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Director Mohammad-Taqi Rahmati holds the Golden Lantern for Best Documentary on Economic War for his “In the Name of Father” at the Ammar festival.

Rouhani promises space rocket launches in weeks

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — President Hassan Rouhani said on Thursday that domestically-manufactured rockets will carry two new satellites into orbit in the coming weeks. Rouhani made the remarks during a ceremony held to commemorate the death of former president and chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in Tehran on Thursday. Rouhani said, “Missiles are our de-

fensive tool and we are proud of it.” He added, “In the coming weeks, we will send two new satellites into space using our domestically-built rockets.” He also described Iran’s defense power and technology achievements as relics of Ayatollah Rafsanjani. Last November, Deputy Defense Minister General Qassem Taghizadeh announced that Iran would launch three satellites into space “on various orbits” within a few months. **→2**

Iran, Iraq stress expansion of energy ties

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh and his Iraqi counterpart Thamer Ghadhbhan met on Thursday to discuss expansion of bilateral ties in energy sector. Heading a high-ranking delegation, Zanganeh was welcomed by Ghadhbhan in Baghdad, Shana reported. Speaking in a press conference after the meeting between the two countries’

officials, Iranian minister underlined the great potentials for expansion of bilateral relations especially in energy sector. Zanganeh also expressed hope that the meeting and other talks between the two sides will advance Iran-Iraq cooperation in every field. He further noted that Iran has enough reserves of gas to increase its exports to Iraq. **→4**

U.S.: Syria withdrawal has begun; Russia doubtful

The United States says it has begun the process of withdrawing from Syria but Russia cast doubt on the claim on Friday, saying it thinks Washington wants to stay in the country. The United States President Donald Trump last month unexpectedly announced a U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria, with the U.S. military spokesman Colonel Sean Ryan an-

nouncing on Friday that the pullout had begun. The U.S. “has begun the process of our deliberate withdrawal from Syria. Out of concern for operational security, we will not discuss specific timelines, locations or troop movements,” he said. Ryan’s announcement came a day after a U.S. military official said the United States had removed some equipment from Syria. **→13**



PERSPECTIVE
Javad Heirannia
political analyst

Reasons behind the eventual withdrawal of Kuwait from PGCC

After several years since the beginning of Syria crisis, the Persian Gulf Arab states are changing their policies towards this country, and following the move of UAE and Bahrain, Kuwait will soon expand its relations with Syria.

Along with this policy change, the Arab leaders of Persian Gulf countries are warming up their ties with Israel.

The Arab-Israel relations get closer but Kuwait does not agree with this policy and intends to maintain its foreign policy outside Israeli influence, but it’s possible as a result Kuwait might be separated from the PGCC.

In this regard, it should be noted that the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council was an organization that was set up in 1981 to control Iran and was attempting to take steps to control Iraq, too.

Alongside these issues, the international and regional powers’ role in influencing these countries also reflects the lack of trust between the PGCC countries. For instance, while Qatar hosts a Turkish military base, this is seen as a threat to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain.

A recent international summit was held in Doha, Qatar, by high-profile figures, while earlier the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh took place with the absence of Qatar, Oman and the UAE’s leaders.

By holding this important summit and gathering outstanding international figures from Iran, Turkey and Russia, Qatar has shown that it could be more widely recognized in the international arena despite the hostile actions of the Persian Gulf Arabs states with the Doha blockade.

On December 12, 2019, Riyadh hosted the first Arab-African conference of foreign ministers of six countries bordering the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, a strategic area vital to global shipping.

During the summit an agreement was made on the establishment of a legal regime for the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden regime was to support world trade, international shipping lanes, regional stability and the investment and development of the member states. The plan, proposed by the King of Saudi Arabia, will be implemented in pursuit of security and stability in the region. **→7**

Jaberi Ansari discusses Syria with Russian military, diplomatic officials

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Hossein Jaberi Ansari, a senior advisor to the Iranian foreign minister for political affairs, held meetings with a number of Russian officials in Moscow on Thursday, discussing the latest developments surrounding Syria.

He held separate meetings with Russian Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Vasilyevich Fomin, Middle East director Sergei Vershinin, and Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, who is also President Vladimir Putin’s special envoy for Middle East affairs.

The planned withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria has created a new situation in the region. Turkish Foreign Minister said Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Wednesday that 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 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,” Cavusoglu stated, according to RT.

Cavusoglu visited Moscow late in December to discuss the situation in Syria. On Wednesday, he mulled bilateral talks between Turkey and Iran, giving no timeframe, however.

At the same time, Cavusoglu revealed that a summit involving the presidents of Turkey, Russia and Iran is being prepared in Moscow. The last meeting between the three presidents was held in Tehran on Sept. 7 **→2**

The first attack of the 2019 anti-aggressor drones

By Farzad Farhadi

TEHRAN — As UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths continues Track II efforts to lay the foundation for peace-building in Yemen, the Yemeni army and popular committees report the attack on the cease-fire by the invader. Fighting broke out in Al-Hudaydah and other fronts in Yemen a day after the ceasefire agreement, and the Yemeni army and popular committees repelled successive raids of mercenaries and invaders.

What is remarkable on the battlefield is the

ever-increasing power of the Yemeni drones and missiles. So far, dozens of missiles have been fired at the military, airports, and oil facilities of Saudi Arabia by the Yemeni army and popular committees. The missiles are now more accurate than ever and hit targets with high precision.

Therefore, despite the Patriot missile defense system in Saudi Arabia, the Saudis have begun efforts to take ownership of the Russia’s S400 air defense system.

The spokesman of Yemen’s Houthi Ansarullah

A clear signal for the German chancellor

By Hanif Ghaffari

TEHRAN — It’s a difficult time for the Chancellor of Germany! She had to pass the power inside the Christian Democrat Party to her rival, Kramp-Karrenbauer. In a conference, Karenbauer rejected claims that she was the “mini Merkel”.

“People consider me a ‘mini,’ a copy, a simple ‘more of the same,’ but I can tell you that I stand

here as my own person, just as life has shaped me and of that I am proud,” she said.

Angela Merkel has announced that she will step down of power in 2021, but the polls conducted in Germany has intensively worried her. The results of these polls indicate that the total popularity of the two traditional German parties, the coalition of the Christian and Social

Democrats, have fallen below 50%. This suggests the unpopularity of the coalition government among the German citizens. Merkel now has to run the weak coalition government until 2021!

Many analysts of Europe’s affairs believe that Merkel’s power is actually over. The Chancellor of Germany is no longer the symbol of power in the United Europe. **→7**



ARTICLE
Martin Love
Political analyst from North Carolina

The U.S. wants to “incite” Iranians and this must be rejected

After a while a rational person begins to think Arabs, or at least Arab “leaders”, bar a handful of reasonably sane souls that includes Syria’s Assad and some others probably in Iraq and Lebanon, maybe in Kuwait and Qatar and even Yemen (it’s difficult to say, much less name names) are just flat stupid – especially when compared with most Iranians whatever their posture is towards the rule of Shia Muslim authorities in the Islamic Republic.

Outstanding among the stupid (and corrupt) has to be Mahmoud Abbas as self-appointed spokesperson and leader of Palestinians. He has done NOTHING for his people west of the Jordan, it appears, for decades. Arafat at least tried. The Israelis make life ever more difficult for Holy Land natives, ethnic cleansing continues unabated, colonial Zionist “settlements” continue to sprout like weeds on stolen land, etcetera, in an area now where Arabs outnumber Jews if one includes Gazans. But this is an old story.

The U.S. has lately been trying to cobble together what’s been termed an “Arab NATO” to confront and weaken Iran. This idea is somewhat analogous to NATO itself where a host of various countries within NATO at U.S. urgings portray a larger country by land mass, Russia, as some kind of aggressive demon aiming to expand and attack Europe when in fact Russia has no such aims but its own defense.

Any “Arab NATO” collection of countries would confront a much larger country by geographic size, Iran, similarly and for the same false reasons, one must suppose. And Iran clearly has no aggressive aims but it does intend to defend itself. What to make of the Arab NATO concept?

Well, one thing seems indisputable. That there is nothing benign about U.S. intentions, and it’s all about dividing the Muslim world (as usual) on the back of a selfish imperialistic desire to augment U.S. presence and control in the Middle East. John Bolton, who has influenced Trump to delay any pull out of U.S. troops from Syria, talks about creating “a more vibrant and secure” Middle East (with the downfall of the Islamic Republic). **→7**



Iran holds aerial drill, tests Qassed smart bombs

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iran held a massive aerial drill in central province of Isfahan on Friday, targeting various positions with domestically made missiles and smart bombs.

During the operational stage on Friday morning, the F-4 Phantom fighter jets fired Maverick tactical air-to-ground missiles and Qassed smart bombs, Tasnim news agency reported.

The two-day drill, started on Thursday, codenamed Fadayeeyan Harim Velayat 8.

According to Press TV, laser-guided, anti-radar and thermal missiles as well as ultralight aircraft were also tested during the maneuvers attended by all Iranian air force bases. **→2**

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

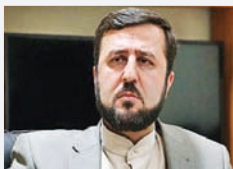


**Zarif on Pompeo:
U.S. brings chaos
wherever it
interferes**

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has mocked U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's speech in which he said "when America retreats, chaos follows," by asserting that the opposite was true.

"Whenever/wherever US interferes, chaos, repression and resentment follow," Zarif wrote on Twitter on Thursday.

"The day Iran mimics US clients & @SecPompeo's 'human rights models' — be it the Shah or current butchers — to become a 'normal' country is the day hell freezes over. Best for the US to just get over loss of Iran."



**Europe a 'safe
heaven' for
terrorists, Iran
says**

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Kazem Gharibabadi, the Iranian ambassador to the Vienna-based international organizations, has said that Europe has turned into a "safe heaven" for terrorists of the Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO/MEK).

It is unacceptable to criticize Iran and sanction Iranians while Europe has turned into a "safe heaven" for terrorists of the MKO, he tweeted on Thursday.

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 in Denmark.



**'Washington's
extremist
policies harming
Americans'**

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said on Friday that the Trump administration's extremist approaches is hurting the American people.

"The U.S., especially its current extremist regime, has chosen a path, exercising hostility towards the Iranian people and opposing all its former governments' actions, that has no benefit for the Americans," the spokesman remarked.

During his speech at the American University in Cairo on Thursday, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo rebuked Obama's administration policies towards Iran and called for an end to Middle East rivalries to roll back Tehran's influence.



**'Sheltering
terrorists no
example of political
freedom in EU'**

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Tehran's ambassador to the UK has lambasted the European states for sheltering anti-Iran terrorist groups, saying giving freedom of activity to notorious outfits does not constitute an example of political freedom.

Hamid Baedinejad made the comments in a post on his Twitter account on Wednesday in reaction to the European Union's recent move to blacklist two Iranians and a department of the Intelligence Ministry over what it calls links to "foiled attacks" in Europe.

Baedinejad complained that Europe has turned into a shelter for terrorist groups such as the Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO/MEK).

"Unfortunately, European countries have become a safe haven and a shelter not only for the MKO, but also for representatives of new terrorist and separatist groups (such as Al-Ahvaziya) that are openly pursuing Iran's disintegration," he said.



**Iran dismisses
reports U.S. citizen
held in suboptimal
condition**

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iran has dismissed as "lies" reports by U.S. media outlets claiming that an American citizen recently arrested in Iran is being held in suboptimal conditions.

"An American citizen named Michael White was arrested in the city of Mashhad a while ago and the American Interests Section in Tehran was informed in the first days" since his arrest, Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi told reporters on Wednesday.

Qassemi said, "We strongly reject such untrue and false reports."

On Tuesday, CBS News claimed the 46-year-old had been in detention since last summer and "was suffering psychologically and was being held in a ward with dangerous criminals."

This is while a U.S. State Department official confirmed that it had been informed of White's arrest but told the Times "we have no additional information to provide at this time."



**U.S. to host
Iran-focused
summit next
month: Pompeo**

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — The United States plans to host a global summit focused on the Middle East, particularly Iran, next month in Poland, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Fox News in a report published on Friday, Reuters reported.

In an interview with the news network, Pompeo said the international gathering would be held Feb. 13 to Feb. 14 in Poland to "focus on Middle East stability and peace and freedom and security here in this region, and that includes an important element of making sure that Iran is not a destabilizing influence".

Iran urges Netherlands to protect diplomats' security after attack by Al-Ahvaziya group

Diplomat criticizes EU for harboring terrorists



"While Westerners act on the basis of unproven probabilities & fictitious assumptions, they easily ignore the obvious realities," Iran's ambassador to The Hague says.

summer, they held their held their annual forum in Paris with the presence of Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani, calling for regime change in Iran.

In a hostile move on Wednesday, the European Council said that it had added two Iranian individuals and the Directorate for Internal Security of the Iranian Intelligence Ministry to the EU's "terrorist list" and froze their funds and other financial assets.

"These listings have been adopted by the

Council as part of its response to recent foiled attacks on the European soil," it added.

On Tuesday, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif slammed the EU sanctions and said they would "not absolve Europe of responsibility for harboring terrorists."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi also called the EU's blacklist decision "irrational" and "odd" and said the move showed the European countries' "dishonesty"

in fighting terror.

The European Council press release came one day after Danish Foreign Minister Anders Samuelsen said that the EU had agreed to enact sanctions against "an Iranian Intelligence Service for its assassination plots on European soil."

Top Dutch diplomat Stef Blok also claimed that his country's secret service had "strong indications" that Iran was involved in the assassination of two Dutch nationals in 2015 and in 2017.

The remarks followed claims by French and Belgian police officials that they had disrupted a plot to conduct a bomb attack on an MKO meeting in Paris last June attended by Giuliani, and several former European and Arab ministers.

The MKO has carried out numerous attacks against Iranian civilians and officials over the past four decades and is listed as a terrorist organization by much of the international community. Out of the nearly 17,000 Iranians killed in terrorist assaults since the victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, about 12,000 have fallen victim to MKO's acts of terror.

France and Denmark issued statements last October and November, respectively, saying they suspected a so-called Iranian government intelligence unit pursued killing plots on their territories.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted that the regime had been behind Europe's row with Iran over murder plot allegations.

Tehran strongly denied any involvement in the purported plots, saying the accusations were merely intended to damage EU-Iran relations amid efforts to save the 2015 nuclear agreement following Washington's withdrawal.

Jaberi Ansari discusses Syria with Russian military, diplomatic officials

1 → 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 Islamic State (IS).

