‘peace talks’ with the Taliban, also joined the table. China has also shown active involvement in the war-ravaged country recently. Senior officials of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan have held two trilateral talks on Afghan peace process in recent months.

Pakistan, which is an important regional player and enjoys leverage over the insurgent group, has pledged its support to the peace process. Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has made many trips to Kabul recently, and participated in talks hosted by Moscow and Doha.

Iran, an important regional player, has always been the supporter of Afghan peace process. Although there had been reports of talks between Tehran and Taliban in the past but it was not confirmed. **→6**

Turkish-backed forces fully withdraw from Manbij front lines

Turkish-backed forces have completely withdrawn from the front lines with Kurdish-led fighters near Manbij in north east Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Wednesday.

Reinforcements that had recently been sent to support operations in Manbij withdrew to bases on the outskirts of the city, the activist group said.

The Turkish government has yet to respond to the report.

Turkey had been massing troops near Manbij after Syrian government forces deployed last week around the city at the request of the Kurds.

The strategic northern city on the Turkish border has been controlled by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces since 2016, but Turkey has vowed to dislodge SDF fighters there.

The military build-up followed President Donald Trump's surprise announcement that U.S. troops would pull out from Syria, leaving Manbij residents exposed to a longstanding threat of attack by Turkey.

■ Trump gives about four months for Syria troop pullout
Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump has agreed to allow about four months for the U.S. military to pull its troops out of Syria, the New York Times reported on Monday, citing administration officials.

The report came after Trump tweeted that “we're slowly sending our troops back home”, backtracking on his initial order for a rapid withdrawal.

Trump unexpectedly announced the troop pull-out on December 19, and U.S. media, citing military officials, reported the withdrawal would take place within 30 days.

In 2011, when the volcano of anger and outrage among Saudis erupted in country's eastern province, Shaheed Nimr was seen as spearheading the movement for radical political reforms and an end to marginalization of minority Shias. The protests spread widely and the Saudi rulers saw it as a threat to their fiefdom.

A year later, without an arrest warrant, Shaheed Nimr was arrested and put behind bars. According to observers, Saudi authorities chased his car until he crashed, dragged him out of the car, and shot him in leg. With blood oozing from his leg, he was taken to the jail. **→6**

Military officials declined the New York Times's request to specify when the departure will take place. The newspaper noted the security concerns and that officials are aware that Trump may change his mind at any time. **→13**

ARTICLE
Syed Zafar Mehdi
Journalist
from New Delhi

Remembering Baqir al-Nimr, symbol of resistance

“Either we live on this land as free men, or die and be buried in it as pious men. We have no other choice,” Sheikh Baqir al-Nimr famously said in 2011. He walked the talk, refused to pledge allegiance to the despotic rulers of his land, refused to accept humiliation, and chose to die with dignity and honor.

On Wednesday, people of the free world marked third martyrdom anniversary of this great flag bearer of resistance, the beloved leader of the campaigners of truth and justice, who laid down his life to uphold the lofty principles exemplified by his leader and the ‘master of martyrs’ in the desert plains of Karbala 1400 years ago.

On January 2, 2016, Saudi Arabian authorities executed 47 people, including Shaheed Nimr, on dubious charges like ‘disobeying the ruler’ and ‘encouraging, leading and participating in demonstrations’. The trial was marked by many glaring inconsistencies and authorities blatantly violated his right to a fair trial. It was a brazen, deliberate miscarriage of justice.

Shaheed Nimr, who belonged to Shia-dominated Awamiyah village in Qatif region of Saudi Arabia, was a vocal critic of the despotic Saudi monarchy. He exercised his right to free speech to voice his resentment over the decades-long discrimination against Shias in the Kingdom. He fearlessly raised his voice against the brutalization and criminalization of dissent in his country.

In 2011, when the volcano of anger and outrage among Saudis erupted in country's eastern province, Shaheed Nimr was seen as spearheading the movement for radical political reforms and an end to marginalization of minority Shias. The protests spread widely and the Saudi rulers saw it as a threat to their fiefdom.

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REPORT
Hamid Bayati
Tehran Times journalist

A spy who is no longer popular

Tzipi Livni, chair of the Kulanu Party (right), is not feeling well these days. She has started her career as spy in the Zionist regime, then entered Israel's political system and later became foreign minister; during the Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's term, she was named as the future prime minister of Israel. Now, she has turned into a figure that can easily be pushed aside.

These developments occur as the Zionist regime plans to hold an early election on April 9.

■ Leaving the left-wing party
Since the announcement of the early election, there have been three major changes in the Israeli political arrangement. The most dramatic one happened on Tuesday, when Avraham “Avi” Gabbay, the current leader of the Israeli Labor Party and the former leader of The Zionist Union, caught Livni off guard and sacked her on live TV.

During a televised press conference where the Israeli leaders were to react to political events, Gabbay called the Kulanu leader's loyalty questionable in the union and said he is ending his partnership with Livni.

Zionist union in 2015 was formed by the partnership of Labor Party led by Gabbay, and Kulanu led by Livni before the 2015 spring elections. Initially, Gabbay was supposed to be the main leader of the union, because the alliance would have Livni maintain her political position.

However, in the past four years, Livni and Gabbay were at daggers drawn for the leadership position of the alliance.

In the run up to the 2019 Israeli legislative election, recent polls showed that the Opposition party Zionist Union, could lose the 24 seats, crashed in the polls to only 9 to 11 seats. Last year, Gabbay resolutely accepted the political leadership of the alliance, and had to draw his horns and let Livni be leader of the parliamentary opposition.

A few hours later, Livni in a separate press conference said she welcomes the separation as “Gabbay didn't allow the partnership to be real.” **→13**



© Tehran Times/ Maryam Kamvab

Exhibition of Firuzeh Awards opens in Tehran

A retailer arranges carpets in a pavilion during the exhibition of the 4th Firuzeh Awards at Tehran's Golt-o-Gu Park on January 2, 2019.

The awards has been established by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to honor Iranian artisans in various fields.

The exhibition, which will run until January 6, is organized every year to promote Iranian cultural products.

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



'Iranian armed forces at full strength'

POLITICS TEHRAN — The Iranian Armed Forces are fully prepared and strong enough to confront any military threat, according to Armed Forces Deputy Chief Ataollah Salehi.

Speaking with IRNA on Tuesday, Salehi said the sanctions against the Islamic Republic have had no impact on the country's defensive power and the enemies are well aware of Iran's deterrent capability.

On stealth visits to Iraq by American officials, the general said the American officials' visits to their bases in Iraq are taking place secretly while the Iranian officials visit Iraq for Arbaeen rituals in the most powerful manner.



New member of supreme cultural body appointed

POLITICS TEHRAN — Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday appointed Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Saeed Reza Ameli as a new member of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, Mehr reported.

The council is a body based in Qom, and was set up at the time of Imam Khomeini. It was formed in December of 1984 and was in fact continuation of the Cultural Revolution Headquarters.

Most of the council's members were appointed by Ayatollah Khamenei. Its decisions can only be overruled by the Supreme Leader.



Iran not counting on 'economic' aspect of SPV: MP

POLITICS TEHRAN — A senior lawmaker said on Wednesday that Iran is not counting on the "economic" aspect of the special purpose vehicle (SPV), the European Union's initiative intended to protect trade with Iran in defiance of U.S. sanctions, Mehr reported.

The Europeans are scared of the U.S. and cannot set up an economic mechanism for Iran, but they are politically determined, and Iran will make use of this capacity to establish links with other countries in the world, said Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Chairman Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh.

The U.S. reimposed economic sanctions on Iran after it unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May.



Nasirzadeh: Enemy views cyberspace as most important tool against Iran

POLITICS TEHRAN — The enemy has waged a media war against Iran, chief of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) said on Tuesday, noting the enemy's most important tool to achieve its sinister goals is cyberspace.

"Today, the enemy is fighting the Islamic Republic of Iran using media, while cyberspace is one of its most important tools," Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh said, IRNA reported.

He further said since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Air Force, with the efforts of its skilled and dedicated staff, has fulfilled impressive achievements, many of which should be presented to the society through media.



Envoy says U.S., Israel seeking to harm Iran-Europe ties

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iran's ambassador to Tirana, Gholamhossein Mohammadnia, has said his expulsion from Albania was an American-Israeli plot to harm Iran's relations with Europe.

"Because of its low capacity and strength, the Albanian government could not endure the pressure and fell victim to the American-Israeli plot," IRNA on Wednesday quoted Mohammadnia as saying.

He emphasized that Iranian diplomats have always acted in accordance to international law.

In December, Albania's Foreign Ministry announced that it had expelled two Iranian diplomats suspected of "involvement in activities that harm the country's security."



Abbas Edalat: UK not involved in my release from Iran

POLITICS TEHRAN — Abbas Edalat, a British-Iranian citizen and a professor of computer sciences and mathematics at Imperial College London, has said the UK government was not involved in his release from Iran.

"With respect to my return from Iran to the UK, it should be pointed out that, during my detention and confinement, my family and I neither sought nor received any consular support from the UK government," Edalat said, The Guardian reported on Tuesday.

"In addition, the Foreign Office was only informed about my return to the UK by Imperial College London, where I work," he added.

Edalat was arrested on April 15 on security charges.

New chapter in Iran-China ties to flourish more rapidly: envoy

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iran's ambassador to China has said a new chapter in relations between Tehran and Beijing, which has coincided with the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution and the Chinese economic reform, will flourish more rapidly than ever.

"In addition to economic ties, the Tehran-Beijing cooperation in other areas is also expanding rapidly," Mohammad Keshavarz-Zadeh said on Wednesday, speaking with IRNA.

Describing China as a big and strong country which has great potential in different fields, he said Iran must avail itself of such capacities in order to develop quickly.

"The authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran unanimously believe that we can have extensive relations with China in the current circumstances and one of my duties is to take their views into consideration in order to make use of China's potenti-



alities," the envoy remarked.

Keshavarz-Zadeh, who was named Iran's ambassador to Beijing last month, also praised China for supporting the 2015 nuclear agreement, saying the Chinese played an important role in clinching the international agreement.

"China has always supported BARJAM (the Persian name for the nuclear deal) and it seems that such trend will continue... We hope we can reap the benefits of BARJAM with China's support," he stated.

Back in May 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew his country from the nuclear pact and ordered sanctions against Iran despite worldwide criticism.

Meanwhile, Iran has continued to comply with the terms of the deal, which was struck in July 2015 after years of negotiations between Tehran and six world powers, including the U.S., Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany.

EU will continue to save nuclear deal in 2019: Mogherini

By staff and agency

European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini has said that work to save the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, will be continued in 2019.

"In September — after a meeting with the Foreign Ministers of China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and Iran, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly — European countries have started preparations to create a mechanism to let our firms continue their legitimate business with Iran. The work continues in 2019 — to prevent a new nuclear arms race in an already unstable region, to strengthen the multilateral non-proliferation architecture that underpins our collective security," she wrote in an article titled "Twelve things to bring with us in 2019".

"In May, Donald Trump announced that the United States would stop implementing the deal negotiated by all global powers with Iran. A few minutes later,



on behalf of the other countries that negotiated and concluded the deal, I confirmed the international community's determination to preserve the deal and its implementation. Two and a half years after we reached

the deal, it continues to work and to guarantee the exclusively civilian nature of Iran's nuclear programme," she added in the article posted on her website.

In an interview published by Livemint on Tuesday, Mogherini said the EU is working with the rest of the international community to preserve the nuclear deal. "We are working, as a union of 28 member states and with the rest of the international community, to preserve a nuclear agreement that has so far been implemented in full, as certified by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 13 consecutive reports," she said.

Mogherini said, "We Europeans cannot accept that a foreign power — even our closest friend and ally — makes decisions over our legitimate trade with another country. This is a basic element of sovereignty, and it is only natural that this reflection takes place, not only in Europe but in other parts of the world, too."

Trump has threatened to punish Europeans if they have economic interaction with Iran.

'Is anything left for Trump to withdraw from,' Zarif asks



POLITICS TEHRAN — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has censured a move by the U.S. and the Zionist regime to leave the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO), asking if there is anything left for the two countries to withdraw from.

"After JCPOA, NAFTA, TPP, Climate Convention & ..., the Trump regime — along with the Israeli regime — today officially withdrew from UNESCO. Is anything left for the Trump Administration and its client regime to withdraw from? Perhaps from planet Earth altogether?" Zarif tweeted on Tuesday.

The U.S. and Israel formally exited the UNESCO on Tuesday.

The countries announced their intention to leave the agency in October 2017 after UNESCO countries voted to make the Palestinian city of Hebron a world historical site, according to United Press International.

The U.S. has been at odds with UNESCO since the agency recognized and admitted Palestine in 2011.

The U.S. and Israel stopped paying their dues to UNESCO as a result. Both lost their voting rights in 2013.

Israel, whose occupation of Palestine violates international law, has also been angered by the recognition of several historical sites as Palestinian, with the Israeli regime claiming them as its own.

Defense budget to increase 21 percent: Hatami



POLITICS TEHRAN — The Iranian year (beginning on March 21) has envisioned a 21% increase for the development of defense sector, Defense Minister Amir Hatami said on Wednesday.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet session, Brigadier General Hatami said he had submitted a report to the cabinet on the progress of defense projects, particularly those related to the missile program, Mehr reported.

The measures taken in the Defense Ministry are aimed to implement the plans put forward by the parliament,

he said, adding that the ministry is progressing rapidly in its projects.

Hatami added that the defense ministry was able to realize what it had predicted to accomplish this year.

President Hassan Rouhani submitted the next year's budget bill to the parliament on Dec. 25, saying that the bill has taken the impact of the U.S. sanctions on Iran into consideration.

Head of Planning and Budget Organization Mohammad Bagher Nobakht also said that the government has been required to spend 5 percent of the general budget for developing the country's defense capabilities.

Rouhani: Trump's secret Iraq visit exposed defeat

POLITICS TEHRAN — President Hassan Rouhani says Donald Trump's recent tiptoeing into Iraq was clear sign of the failure of America's agenda for Iraq.

"The fact that you sneak into a military base in the dark of the night... take some photos with a number of troopers, make a short speech, and then fly away a couple hours later... shows your defeat," Rouhani told a cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

"This means that you have failed. This means that the people of Iraq are malcontent with you and you dare not appear amongst them. You absolutely dare not [do so] in Syria, absolutely not in Lebanon, and no way in Yemen. So by which regional nation specifically are you loved?"

On December 26, Trump spent a few hours at al-Asad Air Base in Iraq's western Anbar Province but did not visit the capital Baghdad. A scheduled meeting between Trump and Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi was scrapped and they only talked over the phone.

Trump acknowledged the security concerns about visiting Iraq, saying it was "pretty sad" that he needed such secrecy to see U.S. troops.

"Pretty sad when you spend \$7 trillion in the Middle East, and going in has to be under this massive cover with planes all over and all of the greatest equipment in the world, and you do everything to get in safely," he said.

The visit sparked a wave of condemnations from Iraqi

officials, with some of them demanding the expulsion of American forces.

Rouhani added, "Since 2003, the Americans have been claiming that they have salvaged Iraq and Afghanistan; but if this claim is true, then why don't you openly make an official trip to see how the Iraqis would welcome you on the streets of Baghdad and Basra?"

"I hope these are lessons to be taken by the White House for the year 2019, and to stop interfering with the lives of nations, particularly the Palestinian nation, where they are constantly interfering. To take a lesson and act according to laws and regulations regarding the al-Quds [Jerusalem], which belongs to the entire Islamic world and all Muslims," Rouhani remarked.

'Resistance only way for Palestinians to regain their rights'

➔ Referring to the U.S. economic sanctions against Iran, he said that the Iranian people have proved that victory can be gained through resistance.

"We have no doubt that we will overcome enemies in this economic war."

He noted, "The Leader of the Revolution [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei] has stood against these plots bravely and the people are united in resistance and fight."

President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. unilaterally from the 2015 nuclear deal in May and ordered sanctions against Iran. The first round of sanctions went into force on August 6 and the second round, which

targets Iran's oil exports and banks, were snapped back on November 4.

'Palestinians won't abandon resistance until victory'

For his part, Nakhala said that in spite of all pressures and threats, the Palestinians will not abandon resistance until they gain victory.

He also praised Iran's supports for Palestine. Pointing to "the deal of the century", he said the U.S. and the Zionist regime seek to close the Palestine issue, however the Palestinians have resisted and will resist to prevent realization of the scheme.

Trump has proposed to establish a Pal-

estinian state with limited sovereignty over around half of the West Bank and Abu Dis as its capital and has called his plan "deal of century".

'Iran to continue supporting Palestinians'

During a separate meeting with Nakhala on Wednesday, Parliament Speaker Ali Larjani said that Iran will continue supporting the Palestinians and the Palestinian cause.

He noted that it is Iran's duty to support Palestine.

Nakhala thanked Iran for its supports and said that the resistance front will gain victory in the region.



Nakhala (L) shakes hands with Rouhani in Tehran, January 1

Cuba's Castro blasts United States on 60th anniversary of revolution

On the 60th anniversary of Cuba's revolution, ruling Communist Party leader Raul Castro blasted the Trump administration for returning to an outdated path of confrontation with the island nation and of intervening in Latin America.

Castro and his late, elder brother Fidel Castro led the rebel band that in 1959 overthrew a U.S.-backed dictator and installed a Communist-run country on the doorstep of the United States, setting the scene for decades of Cold War hostility.

At the time, their revolution inspired leftist movements throughout Latin America, but the celebrations on Tuesday came as the region is shifting rightwards, coinciding with the inauguration of Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro.

Some of Cuba's closest allies, Venezuela and Nicaragua, are mired in political crises, and U.S. President Donald Trump has tightened the decades-old U.S. embargo on the island, after his predecessor, Barack Obama, had sought to normalize relations.

"Once again, the North American government is taking on the path of confrontation with Cuba," Castro said in the southeastern city of Santiago de Cuba where Fidel Castro proclaimed victory six decades ago.

The speech by Castro, who stepped down as president in April but remains head of



the Communist Party until 2021, was part of a solemn, sunset ceremony in a cemetery where both Fidel Castro and independence hero Jose Marti are buried.

"Increasingly, high-ranking officials of this administration are ... trying to blame Cuba for all the region's ills," he said, adding that they stemmed instead from "ruthless

neoliberal policies".

Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton, said in November that Washington would take a tougher line against Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua, calling them a "troika of tyranny."

Clad in military fatigues and cap, the 87-year old Castro said on Tuesday that Cuba had

proven throughout six decades of revolution it could not be intimidated by threats. Instead it remained open, he said, to a peaceful and respectful coexistence.

Cuba's true battle this year was an economic one, he added, reiterating comments made at the national assembly in late December by his successor, President Miguel Diaz-Canel, who announced increased austerity for the fourth year running in 2019 in the face of a cash crunch.

"We need first of all to reduce all non-necessary expenses and to save more," said Castro.

A decade ago, as president, he introduced a series of reforms to liberalize and boost the centrally planned economy, yet it remains heavily state-dominated and bound in red tape.

A series of external shocks such as a decline in aid from Venezuela and devastation wrought by hurricanes have also dented growth, which is sluggish at best.

Nonetheless, the Cuban revolution is on a secure footing thanks to the transition to a competent younger generation of leaders such as the 58-year old Diaz-Canel, Castro said.

"It is opportune to express the fact that the Cuban Communist Party decidedly backs the words and actions of Diaz-Canel since he took office," Castro said.

"The revolution has not aged, it remains young," he said.

(Source: Reuters)

U.S. agents fire tear gas into Mexico at 'violent mob' near border

U.S. border agents launched tear gas into Mexico early on Tuesday to deter a group of migrants that one official called "a violent mob" from crossing over from Tijuana, according to a Reuters witness and the U.S. government.

Clouds of the noxious gas could be seen wafting up from around the fence at the border. One migrant picked up a canister and threw it back into U.S. territory.

U.S. officials said the group had attacked agents with projectiles but a Reuters witness did not see any migrants throwing rocks at U.S. agents.

Tijuana has become a flashpoint in the debate over U.S. immigration policy, which has been intensified by the recent deaths of two migrant children in American custody and a partial U.S. government shutdown over U.S. President Donald Trump's demand for \$5 billion in funding for a wall along the border with Mexico.

A previous incident in November when U.S. agents fired gas into Mexico to disperse migrants triggered a call from Mexico's government for an investigation, as well as international condemnation. Mexico Foreign Ministry spokesman Roberto Velasco said the government "regrets the events" at the border. He said Mexico "advocates respect for migrants' human rights, security and integrity, while calling for respect for laws on both sides of the border."

More than 150 Central American migrants approached an area of the border in Tijuana in the Playas neighborhood

near the beach late on Monday. Migrants said they thought security measures might be relaxed due to the New Year's holiday.

U.S. security personnel fired tear gas into Mexico after midnight as some migrants prepared to climb a border fence, according to the Reuters witness. During a second attempt, migrants began to pass youths and children over the razor wire along the fencing to the U.S. side.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security spokeswoman Katie Waldman called the group "a violent mob" and said they had thrown projectiles at agents who responded with "the minimum force necessary to defend themselves."

"Congress needs to fully fund the border wall," Waldman said in a statement.

'Cruel, inhumane'

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) said in a statement the gas was aimed upwind of people throwing rocks on the Mexican side who obstructed agents from helping the children being passed over razor wire.

The CBP statement said agents had not directly targeted the migrants attempting to cross the fence with tear gas and pepper spray.

A Reuters witness documented in one photo where a migrant had been hit by what appeared to be a gas canister.

Human rights group Amnesty International's deputy director of research Justin Mazzola described the use of

tear gas against migrants "cruel and inhumane" and called for an independent investigation.

The Trump administration is defying international law and orchestrating a crisis by deliberately turning asylum-seekers away from ports of entry, endangering families who see no choice but to take desperate measures in their search for protection," he said in a statement.

CBP said most of the migrants attempting to cross returned to Mexico while 25 people, including two teenagers, were detained. Thousands of Central American migrants have been camping at shelters in Tijuana since arriving in November after traveling in caravans across Mexico to reach the U.S. border, where many have hoped to request asylum.

Mexico's new leftist president, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, has sought not to antagonize Trump over the U.S. president's demands for a border wall. He obtained a pledge from the United States to contribute billions of dollars for development in Mexico's poor south and Central America in order to deter migration.

Trump has backed away from his campaign pledge to make Mexico pay for a wall, but just last week he threatened to close the border with Mexico unless he gets the money he wants from U.S. lawmakers for a barrier.

The United States has also pushed Mexico to house Central American migrants while they seek U.S. asylum.

(Source: AP)

Macron gov. on tenterhooks as new tax regime takes effect

The French government sought on Wednesday to downplay fears that workers will be left out of pocket as the country transitions to a pay-as-you-earn tax system that could fan the flames of a revolt over spending power.

After years of delays, France on January 1 ditched a system whereby residents file income tax returns based on the previous year's earnings, replacing it with a system where the state deducts the taxes directly from people's salaries or pensions each month.

Opinion polls show the French broadly supporting the change but the shift presents risks for President Emmanuel Macron, not least that workers may feel poorer when they receive their new net pay -- even if they will no longer have to save up to pay their taxes three times a year.

Any glitches in the new system which could see taxpayers pay more than they bargained for could further infuriate the "yellow vest" anti-government protesters who have been demonstrating around the country since

mid-November over Macron's fiscal policies, which they see as skewed towards the rich.

