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Persian Gulf Star Refinery’s 3rd phase comes on stream

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**—The third phase of Persian Gulf Star Refinery (PGSR), in south of Iran, was put into operation on Wednesday, IRNA reported.

Speaking in the inaugural ceremony, Mohammad-Ali Dadvar the managing director of the refinery, put the output of the 3rd phase at 12-15 million liters per day, saying that the total output will be stabilized at 45 million liters per day within a week.

As reported by ISNA, after the inaugural ceremony, a press conference was also held at the refinery complex during which the managing director of National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC) noted that the average gasoline production in the country stood at 67.28 million liters per day in the past Iranian calendar year (March 2017 – March 2018), and with phases two and three of PGSR going operational the figure reached 87.95 million liters per day in the current year. **→4**

Iran to downgrade security ties with EU: diplomatic source

POLITICS **TEHRAN** – Some six European ambassadors and charges d’affaires in Tehran were dismissed in less than ten minutes after they visited the Foreign Ministry to justify the European Union’s reasons for sanctioning an Iranian intelligence service and two related people, an unnamed diplomatic source told IRNA on Wednesday.

In retaliation for the sanctions, the

unnamed diplomat said Tehran is considering a downgrading of security ties with the EU. “Soon due decisions will be made and they will cover vast areas,” the source added.

Anders Samuelsen, the Danish foreign minister, tweeted on Tuesday that the European Union agreed to enact sanctions against an Iranian Intelligence Service over claims of assassination plot. **→2**

Turkey calls for joint control with Russia & Iran over U.S. troop pullout from Syria

As the U.S. is experiencing “certain difficulties” with the withdrawal from Syria, it should be coordinated with Iran and Russia to prevent “terrorists” from taking up the vacated space, the Turkish foreign minister said.

“The United States [has] been facing certain difficulties with the process of the troops’ withdrawal from Syria. We want to coordinate this process with Russia and

Iran, with which we had arranged work in the framework of the Astana process, “Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Wednesday.

Cavusoglu visited Moscow late in December to discuss the situation in Syria. On Wednesday, he mulled bilateral talks between Turkey and Iran, giving no time-frame, however. **→13**



ARTICLE

Hanif Ghaffari
Political analyst

Macron’s economic suicide

The French president’s popularity is falling in polls conducted throughout his country. According to the latest polls in France, 75 percent of French citizens are unsatisfied with the performance of Emmanuel Macron and his administration.

“Three-quarters of French people are unhappy with the way President Emmanuel Macron and his government are running the country, with a majority keen to see more measures to boost household incomes, a poll showed on Thursday,” Reuters reported.

“A wave of “yellow vest” street protests in the past two months have rocked Macron’s presidency, forcing him into policy concessions including scrapping a planned fuel tax rise to try and defuse anger over a perceived squeeze on family budgets,” it added.

The increase of the poverty rate, and rising unemployment in France have been among the factors that led to these results. The fact is that Macron’s policies of economic reform in France led to the “political and economic suicide” of this country.

These policies, which were supposed to strengthen Macron’s position in France, and subsequently within the EU borders, prepared the ground for his removal from power. Indeed, what was the main reason behind Macron’s failure? What’s happened in France and which policies went wrong?

Accordingly, there are some points that can’t be easily ignored. The most important point is that Macron was planned to assume the title of the Europe’s economic leader in the short term, and that was to be after succeeding in creating and sustaining economic reforms in France and the Eurozone. Meanwhile, European citizens expressed their satisfaction with the election of Macron as French President in 2017.

They thought that the French president, while challenging austerity policies, would strengthen the components of economic growth in the European Union. Moreover, EU leaders also hoped that Macron’s success in pursuing economic reforms in France would be a solid step in pushing the entire Eurozone out of the economic crisis. **→7**

We extend ‘hand of friendship’ to Persian Gulf neighbors, Iran’s FM says

In a speech to the Raisina Dialogue conference in New Delhi on Wednesday, Foreign Minister Zarif reiterated that Iran extends “hand of friendship” to its neighbors in the Persian Gulf region.

Zarif also said, “We need a strong region rather than the dominance of strongmen in the region.” Following is the text of his speech:

It is a great pleasure to participate in the 2019 Raisina Dialogue. Allow me to thank the people and government of India and the Observer Research Foundation for their hospitality and excellent arrangements and for providing this opportunity to engage in a “Dialogue” on “A World Reorder.”

I think these two pivotal concepts—Dialogue and World Reorder—are very apt for our contemporary situation and deserve serious attention.

First, Dialogue. Dialogue by definition requires a readiness to listen and to re-examine assumptions. As defined by the Global Agenda

on Dialogue Among Civilizations adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly a few weeks after the September 11 tragedy in 2001, dialogue is “founded on inclusion, and a collective desire to learn, uncover and examine assumptions, unfold shared meaning and core values and integrate multiple perspectives.”

Indeed, a genuine dialogue requires “equal footing and mutual respect”, as well as “recognition of diversified sources of knowledge” and wisdom. It should aim at achieving “mutual enrichment” and “identification and promotion of common ground ... in order to address common challenges”.

In this vein, dialogue becomes a new global paradigm as opposed to the prevailing paradigm of exclusion. For centuries—even millennia—politicians defined relations within a zero-sum paradigm: that there had to be winners and losers in every given situation.

Taliban call off talks with U.S. officials over ‘agenda disagreement’

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — Much to the chagrin of mandarins in Washington, Taliban have called off ‘peace talks’ with the U.S. officials in Qatar this week due to an “agenda disagreement”.

This month’s talks, the fourth in a series of talks between the two sides in recent months, aimed was scheduled between Taliban leaders and U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad to discuss the withdrawal of foreign forces and a possible ceasefire in 2019.

Taliban, which has vehemently rejected the offers of Afghan government to engage in direct talks, canceled this week’s talks with

U.S. officials reportedly due to involvement of Afghan officials in the process.

“The U.S. officials insisted that the Taliban should meet the Afghan authorities in Qatar and both sides were in disagreement over declaring a ceasefire in 2019,” a Taliban source was quoted as saying by Reuters.

Earlier Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the two sides were still working on the technical details and were not clear on the agenda for the talks.

This week’s talks involved U.S. withdrawal, prisoner exchange and the lifting

Many criteria were either found, or invented, to construct “the other side”, in other words, the side to be excluded. Diversity—be it geographical, political, civilizational, cultural, religious, patterns of military alliances and level of economic development—has been perceived as a threat and thus a justification for exclusion.

Enemies—based on real or perceived differences—serve not only to justify exclusion but in fact as a convenient managerial tool. The need for an enemy as a managerial tool has been so prevalent that at times enemies have been actually forged.

Demonization requires and breeds ignorance of “the Other”, and not only produces enemies, but creates a perpetual state of confrontation.

The realities of our globalized world have shattered the applicability of the zero-sum perspective. **→13**

of a ban on movement of Taliban leaders, a Taliban leader was quoted saying by Reuters.

The report, quoting Taliban sources, said they had demanded U.S. authorities release 25,000 prisoners and they would free 3,000, but that U.S. officials were not keen to discuss the exchange at this stage.

“We would never announce any ceasefire until and unless we achieve major gains on the ground. We have the feeling that Zalmay Khalilzad doesn’t have enough power to make important decisions,” a Taliban official is quoted as saying. **→6**



REPORT

Syed Zafar Mehdi
Journalist
from New Delhi

Iran, India trade ties on strong footing

Iran’s foreign minister Javad Zarif has displayed astute statesmanship while representing his country in foreign lands. Known for his sharp political acumen and tactful diplomacy, he knows how to bring friends closer and keep adversaries on their toes.

On his three-day visit to New Delhi, Zarif held wide-ranging deliberations with the top political leadership in India, attended the inaugural session of India-Iran Business Forum and spoke at the annual Raisina Dialogue organized by popular think-tank Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

Reaffirming his country’s commitment to expand ties with India, Zarif said the two countries have had engagements with each other for millennia, which includes trading with each other. He said Iran was one of India’s major suppliers of energy and urea fertilizers.

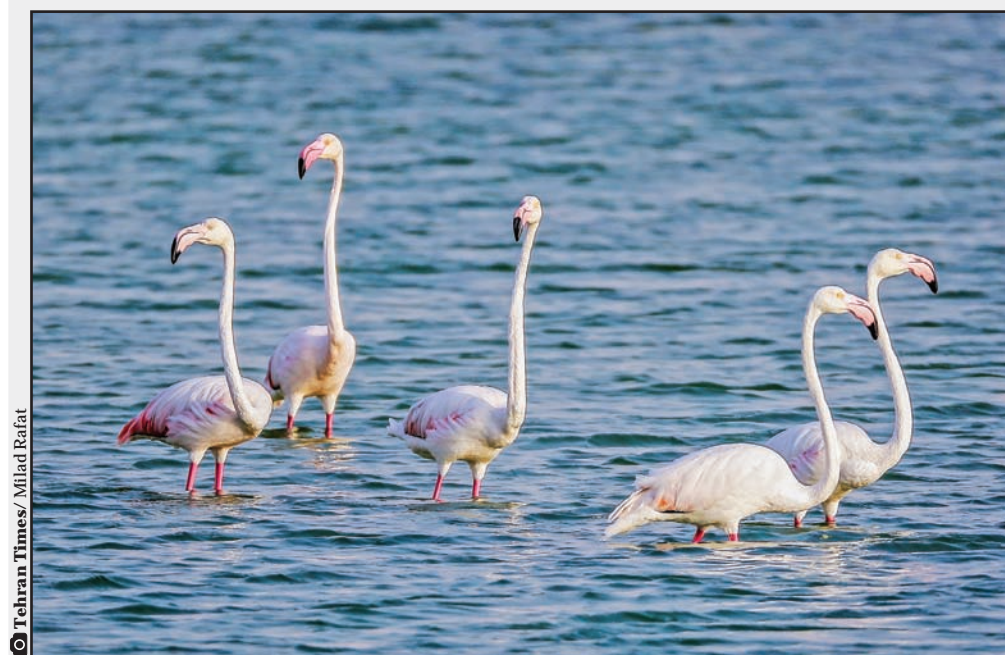
While Iran has always relied on its domestic population to support its growth and development objectives, it is always keen to explore complementarities with other countries. Zarif said, in his keynote address at the India-Iran Business forum.

Zarif also spoke about the challenges posed by the outside world, reaffirming that Iran has always managed to survive and work with the sanctions in place, which, he said, won’t affect Iran’s relations with friendly countries, like India.

Taking a dig at European countries, Zarif said European Union (EU) was moving slower than expected in facilitating non-dollar trade with Tehran to skirt U.S. sanctions, forcing it to explore other avenues.

We continue to work with the Europeans for the special purpose vehicle (SPV) but we are not waiting for them, he told media persons in New Delhi. We are working with our traditional partners like India, like China, like Russia so that we continue to work in the interest of our people.

To streamline their business partnership and circumvent U.S. sanctions, India has allowed Iran’s Pasargad Bank to open a branch in India. The bank will open its branch in Mumbai in next three months, according to India’s shipping minister Nitish Gadkari, who held talks with Zarif on Tuesday. **→6**



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A heaven for wintering birds in Iran

Nayband National Sea Park in the southern province of Bushehr, stretching over 42,000 hectares of area, is a heaven for wintering birds in Iran.

The park is a protected area and is home to eye-catching sceneries including mangrove forest, rare plant species, and coral reefs.

It is also home to native and migratory birds such as flamingos, curlews, great white pelicans, plovers, sandpipers, large white-headed gulls, terns, and egrets.

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



Europe owed to Iran's war on terror, Iran says in response to EU

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — The Iranian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday strongly denounced a recent decision by the European Union to impose sanctions against several Iranian nationals on terrorism charges on the basis of “groundless charges”, threatening “retaliatory measures”.

Calling the EU decision “illogical” and “surprising”, ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said the move shows European countries are not “honest” in fighting terrorism.

“Instead of putting the names of such criminal and terrorist groups such as the Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO) and al-Ahwaziya on its list of sanctions, the European Union has given them a free hand to commit inhumane terrorist acts and is even supporting them,” Qassemi said in a statement posted on the Foreign Ministry website.

Noting that Europe is owed to Iran for the war on terrorism, he said the bloc is making accusations against the Islamic Republic which is standard-bearer of the war against terrorism.



Adil Abdul-Mahdi calls Iran-Iraq ties friendly

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi said on Tuesday that Iran and Iraq have brotherly and friendly ties.

During a press conference, he said that Iraq focuses on interaction with the neighboring countries based on commonalities.

He said in December that Iraq will seeks to find an exemption from U.S. sanctions against Iran.



Karzai: Iran-Taliban talks will benefit Afghanistan

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai has said that Iran-Taliban talks is quite beneficial to Afghanistan.

“Iran is in contact with the Taliban which is definitely beneficial to Afghanistan,” he told ISNA in an interview published on Wednesday.

The Foreign Ministry announced that Iranian diplomats held a meeting with a Taliban delegation in Tehran on December 30. Abbas Araqchi, the deputy foreign minister for political affairs, headed the Iranian negotiating team.

Araqchi visited Kabul on January 5 to brief senior Afghan officials, including President Ashraf Ghani, on Iran's talks with Taliban representatives.

Defense Minister Amir Hatami said on Monday that Iran's talks with Taliban are aimed at restoring peace and stability to Afghanistan.



Austrian president: It's important to keep nuclear deal alive

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen has supported efforts to preserve the 2015 nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

The Der Standard reported on Wednesday that Van der Bellen said that it is very important to keep the JCPOA alive, IRNA reported.

The European Union's spokesperson said Monday that the bloc is still working on setting up a payment mechanism to facilitate trade with Iran and bypass U.S. sanctions.

“Actually, this is the work that is carried out by the (EU) member states. And according to the information that we have, the work is continuing and advancing well,” Maja Kocijancic, spokesperson for EU High Representative Federica Mogherini told a news conference in Brussels on Monday, the Kuwait News Agency reported.



MP calls Pompeo's sanctions remarks 'disgraceful'

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Alaeddin Boroujerdi, an Iranian lawmaker, has said that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's claim that sanctions are aimed at giving the Iranian people a chance to have better lives is “invalid” and “disgraceful”.

“It is obvious that these remarks are disgraceful and have no value,” ISNA quoted him as saying on Wednesday.

In an interview with Newsmax TV on January 3, Pompeo said, “The sanctions on Iran have this ultimate goal: creating an outcome where the Iranian people can have better lives than they have today.”

Iran to downgrade security ties with EU: diplomatic source

➔ Danish intelligence chief Finn Borch Andersen claimed in October that an Iranian intelligence service had tried to carry out a plot to assassinate an Iranian Arab opposition figure on Denmark's soil.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi dismissed the claim as a plot by enemies to undermine Tehran's growing relations with European countries.

A few weeks ago, U.S. officials had called European ambassadors in Tehran to a meeting in the United Arab Emirates, discussing with them their Iran policy and promising an end of the Islamic Republic in months. The U.S. officials had held a separate meeting in the same vein with regional intelligence services as well.

Can EU make decisions independently of U.S., asks VP

Jahangiri says: In reality, we haven't seen any effective performance from the EU



Much depends on the position of the European Union. European leaders have committed to maintaining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with or without Washington's support. But Tehran accuses Europe of failing to match its words with concrete action.

It is in this context that, Javad Montazeri, Euronews correspondent in Tehran, spoke with Es'haq Jahangiri, senior vice-president of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Euronews: Mr. Jahangiri, welcome to Euronews's “Global Conversation”. The first question I'd like to ask you is, where are we on the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action? It feels as though the Iranian people have grown tired of endless arguments about the Plan. How can you defend it?

Es'haq Jahangiri: The Plan of Action has been one of the important measures taken by the Islamic Republic of Iran. This agreement was concluded to answer an allegation that had resulted in pressures being imposed on the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Iranian people.

Whether it's been during the course of negotiations or now, we've always tried to share the issue honestly with our people. Unfortunately, U.S. sanctions were reinstated - and in a more damaging way - following Washington's decision to pull out of the deal unilaterally. With this new round of sanctions, the U.S. has used every possible means, incentivizing and threatening other countries and companies to impede them from working with the Islamic Republic of Iran. In response, we've adopted some measures in a number of areas. For one, we've stated that so long as other JCPOA signatories keep their sides of the bargain, and in particular as long as the European Union takes concrete measures in this regard, we are prepared to see the deal remain in place and will continue to honor it.

Take for example three countries from the EU: Germany, France and the UK. What have these countries done to salvage the JCPOA?

A: The three countries you mention are among the countries that agreed to implement their commitments and obligations under the deal if Iran kept its side of the bargain. They, as well as Russia and China and the other remaining five parties to the deal, are expected to keep to all their commitments. So far, the EU in

general and Germany, France and the UK in particular have behaved well and in a timely fashion when it comes to the politics and adopting diplomatic stances and we are satisfied with them. However, in terms of practical, concrete measures, we are yet to see any concrete measures from these three countries that would enable us to implement this deal to serve the interests of our people and our economy. I think that since World War II, Europe has faced a crucial test. Can it make decisions independent of the U.S. government, in particular when an administration like Trump's is in office? Can it defend its interests and its international commitments? In reality, we haven't seen any effective performance from the EU.

Do you think the EU has the necessary willpower or capability to stand up against Trump?

A: We had assumed the EU has such a capability. Theoretically, and in terms of its approach, it's done well so far. However, when it comes to practice, the EU financial structure and in particular the EU banking system has revealed that this Union isn't capable of standing up for itself as an independent decision-maker... a powerful entity that can conserve what it has achieved and fulfill its commitments. However, we're still hopeful it will keep its end of the deal.

What's your red line?

A: When it comes to making any international decision, we take the costs

and our national interests into account. Where the benefits outweigh the costs, we stand by our decisions. Although we have been largely disappointed with the EU's efficiency in taking concrete measures, there is still hope that the EU could do something so we can reap the benefits of the Plan of Action. Inside the country, the government has been under massive pressure from those who believed all along the EU would not fulfill its commitments and is not to be trusted. As a matter of fact, this pressure has been mounting given the EU's failure to fulfill its commitments. However, we believe that the Plan of Action should remain in place so long as the interests of the Iranian people require it.

Could the Iranian government take other voluntary steps in exchange for promises from the EU?

A: The JCPOA is a deal in which everything has been defined. The measures Iran has to adopt or steps it must take have been specified in the deal.

I mean commitments beyond the scope of the Plan of Action.

A: No, we won't make any commitments beyond the scope of the Plan of Action. The Plan of Action is our situation now. Under the Plan of Action, all parties to the deal who have negotiated and signed it must keep their sides of the bargain.

EU parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held in May and it's possible Mrs. Mogherini and her team may leave their

posts after this election. How do you see the perspective of Tehran-Brussels relations with the departure of Mrs. Mogherini?

A: Governments come and go. Even commitments undertaken by figures like Mrs. Mogherini who is affiliated with the whole EU are not individual commitments. This is a commitment of an entity called the EU and from Germany, France and the UK. Who is in office and holds power is not the main determinant. We expect the EU to fulfil all its commitments under the Plan of Action regardless of any change that may happen.

The question of the EU opening an office in Tehran is still on the agenda. What is the latest on this?

A: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran is following up the issue. I hope the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the EU will come to some sort of arrangement as soon as possible.

Recently, there's been a movement in France called the Yellow Vests. I am sure you've heard about it and followed the news. Do you see any point of convergence and similarity between the demands made by the Yellow Vests and the events recently witnessed involving Iranian workers in Tehran?

A: These two don't share any similarities. The Islamic Revolution emerged victorious 40 years ago and now we are about to celebrate the anniversary of this victory. The most important objective of the Islamic Revolution has been to address the needs of the underprivileged, protect and contribute to the development of deprived regions and create the freedom and justice that the public demands. During the last 40 years, we've witnessed peaceful rallies and gatherings in big cities across the country such as Tehran. The slogans voiced during these gatherings were in line with the slogans of the Revolution and the public demands are a far cry from what is happening now in France and some other European countries.

These are classified as labour union demands. Opponents of the Islamic Republic of Iran outside the country and detractors of this government inside have attempted to misrepresent these demands as politically motivated. Of course workers can have some political demands. However, there's no way you can interpret these demands as a public protest triggering a movement like that of the Yellow Vests in France.

[Read full on website](#)

Military advisor: Iran can help Taliban, Afghan govt. reach common understanding

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Major General Hassan Firouzabadi, a top military adviser to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, has said Iran can help the Taliban and the Afghan government reach a common understanding for stabilizing Afghanistan.

In an interview with IRNA published on Wednesday, Firouzabadi said security in Afghanistan is very important for Iran.

“Iran holds talks with the Taliban with the framework of international law and this group is willing to play role in Afghanistan's security,” said Firouzabadi, who was Iran's Armed Forces Chief of Staff for more than a decade.

The Foreign Ministry announced that Iranian diplomats held a meeting with a Taliban delegation in Tehran on December 30. Abbas Araqchi, the deputy foreign minister for political affairs, headed the Iranian negotiating team.

Araqchi met Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul on Saturday. The office of the Afghan president said Araqchi briefed Ghani about the meeting between Iranian officials and the Taliban.



Defense Minister Amir Hatami also said on Monday that Iran's talks with Taliban are aimed at restoring peace and stability to Afghanistan.

Iran plays important role in regional security' Firouzabadi also said that Iran plays an important role in regional security.

Ayatollah Khamenei: First-class idiots in Washington

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — The Leader of the Islamic Revolution said on Wednesday that some U.S. officials are “first-class idiots”, questioning the sensibility of their failing plots against Iran.

Addressing a large gathering of people from the central holy city of Qom, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the 1979 Islamic Revolution is the main reason behind Washington's deep and lasting hostility toward Iran.

In particular he pointed to a U.S. statesman's promise, in a gathering of “terrorists and thugs” months ago, that they would celebrate New Year 2019 in Tehran.

He compared the calculation ability of the U.S. statesmen to former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein who had hoped to conquer Tehran within a week at the beginning of his invasion of Iran in September 1980.

The Leader said the Americans speak gleefully of “strongest sanctions in history” against Iran, “but the Iranian nation will, God willing, make them suffer an unprecedented defeat in history.”

He urged steadfastness in the face of the U.S. and Europe's “militarism, bluster, and idle talk,” saying, “Neither their threats, nor their words and promises, and not even their signatures are creditworthy.”

'Accusing Iran won't absolve Europe of responsibility for harboring terrorists'

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has told Europeans that making accusations against Iran won't absolve them of the responsibility for harboring the terrorist Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO) - also called Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK) -- who has murdered tens of thousands of Iranians.

“Europeans, incl Denmark, Holland & France, harbor MEK—who killed 12000 Iranians & abetted Saddam's crimes against Iraqi Kurds—as well as other terrorists staging murder of innocent Iranians from Europe. Accusing

Iran won't absolve Europe of responsibility for harboring terrorists,” Zarif tweeted Tuesday.

Danish intelligence chief Finn Borch Andersen claimed in October that an Iranian intelligence service had tried to carry out a plot to assassinate an Iranian Arab opposition figure on Denmark's soil.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi dismissed the claim as a plot by enemies to affect Tehran's growing relations with European countries.

Anders Samuelsen, the Danish foreign minister, tweeted on Tuesday that the European Union agreed to enact

Zarif likens Pompeo and Bolton to 'psychotic stalker' too obsessed with Iran

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Tuesday likened U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton to “psychotic stalkers” who are extremely obsessed with Iran.

“While ordinarily it might be flattering, @SecPompeo's and @AmbJohnBolton's pure obsession with Iran is more and more like the behavior of persistently failing psychotic stalkers,” Zarif tweeted.

Zarif the U.S. is in fact “substituting a real foreign policy with Iran-obsession and -phobia.”

Speaking during a news conference with his Jordanian counterpart Ayman Safadi in Amman on Tuesday, Pompeo said the U.S. was “redoubling not only our

diplomatic but our commercial efforts to put real pressure on Iran.”

He also said the U.S. decision to pull out troops from Syria would not jeopardize Washington's efforts to counter threats in the region, which, he alleged, came from Iran and the Daesh terrorist group, Press TV reported.