Iran, Russia, and Turkey - guarantors of the Syrian peace process under the Astana Group- have spurned efforts by the UN to change the composition of a committee due to



write a new constitution for Syria.

The 150-strong committee, due to start work this year, could pave the way for UN-supervised elections and a possible peace process that would encourage millions of refugees to return to their homeland, the Guardian reported.

The agreement on the committee's formation was formally reached by the three countries on December 18 last year in Geneva and the proposals passed to former UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, for his endorsement and for consideration by the UN Security Council on December 20.

The Geneva agreement was signed off by Çavuşoğlu, his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, and Iran's Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Iranian defense minister attends Maduro inauguration

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami attended the inauguration ceremony for Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro in Caracas on Thursday.

Maduro, who first came to power as president in 2013, was sworn in for a second term in office on Thursday.

Hatami was accompanied by a high ranking delegation.

The defense minister also held a meeting with Bolivian President Evo Morales on the sidelines of the inauguration ceremony, discussing international developments.

Hatami said relations between Iran and Bolivia are friendly which benefits revolu-

tionary and independent countries.

For his part, Morales attached great importance to expansion of ties with Iran and praised Tehran's efforts in fighting terrorism.

Hatami also held a separate meeting with Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez and invited him to visit Iran.

■ Hatami meets Mauritanian president

Prior to his visit to Caracas, Hatami took a trip to the African country of Mauritania and met with President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.

The defense minister called for expansion of ties and praised Mauritania's support for Palestinians.

Iran holds aerial drill, tests Qassed smart bombs

1 → Various bombers, large military transport aircraft, interceptor and reconnaissance planes, and patrol aircraft were used in the drills.

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and offense drones were also used for reconnaissance operations and bombing mock enemy positions.

A spokesperson for the drill said the warplanes detonated ground targets of the hypothetical enemy by dropping 2000-pound Qassed standoff bombs, which are smart, have pinpoint accuracy, and have been developed by experts from the IRIAF (Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force).

During Friday morning's stage of the war game,

ultralight aircraft and offense drones were also flown to detect and hit the positions configured to mirror the capabilities of hostile targets.

Different types of bombers, large military transport aircraft, interceptor and reconnaissance planes, and patrol aircraft have taken part in the drill.

Rouhani promises space rocket launches in weeks



1 → Earlier this week, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Iran will continue with its aerospace program despite U.S. warnings, adding there was no international law prohibiting such a program.

Zarif, who was in New Delhi on a bilateral visit, also told Reuters that leaving a 2015 nuclear deal agreed with world powers is an option available with Tehran but is not the only option on the table.

The United States earlier this month issued a pre-emptive warning to Iran against pursuing three planned space rocket launches that it claimed would violate a UN Security Council resolution because they use ballistic missile technology.

Under the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorsed the nuclear deal in 2015, Iran is "called upon" to refrain from work on ballistic missiles designed to deliver nuclear weapons for up to eight years.

Iran has ruled out negotiations with Washington over its military capabilities, particularly the missile program. It says the program is purely defensive and denies missiles are capable of being tipped with nuclear warheads.

U.S. President Donald Trump pulled out of the international agreement on Iran's nuclear program in May and reimposed sanctions on Tehran. He said the deal was flawed because it did not include curbs on Iran's development of ballistic missiles or regional influence.

Aboutorabi Fard urges monetary policy changes



POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Mohammad-Hassan Aboutorabi Fard, the interim Friday prayer leader of Tehran, said that the monetary policies should be reformed to curb the inflation.

"We will face serious problems if the monetary policies are not reformed. If the monetary policies are not reformed, the inflation will not be curbed," the mild-spoken cleric told worshippers.

"If the banking system is not reformed, the rise in liquidity which is a result of chaos in the banking system will cause economic challenges," he remarked.

He also called for a tax reform in the country, noting that tax reform does

not mean increasing tax rate.

The former lawmaker called for a crackdown on tax evasion.

"Tax evasion is a cruelty against those who pay tax. This [tax evasion] harms the society and causes economic corruption," he said.

According to some reports, there is about 40-50 billion dollar tax evasion, Aboutorabi Fard lamented.

He also called on the MPs to consider the country's long term interests in studying the national budget bill for the next Iranian calendar year, which starts on March 21, 2019.

The former legislator noted that as long as the economy continues to rely on oil revenues the issue of resistance economy is irrelevant.

Trump threatens to declare emergency on border visit

The United States President Donald Trump threatened on Thursday to declare a national emergency to circumvent Congress if he can't reach a deal with Democrats to fund his promised border wall, which has been at the center of an ongoing partial government shutdown.

Trump flew to the Texas border with Mexico to try to bolster his case that the country is facing a crisis which can only be solved by spending billions of dollars to construct a wall.

"We can declare a national emergency. We shouldn't have to," Trump told reporters. "This is just common sense."

His trip to the border town of McAllen, Texas, came on the 20th day of the shutdown, which has left some 800,000 Americans out of work or working without pay.

Prior to the shutdown, Trump said he would be "proud" to shut the government down over the issue but has since blamed Democrats.

He also has been considering whether to declare a national emergency and use it to circumvent Congress by building the wall with money allocated for the Department of Defense.

On Thursday, Trump said it would be "very surprising" for him not to declare a national emergency if he can't make a deal with Democrats.

"I'm not prepared to do that yet, but if I have to, I will," Trump told reporters. "We're either going to have a win - make a compromise - because I think a compromise is a win for everybody - or I will declare a national emergency," he said.

It's not clear what a compromise would entail, as Trump has so far refused to give up on his demand for \$5.7bn in border wall funding, and if he were to go through with the threat to declare a national emergency, it would likely be challenged in the courts.

Democrats, who control the House of Representatives, refuse to approve the funding, saying a border wall is ineffective, expensive and immoral. They have instead said they will allocate more than \$1.3bn for border security measures that don't include a wall.

On Thursday the Democrat-controlled House passed two bills that would reopen the departments of Agriculture, Transportation and other agencies that have been largely shuttered for nearly three weeks. Twelve republicans voted with them on the transportation bill, and 10 on the one to open Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration.



Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has made clear, however, that he will not allow that chamber to vote on any measure that does not include wall funding. McAllen is located in the Rio Grande Valley, the busiest part of the border where individuals cross between official ports of entry.

Trump travelled there with the state's two U.S. senators, Republicans John Cornyn and Ted Cruz. Signaling he's ready to maintain the game of brinkmanship, Trump wrote on Twitter on arrival in Texas that he will scrap a visit to the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, which runs from January 21-25.

Trump had been expected to make a brief appearance at the influential get-together, attended by many world leaders, but said that opposition Democratic "intransigence" required him to stay home.

But Trump has also expressed his own doubts that his appearance and remarks in Texas will change any minds as he seeks money for the wall that has been his signature promise since his presidential campaign.

On December 22, about 25 percent of the government - excluding mainly the Department of Defense and health-related programs - shut down because of Congress' inability to meet a September deadline on funding.

The impasse has continued, while Trump's meetings with Democratic congressional leaders have ended in bitterness. On Wednesday, he stormed out of a meeting with the U.S.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, calling it "a total waste of time".

Trump says undocumented immigrants and illegal drugs are streaming across the border from Mexico, despite statistics that show irregular immigration is at a 20-year low and that many drug shipments likely are smuggled through official ports of entry.

Democrats accuse Trump of using fear tactics and spreading misinformation about the border situation in order to fulfil a 2016 campaign promise as he looks towards his race for re-election in 2020.

"Again, we saw a temper tantrum because he couldn't get his way," Schumer told reporters on Wednesday after Trump walked out of the meeting with Democrats.

The president has been working to make his case to the public and bolster any congressional Republicans who might be wavering.

Pressure on them could intensify on Friday when hundreds of thousands of federal employees - including border patrol agents and airport security screeners - miss their first pay-cheques.

"I have never been more depressed about moving forward than right now. I just don't see a pathway forward," said Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, a Trump ally, who said it was time for the president to declare a national emergency.

On Tuesday, Trump said in his first prime-

time television address from the Oval Office that there was a growing security and humanitarian crisis at the border.

On Wednesday, he visited Republican politicians at the U.S. Capitol, emerging from a meeting to say his party was "very unified".

Less than two hours later, eight Republicans in the House voted with majority Democrats on a bill that would reopen the Treasury Department along with some other programs and did not include any funding for the wall.

On Friday the U.S. lawmakers are expected to vote on a bill that would reopen the Department of the Interior.

■ **U.S. military prepares options to build Trump's border wall**

Meantime, the U.S. Defense Department is preparing options to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border in the event that President Donald Trump declares a national emergency, the latest sign that such a move is gaining support within the White House.

"The Department of Defense is reviewing available authorities and funding mechanisms to identify options to enable border barrier construction," said the U.S. Navy Captain Bill Speaks, a Pentagon spokesman.

"As there has not been such a declaration made, it would be inappropriate to comment further on those efforts," he said.

Trump's declaration of an emergency at the southern border would allow the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to design barriers and allow contractors to build them.

Lieutenant General Todd Semonite, who commands the Army Corps of Engineers, accompanied Trump on his trip Thursday to McAllen, Texas, to tour the border, according to the White House.

The U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said on Capitol Hill on Thursday that Trump is determined to build a wall on the border.

The \$5.7 billion Trump seeks would build 234 miles (376 km) of barriers. Democrats have refused to pass a government funding bill that includes Trump requested amount for a wall, calling it immoral, ineffective and medieval.

Some Republican say they oppose diverting money from the Pentagon or any other federal department to pay for the barriers.

Trump made the wall a key election campaign promise in 2016, saying Mexico would pay for it and claiming it is needed to combat illegal immigration and drug trafficking. Democrats have called a border wall immoral, ineffective and medieval.

(Source: agencies)

MBS in touch with 'former' Saudi royal adviser Qahtani: report

The House of Saud regime Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, also known as MBS, remains in regular contact with his adviser Saud al-Qahtani, accused of masterminding the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the Washington Post reported.

The newspaper, citing unnamed United States and Saudi sources, said that Prince Mohammed, continues to seek advice from Qahtani.

David Ignatius, the paper's security affairs correspondent, quoted an unnamed U.S. citizen who had recently met MBS as saying that Qahtani is in possession of a lot of files and dossiers.

"The idea that you can have a radical rupture with him is unrealistic," the source said.

A Saudi who is close to the royal court concurred. "There's stuff [Qahtani] was working on that he may have to finish, or hand over," he said according to The Washington Post.

The last official government comment on Qahtani was on November 15, when prosecutors said he was under investigation and was barred from leaving the kingdom.

He was dismissed as a royal adviser following Khashoggi's murder, but the ambiguity surrounding his status has raised questions about whether he continues to have influence behind the scenes.

Qahtani is believed to have played a pivotal role in Khashoggi's assassination by first trying to draw him back to Saudi Arabia. He met the Saudi hit team before they left for Turkey and allegedly gave orders to kill Khashoggi if he refused to return to his country voluntarily.

Ignatius quoted another Saudi source as saying that Qahtani had recently made two trips to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), even though he was presumed to be under house arrest in Riyadh.

The adviser also reportedly met recently with senior deputies from the royal court's Centre for Studies and Media Affairs at his home in "Riyadh" and told them that he had been blamed and "used as a scapegoat." Qahtani had run the center until shortly after Khashoggi's death.

The paper reported that "far from altering his impulsive behavior," MBS "appears instead to be continuing with his autocratic governing style and a ruthless campaign against

dissenters," according to the U.S. and Saudi sources.

It said the Trump administration had hoped that the Saudi royal would learn something from Khashoggi's killing and make some changes.

"Domestically, he feels very confident and in control. As long as his base is secure, he feels that nothing can harm him," the U.S. source who had recently met MBS said.

One example that shows how MBS hasn't altered his Qahtani-style internet bullying tactics is a new aggressive social media campaign launched this week to attack Khashoggi and Canadian-based Saudi critic Omar Abdel Aziz.

Ignatius said the Twitter hashtag "Fact" was used to present the alleged involvement of the two men in anti-Saudi plots financed by Qatar.

A video on Twitter titled "Qatar System Exposed", produced by a company with the same name as a Dubai-based video studio, alleged that Khashoggi was part of a plot to "create a new destabilizing Arab Spring (Islamic Awakening) to unsettle Arab countries, mainly, Saudi Arabia", reinforcing what the source said about Qahtani's visit to the UAE.

(Source: Al Jazeera)

Cleric Ali al-Omari cruelly subjected to torture in Saudi jail: rights group

A political dissident and renowned Muslim preacher in Saudi Arabia has reportedly been brutally tortured in prison as a crackdown led by the Saudi regime Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) against Muslim preachers and intellectuals widens in the conservative oil-rich kingdom.

The rights group Prisoners of Conscience, which is an independent non-governmental organization seeking to promote human rights in Saudi Arabia, announced in a post on its official Twitter page that Dr. Ali al-Omari is currently suffering from severe burns and injuries all over his body as a result of savage beatings and electric shocks he experienced during his detention in solitary confinement for 15 continuous months.

It added that Omari was recently released from solitary confinement.

The Saudi regime authorities arrested the cleric, who had called for more rights for women and campaigned against the violent Wahhabi ideology in his TV shows, in early September 2017, together with a group of preachers, academics and writers.

Wahhabism is freely preached by Saudi

clerics backed by the regime in Riyadh. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) Takfiri terrorists and other militant groups use the ideology to declare people of other faiths "infidels," justifying the killing of their victims.

Omari is said to have been completely prohibited from visits and contact with his family during his time in solitary confinement.

The House of Saud regime has lately stepped up politically-motivated arrests, prosecution and conviction of peaceful dissident writers and human rights campaigners.

The Saudi regime officials have also intensified security measures in the Shia-populated and oil-rich Eastern Province.

Eastern Province has been the scene of peaceful demonstrations since February 2011. Protesters have been demanding reforms, freedom of expression, the release of political prisoners, and an end to economic and religious discrimination against the oil-rich region.

The protests have been met with a heavy-handed crackdown by the regime with



security forces increasing security measures across the province.

Over the past years, Riyadh has also redefined its anti-terrorism laws to target activism. In January 2016, the Saudi regime author-

ities executed Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, who was an outspoken critic of the policies of Riyadh. Nimr had been arrested in Qatif in 2012.

(Source: Press TV)

Reuters journalists to remain in Myanmar jail after losing appeal



The two Reuters journalists imprisoned in Myanmar for their reporting on the violence against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state have lost their appeal, with the court upholding their guilty verdict and lengthy prison sentences.