Visiting a tax query call center in the northern city of Amiens, Budget Minister Gerald Darmanin attempted to assure the French that the change would be painless.

"Taxation at source is like the mobile phone. In a month's time we'll be wondering how we ever managed without it," he said, calling it a "big step forward for the French".

He attempted to silence the doomsayers, noting that so far there was no sign of the much-propheesed chaos and that the number of queries received by the call center were on a par with an average month.

93 million letters

The shift to a pay-as-you-earn system was adopted by the Socialist government of Macron's predecessor Francois Hollande, but is only now being implemented, after some dithering by Macron on the issue.

To prepare the French for the change the government has sent 93 million letters and

emails explaining the new system.

The move, which will only affect the 43 percent of households liable for income tax, brings France in line with most Western countries but comes at a critical juncture for the Macron.

Over the past six weeks, "yellow vest" demonstrators -- so-called after the high-visibility jackets they wear -- have repeatedly clashed with police in Paris and other big cities, plunging Macron's presidency into crisis.

The "yellow vest" movement began in rural France over fuel taxes and quickly ballooned into a wider revolt against the 41-year-old president's pro-business policies and perceived arrogance by low-paid workers and pensioners.

In mid-December, he attempted to calm the rebellion by backtracking on a planned increase in anti-pollution fuel taxes.

He also announced 10 billion euros (\$11.4 billion) in tax breaks and income support for the low-paid and retirees, setting back



his deficit-reduction drive in the process.

Since then the protests have appeared to lose steam.

In his New Year's address to the nation on Monday, Macron vowed to resume his reforms programme in 2019, including trimming the sprawling public sector and shaking up the unemployment and pension systems, all potential political minefields.

(Source: AFP)

British MPs, lawyers request visit to detained Saudi activists

A cross-party group of British parliamentarians and international lawyers has asked to visit detained female activists in Saudi Arabia to investigate allegations that they are being tortured and denied legal representation and family visits.

In a letter to the Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom, MP Crispin Blunt, the head of the group's detention review panel, asked Prince Mohammed bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz to assist them in arranging a visit to Dhahban prison near Jeddah to speak to the activists held there.

"We hope to be able to gather direct testimony from the detainees during our visit in Saudi Arabia," Blunt wrote on Wednesday, adding the group wanted to also "meet and interview officials responsible for and tasked" with the activists' detention.

Several international human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have alleged that eight female activists who had campaigned for the right for women to drive have been tortured with electric shocks and whipped with an "egal", a rope that keeps a male headscarf in place.

The groups' reports have also alleged that the women were subjected to sexual harassment, threatened with rape and prevented from accessing lawyers.

"The allegations made and recorded by these human

rights advocates are extremely damaging to the credibility of the progressive reforms announced recently by the Saudi Arabian government," the letter said.

Riyadh has rejected the accusations. "The government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia categorically and strongly denies the allegations made by them. The wild claims made, quoting anonymous 'testimonies' or 'informed sources', are simply wrong," the Ministry of Media said in a statement in November.

The detained activists have been identified as Loujain al-Hathloul, Aziza al-Yousef, Eman al-Nafjan, Nouf Abdelaziz, Mayaa al-Zahrani, Samar Badawi, Nassima al-Saada and Hatoun al-Fassi.

'Urgency'

The letter comes as the Saudi government still grapples with the international fallout of the case of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist and critic of the country's leadership who was brutally murdered in the kingdom's consulate in the Turkish city of Istanbul on October 2.

"The Khashoggi tragedy was obviously a total and utter disaster for Saudi Arabia," Blunt told Al Jazeera.

"It would seem that the people who are responsible for the Khashoggi operation were also responsible for the detention of these Saudi Arabia women's rights activists at exactly

the same time that Saudi Arabian women were getting the right to drive and major steps forward in their own personal freedom, with freedom from the so-called guardian laws, in a way that was a huge step internationally and rightly paraded as such."

Women in Saudi Arabia were finally allowed to drive in June 2018.

The detention review panel said it also wants to collect testimonies from male supporters of the women activists, including Ibrahim al-Modaimegh, Abdulaziz Meshaal and Mohammed Rabea.

Their letter went on to say that following the panel's review, they would be able to support Saudi Arabia in "regaining confidence from the international community that its commitment to progressive reform and the protection of the rights of peaceful pro-reform activists is both credible and sincere".

The group requested the Saudi ambassador to respond by January 9 "in light of the urgency of this matter".

The review panel consists of ITN solicitors, as represented by the firm's partner Tayab Ali; Dr Tim Moloney QC, the deputy head of Doughty Street Chambers; MP Layla Moran; and MP Dr Paul Williams.

(Source: Al Jazeera)

Bolsonaro takes office in Brazil, says nation 'liberated from socialism'



Brazil's newly inaugurated President Jair Bolsonaro said on Tuesday his election had freed the country from "socialism and political correctness," and he vowed to tackle corruption, crime and economic mismanagement in Latin America's largest nation.

Bolsonaro, a former army captain turned lawmaker who openly admires Brazil's 1964-1985 military dictatorship, promised in his first remarks as president to adhere to democratic norms, after his tirades against the media and political opponents had stirred unease.

While investors hope Bolsonaro's free-market stance will reinvigorate Brazil's economy - the eight largest in the world - environmentalists and rights groups are worried he will roll back protections for the Amazon rain forest and loosen gun controls in a country that already has the world's highest number of murders.

"This is the beginning of Brazil's liberation from socialism, political correctness and a bloated state," Bolsonaro, 63, said in an address to the nation made after he donned the presidential sash.

A seven-term congressman who spent decades on the fringes of Brazilian politics, Bolsonaro was swept to power in October by voters' outrage with traditional political parties, making him Brazil's first right-wing president since the dictatorship.

Voters punished mainstream parties following more than four years of graft investigations that laid bare the largest political corruption scheme ever discovered. Centrist parties were trounced, reshaping Brazil's political landscape and polarizing Congress.

Following a knife attack during the presidential campaign that left Bolsonaro hospitalized for weeks, security was tight for his inauguration. Some 10,000 police officers and soldiers were deployed on the streets of Brasilia, the capital, as Bolsonaro and his wife rode in an open-topped Rolls-Royce to Congress.

His voters are now impatient for Bolsonaro to make good on ambitious promises to tackle graft and violent crime and revive an economy still sputtering after the collapse of a commodities boom led to Brazil's worst recession on record.

As thousands of supporters, many with the Brazilian flag draped around their shoulders, chanted "the captain has arrived!," Bolsonaro launched into a fiery speech.

"We have the great challenge of taking on the effects of an economic crisis, of facing the distortion of human rights and the breakdown of the family," he said. "We must urgently end ideologies that defend criminals and penalize police."

Conservative agenda

Bolsonaro, who was sworn in before a joint session of Congress, called on lawmakers to help him "free the nation definitively from the yoke of corruption, crime, economic irresponsibility and ideological submission."

On the economic front, the new leader promised to open foreign markets for Brazil and enact reforms to reduce a yawning budget deficit, putting government accounts on a sustainable path.

Bolsonaro plans to realign Brazil internationally, moving away from developing-nation allies and closer to the policies of Western leaders, particularly U.S. President Donald Trump, who sent Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to his inauguration.

Trump congratulated Bolsonaro in a Twitter message, writing "The USA is with you".

As a clear sign of that diplomatic shift, Bolsonaro plans to move the Brazilian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, breaking with Brazil's traditional support for a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue. Backed massively by conservative sectors of Brazil, including Christian evangelical churches, Bolsonaro would block moves to legalize abortion beyond even the current limited exceptions and remove sex education from public schools, opposing what he calls "cultural Marxism" introduced by recent leftist governments.

One-third of his Cabinet are former army officers, mostly fellow cadets at the Black Nipples academy, Brazil's West Point, all outspoken backers of the former military regime.

Bolsonaro has faced charges of inciting rape and for hate crimes because of comments about women, gays and racial minorities. Yet his law-and-order rhetoric and plans to ease gun controls have resonated with many voters, especially in Brazil's booming farm country.

Tackle 'Brazil cost'

In an interview with Record TV on the eve of his inauguration, Bolsonaro lashed out at Brazil's notorious bureaucracy, which makes doing business difficult and expensive. He vowed to strip away the so-called "Brazil Cost" that hamstring private enterprise.

"The government machine is really heavy," he said. "There are hundreds of bureaucratic governing bodies across Brazil, of regulators as well ... We have to untangle the mess."

Bolsonaro's vow to follow Trump's example and pull Brazil out of the Paris climate change agreement has worried environmentalists. So have his plans to build hydroelectric dams in the Amazon and open up to mining the reservations of indigenous peoples who are seen as the last custodians of the world's biggest forest.

Brazilian businesses are eager to see Bolsonaro take office and install a team of orthodox economists led by investment banker Paulo Guedes, who has promised quick action in bringing Brazil's unsustainable budget deficit under control.

Guedes plans to sell as many state companies as possible in a privatization drive that he forecasts could eventually bring in up to 1 trillion reais (\$257 billion).

That would help restore order to government finances. The key measure, however, for reducing the deficit and stopping a dangerous rise of Brazil's public debt will be the overhaul of the costly social security system. Pension reform will be Bolsonaro's biggest challenge since he has yet to build a base in Congress, where he has eschewed the political horse-trading that traditionally helped Brazilian presidents govern the nation of nearly 210 million people.

(Source: Reuters)

STOCK MARKET

TEDPIX	160898.9
IFX	1875.49

Sources: tse.ir, ifb.ir

CURRENCIES

USD	42,000 rials
EUR	48,274 rials
GBP	53,635 rials
AED	11,437 rials

Source: iribnews.ir

COMMODITIES

WTI	\$44.56/b
Brent	\$53.08/b
OPEC Basket	\$53.92/b
Gold	\$1,283.55 /oz
Silver	\$15.42/oz
Platinum	\$789.65/oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

NEWS IN BRIEF



Iranian trade delegation to embark for Dubai in mid-Feb.

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (TPO) is to dispatch a trade and educational delegation to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from February 17 to 20, 2019, the official portal of the state-run organization announced.

The delegation will make its trip to Dubai simultaneous with the 24th edition of one of the world's largest annual food, beverage and hospitality exhibitions, Gulfood 2019.



Unemployment rate stands at 11.7% in autumn

ECONOMY TEHRAN — According to the latest report of the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI), unemployment rate in autumn which corresponds to the third quarter of current Iranian calendar year (September 23 - December 21, 2018) stood at 11.7 percent.

The center put the number of the unemployed people at 3.159 million in autumn, Tasnim news agency reported on Wednesday.

As SCI announced earlier, unemployment rate in summer which corresponds to the second quarter of the present Iranian year (June 22 - September 22, 2018) stood at 12.1 percent, with the number of the unemployed people at 3.326 million.



Tehran hosting intl. store equipment expo

ECONOMY TEHRAN — The 12th edition of Iran's International Exhibition of Goods, Services, Store Equipment and Chain Stores kicked off at the Tehran Permanent International Fairgrounds on Wednesday.

As reported by IRNA, some 70 domestic exhibitors along with foreign companies from various countries are showcasing their latest products and services during the four-day event.

Commodity groups represented in this year's exhibition include equipment, software, department stores, shopping malls and commercial structures and etc.

The exhibition aims to familiarize the consumers with quality goods and services in accordance with international standards, introduce Iranian products to the world markets and to promote easy and customer-friendly shopping.

Gold hits multi-month high as falling equities cement growth fears

Gold touched its highest in more than six months on Wednesday as sagging equities compounded concerns over weakening global markets, prompting safe-haven flows into the precious metal.

Spot gold was up .15 percent at \$1,284.15 an ounce by 8:54 a.m. ET, having earlier touched its highest since June 15 at \$1,288.66.

U.S. gold futures rose 0.38 percent to \$1,286.20.

"We are seeing a very risk-averse market right now," said Craig Erlam, senior market analyst at OANDA.

Global shares began 2019 on a downbeat note while oil prices and bond yields slid and the Japanese yen strengthened as data from far and wide exacerbated concern over the potential for a global economic slowdown.

Economic and geopolitical concerns mean it is only a matter of time before gold shoots up, said Kunal Shah, head of research at Nirmal Bang Commodities in Mumbai.

Markets are also awaiting views from Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell on the U.S. economic outlook and hints about interest rates in 2019 when he participates in a joint discussion on Friday with former Fed heads Janet Yellen and Ben Bernanke.

Further pointers are expected this week from a closely watched survey on U.S. manufacturing, due on Thursday, followed by the December payrolls report on Friday. (Source: Reuters)

Imports of raw materials without order registration allowed in free zones

ECONOMY TEHRAN — The Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) has legalized imports of 3,243 various types of raw materials and production parts into the country's free economic and industrial zones as well as free special economic zones without order registration, IRNA reported.

According to a deputy from IRICA, Mehrdad Jamal Orounaqi, the job has been done on the way to ease domestic production.

Some of the permitted goods include baby milk powder, butter, whey, corn flour, oats, raw oil, palm, some of minerals such

as manganese, nickel, cobalt, and tin and tungsten concentrates, some industrial goods such as engine oils and industrial oils, sulfur, carbon and liquid helium.

Protecting domestic production presently stands among top priorities of Iranian government. The government prepared a comprehensive plan to brace the country for the U.S.-led sanctions in late June, 2018. The protective plan worth one billion dollars is aimed at creating jobs, supporting the domestic production and preserving the existing jobs.

A specific attention has also been paid



to backing domestic production and job creation in the budget bill for the next Iranian calendar year 1398 (starting on March 21, 2019), which is currently being investigated at the parliament.

"In comparison with the budget bill of 1397, that of the next year allocates more

credit to industries renovation and localization expansion and also is more protective regarding the related issues to the existing funds, providing facilities to mining sector, and allocated grants." Iranian deputy industry minister Farshad Moghimi announced in late December.

Indian Oil says Iran may still invest in Chennai Petroleum expansion

India's biggest refiner Indian Oil Corp Ltd said on Wednesday that Iran may still invest in a refinery expansion project at one of its subsidiaries.

Indian Oil's chairman Sanjiv Singh said that Iran has not ruled out participating in the expansion at Chennai Petroleum Corp Ltd, a south India-based 20,000 barrels per day (bpd) refinery.

Iran's participation has been questioned after India cut back its Iranian crude oil imports following U.S. sanctions.

However, Singh's comments come a few days after India exempted rupee payments to the National Iranian Oil Co. (NIOC) for crude oil imports from a withholding tax.

The exemption will allow Indian refiners to settle about \$1.5 billion of outstanding payments to NIOC through direct rupee payments.



It has been expected that these payments could help Iran invest in Indian projects, particularly the Chennai Petroleum Corp expansion.

"Iran has always been positive with this (the new rules). I think they should be able to invest," Singh told Reuters, following a media conference on Wednesday.

Chennai Petroleum plans to invest up to 356.98 billion rupees (\$5.1 billion) to replace the 20,000 bpd Nagapattinam refinery in Southern Tamil Nadu state with a 180,000 bpd plant.

Naftiran Intertrade, the Swiss subsidiary of National Iranian Oil Company, holds a 15.4 percent stake in Chennai Petroleum, while Indian Oil has about a 52 percent share.

Singh said a detailed feasibility report for the expansion has yet to be prepared. (Source: Reuters)

Economic outlook for 2019: More uncertainty for Japan's economy

With the average worker's pay barely rising and inflation hovering just above zero, it is easy to overlook the resilience of Japan's economic growth streak, which is currently on track to become the longest in the postwar era.

Yet both internal headwinds, such as the upcoming consumption tax hike slated for this coming October, alongside slowing global growth and stock market downturns around the world, indicate that the party may finally be coming to a close.

While it is highly uncertain as to which looming events will hold back global commerce, professional economic soothsayers appear in agreement on one theme for 2019: Growing risks and subsequent uncertainty will significantly slow Japan's economic growth over the next few years.

According to analysis from a dozen top Japan-based think tanks, which publish economic outlook reports at the end of the year, there is broad consensus that the domestic economy will grow by less than 1 percent in 2019, a decline from 1.9 percent growth achieved in 2018.

"The Chinese economy is slowing, the Eurozone is slowing, America is also approaching a slowdown — these are not good signs for the Japanese economy," said Hide Yoneyama, an economist at Fujitsu Research Institute.

Many analysts believe the broad economic slowdown can be partially attributed to the actions of central bankers around the world as they move away from easy-money policies after years of conducting monetary stimulus.

Yoneyama also explained that the



potential global slowdown combined with other risk factors — a consumption tax increase, the U.S.-China trade war and the United Kingdom's potential no-deal exit from the European Union — create a perfect storm that is likely to slow Japan's own economy.

But not all of Japan's business sectors are exposed to equal levels of risk from these global trends.

Technology industries such as e-commerce, mobile payments and artificial intelligence are expected to see robust growth over the next few years. Yet these nimble technology companies still represent a fraction of the overall economy and stand in stark contrast to many sectors, such as regional banking and many small businesses, which will have less wiggle room to escape the intense pressures wrought by a shrinking population.

If economic forecasters are on the mark, these new upstart companies will be unable to offset the crushing force of demographic pressures, making it likely 2019's slowdown in growth may be a new norm rather than a temporary setback.

(Source: The Japan Times)

China economy endures bad start to 2019

China's slim hopes of an economic upturn in 2019 suffered a blow on the first working day of the new year as a privately compiled economic gauge showed signs of weakening manufacturing activities.

The Caixin Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), which tracks the activities of small and medium-sized enterprises, dipped below 50.0 for the first time since May 2017 as December's reading fell 0.5 points to 49.7.

A drop below 50.0 indicates contraction compared to expansion.

It follows Monday's release of the official PMI compiled by China's National Bureau of Statistics, which recorded a drop of 0.6 to 49.4 last month, its first contraction since July 2016.

The PMI is usually an advance indicator of China's industrial production, trade activities, employment and business confidence.

Serena Zhou, an economist at Mizuho Securities in Hong Kong, said that the lower than expected results suggested further weakness in the future and that "the worst is yet to come".

The PMI figures indicated subdued domestic demand and reduced front-loaded shipments to the United States looking to avoid potential tariff increases in the new year, despite more fiscal spending that has driven up fixed-asset investment, she pointed out.

"The economic figures could get worse in upcoming months. The market confidence hit hard by the China-US trade war remains and has not recovered," Zhou added.

he benchmark Shanghai Composite Index dropped after the latest PMI figures were released, cancelling out early gains on the first day's trading of the new year.

China has shifted its priority to economic stabilisation in 2019 after last month's Central Economic Work Conference pledged to develop a stronger home market to offset external uncertainties.

The key meeting to chart economic policies for 2019 also vowed to stabilise the economy, finance, trade, investment, employment and market expectations.

Ding Shuang, chief Great China economist at Standard Chartered Bank, said Beijing's policymakers will face a big test at the end of the first quarter when the data shows the economy has slowed further.

The current 90-day truce with the United States is also set to expire on March 1, with US\$200 million of Chinese imports to the US threatened with a tariff increase from 10 per cent to 25 per cent.

The market had widely expected a slowing economy due to the trade war, but its damage is now not just confined to the trade sector, but it has already affected domestic manufacturers and external demand, Ding added.

He also warned "the government countermeasures have not yet been able to fully offset the impact", and that "they will need a period of time to take full effect".

Ding said Beijing can still boost its credit growth, an important tool to stabilise investment, but it remains reluctant to ease restrictions on property, a key pillar industry of the national economy, to a large extent. Currently, it prefers the loosening of the purse strings, with more pre-tax deductions from the start of the year and an earlier allocation of local government bond quotas to maintain construction momentum. (Source: South China Morning Post)

U.S.-China trade war takes toll on global manufacturing

Factory activity weakened across much of Europe and Asia in December as the U.S.-led trade war and a slowdown in demand hit production in many economies, offering little reason for optimism as the new year begins.

A series of purchasing managers' indexes for December released on Wednesday mostly showed declines or slowdowns in manufacturing activity across the globe.

"We are really seeing a global slowdown into this year, and in Asia, particularly, export-oriented countries are hurting," said Irene Cheung, Asia strategist at ANZ.

"Our expectation for central banks is that most of them won't change policy in 2019 and these numbers coming out on the weak side won't change that outlook."

Euro zone manufacturing activity barely expanded at the end of 2018, providing disappointing reading for European Central Bank policymakers, just after they ended their 2.6 trillion-euro asset-purchase scheme.

Earlier PMI surveys showed Italy remained in contraction territory and was joined by France, where data showed a first deterioration in operating conditions for 27 months.

Manufacturing growth in both Germany and Spain was modest, easing to the weakest in around two-and-a-half years.

British factories, however, ramped up stockpiling as they prepared for possible border delays when Britain leaves the European Union in less than three months' time.

The UK manufacturing PMI rose to a six-month high, stronger than all forecasts in a Reuters poll of economists. [GB/PMIM]

Survey compiler IHS Markit cautioned the improvement did not herald a big change in the outlook for Britain's stuttering economy — it was caused in large part by manufacturers stockpiling inputs and finished goods.

"Despite the headline index rising to a six-month high in December, the manufacturing PMI still suggests that the sector stagnated in Q4," said Andrew Wishart at Capital Economics.

Later on Wednesday, surveys are expected to show U.S. activity was a tad slower, but still expanding, in a sign China has suffered more from trade frictions than the United States.

But world shares started 2019 on a downbeat note, oil prices and bond yields slid, and the Japanese yen strengthened on Wednesday as the factory survey data confirmed the picture of a global economic slowdown.

China breaks

In China, the Caixin/IHS Markit PMI slipped into contraction territory for the first

time in 19 months, broadly tracking an official survey released on Monday.

China's weakness spilled over to other Asian economies. Malaysian manufacturing slowed to its weakest pace of expansion since the survey began in 2012, and Taiwan fell to its lowest since September 2015.

Meanwhile, official economic data out of Singapore showed its gross domestic product grew more slowly than forecast in the fourth quarter as the city-state's manufacturing contracted on a quarterly basis.

With growth slowing and inflation below or barely within target in most countries, Asian central banks are unlikely to continue their tightening cycle this year, barring any shocks in currency markets.

The world's two largest economies agreed at the start of December to a 90-day truce following tit-for-tat tariffs that have disrupted the flow of hundreds of billions of dollars of goods between the two countries.

Tariffs are not the only drag on China's economy. Beijing's sustained drive to reduce debt risks in the economy has cooled the property market and curbed credit flows to the private sector. Meanwhile, the government's intensified crackdown on pollution has dented industrial activity.

In a key annual conference last month,

China's top leaders said they would boost support for the economy in 2019 by cutting taxes and keeping liquidity ample, while promising to continue negotiations with Washington.

China's economic growth slowed to 6.5 percent in the third quarter of last year, the weakest since the global financial crisis. Reuters reported government advisers had recommended a growth target of 6.0 to 6.5 percent for this year at the annual meeting, though the final figure won't be made public until parliament's annual meeting in early March.

A drop in crude-oil prices LCO1c at the end of last year has helped sentiment in Asia's oil-importing economies, where trade deficits are a key vulnerability.

Indonesia's PMI, although still weak historically, rose. India's declined but capped the strongest quarter for the country's manufacturing since late 2012. But Malaysia, which relies heavily on oil revenues, saw its weakest reading ever.

Taiwan and South Korea, which are heavily focused on tech production, also saw activity shrink. The U.S.-China trade war affects chip orders and coincides with a slowdown in demand for smart phones globally. (Source: Reuters)

Oil falls to \$53 on economic worries, surging supply

Oil fell to around \$53 a barrel on Wednesday, pressured by rising output in major OPEC and non-OPEC producers and concern about an economic slowdown that could weaken demand.