“The most significant threats to the region are Daesh and the Islamic Revolution,” Pompeo said.

Bolton also claimed on Sunday that Iran poses a threat to the region through its “quest for deliverable nuclear weapons.”

“We've got the continuing threat of Iran's quest for deliverable nuclear weapons,” Bolton said during a joint declaration with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

sanctions against an Iranian Intelligence Service over claims of assassination plot.

The MKO did numerous terrorist acts in Iran, especially in the early years of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. It also sided with Saddam Hussein's army in the war against Iran in the 1980s.

Saddam also used the extremist group in violent crackdown on the Iraqi Kurds in the north and the Shiites in the south.

MKO has been renamed as the so-called National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which its office is in Paris. France hosts annual gathering of the MKO.

France, Germany approve extension of reconciliation treaty to shore up EU

France and Germany have agreed to deepen a 1963 treaty of post-war reconciliation in a bid to show that the European Union's main axis remains strong and counter growing eurosceptic nationalism among some other members.

The extension to the Elysee Treaty approved by the German and French cabinets will be signed by Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron in the German border city of Aachen, an historical symbol of European concord, on Jan. 22.

"Both states will deepen their cooperation in foreign affairs, defence, external and internal security and development and at the same time work on strengthening the ability of Europe to act independently," states the treaty text, seen by Reuters.

In Paris, Macron's office said the Elysee Treaty extension would help both European powers tackle "the challenges they will be confronted with in the 21st century".

"(We) envisage deepening our engagement in favour of security and prosperity of our peoples in the framework of a more sovereign, united and democratic Europe," it said.

The treaty extension, negotiated over the past year though short on details, stipulates that it will be a priority of German-French diplomacy for Germany to be accepted as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Germany has for years sought greater



influence within the international body, to which its closest allies the United States, Britain and France belong.

While making clear that Germany and France remain committed to the EU and NATO defense alliance, the agreement also signals

that Berlin and Paris will combat efforts by some nationalist politicians in Europe to erode the 28-nation EU.

On Wednesday, Italian far-right Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said he wanted his country and Poland to join forces to

reshape Europe in his quest for a eurosceptic alliance ahead of the European Parliament elections in May.

"Germany and France are making clear that to solve future questions, we need more, not less cooperation," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said.

Facing new challenges from U.S. President Donald Trump in the United States as well as EU governments in Italy, Poland and Hungary, Merkel and Macron are keen to head off any breakthrough for eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament vote.

The treaty further outlines closer cooperation between national intelligence services and police in fighting terrorism and organized crime, and a commitment to moving toward economic convergence.

"Both states will deepen the integration of their economies towards a German-French economic area with common rules," said the treaty text, referring also to calls for the harmonization of economic law. In addition, they will set up a panel of experts to give economic recommendations to each government.

Other areas of cooperation include culture, health, innovation and transport.

Aachen, the venue of the signing ceremony, was the residence of Charlemagne, often called the "father of Europe", who managed to unite much of western Europe in the early ninth century.

(Source: AFP)

U.S. to blame if any South China Sea clash

U.S. naval operations in the South China Sea could spark conflict and the United States would be to blame if a clash occurred, a Chinese military researcher said on Wednesday.

The warning came as Chinese and U.S. trade teams ended talks in Beijing that have raised hopes an all-out trade war could be avoided, but fears remain that strategic tension between two countries are growing.

"Both countries warships definitely have to come into close proximity and it's easy for there to be a misunderstanding or an error of judgment, even a collision," Zhang Junshe, a researcher at China's PLA Naval Military Studies Research Institute, told reporters.

"If there is a collision, the root cause is the United States." On Monday a U.S. guided-missile destroyer sailed near

disputed islands the South China Sea in what China called a "provocation", just as the trade talks began.

Zhang said whenever U.S. warships entered waters that China claimed, China had no option but to send warships to deal with them.

Since Trump took office, there have been 14 incidents of U.S. Navy vessel entering waters that China claims to carry out what the U.S. military calls freedom of navigation operations, Zhang said.

China claims almost all of the South China Sea and denounces the United States and its allies over naval operations near Chinese-occupied islands.

Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and Taiwan have competing claims in the region.

He Lei, former vice president of China's Academy of

Military Sciences, said "foreign forces" that attempted to prevent the unification of China and Taiwan could compel Beijing to use force to bring the self-ruled island under its control.

"Foreign forces that pose as world police to interfere in China's affairs, to obstruct and damage China's unification, are the main culprits that could force the mainland to use force to resolve the Taiwan issue," he told reporters.

U.S. President Donald Trump last week signed into law the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which reaffirms the U.S. commitment to Taiwan, including arms sales.

Chinese President Xi Jinping on Jan. 2 said nobody could change the fact Taiwan was part of China.

(Source: Reuters)

Afghanistan says end to war a 'dream' without Taliban talking to government

Afghan Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah said on Wednesday that the Taliban's refusal to involve the government in peace talks means the end to a conflict that has lasted 17 years can only remain a dream.

Abdullah's remarks came a day after the Taliban called off a fourth round of talks with U.S. officials in Qatar, due to start this week, over disagreements about the involvement of Afghan officials, a possible ceasefire and prisoner exchange.

Efforts for a negotiated settlement have gathered pace in recent weeks, even as reports that U.S. President Donald Trump plans to withdraw thousands of U.S. troops triggered uncertainty.

The United States is pressing Taliban leaders to sit down with Afghan government officials but the Taliban see the United States as the main power and dismiss the Kabul administration as a puppet.

"In any peace deal in which the rights of our citizens, that have been gained with a lot of sacrifices, are not respected, the deal is a dream and will never happen," Abdullah told gathering in Kabul, commemorating the 15th anniversary of the constitution.

"Today the talk about the withdrawal of foreign forces is an excuse for continuation of war and gaining more opportunities."

A Taliban leader told Reuters that the talks, which would have been the fourth round with U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, would have focused on a U.S. withdrawal, prisoner exchange and the lifting of a ban on movement of Taliban leaders.

Taliban sources said that they had demanded that U.S. authorities release 25,000 prisoners and that they would free 3,000, but that U.S. officials were not keen to discuss the exchange.

The war in Afghanistan is America's longest overseas military intervention. It has cost Washington nearly \$1 trillion and killed tens of thousands of people.

■ "No change in Taliban"

Abdullah, who shares power with President Ashraf Ghani after a U.S.-brokered political deal in 2014 that led to formation of a coalition government, said the Taliban have not changed since their austere regime was toppled by U.S.-led forces in 2001.

"We haven't seen any change in the Taliban so far and that country that supports them, has not unfortunately changed its policies toward us either," said Abdullah, referring to neighbouring Pakistan which Kabul accuses of harbouring Taliban leaders.

Pakistan denies the charge and says it is encouraging the Taliban to talk directly with the Afghan government.

A senior Afghan government official said the talks also would



have involved discussion about the formation of an interim administration known as the "peace government" after U.S. forces announce a withdrawal and the Taliban accept a ceasefire.

The peace government would bring all warring parties under one administration until the Taliban are fully integrated and election are held.

But Ghani has strongly opposed any interim government. Abdullah called on Afghans to support the current administration instead.

"They say they are not the Taliban of the past and they have learnt lessons and are in favour of an inclusive government, but they instead go and talk to some individuals and call them elders which is against our national interest," Abdullah said, referring to political figures.

"They do this to show that the government is either weak or does not exist," he added.

The impasse over the talks comes as Afghanistan prepares to hold presidential elections in July with many Afghans believing the vote may be cancelled if a peace deal is reached with the Taliban.

Presidential candidates, including Ghani who seeks a second five-year term, have not officially announced they are running as coalition-building among leaders of various ethnic groups debated whom to support.

The United States sent troops to Afghanistan after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington. At its peak the U.S. deployment involved more than 100,000 troops, but Washington withdrew most in 2014 and now has around 14,000 troops in the country as part of a NATO-led mission aiding Afghan security forces and hunting militants.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on a visit to India on Wednesday that the Taliban must have a role in Afghanistan in future, but not a dominant role.

(Source: Reuters)

UK government defeated as lawmakers vote for quick action if May's Brexit deal rejected

The British government was defeated in parliament on Wednesday as lawmakers voted for a procedural change that reduces the time it has to come up with an alternative plan if Prime

Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal is defeated next week.

The 308 to 297 defeat tries to force the government to come back within three working parliamentary days with

a plan B, rather than the 21 days specified in Brexit law. The change is unlikely to supersede the 21 day time limit in law, but adds political pressure.

(Source: Reuters)

U.S. official Rosenstein, overseeing Russia probe, set to leave

Deputy U.S. Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, who has overseen the Russian election meddling probe, is preparing to leave the U.S. Department of Justice in coming weeks as President Donald Trump's nominee to lead the department is set to take over, a department official said Wednesday.

Rosenstein has had oversight of the U.S. Special Counsel's probe into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and possible connections to Trump's campaign.

Then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, an early Trump supporter during the presidential campaign, had recused himself.

William Barr, Trump's pick to replace Sessions who was fired soon after the November midterm congressional elections, is set to appear for a confirmation hearing next week before the Senate Judiciary Committee, which must weigh his nomination before the full Senate considers his approval.

The official, who asked not to be named since no announcement has been made, said there is no specific plan for Rosenstein's departure and that he plans to leave sometime after Barr's confirmation.

If confirmed, Barr, who was U.S. Attorney General under the late President George H.W. Bush from 1991 to 1993, would oversee the investigation led by U.S. Special Counsel Robert Mueller, a fellow Republican chosen by Rosenstein.

Barr's nomination is likely to meet heavy scrutiny regarding the ongoing investigation, particularly from Democrats, following reports he had written a memo in June questioning the probe. Rosenstein has said the memo had no impact on the department's work.

Rosenstein will stay on to ensure smooth transition with Barr, the official said, adding that he has seen his job as deputy as a two-year stint and is not being forced out.

Asked about Rosenstein's departure, first reported by ABC News, White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said she had not spoken to Rosenstein and would leave any announced departures to him or the president.

"Certainly, I don't think there's any willingness by the president or the White House to push him out," Sanders told Fox News in an interview.

Rosenstein has stayed on under Acting Attorney General Matt Whitaker, whose controversial appointment has sparked numerous legal challenges and raised questions about what role he would play regarding the investigation.

Rosenstein has been frequently criticized by Trump, who calls the Russia investigation a "witch hunt" and denies any collusion with Moscow. Russia has also denied any election interference.

U.S. intelligence agencies have found that Russia sought to sway the 2016 presidential vote to Trump over Democratic challenger Hillary Clinton.

(Source: Reuters)

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STOCK MARKET

TEDPIX	164829.4
IFX	1944.55

Sources: tse.ir, Ifb.ir

CURRENCIES

USD	42,000 rials
EUR	48,116 rials
GBP	53,493 rials
AED	11,437 rials

Source: iribnews.ir

COMMODITIES

WTI	\$51.23/b
Brent	\$60.25/b
OPEC Basket	\$56.43/b
Gold	\$1,228.00 /oz
Silver	\$15.74/oz
Platinum	\$825.20/oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

NEWS IN BRIEF



Persian Gulf Star Refinery's 3rd phase comes on stream

1 → Alireza Sadeq-Abadi also announced that the country's gasoline imports have been reduced to zero since the Iranian calendar month of Mehr (started on September 22).

Persian Gulf Star Refinery in the southern province of Hormozgan is the first of its kind designed based on gas condensate feedstock received from South Pars gas field which Iran shares with Qatar in the Persian Gulf.

Construction of the refinery started in 2006, but the project was delayed as the result of some mismanagement and also financial limitation due to the West-led sanctions against Iran.

Persian Gulf Star, the Middle East's largest processing facility for gas condensate, is planned to play a big role to turn Iran into an exporter of gasoline.



TPO to dispatch trade delegation to Japan in early March

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**— Iran's Trade and Promotion Organization (TPO) plans to dispatch a trade and marketing delegation to Japan in early March.

The delegates active in the agriculture and food sectors are to visit the 44th International Exhibition of Food and Beverages (Foodex 2019) which is planned to be held at Makuhari Messe in Japan during March 5-8, the portal of TPO published.

The exhibition is going to be attended by exhibitors from over 83 different countries active in a variety of areas including agricultural products, food industry, protein and meat products, dairy products, dried fruits, organic products and vegetables, cold and hot drinks as well as packaging equipment, and related industries and machinery.

World Bank sees global growth slowing in 2019

The growth of the global economy is expected to slow to 2.9 percent in 2019 compared with 3 percent in 2018, the World Bank said on Tuesday, citing elevated trade tensions and international trade moderation.



“At the beginning of 2018 the global economy was firing on all cylinders, but it lost speed during the year and the ride could get even bumpier in the year ahead,” World Bank Chief Executive Officer Kristalina Georgieva said in the semi-annual Global Economic Prospects report.

The World Bank outlook comes as the United States and China have been engaged in a bitter trade dispute, which has jolted financial markets across the world for months. The two economies have imposed tit-for-tat duties on each other's goods, although there were signs of progress on Tuesday as the two countries prepared to enter a third day of talks in Beijing.

Growth in the United States is likely to slow to 2.5 percent this year from 2.9 percent in 2018, while China is expected to grow at 6.2 percent in the year compared with 6.5 percent in 2018, according to the World Bank.

Emerging market economies are expected to grow at 4.2 percent this year, with advanced economies expected to grow at 2 percent, the World Bank said in the report.

(Source: CNBC)

Turkey resumes import of oil from Iran

ENERGY **TEHRAN** — Turkey has resumed imports of Iranian crude oil under the U.S. sanctions waiver, according to the trading and shipping sources.

The country restarted oil imports from Iran after a one-month stop in November when U.S. sanctions on Iran were reimposed, Reuters reported on Tuesday.

Turkey used to import about 200,000 barrels per day (bpd) of Iranian crude before the U.S. withdrawal from Iran's nuclear deal in last year and re-imposition of sanctions.

Turkey had reduced its imports from Iran in the months prior to sanctions coming into force in early November. Its imports fell to zero in November.

But in December Turkey took delivery of

two tankers carrying Iranian crude, equivalent to about 54,000 bpd during December, according to a shipping and trading source familiar with the matter.

The Solan tanker delivered into the port of Aliaga, while the Sea Topaz I discharged at Tutunciftlik.

So far in January, Turkey is set to receive a cargo from the Iranian-owned tanker Sinopa, the sources and Refinitiv Eikon ship tracking showed.

Turkish officials and Tupras were not immediately available to comment.

In an interview with NTV in Ankara, Turkish Trade Minister Ruhsar Pekcan had said that Turkey expected the U.S. to extend its sanctions waiver on importing Iranian oil.



India begins paying Iran for oil in rupees: official

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**— India has begun paying Iran for oil in rupees, Reuters reported quoting an Indian senior bank official as saying on Tuesday.

It is the first such payment since the United States imposed new sanctions against Iran in November.

The U.S. has given a six-month waiver to eight countries including India for imports of Iranian oil.

India, the world's third biggest oil importer, wants to continue buying oil from Iran as it offers free shipping and an extended credit period, while Iran will use the rupee funds to mostly pay for imports from India.

“Today we received a good amount from some oil companies,” Charan Singh, executive director at state-owned UCO Bank told Reuters. He did not disclose the names of refiners or how much had been deposited.

New Delhi recently issued a notification exempting pay-



ments to the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) for crude oil imports from steep withholding taxes, enabling refiners to clear an estimated \$1.5 billion in dues.

An industry source said India's top refiner Indian Oil Corp and Mangalore Refinery & Petrochemicals have made payments for Iranian oil imports. Neither was immediately available for comment.

Meanwhile, in a meeting with Indian Minister for Road Transport & Highways, Shipping and Water Resources Nitin Gadkari in New Delhi on Tuesday, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said the European Union was moving slower than expected in facilitating non-dollar trade with Tehran to circumvent U.S. sanctions, forcing it to explore avenues with other nations, adding, “We are working with our traditional partners like India, China, and Russia so that we continue to work in the interest of our people.”

‘Banking system reformations on CBI agenda’

ECONOMY **TEHRAN**— “The plan on amending domestic banking system is being investigated comprehensively and will become operational after getting prepared,” the governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) announced in social media.

According to Abdolnaser Hemmati, CBI's Money and Credit Council has approved two major foreign currency exchange mechanisms, the first is formation of ‘an organized market for foreign currency exchange and related trades’ and the second is preparation of ‘instructions about letting customers open rial-based accounts relying

on foreign currency’.

“At the organized market, foreign currency exchanges will be done in cash and in an electronic framework, relying on the approved regulations,” Hemmati announced.

“In rial-based accounts, the CBI utilizes the made accounts of its customers for making foreign currency investments,” he wrote, “the exchange rates for opening such accounts are daily set at CBI's online Sana system (accessible at sanarate.ir, a website that records daily forex trade from across the domestic exchange bureaus).”



U.S.-China trade talks conclude as hopes of a deal build

Chinese and U.S. teams ended trade talks in Beijing on Wednesday that lasted longer than expected and officials said details will be released soon, raising hopes an all-out trade war that could badly disrupt the global economy can be avoided.

The talks were extended into an unscheduled third day, showing both sides were “serious”, China's Foreign Ministry said.

Share prices jumped in Asia and markets in Europe and the United States were expected to follow suit as the lengthened talks fueled optimism that the world's largest economies were inching toward an agreement.

Ted McKinney, U.S. Under Secretary of Agriculture for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs, said the U.S. trade delegation would return to the United States later on Wednesday after a “good few days”.

“I think they went just fine,” McKinney said of the talks. “It's been a good one for us,” he told reporters at the delegation's hotel, without elaborating.

Speaking at a daily news briefing, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang confirmed both sides had agreed to extend the talks beyond Monday and Tuesday as originally scheduled.

Asked if that meant they were difficult talks, Lu said: “I can only say that extending the consultations shows that the two sides were indeed very serious in conducting the consultations.”

This week's meetings are the first face-to-face talks since U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed in December to a 90-day truce in a trade war that has roiled global financial markets.

The extra day of talks came amid signs of progress on issues including purchases of U.S. farm and energy commodities and increased access to China's markets.

However, people familiar with the negotiations told Reuters on Tuesday that the two sides were further apart on Chi-

nese structural reforms that the Trump administration is demanding in order to stop alleged theft and forced transfer of U.S. technology, and on how Beijing will be held to its promises.

If no deal is reached by March 2, Trump has said he will proceed with raising tariffs to 25 percent from 10 percent on \$200 billion worth of Chinese imports, at a time when China's economy is slowing significantly. Beijing has retaliated in turn to U.S. tariffs.

But as meetings wound down in Beijing on Tuesday evening, Trump tweeted: “Talks with China are going very well!”

The U.S. team is led by Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Jeffrey Gerrish, and includes under secretaries from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy and Treasury, as well as senior officials from the White House.

Vice Commerce Minister Wang Shouwen heads the vice ministerial level talks for

China, though Vice Premier Liu He, a top economic adviser to Xi, made an appearance at a meeting on Monday.

China is keen to put an end to its trade dispute with the United States but will not make any “unreasonable concessions” and any agreement must involve compromise on both sides, state newspaper the China Daily said on Wednesday.

The paper said in an editorial that Beijing's stance remains firm that the dispute harms both countries and disrupts the international trade order and supply chains.

In what is widely seen as a goodwill gesture, China on Tuesday issued long-awaited approvals for the import of five genetically modified crops, which could boost its purchases of U.S. grains as farmers decide which crops to plant in the spring.

On Monday, Chinese importers made another large purchase of U.S. soybeans, their third in the past month.

(Source: Reuters)

Trump is probably going to get his way with the Federal Reserve this year

As President Donald Trump continues to muse about the Federal Reserve, the likelihood that he's going get what he wants this year from the central bank continues to grow.

Markets currently expect the Fed to hold off on rate hikes and are even anticipating the possibility of a cut over the next year or two, playing into the low-rate environment the president has espoused.

That in turn would decrease the chances that Trump might try to fire Fed Chairman Jerome Powell, a move universally regarded as difficult to achieve and likely disruptive if not disastrous for the market.

“Replacing Powell might prompt initial disruptions in markets. Reduced US central bank independence could lead to longer-term damage to the US economy,” Dana Peterson, North American economist for Citigroup, said in a note that called the threat of Powell getting ousted “deep within the realm of tail risks.”

That chance may have declined even more in recent days as market conditions improved and Powell in a public forum Friday provided assurance that the Fed will be “patient” in how it normalizes monetary policy, attentive to what the market is signaling, and flexible in how it proceeds with interest rates and its balance sheet reduction.

Trump nonetheless made it clear he's still keeping an eye on things.

“Can you imagine if I had long term ZERO interest rates to play with like the past administration, rather than the rapidly raised normalized rates we have today,” the president said in his latest Fed-related tweet Tuesday.

Conditions indeed have changed.

Whereas the market — and Trump's predecessor, Barack

Obama — enjoyed for seven years the fruits of near-zero interest rates and quantitative easing that helped push the market up more than 300 percent, the current climate is one of rising rates and no Fed money-printing.

■ Rethinking rates and the balance sheet

As Trump pointed out, the market has gained substantially since his election, but the latest leg in the bull market was tempered by a sharp sell-off in the fourth quarter of 2018 spurred in part by fears of a Fed policy mistake.

Economists expect 2019 to feature the Fed rethinking its strategy on rate normalization as well its approach to reducing the size of the balance sheet bond portfolio by \$50 billion a month.

Economists will get another look inside the policymaking Federal Open Market Committee's thinking Wednesday when the minutes from December's meeting are released at 2 pm ET. The FOMC approved a quarter-point rate hike at the meeting, the fourth of the year.

“If there were to be a sharp enough deterioration in the outlook that threatens outright recession, we think the Fed would pivot aggressively on both rates and balance sheet, cutting rates sharply and putting the balance sheet on hold,” wrote Krishna Guha, head of global policy and central bank strategy at Evercore ISI.

One difference he sees is the Fed making more use of forward guidance on its intentions than on the massive bond purchases it conducted during the three rounds of QE. Powell in the past has voiced skepticism about the balance sheet expansion and has said he doubts the monthly roll-off of bond proceeds would be interrupted unless conditions

change notably. The balance sheet has been reduced by about \$400 billion.

The market is firm in its view as well: Traders are pricing in virtually no chance of a rate hike this year and in fact are now starting to view a cut as more likely heading into 2020-21. In the chart below, the fed funds futures curve rises as the settlement price gets higher, indicating a lower funds rate. The terminal date on the chart is Dec. 31, 2021.

■ Firing without ‘cause’

All of that might mollify Trump, though questions remain about whether he would try to remove Powell should the Fed not do as the president likes.

In Wall Street's view, Trump may have the authority to remove the Fed chair for “cause” but likely would have a hard time proving his case just because he doesn't like where interest rates are heading.

“Removing Powell for ‘cause’ likely would involve a series of lawsuits without timely resolutions,” Peterson, the Citigroup economist, said. “Indeed, President Trump would have to prove that Powell should be removed for ‘cause,’ in which legal precedent alludes to dereliction of duty, moral turpitude, physical or mental incapacity, or similar failings that demonstrate an unfitness for the office, not disagreement over policy.”

As a practical matter, removing Powell wouldn't guarantee Trump a Fed reluctant to hike rates.

Of the remaining group, only St. Louis President James Bullard has professed a strong commitment to pausing on rate hikes.

(Source: Reuters)

Oil rises by over 1 percent on U.S., China trade talk optimism

Oil prices rose by around 1 percent on Wednesday, extending gains from the previous session on hopes that Washington and Beijing may soon resolve trade disputes that have cast a dark shadow over the global economy.

U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude oil futures were at \$50.42 per barrel at 0752 GMT, up 64 cents, or 1.3 percent, from their last settlement. That marked the first time this year that WTI has topped \$50 a barrel.

International Brent crude futures were up 69 cents, or 1.2 percent, at \$59.41 per barrel.

Both crude price benchmarks had already gained more than 2 percent in the previous session.

"Crude continues to extend gains as early reports from Beijing regarding trade negotiations are fueling optimism around successful trade talks between the U.S. and China," said Stephen Innes, head of trading for Asia-Pacific at futures brokerage Oanda in Singapore.