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo had each been handed prison sentences of seven years in September after they were found guilty of breaching the country's Official Secrets Act after it was claimed they were in possession of classified documents.

The trial of the pair was widely criticized, with human rights groups and international governments accusing the Myanmar regime of using the courts to target the two reporters for their reporting on the military-led massacre of Rohingya Muslims in the village of Inn Din in Rakhine.

Both Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who are both Burmese, have continued to stress their innocence, alleging they were handed classified documents, which was used as evidence they had breached secrecy laws, without their knowledge in a police set-up.

The appeal against the verdict, which was filed in November, argued that "compelling evidence" of the arrest being a set-up by the police, as well as violations in due process and key holes in the prosecution's case, had been ignored.

However, in a further blow to freedom of expression in Myanmar, on Friday afternoon a judge at the high court in Yangon rejected the appeal and upheld their guilty verdict. The judge described the seven year jail sentence as a "suitable ruling".

Stephen J Adler, the editor-in-chief of Reuters, said the rejection of the appeal was "yet another injustice among many inflicted upon Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo".

"They remain behind bars for one reason: those in power sought to silence the truth," said Adler. "Reporting is not a crime, and until Myanmar rights this terrible wrong, the press in Myanmar is not free, and Myanmar's commitment to rule of law and democracy remains in doubt."

A statement issued by the EU's spokesperson for foreign affairs, Maja Kocijancic, said the appeal rejection was a "missed opportunity to right a wrong" adding that the ruling "casts serious doubt over the independence of Myanmar's justice system."

The appeal was also condemned by Amnesty International, who said the ruling "perpetuates an appalling injustice" while the chief executive of PEN America, Suzanne Nossel, said that "yet again Myanmar's justice system has turned its backs on the principles of rule of law and respect for rights that are the litmus test of democracy".

Since they were jailed in September, there has been a groundswell of support for Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo internationally, with the pair handed awards for their journalism. They were also among the persecuted journalists named as Time Magazine's Person of the Year 2018.

However, within Myanmar, where there is little sympathy for the plight of the Rohingya, condemnation of the jailing of the journalists has been more muted. The Myanmar state councillor, Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel peace prize winner who was once a leading human rights advocate, has resisted calls to pardon Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, the most recent of which came from the US vice-president, Mike Pence, during a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi in November.

The conviction could still be appealed in Myanmar's Supreme Court, the highest court of appeal in the country.

(Source: The Guardian)

Merkel: Germany 'takes total responsibility' for Nazi crimes in Greece

Chancellor Angela Merkel says Germany "takes total responsibility" for crimes committed by the Nazis in Greece during the Second World War. The Chancellor, who is on a two-day visit in Athens, said on Friday that Germany is "aware of our historical responsibility," but it has already paid Athens 115 million deutschmarks in 1960. "We are aware of our historical responsibility, we know how much suffering Germany caused Greece during the era of National Socialism so the lesson for us is to do everything we can to ensure good relations with Greece and to support each other for the benefit of both countries," Merkel said.

Germany has already dismissed Athens request to a compensation of €288 billion for the destruction Greece sustained between 1941 and 1944, the years the country was subject to Third Reich rule.

"As Greeks, we consider these demands legally active and (can be) judicially pursued and should be solved in the competent European forum, judicial forum," Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos told Merkel during a short meeting.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, however, said Merkel's visit marked "the end of a difficult cycle between our two countries."

This is Merkel's first visit in Greece after the country exited its bailout programs a few months ago.

Back in 2010, it was revealed that Greece that had been affected with a spiraling spending deficit had borrowed much more money than it was able to make in revenue through taxes.

The government then asked for a financial rescue by the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund.

Germany, provider of the bulk of Athens's international bailout during the years of economic crisis, sparked anger among many any Greeks who blame it for tough austerity measures they had to endure. Greek protesters clashed with police on Thursday in Athens, during a demonstration against German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit in the country.

(Source: Press TV)

STOCK MARKET	
TEDPIX	164829.4
IFX	1944.55

Sources: tse.ir, Ifb.ir

CURRENCIES	
USD	42,000 rials
EUR	48,577 rials
GBP	53,697 rials
AED	11,437 rials

Source: cbi.ir

COMMODITIES	
WTI	\$51.95/b
Brent	\$60.81/b
OPEC Basket	\$56.29/b
Gold	\$1,288.95 /oz
Silver	\$15.62/oz
Platinum	\$822.00/oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

NEWS IN BRIEF



Imports of milk powder permitted temporarily

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — The Iranian agriculture minister announced that imports of milk powder is allowed temporarily for processing and re-exporting the product, Tasnim news agency reported on Friday.

Mahmoud Hojjati asked the Iranian Economy Minister Farhad Dejpasand in a letter to allow imports of milk powder into the country for a short period of time for re-exporting purposes.

Iran, Iraq stress expansion of energy ties

➔ Ghadhbhan for his part, stressed the common grounds for cooperation between the two sides and emphasized the implementation of previously signed agreements on energy.

During his visit, Zanganeh also met with Iraq's Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi in which Abd al-Mahdi stressed the importance



Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh (2nd L) and Iraqi Oil Minister Thamir Ghadhban (1st R) speaking in a press conference after a meeting in Baghdad on January 10

of stronger bilateral ties with Iran in various fields especially in oil and gas sectors.

The Iraqi prime minister pointed to cooperation in the fields of oil and gas as one of the most important areas for strengthening relations between the two countries.

Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi and Iraqi Oil Minister Thamir Ghadhban also attended the meeting between the two officials.

Later on Thursday Zanganeh also held talks with Iraqi President Salih Barham during which the Iraqi official reiterated that promoting Tehran-Baghdad relations will benefit regional security and stability.

UK economic growth hits 6-month low, manufacturing slides

Britain's economy cooled in the three months to November, expanding at its weakest pace in six months as factories suffered from tough global trade conditions ahead of Brexit, official data showed on Friday.

Gross domestic product in the three months to November was 0.3 percent higher than in the previous three-month period, down from growth of 0.4 percent in the three months to October and matching the consensus of a Reuters poll of economists.

Manufacturers suffered their longest period of monthly falls in output since the financial crisis, hurt by weaker overseas demand, the Office for National Statistics said.

Worries about the global economy have been mounting due to concerns about a trade war between the United States and China. Figures from Germany and France earlier this week similarly showed falling industrial output.

Britain's economic growth in the three months to November was driven mostly by the dominant services sector, as well as the construction industry.

The figures fit with business and consumer surveys that suggest the economy is slowing sharply after robust growth of 0.6 percent in the third quarter of the year, reflecting growing uncertainty ahead of Britain's planned departure from the European Union, as well as global jitters.

Britain is due to leave the European Union on March 29 and whether businesses will still be able to trade without disruption to cross-border supply chains remains unclear.

(Source: Euronews)

‘S. Korea expected to restart Iran’s oil imports in late Jan. or early Feb.’

ENERGY **TEHRAN** — South Korea is expected to restart imports of Iranian crude oil in late January or early February, Reuters reported quoting the head of South Korea's SK Innovation, which owns the country's biggest oil refiner SK Energy, as saying on Wednesday.

The U.S. launched new sanctions on Iran's petroleum sector on November 4, but it has granted exemptions to eight countries allowing them to temporarily continue buying Iranian oil.

Among those eight countries was South Korea, one of the major customers of Iranian oil, that won a six-month waiver allowing it to purchase a limited amount of crude from Iran, but the country has not imported any oil from Iran since September.

"As South Korea received a waiver and has been in talks with Iran about the first import volume, it seems (Iran oil) could be brought in late in January or early February at the earliest," SK Innovation Chief Executive Officer and President Kim Jun told Reuters on the sidelines of



the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.

South Korean and Japanese buyers were expected to restart Iranian oil imports early

WB predicts 1.1% GDP growth for Iran in 2020, 2021

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — The World Bank (WB) predicts a 1.1 percent growth of gross domestic product (GDP) for Iran in 2020 and 2021.

The bank predicts a -3.6 percent growth for the country' GDP in 2019 but expects it to experience 1.1 percent of GDP growth in the following two years.

Global economic growth is projected to slow to 2.9 percent in 2019 from a downwardly revised 3 percent in 2018 amid rising downside risks, the World Bank said in its newly-released Global Economic Prospects report.

The World Bank said the outlook for the global economy "has darkened" as global financing conditions have



tightened, trade tensions "have intensified," and some large emerging markets and developing economies have experienced significant financial market stress.

China to set lower GDP growth target of 6-6.5 percent in 2019

China plans to set a lower economic growth target of 6-6.5 percent in 2019 compared with last year's target of "around" 6.5 percent, policy sources told Reuters, as Beijing gears up to cope with higher U.S. tariffs and weakening domestic demand.

The proposed target, to be unveiled at the annual parliamentary session in March, was endorsed by top leaders at the annual closed-door Central Economic Work Conference in mid-December, according to four sources with knowledge of the meeting's outcome.

Data later this month is expected to show the Chinese economy grew around 6.6 percent in 2018 - the weakest since 1990. Analysts are forecasting a further loss of momentum this year before policy support steps begin to kick in.

"It's very difficult for growth to exceed 6.5 percent (this year), and there could be trouble if growth dips below 6 percent," said one source who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter.

As the world's second-largest economy loses steam, China's top leaders are closely

watching employment levels as factories could be forced to shed workers amid a trade war with the United States, despite a more resilient services sector, policy insiders said.

Growth of about 6.2 percent is needed in the next two years to meet the ruling Communist Party's longstanding goal of doubling gross domestic product and incomes in the decade to 2020, and to turn China into a "modestly prosperous" nation.

"Considering employment, income and stability, we need growth of at least 6 percent this year," said one of the sources.

Adopting a range as a target would give policymakers room to maneuver amid uncertainties caused by a tit-for-tat tariff war with the United States, as the two sides strive for a possible deal to settle their differences before March.

The government plans to maintain a 3 percent consumer inflation target for 2019 despite a recent softening in price rises, leaving some space for the government to stimulate weaker consumption.

Data this week showed China's consumer

inflation eased to 1.9 percent in December from 2.2 percent in November, below the government's full-year target.

The State Council Information Office did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

More Stimul US Seen

Chinese leaders have turned more pro-growth since the December meeting, softening a drive to rein in financial and debt risks, but they have ruled out "flood-like" stimulus.

"The pressure on the economy is quite big, and overall policy focus is stability this year and even next year," said one of the sources.

The central bank is likely to pump out more cash by further lowering banks' reserve requirements, following a broad-based cut this month, while trying to funnel more credit to small and private firms - vital for growth and jobs, policy sources said.

Policymakers remain reluctant to cut benchmark interest rates despite easing pressure on the yuan, fearing any moves could spur capital outflows as China's short-term bond yields have fallen below those of the

this year, industry sources said in November. South Korea can buy up to 200,000 barrels per day of Iran oil, mostly condensate, an ultra-light form of crude oil under the waiver, the sources said.

South Korea was the third-biggest buyer of Iranian oil and the largest importer of Iranian condensate before the U.S. sanctions were reimposed in November.

Also as reported by Reuters on Tuesday, 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 also reported on Monday that Indian State-run Bharat Petroleum Corp will import 1 million barrels of Iranian oil in February after a gap of three months, with the nation's overall purchases from Tehran remaining at 9 million barrels, three industry sources said.

The United States in early November granted India a six-month waiver from sanctions on Iran's oil exports.

Tehran hosting 3 international expos

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — The Iranian capital is simultaneously hosting three international exhibitions along with a domestic one from January 11 to 14 at the Tehran Permanente International Fairground, IRNA reported on Friday.

The three international exhibitions include the 9th International Exhibition of Architecture, Interior Design, and Modern House (Midex 2019), the 8th International Exhibition of Office Furniture of Iran (HOFEX 2019) and the third edition of Iran's International Exhibition of Agriculture, Agricultural Machineries and Equipment, Inputs, Irrigation Systems and Mechanization (Iran Agri Show 2019).

The 26th Exhibition of Chandeliers and Decorative Lights is also being held during the mentioned period.

As reported, the 9th edition of International Exhibition of Architecture, Interior Design, and Modern House (Midex 2019) is hosting 182 Iranian companies and 21 foreign ones from The Netherlands, China, Russia, Germany, South Korea, Italy, Belgium, Turkey and Finland.

Some 43 Iranian companies are present in HOFEX 2019, and 150 Iranian exhibitors along with the Spain pavilion are showcasing their latest achievements and products in Iran Agri Show 2019.

Finally, 226 Iranian companies are taking part in the 26th Exhibition of Chandeliers and Decorative Lights.

United States, they said.

The government is expected to step up fiscal stimulus this year with steeper tax cuts to help corporates and an increase in spending on infrastructure projects, the sources said.

The annual budget deficit could rise from last year's 2.6 percent of gross domestic product, but is likely to be kept below 3 percent, the sources said without giving specific figures.

Local governments could be allowed to issue up to 2 trillion yuan worth of special bonds in 2019, up from 1.35 trillion yuan last year, they said.

On tax cuts, the focus will be on possibly lowering valued-added tax (VAT), which ranges from 6 percent for the services sector and 16 percent for manufacturers. Such taxes account for more than a third of total government revenues.

Policymakers are unlikely to loosen controls on the property market across the country, but may give provincial and city governments more leeway in tweaking policies to keep local markets steady, the sources said.

(Source: Reuters)

Italy keeps Europe on a downer amid Recession scare for Germany

Slumping production in Italy added to ominous signs for the European economy, days after Germany slid closer to recession.

Italian industrial output fell 1.6 percent in November. That matched a similar trend in huge output declines in Germany, France and Spain. The continued disappointing run of numbers is undermining hope that the current slowdown will stabilize rather than turn into something more worrying.

While the production figures cover the end of 2018 -- and can be erratic -- there's reason to be concerned about the outlook, with multiple economic, political and financial risks. Late on Thursday, European Central Bank Governing Council member Francois Villeroy de Galhau said policy makers must take it slow in the current environment, and cited threats including Brexit, the maturing of the U.S. cycle, and "numerous uncertainties" in China.

JPMorgan Chase & Co. on Thursday cut its euro-area growth forecast and pushed out its prediction for the first ECB interest-rate increase to December from September. Citigroup's Surprise Index, which measures data surprises relative to market expectations, is at a seven-month low.

The big shock this week was Germany, the region's biggest economy, where the slump in industrial output prompted talk that Europe's largest economy could slip into a recession.

Fed Chairman Powell says he is ‘very worried’ about growing amount of U.S. debt

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell is concerned about the ballooning amount of United States debt.