Russian production hit a post-Soviet record in 2018, figures on Wednesday showed. Earlier this week, official data showed U.S. output reached a record in October and Iraq boosted oil exports in December.

Brent crude fell 70 cents to \$53.10 a barrel at 0838 GMT. On Dec. 26, it reached \$49.93, the lowest since July 2017. U.S. crude slipped 62 cents to \$44.79.

"The omens are far from encouraging," said Stephen Brennock, of oil broker PVM, about the price outlook for 2019, citing rising non-OPEC supply and the likelihood of further increases in oil inventories.

"The current bearish bias will therefore continue in the near term and it stands to reason that oil will struggle to break out from its current trough."

Oil fell in 2018 for the first year since 2015 after buyers fled the market in the



fourth quarter over growing worries about excess supply and economic slowdown. U.S. crude slumped nearly 25 percent and Brent by almost 20 percent.

Surging shale output has helped make

the United States the world's biggest oil producer, ahead of Saudi Arabia and Russia. Oil production has been at or near record highs in all three countries.

Adding to concern about economic

slowdown, a series of purchasing managers' indexes for December mostly showed declines or slowdowns in manufacturing activity across Asia - the main growth region for oil demand.

China issued its first batch of crude import quotas for 2019 on Wednesday at a lower volume than for the same batch a year ago though expectations are for the volumes to climb later this year.

Independent market analyst Greg McKenna said in a note on Wednesday that it was "difficult for traders and investors to ignore what looks like a genuine global economic slowdown."

The signs of rising production illustrate the challenge faced by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and allies including Russia, which are returning to supply restraint in 2019, to support the market.

But OPEC is hopeful the supply-cutting deal will work. The energy minister for the United Arab Emirates said on Tuesday he remained optimistic about achieving a market balance in the first quarter.

(Source: Reuters)

What's next for OPEC after Qatar withdraws

Qatar has officially left the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) on Tuesday, ending its 58 years of membership.

The decision to withdraw was announced on December 3 by Qatar's energy minister Saad al-Kaabi, under the circumstances of Qatar being boycotted by former neighboring allies including Saudi Arabia for 18 months. Kaabi said the decision to withdraw was not "political".



With an oil production of approximately 600,000 barrels per day (bpd), Qatar accounts for only two percent of global oil reserves.

Kaabi said the country will "focus efforts" on gas production. With 858 trillion cubic feet of proved natural gas reserve, Qatar ranks the third in the world. But the country is the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Global demand for natural gas is forecast to increase at an average 1.6 percent over the next five years with emerging Asian markets as the main engine for demand.

Driven by continuous economic growth and strong policy support to switch from coal to natural gas, China alone accounts for a third of global demand growth till 2022.

Qatar announced plans to raise its liquefied natural gas output capacity of 77 million tons a year to 110 million tons, around 43 percent rise. The timeframe for completion to reach the new capacity is expected within the next few years.

Qatar announced in December that it plans to invest more than 20 billion U.S. dollars in the oil and gas sectors as well as unconventional resources over the next five years.

Qatar was the first Arab state to join OPEC after its founding in 1960. Now it will be the first Arab state to leave. There have been instances of countries withdrawing from OPEC before: Gabon withdrew in 1992 and rejoined two decades later. Indonesia suspended its membership in 2016.

Data from OPEC Annual Statistics Bulletin 2018 shows that over 80 percent of the world's proven oil reserves are located in OPEC member countries. International Energy Agency (IEA) data indicates that OPEC member countries produce about 40 percent of the world's crude oil. Equally important to global prices, OPEC's oil exports represent about 60 percent of the total petroleum traded internationally.

Moving forward, OPEC is facing many challenges such as continued improvements in the productivity of U.S. shale, oil transportation bottlenecks in the Permian Basin and western Canada, and expected projects coming on-stream in other non-OPEC countries.

(Source: CGTN)

Ship shortage threatens Asian LNG market growth

In the growing market for liquefied natural gas, driven mainly by Asian demand, a shortage of transport vessels could become a bottleneck. While demand for LNG shipments to China is steadily growing as the country increases its consumption of eco-friendly natural gas, the supply of ships is not keeping pace with growing demand for spot charters.

Spot charter rates for LNG carriers with a tank capacity of 150,000-170,000 cu. meters stood at the \$190,000 per day range in November, five times higher than in early May. The market environment has changed considerably since 2015-2016, when the rates were around \$20,000-30,000 per day amid anxiety about a glut of vessels.

"We did not expect that we would run short of vessels so quickly," said a person in charge of LNG carriers at a major Japanese shipping company.

A major reason behind the high charter rates is a surge in gas demand in China. In a drive to reduce serious air pollution, China is rapidly switching from coal to natural gas for power generation. Energy companies and trading houses in China are securing LNG carriers earlier to import LNG stably over the long term.

Other countries in Asia are also turning to the consumption of natural gas. In 2018, Bangladesh began importing LNG and the Philippines also revealed plans to build its first LNG import terminal by investing more than \$700 million.

Energy research firm Bloomberg New Energy Finance estimates that global LNG demand will grow to 450 million tons by 2030, from 284 million tons in 2017, with Asia driving the growth.

About 600 LNG ships are in use worldwide, and about 40 new vessels are expected to go into service in 2019. However, according to Nippon Yusen, most of the vessels are chartered exclusively for new projects under long-term contracts and only a limited number of them flow into the spot charter market.

Spot LNG sales are increasing as natural gas, including American shale gas, which does not necessarily involve long-term contracts, has come to be exported on a full-scale over the past several years. LNG trading practices that have been rigid and characterized by long-term contracts covering a period of over 10 years are changing, but the insufficient transportation infrastructure, or carrying vessels, will become



an obstacle.

The International Energy Agency said in a recent report: "The risk of a lack of timely investment in the LNG carrier fleet could pose a threat to market development and security of supply, which could materialize even earlier than the risk of insufficient liquefaction capacity."

(Source: Nikkei)

Why 2019 could start with an oil rally

Oil prices have regained significant ground since the Christmas Eve meltdown, and there is potential for higher prices in the weeks ahead.

Trying to guess what will happen next with oil is foolish, but several trends and upcoming events could pave the way for a tightening up of the oil market. As we close out the year, December could potentially go down as the low point in the latest price cycle.

To start with, the OPEC+ cuts take effect at the start of January, and in reality, even if the group does not reach the promised 1.2 million barrels per day (mb/d) right away this week (it surely won't), the reductions have been likely underway for some weeks. By some counts, OPEC production fell more than 800,000 bpd in December, most of which came from Saudi Arabia.

So, we start the New Year with big reductions in supply. The cuts will not balance the market right away, and there is disagreement from analysts over whether or not the size of the reductions is ultimately sufficient. At a minimum, the group may need to extend the cuts through the end of 2019 instead of letting them expire in June. But top OPEC officials have already signaled that they are willing to do that.

The second reason that the oil market may have bottomed out is that the waivers on Iran sanctions are set to expire in May. The latest data from Reuters shows that the volume of imports by Asian countries of Iranian crude hit a low in December at 664,800 bpd, down 12.7 percent from a year earlier. However, countries such as South Korea and Japan have indicated that, with waivers from the U.S. Treasury in hand, they could buy more oil from Iran beginning in January.

Thus, Iran may not necessarily play a bullish role in the oil market right off the bat, but the waivers are set to expire in May. The Trump administration will probably be far less lenient this time around, and it will have a looser oil market giving it a stronger hand compared to late October/early November. Estimates vary, but Iran is expected to lose a significant portion of its oil exports, which, combined with the OPEC+ cuts, could go a long way in erasing the surplus.

Third, U.S. shale could finally under-shoot growth expectations. This factor is admittedly speculative, but the crash in oil prices likely pushed a lot of shale drillers back into unprofitable territory. While many companies boast of low breakeven prices, around a quarter of them aren't profitable unless oil trades above \$65 per barrel. At a minimum, plans for new rigs and new drilling could be scrapped. And indeed, there are early signs that is already happening. But if WTI lingers in the \$40s for a while longer, there will surely be more severe revisions to 2019 drilling plans.

The EIA says the U.S. will add 1.2 mb/d of fresh supply in 2019. To the extent that the shale industry fails to deliver on this expectation, it will act to tighten up the market.

Another reason why the oil market could rebound from current levels is that there are few areas of significant supply growth outside of the U.S., and hardly any that could surprise on the upside. Canada and Brazil could add barrels onto the market, but not even close to anything that is expected from the U.S.

In fact, if there are supply surprises, the unexpected event is much more likely to be an outage. Nigeria has an election in 2019, which could spark unrest and put

supply at risk. Production from Libya, as always, is fragile. Libya's production rebound in 2018 was impressive, but the gains are easily reversible. Venezuela's decline is much more certain.

The discussion up to this point has been all about supply. But, arguably, the oil market narrative in 2019 could be dominated much more by demand. Signs of strain on the global economy are piling up by the day. Stock markets have been rocked by volatility, the Fed's rate tightening has rattled confidence and increased the cost of debt around the world while also shaking emerging market currencies, and an economic slowdown appears underway in China.

Just this week, data shows that China's manufacturing purchasing managers index dropped to 49.4 in December, the weakest since early 2016. "What is clear is that the global synchronized growth story that propelled risk assets higher has come to the end of its current run," Singapore-based Oversea-Chinese Banking Corp. said in an economic outlook, as reported by Bloomberg. In China, "a further growth deceleration remains on the cards."

Forecasts from the EIA, IEA and other major energy watchers have demand growth at relatively strong levels, albeit slightly weaker than 2018. Any faltering in the global economy could more than outweigh the array of supply-side factors that could tighten up the market. Time will tell.

Most major investment banks on Wall Street see oil prices rebounding relatively strongly in 2019. Despite sharp downward revisions, bank analysts see Brent averaging in the \$60s-\$70s, which could require a rather significant rally given today's prices.

(Source: oilprice.com)

China cuts crude oil import quotas with first batch of 2019 allowances

China issued its first batch of crude oil import quotas for 2019 on Wednesday at a lower volume than for the same batch a year ago though expectations are for the volumes to climb later this year.

The Ministry of Commerce granted quotas totaling 89.84 million tons to 58 companies in its first allowances for 2019, according to four sources with direct knowledge of the matter and documents reviewed by Reuters on Wednesday.

This is down from the 121.32 million tons issued in the first batch of allowances for 2018, although the sources said Beijing may increase the overall volume for 2019 in a second batch of quotas later this year.

"The market, in general, does not have an upbeat outlook for imports. I think the drop in quota could likely mean easing growth in China's crude imports in the first half," said Zhou Guoxia, a crude analyst with consultants JLC.

One of the four sources, who works for a private Chinese refiner, said they received about a third of its annual quota in



the first batch and expects to get the remainder in a second batch which Beijing usually issues around September.

Dalian Hengli Petrochemical and Zhejiang Petrochemical, which are starting up their new refineries in 2019, have each received quotas of 4 million tons, according to the documents reviewed by Reuters.

(Source: Reuters)



Khuzestan Water and Wastewater Company

Qualitative Tender for Tenderers

To Number 97/1044

(Assignment of the Project as EPCF)

Second announcement

The Khuzestan Water and Wastewater Company intends, in accordance with the implementing regulation of paragraph (c), Article 12 of the Law on Tenders and Circulars No. 100/50225 dated 6/88/1 and No. 100/135946 dated 1385/8/21 of the Planning and Budget Organization of the country, the following project will be given to EPCF (engineering services, supply of goods, construction, installation and financing) to eligible companies with free capacity and with the general information indicated below:

Tender Number	Tender Title	Required field of work (having one of the following options)	Place of documents' sale	Deadline for selling documents an evaluation the date of ad	Date and time of opening evaluation envelopes
97/1044	Implementation of sewage installations in Masjed Soleyman city (main pipeline network, transfer and construction of wastewater treatment plant) by EPCF method	Contractors with a design and construction contract (EPC) in the field of water with expertise of water and waste water	Dezab Consulting Engineers Co.	To date (2019/01/30)	At 14 2019/02/03

● **The Rules of Tenderers' Evaluation:**
In addition to the criteria set out in the above qualitative assessment inquiries, the following criteria for verifying the tenderers' eligibility are required in view of the fact that the initial cost estimate is more than the permissible base level of a given discipline:

1. The name of the contractor is included in the National Competitive Bidding Information Database <http://iets.mporg.ir> and the Assistant's Office is located at: <http://tec.mporg.ir>
2. Having an empty capacity at the base of a given discipline or the above fields.
3. Perform at least one similar project to this project in the last five years at a minimum amount 1/3 of the estimated sum updated in the yearly estimate based on the group's moderation index.

Also, contractors are required to submit an agreement with the foreign financial provider to provide 85% of the project's financial resources.

4. The address and location of the evaluation documents are as follows:

● **Engineering Dezab Co. in addresses:**
Ahvaz, Golestan, Farvardin St., Dezab Consultant Engineering Co., Monitoring Unit, Phone No.: 33214524
Tehran, Shahr-e Ziba, Hakim Gharb, Taavon Blvd., Corner of Sharbani St., P. 13, Zip Code: 147883958,
Phone Number: 44156725 & 41156504

The deadline for delivery of evaluation documents is up to 10 days to reopen the envelopes.

Place of Delivery Evaluation Packs: Ahvaz, Kianpars, First Square, Khuzestan Water and Wastewater Company, Fifth Floor, Secretariat of the Secret and Secret Affairs.

The opening of the envelopes in the Office of Contract Management is open and the Website of the company is: www.abfakh.ir and the National Information Agency of Tenders country is <http://iets.mporg.ir>

Public Relations and Education Department of the Khuzestan Water and Wastewater Company

NEWS IN BRIEF



India
world's fastest
growing
economy

INTERNATIONAL TEHRAN — India remains ahead of China to retain the coveted tag of world's fastest growing large economy despite several highs and lows in the year gone by.

Indian economy's roller-coaster ride in 2018 was best captured by the gross domestic product (GDP) growth. In the first quarter of 2018-19 ending June 30, it grew at an impressive 8.2 per cent, after 7.7 per cent in the first three months of the year. Despite many ups and downs, spike in oil prices and global trade war like situation during 2018, India's economy remains on a strong footing.

According to Niti Aayog deputy chief Rajiv Kumar, the focus of the Indian government in 2019 will be to expedite reforms with a view to accelerate growth.

This year, the BJP government in India, which had promised to take the economy to new heights and create jobs for millions of young people, came under severe criticism from experts following some controversial decisions like demonetization.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's handling of economy will be a big factor in the upcoming parliamentary polls in India this year, believe experts.



Pakistan PM's
jihad
against
'four ills'

INTERNATIONAL TEHRAN — The recently-elected government in Pakistan, which has inherited flailing economy, rampant corruption, poor security, and rising unemployment, wants to tackle all these issues this year.

Prime Minister Imran Khan said on Tuesday that his government's resolution for New Year is to wage 'jihad' against the country's four ills: poverty, illiteracy, injustice and corruption. "Our New Year resolution is to wage jihad against the 4 ills of our country: poverty, illiteracy, injustice and corruption. InshaAllah 2019 is the beginning of Pakistan's golden era," PM Khan said tweeted - his first in 2019.

The speaker of National Assembly Asad Qaiser also expressed hope that the year 2019 would bring sustained economic growth and uplift people and consolidate democracy.

He underlined the need for promoting religious harmony and interfaith dialogue to pursue the ideals of equal development and mutual coexistence as central element for a pluralistic Pakistani state.

Imran Khan led his party Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf to a landslide victory in Pakistan general elections last year, defeating Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N).

Khan has vowed to rebuild institutions of governance and fight corruption in Pakistan. He has also extended hand of friendship towards neighbors including India and Afghanistan.



2018 deadliest
year in a
decade in
Kashmir

INTERNATIONAL TEHRAN — The year gone by has been the most deadly year in a decade in Indian-controlled Kashmir, as the disturbed region continues to reel under fierce fighting between Indian forces and militants.

On New Year's Eve, Indian forces said they neutralized two infiltrators coming from Pakistan, blaming the neighboring country for the three-decade-old conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

The Jammu-Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS), a Kashmir-based rights group, listed 586 dead in its annual 2018 toll: 267 militants, 160 civilians - including 31 children - and the rest, state police and Indian armed forces.

The numbers of slain militants and security forces are both the highest for a decade, as are the nearly 800 recorded clashes.

The security situation in the disturbed region claimed by both India and Pakistan has deteriorated alarmingly over the past few years since the killing of young rebel commander Burhan Wani.

Indian government's 'Operation All-Out' to flush out militant groups has been successful to a large extent but it has also motivated more young and educated Kashmiri youth to take up arms and join the fight against the Indian state.



China
pledges to lend
\$2 billion to
Pakistan

INTERNATIONAL TEHRAN — China has pledged to lend at least \$2 billion to Pakistan to shore up its foreign exchange reserves and prevent further devaluation of rupee against the dollar, Financial Times reported, quoting sources.

The financial support comes as the Imran Khan led government in Islamabad struggles with a weak fiscal position, high debt repayments and dwindling reserves.

"China's promise to Pakistan is an indication of their commitment to help us avoid a crisis. If the rupee falls sharply and we need to prevent its slide, we can turn to China," the report quoted a senior government official saying.

Pakistan's finance ministry and the IMF are due to resume discussions later this month on details of the package, the report stated.

Last months, Chinese Consul General to Pakistan Long Dingbin said Beijing is investing in multiple sectors and launching business ventures, instead of providing loans, in order to "boost Pakistan's economy".

The official said that during Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to China, the two countries signed 15 new agreements which will lead to increased cooperation in the business sector.

The Chinese consul general claimed that China would "never leave Pakistan in a lurch" and will provide "maximum resources" to ensure that it can strengthen its wavering economy.

On New Year, India, Pakistan trade fire on border, violate ceasefire

INTERNATIONAL TEHRAN — The intermittent border skirmishes continue between India and Pakistan, the two estranged South Asian neighbors, escalating political and military tensions.

Over the past few days, the armies of the two countries have again accused each other of trading fire on the Line of Control (LoC), the line dividing the two countries, in the disputed Kashmir region.

On Tuesday, Pakistan summoned India's deputy envoy to Islamabad and condemned the "unprovoked ceasefire violations" by Indian troops across the Line of Control, which reportedly led to the death of a woman.

Mohammad Faisal, Pakistan's foreign ministry spokesman, alleged that the Indian forces along the LoC and the Working Boundary were "continuously targeting civilian populated areas with heavy weapons."

He said that in 2018, Indian forces had carried out more than 2,350 ceasefire violations along the LoC and the Working Boundary, resulting in the death of 36 civilians, while injuring 142 others.

This unprecedented escalation in ceasefire violations by India, the statement noted, is continuing from the year 2017 when the Indian forces committed 1970 ceasefire violations.

"The deliberate targeting of civilian populated areas is indeed deplorable and contrary to human dignity, international human rights and humanitarian laws," the statement added. "The ceasefire violations by India are a threat to regional peace and security and may lead



to a strategic miscalculation."

Reacting to Pakistan's allegations, Indian authorities said Pakistan Army resorted to unprovoked firing at Indian positions on Tuesday morning. "Pakistani firing began early this morning in Khari Karmara area of the LoC. Indian positions retaliated strongly. No casualty or damage was reported on our side," a newspaper report said. In another incident, Pakistan allegedly fired in Khari Karmara area of the LoC, to which Indian positions retaliated strongly, said a report in IANS.

In 2018, there have been more than 1,400 ceasefire violations on the LoC and the International Border (IB) by Pakistan in Jammu

and Kashmir, the report added.

Earlier, Pakistan Army's Inter Services Public Relations in-charge Major General Asif Ghafoor claimed that Pakistan army had shot down Indian spy quadcopter in Bagh sector area along LoC. "Not even a quadcopter will be allowed to cross LOC, in Sha Allah," he tweeted on Tuesday. Indian Army denied any such incident and said "they (Pakistan) keep lying on these issues". The ties between the two nuclear-armed neighbors have worsened in recent years with the intermittent exchange of small-arms and mortar fire along the border.

The two countries have fought two of the three wars over Kashmir and cross-border

attacks have been frequent since the partition of erstwhile British India in 1947.

However, in recent years, the violations of the ceasefire accord the two countries signed in 2003 have increased. According to conservative estimates, more than two thousand such violations have taken place since 2011 alone, which often have sparked political, diplomatic and military tensions.

According to experts, both parties have failed to holistically weigh the causes and consequences of recurring ceasefire violations and failed to take steps in order to prevent them. Meanwhile, Pakistan on Tuesday handed over a list of its nuclear installations and facilities to a representative of the Indian High Commission in Islamabad as part of an agreement between the two countries, said a statement by Pakistan's Foreign Office.

Similarly, India handed over a list of its nuclear facilities to the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi. The annual exchange is mandated by Article-II of the Agreement on Prohibition of Attacks against Nuclear Installations and Facilities between Pakistan and India, signed on December 31, 1988. It has been implemented consecutively since January 1, 1992.

Also, in consistent with the provisions of the Consular Access Agreement between Pakistan and India, signed on May 21, 2008, the two countries exchanged lists of prisoners in each other's custody. This exercise will be repeated on July 1 as the practice is carried out twice a year.

In a first, Iran, Taliban discuss 'post-occupation scenario' in Afghanistan

1 → Last week's discussions between Iran's deputy foreign minister Abbas Araghchi and the group were reportedly coordinated with the government of Afghanistan and aimed at finding a solution to the 17-year protracted war.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi confirmed that the meeting took place. "Since the Taliban control more than 50 percent of Afghanistan, and given the insecurity, instability and other issues that the country is dealing with, they were interested in talks with Iran," he told reporters on Monday.

Qassemi said Iran shares long border with Afghanistan and has always sought a constructive role to maintain peace in the region.

The meeting came days after it was confirmed that Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (NSC), had traveled to Afghanistan for initial round of talks. "The Islamic Republic has always been one of the primary pillars of stability in the region and cooperation between the two countries will certainly help in fixing Afghanistan's security issues of today," Shamkhani was quoted saying, adding that the Afghan government was kept in loop.

Taliban also confirmed that the meeting took place and discussions pertained to "the post-occupation situation, res-

toration of peace and security in Afghanistan and the region".

"The delegation visited Tehran to share Taliban's views on 'post-occupation' scenario and establishment of peace and security in Afghanistan and the region with Iranian officials," Zabihullah Mujahid, spokesman for Taliban, said in a statement.

The talks between Taliban and Iran, according to observers, must be seen in the context of growing insurgency in the region that puts the security of all regional countries, including Iran, at greater risk.

"Negotiations between Iran and a Taliban delegation are significant given that Iran is an important regional power and the neighbor of Afghanistan," said Ali Shamsi, Islamabad-based strategic affairs analyst. "Iran has high stakes in peaceful Afghanistan especially with the emergence of ISIS and its affiliates in the war-torn country that can easily infiltrate into Iran through porous borders."

"The talks between Tehran and Iran are a step in right direction," says Dawood Hotak, a Kabul-based analyst. "Many world powers have been talking to the group without any results, and I believe Iran can be a catalyst of peace in the war-torn country."

The reports about Taliban-Iran talks have raised eyebrows



in Washington. Iran's active role in Afghanistan means U.S. will be under more pressure to pull out from the country, believe experts.