"After a dreadful December for risk markets, crude oil continues to catch a positive vibe," Innes said.

The oil price jumps were in line with Asian stock markets, which climbed to



3-1/2 week highs on Wednesday.

Trade talks in Beijing between the world's two biggest economies entered a third day on Wednesday, amid signs of progress on issues including purchases of U.S. farm and energy commodities and increased U.S. access to China's markets.

State newspaper China Daily said on Wednesday that Beijing is keen to put an end to its trade dispute with the United States, but that it will not make any "unreasonable concessions" and that any agreement must involve compromise on both sides.

If no deal is reached by March 2, Trump

has said he will proceed with raising tariffs to 25 percent from 10 percent on \$200 billion worth of Chinese imports at a time when China's economy is slowing significantly.

Citing the trade tensions, the World Bank expects global economic growth to slow to 2.9 percent in 2019 from 3 percent in 2018.

"At the beginning of 2018 the global economy was firing on all cylinders, but it lost speed during the year and the ride could get even bumpier in the year ahead," World Bank Chief Executive Officer Kristalina Georgieva said in a semi-annual report released late on Tuesday.

More fundamentally, however, oil prices have been receiving support from supply cuts started at the end of 2018 by a group of producers around the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) as well as non-OPEC member Russia.

The OPEC-led cuts are aimed at reining in an emerging supply overhang, in part because U.S. crude oil output surged by around 2 million barrels per day (bpd) in 2018, to a record 11.7 million bpd.

Official U.S. fuel storage data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) is due at 1800 GMT on Wednesday.

(Source: Reuters)

U.S. threatens sanctions against Nord Stream 2 contractors

Washington might slap sanctions on two European contractors that are laying the pipeline for the Nord Stream 2 project, German newspaper Handelsblatt has reported.

Sources in the German federal government told Handelsblatt that the White House would primarily levy sanctions on the highly specialised companies laying the Nord Stream 2 pipeline on behalf of the operating company, Nord Stream 2 AG. These two contractors are Swiss-based Allseas Group and Italian-based Saipem.

A spokesperson from Allseas, which is set to lay over 90 percent of the pipeline, was quoted as refusing to speculate about the possible impact of U.S. sanctions. Saipem did not respond to a request for comment but industry sources, as per the report, called sanctions against the Italian firm "pointless" as it has already completed its part of the work.

U.S. President Donald Trump has been a vocal critic of Nord Stream 2; he earlier said that it was "unfortunate" for Germans but vowed not to go hard on investors in the pipeline. However, U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell, Trump's close ally, delivered a more ominous message.

He told Handelsblatt that companies participating in the construction are "always in danger, because sanctions are always possible"; he is also convinced that looming



sanctions would force these companies pull out of the project all by themselves.

The Trump administration has long opposed Nord Stream 2; it said that the Gazprom-led venture, which is set to divert gas flows away from Ukraine to Germany through the Baltic Sea, poses a threat to European energy security and could be used by Russia to obtain economic and political leverage. Donald Trump has called on European countries that support the project to scrap it in favour of American liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Both Moscow and Berlin have dismissed the allegations, saying that Nord Stream 2 is a purely economic project. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov slammed the U.S. claims as a "camouflaged dishonest competition". The European Commission said that it did not support the venture but refused to prohibit it.

(Source: Sputnik)

Venezuela congress slams oil deals with U.S., French companies

Venezuela's opposition-run congress on Tuesday issued a resolution calling deals between state-run oil company PDVSA and U.S. and French companies announced this week illegal, since they had not been sent to lawmakers for approval.

The body said the oilfield deals with France's Maurel & Prom and little-known U.S. company Erepla violated article 150 of Venezuela's constitution, which requires that contracts signed between the state and foreign companies be approved by the National Assembly, as Venezuela's congress is known.

"They are giving concessions that violate the law," said lawmaker Jorge Millan, mentioning the two contracts.

Congress, largely stripped of its power since the opposition took it over in 2016, is unlikely to be able block the deals from going forward. But the rejection could create legal complications under a future government.

Maduro is set to be inaugurated for his second consecutive term on Thursday following a May vote considered a sham by the domestic opposition and many foreign governments. A regional bloc of Latin American countries last week called on Maduro, a protégé of the late Hugo Chavez, not to take office.

The deals are part of Maduro's effort to reverse a sharp decline in the OPEC nation's crude output that has crippled its economy. Erepla said it would invest



up to \$500 million in three fields, while Maurel & Prom said it would invest up to \$400 million for a 40 percent stake in an oilfield joint venture.

PDVSA did not respond to a request for comment. Maurel & Prom did not immediately respond to a request for comment outside of normal business hours in France.

A spokesman for Erepla, registered in Delaware in November and part-owned by a prominent Florida Republican donor and shipping magnate, said Venezuela's hydrocarbons law "allows PDVSA to contract with companies like Erepla to execute field services without any additional approvals required."

Referring to the Erepla deal during the congressional session earlier on Tuesday, Millan said that while PDVSA referred to the agreement as an oilfield service contract, "the company will be conducting oil exploration and production activities."

(Source: Reuters)

China trade war and US shale are the biggest concerns for outgoing OPEC chief

The U.S.-China trade war and booming American shale production are among the top worries for the United Arab Emirates' energy minister and former OPEC president. After a volatile year for oil prices, hydrocarbon-exporting countries are buckling down for what could be more turbulence ahead.

In terms of geopolitical headwinds for 2019, "One is the potential of heated war between China and the United States," Suhail Al Mazrouei told CNBC's Hadley Gamble on Wednesday. Mazrouei finished his term at the helm of OPEC on January 1.

"I think this is one fundamental, not only affecting us but affecting the whole economics of the world. And I tend to be... more optimistic that we are not going to see a war. It's negotiation tactics, they will end on a resolution, whatever it takes, this year or next year."

While cautiously optimistic on the outcome of ongoing trade negotiations between the world's two largest economies, Mazrouei stressed the impact of U.S. shale production on the market -- something that's increasingly putting OPEC members under pressure. "But this is one thing, how much is coming from the shale oil production I think that's another factor we need to watch and we need to advise that it has to be reasonable," the minister said.

Oil prices have plunged since reaching highs of more than \$86 per barrel in early October over concerns of global oversupply and weakening demand. On Wednesday, benchmark Brent crude futures stood at \$59.28 per barrel where-



as West Texas Intermediate (WTI) futures were fetching \$50.34 a barrel.

The U.S.-China trade war, political turmoil in Europe and fears of an impending slowdown in global economic growth have also seriously clouded the demand outlook.

And the Energy Information Agency has upgraded its supply growth outlook for American crude. U.S. domestic oil production is now expected to increase by 1.18 million bpd next year with output averaging 12.06 million bpd. That flood of fresh U.S. crude supply "will cement its newfound position as the world's top oil producer," according to consultancy firm PVM Oil Associates.

Asked about the growing criticisms of OPEC coming

from the White House, Mazrouei maintained that OPEC listens to what the U.S. has to say when it comes to oil prices and production but insisted that the cartel "always does the right thing."

"When it comes to politics or 'political games'... we're not playing with President Trump or any other president," he said.

"I think what we do is we hear them (the U.S.). They are major consumers versus the major producing nations, we hear what they say but we will always do the right thing from our perspective which is always trying to maintain the balance (in supply and demand)."

OPEC and its non-OPEC counterparts led by Russia agreed to a production cut of 1.2 million barrels per day in early December to put a floor under falling prices, despite Trump's calls to keep the crude flowing.

"We are not in the business of trusting or not trusting presidents," the minister said when asked if he could trust Trump. "We are in the business of watching the market and correcting it every time the geopolitics (are) a factor, affecting the market."

Al Mazrouei's comments follow a tumultuous 2018 for oil which was characterized by price fluctuations as OPEC and its non-OPEC allies, including Russia, vacillated between cutting and increasing their oil production in a bid to stabilize prices.

President Trump remained critical of OPEC's strategy to restrict output, saying that prices were "too high."

(Source: CNBC)

Bloomberg in the middle of 2018.

"Security in parts of the Niger delta remains a major concern with persisting incidents of criminality, kidnapping and vandalism as well as onshore and offshore piracy," Igo Well, general manager for external relations at Shell's Nigerian unit, told Bloomberg in June.

Crude oil theft on Shell's pipeline network resulted in a 50-percent increase in oil losses, the oil supermajor said in its 2017 sustainability report published in April 2018.

(Source: oilprice.com)

OPEC Dec. crude oil output falls to 6-month low of 32.43m bpd

OPEC crude production in December tumbled 630,000 bpd month on month, an S&P Global Platts survey of industry officials, analysts and shipping data showed Tuesday, but the organization still has much more cutting to do to reach its new quotas for 2019.

OPEC's 15 members pumped 32.43 million bpd in December, a six-month low, the survey found.

ICE Brent futures were trading up 2.18 percent at \$58.58/b at 1717 GMT Tuesday and have bounced 16 percent from their 17-month low of \$50.47/b on Christmas Eve, amid signs the market was oversold and strong signals from OPEC kingpin Saudi Arabia it was serious about cutting supply levels.

Saudi Arabia, whose energy minister, Khalid al-Falih, was a driving force behind the forging of the latest output cut agreement aimed at shoring up slumping oil prices, lowered its output by 401,000 bpd in December to 10.60 million bpd, according to the survey.

Falih has pledged that Saudi output in January would come in around 10.2 million bpd, compared with its 2019 quota of 10.31 million bpd.

Saudi Arabia is not the only OPEC member that would need to significantly slash output to become compliant with new quotas.

Stripping out Qatar, which exited OPEC at the end of 2018, and Iran, Libya and Venezuela, which were granted exemptions from the latest round of cuts, the remaining 11 members pumped 26.89 million bpd -- almost 1 million bpd above their collective deal ceiling of 25.94 million bpd, which went into effect January 1.

Iraq, OPEC's second largest producer, raised its output to 4.67 million bpd in December, the survey found, some 160,000 bpd above its new cap of 4.51 million bpd.

Iraq's oil ministry vowed last week to hold the country's output right at its quota level through the deal's six months.

The UAE pumped 3.25 million bpd in December, but will be required to hold production at 3.07 million bpd starting this month.

Nigeria was also far above its quota of 1.69 million bpd, with December output of 1.90 million bpd, though its officials say some of the country's crude should be categorized as condensate, which is not subject to production limits.

■ Exempt members

The quotas are part of OPEC's deal with 10 non-OPEC allies to cut a combined 1.2 million bpd of output compared with October's levels during the first half of 2019 to prevent a supply glut in a market with a lukewarm demand and growth outlook.

OPEC committed to about two-thirds of the collective cuts, but left its most imperiled members exempted, which means any of their involuntary declines will not count toward compliance.

Sanctions-hit Iran continued to struggle to find buyers for its crude, forcing its output to drop to 2.80 million bpd, its lowest since January 2014, according to the survey.

Production in Libya, whose largest oil field, Sharara, shut down for much of December, fell to 970,000 bpd, the survey found.

Venezuela, in the throes of an economic crisis, managed to hold output steady at 1.17 million bpd.

■ Old deal ends

The December figures close the books on the previous round of output cuts, which ran for 2017-18, and committed OPEC and its allies to a combined 1.8 million bpd of supply reductions.

That agreement imposed quotas on 13 OPEC members, exempting Libya and Nigeria.

For the entire two-year run, those 13 members achieved a collective compliance level of 123 percent, aided in large part by Venezuela's collapse. The country began the deal by pumping 2.01 million bpd in January 2017, but dropped 840,000 bpd in the two years, resulting in a 458 percent conformity level with its quota, according to Platts calculations.

Kingpin Saudi Arabia, after having exceeded its required cut for most of the deal, ended up with a two-year compliance level of just 86 percent, after ramping up its output over the last six months, including an all-time high of 11.02 million bpd in November.

(Source: Platts)

BP just discovered a billion barrels of oil in the Gulf of Mexico

BP's investment in next-generation technology just paid off to the tune of a billion barrels of oil.

The British energy company has discovered 1 billion barrels of crude at an existing oilfield in the Gulf of Mexico. BP also announced two new offshore oil discoveries and a major new investment in a nearby field.



BP is the Gulf of Mexico's biggest producer, and it's making strides to hold that title.

BP now expects its fossil fuel output from the region to reach 400,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day by the middle of the next decade. Today, it produces about 300,000 boepd, up from less than 200,000 boepd about five years ago.

On Tuesday, the company said it will spend \$1.3 billion to develop a third phase of its Atlantis field off the coast of New Orleans. Scheduled to start production in 2020, the eight new wells will add 38,000 bpd to BP's production at Atlantis. The decision comes after BP found another 400 million barrels of oil at the field.

BP made the massive 1 billion-barrel discovery at its Thunder Horse field off the tip of Louisiana.

Executives are crediting their investment in advanced seismic technology and data processing for speeding up the company's ability to confirm the discoveries at Atlantis and Thunder Horse. BP says it once would have taken a year to analyze the Thunder Horse data, but it now takes just weeks.

"We are building on our world-class position, upgrading the resources at our fields through technology, productivity and exploration success," Bernard Looney, BP's chief executive for production and exploration, said in a statement.

Just northeast of Thunder Horse, BP also announced new discoveries at fields near its Na Kika platform.

(Source: CNBC)

Nigeria lost \$2.8b to oil-related crimes last year

Oil-related crimes in Nigeria cost the African OPEC producer US\$2.8 billion in lost revenues in 2018, News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) reported on Tuesday, citing a United Nations report on West Africa.

"Oil-related crimes resulted in the loss of nearly 2.8 billion dollars in revenues last year in Nigeria, according to government figures," says the semi-annual 'Report by the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS)'.

Last year, between January 1 and Novem-

ber 23, as many as 82 incidents of maritime crime and piracy were reported in the Gulf of Guinea on Africa's Atlantic Coast, according to the UN report cited by NAN.

"Maritime crime and piracy off the coast of West Africa continued to pose a threat to peace, security and development in the region," the UN says.

In Nigeria, following a wave of militant violence on onshore oil installations in 2016 and early 2017, oil production started to recover in the latter half of 2017, when attacks subsided.

According to the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), the country's oil production increased by 9 percent in 2018 compared to 2017, the NNPC Group's Managing Director Maikanti Baru said in a statement NNPC issued last week.

Although Nigeria has managed to restore its oil production to around 1.8 million bpd, following major militant attacks on oil infrastructure in 2016, sabotages in parts of the oil-rich Niger Delta continue to plague its oil production and the oil majors operating there, a local manager for Shell told

NEWS IN BRIEF

**India's GDP to grow at 7.3% in 2018-19**

INTERNATIONAL d e s k **TEHRAN** — India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rate is expected to grow at 7.3 per cent in the fiscal year 2018-19, and 7.5 per cent in the following two years, according to World Bank forecast.

The forecast has been attributed to an upswing in consumption and investment in one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

China's economic growth is projected to slow down to 6.2 per cent each in 2019 and 2020 and 6 per cent in 2021, according to the January 2019 Global Economic Prospects report released by the World Bank on Tuesday.

In 2018, the Chinese economy is estimated to have grown by 6.5 per cent as against India's 7.3 per cent.

"India's growth outlook is still robust. India is still the fastest growing major economy," World Bank Prospects Group Director Ayhan Kose was quoted as saying by India's state-run news agency PTI.

In India, the growth has accelerated, driven by an upswing in consumption, and investment growth has firmed as the effects of temporary factors wane, the report noted.

Private consumption is projected to remain robust and investment growth is expected to continue as the benefits of recent policy reforms begin to materialize and credit re-bounds, based on report findings.

**CPEC to create 7 lac jobs in Pakistan**

INTERNATIONAL d e s k **TEHRAN** — In a great news for unemployed people in Pakistan, as many as 700,000 new job opportunities are estimated to be created by 2030 under the ambitious project of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Various CPEC projects have thus far provided direct job opportunities to around 75,000 people across the country, according to the Chinese Embassy documents, quoted in Pakistani newspapers.

A recent study conducted by CPEC Centre of Excellence, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform of Pakistan showed that indirectly, CPEC could help create even 1.2 million jobs under this project.

In order to promote economic development of Pakistan, Chinese companies also outsourced a large number of projects to local Pakistani companies, said a report in Express Tribune.

Chinese companies have engaged themselves in three areas to fulfill their social responsibilities in collaboration with the Chinese government.

The Chinese side has proposed to conduct social cooperation on agriculture, education, medical care, poverty alleviation, water supply and vocational training.

He added that government's biggest challenge is to ensure that every person entering the job market is equipped with modern skills with a certain amount of hands-on work experience.

**Myanmar wants to 'work closely' with Bangladesh**

INTERNATIONAL d e s k **TEHRAN** — Myanmar President Win Myint has expressed his interest in working closely with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to address the common challenges of both countries.

"Notwithstanding the challenges facing our two countries, I believe that, through our joint efforts based on genuine goodwill and good neighborliness, the bonds of friendship and cooperation between Myanmar and Bangladesh can be nurtured strengthened," he said in a congratulatory message to Hasina, who was re-elected as the country's Prime Minister last month.

President Win Myint extended his best wishes for the continued economic development, peace and prosperity of Bangladesh during Sheikh Hasina's new term, Bangladesh's Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday.

Bangladesh and Myanmar have been at loggerheads over the repatriation of Rohingya refugees' current living in makeshift camps in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, the largest destination for Rohingya refugees, has received a large number of Rohingyas since 1978 in four phases— before the 1990s, after the 1990s, post-2012, and post-2017. Bangladesh government last week stressed the need for political will of Myanmar for expediting the process of repatriation of Rohingya people to Bangladesh.

**Norwegia offers to mediate on Kashmir dispute**

INTERNATIONAL d e s k **TEHRAN** — Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg has said that her government is willing to mediate between Pakistan and India for the settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

Erna Solberg in an interview with Indian news channel NDTV said the Kashmir dispute cannot be solved only from a military standpoint and that popular support was also important, a report in Kashmir Media Service said.

Last November, former prime minister of Norway Kjell Magne Bondevik had visited the Indian controlled Kashmir and held talks with separatist leaders.

As part of his private visit, he then visited Pakistan controlled Kashmir as well and met the leadership there.

Responding to a question on Bondevik's view that there can be no military solution to the Kashmir dispute, Solberg said there is no military solution to any situation like this.

When asked if Norway saw any role for mediation between Pakistan and India, Solberg said, "If there is an interest from the partners, we will try to use the mechanisms that we know."

Raisina Dialogue: 'Ensuring zero tolerance towards terrorism need of hour'

INTERNATIONAL d e s k **TEHRAN** — Asserting that no country is immune to the "existential threat" of terrorism, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj on Wednesday said the need of hour is to ensure zero tolerance towards terrorism and those using it as an "instrument of convenience".

Swaraj made these remarks while speaking at the Raisina Dialogue organized by India's leading think tank Observer Research Foundation in collaboration with India's Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi.

She said that with unwavering belief in multilateralism, India speaks not just for itself but also for the cause of justice, opportunity and prosperity around the world.

"For us, transformation is not just a domestic agenda but a global vision," she said, while maintaining that terrorism was first among the "critical challenges" confronting the world.

"There was a time when India would talk about terrorism and it would be treated as a law and order issue at many global platforms. Today, no country, big or small, is immune to the existential threat, particularly terrorism actively supported and sponsored by states," Swaraj said. Indian army chief General Bipin Rawat, while participating in a panel discussion at the Raisina Dialogue, said talks with Taliban are in the interest of stability in Afghanistan as long as there are no preconditions attached to the talks.

Noting that Pakistan treated Afghanistan as its backyard, Gen. Rawat said Islamabad wants a situation in the war-ravaged country that is favorable to it.

"Yes, there should be talks with Taliban



as long as they do not come out with any preconditions and so long as they are looking at lasting peace in Afghanistan and bring stability in that country. It is in our interest, in the regions interest and in Pakistan's interest," he stressed.

Gen Rawat said preconditions in a dialogue process gives undue advantage to one of the parties. "When you start attaching preconditions, it gives a sense of a notional victory that one or the other side is taking from a position of strength," he noted.

There have been several rounds of talks in recent months between Taliban and U.S., besides some regional countries including

Iran, Russia, UAE and China.

While the talks between Taliban and U.S. have failed to produce a breakthrough, as Taliban has listed withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan as their main demand, the talks hosted by Moscow and Tehran have been purposeful, according to sources.

Responding to questions on the phenomenon of radicalization globally and the trend in India, General Rawat said it has taken a different form in India as seen in Jammu and Kashmir.

"We see a different form of radicalization in Jammu and Kashmir. Youth are being radicalized due to lot of misinformation,"

Iran, India trade ties on strong footing

1 → India's UCO Bank has also got clearance to open a branch in Iran, said a report in India's state-run news agency PTI. We are very happy that both UCO Bank from India and Pasargad Bank from Iran are getting started with the business, Zarif was quoted as saying.

The two banks will facilitate transactions related to India's operations at Chabahar Port and help Indian companies do trade with Iranian companies without hassles.

Gholamhossein Shafei, the head of Iranian chamber of commerce and industries, who accompanied Zarif on the visit, mooted the proposal of joint Indo-Iranian chamber of commerce to facilitate better business partnership.

During Zarifs meetings with top political leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj, the other issues that figured prominently were Iran's nuclear deal and Afghanistan peace process, according to sources.

India, which is torn between Tehran and Washington, has not clearly spelt out its official position on Iran's nuclear deal, although it managed to convince U.S. to keep Chabahar out of sanctions purview, and to continue oil trade with Iran.

Zarif, according to sources, discussed recent talks between Iran and Taliban in Tehran and Iran's position on the Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. U.S. withdrawal from Syria and Afghanistan and Saudis war crimes in Yemen also came up for discussion, sources said.

India and Iran have deepened their civilizational and trade partnership in recent years, despite the pressure from U.S., an important ally of New Delhi.

Taliban call off talks with U.S. officials over 'agenda disagreement'

1 → The U.S. imposed war in Afghanistan has stretched into its 18th year now and security situation has only deteriorated in all these years, raising big question marks over America's longest war and its objectives.

Last month, Donald Trump ordered the withdrawal of half of U.S. troops from the war-ravaged country, a decision that was welcomed by world leaders, considering the failure of successive U.S. regimes to bring peace to the country.

Meanwhile, regional countries including Pakistan and Iran have stepped up efforts to help bring to end the protracted war in Afghanistan.

Iran hosted a Taliban delegation recently and discussed 'post-occupation scenario', according to reports. The talks were held in coordination with the Afghan government.

Following the talks, deputy foreign minister Abbas Araqchi visited Kabul to discuss it with Afghan government officials. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who was on three-day visit to India also discussed the Afghan-led



peace process with Indian officials.

Mohammad Umer Daudzai, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's special envoy for peace, visited Pakistan this week to hold talks with

the officials there.

He conveyed Afghan government's "strong desire to work closely with Pakistan in all areas of mutual interest", a statement issued



announced on Monday that it has taken over operations of the strategic port. This is the first time India will be operating a port outside its territory.

The work at Chabahar is being carried out within the framework of 2016 trilateral deal that also includes Afghanistan and is aimed at developing the port as a regional trade hub. It will heavily reduce the dependence of Afghanistan on Pakistan's ports.

Zarif's visit to India can be termed a success the way he managed to convince the Indian leadership that strong ties with Tehran are in New Delhi's best interests, said Vikas Swarup, a New Delhi based commentator. The two countries need to join hands and do business, without bothering about what the superpowers say or do.

by Pakistan's foreign office said.

The special envoy also relayed "deep appreciation of the sincerity and vision of Prime Minister Imran Khan for peace and stability in Pakistan", the press release added.

Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi assured him of Pakistan's commitment to peace in the region. He said stability in Afghanistan was in Pakistan's own national interest, and necessary for economic development and prosperity in the region, the statement said.

Qureshi highlighted the growing global view that the suffering of the Afghan people needs to be brought to an end through a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

He assured the envoy that Pakistan "would do all to help the people of Afghanistan see the earliest possible end to bloodshed and enter a new phase of peace and prosperity".