"I'm very worried about it," Powell said at The Economic Club of Washington, D.C. "From the Fed's standpoint, we're really looking at a business cycle length: that's our frame of reference. The long-run fiscal, nonsustainability of the U.S. federal government isn't really something that plays into the medium term that is relevant for our policy decisions."

However, "it's a long-run issue that we definitely need to face, and ultimately, will have no choice but to face," he added.

The Fed chief's comments came as the annual U.S. deficit reaches new sustained highs above \$1 trillion, a fact many economists worry could spell trouble for future generations. Annual deficits have topped \$1 trillion before, but never during a time of sustained economic growth like now, raising concern about what would happen if a recession hits.

Total U.S. debt is about \$21.9 trillion, of which \$16 trillion is owed by the public. In part because of continued rate increases under Powell, the interest cost on that debt could start to become a bigger and bigger burden.

Wall Street's "bond king" and respected financial prognosticator Jeffrey Gundlach said in December that the Fed seems to be on a "suicide mission," raising rates while the government deficit increases as a share of GDP. Normally when the deficit is expanding, the Fed would be lowering interest rates.

Gundlach added that the economy appears to be slowing "and maybe the supply makes it so rates don't go down with economic weakness."

Fitch Ratings — one of the top credit rating agencies that analyzes companies and governments alike — said Wednesday that the ongoing government shutdown could soon start to impact its ability to pass a budget and could impact the government's triple-A sovereign score.

(Source: CNBC)



Commerzbank on Friday downplayed the gloom, saying the disappointment will be countered by better consumer demand.

Last year saw the euro area stumble its way through a host of hurdles, from Italy's budget battles to car production disruption in Germany and riots in France. Overlaying all that was U.S.-China tension, though there's some optimism now that the world's two largest economies may prevent an all-out trade war.

What Our Economists Say...

"Italian industrial production plunged in November,

[illegible]

The DRC election: A very unlikely result

Voters hoped for their country's first democratic transition. Officials named an opposition candidate as the victor – but could this be another win for President Joseph Kabila?

People in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been waiting a long time – since independence from Belgium in 1960 – for a democratic transition of power. They waited two years for this election, and they waited days for its result. Early on Thursday, the country's electoral commission announced that an opposition candidate had won. This was indeed unprecedented, but not in quite the way many had hoped for: it looks, in the words of one analyst of democracy in Africa, like “the first election rigged by the government in favor of an opposition candidate”.

Felix Tshisekedi is said to have defeated not only President Joseph Kabila's hand-picked successor, Emmanuel Shadary, but also the clear frontrunner, Martin Fayulu, who has denounced the results as an “electoral coup”. Critically, the country's respected Catholic church has said that the official results do not tally with data gathered by its 40,000 observers. The key to this bizarre development is not Tshisekedi but Kabila. His government has left half of DRC's 80 million people living on less than a dollar a day, despite its immense mineral resources, while he and those around him have amassed huge wealth. Human rights groups say thousands of civilians have been killed by security forces and armed groups in the last two years. A devastating humanitarian crisis continues.

But Kabila has proved expert at hanging on to power since succeeding his assassinated father in 2001. Elections were delayed repeatedly as he sought to carry on after reaching the two-term limit on the presidency in 2016. Protests were lethally suppressed. When he eventually called elections, he barred western observers. A mysterious fire destroyed voting machines, polls were delayed, and officials said violence and an Ebola outbreak precluded voting in places. Widespread irregularities were followed by the lengthy wait for results, with suspicions growing as the government shut off the internet.

Yet Shadary performed so abysmally that the government apparently realized that naming him victor would not fly. It has been forced to acknowledge its rejection by three-quarters of voters. The widespread belief is that Kabila has agreed a deal with Tshisekedi. Fayulu, a former businessman, is a relative political outsider, though he enjoys the backing of two heavyweights: the tycoon Moïse Katumbi and the former warlord Jean-Pierre Bemba. Tshisekedi's father was an opposition leader and is deeply rooted in DRC politics: Kabila may feel he will find it easier to exert control through political structures. At a minimum, it is thought, the president wants the safeguarding of his family's reported fortune, as well as immunity from any potential prosecution; he should not be given it. At most he hopes to hang on to power if not office – and perhaps to reclaim the latter in future, à la Putin. (He has said that he wants to remain “available” for his country.)

Fayulu is almost certain to appeal to the constitutional court, but few expect it to overturn the results. How far will his backers, the church, regional players and to a lesser extent the international community, press the issue? Despite the fury of his supporters, many will be relieved to see Kabila's party go, and may be satisfied that the presidency will be taken by the man they probably expected to vote for prior to Fayulu's rise and the opposition's split. Concern for stability is a priority, given the country's bloody history. This is not the democratic transition that so many hoped for. Unless pressure is exerted and sustained, it may not be much of a transition at all.

(Source: The Guardian)

Renewing German-French vows for Europe

With the EU splintering on its edges, the original founders plan to better integrate their two peoples as a model of friendship for the rest of Europe.

For a European Union fragmented on many fronts, it may be time to go back to its roots – at the very heart of the Continent. On Jan. 22, the leaders of Germany and France plan to sign a treaty aimed at bringing the bloc's two most powerful economies – and its original founders – even closer.

The two are first going local, hoping to better integrate people living close to the border. Schools on either side will be encouraged to become bilingual, for example. Joint business parks may be set up. Ambulances will be able to cross over. Basic utilities like water might be merged. The idea is to form “Eurodistricts,” or models of integration. This “twinning” pact, negotiated over the past year, also calls for ministers to regularly sit in the cabinet meetings of each other's government. It seeks greater unity in diplomacy and peacekeeping missions. France will push for Germany to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Europeans often forget the EU was born out of a stunning convergence of these two nations after World War II. By the 1960s, France had largely forgiven Germany for its Nazi past and Germans showed great contrition over that past.

Such qualities of character helped suppress the militant nationalism that had sown conflicts for centuries. After World War I, says French President Emmanuel Macron, “we were unable to produce a lasting peace because France and Germany remained divided.”

The current strains within the 28-member union, such as Britain possibly exiting the bloc and the rise of anti-EU nationalist parties, have convinced Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel of the need for deeper European integration – starting with their own countries. The two plan to sign the treaty in the German city of Aachen, which has been controlled by both peoples over time. It is best known as the imperial center of Charlemagne, the great unite of Western Europe in the late 8th century.

The signing date of Jan. 22 is also significant as it marks the 56th anniversary of the signing of the Élysée Treaty, which cemented the French-German friendship and provided the foundation for the EU.

Nearly two-thirds of EU citizens say the bloc is a good thing, according to the most recent Eurobarometer survey. But about half say the Union is “going in the wrong direction.”

With so much division – over migration, EU regulations, the euro's woes, and anti-democratic moves in a few countries – the bloc's two founders are like a couple who, after decades of marriage, find their extended family squabbling and splitting. So they've decide to remind everyone of the origin of that family by renewing their wedding vows and drawing closer. If they can speak as one even more, they will help drive the convergence that has provided a peaceful balancing of interests in Europe for so long.

(Source: The CSM)

The Saudi engine of repression continues to run at full speed

By David Ignatius

One hundred days after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is pressing ahead with anti-dissident campaigns and remains in regular contact with Saud al-Qahtani, the media adviser whom the CIA believes helped organize Khashoggi's killing, according to U.S. and Saudi sources.

The Saudi crown prince, far from altering his impulsive behavior or signaling that he has learned lessons from the Khashoggi affair, as the Trump administration had hoped, appears instead to be continuing with his autocratic governing style and a ruthless campaign against dissenters, the U.S. and Saudi sources said this week.

“Domestically, he feels very confident and in control. As long as his base is secure, he feels that nothing can harm him,” says one American who met recently with MBS, as the crown prince is known. One of Britain's most experienced Saudi-watchers agreed: “He's completely unchastened by what has happened. That is worrying for Western governments.”

MBS has been contacting Qahtani and continuing to seek his advice, according to the U.S. and Saudi sources. A Saudi source said Qahtani had also met recently at his Riyadh home with his senior deputies from the royal court's Center for Studies and Media Affairs, the cybercommand post he ran until shortly after Khashoggi's death.

“I'm being blamed and used as a scapegoat,” Qahtani is said to have told his former aides. “Qahtani holds a lot of files and dossiers,” says the American who met recently with MBS. “The idea that you can have a radical rupture with him is unrealistic.” A Saudi who is close to the royal court agrees: “There's stuff [Qahtani] was working on that he may



“Domestically, he feels very confident and in control. As long as his base is secure, he feels that nothing can harm him,” says one American who met recently with MBS, as the crown prince is known.

have to finish, or hand over,” he said.

One indication that MBS hasn't altered his Qahtani-style Internet bullying tactics is an aggressive social media campaign launched this week to attack Khashoggi and Omar Abdulaziz, a dissident living in Canada.

An Arabic hashtag on Twitter surfaced Thursday claiming to offer “Fact” about the two men's alleged involvement in anti-Saudi conspiracies funded by Qatar. One English-language post showed pictures of the two men with the caption “Jamal and Omar: Qatar's Agents.”

Also appearing on Twitter was a slick video titled “Qatar System Exposed,” apparently produced by a company with the same name

as a Dubai-based studio. The video includes English subtitles alleging that Khashoggi was involved in a plot to “create a new destabilizing Arab Spring to unsettle Arab countries, mainly, Saudi Arabia.”

Another new video argues that The Post shouldn't have given Khashoggi a platform as a columnist when he was also receiving editing advice on his columns from the head of the Qatar Foundation International, a Qatar-funded group based in Washington.

Ironically, the main evidence offered to support these charges of Khashoggi's links to Qatar is a Dec. 22 article in The Post by Souad Mekhennet and Greg Miller.

The Qatar Foundation link was hardly a

secret; I mentioned it in a long column about Khashoggi that appeared on Oct. 12, 10 days after he disappeared in Istanbul.

Even MBS's strongest supporters in the United States appear concerned by the new social media campaign. Ali Shihabi, the head of the Saudi-backed Arabia Foundation, commented in an email to me Thursday:

“I have no idea who is behind this new campaign, but it certainly does not seem wise.” He argued that despite a “concerted campaign funded by Qatar and others... the kingdom's media organs had so far exercised great self-control since the Jamal tragedy, and I would hope that continues.”

The videos and Web postings in the new campaign all have the professional feel of modern media studios in Dubai. According to a Saudi source, Qahtani recently made two trips to the United Arab Emirates, even though he is supposedly under house arrest in Riyadh. The trips couldn't be confirmed independently.

The Treasury Department said Nov. 15 in imposing sanctions on Qahtani that he “was part of the planning and execution of the operation” that led to Khashoggi's death.

The American who recently visited MBS said he cautioned him that top U.S. military and intelligence officials were weighing whether the crown prince was a dictator, like Iraq's Saddam Hussein, nominally committed to modernization but unreliable, or a solid ally of the United States. “As long as you keep Qahtani, people will say you're more like Saddam,” this visitor warned.

Senior Saudi officials who have discussed MBS's continuing contact with Qahtani have urged U.S. patience. “If I try to ban him, [Qahtani] will find another channel,” a senior prince is said to have advised the administration. Meanwhile, the Saudi engine of repression continues to run at full speed.

(Source: The Washington Post)

The president and the wall

By Donald Lambro

Two years into his presidency, Donald Trump is still trying to convince Congress to cough up billions of hard-earned tax dollars to build his wall on the southern border with Mexico.

OK, he originally promised voters that Mexico would pay for the 2,000-mile concrete wall, and his supporters swallowed it hook, line and sinker.

They bought it even after the president of Mexico flatly told him at a face-to-face meeting on the border during the campaign that they were never going to pay for his dream wall. But he continued to repeat his false promise at all of his rallies, asking his supporters, “And who's going to pay for the wall?” “Mexico,” his fans shouted back.

Now, with his job approval polls stuck in the lower 40 percent range and the Democrats, who now control the House of Representatives, refusing to spend one nickel on his wall, President Trump is raising the stakes.

Trump is refusing to sign a budget bill unless it contains the \$5.7 billion he wants to begin construction of his wall, triggering a partial government shutdown that he says he will not open until Congress gives him the money.

Then the president went on nationwide television to deliver what The Washington Post called a “fact-challenged” speech from the Oval Office Tuesday, telling the American people that the United States faced “a growing humanitarian and security crisis” on the Mexican border.

In a misleading, fear-mongering speech, Trump proceeded to tell Americans that thousands of Mexicans are illegally pouring into our country, largely composed of criminals,

rapists, murderers and drug smugglers.

One false claim that he's made before — that terrorists were also crossing the border into the United States — was missing from his speech. Fact checkers, TV anchors, including Fox News, have questioned that claim.

Still, Trump administration officials have raised issues of terrorists entering across the border. But when NBC News looked into those claims, it turned out that U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents “encountered only six immigrants at ports of entry on the U.S.-Mexican border in the first half of fiscal year 2018 whose names were on a federal government list of known or suspected terrorists,” according to data given to Congress that was obtained by NBC.

In Trump's world, only the worst elements in Mexico are crossing the border, when most are presenting themselves at the border, seeking safety, asylum, jobs and a better life.

What Trump doesn't tell Americans is that the number of migrants crossing the border illegally has fallen to a 20-year low. A recent Reuters news service story says this: “Illegal border crossings into the United States have declined dramatically in recent years, yet Trump insists a wall is still necessary to stem a ‘humanitarian and national crisis’ in the region.”

Illegal crossings and apprehensions peaked at 1.6 million in 2000, but has since fallen to a little over 300,000 in 2017. That's the lowest in 45 years.

In fact, there are many more cases of people who just have overstayed their visas than border crossing arrests.

As for drug smugglers, it is true that 90 percent of the heroin sold in the United States comes from Mexico, The Post says, but “virtually all of it comes through legal points of entry.”



“A small percentage of all heroin seized by border patrol officials “was between Ports of Entry,” the Drug Enforcement Administration said in a 2018 report. So Trump's wall would do little to halt drug trafficking.”

Then there's Trump's specious claim that if Congress does not appropriate the \$5.7 billion for his wall, he will get the money from his newly-negotiated North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

“The wall will also be paid for indirectly by the great new trade deal we have made with Mexico,” he said Tuesday night.

The Post called this part of his Oval Office speech a “Four Pinocchio claim.”

Trump must have skipped his Economics 101 course at the Wharton School of Business.

(Source: The Washington Times)

Do Jordan protests herald a new phase of the Arab Spring in 2019?

By Mohammad Ayesh

It has been a tough year for Jordan. Marked by an unprecedented wave of street protests over harsh economic conditions, 2018 saw the return of scenes from the Arab Spring wave that hit the region back in 2011.