Meanwhile, deputy foreign minister Abbas Araghchi is expected to travel to Afghanistan in next two weeks to hold deliberations with the Afghan government on the way forward.

Remembering Baqir al-Nimr, symbol of resistance

1 → Shaheed Nimr was put in solitary confinement of a prison hospital and his family and friends were not given permission to meet him. He was denied proper medical attention for the injuries he sustained during his arrest, which resulted in his poor health condition and partial paralysis of his leg. It took many months for the hospital authorities to remove the bullet from his leg.

During the court hearings in 2013 and 2014, he was denied fair trial. His defense team was ill-equipped to counter the bogus charges against him and the judges failed to inform his defense counsels about hearing dates. His counsels were not allowed to cross-examine police officers that arrested him in an injured state, which was in violation of both Saudi and international laws. He was not even allowed a conversation with his lawyers.

On 15 October 2014, following a farcical judicial process, a Saudi court sentenced Shaheed Nimr to death for crimes related to free speech, disobeying the ruler, mobilizing masses against the regime, and encouraging pro-democracy demonstrations. His brother Mohammad al-Nimr was arrested after he tweeted about the death sentence.

In November 2014, many special rapporteurs issued a report to the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) that Shaheed Nimr's trial "did not meet the most stringent due process and fair trial guarantees." They alleged that he was sub-



jected to torture during his detention, and was denied medical attention.

The torture and lack of medical attention forced him to go on a hunger inside the jail, which further deteriorated his health condition. Shaheed Nimr's astounding popularity was demonstrated on the streets across the world. There were massive protests against the Saudi regime before and after his execution. While he was in custody, his wife Muna Jabir al-Shariyavi died in a New York hospital while mobilizing support for him. Importantly, the silence of U.S. and other Western powers over it amounted to complicity.

In October 2015, Saudi apex court ratified

Shaheed Nimr's sentence, ending all hopes of his survival. Then it was a foregone conclusion. On January 2 2016, he finally faced the gallows, with pride and a smile, like a true warrior.

His arrest, trial and execution were in clear violation of Article 9 and 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the country's own constitution. His custodial torture was in violation of Article 15 of the Convention against Torture (CAT).

Amnesty International said the sentence was carried out "after grossly unfair trial" and said there were "questions about the fairness of the trial is a monstrous and ir-

reversible injustice".

"The killing of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr suggests they (Saudi regime) are using the death penalty in the name of counter-terror to settle scores and crush dissidents," said Philip Luther, Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme, following Shaheed Nimr's execution.

His family was even denied the right to give him a proper funeral. He was secretly buried by Saudi officials without informing his family.

Meanwhile, according to a latest report by UK-based human rights group Reprieve, the prosecutions for political crimes have increased under crown prince Mohammad Bin Salman and that "at least 54 people are facing death sentences for opposing the regime, of which 30 are at risk of imminent execution."

One of them is Ali al-Nimr, Shaheed Nimr's nephew, who was framed under dubious charges of participating in pro-democracy rallies in 2012 at the age of 17, and sentenced to death by crucifixion.

Ali al-Nimr's planned execution, according to Reprieve, is "based apparently on the authorities' dislike for his uncle, and his involvement in anti-government protests, would violate international law and the most basic standards of decency. It must be stopped."

If we don't raise our voice for the young Nimr, he will also meet the same fate as his uncle. Time is now.

U.S., Israel pressing Honduras to moving embassy to Jerusalem al-Quds

In Brazil, Israel and the U.S. have lobbied Honduras to follow in Washington's footsteps and relocate its embassy from Tel Aviv to the occupied Palestinian city of Jerusalem al-Quds.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez on the sidelines of the inauguration of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in Brasilia on Tuesday.

They "agreed to pursue a plan of action, which includes meetings in their three respective capitals, to advance the process of the decision to open embassies in both [the Honduran capital] Tegucigalpa and Jerusalem (al-Quds)," read a joint statement released by the U.S. State Department.

They also agreed to "strengthen political relations and

coordinate development cooperation in Honduras," the statement added. Netanyahu held a separate meeting with Hernandez, but no information was released about that one.

Honduras, a poor Central American country, had earlier expressed keenness to transfer its diplomatic mission to Jerusalem al-Quds in exchange for Tel Aviv opening an embassy in Tegucigalpa as well as technology sharing.

Later last month, a Honduran delegation visited the occupied territories to discuss developing bilateral relations and a possible embassy move, according to Israel's ministry of foreign affairs.

In a highly controversial policy shift, U.S. President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem al-Quds as the "capital" of Israel in December 2017 and moved the American embassy

to the ancient city months later.

Peru, also in South America, has however adopted a different approach. Joining a group of Latin American countries that recognized a "free and sovereign" state of Palestine back in 2011, it has in recent days named a square in its capital Lima after Palestine, arousing outrage among Israeli authorities.

Israel lays claim to the whole Jerusalem al-Quds, but the international community views the city's eastern sector as occupied territory. Israel occupied East Jerusalem al-Quds during the Six-Day War in 1967 and later annexed the city in a move not recognized by the international community.

(Source: Press TV)

Inheritance of the 2018 transformative trends affecting 2019

By Tiberio Graziani

The main transformative trends in 2018 that will affect next year will concern at least the following three different global and interconnected sectors: Economic & Financial Area; Security; Dismantling of the Old World Order.

Economic & financial area

Regarding the economic and financial area, it will be necessary to monitor the growing importance of advanced technologies and their applications in the production cycles of the most industrial nations. In the next year, we will face a sort of rationalization of these production processes that will profoundly change the evolution of the current social equilibrium within nations and also the relations between states and large financial organizations. According to some analytical studies, a third of US workforce (about 50 million people) could be transformed by 2020. Furthermore, we will witness the explosion of new markets based on the technological needs of the elderly and the disabled people. We will also face the increase of cryptocurrencies. The knowledge and management of new technologies - ICT, AI, blockchain, 3D printing mainly - will constitute the challenge of the next decade between the major world powers and the main investment groups.

Security

The impact of the advanced technologies on geostrategic decisions will increase. The new technologies will contribute to impressing, in 2019, a decisive turning point in what we can define henceforth as a new global revolution in military affairs. The military-industrial-financial complexes of the major world powers will undergo a complete transformation starting from 2019.

Dismantling of the old world order

Another important trend that will affect the global level concerns the dismantling of the old world order based on the criteria of multilateralism. In 2019, we will witness the weakening of large global organizations such as the UN and the reorganization of multilateral consultations regarding international trade, climate issues and regulations on the use of new technologies. This will happen for two main reasons. The first is due to the growing presence and importance of global players of nations like China, Russia, and India, who obviously try to implement their 360 degree spheres of influence, even outside the old institutions born in the so-called bipolar era, when the destinies of the world were substantially decided in Moscow and Washington. The second reason is due to the putting into practice of the "Trump Doctrine," which, over the past two years, has placed a particularly bilateral strategy on U.S. foreign policy, upsetting the old equilibria.



2019: Key geopolitical challenges European Union

A very important transformative trend will concern the European Union. 2018 has been a very critical year for the EU, both on the economic level, but above all on the political and social ones. 2019 will be a year in which the fate of the "European Common House" will be decided. As a consequence of the neopopulist waves and the so-called sovereignist ones that marked the social and political life of the Europeans during 2017-2018, most likely, the elections for the renewal of the European Parliament will reward the anti-European parties. 2019 will therefore be a very unstable year for the economy and politics of the European Union.

Regarding Europe's role at global level, we have to consider that the contentious relations between the U.S. and China as well as with Russia will impact the European Union in 2019. For different and divergent aspects, the U.S., Russia, and China have an interest in weakening the European Union.

For the U.S., with Europe in the grip of a political, economic, and financial identity crisis, this situation would allow Washington to "manage" the U.S. economic recovery, especially now that the traditional British ally, thanks to Brexit, is released from the obligations that tied it to Brussels. Moreover, at a geostrategic level, the continuing European crisis allows the U.S. to gain time in making costly decisions and responsibilities in financial terms in the theatres of North Africa and the Middle East.

For Russia, the issue is more delicate and problematic. A weak European Union, according to the Kremlin, would be more malleable in relation to the Ukrainian issue

and the sanctions regime that has influenced the Russian economy since 2014. But this could be true, for the short term. In fact, a European Union weakened in the medium and long term would be at the mercy of the strategic interests of the U.S., since the EU is the eastern periphery of the U.S. geopolitical system, built at the end of the Second World War. Ultimately, in the absence of a political EU, the true European "glue" would consist only of NATO's military-diplomatic device: something that Moscow certainly should not wish.

A fragmented Europe, unable to have a coherent and unitary policy of infrastructural development, does not realistically have the useful force to negotiate - on the basis of equal geopolitical dignity - with China on the great project of the New Silk Road. For this reason, at the moment, a weak Europe is convenient for China. For Beijing it is easier and cheaper to negotiate with individual EU countries and, in some cases, even with regional administrations. Moreover, the absence of a truly European foreign policy allows China to operate in Africa without real competitors, apart from the U.S. and Russia.

Asia

The main geopolitical challenges in Asia will concern relations between the U.S., Japan, and China. Tokyo, although in line with U.S. policies, could be a point of mediation between the different positions of Washington and Beijing.

On the geostrategic level, Washington will have to follow up on the initiatives launched in 2018 with Pyongyang for a complete normalization of relations. It will be a bumpy route, because the conflicting interests of the U.S. and the People's Republic of Chi-

na remain in the background of the North Korean issue.

Another very controversial issue about the relations between the U.S. and China will concern Tibet. In particular, in the first months of 2019 Beijing and Washington will have to find a mediation in reference to the effects of the "Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act" (signed by President Trump at the end of 2018) that promotes the access to Tibet of U.S. diplomats, journalists and citizens and denies U.S. visas to Chinese officials considered responsible for blocking access to Tibet.

Another issue that will have considerable geopolitical impacts at regional and global levels is related to the Chinese project of the New Silk Road. Beijing - in order to achieve its objectives - will consolidate its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation.

U.S.-China trade tensions impact

During 2018, the Trump administration conducted a real trade war against China. In the next year this war will be in a certain way perfected. We have already had warnings of such kind: the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer and daughter of founder of high-tech giant Huawei, constitutes an example of the escalation of the U.S.-China tensions. The tensions between the U.S. and China are not just commercial, but strategic. The U.S. and China compete for technological supremacy. This strategic confrontation will affect the entire global system, impacting the worldwide financial system and determining choices of field between the various countries of the globe.

North Africa, Near and Middle East

In North Africa (particularly in Libya), Moscow's stabilizing function is destined to grow in importance.

In 2019, we will witness a rearrangement of forces within the quadrants of the Near and Middle East. Despite the Kashoggi affair, the United States will strengthen its ties with Saudi Arabia and will target the new Israeli government to counter Iran's presence.

The geopolitical and strategic dynamics concerning the area, however, will be affected by the increasing influence of the Russian Federation, Iran and Turkey in the course of the next year.

Central and South America

Although the U.S. has regained some positions in South America, the Chinese presence and, partially also the Russian one, in the area will produce effects on the hegemonic attempt of the Trump Administration. The issue of migration is destined to play an increasing crucial role in Trump's Central American policy.

Chairman Vision & Global Trends International Institute for Global Analyses (Source: www.vision-gt.eu)

10 good things about 2018

TEHRAN (FNA) — The New Year has come and this is a great time to think about some of the events that took place during the past 12 months.

Despite President Donald Trump's Muslim travel ban, anti-migrant policies, moving U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem Al-Quds, off-the-cuff "fire and fury" threat to North Korea, and withdrawal from a host of international agreements, there are still some rousing points of light from 2018.

Here are the top ten events for 2018 — other important developments were left out, such as the new ceasefire agreement in Yemen et al:

1. Victory over ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

Few months before Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared final victory over ISIL after Iraqi forces drove its last remnants from the country; it was the allied forces of Iran, Syria, Russia and Hezbollah that announced the defeat of the foreign-backed goons in neighboring Syria. The Syrian army and its allies are still fighting ISIL in desert areas, but the capture of all terror-held territories ends ISIL's era of territorial rule over the so-called caliphate that it proclaimed in 2014 across Iraq and Syria and in which millions suffered under its reign of terror.

2. Trump orders U.S. troops out of Syria.

On December 19, Trump called for a U.S. withdrawal from Syria over the apparent objections of military advisers and a bipartisan group of lawmakers. The withdrawal of the more than 2,000 troops is based on Trump's decision that the mission against ISIL is complete! U.S. military leaders, including former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, disagree. They don't think the U.S. has actually defeated ISIL.

3. The end of a terrible alliance.

The tragic murder of Khashoggi at the U.S. consulate in Istanbul shook Riyadh's Western allies. It was a turning point for the U.S.-Saudi alliance. With three years of relentless Saudi bombing of Yemen leading to the world's greatest human catastrophe and the barbaric murder of Khashoggi, Congress and business leaders finally began to question their relationship with this retrograde regime and its brutal de facto leader Mohammad bin Salman. In an unprecedented vote, the Senate approved a measure to halt U.S. support to the Saudis in Yemen. Some European governments stopped arms sales to Saudi Arabia as well.

4. Trump orders U.S. military to start withdrawing 7,000 troops from Afghanistan.

The effort to curb Trump's support for the Saudi war on Yemen comes at the same time that Trump announced a halving of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. This was an abrupt shift in the 17-year-old war there and it's good news. It came hours after Jim Mattis, the former secretary of defense, said he would resign from his position after disagreeing with Trump over his approach to policy in the Middle East.

5. World leaders react to U.S. withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal.

Following Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, there was an immediate reaction by world leaders, including the other parties to the landmark deal. France, Germany and the UK regretted the U.S. decision to leave the JCPOA, pledging to work collectively to keep Iran under the deal by providing it with the merits promised under the agreement. China and Russia also reiterated they want to uphold the deal, arguing that "the deal makes the world safer", and that they could find no legitimate reason for pulling out of the deal.

6. World condemns Trump's decision to move U.S. embassy.

The embassy move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem Al-Quds infuriated Palestinians and sparked international condemnation, arguing that the city's final status should first be resolved through Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. From the UN and European allies to global rivals like China and Russia, from Iran to the Vatican, his move was denounced. The Cairo-based Arab League urged the international community to oppose what it considered an "unjust decision" and the ongoing "Israeli occupation" of Al-Quds.

7. Trump's Muslim travel ban and anti-immigrant policies condemned.

Trump's immigration policies drew international condemnation as religious discrimination from allies and religious leaders, including Pope Francis, who took aim on moral grounds at the administration's practice of separating migrant children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border. Leaders from London to Ottawa and to Tehran described the separations as unjust and cruel. The pope, who has placed the issues facing migrants at the center of his papacy, stepped into the issue, saying he agreed with statements by U.S. Catholic bishops, who called the separations "immoral" and "contrary to our Catholic values."

8. A trade war that united the world.

Trump became the bully of the global economy, using the immense leverage of the U.S. market and the close to \$3 trillion of foreign goods and services Americans buy every year to bludgeon allies and foes alike into rewriting trade pacts and offering favorable concessions. For the most part, the rest of the world stood firm, either granting minor compromises or simply fighting back. The EU, Canada, and Mexico all retaliated against Trump's metal tariffs by slapping duties on U.S. products, all while clearing a path for the very thing that Trump claims to be striving to prevent: a dominant China and a diminished U.S.

9. More than 460 rockets were fired at Israel.

Last November was a turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, when Israel faced the most intense rocket barrage from Gaza since the 2014 war, as Palestinian resistant groups opened fire in response to a botched Israeli commando raid inside the besieged Strip. The rockets and mortars filled the skies with explosions and sent thousands of illegal Israeli settlers fleeing to bomb shelters. The fighting forced Tel Aviv to head towards a ceasefire deal. "The Occupation and its supporters must understand that unless Palestinians live in peace, they won't live in peace. Playing with the lives of Palestinians can't be without a price," Islamic Jihad said after the deal.

10. America is isolated and the world is doing great.

Trump's vision for U.S. foreign policy of "America First" has led to "America Isolated." The U.S. is standing alone on more key global issues than ever before. And America's seductive sheen of "soft power" has been diminished. In Iran, Russia, China, all hopes that Trump would improve relations and usher in a new period of cooperation, are dead. On balance, the tectonic plates of global power are shifting toward a multilateral system of global governance and cooperation.

So there you have it. Despite Trump in the White House and the rise of right-wing movements around the globe, 2018 was still full of good things. Who knows, this might even mark the winding down of the disastrous wars that the U.S. has waged on itself and the rest of the world for so many years.

Zaria massacre: How 4 undergraduate from the same Family were killed

By Waziri Isa

ZARIA — Two years on, the horrible experience of December 12-13, 2015 has persisted, like an indelible paint in the eye of my heart. How could I ever forget? It will ever remain a dark day for the remaining days of my life. That was the day I lost four of my children— three boys and a girl; all university undergraduates during the tragic band brutal attack on members of the Islamic Movement in Nigerian by President Buhari's Army led by General Buratai in Zaria.

For my family, the day started like any other day. That day coincided with the 1 of Rabi'ul Awwal in the Islamic Calendar. That is the birth month of the Prophet (SAWA). It was supposed to be a joyous month, full of festivities. To kick start the merry making, will be a ceremonial change of flag at the Hussainiyah Centre in Zaria later that day. No one wants to miss that symbolic flag hoisting, signifying a transition from the sad season of Al Muharram, in which the brutal killing of the grandson of the Prophet, Imam Hussein took place and the fortieth day commemoration of my martyrdom as well as the death of the Prophet in Safar. Flags change from black to green over all domes of Islamic centres otherwise known as Husseiniyyah all over the world. Mood changes as well from sadness to happiness. Even the mode of dressing changes from a predominantly black theme to a more colourful and brighter one. There was absolutely no premonition that something ominous was lurking in the corner.

I set out to drop my children earlier at the Hussainiyah venue, so that they can contribute in getting the venue ready for the festive occasion. First signs of problems however appeared as I approached the centre, when I heard sound of gunshots. The roads were blocked and people were being diverted. I tried to enquire what the problem was and someone told me that soldiers were shooting Shiites. When I asked for what reasons, he simply told me, better find your way out of here fast so it doesn't affect you! I wondered whether if this was what the Sheikh had repeatedly told us, that there were attempts by the government to attack the Islamic Movement. I was present some weeks earlier when the Sheikh had informed us that he got security reports that the military was trying to perfect a scenario where they would tell the world that the military was attacked by the Shiites and then use that as an excuse to descend on every member of the movement in a massacre.

I therefore decided to follow the diversion and take my children to the Sheikh's house instead. As I dropped them, I told them I would get back home and pick others. I told them

to alert me when the Sheikh is ready for the Programme. The call never came until late in the night. It turned out to be a distress call from one of my sons and not that Sheikh was to conduct any programme. It was about 10pm. He told me that he had been shot by the army at the residence of the leader. The first instinct as a father was to rush to where my son was shot but I was told by my son that all the roads leading to the sheikh's residence had been blocked by the army. While still weighing my options, another of my sons called to inform me that the army were pointing their guns at him! An hour later, he called me to say he had been shot too in the leg. At that time, I could hear gun shots in the back ground. At about 1 am, I got another distress call but this time around, it was from my daughter, who told me she was shot on her belly. She was talking to me in a way she had never talked before! She said she knows we would not see again until we meet in Heavens before the Prophet(S). She said she was lucky to attain martyrdom. I felt some sense of helplessness because I couldn't go to help them because the roads leading to the residence were blocked.

The following day, my eldest son called to tell me that there were hundreds of corpses everywhere and he was among the few still surviving souls in the place at the time. He told me that the soldiers had trapped them and he doesn't know where other people were or if they were killed. I encouraged him to keep praying and as we were talking, he informed me that the soldiers were approaching him with guns and that he isn't sure I will ever get to speak with him again. Bye-Bye Daddy, I love you but I love the Prophet even much more! Then the line went off. He was also killed.

At the time my son first called me that Saturday night told me that he was dying because of so much blood loss, I was devastated because I could not go to help them. All I could do was to make some quick contacts to see if this madness could be stopped. I called Reverend Father Matthew Hassan Kukah to appeal to the government to stop the killing in Zaria. I also called Reverend Hayep in Kaduna and reported to him what was going on. Both tried their best but it was futile. Apparently the die had long been cast by the government. With the knowledge of hindsight now, it was obvious that it was a premeditated mass murder! What is even more painful is that after killing these children, they denied us access to their corpses so that we could pray for them and bury them appropriately. They were buried in mass graves. What offense have we committed to deserve this sort of oppression?

Initially, the government had thought they would have killed every one of us. Then, there would be nobody to tell our

story. They quickly rushed to Human Rights Commission to report that we had wanted to assassinate the Chief of Army Staff, in order to change the storyline. They didn't then admit that they massively killed people. The government used the might of the state to embark on massive campaign of misinformation and calumny against us. They massively demolished structures and properties associated with us without following due process. When the International outcry by Human Rights bodies started to put pressure on them, they agreed they would institute a Judicial Commission of Inquiry. When they did, it was a one-sided one, with people known to be vehemently opposed to us as members. Some had authored tens of books against us, calling for our massacre anyway. The government next ensured we never get heard even at the panel. In spite of all these, there was a confession of existence of mass grave with at least 347 bodies. Before then, the government had refused to acknowledge that they massacred innocent people in Zaria, including my four undergraduate children.

The panel had no option but to agree that the Army carried out a massacre and held the Military Officers culpable. The government however rejected that narrative and rather outlawed the Islamic Movement, as if to say we are second class citizens with no rights to even exist, let alone be free to associate, or have a right of conscience, religion and all that. You can see that again the government has constituted yet another Inquiry panel, who also took deliberate steps to ensure that we are never heard. However, no matter the outcome of the panel set up by the government, the ultimate verdict on what happened and who is culpable would be determined by God on the Day of Judgment.

What was most painful was the fact that as the only graduate in my family, I believe I would train my children to become useful citizens that would contribute to the development of the country. I did not only lose them but I also did not have the dignity of praying for and giving them a befitting burial as they were all burnt and given mass burial by the army. Although I am devastated by the death of my four children, the family have taken solace in the fact that even prophets were killed for what they believed in. The Prophet's children, who were the rightly guided Imams, were killed one after the other. Christians believe Jesus Christ was killed according to the biblical narration. How did Mary take it? She left things to God. They referred everything to divine justice. We have overcome it. We have left everything to God, but never forgotten. I had fourteen children, so the government still has ten more to kill. If they think that killing will kill an ideology, they are in for the greatest surprise of their lives.

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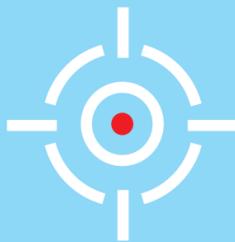
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UNESCO national commission, Tehran Municipality discuss co-op

HEALTH TEHRAN — Iranian National Commission for UNESCO and Tehran Municipality discussed increasing cooperation to promote Tehran citizens' social well-being as well as making the city more accessible to people with disabilities.

In a meeting with Valiollah Shojapurian a Tehran Municipality official, secretary general of Iranian National Commission for UNESCO, Hojatollah Ayoubi, said the two organizations should join efforts to raise awareness about disabilities among citizens, to educate people about their citizenship rights and to encourage them to increase their participation in social affairs.

"Every activity for promotion of social rights in Iran, should be recorded and reported to UNESCO, so that the world have a clear image of Iran's social status," Ayoubi remarked.