The Afghan special envoy noted that the two countries had a "unique relationship marked by commonalities and similarity of interests".

Israel must respect intl. law, leave occupied Golan Heights: Jordan

Jordan has hit out at Israel over its recent call for the United States to recognize the regime's occupation of the Golan Heights, saying Tel Aviv will have to eventually pull its forces out of the Syrian region.

"The Golan Heights are occupied Syrian territory. International law is clear on that. It has to be treated as such," Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi told a press conference with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Amman on Tuesday. He then called on the Tel Aviv regime to leave the Golan Heights based on the 1974 Golan ceasefire deal with the Damascus government.

"Our position is that Israel needs to withdraw from that territory in the framework of a peace agreement," Safadi said.

Just two days earlier, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed that Israel would "never leave the Golan Heights," urging all countries to recognize the regime's grip over the occupied territory. Netanyahu made the comments in a meeting with U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton in the occupied Jerusalem al-Quds.



Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi (R) speaks at a joint press conference with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Amman, Jordan, January 8, 2019.

In 1967, Israel waged a full-scale war against Arab territories, during which it occupied a large swathe of Syria's Golan and annexed it four years later, a move never recognized by the international community.

In 1973, another war, known as the Arab-Israeli War,

broke out. A year later, a United Nations-brokered ceasefire came into force, according to which Tel Aviv and Damascus agreed to separate their troops and create a buffer zone in the Golan. Israel has over the past decades built dozens of settlements in the Golan Heights in defiance of international calls for the regime to stop its illegal construction activities.

Syria has repeatedly reaffirmed its sovereignty over the Golan Heights, saying the territory must be completely restored to its control.

Since 2011 — when foreign-sponsored militancy first broke out across Syria — Israel has been using Golan to prop up anti-Damascus Takfiri terrorists.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Safadi, whose country is the custodian of Jerusalem al-Quds' Muslim holy sites, described the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the region's central problem. While Amman and Washington "don't always agree on every issue, we will continue to work together to solve the region's problems," he added.

(Source: Press TV)

40 years of China's open-door economic policy and great changes

By Reza Amouei

China held a grand gathering on December 18, 2018, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the country's reform and opening-up in Beijing, a great revolution that has changed the destiny of the Chinese nation and the world that began in 1978.

The ensuing four decades has painted a completely different picture for China. The country maintained an average annual growth rate of more than 9 percent and became the world's second-largest economy; China's share in the world economy increased from 2.7 to 16 percent; and 800 million Chinese were lifted out of poverty.

How did China warm up to the intl. community?

The 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China held its third plenary session in Peking December 18- 22, 1978. It was attended by 169 Members and 112 Alternate Members of the Central Committee.

It was announced at the meeting that the party would focus on economic development and would use all available tools to achieve this goal.

In the winter of the same year, for the first time since the establishment of China's communist system, the lands of the extremely poor Xiaogang Village in east China's Anhui Province were transferred to its residents and the government ordered the purchase of their products.

A year later Xiaogang Village, which was already suffering from poverty and famine, was the pioneer in selling private agricultural products in China, and the same pattern of privatization of China's rural areas expanded.

Also, the legal amendments related to recognition of the right to land for peasants paved the way for membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO) eight years from the date of privatizing agricultural land in 1978. China adopted the World Trade Organization (WTO/GATT) agreement in 2001.

The easing of restrictions on foreign direct investment (FDI) allowed foreign businesses easier entry to the marketplace than in the past, which made the switch for China easier in the 1980's.

China's has witnessed a queue for the entry of U.S. and European employers seeking both cheap labor and tax-free profits.

Deng was purged twice during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, but after Chairman Mao Zedong's death in 1976, Deng led China through far-reaching market-economy reforms.

In 1979, a year after he came to power, he established the export-processing zones for the first time in Guangzhou to show that



China's doors were open for business to the world. The model of the Guangzhou Harbor was implemented in 1988 in at least in 14 other Chinese cities.

The secret behind China's reforms
Bert Huffman, the author of an article titled "Reflections on forty years of China's reforms", cited four key features of the success of China's economic reforms:

Gradual reforms
Reforms in China developed only gradually, starting in the rural areas with the household responsibility system and township and village enterprises and some initial steps to open up the economy to foreign trade and investment, which only started to play a significant role in the 1990s.

Decentralization and incentives
Decentralization to local governments became a powerful tool for progress within the confines of central political guidance. The provinces and local governments received increasing authority over investment approvals, fiscal resources, and policies. Provinces, municipalities and even counties were allowed, even encouraged, to experiment with reforms in specific areas, and successful experiments then became official policy and were quickly adopted throughout the country. In a way, by decentralizing, China turned the country into a laboratory for reforms. Within the party, the personnel promotion system was largely based on the achievement of growth. Experience in the regions also counted heavily in the promotion to higher-level party posts, which provided the most talented with the incentives to gain that experience, and to

demonstrate their capacity to reform and spur growth.

Pragmatism and transitional institutions

China's approach to reforms provided the room for the country's own particular institutions to emerge, which suited the country's purposes well at any given point on its reform path. It allowed a continuation of the planning system at planned prices, which avoided the collapse of production, but at the margin the system allowed a non-planned economy to emerge.

China's effort to promote intl. political standing

Four decades after the start of its reforms, China has seized the Western liberal market, and since 2016 it has become the world's second-largest economy after the U.S.

According to statistics, the past decade, from 2008 to this year, has been the decade of China's economic peak since its foreign investment in the country, which was \$55 billion in 2008, reached \$196.2 billion in 2018.

All these statistics threaten the position of powerful economies, especially the U.S., to the extent that China's global positioning is improving.

Indeed, China, despite its undeniable economic status, has faced challenges from Western rivals in the international political arena, and the Chinese have not stopped working in this area, seeking to promote their political status.

Institutionalization of reforms

China began the movement in the political context of the international system less

than 15 years after the start of its economic reforms, and, following the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001, it sought to establish an international and non-international institution.

In fact, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as an international organization in the field of security and economic affairs with Russia and Asian countries, has more than anything else a political function against Western political and security institutions, including the G7. Its future vision is to develop partnership in security spheres. And the military can be seen as an eastern alternative to NATO, although it has a long way to go.

China's hands-off policy system

Unlike Western leaders, China's leaders have never claimed to impose their political norms on their political and even strategic partners. Unlike Western leaders in Washington, London or Paris, who have always been criticizing other countries for alleged human rights issues, China has never emphasized political norms in deepening ties with its partners.

Perhaps the best description of this feature is the Chinese President's remarks on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of reforms when he said China will "never seek hegemony no matter how developed it becomes one day."

Indeed, China is trying to show non-interference from its political behavior, and this is contrary to the Western-style approach to foreign policy, which seems to have a mania for interventionist policies.

Deepening political influence in light of China's global market

According to United Nations statistics released by Bloomberg, in 2015, America had \$502.6 billion worth of imports from China and \$116.2 billion worth of exports to the country. In the Trump era some change has been apparent, of late related to the tariffs and trade war started by Trump.

Chinese President Xi Jinping offered another \$60 billion in financing to Africa in September 2018. China is also investing heavily in the South Asian region, both in Pakistan and simultaneously in Afghanistan, and is now becoming the economic partners of these countries. China's presence in other regions, including the Arab states of the southern Persian Gulf, is rapidly expanding.

Based on this, now 40 years after the start of China's open economic reforms, the country has been able to deepen its political influence in different regions by developing its economic ties in world markets, even if Chinese political development is not welcomed by the West.

Macron's economic suicide



1 → In other words, in the midst of anti-Euro and extremist and far-right movements in Europe, Macron was the last hope of European authorities to "manage the economic crisis" which was raising inside the Eurozone: the hope that has soon faded away!

"Failing to persuade French citizens" on his economic reforms, and Macron's miscalculations about the support of French citizens for himself, were among the important factors in shaping this process. Macron had to give concessions to protesters to prevent further tensions in France. After the country's month-long demonstrations, Macron was forced to retreat from his decision on raising the fuel price.

Besides, he had no way but to make promises to the French citizens on issues such as raising the minimum wages and reducing the income tax. This had but one meaning: Macron's economic reforms came to an end. Right now, European authorities know well that Macron is incapable of regaining his initial power in France and the Eurozone by 2022 (the time for the France general elections).

Therefore, Macron has to forget the dream of EU's economic leadership until the last moments of his presence at the Elysees Palace. Of course, this is if the young French president isn't forced to resign before 2022! The European authorities and the Eurozone leaders have no alternative for Macron and his economic reforms in Europe.

That's why they're so worried about the emergence of anti-EU movements in countries such as France and Germany. For example, they are well aware that if Marin Le Pen can defeat Macron and come to power in France during the upcoming elections, then the whispers of the collapse of the Eurozone, and even the European Union, will be clearly heard, this time with a loud voice, all over the Europe.

Human Rights: Time for U.S. to walk the talk

TEHRAN (FNA) — There is an explanation as to why the United States continues to support Saudi Arabia's war and says the Saudis and their coalition partners don't have to answer to the suffering they inflict on the besieged people of Yemen.

The Trump administration's record of human rights violations is poor and the State Department has just announced that it won't cooperate with United Nations investigators regarding their complaints about such issues in the US.

This is while the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights has issued a report on "devastating inequality" in the US and the Trump White House has left unanswered at least 13 official requests from UN special rapporteurs on human rights since last May. The deliberate failure to respond began a month before Philip Alston, special rapporteur on extreme poverty, issued a scathing report detailing "devastating inequality" in the US, made worse by the anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant policies of President Donald Trump and Republican lawmakers.

According to Alston, Washington's refusal to answer questions and cooperate not only leaves issues including inequality and the rights of immigrants and asylum seekers unaddressed in the US, but also sends a harmful message to other human rights abusers leading countries around the world. In his words, "This sends a message that you can opt out of routine scrutiny if you don't like what is being said about your record on human rights."

Obviously, the dismissive Trump administration officials see domestic human rights violations as an internal matter - the same officials that draft resolution after resolution against other nations at the UN regarding similar issues. They even call the UN study "patently ridiculous" and claim no human rights violations exist in the US, which is ridiculous. There is well documented evidence of growing income inequality, the police brutality against people of color, the Muslim travel ban and anti-immigrant policies, the use of solitary confinement in prisons, and the Department of Homeland Security's forcible separation of thousands of children from their parents.

Such attitude demonstrates a rather inappropriate arrogance, at a time when human rights not just in the US but also in neighboring Canada are far from perfect, where three quarters of a century after the UN Charter, human rights are similarly and manifestly far from being realized (enjoyed) by far too many people. Despite some progress, the gap between declaration and real experience remains wide and, for some, stark, and the persistence of that shortfall brings into doubt the sincerity of their commitment and even their values.

On the other hand, the US has already withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council, for being "preoccupied with Israel". But why is the Council preoccupied with Washington's surrogate? For a start, Israel has committed serious human rights abuses that are worthy of the Council's condemnation. It is absurd for Washington to claim that Israel has "committed no offence". The recent killings of Palestinian protesters, targeted killings, illegal settlements, forced evictions, war crimes, the Gaza blockade and, most fundamentally, an ongoing occupation of Palestine that has lasted for more than 50 years, will cause critics to proliferate.

Nevertheless, that does not explain the Trump administration's dismissive attitude toward the UN, rejecting even legitimate condemnation by the Council, and deliberate refusal to walk the talk and end scale of human rights abuses within its borders. Regardless of its causes, it is fair to expect that US human rights violations not be dismissed outright.

Long story short, the US, the only country in the world that has failed to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, cannot play a leadership role in human rights. It has withdrawn from the Human Rights Council and refuses to cooperate with United Nations investigators regarding their complaints about human rights violations in the US, which are too numerous to mention, but which include torture and the highest proportion of incarceration in the world.

Mick Napier: Nation State Law explicitly shows the nature of Apartheid Regime in Tel Aviv

TEHRAN (FNA) — Human rights activist Mick Napier believes that nation state law exposed and made official what was factual since the creation of the Israeli regime: the apartheid nature of Israel.

Mick Napier, in an exclusive interview with FNA, said that by implementation of the nation state law "Israel has shot itself in the foot by labeling itself internationally as an apartheid state while gaining no particular advantage for its program of ethnic cleansing."

According to the activist, the Great March of Return protests and Israel's brutal reaction have further diminished the "minimal support for Israel in world public opinion and have also made it more difficult for Israel supporters to defend and support Israel actions thus opening wider possibilities to build the BDS campaign."

Mick Napier is an activist and campaigner for the rights of Palestinians. He is a founding member of the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign and has been interviewed by international news outlets such as Press TV and Al Jazeera English to comment on issues related to Palestine.

FNA has conducted an interview with Mick Napier about Israel's brutal crackdown on Palestinian protesters, the Israeli legislation known as the nation state law and also Trump's so-called deal of the century.

Below you will find the full text of the interview:

It seems that killing scores of people and maiming thousands more over the past several months are not indications of what Israel thinks is enough to keep Gaza in check. Do you think Israel's deadly clamp down on Palestinian protesters is going to end anytime soon?

A: Usually no one can predict when major political developments will occur, such as the Berlin Wall coming down, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Shah of Iran being overthrown, or Israel's siege of Gaza being defeated. It is actually a joint Israeli-Egyptian siege supported by the USA and the EU and, despite their public statements, many of the Arab regimes as well. So given the present balance of power, together with the refusal of the Palestinians to submit, it is difficult to see an end to this harsh siege and Israel's ongoing mass killing of Palestinians. Israeli strategists may conclude that they need another huge massacre of Palestinians in Gaza or to continue with Netanyahu strategy of constantly expanding settlements and maintaining a harsh regime which does not come too much to the attention of world public opinion.

What do you think the protests known as 'Great March of Return' have accomplished so far?

A: The protests and the savagery of Israel's reaction have further eroded minimal support for Israel in world public opinion and have also made it more difficult for Israel sup-

porters to defend and support Israel actions thus opening wider possibilities to build the BDS campaign. Since the BDS call was launched in 2005 this movement has broadened and deepened its support around the world year after year but it has not been a gradual process; it has also increased by large steps following particular high-profile Israeli crimes such as operation cast lead, operation protective Edge and for example the massacre of Turkish aid workers on the Mavi Marmara. The work of the Israeli snipers also has Israel crossing a new red line and producing a surge in hostility towards the apartheid state and sympathy for the Palestinians by virtue of the obvious callous cruelty involved. At the same time Israel continues with house demolitions and full spectrum criminality against the Palestinians which contributes to this trend.

How do you think the US and some Arab states are complicit in crimes against the Palestinians, specially in light with the discreet links between Israel and Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states?

A: The crimes against the Palestinian people could not take place without strong US support, with a green light from the EU, the Arab Royal dictatorships and Egypt. I would suggest the links between Israel and Saudi Arabia UAE and Oman are no longer concealed but are increasingly open and above board. Millions around the world would be shocked but not surprised if Saudi Arabia opened an embassy in Tel Aviv or even al-Quds.

In July 2018, the so-called nation state law was adopted by Israeli Knesset. What do you think the legislation shows about the nature of the regime in Tel Aviv?

A: Many people around the world have denounced Israel's so-called nation-state law because it states unreservedly that in Palestine, the whole of Palestine, the democratic right to self determination, self-organization of the two building communities under collective political control is reserved exclusively for Jews and Palestinians are explicitly denied the same rights. Actually I think we should welcome Israel's nation state law for it only makes explicit that which was real since the state of Israel was founded out of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948. After that initial huge wave of ethnic cleansing most of Palestine groaned under a harsh apartheid regime and vain all of Palestine after 1967. In passing this law Israel has merely made public and official what previous Israeli governments tried to conceal. If we remember that apartheid has been condemned as a crime against humanity in international law it looks like Israel has shot itself in the foot by labeling itself internationally as an apartheid state while gaining no particular advantage for its program of ethnic cleansing.

Many believe that the continuing illegal Israeli set-

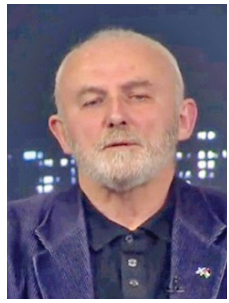
tlement activities have hammered nail after nail into the coffin of a diplomatic solution. What do you think about that?

A: To achieve a diplomatic solution at least two sides must be willing to reach an agreement which concedes at least some of the positions of the other side, however minimal. The Israeli regime has however declared time after time that it will never allow any Palestinian state, however weakened and subordinated to Israel, and that the Israeli state intends to maintain undivided control over the entire land surface of Palestine, with the partial exception of Gaza which will be subjected to a harsh regime on its perimeter possibly until sometime in the future when the people of Gaza could be driven into the Sinai.

As long as Israel remains a Zionist, i.e. a settler colonial state with ambitions for Jews from every country to move there, while Israel is committed to the dispossession of the native Palestinian people, and sees herself as an extension of American military power into the region, the only diplomatic solution one can envisage would be built upon the crushing of the Palestinian people. Even then one could not be sure that Israel's territorial ambitions would be delimited by the Jordan River. In fact everything in the record of Zionist colonization tells us that Zionist expansionary appetites not sated but whetted by success.

The current administration in the US has been boasting about their new plan for Palestine and even calling it the deal of the century. What do you think would be in the new deal for Palestinians?

A: Even those who embraced the Oslo peace process now realize it was a swindle and a cover for continued Israeli settlement expansion and disposition of the Palestinian people. A glance at a quality map shows that a solution based on two separate States between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean is an illusion which is only kept alive so that Netanyahu's government can postpone the timetable for reaching an agreement for Palestinians to the indefinite future when such a two state solution can be achieved while in the meantime maintaining a brutal regime over those Palestinians and constantly expanding the land surface under Jewish control and shrinking the areas where Palestinians be live and work. Trump's so-called deal would merely be the imposition of further pain on the Palestinians, the consolidation of past ethnic cleansing, and would copper fasten a military apartheid state onto the whole of Palestine.



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‘U.S. committing war crime by hampering medicine transfer to Iran’

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — U.S. unfair sanctions against Iran is indeed an obvious example of war crime as it has denied Iranian patients having access to medication and their basic needs, said the head of Iran Hemophilia Organization.

“Imposing sanctions on a country is the same as getting into a war, but there are no rules when it comes to sanctions; however, there should be certain rules and restrictions so that people do not have to suffer irreversible damages,” said Ahmad Qavidel in a meeting on Tuesday to analyze sanctions’ effects on the right to health.

U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew Washington unilaterally from the 2015 nuclear deal in May 2018 and ordered sanctions against Iran. The first round of sanctions went into force on August 6, 2018 and the second round, which targets Iran’s oil exports and banks, were snapped back on November 4.

“U.S. is lying that sanctions do not include medication. Currently, many foreign pharmaceutical companies have representatives in Iran but we cannot purchase their products because sanctions have restricted our banks in their transactions,” IRNA quoted Qavidel as saying.

“Lawyers should help us, so that the enforcement of sanctions are controlled by certain rules and restrictions. We can’t just sit back and watch people die; we have to take actions.”

“Nothing will be solved with Europeans’ words of sympathy; rather, we should



Ahmad Qavidel in a meeting on Tuesday to analyze sanctions’ effects on the right to health.

“U.S. is lying that sanctions do not include medication. Currently, many foreign pharmaceutical companies have representatives in Iran but we cannot purchase their products because sanctions have restricted our banks in their transactions.”

try to start negotiating with Europeans and we should also reveal the true face of Trumpism to the world, the idea behind Trumpism will encourage racism and

indifference in the world.”

“We appreciate the support of Iran BAR association, as the medical associations and organizations have to translate their needs

and problems into legal terms and statements,” Qavidel finally remarked.

Over the meeting, the director of drugs department at the Iranian Food and Drug Administration said there are foreign currencies available but no banks would accept them, so supplying medications is disrupted and the prices keep rising.

“Our only option now is to seek legal help, as the patients expect us to provide them with medicine,” Mohammad Abdzadeh noted.

“U.S. has the temerity to threaten to stop its collaboration with the companies who work with Iran; this, has even a more adverse effect than the sanctions itself,” Abdzadeh added.

“We can’t transfer the money to supply bandages for patients suffering Epidermolysis Bullosa (EB), and we have resorted to asking one company to do it for us,” the official regretted.

“People are being very tolerant, but the authorities must increase their efforts, many sectors are mismanaged, and we even have problem in transporting the medications properly,” Abdzadeh remarked.

Over the meeting, the head of EB Health House in Tehran announced that EB patients have been out of bandages since the beginning of the second Iranian calendar month, Ordibehesht (April 21, 2018).

“The former health minister had provided EB patients with free bandages but with the current shortage, the patients have become desperate,” added Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Hamid Reza Hashemi Golpaygani.

Iran, Germany to fund joint medical research projects

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — Iran National Institute for Medical Research Development (NIMAD) has reached an agreement with German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) to financially support joint medical researches that have certain features.

According to the agreement, the budget assigned to Iranian medical-science researchers is 3 billion rials (around \$70,000) that will provide each of the ten top chosen projects with a 300 million rials (around \$7,000) grant, Mehr news agency reported on Tuesday.

The projects shouldn’t take no longer than two years. The proposal for projects were being received since December 22, 2018 and the deadline is April 15.

The fund is aimed to encourage joint projects between researchers and make them familiar with research potentials of one another.

Exchange of knowledge between researchers, putting research into practice, facilitating cooperation between the two countries’ medical partners as well as setting up joint workshops, campaigns, research consortiums and events are among the main objectives of the plan.

Another purpose of the scheme is to initiate projects that could attract funds from other European Union support programs such as Horizon 2020 and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG).

DFG is a German research funding organization and Horizon 2020 is the biggest EU Research and Innovation program with nearly €80 billion of funding available over 7 years (2014 to 2020).

Diet soda linked to risk for diabetic blindness

Drinking diet soda may raise the risk for a severe type of diabetic eye disease that can lead to blindness, a new study says.

The study, published in Clinical and Experimental Ophthalmology, is the first to evaluate the link between soft drinks and what’s called proliferative diabetic retinopathy.

“In our clinical sample of people with diabetes, consuming more than four cans, or 1.5 liters, of diet soft drinks per week was associated with a twofold increased risk of having proliferative diabetic retinopathy,” first author Eva Fenwick, PhD, told Medscape Medical News. Fenwick is a clinical research fellow at the Singapore Eye Research Institute and an assistant professor at the Duke-NUS Medical School, Singapore.

The study did not find the same results among those who drank regular, sugar-sweetened soft drinks.

More studies are needed to tell whether soft drinks are unhealthy alternatives to sugar-sweetened beverages, Fenwick says.

Diet soft drinks have been marketed as healthier than regular soft drinks, yet a growing body of evidence has suggested that artificial sweeteners may also harm your health. Past research has linked diet soda to a higher risk of diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

(Source: WebMD)

Millions of people wrongly believe they have food allergies

These days, it can seem like just about everybody has a food allergy. But according to a new study, about 11% of American adults actually do.

Yet 19% of adults believe they have a food allergy, even though some don’t have the diagnosis or symptoms to back it up, according to findings published in JAMA Network Open.

This discrepancy suggests that quite a few adults are conflating allergies with less-severe food intolerances, which typically come with minimal digestion-related symptoms, the researchers write. If someone is truly allergic to a food, eating it can trigger a potentially life-threatening immune response. (People who are lactose intolerant, for example, may experience bloating, stomach pain and gas after eating dairy products, while those with a true milk allergy can

experience wheezing, hives and anaphylaxis.)

The new estimates were based on survey responses from almost 40,500 American adults who were asked if they had any diagnosed allergies, symptoms or hospitalizations. The researchers couldn’t independently confirm whether each survey respondent actually had a food allergy, but allergies were considered “convincing” if the person reported a physician’s diagnosis or significant symptoms such as swelling, trouble breathing, chest pain, vomiting or fainting after eating a certain food. Reports of an allergy that were only backed by milder symptoms, such as itching, stomach pain and rashes, did not meet the researchers’ criteria.