In December, protests turned violent, after weeks without any clashes between demonstrators and security forces.

The country's economic crisis has worsened in recent days, heightening tensions in the streets. Jordanian security services used force last month to disperse protesters who tried to reach the prime minister's office in Amman, but the demonstrators have vowed to continue protesting in an effort to push the government to revoke a controversial income-tax law.

Protesters are also calling on the government to cancel the country's cybercrime law, which imposes harsh penalties on social media activists, and for the release of detainees who took part in previous protests.

■ **No fix in sight**

If the protests in Jordan escalate in the New Year, bringing down Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz's government or producing more violence, it could pave the way for a new wave of change in the region – possibly even a second phase of the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2010 and ended in Syria, where the revolution has largely failed.

Although Jordan's King Abdullah II intervened last summer in response to protesters' demands, the recent deterioration marks a serious shift in this wave of social unrest for



Recent violence marks a serious shift in the country's wave of social unrest, sparked by economic and political concerns.

several reasons. Firstly, the protests are taking place at a higher pace and with greater levels of violence, despite amendments to the income-tax law. This means that the protesters have not accepted the government's concessions.

The income-tax law is among the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund to continue supporting Jordan, whose financial crisis is likely to continue, with no fix in sight beyond collecting greater amounts of taxes from Jordanian citizens.

Secondly, the December protests came just two days after a meeting between the

prime minister and a number of activists. But the meeting was boycotted by some protest leaders and failed to alleviate the ongoing tensions, as evidenced by the recent flare-up.

■ **Dozens of detainees**

In addition, the cybercrime law has failed to contain online dissent, which has spilt over onto the streets. The arrest of activists has not contained the protests, with activist Fakher Daas telling Middle East Eye that “there are dozens of detainees. The number of protesters under police custody is significant.” The Jordanian government, meanwhile, said it

was not holding any political prisoners, noting: “All the protesters under custody are charged with violating the law.”

Although the new income-tax law will bring 180 million Jordanian dinars (\$253m) into state coffers, there are no indications that the country's political and economic crisis is nearing a resolution.

The reasons behind the financial crisis are numerous, but the most important factor is that financial aid from Persian Gulf countries has been cut off for almost two years now. A five-year aid package from the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) states to Jordan, worth some \$3.6bn, ended in January 2017, but no further assistance was offered.

To understand the importance of the Persian Gulf's financial aid to Jordan, consider that the general budget of Jordan is estimated at nine billion Jordanian dinars (\$12.5bn).

■ **Social and political demands**

Jordan's political calamity is escalating due to an accelerating economic crisis. The income-tax law that has sparked protests among the poor and middle classes will generate only a quarter of a billion dollars for the treasury of the Jordanian state, just a fraction of the cancelled funds from the Persian Gulf states.

In light of the ongoing protests, the government is at genuine risk of being sacked. In addition, the current wave of unrest in Jordan may tempt the broader Arab public to again rise up with social and political demands, which could lead to a second phase of the Arab Spring in 2019.

(Source: Middle East Eye)

The U.S. wants to “incite” Iranians and this must be rejected

1 → It's a wonder that ANY Arabs believe this nonsense, and maybe some are beginning not to. For example, Jordan has lately called for the end of the Israeli occupation of the Golan, and some Iraqis are demanding the end that the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Also, pompous U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has had the gall to claim that the U.S. only wants a “better life” for the Iranian people with some sort of new governance, and at the same time has made life hard for most all Iranians with economic sanctions and other threats. Does that make sense? Of course not.

This is not a claim that ought to be in any way “bought” by Iranians generally – that the U.S. has ANY intentions but to create discord, division and chaos in the Middle East for the alleged benefit of any country EXCEPT itself and Israel, which has so fully captured many in Washington that some “leaders” are willing to throw away the most cherished amendment to the Constitution – free speech -- by making criticism of Israel a crime. In fact, if the U.S. wants any coherent Iran at all, it wants a government in Iran that, like the Shah's, was simply a repressive one eager to do the bidding of the U.S. and open up Iran to the exploitation of U.S. corporations.

However, it's also fair to say that what the U.S. is dangling before the Iranian people is some kind of appeal to further upset by the downsizing if not the eradication of Iran's



current rule of (Islamic) law. To be clear, there are social and political controls in Iran that have limited “free speech” and what may be termed full “democracy”.

But this is no more evident, and perhaps far less so in Iran, than in the harsh kinds of social and political controls so apparent in Saudi Arabia and even in Sisi's Egypt, to

name just two countries. And it's interesting to note that Assad's Syria, an Iranian ally, is in fact far more if not entirely “secular” in orientation than most all other Arab countries today. It's a huge positive that some Arab countries are now beginning to reestablish diplomatic relations with Assad and Syria.

This apparent “dangling” by the U.S. of

some sort of “freedom” of social license from Islamic rules for Iranians, really constitutes little more than incitements directed towards Iranians generally to create division and discord inside the Islamic Republic for – ultimately -- the benefit of the U.S. and Israeli imperialism and its further consolidation.

Even if there is merit in the idea of more “democracy” for Iranians, it's far more important to realize that the Trump Administration does not in fact give a hoot about real “democracy” in the Middle East. If it did, let's be quite clear, it would NOT be supporting or allied with the Saudis, the Zionists or even Sisi in Egypt about whom it can easily be said are not sincerely “democracy” minded.

The real tragedy of the Middle East is that the predominate Muslim populations, tolerant of other faiths and minorities, and whether Sunni or Shia, have failed to recognize the power and benefits inherent in hanging together as a first priority and advocating for each other to create more unity and peace regionally.

Perhaps this may begin to dawn on the Arab and Muslim masses, because one thing is certain: over the last 100 years since the end of the Ottomans the “West” and particularly the U.S., the British, the Zionists and the French, too, have made life miserable for too many in the Middle East.

The first attack of the 2019 anti-aggressor drones

1 → According to reports, Abdullah al-Nahki, Yemen's Chief of Staff and other senior military commanders including Deputy Chief of Staff Saleh Al-Zindani, were hospitalized in Aden during the operations.

■ The military and drone power of the Yemeni army and popular committees are invaders' nightmare

It is undeniable that ballistic missiles and drones of the army and popular committees of Yemen have a strategic impact in the Yemeni war and play a significant role in deterrence against the Saudi coalition.

Last year when the Yemenis unveiled the Badr-1 smart rocket, the anti-Yemeni coalition along with their US-Zionist allies got worried.

■ The path to Yemen's missiles development
A Yemeni newspaper reported: “The Yemenis bought the ballistic missiles in the 70s from the Soviet Union, rockets such as Scud, Luna, and Tochka.”

In 1998, the Yemeni army had Iraqi experts help develop its missiles alongside former Soviet Union rocket engineers. These both played an important role in the construction of the Yemeni army's scientific research and development center in Sana'a. For six years, more than 2,000 ballistic missiles were transferred from Mukalla and Aden to Sana'a.

Despite the claims over Iran's support for Yemen's missile defense, Sana'a has had one of the largest ballistic missile

arsenals in the Middle East in terms of numbers and range. The Yemeni army demonstrated its missile capability in the Yemeni unification ceremony in May 1990. More than 60 percent of the Yemeni missiles are exported from countries, especially North Korea, Russia and China, and 40 percent are made inside Yemen.

Many believe the development of the missile program in Yemen has been extended to 1,000 kilometers with ballistic missiles.

Yemen, which did not earlier have missiles with a range of more than 300 kilometers, within two years, capabilities reached a range of 1,000 kilometers covering the entire island Arabian peninsula.

The next ballistic missile, the Bokan-3, whose range exceeds 1,500 km, will be a surprise.

■ Destruction of Yemeni missiles didn't come true
The United States and the Saudi-led allies sought to destroy Yemen's missile capability, but they failed to reach that objective.

Mohammad Abbas al-Zalee, a Yemeni analyst, writes: “The ballistic missiles launched by Houthis in Saudi Arabia are not from Iran, and those who claim that these missiles are sent from Iran in small pieces or as an entire rocket are wrong. This is a misconception and illogical. These missiles are Yemen missiles.”

The Yemeni missile power has frustrated the officials of



Riyadh and their allies. The reality is the US Patriot missile defense system in Saudi Arabia has failed to deal with Yemen's missile power.

Yemenis rockets and drones have become a nightmare for aggressors.

A clear signal for the German chancellor

1 → She has lost the power of managing the power equations in her country. In other words, Merkel has become a “passive player” in Berlin, the European Union and the Eurozone.

This is while Merkel had previously said that she hoped her planned departure would end bitter fighting in her weak and fractious right-left coalition, confessing that “the picture the government is sending out is unacceptable”.

According to an Infratest dimap survey, the Alternative for Germany (AFD), the Green Party and Liberal Democrats are now increasing their relative popularity to challenge the two ruling parties (Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) and to end the domination of the two traditional German parties on the power equations in Berlin.

Undoubtedly, Merkel can't be now regarded as a successful politician at the head of the political and administrative equations of Germany. At the beginning of the German coalition government, many analysts believed that the presence of Social-Democrats alongside the Christian Democrats was a big mistake.

The anti-EU and anti-immigration party of “Alternative for Germany” has become the main opposition party in the German parliament. On the other hand,



as the current trend continues and the popularity of the two traditional German ruling parties drops in the polls, they will lose more votes in the upcoming German elections in 2021.

What is happening today in Germany is a big catastrophe for Merkel, the Christian Democrat and, subsequently, the Social-Democratic Party. It's not possible to restore the political power of these two parties in the near future, that is, as long as they are working together in the coalition government of Germany.

On the other hand, the political equations in Germany are so complex that none of the traditional German parties

will be able to win the majority of seats in the parliament.

As a result, a large part of the German authorities' time and energy will be consumed by forming a coalition government (which will be a weak one). This will undermine the position of Germany's leadership in the United Europe. In this sophisticated game, the Alternative for Germany (which the other German parties are unwilling to join) have been struggling to broaden its political and social popularity.

This extremist party hopes that other right-wingers, including French national leader Marine Le Pen, will be able to win good results in the elections and other political platforms in their country, and that their victory will influence Germany.

Merkel is no longer the symbol of Christian Democrats' power in Germany's and Europe's equations. Political history of the German Chancellor as the EU leader has come an end at a time when her substitute (in the event of a relative and fragile victory in the country's next general elections), should devote her power to attempts for the formation of a coalition or minimal government in Berlin. Without a doubt, Angela Merkel never imagined that she would have to permanently withdraw from power in Europe by 2021, as an incapable chancellor.

Reasons behind the eventual withdrawal of Kuwait from PGCC

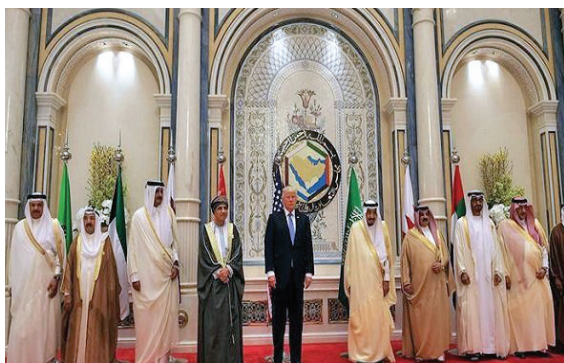
1 → The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on December 12 that Saudi Arabia agreed to establish a Red Sea regulatory regime aimed at strengthening security and investment in the Red Sea bordering countries.

According to the statement, the seven countries are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, Somalia, and Jordan.

The conference also features a new Saudi-led regional bloc that shows the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council's failure.

Regarding the normalization of relations with Tel Aviv and the “deal of the century”, we are also seeing disagreements among members of the Council. Kuwait is one of the countries that disagrees with the policy of normalization of relations with Israel by some member states of PGCC. Kuwait has never wanted to be dominated by the Saudis. We also see a sharpening of the country's disagreements with Saudi Arabia over joint oil fields, too.

This disagreement is over the Neutral Zone, and area of



about 5,700 square kilometers. Its dividing line begins north of Khafji oil field and runs straight to the west.

Kuwait disagrees with the resumption of oil extraction from the neutral zone without its recognition, and calls for its control as a Kuwaiti-dominated area.

Kuwait has discovered that Saudi Arabia is not a true friend of the Persian Gulf states, but an interventionist in the Persian Gulf states' internal affairs.

Kuwait knows that the deal Saudi Arabia and its allies, the Emirates and Bahrain made with Qatar may repeat with Kuwait and Oman. In fact, what caused Qatar not to invade Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE was the resistance and meddling of Kuwait and Oman.

Accordingly, Kuwait seeks to strike a balance between the three countries. Although Kuwait has military and security ties with the U.S., it well knows that the U.S. is constantly threatening regional security. No one has forgotten what Trump said about Saudi Arabia: “You might not be there for two weeks without us”.

Former Italian PM underlines close economic ties with Iran



NEW DELHI (Tasnim) — Former prime minister of Italy Paolo Gentiloni highlighted his country's “historical commitment” to broadening trade ties with Iran, stressing that Italy should adopt policies that are independent of the US.

Paolo Gentiloni Silveri, the 57th prime minister of Italy who ruled the European nation from December 2016 to June 2018, has joined a host of diplomats, scholars and political figures, including Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in India for a multilateral conference dubbed the Raisina Dialogue.

In an interview with Tasnim in New Delhi, Mr. Gentiloni expressed his views about international trade with Iran and the US' attempts to block relations with Tehran.

Asked about his get-together with Zarif, Gentiloni said, “We are old friends and former colleagues and always pleased to meet Minister Zarif, and we discussed both the relations between Europe and Iran that I deem very relevant, and I hope in positive revolution in these relations.”

As to plans for eliminating US dollar from the international trade with Iran, the former Italian premier said, “Well, I think we have to insist on good economic relations with Iran. This is a historical commitment of my country, and I hope that the international situation allows us to continue.”

He was also asked about the latest developments regarding the special purpose vehicle (SPV) - a financial mechanism devised by the EU to save the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and preserve trade with Tehran - and the impact of the US sanctions on Italy's ties with Iran. Gentiloni said, “We have always considered seriously the positions of the United States, but we need an autonomous policy, independent (policy).”

EU countries led by France, Germany and Britain - signatories to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal - want to enable non-US trade with Iran to continue in defiance of Washington.

The EU has devised the SPV to continue trade with Iran and neutralize the US sanctions against Tehran.

On May 8, US President Donald Trump pulled his country out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was achieved in Vienna in 2015 after years of negotiations among Iran and the Group 5+1 (Russia, China, the US, Britain, France and Germany).