Over the meeting, Shojapurian, the deputy director for social and cultural affairs at Tehran Municipality, announced the organization shares similar goals with UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Committee in Iran, so that the two organizations can define many new health and education projects to collaborate on.

"Developing data banks about the number of people living in Tehran's



Developing data banks about the number of people living in Tehran's informal settlements and their condition, running educational and cultural programs for residents of run-down areas and giving them medical services are examples of such shared goals.

informal settlements and their condition, running educational and cultural programs for residents of run-down areas and giving them medical services are examples of such shared goals. These programs contribute to sustain development of cities and promotion of city life," he further stated.

According to Shojapurian, another potential field of cooperation between municipality and UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Committee in Iran are programs to empower and educate vulnerable groups such as women and people with disability; this includes giving health education to the

kids, women, the physically-challenged and the elderly.

"Transformation of urban areas to meet the needs of people with special needs and supporting NGOs in furthering their social contributions are among our other missions," he further noticed.

Over the meeting, Shahindokht Molavardi, the head of UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Committee in Iran, announced that a national project for educating citizens about their social rights is being developed and soon the media and other cultural bodies will be called on to participate in its implementation.

In December, on the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities, Iranian Welfare Minister Mohammad Shariatmadari called on Tehran and other metropolises' mayors to start making cities accessible for the physically challenged.

Shariatmadari announced one third of the budget at Iran's Welfare Organization should be allocated to rehabilitation services for people with disabilities.

According to Shariatmadari, the law on the rights of people with disabilities is good but most importantly it should be implemented and NGOs active in this field should ask for the proper budget allocation for the law.

Iran to host Pharmapack Middle East 2019 expo

HEALTH TEHRAN — Pharmapack Middle East 2019 exposition will be held in Iran's Kish Island from January 30 to February 1, Mehr news agency reported.

Chemical and pharmaceutical packaging as well as the active pharmaceutical ingredient industry (API) are the main subjects of the exhibition.

API is the organ by which active pharmaceutical ingredients are manufactured from raw materials through both chemical and physical means.

Around 110 domestic and 20 foreign companies will take part in the event. India, Bulgaria, Poland, Russia, China, Italy, Germany, Turkey, the UAE, Switzerland and the U.S. are among the participants in the exhibition.

The exhibition gives an opportunity to packaging and pharmaceutical experts to build up relationships with each other as well as their target market. It will also presents world pharmaceutical companies with investment opportunities in the Middle East.

It is also aimed to invite ambassadors of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries and register 28 commercial delegations who come from countries that are possible destinations of Iran's pharmaceutical exports. Introducing advantages and opportunities of investment in Kish Island is another objective of the exhibition.



Average 10 year-old has already eaten more sugar than maximum recommended for an adult in UK

Children have on average already eaten more sugar than the maximum amount recommended for an 18-year-old by the time they reach their 10th birthday, new research suggests.

The recommended maximum amount of sugar for 10-year-olds is 20-24 grams a day, but according to figures released by Public Health England (PHE), children are consuming an average of 52.2 grams a day – equivalent to 13 cubes a day and eight more than the recommended level.

The data, gathered from household eating habits in across the UK, was released as PHE offers parents tips on how to get youngsters eating less sugar. It said taking different choices of yogurts, drinks and cereals could cut a child's sugar intake by half.

PHE said food and beverage manufacturers have also responded to calls for lower sugar content, making it easier for parents to find alternative options.

Chronic fatigue syndrome: New evidence of immune role

Researchers recently investigated the immune system's role in chronic fatigue system in unprecedented depth. The findings might help design future treatments.

Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), or myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME), is a mysterious condition.

The main symptom of CFS is extreme and often unrelenting fatigue. Others include muscle and joint pain, sleep issues, and flu-like symptoms.

Researchers do not yet know what causes CFS. Suggestions include viral or bacterial infection, changes in the immune system, hormone imbalance, and mental health conditions.

Because of this, they have not yet been able to design a test that can diagnose CFS, and current treatments only relieve symptoms.

Over the years, interest in the role that the immune system might play in CFS has grown.

Often, people with CFS report that their symptoms be-

gan following an infection or other insult to the immune system. These reports are common, but once symptoms have appeared, it is impossible to assess how the body was behaving before they arrived.

Researchers from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Neuroscience at King's College London in the United Kingdom used an interesting model to delve deeper.

Interferon-alpha

The researchers investigated people who were taking a treatment for hepatitis C called interferon-alpha. Interferon-alpha works by triggering the immune system in the same way that a significant infection would.

People who take this course of medication often report CFS-like symptoms during the treatment.

A smaller number of people go on to experience a CFS-like condition that can last 6 months after treatment has ended. The symptoms include fatigue, cognitive impairment, and

joint and muscle aches.

The scientists followed 55 people who underwent this treatment. They assessed their fatigue levels and measured immune markers before interferon-alpha treatment began.

With this baseline information, they could monitor how each individual's immune system reacted to interferon-alpha. Of the participants, 18 went on to develop CFS-like symptoms. The scientists have now published their findings in the journal Psychoneuroendocrinology.

Altered immune response

In those who went on to experience CFS-like symptoms, the researchers observed greater immune responses to the interferon-alpha treatment.

More specifically, this group produced around twice as much interleukin-10 and interleukin-6. Both of these molecules are important immune system messengers.

(Source: Medical News Today)

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Over 75,000 Pakistani pilgrims visit Iran in 2 months



A view of holy shrine of Imam Reza (AS) in Mashhad

TOURISM TEHRAN — Over 75,000 Pakistani pilgrims visited religious places across Iran from September to November 2018, which is deemed as a record number, Pakistan Today reported on Wednesday.

"An unprecedented surge in religious tourism between Pakistan and Iran was witnessed during the months of Muharram and Safar this Islamic year," the report said.

People from Iraq, Republic of Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Turkey and Pakistan respectively constituted the highest travelers to Iran during the first seven months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2018), according to statistics compiled by Iran tourism organization.

Mashhad, which embraces more than 900 hotels, apartment hotels and guest houses, is the prime destination for Pakistani travelers who come to go on pilgrimage to the holy shrine of Imam Reza (AS), the eighth Shia Imam.

Visits to Belqeys citadel up 55%



HERITAGE TEHRAN — The number of visitors setting foot on Belqeys citadel rose by 55 percent during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2018), from the same period a year earlier.

The ruined citadel, which is sometimes referred to as Shahr-e Belqeys ("The city of Belqeys") is located in northeastern North Khorasan province. It lies at a short distance from the city of Esfaryen.

"A total of 60, 892 people toured the historical city during the first nine months of the year," provincial tourism chief Habib Yazdanpanah said, ISNA reported.

Remnants of the citadel, family lodgings, irrigation channels, a cistern, and a hypostyle hall are amongst objects so far been unearthed in Belqeys during rounds of excavation.

Belqeys is Iran's second largest mudbrick citadel after the UNESCO-registered Bam citadel.

Iran attracts higher foreign tourists despite sanctions

TOURISM TEHRAN — Iran hosted over five million foreign nationals during the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2018), up 57 percent year on year, as the U.S. has snapped sanctions back in place to cripple Iran's economy.

"A total of 5.520 million travelers visited Iran during the first eight months of the year, which shows a 57 percent increase year on year," CHTN quoted a senior tourism official on Wednesday.

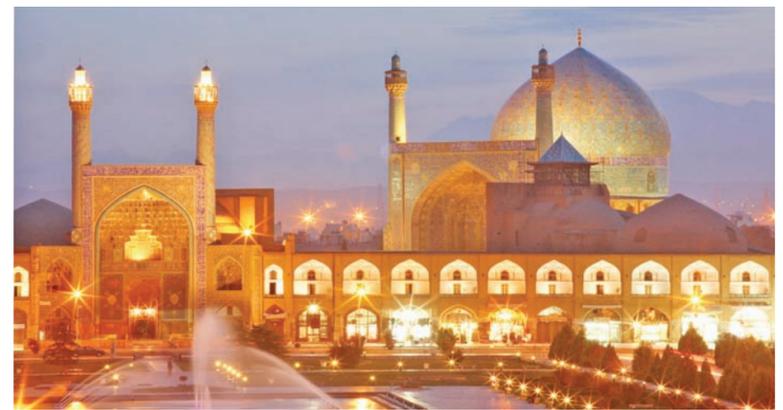
"Tourism is one of the means that help [foreign] people see realities (what is going on in the country), and despite [sanctions-related] pressures in recent months, foreign tourists are more inclined to visit Iran and

getting acquainted with its people," Vali Teymouri said.

U.S. sanctions together with its anti-Iran propaganda campaign, however, has lessened Western travelers to the Islamic Republic but the country is doing its best to attract more visitors from neighbors.

Over the past couple of years, Air France, British Airways and KLM Royal Dutch Airlines have stopped flights to Tehran due to what they publicized as "negative results and financial outlook."

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.



Detail shows UNESCO-registered Imam Square in Isfahan, central Iran.

Iranian cities, free zone closer to visa-free travel for Iraqi nationals



TOURISM TEHRAN — Iran is considering to grant visa-free entry to Iraqi nationals visiting southwestern cities of Abadan and Khorramshahr and Arvand Free Zone as well.

"Visa-free entrance to Abadan, Khorramshahr and Arvand Free Zone will be resumed for Iraqi travelers as of next week," manager quoted Arvand Free Zone Organization CEO Esmail Zamani as saying on Tuesday.

However, he didn't announce a specific date for implementing the scheme.

"According to an agreement, Iraqi tourists can travel to Arvand Free Zone with just valid passports without the need for

getting visas." Up to 1,000 Iraqi nationals are forecast to visit the free zone per day, he added. "It is expected that economic thrive will be back to Abadan and Khorramshahr with mass arrivals of Iraqi travelers in Arvand Free Zone."

Some two million Iraqis visited Iran during the first seven months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21), turning Iraq into Iran's largest source of tourists.

Arvand Free Zone is situated at the confluence of the two major rivers of Karun and Arvand in Khuzestan province bordering Iraq and Kuwait.

Kermanshah exports \$8m of handicrafts in 6 months



HERITAGE TEHRAN — Handicrafts exports from Kermanshah province reached \$8 million during the first six months of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2018).

"Handmade pairs of Givah (a kind of lightweight traditional footwear) constituted the lion's share of exports [during the period]," local official Parvaneh Heydari said, CHTN reported.

The western province exported \$18 million worth of handicrafts during the past [Iranian calendar] year, she added. Some 11,000 people are currently

engaged as crafters across Kermanshah where 60 fields of handicrafts are practiced, Heydari explained.

In late 2017, Marivan, a historical city in Kermanshah, officially celebrated being named a world crafts city for Kalash, in an event attended by Ghada Hijavi, the head of World Crafts Council-Asia Pacific Region.

Kalash is usually made from carpet yarn, leather and other raw materials so that it lets the air circulate from its tiny pores. They traditionally come in blue, orange, and black as well.

Fishermen make medieval discovery in Severn Estuary

Fishermen from Black Rock Lave Net Fishery made the discovery on their fishing grounds just off the coast of Port-skewett in Monmouthshire in south-east Wales.

The baskets had been buried in the river bank for hundreds of years until a recent storm in the estuary washed away the layers of mud, sand and silt to reveal a glimpse into the history of the area.

It is now the close season for the Black Rock Lave Net Fishery, but the fishermen continue to watch the fishing grounds and often find many things of interest such as these baskets.

This isn't the first time the group have found artefacts such as these. However, as Martin Morgan, secretary of the fishery, explained, it is unusual to uncover so many baskets grouped together.

Mr Morgan said: "The baskets would have been baited and pegged to the estuary bed at low tide. The catch would have been green eels and lamprey.

"They are made of willow and hazel in an urn shape with a non-return built into the neck. The overall length



Ancient fishing baskets thought to be at least 600 years old have been unearthed in the Severn Estuary

is around two feet." Previous finds made by the fishermen have been recorded by Cadw and carbon dated by Reading university to be from around the 12th to the 15th century. These baskets were found in the same area and look to be of a similar design.

Mr Morgan explained that members of the fishery were hoping to get their most recent find carbon dated but added: "Once exposed, they are quickly destroyed by the tide so our fishermen record details of them. Time is of the essence.

"People have fished this estuary for thousands of years, and it's great for our fishermen to uncover and record some history."

Lave net fishing, as practiced by Mr Morgan and his colleagues at Black Rock, is an ancient fishing method, recorded on the estuary in the 17th century. However, it is thought to have been around for even longer.

The Black Rock Lave Net Fishermen are now the last traditional salmon fishery on the Welsh region of the estuary. (Source: southwalesargus.co.uk)

What you need to know before your first trip abroad

Making sure you have a hotel room and a flight is just the beginning. Here are some tips to help you plan your first international trip.

Travel is unpredictable, and sometimes that's a good thing. You spot a humpback whale during your boat tour, for example. Other times, those unpredictable travel moments are utterly aggravating, like when bad weather cancels your flight or the hotel you've booked can't seem to find your reservation.

Obviously you want to minimize the frustrating experiences as much as you can. This is especially important if it's your first time traveling outside of the country and you might not know what to expect. From passports to jet lag, here are a few tips for a smooth first trip abroad.

Save cash with boutique hostels
Despite their longstanding reputation of being grungy crash pads, some hostels are downright luxurious. In recent years, there's been a trend toward boutique hostels: upscale options with cafes, fun community activities, and well-decorated rooms.

You'll still have to share a space (and a bathroom) with fellow travelers, but you'll save a wad of cash. Some of the most upscale hostels charge only \$30 a night, depending on the destination. Start your search on sites like HostelGeeks.com and HostelWorld.com.

Set a travel alert on your credit cards

Before using your credit or debit card abroad, call your carrier and place a travel alert on your account (you may also be able to do this on their website). This way, the credit card company won't mistake your foreign transactions for fraud and freeze your card.

While you're at it, ask about your bank or credit card company's policy on foreign transaction fees, too. Many cards still charge a fee for customers to use the card abroad (although the best credit cards don't), usually as a small percentage of every purchase. Between all the restaurant stops and souvenir shopping, these fees can add up fast. If your card comes with this fee, consider applying for a card with no foreign transaction fees before your trip.

Be wary of bank fees

Most foreign countries have easily accessible A.T.M.s that will accept credit and debit cards from U.S. banks. But before you leave for your trip, look up your bank's fees and policies for withdrawing cash at international A.T.M.s and see if they're part of the Global A.T.M. Alliance Network or Allpoint network. If so, and you use an in-network A.T.M., you can at least avoid usage fees, though you'll probably still be charged an international transaction fee.

Prepare for jet lag

The most effective way to beat jet lag, according to a study published in Sleep Medicine Clinics, is to set your circadian rhythm — the internal clock that tells you when to be sleepy and when to be alert — to your new time zone as fast as possible. "We recommend resetting the circadian clock at least partially toward the destination time zone before flying," the study's authors write.

This can be tricky if you live in San Francisco and you're traveling to London, but the closer you can get to your destination time, the better. That might mean going to bed earlier or getting up early, depending on the time zone.

Have a transportation plan from the airport

When your flight lands in your destination city, you'll probably be itching to get out of the airport. In addition to taxi service, most international airports are equipped with direct commuter trains or shuttles that will take you to the city center, and you'll follow the baggage claim signs to the appropriate shuttle or train stop. At London's Heathrow Airport, for example, you can take the Heathrow Express to get to Central London. And the Leonardo Express shuttle at Fiumicino airport will take you to Rome's central train station, Termini. Of course, most airports also have cheaper



public transportation options that may be a little trickier to navigate. You can take the London Underground from Heathrow on the Piccadilly line, for example, but you'll have to figure out which stops and transfers to make to get to your final destination. Google Maps is an excellent navigator, but research your route beforehand so you're prepared upon arrival (especially if the airport lacks free Wi-Fi). You can find train prices, schedules and connecting shuttle information on the airport's website, or use a database like iFly or World Airport Guides, which list transit information for airports around the world. (Source: The New York Times)

ROUND THE GLOBE

Saloum Delta

Fishing and shellfish gathering have sustained human life in the 5,000 km² property, which is formed by the arms of three rivers in Senegal.

The site comprises brackish channels encompassing over 200 islands and islets, mangrove forest, an Atlantic marine environment, and dry forest.

The region of the Saloum Delta is a remarkable testimony to the synergy between a natural environment with extensive biodiversity and a style of human development that is still present albeit fragile.



Sustainable shellfish gathering and fishing practices in brackish water, and the processing of the harvest for its preservation and export was developed here. The shell mounds and the tumulus mounds form specific and exceptional cultural landscapes.

The numerous shell mounds in the Saloum Delta are generally well-preserved and they sometimes have imposing dimensions. They are direct testimony of sustainable and very ancient socio-economic practices. Over the centuries, they have led to the formation of numerous man-made islets contributing to the stabilization of the delta's land and channels.

With their characteristic vegetation within the delta's natural environment, the shell mounds form typical cultural landscapes. Some mounds include tumuli; they form, with their baobab vegetation and their undulating forms, funerary sites with specific landscape features.

(Source: UNESCO)

GWM officially launches ORA brand, new energy strategy

Great Wall Motor (GWM) New Energy officially launched its all-new brand ORA, together with its new energy strategy in Baoding, Hebei Province on Aug. 20. Ning Shuyong, vice president of GWM said that ORA will be a 100% forward-engineered pure electric vehicle brand under GWM.

In the meantime, GWM also announced its product plan over next few years. By 2025, GWM New Energy will launch 12 new models under various brands like ORA, Spotlight and WEY. The 12 new models consists of three BEV models from ME platform, one crossover BEV model and four mid-to-large PHEV models, two compact BEV models co-manufactured with BMW, one large BEV model and one large FEV model.

ORA, which unveiled at Auto China 2018, had launched two electric concepts,



the ORA R1 and the ORA R2, as well as a pure electric crossover SUV, the ORA iQ.

Moreover, the brand also announced that it will launch its first hydrogen-powered

model by 2022.

It is revealed that ORA branded products will be based on ME platform, which is an EV-exclusive architecture platform. The ORA iQ will hit the market in August, while the ORA R1 and R2 will go on sale in the first and third quarter of 2019 respectively. In addition, ORA brand will officially launch a new model with range of 500km in 2021.

ORA also acts as the mobility brand of GWM. Apart from releasing product strategy, GWM also launched ORA mobility brand, which will start an investment of RMB 1 billion for its first phase. Based on Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei and targeting East China, Hainan, and southwest China, the ORA plans to complete deployment in 200 cities and expand its global footprint in 2025.

(Source: Gasgoo)

NASA probe believed to have passed distant space rock on landmark mission

A NASA explorer is believed to have reached the solar system's outermost region early Tuesday morning, flying close to a space rock 20 miles long and billions of miles from Earth on a mission to gather clues about the creation of the solar system.

The body is farther from Earth than any other that has had such a close encounter with a NASA probe, scientists believe.

The New Horizons probe was slated to reach the "third zone" in the uncharted heart of the Kuiper Belt at 12:33 a.m. Eastern. Scientists will not have confirmation of its successful arrival until the probe communicates its whereabouts through NASA's Deep Space Network at 10:28 a.m. Eastern, about 10 hours later.

Once it enters the peripheral layer of the belt, containing icy bodies and leftover fragments from the solar system's creation, the probe will get its first close-up glance of Ultima Thule, a cool mass shaped like a giant peanut, using seven on-board instruments.

Scientists had not discovered Ultima Thule when the probe was launched, according to NASA, making the mission unique in that respect. In 2014, astronomers found Thule using the Hubble Space Telescope and selected it for New Horizons' extended mission in 2015.

"Anything's possible out there in this very unknown region," John Spencer, deputy project scientist for New Horizons, told reporters on Monday at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory in Maryland.

Launched in January 2006, New Horizons embarked on a 4 billion mile journey toward the solar system's frigid edge to study the dwarf planet Pluto and its five moons.

During a 2015 fly-by, the probe found Pluto to be slightly larger than previously thought. In March, it revealed that methane-rich dunes were on the icy dwarf planet's surface.

After trekking 1 billion miles beyond Pluto into the Kuiper Belt, New Horizons will now seek clues about the formation of the solar system and its planets.

As the probe flies 2,200 miles (3,500 km) above Thule's surface, scientists hope it will detect the chemical composition of its atmosphere and terrain in what NASA says will be the closest observation of a body so remote.

"We are straining the capabilities of this spacecraft, and by tomorrow we'll know how we did," New Horizons principal investigator Alan Stern said during the news conference at the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory in Maryland. "There are no second chances for New Horizons."

While the mission marks the farthest close-encounter of an object within our solar system, NASA's Voyager 1 and 2, a pair of deep space probes launched in 1977, have reached greater distances on a mission to survey extrasolar bodies. Both probes are still operational.

(Source: Reuters)



A multi-person brain-to-brain interface for direct collaboration between brains

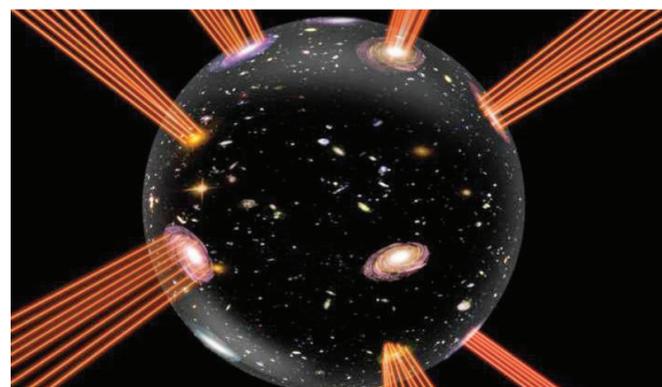


We present BrainNet which, to our knowledge, is the first multi-person non-invasive direct brain-to-brain interface for collaborative problem solving. The interface combines electroencephalography (EEG) to record brain signals and transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to deliver information noninvasively to the brain. The interface allows three human subjects to collaborate and solve a task using direct brain-to-brain communication. Two of the three subjects are "Senders" whose brain signals are decoded using real-time EEG data analysis to extract decisions about whether to rotate a block in a Tetris-like game before it is dropped to fill a line. The Senders' decisions are transmitted via the Internet to the brain of a third subject, the "Receiver," who cannot see the game screen. The decisions are delivered to the Receiver's brain via magnetic stimulation of the occipital cortex. The Receiver integrates the information received and makes a decision using an

EEG interface about either turning the block or keeping it in the same position. A second round of the game gives the Senders one more chance to validate and provide feedback to the Receiver's action. We evaluated the performance of BrainNet in terms of (1) Group-level performance during the game; (2) True/False positive rates of subjects' decisions; (3) Mutual information between subjects. Five groups of three subjects successfully used BrainNet to perform the Tetris task, with an average accuracy of 0.813. Furthermore, by varying the information reliability of the Senders by artificially injecting noise into one Sender's signal, we found that Receivers are able to learn which Sender is more reliable based solely on the information transmitted to their brains. Our results raise the possibility of future brain-to-brain interfaces that enable cooperative problem solving by humans using a "social network" of connected brains.

(Source: arxiv.org)

Cosmologists claim universe is riding on an expanding bubble in an extra dimension



Authors of the new model claim their creation is compatible with string theory's current framework.

Cosmologists at Uppsala University in Sweden have developed a new model for the structure of the universe.

In a new paper published in the journal Physical Review Letters, scientists claim the universe is riding on an expanding bubble in an extra dimension. The new model could help astrophysicists unravel the mysteries of dark matter.