They found that almost 11% of people had at least one convincing food allergy. The most common allergens were

shellfish (2.9%), milk (1.9%), peanuts (1.8%), tree nuts (1.2%) and fin fish (0.9%), according to the study. Extrapolated to the national level, that means an estimated 7.2 million American adults are allergic to shellfish, 4.7 million are allergic to milk, 4.5 million are allergic to peanuts, 3 million are allergic to tree nuts and 2.2 million are allergic to fin fish.

About 45% of the adults with a food allergy had more than one, the researchers found.

Food allergies are also common in children, affecting about 8% of American kids, but many childhood allergies can be outgrown. Other times, allergies can start in adulthood: About 48% of people with allergies in the new study reported developing at least one of their conditions as an adult.

(Source: Time)

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HERITAGE & TOURISM

Oman’s nationalization of tourism sector creates more job opportunities for youth



A group of female Omani diploma students are taken to Nakhal Fort in north Oman to receive lessons in being a tour guide.

Ambling between the sand-colored buildings of Nakhal Fort in north Oman, a hospitality professor instructs his students on how to become successful tour guides.

The group is comprised only of Omani women – a scene deemed unusual in a country where foreigners vastly outnumber locals in the private sector.

The 10 female students walk across the pre-Islamic fortification, some in the black flowing over-garment typical of the region and others in brighter colors. All listening attentively to their professor. “The tourists you will guide are often elderly, don’t hurry them,” he tells the young women.

Omani parents once discouraged their children from working in the tourism industry – an activity often associated with nightlife, alcohol and moral decay. Instead, they pushed for jobs in the public sector, or the profitable oil industry.

This shifted when the Omani government in March 2016 announced a plan to create 500,000 new jobs in the tourism industry by 2040 and that 70 percent of the positions would go to local men and women.

In a country where the number of unemployed graduates is nearly 60,000 and expatriates account for more than 87 percent of the private sector, young men and women jumped at the opportunity.

Sector growth is key in motivating students, explained Dr Abdulkarim bin Sultan Al Mughairi, the Dean of the Oman Tourism College (OTC), the sultanate’s only academic institution specializing in tourism.

Established in 2001 in Muscat, the college aims to professionalize all components of the labor force – from tour guides and chefs to managers and receptionists. To date, 818 full-time students have enrolled, twice as many as in 2013, in addition to the 300 attending one-day programs and short courses. The college aims to offer Russian lessons – on top of English, French and German – to cater to the growing number of Russian tourists in the country.

Since its establishment in 2004, the Ministry of Tourism has marketed Oman as the hidden jewel of the Arabian Peninsula, blessed with Rocky Mountains, wind-swept deserts and a 3,165 kilometers-long coastline. In 2017, 3.3 million tourists visited the sultanate, an additional 1 million compared to a decade earlier.

By 2040 the tourism industry is expected to account for six percent of Oman’s GDP and play a major role in job creation for Omani nationals. “A \$110 million hotel would create 300 jobs, just like a \$7 billion oil refinery,” Director General of Tourism Promotion Salim Aday Al Mamari, told The National.

(Source: The National)



ROUND THE GLOBE

Archaeological site of Troy

With some 4,000 years of history, Troy is one of the most famous archaeological sites in the world.

Its extensive remains are the most significant and substantial evidence of the first contact between the civilizations of Anatolia and the burgeoning Mediterranean world.

Excavations started more than a century ago have established a chronology that is fundamental to the understanding of this seminal period of the Old World and its cultural development. Moreover, the siege of Troy by Mycenaean warriors from Greece in the 13th century BC, immortalized



by Homer in The Iliad, has inspired great artists throughout the world ever since.

Troy is located on the mound of Hisarlik, which overlooks the plain along the Turkish Aegean coast, 4.8 km from the southern entrance to the Dardanelles. The famous archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann undertook the first excavations at the site in 1870, and those excavations could be considered the starting point of modern archaeology and its public recognition.

Research and excavations conducted in the Troia and Troas region reveal that the region has been inhabited for 8,000 years. Throughout the centuries, Troy has acted as a cultural bridge between the Troas region and the Balkans, Anatolia, the Aegean and Black Sea regions through migration, occupation, trade and the transmission of knowledge.

A total of 24 excavation campaigns, spread over the past 140 years, have revealed many features from all the periods of occupation in the citadel and the lower town.

(Source: UNESCO)

How tech can help Southeast Asia keep up with surging tourist arrivals

Last year, popular tourist destinations Maya Bay in Thailand and Boracay in the Philippines were temporarily closed for rehabilitation, as both suffered from the environmental impact caused by a surge in tourist arrivals.

In 2017, the Asia-Pacific region logged a 6 percent increase in inbound tourism, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization. Southeast Asia saw tremendous growth, welcoming over 120 million international visitors and US\$130.7 billion worth of tourism receipts.

That uptick continued in 2018, with tourist numbers in the region going up by 10 percent in the first quarter, exceeding the international average of 6 percent.

■ The impact of more tourism

This growth, however, comes at a price. Aside from its impact on the environment, the tourism boom also affects related businesses such as hotels.

Boracay’s tourism industry, for example, is expected to lose millions of dollars in revenue as a result of the closure, with 11 hotels predicting combined losses of over US\$10 million.

Hotels across the world also encounter other difficulties due to the surge in tourism. One concern that plagues them is the language barrier, which is the “biggest anxiety in travel,” according to Booking.com.

It also hampers the ability of hotels to deliver quality service to their guests, with miscommunication happening or communication being reduced to a cursory level.

Hotels also face high employee turnover rates because of low pay, strict industry discipline, and long working hours. And with some hotels struggling to train new hires sufficiently, existing staff face a heavier workload. This



vicious cycle only exacerbates the situation.

This is especially true for hotels in rural destinations. On the island of Ishigaki in Japan, for instance, several hotels offer discounted rates to forego the daily cleaning of rooms and curb the demand for manpower.

■ The role of tech

Hotels are turning to technology to deal with struggles like managing the influx of guests. One player in hotel tech is Japan-based TradFit. Using artificial intelligence, internet of things, and voice recognition, TradFit supplies hotels with screen-equipped smart speakers and a chatbot that acts as a digital concierge.

These speakers let customers make calls, send in requests for housekeeping or room service, and search for recommendations. Staff can respond to inquiries from a central

application, allowing hotels to optimize the way they handle client requests.

The central application also enables hotels to manage the smart speakers, analyze customer statistics, and provide additional information to guests.

TradFit also has a chatbot that can translate up to 17 languages. It can be implemented on the hotel’s website and smart speakers to assist guests at all stages of their visit. Through machine learning, the chatbot draws on information from the questions asked by guests to improve its answering capabilities.

■ A help to both customers and staff

The use of technology in hotels benefits both guests and hotel staff.

TradFit’s technology helps reduce the manpower required in handling customer enquiries, freeing up the staff’s workload

for other tasks such as managing check-in and check-out procedures, facilitating room turnovers, and carrying out customer requests.

The system’s ability to act as a translator also eases the burden of having to hire staff fluent in different languages.

Yoshiki Toda, CEO and founder of TradFit, explains that this functionality also puts guests at ease, as they can communicate with the hotel via a language they’re comfortable using. And for guests who dislike calling the reception at odd or late hours, they can use the company’s voice recognition and chatbot services instead.

Equipping TradFit’s systems with information on local attractions and dining options also helps hotels provide value-added services. Guests can look up in-house services, such as restaurants and spas, and make reservations accordingly. They can also search for nearby attractions and activities and make bookings through the smart speakers and chatbots.

According to Toda, this lets hotels promote their in-house services and potentially receive additional advertising revenue from the other businesses they promote through TradFit’s systems.

■ Transforming the hotel industry

The use of technology can transform the hotel industry. Aside from streamlining processes and reducing workload, tech solutions allow hotels to focus on what really matters – delivering quality service to their customers.

With international visitors to Asia predicted to grow at a rate of 5 percent each year, implementing tech solutions will go a long way in improving hotel services in the region and enabling travel and tourism businesses to operate in the most effective way.

(Source: technasia.com)

Last chance tourism: Is this trend just causing more damage?

Our love of travel is damaging the world to an almost irreconcilable state. So instead of rushing to see something ‘before it’s gone’, Jessica Brown asks what we should be doing

One of the greatest ironies of our time is that humans are simultaneously intrepid travelers, and one of the main causes of the irreversible damage happening to our planet. Rising sea levels, erosion, deforestation and urban development are just some of the man-made reasons our most treasured corners of the earth are changing beyond recognition.

But this irony is big business; visiting parts of the world before they disappear is becoming increasingly common. Last chance tourism, which Forbes named as one of this year’s top travel trends, is attracting visitors to the Amazon rainforest, the retreating mangroves in the Everglades in Florida, Australia’s bleaching Great Barrier Reef, the melting ice in Montana’s Glacier National Park and the sinking city of Venice.

Since 2003, tourism to the Maldives has increased by 68 per cent, and the number of visitors to the Galapagos Islands have increased by 38 per cent, according to travel insurance comparison site Squaremouth. But with these increasing numbers comes more damage to already fragile areas. Tourism to the Glacier National Park, which is warming at twice the overall rate of the planet, rose 15 per cent between 2001 and 2005, but tourists there are trampling over vegetation, introducing non-native species to the ecosystem, littering and causing pollution, the National Park Service has said.

Damage is also on a much wider scale. A longhaul journey to view polar bears in Churchill, a town in the Canadian province of Manitoba which is the only easily accessible place to view the creatures in their natural habitat, can contribute up to 8.61 tons of carbon dioxide per person per trip.

This is compared to the 10.9 tons someone living in the UK contributes over the course of an entire year, according to a 2010 study published in the journal Current Issues.

One defence of last chance tourism is that it helps raise awareness of climate change, which offsets the damage caused. But the researchers have found that while tourists to Churchill perceive climate change to have a negative impact on polar bears, they don’t necessarily understand how they themselves contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

Similarly, a survey of Antarctic cruise passengers found that 59 per cent felt that their travel did not impact on climate change, and fewer than 7 per cent said they had or



might offset their emissions as a result of their experience.

Eke Eijgelaar, researcher and lecturer at the Centre for Sustainability, Tourism and Transport at NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, says he doesn’t believe last-chance tourism raises people’s awareness of the effects of climate change enough to outweigh the unwanted effects they can have on fragile environments.

“The impact of these mostly long-distance journeys is just too big. Just imagine all 500 million Europeans travelling to either the Great Barrier Reef or Antarctica. Their total carbon footprint would amount to the annual carbon footprint of 250 million British or Dutch people,” he says.

Another argued benefit of last chance tourism is that it raises money and publicity for conservation efforts. The president of the Maldives, Abdulla Yameen, said last year that mass tourism will create the funds it needs to adapt to climate change, and has backed plans to increase tourism from 1.3 million people a year to more than 7 million in 10 years.

Money from tourism to the Great Barrier Reef contributes to the marine park that is tasked with protecting the reef. But the downside to this is that human activity also pollutes the individual reefs, which can be damaged by tourists getting sun lotion into the sea, research has found.

In 2012, scientists estimated that the Great Barrier Reef had already lost more than half of its coral cover since 1985, but the way research is reported, and the threats that drive tourists to visit such endangered places, are misplaced, ac-

cording to ecologist Peter Mumby.

“The reef has experienced a very serious impact over the last few years in particular, but remember that it’s the size of Italy,” he says. “There remain many wonderful areas, and I’ve little doubt that tourists will always find something valuable to enjoy.

“Yes, the reef is likely to deteriorate, and we need to accelerate action to protect it, but the notion that it will die is wrong.”

Similarly, while you can see climate change having an impact on the people and wildlife living in the Arctic, it isn’t disappearing or melting, as media reports may have us believe. At least, so says Edda Falk, of the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO), which helps regulate tourism in the region.

“It’s such a massive area of land, and species and people adapt and develop. It’s not disappearing, it’s just going to change. Polar bears are considered vulnerable and climate change is affecting their habitat, but it’s not disappearing,” she says.

Eijgelaar says last chance tourism is happening mostly in areas that “make it into the headlines”.

“Tourism’s constantly on the rise. Perhaps, with more and more tourists looking for new and exotic things, they are a bit more attracted by media accounts of coral losses at the Great Barrier Reef and sinking images of Venice, and then choose that as their destination,” he says.

But these areas are suffering greater numbers of tourists year-on-year. Mumby says the majority of the tourism industry acts responsibly, particularly in Australia, and aware of the impacts of climate change, but this isn’t the case globally.

“I’ve seen unregulated mass tourism in much of Asia and Micronesia, where snorkellers and divers are let loose with no instructions.”

Regulations on tourism are increasingly being implemented to combat damage to precarious and threatened ecosystems in places including the Antarctic, where regulation is left up to the private sector because no country is allowed to own sovereign territory on the continent, in accordance with the Antarctic Treaty, signed in 1959 by 12 countries.

Amanda Lynnes, of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), AECO’s equivalent in the Antarctic, says the Antarctic can be a role model for managing tourism in other wilderness areas.

(Source: independent.co.uk)

Ten key tips for your winter road trip

Taking a road trip in the winter can be a wonderful adventure, but if you are planning on exploring areas where you are likely to encounter snow and ice, then it is important to make sure that you and your vehicle are ready to handle the different conditions. It is also worth considering whether you should take a course to learn how to drive in such conditions if you have never encountered the different road surfaces that can be produced when you encounter ice and snow.

However, by making these preparations, you can help to give yourself the best chance possible of having a great road trip.

■ Have your tires ready for the conditions

The tires are the point where your vehicle touches the ground, so making sure that they are in good condition is vital, otherwise you will quickly find your vehicle sliding all over the road. If you are going to be driving a fair amount through snow, then consider getting specialist tires to deal with these conditions, or if you are going to very snowy areas make sure you have snow chains to allow you to travel safely.

■ Check the fluid levels before traveling

The low temperatures that are encountered when taking a winter road trip can be particularly

challenging for the operation of your vehicle, with water freezing and oil not working as well as it does in warm temperatures. As well as these, make sure you check your antifreeze is well topped up, and it is worth making sure you have some de-icer in the car too for those mornings when you have to clear the windows.

■ Research your route for roads prone to snow

In many of the mountainous areas that can make for magical winter road trips, many roads will often be prone to either being closed or being restricted to slow speeds, so make sure that you take into account any such roads which may have an impact on your route during the trip.

■ Pack the essential equipment for releasing your vehicle from the snow

If you have ever had to clear snow to get your car from your driveway, then you will know how difficult a job it can be. Imagine trying to do this with your bare hands, and you will realize it makes sense to have at least a shovel and a small amount of grit with you to help move your vehicle, otherwise you may be waiting for the snow plow for some time.

■ Be familiar with winter driving techniques

There are several techniques that you can use when driving in snowy and wintry conditions,

and one of the most important things you can do is to drive smoothly, and leave plenty of space between you and the car ahead in case you skid while braking. Reading up on the full range of techniques, and practicing them if you can will really help you if you encounter poor driving conditions.

■ Pack an emergency kit in case you become stuck

While nobody likes to think of having an accident while you are on a road trip, it is something you should consider, as even a small prang in wintry conditions can become very serious if you cannot move the vehicle and the temperatures drop below zero. Having an emergency kit with basic first aid equipment, emergency blankets and food and drink can be a life saver if things take a turn for the worse.

■ Service your vehicle before you travel

Traveling in colder weather takes a much greater toll on the mechanical parts of your vehicle, so making sure you give the vehicle a service before you travel should help to identify any potential problems so they can be rectified before you find yourself on the winter roads.

■ Give yourself extra time in your itinerary

One of the biggest mistakes when plan-

ing a winter road trip is to over-estimate the miles that you can cover comfortably during your trip, so make sure that you give yourself plenty of time for stops, and certainly don’t assume that you will be able to travel along at the same pace as you would on the highway in the summer.

■ Avoid traveling during rush hour

The rush hour in cold weather is certainly not somewhere to be if you are driving in winter weather for the first time, and the crush of vehicles close together makes accidents all the more likely.

As well as making your road trip safer, it is much more enjoyable to drive when the roads are quieter, as nobody enjoys the frustrations of a traffic jam!

■ Take the numbers of a few local recovery services along your route

The emergency recovery is not something that you will want to use, but if you are traveling in rural areas you may not always have cell phone signal to check for phone numbers, so having the number of a few services, or your own national recovery service if you have one, can help avoid a series of wasted phone calls from a phone booth in poor weather conditions.

(Source: tripsavvy.com)

Scientists inch closer to fusion energy with discovery of a process that stabilizes plasmas

Scientists seeking to bring the fusion reaction that powers the sun and stars to Earth must keep the superhot plasma free from disruptions. Now researchers at the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory (PPPL) have discovered a process that can help to control the disruptions thought to be most dangerous.

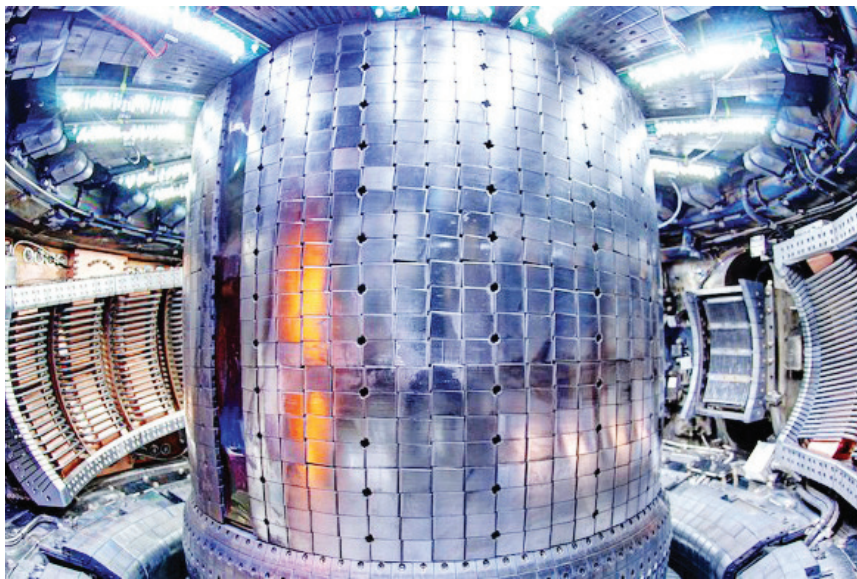
Replicating fusion, which releases boundless energy by fusing atomic nuclei in the state of matter known as plasma, could produce clean and virtually limitless power for generating electricity for cities and industries everywhere. Capturing and controlling fusion energy is therefore a key scientific and engineering challenge for researchers across the globe.

The PPPL finding, reported in *Physical Review Letters*, focuses on so-called tearing modes — instabilities in the plasma that create magnetic islands, a key source of plasma disruptions.

Researchers found in the 1980s that using radio-frequency (RF) waves to drive current in the plasma could stabilize tearing modes and reduce the risk of disruptions. However, the researchers failed to notice that small changes — or perturbations — in the temperature of the plasma could improve the stabilization process, once a key threshold in power is exceeded.

■ The overall impact

The overall impact of this process creates what is technically called "RF current condensation," or concentration of RF power



inside the island that keeps it from growing.

The "power deposition is greatly increased," said Allan Reiman, a theoretical physicist at PPPL and lead author of the paper.

"When the power deposition in the island exceeds a threshold level, there is a jump in the temperature that greatly strengthens the stabilizing effect. This allows the sta-

"There is worry about islands getting large and causing disruptions in ITER," Reiman said. "Taken together, these new effects should make it easier to stabilize ITER plasmas."

bilization of larger islands than previously thought possible."

This process can be particularly beneficial to ITER, the international tokamak under construction in France to demonstrate the feasibility of fusion power. "There is worry about islands getting large and causing disruptions in ITER," Reiman said. "Taken together, these new effects should make it easier to stabilize ITER plasmas."

■ Confining tokamak plasmas

Reiman worked with Professor Nat Fisch, associate director for academic affairs at PPPL and coauthor of the report. Fisch had demonstrated in a landmark 1970s paper that RF waves could be used to drive currents to confine tokamak plasmas through a process now called "RF current drive."

"Hence," he said, "Reiman's 1983 paper essentially launched experimental campaigns on tokamaks worldwide to stabilize tearing modes." Moreover, he added, "Significantly, in addition to predicting the stabilization of tearing modes by RF, the 1983 paper also pointed out the importance of the temperature perturbation in magnetic islands."

The new paper takes a fresh look at the impact of these temperature perturbations on the islands, a feature which has been underappreciated since the 1983 paper pointed to it. "We basically went back 35 years to carry that thought just a bit further by exploring the fascinating physics and larger implications of positive feedback," Fisch said.

(Source: newswise.com)

How radio astronomers will tune into the cosmic dawn from the far side of the moon

China's history-making Chang'e-4 spacecraft touched down on the far side of the moon last week and it opened up some exciting new avenues of scientific enquiry. While the rover goes to work examining the makeup of the lunar crust and mantle, a small radio instrument aboard a satellite parked in lunar orbit will allow scientists to listen into low-frequency signals that are blocked by the Earth's atmosphere. So, after falling on deaf ears for so long, what could these secretive radio waves tell us?

We first detected radio waves from space in the 1930s, but it wasn't until after World War II and advances in radar technology that things really got interesting.

One well-known example of this was the detection of Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation in the 1960s, the lingering glow of the Big Bang, which earned the discoverers the 1978 Nobel Prize in Physics.

■ Radio waves

Since then, radio waves have been instrumental in furthering our understanding of the universe.

By processing the information gathered by these telescopes, astronomers have been able to detect new kinds of objects, such as pulsars and quasars, and use radio waves emanating from distant hydrogen clouds to map out the structures of faraway galaxies.

While they have taught us a lot, the huge dish antennas

we use to collect radio waves on Earth are only painting part of the picture.

Our atmosphere blocks radio waves at lower frequencies before they can reach us, but scientists theorize that we could learn a lot from them, particularly about the early universe, if only we could tune in.

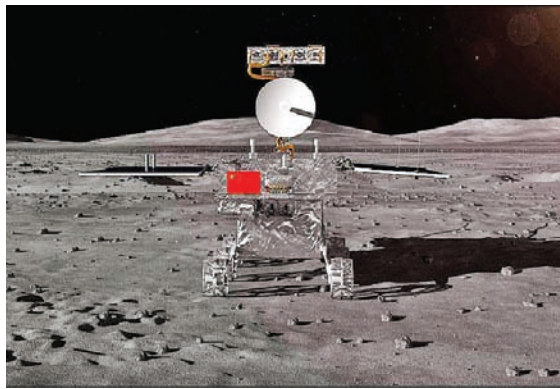
While suitably equipped instruments have been sent to space for this purpose before, their visits were short-lived. And though modern space probes are fitted with radio instruments, they are not designed with radio astronomy in mind.

Conversely, a small instrument developed by astronomer Marc Klein Wolt's team at Radboud University and sent along as part of the Chang'e-4 mission to the moon, very much was.

■ Hitched a ride to the moon

Developed in partnership with Dutch radio astronomy organization ASTRON and private company Innovative Solution in Space, the NCLE – Netherlands-China Low-Frequency Explorer – instrument hitched a ride to the moon on the Queiqiao satellite back in May.

This satellite was sent ahead of the Chang'e-4 lander itself, because the moon blocks all radio contact from Earth and so to land on its far side requires signals to be relayed somehow.



In this case, scientists have done so via a satellite parked out beyond the moon with clear communication lines both down to the surface and back to Earth.

We put a few questions to Klein Wolt about the traditional troubles in getting radio astronomy into space, how these challenges were overcome and his hopes for this relatively small but potentially game-changing instrument.

(Source: New Atlas)

Ancient gene duplication gave grasses multiple ways to wait out winter

New research provides valuable insight into how winter-adapted grasses gain the ability to flower in spring, which could be helpful for improving crops, like winter wheat (above), that rely on this process.

If you've ever grown carrots in your garden and puzzled over never once seeing them flower, don't blame your lack of a green thumb.

Carrots, beets and many other plants won't flower until they've gone through winter. The extended cold gives them the signal to flower quickly once spring arrives, providing the plants an edge in the race to produce seeds.