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



NEW DELHI (Tasnim) — The foreign minister of Spain said his country would do its best to preserve economic relations with Iran despite the US sanctions against Tehran.

In an interview with The Tasnim News Agency in New Delhi on Wednesday, Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation Josep Borrell commented about Tehran-Madrid ties and the efforts to save the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Mr. Borrell, 71, is among the diplomats, scholars and political figures who have gathered in India for a multilateral conference dubbed the Raisina Dialogue.

Asked about the content of his meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Borrell said, “We talked about the situation and the relationship between Europe and Iran after the Americans breaking the (nuclear) deal.”

Commenting on the significance of Tehran-Madrid relations, the Spanish diplomat said, “We are very much interested in keeping the best relations with Iran. It has been a very nice meeting, and we'll do our best to continue having economic relations despite the American decisions.”

Asked about Spain's willingness to save the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), he stressed, “Yes, it's very important for all European countries. It is important to make the nuclear deal to be preserved, for sure.”

“It (the nuclear deal) is an important part of our security. We have been investing a lot of energy, diplomatic energy and political will, on building this agreement. That's why we think it's important,” Borrell noted.

Asked about the impact of US pressures on Spain's ties with Iran, the senior diplomat said, “We know, all European countries, that their stage are in different position from us.”

EU countries led by France, Germany and Britain - signatories to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal - want to enable non-US trade with Iran to continue in defiance of Washington.

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1.3 million Iranians suffering from epilepsy

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — There are 1.3 million Iranians suffering from epilepsy and 400,000 of them are diagnosed with drug-resistant disease, the head of the 15th International Congress on Epilepsy has said.

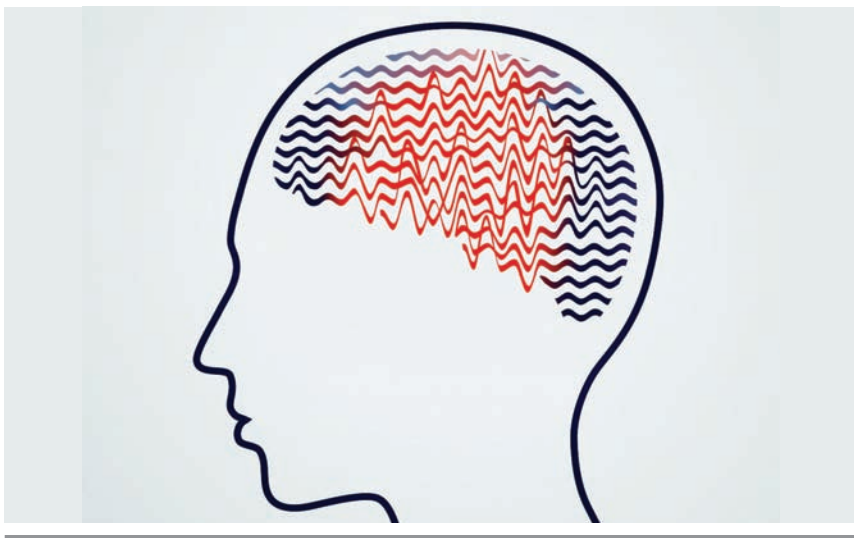
Epilepsy is a chronic disorder of the brain that affects people of all ages. It is characterized by recurrent seizures, which are brief episodes of involuntary movement that may involve a part of the body (partial) or the entire body (generalized), and are sometimes accompanied by loss of consciousness and control of bowel or bladder function.

Epilepsy's side effects can be easily managed in case it is diagnosed timely, and the quality of the patients' life will increase, IRNA news agency quoted Hossein Pakdaman as saying on Thursday.

Despite other countries where they invest on research for epilepsy, not much is spent in Iran on research and treatment methods for epilepsy, he regretted.

Being injured in road crashes is one of the leading causes of epilepsy in Iran and the number of people suffering from the disorder in the country is two or three times more than other developing countries, he added.

Dariush Nasabi Tehrani, director and founder of the Iranian Epilepsy Associ-



Being injured in road crashes is one of the leading causes of epilepsy in Iran and the number of people suffering from the disorder in the country is two or three times more than other developing countries

ation, for his part, said that while there different medications available for treatment of epilepsy the main treatment for

epilepsy patients is taking medicine and even changing the medicine might give rise to seizures in such patients.

Such patients' well-being is highly dependent on the use of drugs and in some cases one hour delay in taking the medications may result in seizures, he warned.

Marjan Asadollahi the scientific secretary of the 15th International Congress on Epilepsy also called on insurance companies to cover treatment and medication costs of such patients.

The 15th International Congress on Epilepsy will be held on January 23-25. Drug resistant epilepsy, medical and surgical managements, epilepsy in systemic diseases, and psychogenic seizure and psychological aspects of epilepsy are the main themes of the congress.

■Epilepsy worldwide

According to World Health Organization (WHO) approximately 50 million people worldwide have epilepsy, making it one of the most common neurological diseases globally.

Nearly 80% of the people with epilepsy live in low- and middle-income countries. People with epilepsy respond to treatment approximately 70% of the time.

About three fourths of people with epilepsy living in low- and middle-income countries do not get the treatment they need.

In many parts of the world, people with epilepsy and their families suffer from stigma and discrimination.

Exercise can help fight off Alzheimer's, but how?

Exercise is a vital element of a healthful lifestyle; it helps maintain heart health, improve mood, and fight weight gain. New research also suggests that it can protect a person's cognitive skills, and a new study uncovers fresh information as to how this can happen.

According to a study covered on Medical News Today last year, engaging in regular, leisurely exercise can help keep the body young and healthy.

The same appears to be true for the relationship between exercise and the mind; only 10 minutes of physical activity may boost cognitive function in the short-term.

Meanwhile, exercising regularly for 6 months could actually reverse the symptoms of mild cognitive impairment.

Starting from such evidence, which suggests that exercise has a protective and even healing effect on brain functioning, a team of researchers from numerous international academic institutions has recently investigated some of the biological mechanisms that underlie this relationship.

The researchers came from institutions including the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and the Taub Institute for Research on Alzheimer's Disease and the Aging Brain at Columbia University in New York City, NY.

They conducted the new research — the findings of which appear in the journal Nature Medicine — in a mouse model, and it suggests that a protein and hormone released during exercise might be the main factor behind slowing cognitive impairment linked to conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

■The memory-boosting protein

In the new study paper — the first author of which is Mychael Lourenco, from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro — the scientists explain that in Alzheimer's disease, as well as in other neurodegenerative conditions, hormonal signals are impaired.

"Failure of hormone-initiated signaling pathways," the authors explain, "has been associated with brain disorders, including [Alzheimer's disease]."

This has led investigators to target such signaling pathways in an effort to find better treatments and preventive approaches for cognitive impairment.

Lourenco and team started by looking at hormonal levels in the hippocampus and cerebral spinal fluid of people with Alzheimer's. Then, they repeated the investigation in a mouse model of the condition.

They found that in Alzheimer's, the levels of a protein

and hormone called irisin, as well as those of its precursor — fibronectin type III domain-containing protein 5 (FNDC5) — are significantly reduced in both the hippocampus and the cerebrospinal fluid.

The researchers explain that irisin is a myokine, a messenger protein released by muscle cells in response to the contractions that occur during physical activity.

■Potential for 'an attractive novel therapy'

Mice that the researchers engineered to express lower-than-normal levels of irisin in the brain had trouble with short-term memory and less of an ability to strengthen synapses. These are the links between neurons that support information flow and memory recall in the brain.

However, when the researchers increased irisin level in rodents, they found that this boosted their memory as well as their ability to form and strengthen new synapses.

They also made another interesting find: when they blocked irisin signaling in mice, the animals no longer enjoyed the cognitive boost normally offered by exercise. This further strengthens the idea that this protein is key to safeguarding memory and brain health.

(Source: Medical News Today)

High-fibre diet cuts risk of death from cancer, stroke and heart disease by up to a third, major study finds

A nutritional review, which includes 185 studies and 58 clinical trials conducted over nearly 40 years, found that eating at least 25g to 29g of fiber per day was linked to a 15 to 30 per cent reduction in rates of life-threatening cancers, strokes and heart disease.

For every 1,000 participants, researchers found that eating more fiber translated into 13 fewer deaths and six fewer cases of coronary heart disease.

But worldwide the majority of people consume less than 20g of fiber a day.

UK guidelines, in place since 2015, recommend that people eat 30g a day, yet only 9 per cent of British adults meet the target.

In the U.S. rates of consumption are even worse, with the average adult eating just 15g of fiber a day.

Experts found that for every 8g increase in fiber consumption, total deaths from coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes and colorectal cancer plummeted by 5-27 per cent.

Researchers did not find any risks associated with eating fiber but the nutritional review's authors noted that consuming lots of it could have ill-effects for people with low iron or mineral levels.

Whole grains, which are high in fiber, can further reduce iron levels.

The review's authors also emphasized that their results mainly related to fiber rich foods and not synthetic fiber, such as powders, which can be added to meals.

"This study effectively re-endorses that the UK government advice to consume 30g fiber per day is pretty spot on," said Nita Forouhi, a professor at Cambridge University's MRC Epidemiology Unit.

"The onus is on individuals themselves, as well as public agencies, to make it happen, as average fiber intakes remain woefully low at a population level in the UK.

"This research did not study total carbohydrate intakes specifically, but its findings do imply that, though increasingly popular in the community at large, any dietary regimes that recommend very low-carbohydrate diets should consider the opportunity cost of missing out on fiber from whole grains.

"This research confirms that fiber and whole grain intakes are clearly important for longer term health."

The nutritional review was commissioned by the World Health Organization, authored by researchers from the University of Otago and is published in The Lancet.

(Source: The Independent)



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sq.m,spj,\$8000

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garden,500 sq.m built up
area,indoor spj,4Bdrs,fully
furn,triplex,\$15000

Darous
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Valiasre
Tajrish
Jordan
Vanak
Arjantin
Zafar...
nice cases ready to move in.

‘80% of web content for kids not safe for Iranian children’

TECHNOLOGY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Over 80 percent of internet content for kids is not safe and appropriate for children in Iran, the secretary of Koodakonline festival said, Fars reported on Wednesday.

Seyyed Jamal Hadian explained that the web content either is not appropriate for children’s age range or is made by foreign developers and is not appropriate for the Iranian culture.



The secretariat of the festival has received 1,120 works, of which 638 ones were web series and others were films so far, he said.

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Ministry will hold Koodakonline festival on web series and online short films for children in spring 2019.

The festival only acts as a facilitator to connect inventors, investors and producers, he said.

Sometimes both money and human resource are provided but there is no will to perform the work, he lamented.

A total of 20 top ideas in the web series section is selected and the Information and Communication Technology Ministry provide a subsidiary for producing as well as some facilitations like equipment, office, director and animator, he explained.

Several state-run organizations and private sectors including VOD supporters and publishers announced their support as sponsor of the festival, he said.

He named Amir Hossein Akrami, Banafsheh Badiei, Hamed Tamoli, Mehdi Hajvani, Bozorgmehr Hosseinpour, Ali Derakhshi and Hadis Lazar Gholami as the members of the jury.

Applicants can submit their works to the secretariat of the festival until January 21 and the winners will be announced in April 2019, he said.

The ICT ministry support five top idea for commercialization, he concluded.

The festival acts as an incubator in the field of creating appropriate content for children and young adults, the ICT minister said in December 2018.

In November, the ICT Ministry released a survey according to which, only eight percent of Iranian parents monitor their children’s online activity in Iran.

The ministry is projected to introduce parental control applications in the near future.

Tech terms you need to know

The devices and systems we use seem to change or get updated on an almost daily basis.

As our lives become increasingly interconnected, a range of new words and phrases are being added to the technological lexicon.

■ Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence, or AI, is a term that can mean different things to different people.

For its part, analytics business SAS states that AI “makes it possible for machines to learn from experience, adjust to new inputs and perform human-like tasks.”

A conceptual images of thousands of multi colored squares all moving in midair against a black background, coalescing to form a face of a head. This image is very abstract and could illustrate artificial intelligence or connection...With motion blur and bokeh effects.

■ Autonomous vehicle

A vehicle, such as a car or truck, that uses technology and sensors to drive without the need for human assistance.

Uber, Tesla and Hyundai are just some of the big businesses working on self-driving technologies.

■ Biometrics

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security describes biometrics as being “unique physical characteristics” that can be utilized for “automated recognition.” Think fingerprints, iris scans and voice recognition.

■ Blockchain

A distributed digital ledger that records transactions.

Instead of different parties in a transaction keeping their own records of that transaction — which could potentially differ and cause confusion — blockchain creates one “master” record. This cannot be changed once a transaction has been recorded.

As technology giant IBM notes: “All parties must give consensus before a new transaction is added to the network.”

■ Cloud computing

The term “cloud computing” has been used with increasing frequency over the last few years.

It’s described by Microsoft Azure as “the delivery of computing services” like software, servers, storage and databases, over the internet, or “cloud.”

■ Contactless

A cashless method of paying for goods and services. In the U.K., contactless payment technology can usually be used for payments of £30 or under, although there are some exceptions.

Contactless payment technology can be incorporated into a range of devices, from debit and credit cards to smartwatches and smartphones.

■ DDOS

DDOS stands for Distributed Denial of Service. The U.K.’s National Crime Agency (NCA) says that DDOS attacks take place when a group of “compromised, controlled computers” send messages to another computer or server simultaneously.

The messages are sent involuntarily — that is to say without the consent of the computer’s owner — the NCA adds. DDOS attacks are malicious and can make websites slow down and crash, making them inaccessible to users.

■ Fintech

An amalgamation of the words “financial” and “technology.” According to the Central Bank of Ireland, fintech “describes the use of technology to deliver financial services and products to consumers.”

Examples of fintech include mobile banking and contactless payments.

■ Hydroponics

As the Royal Horticultural Society states, hydroponics refers to “the science of growing plants without using soil, by feeding them on mineral nutrient salts dissolved in water.”

Some hydroponic systems are located underground and use LED technology to grow crops such as micro greens and salad leaves throughout the year.

(Source: cnbc.com)

ISA supports space-based agriculture

TECHNOLOGY d e s k **TEHRAN** — The Iranian Space Agency provides facilities for space-based startups active in the field of agriculture, Mehr reported on Thursday.

According to an agreement signed between the agriculture research and development technology fund and ISA, some facilities are provided for the startups, Shabnam Yazdani, an official with ISA announced.

The Information and Communication Technology Ministry also offers loans to startups.

The government paves the way for development of space technology, however the private sector mostly provides infrastructure and general systems, she said.