According to the most popular models of cosmic evolution, the ubiquitous presence of dark matter accounts for the universe's continued expansion. But little is understood about the mysterious matter.

Scientists previously looked to string theory for answers. String theory posits that all matter exists as tiny vibrating filaments. String theory also demands more than three dimensions.

Some proponents of string theory claim their models successfully account for dark energy. But many astrophysicists

consider string theory models flawed and unworkable.

In the new model, the entirety of the universe is contained on the edge of an expanding bubble. All of the matter contained within the universe is linked with strings stretching into a fourth dimension.

Researchers think the new model can also explain the development of black hole.

"Gravitational collapse of the string endpoints in four dimensions results in an unstable black string solution in five dimensions," researchers wrote in their paper.

Authors of the new model claim their creation is compatible with string theory's current framework. According to the new research, the new model also allows for multiple bubbles and multiple universes.

"The Uppsala scientists' model provides a new, different picture of the creation and future fate of the Universe, while it may also pave the way for methods of testing string theory," according to a news release.

(Source: UPI)

Vast stretch of underwater Ice Age sand dunes preserved as stone

A vast stretch of submerged ancient sand dunes, found off the east coast of Australia, have scientists scratching their heads.

The dunes are remarkably preserved, despite being drowned by rising seas.

Scientists think this is because they turned to stone before disappearing under the waves 12,000 years ago.

And they are like an ancient version of the World Heritage-listed Fraser Island sand dunes nearby.

"The site would have been an island exactly like Fraser Island, surrounded by water but 40 kilometres away from the current shoreline," said Tiago Passos, a PhD student at the University of Sydney who was part of a team that made the discovery.

The 70km stretch of dunes, discovered on the sea floor between Fraser and Moreton islands, has stumped scientists, who say such ancient structures should have been destroyed by rising water.

"I think the intriguing thing is what mechanism enabled them to be so well preserved," said Mr Passos, whose study on the dunes has been accepted for publication in the Australian Journal of Earth Sciences.

Humans would have been around at this cooler and drier time, and could well have felt the sand of these dunes between their toes.

But after the dunes hardened, walking over them would have felt like walking on a rock, Mr Passos said.

The dunes were first discovered by an expedition to the Great Barrier Reef that mapped the sea floor at a location called Barwon Bank on the Fraser Shelf, 50km north of Moreton Island.



Sonar imaging picked up curved underwater structures 60 metres below the waves.

"They were originally thought to be part of an ancient reef," said Mr Passos, who analysed the images and samples of what turned out to be rock-like structures.

Mr Passos's investigation revealed these curved features were not a reef but in fact dunes made of coarse grains of sand.

He said the underwater dunes are almost identical in shape to those on the nearby Fraser Island.

"This makes our case stronger that these features are sand dunes," he said.

But, he added, there is one major difference between the famous Fraser Island dunes and their underwater counterparts.

The 17,000-year-old sand grains in the submerged dunes contain calcium carbonate rather than quartz, which makes

up most of the world's sand dunes today.

Mr Passos and colleagues argue the dunes survived the ages because, over time, the carbonate sand grains were cemented into rock through physical and chemical changes — a process called "diagenesis".

"Contact with fresh water in rain solidified the sediments," Mr Passos said.

An ancient version of Fraser Island
Mr Passos said the "palaeo-dunes" would have formed part of an island "analogous" to Fraser Island, which, at 122km long, is the biggest sand island in the world today.

Unfortunately, the parabolic Fraser Island dunes or any other present-day dunes are not likely to also survive being inundated by rising seas, he added.

"They would be eroded as they don't have enough carbonate content to turn them into rock," he said.

Marine geologist Dr James Daniell of James Cook University, who was not involved in the research but has collaborated with some of the authors, said the dunes were "pretty significant features".

"Some of them are 10 to 15m high," he said.

"What's special is they are very similar to what we see on modern-day Fraser Island and Stradbroke Island."

Dr Kevin Welsh from the University of Queensland, who studies the formation of quartz sand dunes at places such as Cooloola and Fraser Island, agreed.

He said the discovery could help scientists understand how such sand dunes form.

"It shows these parabolic sand dunes can form under quite different conditions and with different materials," he said.

(Source: ABC News)

Leafcutter ant 'compost piles' produce potent greenhouse gases

Leafcutter ants are known for producing lots of trash. In fact, the species *Atta colombica* can create bathtub-size, thigh-high mounds of refuse that contain not only leaves, but also ant poop, bacteria, and dead ants. Now, researchers have discovered these massive compost piles are potent sources of greenhouse gases.

Researchers analyzed the exhalations of 22 leafcutter mounds in southwestern Costa Rica. They found that in the humid, oxygen-poor conditions of the piles, bacteria produce



prodigious amounts of methane and nitrous oxide. Levels of methane seeping from the mounds were about 20 times higher than those emanating from the surrounding forest floor. But the big surprise was nitrous oxide, which left the mounds in concentrations 1000 times or more above background levels, the researchers report online today in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B.

Such rates rival or exceed those from wastewater treatment plants and dairy

manure lagoons. But how they affect the climate is unknown — that's because coming up with an estimate of total emissions, from *A. colombica* and the nearly four dozen other species of leafcutter ants, might be next to impossible. However, their research may have explained one mystery: why other studies have detected widely varying levels of methane and nitrous oxide in the regions where some of these ants live.

(Source: sciencemag.org)

Geckos can run on water

A small lizard is among the elite group of animals that race across the surface of water.

Many insects can skate, stride or whirl around on the surface of the water. But larger animals usually have to swim.

There are a few exceptions. The famed Basilisk lizard zips along, slapping down its feet so fast that it seems to be outrunning the possibility of sinking.

A few bird species, like Western grebes, eiders and mallards run along the water as a prelude to taking off.

That seemed to be about it, until researchers found Asian house geckos, in Singapore, apparently running across the surface of water.

They weren't fully upright, like the basilisk lizards, but they definitely weren't swimming. It looked like most of their body was above the water line, and they were going fast.

Their water speed was "virtually indistinguishable from their land running speed," according to Jasmine A. Nirody.

Dr. Nirody, who will start research at Rockefeller University this coming year, and Judy Jinn, were graduate students in the lab of Robert J. Full at the University of California, Berkeley, when they decided to subject the geckos' water running to greater scrutiny. They built a tank, acquired some house geckos and used video to document the geckos' water running in a controlled environment so that it could be mathematically analyzed.



As they and their colleagues reported in Current Biology, geckos use both running and swimming motions.

They run on all four legs, slapping the water with their feet the way grebes and basilisks do, finishing the leg movements with paddle-like strokes that help raise most of their body above the water surface and push them forward.

They also swim, using their tails the way alligators do, in an undulation that can only be seen from above.

Also, their skin is very slippery, or hydrophobic, and that helps their bodies hydroplane as the feet and tail power them forward.

The researchers also showed that surface tension was important. When they added soap to the water in the test tank to reduce surface tension, the geckos floundered, moving at a much slower speed and failing to get enough of the body above water to hydroplane.

The soapy water struggles were apparently exhausting, Dr. Nirody said, because some of the geckos just stopped, as if the effort was just too much.

Some actually sank to the bottom of the tank and stayed underwater. They can hold their breath for quite a while, Dr. Nirody said. She speculated that this behavior might be an alternative to the fast running, which seems to be a response to fear.

If you can't outrun them, save your strength and hide on the bottom. Smart geckos.

(Source: The NYT)

Tehran transport fleet to add 13 articulated buses

ENVIRONMENT TEHRAN — Thirteen new articulated buses have been purchased and will be added to Tehran public transport fleet, Tehran bus operating company's director general Peyman Sanandaji said on Wednesday. Purchasing the buses has been financed through congestion charges, YJC quoted Sanandaji as saying.



Congestion Charge is daily charge for driving a vehicle within the charging zone between 07:00 and 19:00, Saturday to Wednesday in Tehran.

The buses cost about 150 billion rials (nearly \$3.5 million), and will be added to the fleet by the end of the current [Iranian calendar] month of Dey (January 20), he concluded.

Old public transport in the metropolis of Tehran is one of the leading causes of air pollution.

Tehran Mayor Pirouz Hanachi said on Tuesday that Tehran is short of 3,000 buses.

DOE calls on ISRC to become warning center for environment

ENVIRONMENT TEHRAN — The Department of Environment (DOE) chief Issa Kalantari has called on the Iranian Space Research Center (ISRC) to become a warning center for the environment and natural resources. Kalantari made the remarks during a visit to the Iran space technology achievements exhibition held at ISRC on Tuesday, IRNA reported on Wednesday.

"Technology development without knowing how to use it, leads the planet to end up running out of resources and the environment depleted, so no resources will be left for the next generation to live," he lamented.

Criticizing poor environmental policies, Kalantari highlighted that many inappropriate policies being practiced to manage the country's natural resources, especially water, over the past 25 years, has caused 90 percent of the country's fresh water to withdrawn.

Referring to the destruction of rangelands and northern forests, he regretted that the natural and environmental resources are being depleted in a short time, while they have been living for thousands of years before we started living on earth.

Kalantari went on to note that the ISRC must warn the public about the endangered environment, "otherwise we betrayed the next generations".

"Officials must be aware of the environmental issues and risks, ISRC must also warn the country's main decision and policy makers to consider irreparable damages the environment is facing, in their decisions and policies," he explained.

LEARN ENGLISH

Capital Punishment

Professor: It's all for today's class. We will continue our lecture on crime and punishment tomorrow.

A: Do you think we should be tougher on crime?

B: Well, it depends on what you mean.

A: For example, we could bring back the **death penalty** for murder, give longer **prison sentences** for lesser offences and lock up **juvenile offenders**.

B: Those really sound like **Draconian** measures. Firstly, what do you do about **miscarriages of justice** if you've already put innocent people to death?

A: You'd only use **capital punishment** if you were absolutely sure that you'd convicted the right person.

B: But, there've been many cases of wrongful conviction where people have been imprisoned for many years. The authorities were sure at the time, but later it was shown that the evidence was unreliable. In some cases, it'd been **fabricated** by the police.

A: Well, no system of justice can be perfect, but surely there's a good case for longer prison sentences to deter serious crime.

B: I doubt whether they could act as an effective **deterrent** while the detection rate is so low. The best way to prevent crime is to convince people who commit it that they're going to be caught. It doesn't make sense to **divert** all your resources into the prison system.

A: But if you detect more crimes, you'll still need prisons. In my reckoning, if we could lock up more juvenile criminals, they'd learn that they couldn't get away with it. Soft sentences will merely encourage them to do it again.

B: Yes, but remember that prisons are often schools for criminals. To remove crime from society, you really have to tackle its causes.

A: Well, if I were president, I would impose tougher laws and punishment. I would have a peaceful society based on fear of punishment, not consciousness of doing the right thing.

B: You sound like a **dictator**!

A: Well if it works, why not?

Key vocabulary

death penalty: the punishment of death

prison sentence: the amount of time to keep criminals in jail

juvenile offender: underage criminals

Draconian: very strict and severe

miscarriage of justice: an unjust legal decision

capital punishment: punishment of death

fabricate: to make something up to trick people

deterrent: something that prevents people from doing something

divert: to move resources from one thing to another

dictator: someone who rules with absolute power

Supplementary vocabulary

diversion: the act of changing the direction or use of something

authoritarian: expecting or requiring people to obey rules or laws

divisive topic: an issue that causes disagreement between people and causes them to separate into different groups

recidivist: a person who continues to commit crimes even after being caught and punished

rehabilitate: to teach (a criminal in prison) to live a normal and productive life

\$215m to be earmarked for Anzali wetland nano bioremediation

1 → Amid all the contaminations increasing in the wetland for a long period of time, minerals play a major role in causing severe threats to the regions biodiversity, thus the wetland undergone numerous environmental problems, Mehdi Abtahi director of Isfahan Science and Technology Town said.

Sediments, caused by wastewater, creates a thick layer of organic and mineral materials on the wetland's surface water, which will be separated and removed by nanomaterials, he added.

He further noted that in order to evaluate the method's efficiency, a committee comprising of various universities nationwide is established.

He also highlighted that the pilot scheme already has been started on 1,200 hectares of the wetland, and it is planned to be carried out on some other 12,000 hectares.

As per the aforementioned memorandum of understanding about 9 trillion rials (nearly \$215 million) is allotted to the project, he added.

Covering more than 19,000 hectares, the wetland is located near the northern port city of Bandar Anzali, neighboring the Caspian Sea. The wetland was designated as a Ramsar site on June 23, 1975. It is fed by several rivers and separated from the Caspian Sea by a dune system.



Sediments, caused by wastewater, creates a thick layer of organic and mineral materials on the wetland's surface water, which will be separated and removed by nanomaterials.

The lagoon is home to submerged and floating vegetation and also extensive reed beds. It bears international impor-

ance in terms of breeding, staging and wintering water birds. In September 2018, Mustafa Ki-

akojouri, the budget office director of the DOE, regretted that over the past few years, water level has decreased from 11 meters to 3 meters in the wetland.

Environmentalist Mohammad Amin Ma'soumi said in April 2018 that some 150,000 tons of waste was produced and dumped in Bandar Anzali every day which lead to entering of some 90,000 liters of leachate to underground waters and the wetland.

Also in June 2018, Masoud Baqerzadeh, the deputy environment chief for the wetlands, said there were some 105 wetlands in Iran, stretching 3 million hectares of lands, of which about 1.3 million hectares were affected by drought, leading to the total dryness of some 60 wetlands, ILNA reported.

Saeed Pourali, professor of cross-cultural environment management at the Phoenix University Excessive, told Khabaronline in July last year that groundwater and surface water withdrawals, along with continuous droughts, has reduced groundwater levels, resulting in depletion of rivers, lakes and wetlands.

He also added that in addition to climate change, lack of proper use of modern sciences coupled with lack of attention to warnings by officials about water shortage have aggravated the situation.

'More accessible sidewalks and crosswalks for people with disabilities'

SOCIETY TEHRAN — Some 27 percent of the country's crosswalks and sidewalks have become accessible for the people with disabilities, Hossein Nahvinejad, deputy director for Iran's Welfare Organization for rehabilitation affairs has announced.

Referring to the agreement with the Central Bank, Nahvinejad said a system providing services to the visually impaired people is to be launched for the first time in banks, Mehr reported on Wednesday.

"Moreover, a per the arrangements made with the universities classes will be held on ground floor for students with disability so that they can easily attend the classes until the buildings will become accessible for them," he added.

The law concerning the rights of persons with disabilities has obliged the responsible bodies to promote accessibility for these people in the country, he stated, adding, the Welfare Organization also held meetings for the related organizations and signed memorandums of understanding enforce the law.



"So far, 27 to 30 percent of the country's crosswalks and sidewalks has been made suitable for the persons with disabilities to easily pass through," he highlighted.

He went on to explain that some 200 buses in public transport fleet have become accessible for the physically challenged people in Khorasan Razavi province, and another 200 disability-friendly buses have been purchased in Isfahan province.

According to an agreement with the municipality of Lorestan province, sidewalks will become more accessible for people with disabilities and the elderly, he added.

Majlis [the Iranian parliament] approved both general outlines and details of a bill on rights of persons with disabilities in January 2018. The law provides better living conditions for persons with disabilities to no longer feel isolated, additionally, development of disability-friendly cities, health insurance and employment are some of the articles of the law.

Trump to scrap Obama law stopping coal plants poisoning air with mercury

Environmentalists are up in arms over moves by Donald Trump's administration to ease restrictions on coal power plants that would allow mercury and other toxins to be released into the air. Officials are considering loosening regulations set up under Barack Obama that have helped to dramatically cut pollution that can cause respiratory illnesses, as well as learning disabilities and other birth defects in children.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says the cost of regulation outweighs the savings and benefits to human health and the environment, and it wants to change the way the calculations will be made.

Under the 2011 Mercury and Air Toxic Standards (Mats), coal-burning power plants were required to install expensive equipment to cut output of mercury and other polluting chemicals.

The regulation led to a drop in mercury emissions from coal-fired power plants of an estimated 85 per cent.

The proposal is the latest in a long line of steps by President Trump to scrap steps to protect the environment taken under Mr Obama.

The environment has been targeted more than any other policy area under Mr Trump, with changes including allowing

oil and gas drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; loosening rules on capturing methane when drilling for energy; rubber-stamping oil pipelines; ending the Clean Power Plan, repealing the Clean Water Rule, and increasing use of carbon-emitting fossil fuels, as well as pulling out of the Paris accord on climate change.

Coal power plants in the U.S. are the largest single man-made source of mercury, which enters the food chain, mostly through fish.

The World Health Organization says mercury is one of the top 10 chemicals or groups of chemicals of major public health concern.

But since August, the agency has been reconsidering the justification for the regulation that curbs emissions.

Now officials propose using a different cost analysis to evaluate whether it is needed, a move that will go out for a 60-day public consultation.

It paves the way for looser rules and for coal mining companies to challenge the environmental protection in court.

The agency says the crackdown has produced only a few million dollars a year in measurable health benefits and is not "appropriate and necessary" — the test under the country's Clean Air Act.

The change could set a precedent reaching far beyond mercury rules. "It will make it much more difficult for the government to justify environmental regulations in many cases," said Robert N Stavins, a professor of environmental economics at Harvard University, The New York Times reported.

The Trump administration has been trying to support the U.S. coal industry, which has been struggling to compete with natural gas and other cheaper, cleaner forms of energy.

Hal Quinn, head of the National Mining Association, claimed that the Obama administration had carried out "perhaps the largest regulatory accounting fraud perpetrated on American consumers" when it calculated that the health benefits would outweigh the cost of equipment upgrades.

But Democratic Senator Tom Carper, condemned the plan, saying the Trump administration was playing with numbers, ignoring "clear health, environmental and economic benefits to come up with a bottom line that suited the administration's deregulatory aims".

Janet McCabe, a former air-quality official in the Obama administration's Environmental Protection Agency, said that coming one week into a govern-

ment shutdown, and in the lull between Christmas and New Year, "this low-key announcement shouldn't fool anyone — it is a big deal, with significant implications".

U.S. environmental group the Sierra Club condemned the "dangerous and disgraceful" plan.

Mary Anne Hitt, director of the Beyond Coal campaign of the Sierra Club, said: "Trump and Andrew Wheeler [acting head of the agency] just put coal in the stocking and mercury in the drinking water of American moms and kids, in a cynical and dangerous move days after Christmas.

"If this disgraceful proposal is finalised, it will mean that profits corporate polluters rake in while making our kids sick will officially take priority at the EPA over the health of the public and the environment.

"The policy... means more pregnant women, young children, and the elderly will be exposed to deadly neurotoxins and poisons, just so wealthy coal and oil barons can make a few extra bucks.

"Virtually every coal plant in the U.S. has already met this lifesaving standard, and now Trump is recklessly trying to roll it back."

(Source: The Independent)

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

Over 1 million children born within 9 months in Iran

Based on the data released by the National Organization for Civil Registration of the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 22), a total of 1,046,099 births were recorded in the country, while 276,787 died during the same period.

ولادت بیش از یک میلیون کودک ایرانی طی ۹ ماه

بر اساس گزارش ارائه شده توسط سازمان ثبت احوال آمار ولادت و فوت طی ۹ ماهه نخست سال ۹۷، یک میلیون و ۴۶ هزار و ۹۹ واقعه ولادت و در همین بازه زمانی نیز ۲۷۶ هزار و ۷۸۷ واقعه فوت در کشور ثبت شده است.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“-phile, -phil, -philia, -phily, -philous, -philic”

Meaning: loving

For example: It is an honor indeed for this **bibliophile** to able to assist a bookman such as you in your research.

PHRASAL VERB

Lose out

Meaning: to not get something good, valuable etc. because someone else gets it instead

For example: He lost out to Roy Schneider for the lead role.

IDIOM

Come into one's own

Explanation: to finally obtain rightful recognition of your ability or talent and begin to succeed

For example: He's a talented violinist who has at last come into his own.

Lebanon 'close to forming government early in new year'

Lebanon's Hezbollah believes solution to govt. impasse 'very close'

➔ "The president and I are determined to meet again and end this issue, because the country cannot continue without a government," he said, without offering any explanations surrounding the nature of that 'issue.'

Hariri called on all political factions to work towards reviving the process of cabinet formation.

Meanwhile, a senior official with Lebanon's Hezbollah resistance movement said Wednesday that he believed a solution to the stalemate was "very close."

"We believe the solution is very close," said Mahmoud Qamati, deputy head of Hezbollah's political council, suggesting that it could happen in time to be considered "a holiday gift."

"The intentions held by everybody are positive and for the benefit of the country," he added.

Lebanon's first parliamentary vote in nine years was held in May last year but lawmakers have since failed to form



a government. Hezbollah and its political allies secured over half of the seats. The movement's allies include the Amal

Movement led by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement founded by Aoun.

The parliamentary seats are split evenly -- 64 for Christians and 64 for Muslims, including Druze, with the two halves further divided among 11 religious groups.

The impasse, coupled with the poor economic conditions, has led to a political crisis in the country, sparking public dissatisfaction.

"The economic situation is difficult, but this is not to say it is impossible," Hariri said on Tuesday.

Political rivalry led to years of governmental paralysis in Lebanon, and the country did not produce a state budget from 2005 until 2017.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said that Lebanon must urgently address its fiscal policy in order to sustain its high levels of public debt.

(Source: agencies)

Israel OK's construction plans for over 10,000 settler units in 2018: PLO

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) says Israeli officials approved plans for the construction of more than 10,000 homes in the West Bank last year, heedless of the international outcry against Tel Aviv's land expropriation and settlement expansion policies in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The organization, in a report published on Wednesday, said Israeli authorities gave the green light for 10,298 new units, of which 2,600 were built in East al-Quds (Jerusalem).

The report added that Israeli authorities approved a new settlement -- called the Amihai settlement -- near the West Bank city of Nablus, along with a new neighborhood in the Gush Etzion settlement near Bethlehem, situated about 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) south of al-Quds (Jerusalem).

Israeli officials confiscated 3,439 dunams (3,439 square kilometers) of private Palestinian land in the West Bank, including 1,182 dunams (1,182 square kilometers) in the strategic Jordan Valley.

The report further noted that Israeli forces uprooted some 7,600 olive, palm and almond trees in the West Bank last year.

It also stated that Israeli authorities demolished 538 homes and structures in 2018, while issuing demolition orders for another 460 structures.

The demolitions, the report highlighted, resulted in the displacement of some 1,300 Palestinians, including 225 children.

Israeli settlement construction activities surged in Trump era

Meanwhile, the anti-settlement monitoring group Peace Now says figures, gathered from official Israeli sources, show an increase in the construction of settler units in 2018 and a sharp spike in planning for future construction.

It added that the trend has only deepened Palestinian mistrust in the administration of the United States President Donald Trump as it says it is preparing to roll out a so-called peace plan.

Less than a month before Trump took office, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 2334, calling on Israel to "immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem" al-Quds.

About 600,000 Israelis live in over 230 illegal settlements

built since the 1967 Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and East al-Quds (Jerusalem).

Palestinians want the West Bank as part of a future independent Palestinian state with East al-Quds (Jerusalem) as its capital.

The last round of Israeli-Palestinian talks collapsed in 2014. Among the major sticking points in those negotiations was Israel's continued settlement expansion on Palestinian territories.

Trump backtracked on Washington's support for a "two-state solution" earlier this year, saying he would support any solution favored by both sides.