But cold isn't always required. In the 1930s, two English scientists discovered that some crops in the grass family, like rye or wheat, can use short days instead of cold to tell them when winter has come.

"But nothing was known about how it works," says Rick Amasino, a professor of

biochemistry and genetics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

■ Florigen induces flowering

Now, more than 80 years later, Daniel Woods and others in Amasino's group have finally discovered how grasses count the short days of winter to prepare for flowering. In most plants, a protein called florigen induces flowering during the lengthening days of spring and summer.

Grasses have multiple copies of the florigen gene, thanks to an ancient duplication in their genomes. One of those copies has been repurposed to be expressed during the short days of winter, giving some grasses a new way to prepare for spring.

The work is published Jan. 8 in the journal *eLife*. The new research provides valuable insight into how winter-adapted grasses gain the ability to flower in spring, which could

be helpful for improving crops, like winter wheat, that rely on this process.

Vernalization, the requirement for a period of cold before flowering can take place, evolved multiple times in diverse plant families.

Scientists believe that vernalization allows plants to fill a new niche, one where they store up energy one year and flower quickly the next spring before they get shaded out or outcompeted by other plants.

■ Vernalization genes identified

In the past, Amasino and his group have identified genes regulating vernalization in a member of the cabbage family known as *Arabidopsis*.

To get at the use of daylength as a winter signal, Amasino's group turned to *Brachypodium*, a grass used in the lab that is related to crops like corn, rice and wheat. They found

that, out of 51 varieties of *Brachypodium*, 40 could sense short days as a sign of winter, showing there was variation for this trait among the varieties.

"If you have variation, you can do genetics," says Amasino, who is a member of the Great Lakes Bioenergy Research Center, a U.S. Department of Energy-funded institute headquartered at UW-Madison.

The team found that the duplicate, named FTL9, has evolved to act as a sort of inverse of its parent gene florigen. Where florigen builds up in leaves during long days to cause flowering, FTL9 accumulates during the short days of winter. While enough florigen makes flowering inevitable, FTL9 only makes flowering possible by releasing the brakes on florigen once spring arrives.

(Source: phys.org)

Study shows algae thrive under Greenland Sea ice

Microscopic marine plants flourish beneath the ice that covers the Greenland Sea, according to a new study in the *Journal of Geophysical Research: Oceans*. These phytoplankton create the energy that fuels ocean ecosystems, and the study found that half of this energy is produced under the sea ice in late winter and early spring, and the other half at the edge of the ice in spring.

The researchers pioneered new technology and methods to make this discovery. About 4,000 oceanographic instruments called Argo floats are currently bobbing around the global ocean, moving between the deep sea and surface as they take vital measurements such as water temperature and salinity. This study used some of the first floats equipped to navigate icy waters and measure biogeochemical properties like nutrient concentrations and phytoplankton biomass.

The floats sampled in the difficult conditions around and below the Greenland Sea ice continuously for four years, giving the researchers an unprecedented and invaluable look at this previously impenetrable region.

"These floats gave us the opportunity to gather data through the annual cycle and across multiple years, which is crucial for understanding this changing region," said Paty Matrai, Bigelow Laboratory senior research scientist and study author. "We now have an incredible observational dataset and are able to see the full picture of the phytoplankton community through the seasons."

■ Biological art

This new approach represents a breakthrough in studying the

Greenland Sea, which has historically been difficult. Extensive sea ice and the long polar night prevent both ships and satellites from capturing the huge amount of biological activity under the ice.

Sampling with floats gave the researchers access to this concealed ecosystem. The data they collected revealed that, once light arrives at these northerly latitudes, half of energy production occurs beneath the sea ice, and the other half occurs at the ice edge.

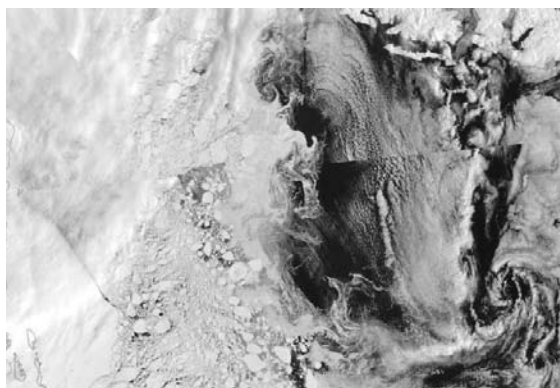
In summer, the phytoplankton communities move deeper in the water to access nutrients - another place that cannot be seen by satellites, but can be sampled by floats. These results suggest that previous studies might have significantly underestimated the amount and productivity of phytoplankton in this region.

"By the time the ice has receded and the water is accessible to boats and satellites, half the annual production has already happened," said Nico Mayot, a postdoctoral researcher at Bigelow Laboratory and first author on the paper. "If you only look at those data, you only have half the story. These float data give us the full story, from winter to summer, and from the surface to the deep ocean."

■ Climate change

The Greenland Sea is an important transition zone between the North Atlantic and Arctic oceans, both of which are being profoundly impacted by global climate change. The way it functions and changes may have important consequences for how food webs in these waters evolve.

An accurate picture of the phytoplankton community



in this important region opens the door for further study, and the researchers have made the project data available to the global scientific community. The researchers anticipate that the under-ice floats will become a key component of Arctic observation and believe that coupling these data with satellite measurements can make it even more powerful.

"Now we are able to ask a whole set of new questions, like whether this pattern is the same elsewhere in the Arctic Ocean," Mayot said. "Understanding how energy is produced in these rapidly changing environments will allow us to anticipate and plan for the future."

(Source: eurekalert.org)

Scientists discover new type of carbohydrate

Australian researchers have discovered a new type of complex carbohydrate in barley, according to a study published in the *Journal of Central Science*.

The new compound is a type of polysaccharide — a carbohydrate which is made up of chains of different, simple sugar molecules bonded together — and is the first of its kind to be discovered in more than three decades.

According to the team from the University of Adelaide which made the discovery, the new carb is essentially a combination of glucose — the most abundant simple sugar — and xylose, which is found in the embryos of most edible plants.

The hybrid carb could take the form of either a viscous gel or a stronger substance depending on the ratios between the glucose and the xylose.

Alan Little, senior research scientist with the Adelaide team and author of the *Central Science* study, said

that the polysaccharide could have a host of potential applications in food, medicine, cosmetics and other domains.

"Plant cell walls contain components that are of major interest for many industries such as renewable sources for energy production, composite materials or food products," he said in a statement.

"Knowledge of this new polysaccharide will open up further research to determine its role in the plant," he continued. "We know that it can be found in the roots of barley suggesting it may play a role in plant growth or resistance to external stresses such as salinity or disease."

By observing natural variation of the polysaccharide in different cereal crops we will aim to identify links to important agricultural traits."

Once researchers understand more about the new compound, its potential applications will become clearer.

Currently, polysaccharides are being used to improve the quality of nutrients in certain foods, among numerous other applications.

The "properties of the new polysaccharide could be manipulated to suit the desired function, increasing the range of potential uses," Little said.

(Source: Newsweek)

Space bacteria adapting to harsh environment to survive, scientists explain

A new study sheds light on why bacteria in space are adapting to harsh conditions. Researchers further said that these microbes don't actually mutate into antibiotic-resistant organisms but were just coping with their new environment.

Bacteria in the International Space Station are just trying to make it through in space, but that doesn't mean these microbes are mutating, scientists explain.

Scientists found that these were not mutating into something as dangerous as antibiotic-resistant organisms.

Although these space bacteria were found to have different genes than those found on Earth, experts say this doesn't make it harmful to humans. They went on to explain that these microbes were simply adjusting to the environment and the stressful conditions.

The findings debunk rumors that bacteria traveling in space along with astronauts are becoming more and more immune against antibiotics and address concerns regarding the effects of the stressful conditions on these organisms.

"People will be in little capsules where they cannot open windows, go outside or circulate the air for long periods of time. We're genuinely concerned about how this could affect microbes," lead author Erica Hartmann of Northwestern said.

This study sheds light on the safety of astronauts traveling for longer periods across space and is especially important for future missions to farther places in the solar system. Along with their human co-passengers, bacteria are usually brought on board either by the astronauts themselves or in their cargo.

Researchers used data from the National Center for Biotechnology Information to differentiate *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Bacillus cereus* from those on Earth. The former bacteria are usually thriving on human skin and the latter microbe, found in soil.

(Source: Tech Times)

Giant singers from neighboring oceans share song parts over time

Singing humpback whales from different ocean basins seem to be picking up musical ideas from afar, and incorporating these new phrases and themes into the latest song, according to a newly published study that's helping scientists better understand how whales learn and change their musical compositions.

Singing humpback whales from different ocean basins seem to be picking up musical ideas from afar, and incorporating these new phrases and themes into the latest song, according to a newly published study in *Royal Society Open Science* that's helping scientists better understand how whales learn and change their musical compositions.

The new research shows that two humpback whale populations in different ocean basins (the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans) in the Southern Hemisphere sing similar song types, but the amount of similarity differs across years. This suggests that males from these two populations come into contact at some point in the year to hear and learn songs from each other.

The study titled "Culturally transmitted song exchange between humpback whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) in the southeast Atlantic and southwest Indian Ocean basins" appears in the latest edition of the *Royal Society Open Science* journal. The authors are: Melinda L. Rekdahl, Carissa D. King, Tim Collins, and Howard Rosenbaum of WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society); Ellen C. Garland of the University of St. Andrews; Gabriella A. Carvajal of WCS and Stony Brook University; and Yvette Razafindrakoto of COSAP and Madagascar National Parks.

"Song sharing between populations tends to happen more in the Northern Hemisphere where there are fewer physical barriers to movement of individuals between populations on the breeding grounds, where they do the majority of their singing. In some populations in the Southern Hemisphere song sharing appears to be more complex, with little song similarity within years but entire songs can spread to neighboring populations leading to song similarity across years," said Dr. Melinda Rekdahl, marine conservation scientist for WCS's Ocean Giants Program and lead author of the study. "Our study shows that this is not always the case in Southern Hemisphere populations, with similarities between both ocean basin songs occurring within years to different degrees over a 5-year period."

(Source: Science Daily)

Government must consider meat tax to tackle climate change, says British MP

The government must consider a meat tax in order to slash greenhouse gas emissions from British farming, according to Green Party MP Caroline Lucas.

Emissions from agriculture make up 10 per cent of the UK's total, prompting calls for massive changes to encourage farmers towards more environmentally friendly practices.



The former Green leader was addressing attendees at the Oxford Farming Conference, where speakers including environment secretary Michael Gove had already laid out a vision for making British agriculture greener.

On Thursday the National Farmers' Union president Minette Batters said UK farming must aim to effectively cut all emissions within two decades, a target that was welcomed by Ms Lucas.

But to ensure farming operates "within planetary boundaries", she suggested a meat tax to help curb consumption could be necessary, despite opposition to such action by ministers.

"At the risk of incurring the wrath of the energy secretary in particular who said recently that encouraging people to eat less meat would be 'the worst sort of nanny state ever', I'd add that we need serious consideration of measures like a meat tax, particularly for beef," said Ms Lucas.

She said such a tax could potentially be offset for more sustainable meat producers, such as organic farmers, by pumping money into environmental schemes on farms.

This echoes recent calls from Oxford University scientists for a tax on red and processed meats in order to tackle the cancers, heart attacks and strokes linked to their consumption.

Ms Lucas noted that British diets are already shifting away from meat, with one in eight people describing themselves as vegetarian or vegan.

Many scientific studies have highlighted global livestock farming as a major threat to the climate due to the methane and CO2 gases it produces.

However, many farmers oppose the idea of additional taxes, which they say demonise meat unfairly and ignore the positive role livestock play in environmental management.

(Source: The Independent)

LEARN ENGLISH

Movie Review

A: Welcome back movie lovers to another "Premier Movie Review". My name is Richard Clarke and I am joined today by the very **erudite** David Watson.

B: Thank you, Dick. Today we are going to talk about the movie "Lion King". Tell me Dave, what is your **impression** of this film?

A: Well, I think this film is simply a **fable**, **depicting** man's **eternal** greed for power, and in my opinion, it's a very fine film. Even despite the **accusations of plagiarism** traditional folk tales from other countries. The musical **score** was amazing, the animation was very well done, and the story was simply **enchanting**.

B: I think otherwise. Even though the animation was technically strong, and as you say, the score and songs performed by Elton John were great, the film lacks a certain originality; it lacked heart. And I would **dare to say**, it was too **predictable**.

A: Predictable! How! Come on, It's a G-rated movie! It's for the kids! It's not a thriller!

B: Well, that's just it. It did have some very dramatic and intense scenes. For example, when Mufasa dies, or the dark, **grim portrayal** of Scar. Even so, the film is **linear**. Mufasa dies, Simba runs away thinking it's his fault. Falls in love and returns to retake what is **rightfully** his. It's just too cliché.

A: How can it be cliché? It's a fable! It's telling a time-honored story! The movie makes a point of how the hunger for power leads to corruption, and teaches children the value of respect, life and love.

B: You have always been so soft, Dave!

A: Open your heart Dick. Don't shut us out.
B: Anyway... That's all for today folks! Join us next time as we talk about a movie; How to lose a guy in 10 days; I'm sure you'll love that one Dave!

■ **Key vocabulary**
erudite: having a lot of knowledge; especially gained from studying
impression: the feelings one has after a specific event
fable: beautiful story about animals that has a moral or lesson
depict: describe, show, especially in art or pictures
eternal: lasting forever
accusation: action of claiming something is wrong
plagiarism: practice of copying others' ideas
score: written work showing notes of music
enchanting: attractive, holding one's attention
dare to say: have the confidence to say
predictable: easy for others to foresee what is going to happen
grim: unpleasant
portrayal: the act of showing or describing something, especially in art
linear: moving in logical way, from start to end
rightfully: according to law

■ **Supplementary vocabulary**
screen play: the written words from a film
performance: the activity of an actor in a play
central character: the main person in a movie
plot: story in a movie or book
cinematography: used to describe the camera work in a movie
cial thing or ability that a person has triumph common noun, singular a great success or achievement a person has/ triumph



No water transfer from enclosed bodies of water: MP

ENVIRONMENT d e s k **TEHRAN** — According to the national budget bill for the next Iranian calendar year (starting on March 21, 2019), no water will be transferred from enclosed bodies of water regarding its probable environmental consequences, MP Nour Mohammad Torbatinejad has said.

It is approved that water transfer from enclosed bodies of water will not be carried out unless extensive studies and researches are done in advance, Torbatinejad, who is the spokesman for agriculture committee of Majlis (Iranian Parliament) added, IRNA reported.

Referring to other subjects revised at the commission, he noted that it is necessary to allocate a larger proportion of subsidies to support agriculture and farmers.

Due to the lack of water resources in the central regions of Iran and the ever increasing

need for this vital element for development, a plan was proposed for transferring the Caspian Sea water to Semnan province in 2005 and the project was approved by the administration in 2012.

However, the Department of Environment (DOE) has delayed the project due to its potential environmental issues.

In May 2018, Parvin Farshchi, deputy head of the DOE for marine affairs, said that Iran was weighing up the option of transferring water from Sea of Oman to drought-ridden provinces of Sistan-Baluchestan, Hormozgan and Khorasan Razavi.

Farshchi also explained that each marine environment has its distinguishing characteristics and this is why we said no to water transfer schemes from the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. She also stated that Sea of Oman is different from

Tehran subway to add 376 new cars: deputy mayor



SOCIETY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Some 376 subway cars will be built to enter Tehran's underground transport fleet by the next 48 months, Mohsen Pourseyyed Aqaei, deputy mayor for traffic and transport affairs has said.

The Municipality of Tehran, a Chinese company and an Iranian wagon company have signed a contract, through which the Chinese company will share the knowledge of a special manufacturing process, then building some 376 railway cars will get underway, he stated, Mehr reported.

Touching upon some 1,050 subway cars the government was supposed to supply for Tehran metro fleet, he highlighted that through a tender launched between China and Iran, 630 cars for the Tehran subway is planned to be supplied, while some 420 cars is yet to be provided.

Pourseyyed Aqaei further stated that it is planned to increase the share of manufacturing railroad cars from 30 to 50 percent,

adding, so with learning new manufacturing methods, some 376 metro cars will be built for line 7 of the metro.

Tehran mayor, Pirouz Hanachi, for his part said that while currently some 1,350 railway cars are running in the capital's subway system, it is still facing lack of 2,000 cars.

Pointing to 2.5 million metro trips daily, he said that it must enhance amounting to 7 million trips.

Clearly, air pollution is mitigated by reducing private transport vehicles and to do that, subway system should be developed as the most efficient public transport, Hanachi highlighted.

Tehran subway system consists of five operational lines, stretching to 170 kilometers, and two lines of 6 and 7 are under construction. The lines link south to north, east to west and are gradually covering more neighborhoods. By completing the two aforementioned lines 70 kilometers will be added to the current railways.

Air pollution should become main issue for theses: academic

ENVIRONMENT d e s k **TEHRAN** — The budgets for developing master's or doctoral theses and researches should be directed towards finding ways to mitigate air pollution, as the issue has been the main challenge for metropolises across the country in recent years, Shahid Beheshti University faculty member Yousef Rashidi has said.

Stressing the need for exchanging knowledge among experts and academics in the field of air pollution, he stated, given that air pollution imposes numerous threats to the public health and brings environmental damages to the country, research budget allocation should focus on air pollution in order to ultimately present to the responsible bodies as executive plans.

Touching on the need for quality content to come up with solutions for curbing air pollution, he highlighted that the 6th rounds of national conference on air and noise pollution

management has been held in recent years in this regard.

Six editions of the conference have been held with foreign experts in attendance, aiming to share the latest scientific achievements in reducing air pollution and preventing repeating the inefficient methods other countries tried before, he added.

The 7th national conference on air and noise pollution management organized by Tehran Municipality, Sharif University of Technology and Iranian scientific association of clean air, will be held in Tehran on January 28-29.

He went on to say that all the advanced achievements on this field will be analyzed by the experts and will be gathered as a package of proposals and granted to the Department of Environment (DOE), municipalities and other air pollution control agencies.

He further called on the DOE to cooperate more on this field. World Health Organization (WHO) asserts that Tehran

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

A ← → ع

Govt. allots \$240m to mitigate water shortage

Iran's government has allocated some 10.02 trillion rials (nearly \$240 million) to reduce water shortage nationwide, Ismail Najjar, head of the National Disaster Management Organization has said. The amount is allocated to the Energy Ministry for taking necessary measures to tackle the issue, YJC quoted Najjar as saying on Monday. Climate change is actually happening in Iran, and with climate change, depletion of water resources, drought spells, low precipitations, changes in precipitation, temperature rise, desertification, and land subsidence also occur, he concluded.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“noct-, nocti-”

■ **Meaning**: night
■ **For example**: The most notable feature of *nocturnal* animals is the size of their eyes.

PHRASAL VERB

Wipe something away

■ **Meaning**: to stop something existing
■ **For example**: A frown quickly wiped away her smile.

IDIOM

Between a rock and a hard place

■ **Explanation**: to have a choice between two things, both of which are unpleasant or dangerous
■ **For example**: You were really between a rock and a hard place when you had to choose between your career and your relationship.



An aerial view of the Caspian Sea

the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, in that it is deeper and unlike the Caspian Sea which is in fact an enclosed inland body of water and the Persian Gulf which is partially enclosed by land Sea of Oman is connected to the Indian Ocean.

President Hassan Rouhani presented the administration's draft of the national budget bill for the next year to the Majlis on December 24. Preserving water resources and environment is among the focal points of the bill.

500 job creation plans launched in western province of Lorestan



SOCIETY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam also known as Sedad-e Ejraiye Farman-e Hazrat-e Imam has launched 500 job creation plans in the western province of Lorestan, Tasnim news agency reported on Tuesday.

Moreover 110 projects, including setting up medical and cultural centers, was launched in the region, the report added.

Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam has so far executed some 1,402 projects worth of 15.7 trillion rials (nearly \$374 million) in Lorestan in an attempt to eradicate poverty and socially and economically empower the citizens.

Mohammad Mokhber, director of Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam, also explained that "we are planning on implementing resistance economy strategies in this province."

Mokhber went on to say that the main objective of the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam is to boost employ-

ment and over the past few years some 400,000 jobs were provided nationwide.

Last year (March 2017-March 2018) some 30 trillion rials (nearly \$715 million) including donations made by the benefactors, low interest loans as well as the investments made by Barekat charity foundation affiliated to the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam was spent on job creation, he highlighted.

So far some 10,000 housing units were built in underprivileged areas and this year (starting on March 21, 2018) some 200 schools and 200 mosques and cultural centers are set up in such areas, he added.

Providing dowries for girls, medications for cancer patients, wheelchairs for people with physical disabilities, students stationery, and also cochlear implants are among other services of the Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam to the underprivileged, Mokhber concluded.

Turkey calls for joint control with Russia & Iran over U.S. troop pullout from Syria

➡ At the same time, Cavusoglu revealed that a summit between all three parties is being prepared in Moscow.

The proposal comes as Ankara and Washington are engaged in a bitter war of words over the U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria. On Tuesday, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton blasted an opinion piece penned by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for the New York Times as both "offensive and wrong."

Erdogan praised his own efforts in combatting terrorism in Syria, while criticizing the U.S.-backed operations in Raqqa and the Iraqi city of Mosul, as well as recalling the "lesson of Iraq" and the "premature declarations of victory" which led to the emergence of ISIL (formerly ISIS).

Prior to that exchange, Bolton demanded safety guarantees for Syria's Kurds from Turkey, calling it a precondition for U.S. withdrawal. The Turkish president called Bolton's demands a "huge mistake" and refused to "swallow" them. He also reiterated Ankara's



resolve to fight "terrorism" in Syria, stressing that it actually seeks to protect the "Kurdish brothers" in the neighboring country.

Russia, along with Turkey and Iran, is a guarantor of the ceasefire in Syria, which has been successfully implemented in several areas throughout the country. Moscow has actively undertaken efforts to settle the years-long conflict, supporting the Syrian government forces in the fight against terrorism, bringing humanitarian relief to civilians, and working on the bringing warring parties to the negotiating table. The abrupt decision to withdraw troops from Syria announced by President Donald Trump in December was met in Moscow with a great deal of skepticism.

"Concerning the pullout of U.S. troops, I don't know what that is. The U.S. has been in Afghanistan for 17 years already, and almost every year they say that they're pulling their troops out. But they're still there," President Vladimir Putin said at the time.

(Source: RT)

Pompeo makes unannounced visit to Iraq

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has made an unannounced visit to Iraq, involving meetings with high-ranking officials and no statement to media.



The American top diplomat landed in the capital Baghdad on Wednesday amid conflicting statements from the White House over troop withdrawal from Syria.

He met with Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, President Barham Salih, Foreign Minister Mohamed al-Hakim and Parliament speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi.

During his Middle East tour, the American hawk has been keeping up with his campaign of anti-Iran threats.

Last month, U.S. Energy Secretary Rick Perry led a trade delegation to Baghdad to urge the Iraqi government to sever its energy ties with Iran and turn to Washington.

The former CIA chief's visit is the third high-profile one by an American official to Iraq in the last month. He was expected to visit the Egyptian capital Cairo later in the day.

Meanwhile, efforts are underway in U.S. Congress that could possibly result in hearings on Trump's Syria policy.

"It may be one of those issues that would be appropriate to have a hearing on to see exactly what the administration intends to do and when," Texas Republican Representative Mac Thornberry told reporters in Washington. "I think currently there are a fair number of folks here and around the world trying to figure out what we're going to do and when. And I don't have any good answers."

A withdrawal framework for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) has been approved and is currently being executed by U.S. forces, said Pentagon spokesman Commander Sean Robertson in a statement on Tuesday, failing to offer any timetable for the allegedly finalized plan.

Operation Inherent Resolve is the name of a U.S. military campaign launched in August 2014 after the Daesh terrorist Takfiri group overran large swaths of Syria and Iraq.

The U.S. has ever since maintained military presence in Syria without any authorization from the Damascus government or a UN mandate.