Recently, the private sector has been engaged in activities such as remote sensing and telecommunication satellites, she added.

Firstly, ISA should introduce space technology and application of satellite data to people and then recognize their needs, which can be met by space-based



technology, she explained.

“In this way, we can provide a business opportunity for entrepreneurs and startups to meet the society’s need.”

For example, space-based data and technology has a great role in agriculture. Monitoring the area under cultivation, in general, as well as cropping pattern modification and modern farm management methods and services can be provided by space-based technology, she said.

Moreover, data provided by satellites as well as metrological data and data provided by drones and soil maps and databases are important parts of a chain, which can help farmers to be more productive, she explained.

Obtaining these data helps lay the infrastructure and is costly, however the government can support startups to provide the data, she added.

Universities and academic centers can empower human resources in the field of space technology, she concluded.

Iranian apps, online services developed: minister



TECHNOLOGY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Iran has developed homegrown anti-virus, machine translation service, navigator and GPS projects, the information and communication technology (ICT) minister said on Wednesday, Mehr reported.

Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi said that the projects are done at the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Research Center.

The antivirus, Padvish, which has been downloaded for one million times, is considered as a rival for foreign applications, he said.

The application has been installed 700,000 times on computer and 300,000 times on cellphones so far, he announced.

Azari Jahromi named ‘Targoman’ as the first Iranian machine transla-

tion service, which is comparable to the Google Translate.

Targoman provides services in eight languages including Russian, Japanese, English and Arabic, he said.

It has also begun negotiations with startups in other countries for some mutual projects, he explained.

He also said that the national navigator has been downloaded for two million times by the users, which is comparable to the popular foreign navigator ‘Waze’ in the country.

During the past year, the ICT research center has conducted applicable researches, he said.

Azari Jahromi announced that the center should provide data to the public and can encourage startups by holding educational workshops.

Some 64% of Iranians are internet users: report



TECHNOLOGY d e s k **TEHRAN** — According to a report released by the Measuring Information Society of Iran at the Information Technology Organization, 64 percent of Iranians above six years are internet users.

A survey was conducted at urban and rural areas during winter season of the Iranian calendar year 1396 (ended March 20, 2018) by the Statistical Center of Iran.

According to the survey, the internet user is defined as someone who has used internet during the past three months and by this definition 46,315,545 people are internet users in Iran.

According to the report, 72.8 percent of Iranian families have access

to the internet, which means that 17,936,000 families benefit from internet nationwide.

A total of 17,216,000 families have access to computer, which is 69.7 percent of the population.

Another survey, which was conducted two years ago, reported that 61.39 percent of Iranian families have access to internet until the yearend of Iranian calendar year 1395 (ended on March 21, 2017).

Hence, there is a 10 percent development during a year, according to the report.

The survey is done according to 19 indicators and factors provided by International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

It is not technology that will steal your job



the most automated auto plant in the world. Only after he couldn’t get enough new cars out the door did he have to admit he underestimated the importance of the workforce.

■ Compensate and assist those who are displaced

Some workers will lose their jobs and be displaced. They need to be compensated fairly and provided adjustment assistance to avoid creating another generation of “winners and losers”.

● Globalization: The wave of globalization that has accelerated since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 has created an enormous gulf between winners and losers. Brexit, Trump, and the ensuing trade wars are manifestations of expanding trade without attending to its effects on workers and communities. But we can’t solve this problem with trade wars, isolationist strategies, or empty promises to bring back old-style factory jobs. The better option is to put advances in technology to work to build the next generation manufacturing industries, processes, and jobs, some of which can be produced locally in maker spaces using modern digital fabrication tools. These investments need to be combined with significant regional economic development, infrastructure, and education that offer the best chances of rebuilding communities hardest hit by the most recent wave of globalization.

● Worker responses to growing inequality: A megatrend of the past several decades has been the decline in the share of income going to labor and increases in income inequality. This corresponded with, and in part happened because of declining union membership and power in the majority of OECD countries. But the quiet acquiescence

of workers to their declining fortunes may be coming to an end. If so, we are in for a tumultuous period of protests and search for new ways for workers to build power to improve their conditions at work, whether that be in the gig world of Uber, the low wage world of McDonalds and Walmart or the high tech world of Google, Amazon, and others.

Will established labor unions adapt and find new ways to recruit and represent workers and counterbalance employer power? Maybe. If they don’t, either new ‘alt-labor’ organizations will rise out of the ashes of the current unions or it will be left to government policies to address the consequences of declining returns to labor.

That will mean turning to tax reforms and perhaps even some form of income guarantees to redistribute the gains from technological advance more equitably across the workforce. Most likely some combination will be needed of new forms of labor organizing, updating and strengthening labor and employment policies to ensure all who work, whether in standard employment relationships, contract, or independent contract relationships are covered by basic employment standards, and tax reforms that help shift returns from capital to labor.

● Workforce diversity within and across borders: Population growth in Africa, India, and other less developed countries will be accompanied by slower growth and aging populations in Europe, Japan, China, and North America. This means cross-border migration will likely accelerate, leading either to greater tensions than those already present or to a new era of assimilation as immigrants are welcomed to help fill workforce shortages in advanced economies. Which will it be? Neither is preordained but it will take a sustained effort to rebuild respect for and ability to capture the value of diversity in our workplaces.

● Climate change: Climate change is probably the mother of all megatrends that will influence not just the future of work but the future of the planet. But this could be our ace in the hole-a potential avenue for addressing all of the other megatrends mentioned above. Investing in alternative energy sources and associated infrastructure could produce a large number of high quality jobs and help save the planet.

The bottom line is if we go beyond predicting or worrying about these megatrends and start focusing on strategies to address and manage them, we can shape a positive and rewarding future for work. The future of work, indeed, the future of our planet is in our hands.

(Source: irishtimes.com)

Oceans are warming even faster than previously thought, research team suggests

Heat trapped by greenhouse gases is raising ocean temperatures faster than previously thought, concludes an analysis of four recent ocean heating observations. The results provide further evidence that earlier claims of a slowdown or 'hiatus' in global warming over the past 15 years were unfounded.

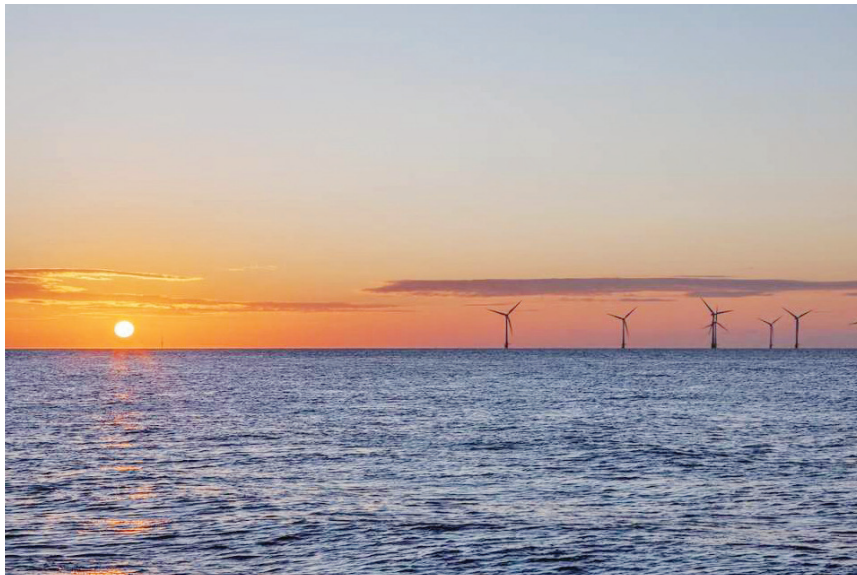
Berkeley -- Heat trapped by greenhouse gases is raising ocean temperatures faster than previously thought, concludes an analysis of four recent ocean heating observations. The results provide further evidence that earlier claims of a slowdown or 'hiatus' in global warming over the past 15 years were unfounded.

"If you want to see where global warming is happening, look in our oceans," said Zeke Hausfather, a graduate student in the Energy and Resources Group at the University of California, Berkeley, and co-author of the paper. "Ocean heating is a very important indicator of climate change, and we have robust evidence that it is warming more rapidly than we thought."

Ocean heating is critical marker of climate change because an estimated 93 percent of the excess solar energy trapped by greenhouse gases accumulates in the world's oceans. And, unlike surface temperatures, ocean temperatures are not affected by year-to-year variations caused by climate events like El Nino or volcanic eruptions.

Climate change models

The new analysis, published Jan. 11 in Science, shows that trends in ocean heat content match those predicted by leading climate change models, and that overall ocean warming is accelerating.



Assuming a "business-as-usual" scenario in which no effort has been made to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the Coupled Model Intercomparison Project 5 (CMIP5) models predict that the temperature of the top 2,000 meters of the world's oceans will rise 0.78 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. The thermal expansion caused by this

bump in temperature would raise sea levels 30 centimeters, or around 12 inches, on top of the already significant sea level rise caused by melting glaciers and ice sheets. Warmer oceans also contribute to stronger storms, hurricanes and extreme precipitation.

"While 2018 will be the fourth warmest year on record on the surface, it will most

certainly be the warmest year on record in the oceans, as was 2017 and 2016 before that," Hausfather said. The "global warming signal is a lot easier to detect if it is changing in the oceans than on the surface."

Gaps in measurements

The four studies, published between 2014 and 2017, provide better estimates of past trends in ocean heat content by correcting for discrepancies between different types of ocean temperature measurements and by better accounting for gaps in measurements over time or location.

The "Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report, published in 2013, showed that leading climate change models seemed to predict a much faster increase in ocean heat content over the last 30 years than was seen in observations," Hausfather said. "That was a problem, because of all things, that is one thing we really hope the models will get right."

A fleet of nearly 4,000 floating robots drift throughout the world's oceans, every few days diving to a depth of 2000 meters and measuring the ocean's temperature, pH, salinity and other bits of information as they rise back up. This ocean-monitoring battalion, called Argo, has provided consistent and widespread data on ocean heat content since the mid-2000s.

Prior to Argo, ocean temperature data was sparse at best, relying on devices called expendable bathythermographs that sank to the depths only once, transmitting data on ocean temperature until settling into watery graves.

(Source: sciencedaily.com)

Unlike surface temperatures, ocean temperatures are not affected by year-to-year variations caused by climate events like El Nino or volcanic eruptions.

Discovery adapts natural membrane to make hydrogen fuel from water

A chemical reaction pathway central to plant biology have been adapted to form the backbone of a new process that converts water into hydrogen fuel using energy from the sun.

In a recent study from the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Argonne National Laboratory, scientists have combined two membrane-bound protein complexes to perform a complete conversion of water molecules to hydrogen and oxygen.

The work builds on an earlier study that examined one of these protein complexes, called Photosystem I, a membrane protein that can use energy from light to feed electrons to an inorganic catalyst that makes hydrogen. This part of the reaction, however, represents only half of the overall process needed for hydrogen generation.

Protein complex

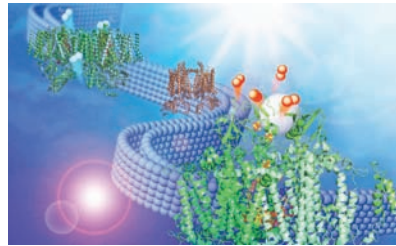
By using a second protein complex that takes energy from light to split water and take electrons from it, called Photosystem II, Argonne chemist Lisa Utschig and her colleagues were able to take electrons from water and feed them to Photosystem I.

The "beauty of this design is in its simplicity — you can self-assemble the catalyst with the natural membrane to do the chemistry you want" — Lisa Utschig, Argonne chemist

In an earlier experiment, the researchers provided Photosystem I with electrons from a sacrificial electron donor. The "trick was how to get two electrons to the catalyst in fast succession," Utschig said.

The two protein complexes are embedded in thylakoid membranes, like those found inside the oxygen-creating chloroplasts in higher plants.

The "membrane, which we have taken directly from nature, is essential for pairing



the two photosystems," Utschig said. "It structurally supports both of them simultaneously and provides a direct pathway for inter-protein electron transfer, but doesn't impede catalyst binding to Photosystem I."

Natural membrane

According to Utschig, the Z-scheme — which is the technical name for the light-triggered electron transport chain of natural photosynthesis that occurs in the thylakoid membrane — and the synthetic catalyst come together quite elegantly. The "beauty of this design is in its simplicity — you can self-assemble the catalyst with the natural membrane to do the chemistry you want," she said.

One additional improvement involved the substitution of cobalt or nickel-containing catalysts for the expensive platinum catalyst that had been used in the earlier study. The new cobalt or nickel catalysts could dramatically reduce potential costs.

The next step for the research, according to Utschig, involves incorporating the membrane-bound Z-scheme into a living system. "Once we have an in vivo system — one in which the process is happening in a living organism — we will really be able to see the rubber hitting the road in terms of hydrogen production," she said.

(Source: phys.org)

Astronomers find signatures of a 'messy' star that made its companion go supernova

Many stars explode as luminous supernovae when, swollen with age, they run out of fuel for nuclear fusion. But some stars can go supernova simply because they have a close and pesky companion star that, one day, perturbs its partner so much that it explodes.

These latter events can happen in binary star systems, where two stars attempt to share dominion. While the exploding star gives off lots of evidence about its identity, astronomers must engage in detective work to learn about the errant companion that triggered the explosion.

On Jan. 10 at the 2019 American Astronomical Society meeting in Seattle, an international team of astronomers announced that they have identified the type of companion star that made its partner in a binary system, a carbon-oxygen white dwarf star, explode. Through repeated observations of SN 2015cp, a supernova 545 million light years away, the team detected hydrogen-rich debris that the companion star had shed prior to the explosion.

Red giant star

The "presence of debris means that the companion was either a red giant star or similar star that, prior to making its companion go supernova, had shed large amounts of material," said University of Washington astronomer Melissa Graham, who presented the discovery and is lead author on the accompanying paper accepted for publication in The Astrophysical Journal.

The supernova material smacked into this stellar litter at 10 percent the speed of light, causing it to glow with ultraviolet light that was detected by the Hubble Space Telescope and other observatories nearly



two years after the initial explosion.

By looking for evidence of debris impacts months or years after a supernova in a binary star system, the team believes that astronomers could determine whether the companion had been a messy red giant or a relatively neat and tidy star.

The team made this discovery as part of a wider study of a particular type of supernova known as a Type Ia supernova. These occur when a carbon-oxygen white dwarf star explodes suddenly due to activity of a binary companion.