"Looking at two-state or one-state, I like the one that both parties like. I'm very happy with the one both parties like. I can live with either one," the U.S. president said during a joint press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Washington on February 15.

Israel's Zionist Union opposition bloc falls apart live on television

Elsewhere, Israel's main left-wing opposition bloc, Zionist Union, breaks apart live on television after the leader of Labor Party humiliated allied Hatnua chair Tzipi Livni in front of the cameras and announced an end to his partnership with her ahead of April's early elections.

In a shock announcement that caught Livni off guard at a televised Zionist Union meeting, Avi Gabbay's Labor Party questioned the Hatnua leader's loyalty and said he was ending his partnership with her.

"I still believe in partnership, in connections, in uniting a large camp committed to change, but successful connections necessitate friendship, upholding agreements, and commitment to a course," he said. "That didn't happen in this partnership."

Lost for words, Livni approached the podium immediately afterwards and only said she would take time to reflect on his announcement before responding.

Later, she rejected Gabbay's disloyalty claims, but said he "was right about one thing today -- it was never a real partnership between us, because he never wanted a partnership."

"The way he ended it today is proof," Livni said. Before falling apart, the Zionist Union was the second-big-



gest faction at the parliament. It won 24 out of 120 seats in 2015, behind Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likud, which won 30.

Indictment decision awaits Netanyahu

The polls had originally been scheduled for November. Likud called the polls last Monday in a move, which experts say, is aimed at giving a fresh mandate to Netanyahu to help him survive an ongoing corruption drama.

Netanyahu faces three corruption cases revolving, among other things, around charges of his accepting gifts from businessmen overseas and a media bribery scheme.

The premier, who always denies having committed any corrupt practices, claims he is convinced that the three cases against him will yield "nothing." On Monday, he also said he would not step down even if the regime's attorney general sought to indict him for corruption.

On Tuesday, Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit's spokesman told Israel's Channel 2 that he will publicize his decision to indict the premier before the upcoming elections.

He cited Mandelblit as saying "it was an obligation to decide" prior to the elections, so that voters would be fully aware of possible charges before going to voting booths.

(Source: Press TV)

U.S. demands immediate return of ex-Marine detained in Russia on spy charges

The United States is demanding the immediate return of a retired U.S. Marine detained by Russia on spying charges, and wants an explanation of why he was arrested, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Wednesday.

Pompeo, in Brasilia for the inauguration of Brazil's new president, said the U.S. government hoped to gain consular access to Paul Whelan within hours.

"We've made clear to the Russians our expectation that we will learn more about the charges, come to understand what it is he's been accused of and if

the detention is not appropriate, we will demand his immediate return," Pompeo said.

In Moscow, RIA news agency cited a foreign ministry spokesman as saying Russia has allowed consular access to Whelan. Russia's FSB state security service detained Whelan Friday and opened a criminal case against him.

The State Department did not immediately confirm that Moscow had provided consular access.

Whelan was visiting Moscow for the

wedding of a former fellow Marine and is innocent of the espionage charges against him, his family said on Tuesday.

He had been staying with the wedding party at Moscow's Metropol hotel when he went missing, his brother, David, said.

"His innocence is undoubted and we trust that his rights will be respected," Whelan's family said in a statement released on Twitter Tuesday.

Russia's FSB state security service said Whelan had been detained on Friday, but it gave no details of his

alleged espionage activities. Under Russian law, espionage can carry a prison sentence of between 10 and 20 years.

David Whelan told CNN that his brother, who had served in Iraq, has been to Russia many times in the past for both work and personal trips, and had been serving as a tour guide for some of the wedding guests. His friends filed a missing persons report in Moscow after his disappearance, his brother said.

(Source: Reuters)

Six dead in rail accident on wind-battered Danish bridge

Six people were killed Wednesday and 16 injured after debris believed to be from a cargo train smashed into a passenger train in high winds on a bridge connecting two islands in Denmark, the rail operator and officials said.

Accident investigator Bo Haaning told reporters that part of the cargo train appeared to have been whipped off in strong winds, hitting a passenger train that was traveling in the opposite direction and causing it to brake suddenly.

Images from the scene showed the cargo train still standing on the tracks, the tarpaulin covers of its carriages torn open in places to reveal jumbled cases of beer, while the metal tracks appeared mangled in places.

An unidentified object can also be seen lying across the front of the passenger train on another track.

Rail operator DSB said six people died in the accident, which occurred around 7:30 a.m. on the Great Belt Bridge connecting the islands of Zealand, where Copenhagen is located, and Funen. There were 131 passengers and three crew on board.

Police said none of the 16 hurt had life-threatening injuries. Passenger Heidi Langberg Zumbusch had just boarded the train and taken her seat when the accident happened. "There was a loud crash and the windows started smash-



ing onto our heads. We flew down onto the floor, and then the train stopped," she told Danish public broadcaster DR.

"We were lucky. The people in the carriage in front of us were not so lucky," she said, adding that her co-passengers told her they saw the side of that carriage had been ripped off.

Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen sent condolences to the families of the victims.

"Regular Danes on their way to work or on their way

home after the holidays have had their lives torn apart. It's deeply saddening. My thoughts are with the victims and their families," he said.

A Funen police spokesman told reporters he could not provide details of the accident, but added: "We know that an object hit the train."

Another passenger, 19-year-old Simon Voldsgaard Tondering, told daily Politiken that the train suddenly began to shake violently.

"I looked out the window and there were sparks flying up the side of the train. And then all the windows broke and shards of glass flew over us and panels broke loose. And then everything went black," he said.

Heavy winds were reported across Scandinavia overnight Tuesday and Wednesday, causing power outages, bridge closures and ferry cancellations.

The Great Belt link consists of a road suspension bridge and a railway tunnel between Zealand and the small island of Sprogø, with a bridge for both road and rail traffic between Sprogø and Funen.

The bridge was closed for several hours due to the accident, but car traffic later resumed while rail traffic remained shut in both directions.

(Source: Daily Star)

A spy who is no longer popular

➔ Meanwhile, General Benjamin "Benny" Gantz, former Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, formed a party on December 6. In response to the developments in Zionist unity and a series of other political events, Gantz said on Monday that his entry into politics has created the turbulence.



General Gantz who is a popular and public figure called his party "the backbone of Israel" and emphasized that flexibility and moderation would be the key to its plans.

According to polls, the newly established Gantz Party which has not revealed the names of members, is superior to decade-old parties like the Israeli Labor Party and Meretz, and may win the election of April 9, after Likud.

The new right-wing party

On the other hand, Education Minister Naftali Bennett and Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, who in the past two years were the two leaders of the Israeli right-wing party, in a news conference on Saturday announced that they were quitting their right-wing party to launch a new party called "New right."

Schullit Teacher, chairman of the Jewish House Fraction, together with Bennett and Shaked, left the party and joined the "new right."

Nathalie Bennett, in the current cabinet of Netanyahu, was the Minister of Education and Shaked, the justice minister; they said that by forming a new party, they left themselves behind the old party's constraints and gave Israeli right-wing non-religious supporters who, through this new party, pursue their political and social demand.

Netfali Bennett and Aylat Shaked, Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud party have been accused of having formed a coalition of cabinet, have always been captured by religious parties and have "regularly ransomed to keep the coalition alive."

Abandoned members of the House of Judaism consider the separation of their two powerful leaders "betrayal," but they have said they are struggling to strengthen the Jewish home in new conditions.

Gallant joins Netanyahu

Meanwhile, the Kulanu Party, led by the finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, in a sudden move on Dec. 31, 2018 had a change of heart and a retired lieutenant-general Yoav Gallant who was housing and construction minister of this party has declared to join Netanyahu's right-wing Likud.

Netanyahu's response to political developments

Netanyahu who went on the five-day trip to Brazil at the height of the electoral campaign in order to attend the oath of office of Brazilian President-elect Jair Bolsonaro, has slammed the political developments in Tel Aviv from Rio de Janeiro.

Netanyahu said ironically that the new Bani-Gantz party is also a left party and he as the main leader of Israel's main party, has nothing to do with what the left wing does.

Referring to the split of the Zionist Union, Netanyahu said on Tuesday that the Zionist Union including Gabbay's Labor party and Livni's Kulanu are the left-wing parties who won't go far in the upcoming elections.

Netanyahu criticizes Ayelet Shaked and Naftali Bennett's decision to break away from the Jewish Home and form their New Right political party and said Bennett's and Shaked's 'New Right' party is a big danger and blow to the right party, and it is not unlikely that some smaller right-wing parties will not even get a single seat, which would undermine the right wing and it is incapable of forming the next government.

Bennett and Shaked, however, rejected the allegations and said their actions will strengthen the right wing party of the country.

Prior to these developments, polls indicated Netanyahu would be Israel's prime minister, and now he boosts his presence in power by forming the divisions.

Some experts believe that not only these developments can change last week's polls about the fate of the election in the early spring of 1998, but Netanyahu's announcement on the trip to Brazil on Monday, suspected of being prosecuted for his corruption investigation files. The Zionist regime's election scene has triumphed over the past three months, with little excitement and exuberance.

Netanyahu seems to be in a good position to deal with his corruption cases to remain in power.

Turkish-backed forces fully withdraw from Manbij front lines

➔ On Sunday, U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham said Trump had agreed to slow down the timetable. Graham told reporters that he was "going to ask [Trump] to sit down with his generals and reconsider how to do this".

Trump initially said the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) had been defeated, but he has somewhat backtracked on that claim, saying now that ISIL is "mostly gone".

Trump's decision to pull U.S. troops out of Syria has angered many politicians, including those within his own Republican Party, as well as Pentagon officials. Defense Secretary James Mattis unexpectedly resigned after the announcement, and Brett McGurk, the U.S.'s top envoy in the fight against ISIL, announced he would be leaving his post earlier than expected due to the decision.

Critics not only warn of a resurgence of ISIL, but worry that the withdrawal is a betrayal of U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in Syria and leaves them vulnerable to an attack from Turkish forces. Turkey considers the U.S.-backed Kurdish People's Protection Units, which now controls nearly 30 percent of Syria, a terrorist group linked to fighting within its own borders.

(Source: agencies)

Nadal pulls out of Brisbane International with thigh problem

Rafa Nadal has pulled out of this week's Brisbane International due to a minor thigh strain, but the Spaniard is hopeful that he can shake off the problem in time for the Australian Open later this month. Nadal endured an injury-plagued 2018 season that saw him contest only nine tournaments due to hip, knee, abdomen and ankle injuries and the world number two said the decision to skip the season-opener was precautionary.

"I still wanted to play... but if I play here, there is a important risk to (not) have the chance to play Melbourne," Nadal, who was due to face Frenchman Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in the second round on Thursday, said in a statement.

"It's a small thing that can become a much bigger... when you compete the intensity on the muscle it can get worse... I feel better than I did four days ago... it's a risk to damage my body for one month if I play here."

The 32-year-old did not play after retiring against Juan Martin del Potro in their U.S. Open semi-final last September and underwent ankle surgery two months later.

He lost a three-set exhibition match against South Africa's Kevin Anderson in Abu Dhabi last week and had indicated that he was fighting fit ahead of the Brisbane event.

However, an MRI scan revealed otherwise. "I have to be ready to understand that this kind of stuff happens when you're coming back from injuries. I have to accept and keep going," Nadal, who had withdrawn from the tournament last year as well, added.

Lucky loser Taro Daniel will replace Nadal in the second round against Tsonga. Despite an injury-curtailed 2018 season, Nadal managed to win five titles last year, including a record-extending 11th French Open title that took his Grand Slam tally to 17.

The Australian Open begins in Melbourne on Jan. 14. (Source: Reuters)

Murray and Edmund beaten at the Brisbane International

Andy Murray's latest comeback ended after he was outplayed by Russia's Daniil Medvedev in the second round of the Brisbane International.

The Briton, in his first tournament since September, pushed Medvedev before the 22-year-old took control at the end of the first set. Murray, 31, looked to wane as Medvedev continued to overpower him and win 7-5 6-2 in one hour and 21 minutes.

The Scot is ranked 240th in the world after playing six tournaments in 2018.

After his opening round win over Australian wildcard James Duckworth, Murray admitted he did not know how much longer he would be able to play top-level tennis after hip surgery.

His next scheduled tournament is the Australian Open - the first Grand Slam of the year, which starts on 14 January - although he could decide to take a wildcard for next week's Sydney International. Questions still remain about the level Murray will be able to reach following hip surgery a year ago, with many fans wondering if his game can ever return to the same standard that made him one of the world's best players.

His latest comeback - his first tournament since losing at the Shenzhen Open in September - started with a comfortable win over Duckworth, but Medvedev was always to provide a sterner test. (Source: BBC)

Serena in inspirational message to working mums



Serena Williams has posted an inspirational New Year message to mums and dads juggling parenthood with work, saying "anything is possible".

The 23-time Grand Slam champion began 2019 in Perth at the mixed teams Hopman Cup, with baby Alexia Olympia in tow. She posted a picture of herself and her daughter to her 10.4 million followers on Instagram, holding her child as she stretched her leg. Williams, 37, said "it's not about what we can do it's what we MUST do as working moms and working dads".

"Anything is possible. I was getting ready for the first match of the year and my dear sweet baby @olympiaohanian was tired and sad and simply needed mama's love.

"So if it means warming up and stretching while holding my baby that's what #thismama will do.

"My fellow moms and dads working - or stay home it's equally as intense - but you inspire me," she added.

"Hearing your stories makes me know I can do this. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. This year is to you!"

The last time Williams played in Australia was January 2017, when she won the Australian Open when eight-weeks pregnant.

Last month, the WTA introduced new rules so returning mothers have a special ranking that earns them a seeded position at tournaments, ensuring they do not face a top player in the opening round.

Williams, along with other tennis mums like former world number one Victoria Azarenka, had advocated for the changes to help ease the transition back for players who had given birth.

She is partnering Francis Tiafoe for the United States at the Hopman Cup and on Tuesday evening played mixed doubles against Switzerland, with Roger Federer on the other side of the net. (Source: AFP)

Schumacher 'in the very best of hands', says family



The radio silence surrounding the status of stricken Formula One legend Michael Schumacher is totally understandable, his mentor at Benetton and Ferrari Ross Brawn told Press Association Sport on Wednesday.

The seven-time world champion -- a record that still stands -- will turn 50 on Thursday but his millions of fans are none the wiser as to what the German superstar's state of health is. Schumacher, who won 91 Grand Prix during his stellar career, suffered severe head injuries in a skiing accident in December 2013 and has not been seen in public since.

He is understood to be receiving medical care at the family home near Lake Geneva in Switzerland, but updates regarding his health have been few and far between.

His privacy -- there have been precious few leaks about his status -- has been zealously enforced by his wife Corinna.

"I am constantly in touch with Corinna, and I totally agree with their decision," said Brawn, who is one of the few people known to have visited Schumacher.

"Michael has always been a very private person and that's been a guiding principle in his career, his life and his family always agreed with that choice. "It's completely understandable that Corinna has wanted to maintain the same approach, even after the tragic event, and it's a decision we must all respect.

"I'm sure the millions of people who are still Michael fans will understand it, too."

Schumacher's landmark birthday is to be marked by Ferrari -- who won six con-

structors titles whilst he was with them from 1996-2006 -- with a special exhibition titled The 'Michael 50'.

The exhibition in the Ferrari Museum in Maranello will be run in association with the Keep Fighting Foundation launched in 2016 by the Schumacher family.

The exhibition will allow the public to discover the contribution that Schumacher -- who won five of his seven drivers titles with Ferrari -- made to the car's development as a driver and later as a consultant.

Brawn also expressed his hope that the Schumacher name may once again grace Formula

One through 19-year-old Mick Schumacher.

His precocious talent has already seen him crowned F3 champion in 2018 and will drive in the Formula Two Championship this year.

"Carrying that name weighs heavily but Mick manages it with great care and intelligence," said Brawn.

"Clearly, I'd hope to see him in F1 one day, but the important thing is to let Mick grow and find his own way without creating any unnecessary expectations."

Being well cared

The family of stricken seven-times Formula One world champion Michael Schumacher

have assured fans the Ferrari great is being well cared for as they prepare to celebrate his 50th birthday on Thursday.

Schumacher, who retired from racing in 2012, has not been seen in public since he suffered severe head injuries in a skiing accident five years ago. The German is being cared for at home in Switzerland.

"You can be sure that he is in the very best of hands and that we are doing everything humanly possible to help him," the family said in a statement that made a rare comment about his condition.

"Please understand if we are following Michael's wishes and keeping such a sensitive subject as health, as it has always been, in privacy," it added.

The family said an official Michael Schumacher app will be released on Thursday to enable fans to review all his career successes.

The Keep Fighting Foundation has also created a virtual museum.

"The app is another milestone in our effort to do justice to him and you, his fans, by celebrating his accomplishments," the family said. "Michael can be proud of what he has achieved, and so are we... we want to remember and celebrate his victories, his records and his jubilation."

Schumacher won his first two titles with Benetton in 1994 and 1995 before five in a row with Ferrari between 2000-2004.

He remains the sport's most successful driver, with a record 91 grand prix wins. (Source: Staff & Agency)

Chelsea sign Christian Pulisic for £58m



Chelsea have signed Borussia Dortmund forward Christian Pulisic for 64m euros (£58m), but will loan him back to the German club until the end of the season.

The 20-year-old United States international, who was linked with Liverpool and Arsenal, joined Dortmund as a youth player in 2015.

Pulisic has scored nine goals in 23 games for the US. "It's a privilege to have signed for such a legendary club," he said.

It is the highest transfer fee for an American player, beating the 20m euros Wolfsburg paid for John Brooks in 2017. Dortmund director Michael Zorc said: "It was always Christian's dream to play in the Premier League.

"That certainly has to do with his American background, and as a result we were unable to extend his contract.

"Against this background, we have decided to accept an extremely lucrative bid by Chelsea, given the low contract maturity."

Pulisic's contract at Dortmund was due to expire in June 2020.

In an emotional statement on Twitter, Pulisic said he will leave Dortmund with a "heavy heart".

"It feels like only yesterday that I arrived in Dortmund as a raw, excited, very nervous but exceptionally proud 16-year-old from a small American town called Hershey," he said.

"I would not be here without the club and their belief in giving young players a chance. Many memorable moments stand

out - to have experienced all of them before my 20th birthday, still feels at times like a dream.

"For the next six months, it's all BVB. Please do not doubt my passion, determination and my 110% commitment to the team right until the last ball is kicked this season."

Pulisic made his Bundesliga debut, aged 17, in January 2016, and two months later won his first USA cap.

He has played 81 games in the German top flight and 20 in the Champions League.

He has scored three goals in 18 appearances in all competitions for Dortmund this season.

Chelsea director Marina Granovskaia described Pulisic as "one of Europe's most sought-after young players".

"At just 20, we believe he has the potential to become an important Chelsea player for many years to come," she said.

Pulisic is the first major Premier League signing since the transfer window opened on 1 January.

His is the third highest fee paid for a Bundesliga player, after Ousmane Dembele's £135m move from Dortmund to Barcelona in 2017 and Manchester City's £55m deal for Kevin de Bruyne from Wolfsburg in 2015.

Chelsea are fourth in the Premier League, 11 points behind leaders Liverpool.

Dortmund lead the Bundesliga by six points and will face Tottenham in the last 16 of the Champions League. (Source: BBC)

FIFA should expand 2022 World Cup to 48 teams if possible - Infantino



FIFA should if possible increase the size of the football World Cup in Qatar in 2022 to 48 from 32 teams, the global governing body's president Gianni Infantino said.

Last month, Infantino said a majority of national football federations were in favour of expanding the tournament and a decision was expected ahead of the qualifying draw in March.

Infantino, speaking at a sports conference on Wednesday, also said FIFA was seeing whether it would be possible for some of Qatar's Gulf neighbours to host some of the matches.

He said last month that it would be "difficult" to stage an expanded tournament in Qatar alone.

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt launched a diplomatic and trade boycott of Qatar in June 2017 that has complicated the prospect of sharing the tournament.

The countries accuse Qatar of supporting terrorism, which it denies.

FIFA voted in 2017 to increase the size of the tournament from 32 to 48 teams starting from 2026 but, since then, Infantino has been mulling the possibility of bringing the change forward to 2022.

"If you think it's a good thing to have 48 teams in the World Cup, why not try four years before, that's why we are analysing whether its possible to have 48 teams already in 2022," Infantino said on Wednesday.

"The World Cup will take place in Qatar with 32 teams. Obviously, if we can increase it to 48 teams and make the world happy we should try it."

Qatar said it would not take a final decision on the tournament expansion until it has seen details of a feasibility study from FIFA.

The study is expected to discuss aspects of scheduling, the number of required venues, training sites, and how many games per day would be played under an expanded format.

Qatar, a tiny but wealthy Arab nation, has moved ahead with ambitious plan to scale up infrastructure ahead of the 2022 tournament that includes \$6-8 billion on eight stadiums and sporting facilities.

"If we can accommodate some of the neighbouring countries in the gulf region which are very close by to host a few games in the World Cup this could be very beneficial for the region and the entire world," Infantino added.

"There are tensions in this particular region and it's up to their respective leaders to deal with that but maybe it's easier to talk about a joint football project than more complicated things.

"If it can help all the people in the Gulf and all the countries in the world develop football and bring a positive message to the world about football, then you should give it a try." (Source: Reuters)

World Anti-Doping Agency accused of being 'played' by Russia

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has been accused of being "played by the Russians" after the country's anti-doping agency missed the December 31st deadline to hand over data from its Moscow laboratory.

Sir Craig Reedie, WADA president, said he was "bitterly disappointed" that one of the conditions set when it lifted the three-year suspension on the Russian anti-doping agency (RUSADA) in September had not been met.

WADA's compliance review committee will meet on January 14 in Canada to consider its options, which could see the country once again banned from international events.

Travis Tygart, United States anti-doping agency (USADA) chief executive, said the situation was a "total joke" and an "embarrassment for WADA and the global anti-doping system."

"No one is surprised" In a statement, Tygart said: "In September WADA secretly moved the goalposts and reinstated Russia against the wishes of athletes, governments and the public. In doing this WADA guaranteed Russia would turn over the evidence of its state-supported doping scheme.

"No one is surprised this deadline was ignored and it's time for WADA to stop being played by the Russians and



immediately declare them non-compliant for failing yet again to meet the deadline."

However, International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach has suggested Russia would not be suspended for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, saying the country had "served its sanction" when banned from the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang last year.

WADA's decision in September allowed Russian athletes to return to competition across all sports despite the country not having complied with all demands following the revelations in 2015 of a state-sponsored doping program.

The suspension was lifted pending Russia meeting "strict conditions" that included a timeline for "access to the former Moscow laboratory data and samples."

In November Reedie had said it was "very hard to believe" Russian authorities "won't deliver," but last month WADA was unable to extract all of the promised data with the Russian authorities reportedly saying that the team's equipment required to be certified under Russian law.

The UK anti-doping athlete commission said RUSADA must be declared non-compliant and suspended.

It said: "The Russian state needs to prove unequivocally that they have learned from the biggest doping scandal under WADA's watch, and that they will from this date forward be committed to a drug-free, transparent regime across international sport.

"Otherwise the WADA compliance review committee and the WADA executive committee must immediately declare RUSADA non-compliant.