(Source: agencies)

Kuwait to distance itself from PGCC as Israel expand ties with Arab states

Although Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) states concur on many policies, such as Syrian government being admitted back into the Arab states community, some issues remain unresolved within the council as Kuwait is apparently not following in the footsteps of others to normalize diplomatic ties with the Israeli regime.

According to a commentary published by the United States-based al-Monitor media site, Kuwaiti officials are not on board with their PGCC counterparts on establishment of relations with Tel Aviv.

It noted that Kuwait threw its backing behind Lebanon at the United Nations Security Council on December 19, 2018, saying the Israeli military's operation to block what it claims are tunnels the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance movement has dug into the occupied territories are in violation of Lebanese sovereignty.

"Lebanon has been living for years with Israeli violations. Israel has tried to exaggerate this incident militarily, and in the media," Kuwaiti Ambassador Mansour Ayyad al-Otaibi said at the time.

Otaibi then condemned "Israeli violations against Lebanese sovereignty, in land, air and sea," stressing that efforts by Hezbollah to counter Israel are "legitimate" resistance and not terrorism.

The Kuwaiti government even considered opening an embassy in Palestine last year as part of attempts to strengthen its diplomatic presence in the occupied territories.

President of the Kuwait Football Association, Sheikh Ahmad Yusef, recently told the Kuwaiti Arab-language al-Rai daily newspaper that his country would not co-host the 2022 FIFA World Cup soccer tournament with Qatar as the Persian Gulf kingdom would not issue entry visas for Israelis — something that is against FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) regulation.

This is while Israeli politician and the leader of the opposition Israeli Labor Party, Avi Gabbay, secretly visited Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), last month and discussed various regional issues with three senior Emirati officials.

Israeli Transportation and Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz visited Oman on November 4 last year to attend an international transport conference and pitch a railway project that would link the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean via the Israeli-occupied territories.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in late November 2018 visited Oman, where he met Sultan Sayyid Qaboos bin Said Al Said at the Bait al-Barakah Royal Palace in the coastal city of Seeb near the capital Muscat.

Israel's English-language daily newspaper The Jerusalem Post reported that the two men had discussed ways to advance the so-called Middle East peace process as well as matters of mutual interest with regard to the region's stability.

Netanyahu was accompanied by senior officials, including the head of the Mossad spy agency and his national security adviser.

Netanyahu's unpublicized visit to Oman came on the same day that Israeli Culture and Sports Minister Miri Regev traveled to the UAE to accompany Israel's judo team at the Abu Dhabi Grand Slam 2018.

Regev arrived in Abu Dhabi on October 26, and she participated in the opening ceremony of the international event at the Emirati capital's Zayed Sports City, Palestinian Arabic-language Ma'an news agency reported.

Her visit to the UAE marked the first of its kind by an Israeli minister to a Persian Gulf littoral state.

Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi have no diplomatic ties and the UAE does not recognize Israel, but the two sides have increased back-channel cooperation in recent years. There have been numerous reports of growing contacts between Saudi and Israeli officials too.

Among Arab countries, Israel has diplomatic relations only with Egypt and Jordan.

(Source: Press TV)

We extend 'hand of friendship' to Persian Gulf neighbors, Iran's FM says

Zarif: We need strong region rather than strongmen

➡ Our approach to challenges ranging from the environment, global economy, trade and transfer of knowledge and technology to eradication of extremism and terrorism, organized crime and weapons of mass destruction can bring about either "positive sum" or "negative sum" outcomes. If we approach these common challenges with a "zero sum mentality", we will all lose and end up with "negative sum" outcomes. In the era of globalization of information and emotions, there can be no island of stability, security, or prosperity.

So "Dialogue" in the theme of this conference represents a revolutionary departure, where our common humanity and common vulnerabilities become better tools for global governance than perceived or manufactured enemies. To sum up, "Dialogue brings with it equal footing....as it is a process by which we accept, as much as we want to be accepted. We include, as much as we want to be included. We listen, as much as we want to be listened to... dialogue can be a framework where the weakest is accorded the privilege to be listened to, and where the strongest finds it necessary to explain its case to others."

Let me now turn to the second pivotal concept: "A World Reorder." We live in a transitional phase where the convenience of a global order which channeled and organized our expectations is no more. It brings with it the danger of miscalculations which can make the difference between rise and conversely demise for countries and regions. This all highlights the fundamental challenge here: namely, correcting cognitive disorders.

Allow me to put forward a proposition. The emerging global order is "post-western". This is not derogatory to the West, but simply a statement of reality that the West—as a geographic or political construct—does not possess a monopoly over all consequential global developments.

Today it is evident that unlike the early 20th century, all important events do not take place in the West. And unlike only a few decades ago, the West no longer controls or even influences all significant developments. I will spare you from the many examples of the latter, and rather posit that the practical implication of this shift for our volatile neighborhood in West, Central and South Asia is that we cannot expect the West to provide us with all the remedies—nor can we blame it for all our ills.

Distinguished friends,

Our region—however we choose to define it since regions are not rigid geographies but rather flexible constructs—is seen as the locus of many global problem, particularly extremism and terrorism. Be it West Asia, Central Asia or South Asia.

It is easy for us in this neighborhood to blame the West as the ultimate culprit in our problems. There is no shortage of historical facts here. At the same time, it has been even more convenient for the West to blame us—particularly Muslims—for problems arriving on its shores. Finger-pointing in both directions—and even within our region—is perhaps

the easiest diversion.

But the situation is far too serious for a game of blame. While there is a lot of blame to go around, we need to break the habit of always throwing the ball in the other's court.

As I elaborated in the opening of my thoughts here, it is high time for the countries in our region to abandon two illusions: that security can be bought or imported AND that security can be achieved at the expense of the insecurity of others. We need to stop rehashing our grievances and our narratives of past history and move in the direction of establishing a working and yet modest and realistic regional mechanism.

We cannot wish away our differences, nor can we neglect the anxieties born by divergences in size, or human and natural resources.

We can start with a "Regional Dialogue Forum", particularly in the Persian Gulf region which has been the scene of so many wars in the last 4 decades; from Saddam Hussein's aggression against Iran and later against Kuwait, to US operations and finally to the humanitarian nightmare in Yemen.

Admission to such a forum should be based on accepting generally recognized principles and shared objectives, notably, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and the political independence of all states? the inviolability of international boundaries? non-interference in internal affairs of others? the peaceful settlement of disputes? the impermissibility of threats or use of force, and the promotion of peace, stability, progress and prosperity in the region.

A forum such as this could help promote understanding and interaction at the levels of government, the private sector and civil society, and lead to agreement on a broad spectrum of issues, including confidence-building measures? combating terrorism, extremism and sectarianism? ensuring freedom of navigation and the free flow of oil and other resources? and the protection of the environment, which is an imminent existential challenge, particularly for our neighbors in the southern Persian Gulf region.

We need a strong region rather than the dominance of strongmen in the region. From our perspective a strong region is characterized by the following attributes:

- 1- Homegrown political and territorial stability;
- 2- Reliance on the populace as the source of legitimacy, security and prosperity;
- 3- Harmonization of national identities and regional citizenship;
- 4- Participation of all relevant regional countries in ensuring peace in the region through regional institutions, organizations or ad hoc arrangements;
- 5- More confidence, more trade and more interaction between and among the countries in the region, than with external powers;
- 6- Economic relations and people-centered interactions, making any resort to war costly and untenable;
- 7- A regional culture that will place national security on



Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif held talks with his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj in New Delhi on Wednesday.

a par with regional security; and,

8- A sustainable regional environment.

We in Iran have been forced into the privileged position of relying solely on our own population as the source of our security and advancement, while welcoming the opportunity to progress through regional and global cooperation. We have also learned that we can only attain security in a secure region, where our neighbors also enjoy internal and external stability. Guided by commonsense, we recognize that the era of global and regional hegemony is long gone and that a stronger region is in our interest, in the interest of the entire region, as well as ultimately in the interest of the entire world.

Thus, we are prepared to engage our neighbors and all those interested in the stability of this pivotal—yet volatile—region based on mutual and collective compliance with the following principles and objectives:

- 1- Preservation of territorial integrity and the stability of the countries in the region through the strengthening of domestic governance and the prevention of external aggression;
- 2- Promotion of good governance throughout the region;
- 3- Exercise of strategic self-restraint by all regional actors;
- 4- Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, eradication weapons of mass destruction, and prevention of costly and destabilizing conventional arms race;
- 5- Promotion of regional balance and rejection of hegemony by regional or supra-regional powers;
- 6- Strengthening of regional economic prowess and governance;
- 7- Adherence to multilateralism; and
- 8- Connectivity and more efficient utilization of transit routes between north and south, and between east and west.

We share with India many commonalities in forging such a neighborhood in South, Central and West Asia. We also extend our hand of friendship to our neighbors in the Persian Gulf region again, in order to move in this direction.

Deal reached for 49 migrants to disembark

Malta has reached a deal with other EU member states to allow 49 migrants aboard two rescue ships off the coast of the island nation to disembark, Prime Minister Joseph Muscat said Wednesday.

"An ad hoc agreement has been reached," Muscat told journalists, adding that it also included a decision on the fate of 249 rescued migrants already in Malta.

The 49 migrants, including a baby and several children, were rescued while attempt-

ing the dangerous Mediterranean crossing from North Africa to Europe.

Muscat said that of the total of 298 migrants, 176 would be sent to Germany, France, Portugal, Ireland, Romania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Italy.

Another 78 will be allowed to stay in Malta, and 44 Bangladeshi migrants will be sent back to their country.

The migrants have been stranded off the coast of Malta on the Sea-Watch and another

boat since late last year, with no country allowing them to dock, suffering sea sickness and dehydration, with some briefly refusing food. They have been unable to disembark because of a diplomatic deadlock among EU member states, despite an appeal by Pope Francis on Sunday for EU leaders to show solidarity.

On Tuesday Malta appeared to raise the stakes still further, saying that any deal on the fate of the 49 must include that of the

249 rescued migrants already on the island.

"Malta never closed its ports and it is still a safe port," said Muscat, who has previously complained that his country has to bear an unfair share of migrant numbers.

"We wanted to send a strong political message that the burden must be shared because it is a European issue... Every hour that passed without a solution was not an hour I was proud of," he said.

(Source: Daily Star)

Putin is the 'greatest gift' to NATO since end of Cold War: Petraeus

Russia successfully 'breathed new life' into NATO by giving it a reason to boost military expansion into Eastern Europe and strengthen the U.S. foothold on the continent, ex-CIA boss, retired four-star general David Petraeus said.

Russia singlehandedly gave the American-led military bloc "a new reason for living," the former general told the audience at an international conference in New Delhi, India on Wednesday. Petraeus stressed that Moscow prompted the alliance to deploy more troops and aircraft into Eastern Europe and the Baltic States as well as set up new command HQs in the region.

It was done under the pretext of fighting 'Russian aggression' as relations between NATO and Moscow steadily deteriorated during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. In that sense, Putin is "the greatest gift" NATO has received since the conclusion of the Cold War, the American general said.

He also 'credited' the Russian leader for providing the U.S. with the rationale to return an armored brigade to

Europe "for the first time in a number of years." It is currently stationed in Poland.

The former CIA head told the audience that despite the occasional tensions between the U.S. President Donald Trump and NATO, Washington remains the "backbone" of the alliance as its chief armed force and financial backer.

In recent years, the U.S. and its allies have been boosting military might in Europe, citing the need to deter Moscow following the Ukrainian crisis and the accession of Crimea into Russia. This strategy led to the increase of the number of combat-ready troops and large-scale military drills near the nation's borders.

The Kremlin, in turn, had been blasting NATO's continued expansion eastward. Russian politicians said that the growing militarization of the region undermines European security and may lead to destabilization in the region.

Four-star General David Petraeus was considered to be one of the most influential military policy-makers in



the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations. Before being appointed the head of the CIA, he led the U.S. Central Command.

(Source: RT)

Police injured as Lazio’s 119th anniversary celebrations turn violent

Eight police officers were injured after celebrations to mark Lazio’s 119th anniversary in the centre of Rome turned violent, police told Italian media on Wednesday.

The skirmishes took place at Piazza della Libertà in the centre of the Italian capital where up to 2,500 Lazio fans gathered late Tuesday at the spot of the club’s foundation.

The gathering had also been attended by the club’s president Claudio Lotito who addressed the crowd but left before tensions mounted. Shortly after midnight, an estimated 300 fans, with their faces covered, broke away from the main group and began throwing bottles and other objects at police, who responded with tear gas and water cannons.

Police said eight officers had injuries, mostly with cuts and bruising, one fan was arrested and three others detained, all with links to the club’s hardcore ‘Ultra’ fans.

All will receive DASPO Urbano exclusion orders, a ‘Sports Event Access Ban’.

Tensions are running high in Italy after violent clashes before Inter Milan’s league game against Napoli on December 26 in the San Siro, which was also overshadowed by racist chanting.

A 39-year-old Inter Milan fan was killed after being struck by a car. There were also clashes in Rome before Lazio’s Europa League game against German club Eintracht Frankfurt last month.

Lazio were founded at Piazza della Libertà on January 9, 1900 by a group of army officers.

City rivals AS Roma were formed 27 years later following the merger of various capital clubs.

(Source: France 24)

Liverpool’s Salah named African Player of the Year again

Liverpool’s Mohamed Salah is the 2018 Confederation of African Football Player of the Year - the second consecutive year he has won the award. Egypt forward Salah, 26, beat Liverpool team-mate Sadio Mane of Senegal and Arsenal and Gabon striker Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang to the title.

He received the award at a ceremony in Senegal on Tuesday. “I have dreamt of winning this award since I was a child and now I have done so twice in a row,” Salah said.

Houston Dash and South Africa forward Thembi Kgatlanga was named Women’s Player of the Year.

Salah was voted the BBC African Footballer of the Year for the second time in December. He scored 44 goals for Liverpool during the 2017-18 season, helping the Reds to the Champions League final before scoring twice for Egypt at the World Cup in Russia.

He has scored 16 goals in 29 appearances across all competitions for Liverpool this season.

Salah, Mane and Aubameyang were joined in the Team of the Year by Manchester United defender Eric Bailly, Manchester City midfielder Riyad Mahrez, Liverpool midfielder Naby Keita and Tottenham full-back Serge Aurier.

(Source: BBC)

Barcelona icon Iniesta apologises over blackface photo

Barcelona legend Andres Iniesta has apologised after posting a photo on social media with two people in blackface as part of Epiphany celebrations.

The 34-year-old superstar who currently plays at Japan’s Vissel Kobe had no intention “to upset anyone by displaying that photo,” according to a statement by his agency sent to AFP on Wednesday. “He would like to apologise to those people who may have felt offended,” the statement said.

Iniesta’s picture on Twitter and Instagram posted on Sunday showed his family and a group of people in costumes, taking part in the Three Kings Day celebration also known as Epiphany, which is widely celebrated in Spain.

The midfielder, who lifted 32 major trophies and made 674 appearances for Catalan giants Barca, joined Vissel Kobe in May, calling his J-League move an “important career challenge”.

The Spain icon’s decision to choose Vissel arguably represents Japanese football’s biggest transfer coup, with many top players now moving to cash-rich Chinese clubs in the twilight of their careers. It also came as a timely boost to the J-League, which used to attract luminaries such as Brazilian great Zico and former England star Gary Lineker when it began in 1993, but has struggled to attract marquee players in recent years.

Iniesta -- who famously scored Spain’s winning goal against the Netherlands in the 2010 World Cup final -- had been top of the wishlist of Vissel owner Hiroshi Mikitani.

The billionaire businessman is also the founder and CEO of Rakuten, Barcelona’s main sponsor, and was heavily involved in the deal that brought Iniesta to Japan.

(Source: AFP)

World Cup winner Pavard to join Bayern Munich from July 1

French World Cup winning defender Benjamin Pavard will join Bayern Munich from Stuttgart on a five-year contract as of July 1, the defending German champions revealed Wednesday.

Media reports in Germany put the transfer at 35 million euros (\$40 million) for the 22-year-old who can play at right-back or centre-back. “He is young and a world champion, so we are happy and proud to have won over such a player,” said Bayern’s sports director Hasan Salihamidzic at their winter training camp in Doha.

Pavard’s status skyrocketed last summer when the centre-back scored the goal of the World Cup with a stunning net-busting strike in a 4-3 last-16 win over Argentina that set France on their way to the Russia 2018 title.

Pavard has been at struggling VfB Stuttgart, who are currently third from bottom in Germany’s top flight, since 2016 after he joined from French side Lille for five million euros.

(Source: Goal)

Unified Korea men’s handball team keep rivals guessing at world champs

After a unified Korean women’s ice-hockey team became a feature of last year’s Winter Olympics, a men’s team of North and South Korean players is an unknown factor for Thursday’s opening game of the world handball championships.

A unified Korean team, with four players from the communism-ruled North added to the 16-strong squad of South Korea players, face Germany, the co-hosts alongside Denmark, when the 2019 World Men’s Handball Championships opens in Berlin on Thursday.

The unified Korean women’s ice hockey team was a colorful attraction at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics despite losing all their games and finishing last.

Likewise, the men’s handball team is not expected to survive the group stages at the 2019 finals, contested by 24 teams.

However, the significance of a unified team playing in Germany’s capital, which celebrates the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall this November, is not lost on the Koreans.

“With the fall of the Wall, one went on the path of peace. We want to show, as a unified team, that we Koreans can also follow a similar path,” said the team’s coach Cho Young-shin, a South Korean.

This will be Korea’s debut at a men’s world championships and the opening match is a 14,500-seater sell-out in Berlin with millions expected to tune in on television with



Germany, a handball powerhouse, among the favourites to win a fourth world title.

“This game is steeped in history and will bring a lot of attention to our sport,” beamed Bob Hanning, vice-president of the German Handball Association (DHB).

The Koreans have been granted special permission by the International Handball Federation (IHF) to compete and they are the only team allowed to have 20 in their squad, four more than their rivals.

The idea is the brainchild of IHF presi-

dent Hassan Moustafa, who invited a unified Korean team after South Korea qualified for the world championships by finishing third at the Asian Cup.

■ Breaking the ice

The full Korean team first set eyes on each other just before Christmas on 22 December in Berlin.

“At the first meeting, we were a bit out of touch with one another”, admitted team captain Jung Su-young, but his North Korean team-mate Ri Song Jin said the ice was

Buffon: I suffered with depression, had panic attack at Juventus



Paris Saint-Germain goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon has said he suffered with depression early in his career and once missed a match for Juventus due to a panic attack.

Buffon has enjoyed an incredible career which has so far seen him win 23 major trophies -- including a World Cup -- and he is still fighting to win his first Champions League medal at the age of 40.

But, despite enjoying success from an early age, there have been difficult moments for the ex-Italy international -- in particular during his early period with Juve.

“For a few months, everything just stopped making sense,” Buffon told Vanity Fair. “It seemed like no one cared about me, just the footballer I represented.

“It was like everyone was asking about Buffon and nobody about Gigi. It was a really difficult moment.

“I was 25, riding the wave of success but one day, before a Serie A match, I went to Ivano Bordon, the goalkeeper coach, and told him: ‘Ivano, get [No. 2 goalkeeper Antonio] Chimenti to warm up and play. I’m not feeling up to it.

“I had suffered a panic attack and was in no state to play the match.”

However, Buffon said it was important the situation reached this point as it allowed

him to move forward.

“If I had not gone through this experience, that cloud and that turmoil with other people, I may have never have got out of it,” he said. “I had the clarity of understanding that it was a watershed moment between giving up and confronting those insecurities we all have.

“I was never scared of showing them nor of crying -- something which happens to me and of which I am not at all embarrassed.”

Meanwhile, Buffon also spoke about the racist abuse aimed at Napoli’s Kalidou Koulibaly by Inter Milan fans during a Serie A clash on Dec. 26, and said the situation reflected the social tensions of the country following the recent refugee crisis.

“If a boat goes down outside of Italy and 300 people die, we are all sad and consider adopting some those who are now orphans,” he said. “But if they don’t drown, we complain about 300 immigrants being allowed in and what they’re coming here to do. “It’s difficult to try and contextualise what happened in Milan. Hate is an ill wind regardless of where it came from. Not just in a stadium.

“Because I have the strong suspicion that, in all of this, football is just a pretext.”

(Source: ESPN)

South Africa blame ‘politics’ for humiliating loss to Egypt



As South Africa reeled Wednesday after a humiliating defeat by Egypt in a contest to decide the new 2019 Africa Cup of Nations hosts, the blame game began.

South African football officials said the 16-1 vote in favour of Egypt in Senegal Tuesday was “political” without offering insight.

Confederation of African Football (CAF) president Ahmad Ahmad said Egypt politicians were more enthusiastic than their South African counterparts about the June 15-July 13 event.

A CAF insider told AFP that South Africa have not been forgiven for backing the winning Canada/Mexico/United States 2026 World Cup bid instead of sole rivals Morocco.

Acting South African Football Association chief executive Russell Paul said: “Technically, there is no country in Africa better suited to host the Cup of Nations than South Africa.

“We do not have a fight with Egypt, we have a fight with the way the process unfolded,” he added, referring to the vote being brought forward 24 hours without an explanation.

“A delegation had been prepared for a Wednesday presentation only to find that

broken at an evening team-building event, “since then we are connected by friendship”.

At least one North Korean player will feature in each of their five preliminary round games.

The Koreans are in Group A, alongside reigning world champions France and European powerhouses Russia, Germany and Serbia. The team will play under the blue and white flag showing a unified Korea and are an unknown factor for the Germans, who had problems getting video footage of the North Koreans to analyses.

“They play a fast ball game and are tactically very disciplined. They will be a hard test for us,” said German head coach Christian Prokop.

Goalkeeper Silvio Heinevetter expects a tough afternoon after Germany struggled to beat South Korea four years ago, “it was extremely unpleasant -- these little fast guys are not as bad as you’d think.”

The IHF invited both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and North Korea’s leader Kim Jong Un to the opening match, but neither are expected to attend.

Instead, guests of honor will be Germany’s president Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Thomas Bach, president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a keen observer with North and South Korea having agreed to bid for the 2032 Olympic Games.

(Source: AFP)

Djokovic, Federer, Serena remain favourites to win opening Grand Slam

Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer loom over Melbourne Park for the year’s opening Grand Slam as favourites for the Australian Open as questions remain as to whether one of Generation Next could finally end their stranglehold.

The Serbian world number one and his Swiss opponent have won eight of the nine titles on Rod Laver Arena since 2010 and 11 of the last 13 on the bright blue courts in central Melbourne.

Both have six titles each, and are seeking to break a three-way tie for the most victories with Australia’s Roy Emerson.

While Federer has won the tournament for the last two years, Djokovic’s history in Australia and rediscovery of his form last year means the world number one will be the man to beat.

The 31-year-old went into a bewildering slump in mid-2016 that only ended when he won Wimbledon last year before he went on to claim his third U.S. Open crown and move to 14 Grand Slam titles, three behind Rafa Nadal.

The Spanish world number two, however, is battling another leg injury that forced him out of the Brisbane International last week and it is apparent that hard courts are putting undue stress on the 32-year-old’s body.

He retired in the quarter-finals against Marin Cilic last year in Melbourne and suffered yet another knee injury that forced him out of the U.S. Open semi-finals before he had ankle surgery in November.

Federer, however, continues to defy the odds at 37 and



prepared for his title defence with some convincing performances in the Hopman Cup in Perth last week.

The 20-times Grand Slam winner’s victories over Greece’s world number 15 Stefanos Tsitsipas and world number four Alexander Zverev prompted the German to playfully quip that he was tired of Federer winning everything.

“I mean, you’re 30-whatever. Why? Just why?”, Zverev asked jokingly of Federer at the Hopman Cup trophy presentation.

The 21-year-old Zverev appears the most likely of the

younger generation hoping to end the world’s top three’s domination of Grand Slams, having beaten Federer and Djokovic at the ATP Tour Finals in London last November.

While others in ‘Generation Next’ like Austria’s Dominic Thiem and the 22-year-old Russians Karen Khachanov and Daniil Medvedev could cause upsets, it is debateable whether they can win seven matches over 14 days.

Two of the older generation who have shown they do have that ability -- Britain’s Andy Murray and Switzerland’s Stan Wawrinka -- could be dangerous floaters in the draw.

Murray, a five-time finalist at Melbourne Park, spent most of last year recuperating from hip surgery and looked rusty last week in Brisbane but declared himself pain free.

Wawrinka, the 2014 champion, is also coming back from knee surgery and a back injury in the second half of 2018, but typically flies under the radar through Grand Slams.

The women’s draw looks more open even with Serena Williams, the most dominant force in the sport, back and chasing a 24th grand slam singles title to tie Margaret Court’s all-time record.

The American was eight weeks pregnant when she won her 23rd title at Melbourne Park in 2017 and returned to action last year where she reached finals at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. Williams enters the year’s first Grand Slam ranked 16th but she still remains the favourite in Melbourne even if she lost to Naomi Osaka in the Flushing Meadows final.

(Source: Reuters)



S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Iran national football team are sweating on star man Alireza Jahanbakhsh's fitness in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

Jahanbakhsh has been added to the team training and will likely be fit for Team Melli's next match.

He told reporters his recovery process is going well and raised hopes that he will be fit for Vietnam's clash.

Albion's record signing, who sustained hamstring damage in the 3-1 defeat at Everton in October, missed Iran's opening match against Yemen.

Team Melli have been scheduled to meet Vietnam in Group D of the competition at the Al Nahyan Stadium in Abu Dhabi on Saturday.

Iran sit top of the table after beating Yemen 5-0 in their opener on Monday.

Iraq are second thanks to a 3-2 late win over Vietnam.

Iran last won the Cup in 1976 and the Persians are looking forward to end their 43-year trophy drought in the UAE.

The 2019 AFC Asian Cup is being held in the UAE from Jan. 5 to Feb. 1.

A total of 24 teams are separated into six major groups with four team members per group.

The significant nations included in the AFC Asian Cup 2019 are India, United Arab Emirates, South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain, Vietnam, Oman, Lebanon, China & many more.



Japan fight back to survive Turkmenistan scare



Japan produced a stirring second-half fightback to ensure they got their AFC Asian Cup 2019 Group F campaign off to a winning start by beating Turkmenistan 3-2 on Wednesday.

It initially looked as though an upset was on cards at the Al Nahyan Stadium as the Samurai Blue were made to pay for sluggish start to the contest in the 26th minute.

There appeared to be no apparent danger when Arslanmyrat Amanow picked up possession 30 yards out from goal down the left.

Gonda did however make amends ten minutes later with a smart save to deny Ahmet Atayev, after the opposition midfielder had latched onto a Vahyt Orazsahedov layoff and fired away a snapshot.

Only five days old, the Asian Cup has already produced its fair share of shocks and upsets and it was beginning to look like another would be on the cards.

However, just 11 minutes into the second half, the Japanese responded when Genki Haraguchi's drilled pass from the left found Yuya Osako and he brilliantly took it into his stride, sold a dummy to a defender before sending a shot nestling into the bottom corner.

Right on the hour mark, Japan found

themselves ahead with Osako on target once more although most of the work was done by Yuto Nagatomo, who did well to keep the ball alive down as he ghosted inside Mekan Saparov and lifted a cross over the opposition goalkeeper to leave his striker with a simple tap-in.

A third goal arrived for the Samurai Blue in the 71st minute and this time it was Osako's turn to play his part in the build-up, as he linked up with Takumi Minamino to release Ritsu Doan.

The Groningen starlet cleverly got onto his preferred left foot with a neat swivel and create just enough space to clip a neat effort past Mammet Orazmuhammedov with the help of a deflection.

There was still time for one final twist of the tale when Japan sloppily gave away possession inside their area and allowed Altymyrat Annadurdyev to race through on goal, where he was unceremoniously brought down inside the box by Gonda.

Ahmet Atayev made no mistake in emphatically converting from the spot but it ultimately proved to be a consolation, as Japan held out for their first win of Asian Cup 2019.

(Source: Fox Sports Asia)

Uzbekistan score late winner to pick up huge win against Oman



Uzbekistan took home all three points after they scored a late winner through Eldor Shomurodov, handing the White Wolves a crucial victory at the AFC Asian Cup 2019.

The game burst into life in the second half, but the first half presented chances for Oman, who were denied by the expertise and experience of Uzbekistan's veteran goalkeeper Ignatyi Nesterov.

The keeper made one sensational save to deny Oman in the first period, and that gave the White Wolves the confidence to head forward and make an attack of their own.

One such attack from the Uzbekis resulted in a free-kick, but what transpired next was a touch of class from who else but Odil Ahmedov. The skipper struck a sweet set piece past Faiyz Al Rusheidi, and gave his nation an unlikely lead.

Despite all the pressure, Oman were unable to score in the first half, but that all changed in the second forty-five minutes.

The Reds continued their assault on the Uzbeki goal, and Ignatyi Nesterov was there again for the large part to ensure his team keep the lead, but a smart substitution resulted in the introduction of Muhsen Al Ghassani.

The super sub came up with the goods for his nation, making a good run and calmly slotting the ball past Nesterov to send the Omani fans into delirium.

That goal from Oman prompted changes from the Uzbekistan camp, and young Eldor Shomurodov was the player who won it from his team in the 86th minute as an unlikely attack from the White Wolves saw the youngster in space.

His finish was that of a seasoned campaigner, slotting home past a shell-shocked Faiyz, making it 2-1 to Uzbekistan.

The game saw further late action after Oman appealed for what could have been a penalty, but the appeals were waived off by the referee who saw nothing wrong. As the game neared a close, Oman found themselves attacking again, but last man Egor Krimets would have none of it, blatantly pulling back the opposition and giving a foul away.

It turned out to be a red card offence, but the defender took one for the team and ensured his team hold on for a famous win.

Uzbekistan held on in the end, but it was certainly a lucky escape. With tougher opposition to come, it will be interesting to see how this particular group shapes up.

(Source: Fox Sports Asia)

Katanec hails Tareq impact following late win

Head coach Srecko Katanec has revealed his delight after Humam Tareq came off the bench to help inspire Iraq to a vital 3-2 win over Vietnam in Group D of the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 on Tuesday.

Originally named as a substitute, the livewire Tareq was brought on in the 58th minute and duly netted a vital equalizer just two minutes later courtesy of a thunderous finish.

With the Esteghlal star to the fore, Iraq pressed for a winner and their persistence paid handsome dividends when Ali Adnan converted a last gasp free-kick to seal all three points for the Lions of Mesopotamia.

"Honestly, it was entirely my mistake that I put him [Tareq] on the bench and he was undoubtedly the key player," a relieved Katanec said of the 22-year-old.

"He gave us energy and he scored the equalizer. He did everything. Every team needs a player like this, without energy you have nothing.

"In the first half we were lacking in just that and did not have one player who was willing to push and push. His attitude was excellent."

The victory saw Iraq go second in the group behind the Islamic Republic of Iran, although Katanec, with one eye already on Saturday's fixture against Yemen, was quick to declare that his side must improve if they are to stand



any chance of progressing further in the tournament they won in 2007.

"I expected a tough and very difficult match, and in the first half we played badly, but after the break I believe we were the better team," he explained.

"It is very important to get three points in the [group stage] of this tournament. It was tough at times, and I made some mistakes and I learned a lot from this game, but I know we will develop as the competition goes on.

"If I am honest though, we also need to be even better than we were in the second half which was obviously better than the first. We have many things to improve and I hope our second game will be better. I saw today who can and

Saudi Arabia delight Pizzi

Dubai: Head coach Juan Antonio Pizzi was more than satisfied with his side's performance in their 4-0 win over DPR Korea in their AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 Group E opener on Tuesday, attributing the convincing victory to their playstyle.

"We are so happy to start the tournament this way and to win this game, especially with the number of goals we scored," said Pizzi.

"What was most important was that we implemented our own style of play today. We will follow the same ambition for the coming matches."

Two goals in each half from four different goalscorers sealed Saudi Arabia the three points ahead of matches against Lebanon and Qatar.

"I'm personally very happy because normally the first game of the tournament there are nervous moments, especially when we knew Australia lost their opening game, and we didn't want that to happen to us.

"I'm so happy and, hopefully, we will continue with the same level throughout the tournament."

Pizzi took charge of the Green Falcons in

late 2017, with the aim of guiding the West Asians in the 2018 FIFA World Cup campaign.

While he admits his team have to improve offensively, the 50-year-old Spaniard was also quick to hail his players determination to excel since Russia 2018.

"There is no doubt that the time that you spend with a team allows you to gain confidence of the players, but we also noticed our players are ready to learn and ready to do what we ask as technical staff."

"The have a high commitment, even the new players, and day after day, they became

more consistent.

"After our first loss in the World Cup in 2018, I think the team understood perfectly that they had to do everything, to be organized, to obey orders in order to be a better team.

"It is possible that we might lose against other opponents, but the most important thing is that this is the plan we will follow into the next phase."

As for DPR Korea, the defeat was a repeat of their 2015 AFC Asian Cup campaign, where they lost 4-1 to the Saudis.

(Source: the-afc)

Iranian weightlifter Moradi nominated for lifter of the year

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Sohrab Moradi from Iran has been nominated for the Best Male Lifter in 2018 by the International Weightlifting Federation.

The Iranian weightlifter has had an incredible 2018 competitive season. In August, he blew the weightlifting community's mind with his 189kg world record snatch in the -94kg weight class. Then in November at the IWF World Championships, Moradi swept gold and set three world records in the brand new -96kg weight class.



Moradi must vie with Indonesian Eko Yuli Irawan (61kg), Xiaojun Liu from China (81kg), Armenian Simon Martirosyan (109kg) and Lasha Talakhadze from Georgia (+109kg).

The deadline to register to vote is Jan. 31.

The Lifter of the Year election was initiated by the late Jenó Boskócs (Hungarian), the founding Editor-in-Chief of the magazine. After his death in 2010, World Weightlifting created a Challenge Trophy in Memoriam Jenó Boskócs.

The same Trophy – one for Men, one for Women – has been awarded annually ever since to the Best Male and Best Female Weightlifter of the World. Every year, the new names are engraved on the Trophies.

Igor Kolakovic returns to Iran

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Montenegrin coach Igor Kolakovic held a meeting with Iran Volleyball Federation acting president Afshin Davari on Wednesday.

The 54-year-old coach failed to meet expectations in the 2018 FIVB Volleyball Men's World Championship held in September. Under guidance of Kolakovic, Team Melli finished in 13th place out of 24 teams.

Now, Kolakovic has returned to Iran to negotiate with the country's federation about his future.

He held a meeting with Davari at the federation's headquarters amid speculation surrounding his future

Iran to meet Australia in AFC U-16 Women's C'ship qualification opener

IRNA — Iran will start the AFC U-16 Women's Championship qualification with a match against Australia on March 3.

The match has been scheduled to take place at the New Laos National Stadium in Vientiane, Laos.

Iran will face Laos and Vietnam on March 5 and 7 respectively in Group A.

Group B consists of China, the Philippines, Bangladesh and host Myanmar.

The group winners and runners up will qualify for the 2019 AFC U-16 Women's Championship, to be held in Thailand next September.

North Korea, South Korea, and Japan as the top three teams of the 2017 AFC U-16 Women's Championship and host Thailand have automatically qualified for the final tournament

Bayern Munich coach Kovac meets Branko Ivankovic

TASNIM — Bayern Munich coach Niko Kovac met his old tutor Branko Ivankovic in Doha, Qatar.

Bayern Munich and Persepolis are holding training camp in their winter break at the Aspire Academy in Doha.

Kovac was a member of Croatia national football team at the 1998 FIFA World Cup qualifications, but missed the finals in France because he did not fully recover from injury until the beginning of the preparations for the tournament.

Ivankovic was part of the competition's eventual bronze medalist as assistant coach.

Shevchuk named Best Powerlifter of 2018, Siamand comes third

Mariana Shevchuk has been chosen as 'Best Powerlifter of 2018' by public vote in a close contest ahead of Jhon Castaneda, Siamand Rahman and Sherif Osman.

The 22-year-old Ukrainian broke the women's up to 55kg world record to win gold at the Berck-sur-Mer 2018 European Open Championships.

The vote was carried out on World Para Powerlifting's Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, with Shevchuk collecting the most combined votes across all social media pages.

Castaneda received massive support from his Colombian fans to end in second place. The 38-year-old won the men's over 107kg continental title with an Americas record lift of 212kg on home soil in Bogota.

Iran's Siamand Rahman ended third overall. The world's strongest Paralympian comfortably won the men's over 107kg with a 285kg lift at the 2018 Asia-Oceania Championships.

Egypt's Sherif Osman, who successfully defended the continental title in Algeria with a 206kg lift in the men's up to 59kg, finished fourth.

(Source: Paralympic.org)

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■ Managing Director: Ali Asgari
■ Editor-in-Chief: Mohammad Ghaderi

» Editorial Dept.: Fax: (+98 21) 88808214 — 88808895
editor@tehrantimes.com
» Switchboard Operator: Tel: (+98 21) 43051000
» Advertisements Dept.: Telefax: (+98 21) 43051450
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Zip Code: 1599814713



GUIDE TO
SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Guide to spiritual awakening
God must be thanked for every blessing, and
he who is thankful, receives more blessings,
and he who neglects it, endangers that
blessing and may soon lose it. *Imam Ali (AS)*

“The End of the World” set for Jan. 12

A R T **TEHRAN** — A reading of French playwright Jean-Luc Lagarce's 1990 play “Only the End of the World” will be performed at the Qashqai Hall of Tehran's City Theater Complex on Saturday.



A poster for the reading performance of French writer Jean-Luc Lagarce's play “Only the End of the World”.

Ziba Khadem, the translator of the play, will direct the reading performance, which will be followed by a review session by scholars Kamran Sepehran and Mohammadreza Khaki.

The play is about Luis, a man in his forties, who decides to visit his family after a long absence to inform them that he is dying.

“The Invention of the Jewish People” appears in Iranian bookstores

A R T **TEHRAN** — Israeli professor of history Shlomo Sand's 2008 book “The Invention of the Jewish People” has recently been published in Persian by Now Publications in Tehran.

Translated by Ahad Aliqolian, the book is a study of the historiography of the Jewish people.



Copies of the Persian version of Shlomo Sand's “The Invention of the Jewish People” are seen in the photo.

Sand tries to find historical evidence of the forcible exile of Jews from the area now bordered by modern Israel, and its surrounding regions at the study but as he couldn't find any proof, he concludes that the expulsion simply did not happen and no one exiled the Jewish people from the region, and therefore the Jewish diaspora is a modern invention.

“Katyusha” to go on screen at Rajasthan film festival

A R T **TEHRAN** — Iranian director Ali Atshani's comedy “Katyusha” will go on screen at the 5th Rajasthan International Film Festival (RIFF) in Jaipur, India.



Ahmad Mehranfar (L) and Hadi Hejazifar act in a scene from “Katyusha” by Ali Atshani.

The film is about a middle-aged religious man, Khalil, who is supposed to take care of a spoiled son of a wealthy man as his bodyguard for a number of days. The gap between their social levels and worldviews creates some problems.

The festival will run from January 19 to 23.

“Ganjur” to celebrate centenary of children’s theater in Iran

A R T **TEHRAN** — The cast and crew members of “Mystery of Ganjur”, a play on stage at the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA), plan to mark on Saturday 100 years since early modern children's theatrical performances were staged by Jabbar Baghcheban in Iran.

Veteran children's theater experts, including Davud Kianian, Hassan Dadashgar and Adel Bozdudeh, are expected to attend the celebration.

A group of labor children have also been invited to attend the event, which will be followed by cutting the cake for 100 years of Iranian children's theater.

The guests are also scheduled to visit an exhibition of puppets created by students of veteran puppet maker Homa Jeddikar.

The celebration will come to an end with a performance of “Mystery of Ganjur” from directors Hani Hosseini and Marzieh Naderi.

The story of the play is set in an unknown country where Palasht, the monster of evil, robs the people of all their happiness and they gradually forget happiness. However, Ganjur, a boy that lives with Simorgh, a mystical bird in Iranian mythology, decides to fight the monster to bring back happiness. But he needs the people to help him in this struggle.



Actor and director Mikail Shahrestani rehearses for “The Street Performer of Manhattan” in an undated photo. (Ti-wall/Babak Haqqi)

Jordan Peele’s “Us” to premiere as opening film at SXSW

NEW YORK (AP) — Jordan Peele's “Us,” his anticipated follow-up to “Get Out,” will make its world premiere at the South by Southwest Film Festival.

SXSW announced Tuesday that “Us” will open the 26th edition of the Austin, Texas, festival on March 8. Like Peele's “Get Out,” “Us” is a socially minded horror thriller.

The film stars Lupita Nyong'o as a woman returning to her beachside childhood home with her husband and two

children. On the vacation, an unresolved trauma from her past is unearthed leading to an eerie confrontation for the family with doppelgangers of themselves.

“Us” will be released March 22 by Universal Pictures. Peele also produces along with Jason Blum of Blumhouse Productions. Co-stars include Winston Duke, Elisabeth Moss and Tim Heidecker.

SXSW runs March 8-17.

Margot Robbie to play Barbie in doll’s first live-action film

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) — Australian actress Margot Robbie is to play Barbie in the first live-action feature movie about the iconic and controversial doll, who has enjoyed multiple careers in her 60-year lifetime.

Toymaker Mattel and movie studio Warner Bros on Tuesday announced they were partnering to make the film, which will star the Oscar-nominated actress. Robbie, 28, will also co-produce the film, the companies said in a statement.

No plot, title or release date was announced for the film, which comes 60 years after the adult-figured Barbie fashion doll was launched in March 1959.

Robbie, who was Oscar-nominated for her starring role in the 2017 ice-skating movie “I, Tonya” and who appeared in the 2016 superhero movie “Suicide Squad,” said she hoped the film would “have a tremendously positive impact on children and audiences worldwide.”

“Barbie has empowered kids to imagine themselves in aspirational roles from a princess to president,” the actress said in a statement.

Barbie has adopted more than 200 careers in her lifetime, including robotics engineer, astronaut and teacher.

She is the best-known doll in the world and a cultural icon celebrated



This combination photo shows actress Margot Robbie and Barbie. (Reuters/Phil Noble/Mattel)

by the likes of Andy Warhol, the Paris Louvre museum, and the 1997 satirical song “Barbie Girl” by Scandinavian pop group Aqua.

But critics said her curvy body promoted an unrealistic image for young girls, and sales began dropping in 2014, leading California-based Mattel to add a wider variety of skin tones, body shapes, hijab-wearing dolls and science kits to make the products more educational.

The live-action Barbie film is the first venture from the recently established Mattel Films unit set up in September to develop the franchise of Barbie and other toys, such as Hot Wheels and American Girl.

‘I’m over it:’ Comedian Kevin Hart rules out hosting the Oscars

NEW YORK (Reuters) — The actor Kevin Hart ruled out hosting this year's Oscars because he no longer had enough time to prepare for the show, days after saying he was evaluating his December decision to step down over criticism of past homophobic comments.

He told ABC that he was no longer willing to discuss the anti-gay comments he had made on Twitter in 2010 and 2011, which caused the uproar that led him to step down as host, saying his previous explanations and apology were sufficient.

“I’m over it,” he said repeatedly to almost every question on the topic during a sometimes testy interview on ABC's “Good Morning America.”

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences named Hart as Oscars host in December, but he stepped down soon after amid criticism of his past tweets.

Last week, Hart had said he was re-evaluating that decision after the openly-gay comedian Ellen DeGeneres, a past Oscars host, said she had called the Academy to advocate for Hart. By Wednesday, the evaluation appeared to be over.



Cast member Kevin Hart poses at the premiere for “Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle” in Los Angeles, California, U.S., December 11, 2017. (Reuters/Mario Anzuoni)

“No, I’m not hosting the Oscars this year,” he said in an ABC interview. “It’s not in God’s plan right now.” He said



A poster for “Mystery of Ganjur” by Hani Hosseini and Marzieh Naderi.

“The Street Performer of Manhattan” explores impacts of systemic cultural dysfunction

A R T **TEHRAN** — “The Street Performer of Manhattan” came to a Tehran theater on Wednesday to demonstrate the devastating effects of a cultural system dysfunction.

Mikail Shahrestani is the actor and director of the monolog that he has co-written with Nima Mehr.

“The play is about a retired actor who has been badly treated in his society, which is suffering from systemic cultural dysfunction that has not allowed him to demonstrate his inner values,” Shahrestani told the Persian service of MNA on Wednesday.

“He has always been dreaming of performing Shakespeare's plays, but now he has to record his performances on the streets to send to his daughter to convince her to visit him after 20 years,” he added.

The play also includes soliloquies of main characters in Shakespeare's “Macbeth,” “Hamlet,” “Othello,” “King Lear,” “Julius Caesar” and “The Merchant of Venice.”

“Playing the roles of ten characters makes things difficult for me because I have to change my costume for each character almost instantly, but there are some people present backstage to help me with this,” Shahrestani said.

“I hope everything will go well during all performances, because any dissonance would ruin the whole work,” he mentioned.

Shahrestani has previously performed Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's “Partners in Crime”, Tennessee Williams' “The Glass Menagerie”, Anton Chekhov's “Uncle Vanya” and many other plays by outstanding playwrights in the world.



In this March 4, 2018 file photo, Jordan Peele arrives in Los Angeles. (Richard Shotwell/Invision/AP, File)

Tom Hanks to present SAG’s lifetime award to Alan Alda

NEW YORK (AP) — One of America's sweethearts hands the torch to another when Tom Hanks presents Alan Alda with a lifetime achievement award at the upcoming Screen Actors Guild Award ceremony.

The 82-year-old Alda, a Golden Globe and Emmy-winner, will become the 55th recipient of the annual award given to an actor who fosters the “finest ideals of the acting profession.” Hanks will hand it to him in a Jan. 27 ceremony.

“I’m so thrilled that Tom agreed to that. I had no idea they were even asking him. And it’s so generous of him,” Alda told The Associated Press.

Alda and Hanks worked together on the film “Bridge of Spies,” and Alda said they “have run into each other casually over the years at awards ceremonies and on airplanes and things like that. So, I remember him when he was just a kid.”

Throughout a career that has spanned seven decades, Alda has appeared in “The West Wing,” “The Aviator” and “Manhattan Murder Mystery,” but is perhaps best known for his role as Hawkeye Pierce in the television series “M(asterisk)A(sterisk)S(asterisk)H.” Alda has won six Emmy Awards and was also nominated for an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in 2004 for his role in “The Aviator.”

Alda has also been involved in numerous



In this Oct. 25, 2018 photo, actor Alan Alda poses for a portrait in New York. (Matt Licari/Invision/AP)

charities and organizations that have supported children's causes, women's issues and the sciences. The latter inspired the formation of the Alan Alda Center for Communicative Science at Stony Brook University in New York.

That combined with his affable personality has earned Alda his “nice guy” reputation over the years. He jokes that the “niceness” compensates for a profession that is not always viewed kindly.

“It’s a counterbalance, I guess, to the rowdy reputation that a lot of actors have had over the last couple of hundred years, including the guy who shot Lincoln. So it’s good to balance the reputations of the acting profession,” Alda said.

he could not rule out hosting in future years.

Hart, known for his stand-up comedy and roles in films including “Ride Along,” said he would not have enough time ahead of the Feb. 24 ceremony in Los Angeles to prepare to do a professional job: “If I do something I want to give it my all.”

The Academy, which hands out the Oscar awards, has not announced a replacement host.

In one of his old Twitter posts, Hart had described an actor's picture as a “gay billboard for AIDS.” In another, he said if his son were to play with a doll's house, he would break it over the boy's head and tell him to stop being gay.

Hart apologized in December for “insensitive words from my past” and told DeGeneres last week in an interview on her talk show that he does not “have a homophobic bone in my body.”

Pressed repeatedly in Monday's ABC interview to elaborate on those comments, Hart declined.

“I’ve said everything I can possibly say and I’m over it.”