"WADA's leadership has the opportunity to stand up for the interests of athletes, their families, their fans and their sport. We trust that those we look to for leadership will demonstrate their resolve and commitment to clean sport. (Source: CNN)

Not easy to win Asian Cup title, Iran defender Hosseini says

S P O R T S TEHRAN — Iran national football team defender Majid Hosseini says there is a difficult task ahead of them to win the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

Team Melli, who have been drawn in Group D along with Yemen, Vietnam and Iraq, are going to end their 43-year title drought in the competition.

Carlos Queiroz's men will start the competition with a match against Yemen on January 7 in Abu Dhabi.

Hosseini, who currently plays at Turkish top flight football team Trabzonspor, replaced injured Rouzbeh Cheshmi in the 2018 World Cup and proved himself as a strong defender in Team Melli line-up against Spain and Portugal.

"Queiroz is a great coach and we could defeat Morocco in the World Cup with him. He had exact analysis of the teams we played

in the World Cup," Hosseini said.

"Iran will have a difficult task in the AFC Asian Cup since the Asian teams have improved and take advantage of good infrastructure. For example, Qatar have progressed in the recent years and it shows we will have a difficult task in the UAE," the defender added.

"I watched 2015 AFC Asian Cup on TV. Iran were reduced to 10 men in the match against Iraq and lost to the team in penalty shootout. I think the referee's decision went against us in that match but we have to play in a way which even a mistake cannot stop us. I also hope the officials don't favor the Arabian teams," the 22-year-old defender stated.

"I am soldier of Team Melli and will do my best in the competition and no matter if I am not in starting lineup," Hosseini concluded.



Protect us from crocodiles: Carlos Queiroz

S P O R T S TEHRAN — Iran national football team coach Carlos Queiroz has asked the Iran football federation President Mehdi Taj to protect Team Melli from crocodiles!

Iran will leave Qatar for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup on Wednesday after completing two-week training camp in Doha. "We want to participate in the Asian Cup with high concentration and I want Mr. Taj to protect us from the people who want to distract us from whatever our primary goal is. Iran football officials should have learned from the past and they must protect us from the people who want to distract our concentration. It's not the right time. We must be protected from crocodiles," the Portuguese said in a news conference.

Iran have not won the AFC Asian Cup for 43 years and Queiroz says they will have a difficult task to end the title drought.

"We are concentrating on our first match against Yemen. The first game is always the most difficult game in these kind of competitions. It's a game we need to win. It's a crucial game. Needless to say Iran have not won the title for more than 40 years. The country's clubs also had their problems," Queiroz added.

"When I took charge of Team Melli seven years ago, the most of Iranian people were afraid of Bahrain football team. And I have to emphasize once again Japan, South Korea and Australia are the favorites to book a place in semifinals and we will also do our best," he stated.

AFC Asian Cup: Five memorable openers

As the 2019 AFC Asian Cup UAE opener between the hosts UAE and Bahrain approaches, the-AFC.com looks at five memorable Asian Cup opening matches over the years.

The AFC Asian Cup opening match has not always seen the host have it easy, as there have been instances where we saw the host nation stunned on their home turf. Over the years, there were many a classic encounter which saw entertaining draws or a shock result that remains in memory.

1996: UAE v Korea Republic

The UAE hosted the AFC Asian Cup for the first time in 1996 and would face two-time winners Korea Republic in their opening match.

At Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi, the home crowd were stunned early into the match when Hwang Sun-hong scored in the ninth minute, but forward Khamis Saad capitalised on a defensive mistake to equalise for the hosts before the break.

The final result would be 1-1, and this was an early indicator of the UAE's ability to hold their own against Asia's traditional powerhouses, as they went on to reach the final for the first time in their history.

2000: Lebanon 0-4 IR Iran

Lebanon had never qualified for the Asian Cup before 2000, and their introduction to the tournament was not an easy one. The



draw pitted the Cedars against three-time winners IR Iran in the opening match.

While 52,418 fans gathered at the Camille Chamoun Sport City Stadium in Beirut, it was not enough for the home side to produce a memorable performance.

Karim Bagheri opened the scoring in the 19th minute for Team Melli, before Hamid Estili added two in the last 15 minutes of the game and Ali Daei put the icing on the cake in injury time to defeat Lebanon 4-0.

2004: China PR 2-2 Bahrain

Prior to their appearance in 2004, Bahrain had only made it to the AFC Asian Cup

on one occasion - in 1988 - and they were eliminated without a win to their name.

For China PR, expectations were huge on home soil, but facing them in the opening match were a different Bahrain side to those which had achieved little success in Asian football.

A resilient Bahrain side went into the half-time break 1-0 up thanks to Mohammed Hubail's 41st-minute strike. Zheng Zhi and Ji Linyu scored in the space of eight minutes to put China back in the lead, but Husain Ali snatched a late equaliser for Bahrain as the two sides shared the spoils.

2011: Qatar 0-2 Uzbekistan

Singapore, in 1984, were the last host nation to win their opening AFC Asian Cup match, and the curse continued into 2011 as Qatar welcomed Uzbekistan in front of 47,000 fans in Doha.

After a goalless first half, Odil Ahmedov struck one of the goals of the tournament, firing home from 40 yards out to put Uzbekistan in front in the 59th minute. Captain Server Djeparov deepened Qatar's wounds with the second in the 77th minute.

Uzbekistan would go on to reach the semi-finals before losing 6-0 to Australia, while Qatar were knocked out at the quarter-finals by eventual winners Japan.

2015: Australia 4-1 Kuwait

The host nations' curse was finally broken in Melbourne as Australia became the first hosts to win their AFC Asian Cup opening match in three decades.

The Socceroos did so in style, plugging four past Kuwait. It was, however, the Blues who got on the scoresheet first just eight minutes into the match through Hussein Fadhel.

Australia's reply was fierce, as Tim Cahill and Massimo Luongo scored before half time to put the Socceroos 2-1 up. Mile Jedinak added the third with a trademark penalty kick in the 62nd minute, before James Troisi would score the fourth of the match in injury time.

(Source: the-afc)

South Korea counting on red-hot Son to shine on Asian Cup quest

South Korea are hoping Son Heung-min's dazzling pace and goals can help them end a 59-year wait to be crowned continental kings as the newly expanded Asian Cup starts at the weekend.

Holders Australia, four-time winners Japan, Carlos Queiroz's Iran and hosts the United Arab Emirates are all formidable opponents, but none will relish facing Paulo Bento's Koreans.

The 2015 runners-up have put their stamp on the international scene in recent times, stunning holders Germany at last year's World Cup before winning the Asian Games football tournament in September.

Son, 26, was at the heart of both successes and his delight was plain to see at the Asian Games in Indonesia, where victory earned the team an exemption from South Korea's compulsory, 21-month military service.

The Tottenham Hotspur forward, who has a deadly shot with either foot, has been in scorching form for his club, scoring seven goals in his last seven Premier League games. But he will sit out South Korea's first two games next week under a deal with his club in return for his release for last year's Asian Games.

Son, the most prolific Asian in Premier League history, will hope South Korea get the job done against the Philippines and Kyrgyzstan before he jets in for their final Group C clash against China on January 16.

The Koreans, edged 2-1 by Australia after the 2015 final went to extra time, haven't won the Asian Cup since 1960 -- a puzzling record considering their 10 World Cup appearances, including the 2002 semi-finals.

Arnold's predicament

Japan are among their chief rivals in UAE, after they were the only Asian side to reach the World Cup knock-outs before narrowly going down to Belgium in the last 16.

The Blue Samurai, winners of four of the last seven editions, will demand improvements on 2015, when as defending champions they slipped up with a penalties defeat to UAE in the last eight.

Recent results have been encouraging, including a 4-3 win over Uruguay, and Hajime Moriyasu has picked on form after ditching World Cup stars Shinji Kagawa and Shinji Okazaki in favor of younger players.

Australia, however, seem to have gone backwards since they lifted the trophy in Sydney in 2015, and it's a tall order for new coach Graham Arnold who is plunged into the title defense just four games into the job.

After record scorer Tim Cahill retired, Arnold's predicament worsened last month when midfield lynchpin Aaron Mooy suffered a serious knee injury and was ruled out of tournament.

Three-time winners Iran look much more settled, and after winning plaudits for their narrow 1-0 defeat to Spain and 1-1 draw with Portugal at the World Cup, Carlos Queiroz's side have gone unbeaten in their six games since.

With attacking talent including Rubin Kazan's Sardar Azmoun, with 24 goals in 40 internationals, and Brighton winger Alireza Jahanbakhsh, Iran will expect to do better than 2015, when they were ousted in a combustible quarter-final against arch-rivals Iraq.

Dark horses and VAR

UAE received a body blow with the loss of playmaker Omar Abdulrahman to a knee injury, but they have plenty of firepower and are redoubtable on home ground, where they were runners-up as hosts in 1996.

Meanwhile, rivals Qatar are desperate to make a statement before 2022, when they will be the first World Cup hosts in the modern era never to have qualified for the tournament by right.



Success in UAE would be doubly satisfying for Qatar, who have been at the center of a diplomatic storm in the Gulf and under blockade from their neighbors since June 2017.

On Saturday in Abu Dhabi, the UAE and Bahrain will open the biggest Asian Cup yet after it grew from 16 to 24 teams, paving the way for Kyrgyzstan, war-torn Yemen and Sven-Goran Eriksson's Philippines to make their debuts.

Among many sub-plots, China's stuttering attempts to become a football power will come under scrutiny, in what looks set to be Marcello Lippi's last outing as coach, while India get a rare chance to impress at the region's top level. Saudi Arabia, who won the last of their three Asian Cup titles in 1996, should factor in the closing stages, and Syria, Uzbekistan and North Korea lurk as dark horses.

One wildcard looks set to be the introduction of video assistant referees (VAR) for the quarter-finals, which could raise the likelihood of penalties after playing a role in the record number given at last year's World Cup.

(Source: AFP)

Team Melli land in UAE for Asian Cup

S P O R T S TEHRAN — Iran national football team, known as Team Melli, arrived in Abu Dhabi, the UAE on Wednesday for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

Team Melli held a two-week training camp in Doha, Qatar ahead of the competition.



Iran were held 1-1 by Palestine in a friendly and defeated Qatar 2-1 in the training camp.

Iran national football team, who have been drawn along with Yemen, Vietnam and Iraq in Group D, are going to end their 43-year title drought in the prestigious competition.

Carlos Queiroz's team will begin the campaign with a match against Yemen on January 7 in Abu Dhabi.

The 2019 AFC Asian Cup will be held in the United Arab Emirates from January 5 to February 1.

Jahanbakhsh fit for Asian Cup, Carlos Queiroz says

Iran coach Carlos Queiroz believes Alireza Jahanbakhsh will be fit for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup tournament in the UAE.

Jahanbakhsh joined Brighton & Hove Albion last summer from AZ Alkmaar where he finished the 2017-18 season as the leading scorer in the top Dutch division.

But a hamstring injury has limited the 25-year-old's impact for the English team and raised questions over his involvement in the Asian Cup which Iran last won in 1976.

Queiroz said Jahanbakhsh will be given every opportunity to prove his fitness, even though he may not be ready for the opening game against Yemen in Abu Dhabi on Jan. 7.

"From a medical and technical point of view, we have a strong belief that he will be able to recover for the competition, although possibly not for the first stage," the Portuguese coach said.

Jahanbakhsh has been included in Iran's 23-man squad for the tournament but regulations allow coaches to replace players up to 24 hours before their first game on medical grounds if required.

Queiroz's team is among the favorite to win despite injuries which have ruled out midfielders Saeid Ezatollahi and Ali Golizadeh and defender Sadegh Moharrami.

(Source: Reuters)

Iranian karatekas among world top fighters

IRNA — Based on the latest ranking of the International Karate Federation, which was released in 2018, four Iranian karatekas are among the top fighters in the world.

The world federation ranking listed Sajjad Ganjzade, Zabihollah Poursheib, Bahman Asgari and Amir Mahdizadeh which have received 2nd, 4th, 5th and 7th rankings in their own weight category.

Earlier, Iranian karate fighters snatched colorful medals in Karate 1-Series A, held in Shanghai, China.

AFC Asian Cup 2019 — Players to Watch: Alireza Beiranvand

Without a doubt, the highlight of Alireza Beiranvand's 2018 would have been in June when he denied global superstar Cristiano Ronaldo from the penalty at the FIFA World Cup. However, the save just happened to be the standout moment of what was overall a brilliant campaign for Beiranvand, who will head to AFC Asian Cup 2019 as one of the most highly-rated goalkeepers in the entire continent. Standing at 1.94 metres tall, size and aerial ability was never an issue for the Persepolis man but he has also proven to be a surprisingly agile shot-stopper.



Rather, it has been consistency that has been the main issue for Beiranvand but, while he did have his ups and downs in the first half of the year, he really used his World Cup heroics as a platform to build on.

The second half of 2018 saw the Sarab-e Yas native play a key role in Persepolis reaching the final of the AFC Champions League even if they were ultimately beaten by Kashima Antlers, with another defining moment coming in the semi-finals against Al Sadd when he produced a miraculous save to deny Spanish legend Xavi.

Having turned down overseas interest in the immediate aftermath of Russia 2018, Beiranvand could now feel the time is right for him to make a move abroad.

While he should have shortage of suitors, another standout tournament in United Arab Emirates could just see his stock rise even higher.

(Source: Fox Sports Asia)

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Public Relations Office: Tel: (+98 21) 88805807
Subscription & Distribution Dept.: Tel: (+98 21) 43051603
www.eshterak.ir Distributor: Padideh Novin Co.
Tel: 88911433
Webmaster: webmaster@tehrantimes.com
Printed at: Rooztab - ISSN: 1017-94

No. 18, Bimeh Alley, Nejatollahi St., Tehran, Iran
P.o. Box: 14155-4843
Zip Code: 1599814713



GUIDE TO
SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Slander is the only way for the weak. Many a man has been involved with distress by people's praise.

Imam Ali (AS)

NEWS IN BRIEF



Tehran session to scrutinize history of art interactions between Iran and China

A R T TEHRAN — The Research Institute of Art in Tehran plans to hold a session, which will conduct a comparative study of the history of artistic interactions between Iran and China.

The session will begin at 3 pm on January 7, the institute announced on Wednesday.

Iranian scholar Amir-Abbas Mohammadi-rad will give a lecture at the session is part of a conference on Iranian and Islamic arts in Central Asia and China.

German-Jewish author Edgar Hilsenrath dies at 92

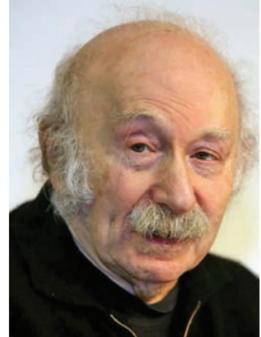
BERLIN (AP) — Edgar Hilsenrath, a German-Jewish writer whose fictional account of the Holocaust from the perspective of a Nazi perpetrator became a bestseller, has died at 92.

The German news agency dpa quoted Hilsenrath's second wife, Marlene, as confirming Tuesday that the author died Dec. 30 in western Germany after battling pneumonia.

Born in Leipzig in 1926, Hilsenrath moved to Romania at 12 to escape Nazi persecution, and was later deported to Ukraine.

His first novel, "Night," recounting the horrors of trying to survive in a Jewish ghetto, was published in 1954.

Hilsenrath gained international fame with his 1971 novel "The Nazi and the Barber" — a grotesque story about an SS member who pretends to be Jewish after the war to escape prosecution — that sold millions of copies worldwide.



The Jan 11, 2007 file photo shows Edgar Hilsenrath, a German-Jewish writer, in Berlin. (Tim Brakemeier/dpa via AP)

Kanye West pledges to perform in Maga hat, and reaffirms presidential ambitions

LONDON (The Guardian) — Having distanced himself from politics in October, Kanye West welcomed the New Year by reaffirming his support for Donald Trump in a series of tweets.

"Trump all day," West posted, followed by a tweet containing three dragon emojis, an apparent reference to his description of himself and the U.S. president sharing "dragon energy". A further tweet stated: "Just so in 2019 you know where I stand."

He affirmed, "From now on I'm performing with my ... hat on," in reference to the Make America Great Again hat associated with Trump's presidential campaign that he frequently wore in 2018. In December, Pusha T — whose 2018 album Daytona was produced by West — told The Daily Show that West had stopped wearing the hat. Pusha T has described the accessory as "this generation's Ku Klux hood".

West explained his attraction to the Maga hat: "One of my favorite of many things about what the Trump hat represents to me is that people can't tell me what to do because I'm black."

In late October, West — stung by ultra-conservative commentator Candace Owens falsely claiming he had described the logo for her "Blexit" campaign designed to deter black Americans from voting Democrat — said: "My eyes are now wide open and now realize I've been used to spread messages I don't believe in. I am distancing myself from politics and completely focusing on being creative!!!"

However, yesterday West warmed once again to the theme: "Blacks are 90% Democrats," he tweeted (a Pew Research Center poll cited 90% of Black voters supporting the Democrats in the 2018 House of Representatives race), and suggested: "That sounds like control to me," adding a suspicious face emoji. "They will not program me," he wrote.

In a tweet stating "2024", West seemed to allude to his previously discussed ambitions to run for president. In early October, West met with Trump in the Oval Office and monologued about race relations, tax breaks, criminal justice and mental health and described the Maga hat as a "Superman cape".

West also deleted a series of tweets aimed at Drake, with whom he is feuding. One tweet called out the Canadian rapper for following his wife, Kim Kardashian West, on Instagram. Drake appears to have unfollowed the life star.

Last month, Snoop Dogg criticized West's social media outbursts: "He acting a plum damn fool," the rapper said in a video posted to Instagram.

Iran to organize exhibition of theatrical productions at Fajr festival

A R T TEHRAN — Iran plans to organize an exhibition during the 37th Fajr International Theater Festival for the first to present its national theatrical productions.

The National Showcase for Iranian Dramatic Arts will be held from February 14 to 18 in Tehran, the director of the international section of the festival, Saeid Asadi, said in a press release on Tuesday.

"The showcase is aimed at introducing Iranian theatrical productions to guests coming from other countries to the event," he added.

He noted that the showcase's guests will carefully be selected from among those people who could create opportunities for Iranian troupes.

The troupes are scheduled to present their works based on a comprehensive program during the exhibition.

Seven plays will be performed by Iranian troupes in the international competition of the 37th Fajr International Theater Festival, which is scheduled to take place in Tehran from February 11 to 23.

"Flight Instructions for Captain and Cabin Crew" by Farhad Fozuni, "Steve Jobs" by Mehran Ranjbar and "She" by Arash Dadgar are among the plays.

"Mother" by Majid Kazemzadeh, "Death and the Penguin" by Payam Dehkordi, "The Play" by Masud Haqqanah and "Oblomov" by Siavash Bahadori-Rad will also be staged at the event.



A poster for the 37th Fajr International Theater Festival.

Iranian photographers honored at Brooklyn Photo Contest



"Soil Tillage" by Iranian photographer Amin Dehqan won the MOL Ribbon at the Brooklyn 2018 Photo Contest in New York City.

A R T TEHRAN — Iranian photographers Saeid Arabzadeh and Amin Dehqan have been honored at the Brooklyn 2018 Photo Contest in New York City, the organizers have announced.

Arabzadeh won the Salon Bronze for "The Darkness", a black and white portrait of a young woman, in the Open Monochrome category.

Dehqan received the MOL (Master of Light) Ribbon for his photo "Soil Tillage" in the Photo Journalism section.

The photo depicts a group of thespians performing tazieh, an Iranian passion play about the tragedy of Ashura.

The contest was organized by the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP) and the Photographic Society of America (PSA).

Iranian musician wins awards at Alba Rosa Viëtor competition



Iranian musician (L) poses with other winners of the Alba Rosa Viëtor Composition Competition at Concertgebouw, a concert hall in Amsterdam, the Netherlands on December 2, 2018.

A R T TEHRAN — Iranian composer and pianist Ramin Amin-Tafreshi received two awards at the Alba Rosa Viëtor Composition Competition 2018 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

He shared second prize for his composition "It's the Voice that Shall Remain" with Mario Oyanadel Guinez with "The Only Lifeline" from Chile

during the closing ceremony of the contest on December 2, 2018, Persian media announced on Wednesday.

Silvia Lanao Aregay from Spain took first place for her work "Emporda".

Amin-Tafreshi also received the audience award of the competition, which is a part of the Alba Rosa Viva! Festival, named after the Italian composer, violinist and pianist Alba Rosa Viëtor.

Italy's Uffizi demands return of Nazi-looted painting

FLORENCE, Italy (Reuters) — Italy's Uffizi Galleries called on Germany on Tuesday to return a still-life painting by the Dutch master Jan van Huysum, which was looted by retreating Nazi troops in World War Two.

"Germany has a moral duty to return this painting to our museum," said Uffizi chief Eike Schmidt, who is himself German. "This story is preventing the wounds inflicted by World War Two and the horrors of Nazism from healing."

The "Vase of Flowers" painting, worth millions of dollars, was originally put on display in Florence in 1824 after it was bought by Grande Duke Leopoldo II for his art collection.

The oil canvas hung in the city's Pitti Palace until 1940, when it was evacuated to a nearby village following the outbreak of World War Two. Three years later it was



A general view of Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy April 1, 2017. (Reuters/Tony Gentile/File Photo)

seized by German troops and eventually taken to Germany where it only resurfaced following German reunification in 1991 in the hands of a family.

Intermediaries have demanded payment for its return, which the Uffizi is refusing. All efforts to get it back via legal channels have failed, with Germany saying it cannot intervene because of a statute of limitations that prevents prosecution for alleged crimes committed more than 30 years ago.

"Germany should not apply the statute of limitations to works of art stolen during the war," said Schmidt, who on Tuesday hung a black and white photograph of the missing canvas in the Pitti Palace museum.

The word "stolen" written in Italian, English and German is prominently printed on the photo and the picture was put on the Uffizi's Twitter feed.

Netflix pulls comedy show episode in Saudi Arabia: media

LOS GATOS (Reuters) — Netflix pulled an episode of the comedy show "Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj" from its Internet streaming service in Saudi Arabia after kingdom officials complained, multiple media outlets reported Tuesday.

The episode of the news-comedy program in question criticized the country over the slaying of Washington Post journalist Jamal Kashoggi last year at the kingdom's consulate in Turkey.

Kashoggi had been an outspoken critic of the kingdom and of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Financial Times and other media reported. The kingdom has since acknowledged publicly that the reporter, who was a permanent U.S. resident, died in its custody.

Netflix officials were not immediately available for comment and no statement was posted on its official corporate, Facebook or Twitter sites.

Saudi Arabia officials also were not immediately available for comment.

But in a statement to the Financial Times and other media, Netflix confirmed that it removed the episode in Saudi Arabia last week after the kingdom's Communications and Information Technology Commission asked that it be removed because it allegedly violated the kingdom's anti-cyber crime law.

"We strongly support artistic freedom and removed this episode only in Saudi Arabia after we received a valid legal request - and to comply with local law," a Netflix official said in a statement to the Hollywood Reporter publication.

In the episode, first aired in the U.S. in October, Minhaj said, "Now would be a good time to reassess our relationship with Saudi Arabia. And I mean that as a Muslim and as an American."

He also criticized the kingdom for its involvement in the Yemen war and described it as being autocratic.

The New York Times reported that the episode is still available in Saudi Arabia on the YouTube platform.



Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute Gala - Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons: Art of the In-Between - Arrivals - New York City, U.S. - 01/05/17 - Comedian Hasan Minhaj. (Reuters/Lucas Jackson)