Carbon-oxygen white dwarfs

Carbon-oxygen white dwarfs are small, dense and -- for stars -- quite stable. They form from the collapsed cores of larger stars and, if left undisturbed, can persist for billions of years.

Type Ia supernovae have been used for cosmological studies because their consistent luminosity makes them ideal "cosmic lighthouses," according to Graham. They've been used to estimate the expansion rate of the universe and served as indirect evidence for the existence of dark energy.

Yet scientists are not certain what kinds of companion stars could trigger a Type Ia event.

(Source: eurekalert.org)

Moonlight influences opening and closing of oysters' shells, say researchers

The gentle glow of moonlight on water has moved musicians, poets and painters — and, it turns out, molluscs. Researchers have discovered the opening and shutting of oysters' shells appears to be tied to the lunar cycle.

Biological clocks have intrigued scientists for centuries, and researchers in the field won the 2017 Nobel prize for studies into the 24-hour body clock.

However, organisms do not necessarily have biological processes linked only to the rhythm of day and night, the circadian clock.

Other patterns that include links to the tides have been found for species including the horseshoe crab, and to the phases of the moon for creatures including the bristle worm. Some have suggested the latter may also affect humans.

Now experts say they have found evidence that oysters not only have a circadian clock and a tidal clock, but are also attuned to lunar rhythms.

The moonlight effect

"It was a surprise to see that there is such an effect of the moonlight," said Laura Payton, co-author of the research from the University of Oldenburg.

Writing in the Biology Letters journal, Payton and her colleague Damien Tran from the University of Bordeaux describe how they tracked the behavior of 12 Pacific



oysters submerged off the French coast over the course of three and a half lunar cycles from the end of 2014.

The team used electrodes to track the molluscs' degree of opening every 1.6 seconds and looked at astronomical data to assess how much of the moon was illuminated.

The results reveal the oysters were most open in the buildup to — and presence of — a new moon, and less open as the moon entered first quarter and full phases.

The team says that suggests oysters can sense moonlight — even though it is far less intense than the sun's rays.

However, Payton said the situation was

complex, noting the creatures appeared to be able to tell if the moon was waxing or waning: the oysters were generally more open during the third quarter than the first quarter.

Payton said one possibility was that the benthic bivalves may have evolved an internal lunar clock, rather than passively relying on direct cues. In that case, she added, the moonlight sensed by the oyster would help keep this clock in sync with the environment rather than directly triggering the opening and shutting of the shell — similar to how humans use daylight to keep their internal 24-hour clock on track.

The moonlight levels

The team suggests the increased opening of the oysters when moonlight levels are lower might be linked to the possibility that more food is available at low light levels: previous studies have suggested the movement of plankton also appears to be influenced by light. "We know that oysters open their valves when there is food," Payton said.

However, the study did not look at the impact of the moon on oysters' behavior in all seasons, or take into account cloud cover — and hence the actual level of moonlight the molluscs experienced.

David Wilcockson, a senior lecturer in aquatic biology at Aberystwyth University, said there were still many mysteries in the field. "We know that, for example, tidal, lunar and circadian clocks appear to have separate mechanisms, but they are to some extent linked — and we don't know quite how and to what level," he said.

Wilcockson said human activity could cause unexpected problems in marine environments — an issue research like the latest study could help examine. "If you have coastal lighting, for example, or lighting on marine structures, then of course we don't really know what the impacts of those might be," he said.

(Source: The Guardian)

Sunscreen and cosmetics compound may harm coral

Although sunscreen is critical for preventing sunburns and skin cancer, some of its ingredients are not so beneficial to ocean-dwelling creatures. In particular, sunscreen chemicals shed by swimmers are thought to contribute to coral reef decline.

Now, researchers reporting in ACS' journal Analytical Chemistry say that one such chemical, octocrylene (OC), which is also in some cosmetics and hair products, accumulates in coral as fatty acid esters that could be toxic to the marine organism.

According to several research studies, up to 14,000 tons of sunscreen end up in the world's oceans every year. To protect coral reefs, the state of Hawaii recently banned sunscreens containing oxybenzone and octinoxate, two chemicals known to harm coral, with the law set to take effect in January 2021. Another substance, OC, can be found in cosmetics such as hair sprays and conditioners, as well as sunscreens.

Although OC is toxic to coral at high concentrations, Didier Stien, Philippe Lebaron and colleagues wondered how it would affect coral at levels more likely to be encountered in the environment.

To find out, the researchers exposed coral to OC at various concentrations for a week. They found that the coral was sensitive to the compound at concentrations of 50 micrograms per liter and greater, which is about 10 times higher than levels measured in the ocean. OC accumulated in the coral as fatty acid conjugates, which may interfere with the organism's metabolism.

The team also detected increased levels of acylcarnitines in the exposed corals, which are produced under conditions of abnormal fatty acid metabolism and mitochondrial dysfunction. The researchers say that levels of OC in the ocean might have been underestimated previously because these measurements did not take into account OC fatty acid esters.

(Source: tunisiesoir.com)

Spring migration causes 2b birds to cross Gulf of Mexico, says study

A new study indicates that an average of 2.1 billion birds migrates through the Gulf of Mexico each spring. The findings also revealed that the highest activity, with 26,000 birds per kilometer, occurs along the western coast of Texas.

Scientists explain that quantifying the migration intensity and timing of movement is necessary to understand the impact of climate change and shifting landscapes on migratory birds.

The most crucial findings of the study are the fact that at least half of yearly migration happens within a period of 18-days. This information, researchers suggest, can help mitigate the harm to bird populations caused as a result of wind turbines and light.

The study combined data from bird watchers and weather radar stations to provide detailed understanding into spring bird migration along the Gulf of Mexico. The findings of the study, which was published in the journal Global Change Biology, reveal the timing, location, and intensity of these movements.

"We looked at data from thousands of eBird observers and 11 weather radar stations along the Gulf Coast from 1995 to 2015," said lead author Kyle Horton, an Edward W. Rose postdoctoral fellow at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.



The radar helped reveal the timing of bird migration and the routes they take. Researchers found that the peak spring migration remained consistent for over two decades along the Gulf coastline and the period between April 19 and May 7 is the busiest.

Scientists explained that even though the migration has evolved due to climate change, the current rate of change may be too brisk for the birds to keep up. The findings also show that seasonal movements now commence sooner. However, the peak activity has remained unchanged with regard to the change in seasonal movements, which may be an alarming trend.

(Source: Tech Times)

Earth's magnetic pole moving fast, baffling scientists

Earth's north magnetic pole is moving fast and in an unexpected way, baffling scientists involved in tracking its motions.

Our planet is surrounded by a magnetic field. It is thought to arise from the electric currents generated by Earth's core—a solid iron ball surrounded by a liquid metal. This field is one of the reasons life is able to thrive as it deflects the solar wind, protecting us from harmful radiation.

However, the magnetic field is constantly moving. At the moment, its north pole is over Canada, but it is slowly making its way toward Siberia. In the early 2000s, NASA announced the pole's rate of movement had increased to about 25 miles per year.

The changes to Earth's magnetic field are tracked with the World Magnetic Model. According to the British Geological Survey, the World Magnetic Model is used extensively for navigation by the U.S. Department of Defense, as well as many civilian systems. Because of the constant changes, the model has to be revised regularly.

In 2014, a new version of the model was released. This was expected to last until 2020, but last September it had to be revised following feedback from users that it "had become inaccurate in the Arctic region," the British Geological Survey said.

Now, the World Magnetic Model is set to be updated again. A meeting was scheduled for January 15, but because of the U.S. government shutdown, it has been postponed until January 30, Nature magazine reported.

"The error is increasing all the time," Arnaud Chulliat, a geomagnetist at the University of Colorado Boulder and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, told Nature. He said learning that the World Magnetic Model had become inaccurate placed scientists in an "interesting situation" with experts wondering just what was going on.

According to Nature, a geomagnetic pulse under South America in 2016 shifted the magnetic field unexpectedly. This was exacerbated by the movement of the north magnetic pole. "The fact that the pole is going fast makes this region more prone to large errors," Chulliat said.

(Source: Newsweek)

Education Ministry elaborates on elimination of university entrance exam

SOCIETY **TEHRAN** — On January 2, Education Minister Mohammad Bat’haei bid farewell to Konkur, the university entrance exam being held annually for gaining admission to higher education, however, there are many questions left as to how students will be evaluated to gain admission to a specific university.

Bat’haei in a tweet explained that students can gain admission to 85 percent of the fields of studies at universities without needing to take part in the difficult exam and undergo intense stress, solely based on their educational backgrounds; farewell to Konkur.



The Iranian university entrance exam, is a standardized multiple choice test used as a means to gain admission to higher education in Iran. Students in the three main groups of mathematical sciences, experimental sciences, and human sciences and two other groups of arts and foreign languages will compete in an attempt to seek a place in one of the public universities after finishing the 12-year compulsory education.

As the number of seats at top public universities are limited the competition is usually cut-throat and the exam content is rigorous.

However, changes announced by the Ministry have so far perplexed students and their families wondering what is considered as the education background.

Moreover, some are speculating about the possible outcomes of the newly proposed scheme, fearing whether all students can gain admission to the higher education fair and square.

There is also one other group who may not have a very good educational background and believe they have lost any chances of going to university forever.

Inquired about the possible implications of elimination of Konkur, Abbas Soltanian, director of the high school education department at the Ministry of Education, said that educational background refers to the grades and scores students obtain during their last year of education in nationwide end-of-the-term exams.

This year in booklets being distributed by Sanjesh Organization [which is in charge of coordinating and administering Konkur] all majors available for students to choose without needing to take Konkur will be announced, IRNA news agency quoted Soltanian as saying on Friday.

He didn’t mention the exact time of the distribution of the booklets. That some believe educational backgrounds include the scores students obtained during their high school years is wrong, he said, adding that nonetheless, students should prepare themselves for their last year final exams during those years.

Additionally, Soltanian said that those who have received poor grades are allowed to take the exams one more time to improve them.

Students who have been graduated from high school in 2006 and later can take their final exams once more to raise their grades, he added.

He also stated that students and their parents should not worry about the fairness of the new scheme as the final exams of the 12th grade are all standardized ad being held nationwide and there are no chances of cheating in the exams.

The deeper students’ knowledge are the better they would perform at their final exams, Soltanian noted, saying that examining students’ knowledge in a three-hour multiple choice exam is not efficient.

This new method would decrease students’ stress and ease the process of gaining admission to universities.

LEARN ENGLISH

Discussing the Competition

Mr. Ford: Now, of course, with all this **cutting-edge** technology there must be a **catch**, you might ask yourself. I bet the retail price will be too much for most consumers, you might say. Well, you’d be wrong!

Mr. Ford: Yes, of course the x420 is **aimed** at the luxury market, but if you compare the price of our leading competitors, the x420 represents incredible value for money. At only 15,000 RMB it is far more affordable and far more attractive than almost any leading brand and model.

Mr. Ford: So, what **differentiates** us from our competitors? Well, if we compare Orange’s luxury MP40 range then we can really **highlight** some of the differences.

Mr. Ford: Now, of course Orange has an **enviable** record for producing revolutionary and top class products, and I must admit the MP40 is a breath-taking machine. However, for most consumers the MP40 is simply far too expensive to consider.

Mr. Ford: The questions we must ask ourselves are “What does the Alpha brand stand for?” and also “How can we set ourselves apart from our competitors?” The answer to both of these questions is the same my friends.

Mr. Ford: Alpha stands first and **foremost** for quality, for excellence and for service. If we always stick to this philosophy, then I’m confident that we will really be able to expand our market share significantly. Okay, let me move on now to give you an idea of our marketing campaign for the x420.

■ **Key vocabulary**
cutting edge: the newest and most advanced
catch: hidden problem that makes something complicated
aim: to direct (something) at a particular goal
differentiate: to make different in some way
highlight: to make or try to make people notice
enviable: causing envy; very desirable
foremost: most important

■ **Supplementary vocabulary**
high-end: at the top level of consumer purchases, aimed at luxury and high quality markets
outsources: to send a job somewhere else, often overseas
hotline: a phone number people can call to get help any time of day
motto: an expression that is the guiding principle of a person or organization
trademark: something (symbol, logo, phrase, etc.) that distinguishes one company’s product from its competitors
(Source: irlanguage.com)

Be on the horns of a dilemma: Water transfer from Caspian Sea to central Iran

By Maryam Qarehgozlou

TEHRAN — Water transfer from Caspian Sea in northern Iran to the central province of Semnan has been a controversial scheme which has put many on the horns of the dilemma.

Uneven water resource distribution and imbalanced water demand of the human society makes water transfer inevitable. Water transfer has been a method to alleviate and even resolve the urgent demand of the water-stressed areas.

A number of countries have made attempts and have achieved enormous benefits. However it definitely involves changes of the ecological environment in different basins.

■ **Department of Environment gives the green light**

On January 5 chief of Department of Environment Issa Kalantari told ILNA news agency that he has no objection to water transfer from Caspian Sea to the central parts of the country.

“Providing potable water as well as water needed for industrial purposes is a must for the government by any means and water transfer from the Caspian Sea is one of those means,” Kalantari said.

Transferring water from the sea is alright provided that environmental impact of the scheme is assessed, he said, adding that water transfer can be both good and bad.

He also highlighted that more than 100 percent of renewable water resources are being used in the country with agriculture sector being the biggest consumer saying that water transfer for agricultural use is not acceptable.

He went on to say that environmental activists are not weighing up the matter properly the negativity is not good for the environment.

The environment chief also said that water shortage in central Iran would result in forced migration of the residents to Tehran.

Inquired about environmental consequences of water transfer from the Caspian Sea he explained that the volume of water in the Caspian Sea is about 80,000 billion cubic meters and transferring 100 million cubic meters of water won’t affect water



level at the sea.

Moreover, he added, other littoral countries have already installed pipes for gas and oil transfer deep into the sea which is against the law and Iran can also transfer water from the sea without negotiations.

Mentioning the increased salinity of water by using desalination plants, Kalantari explained that the Persian Gulf littoral countries are desalinating billions of cubic meters of water and causing great problems for the Persian Gulf but the Iranian Medias are criticizing the government for desalinating only 1 billion cubic meters of water annually.

We should safeguard our national interest, he suggested, restating that transferring water for agricultural purposes is not economically justifiable but for drinking and industrial purposes is a must.

He also ensured the public that the process will be done with the lowest environmental impacts possible.

■ **Parliament opposes the plan**

According to a report by the YJC published on January 11, Mohammad Ali Shaeri, head of the agriculture committee of Majlis (Iranian

Parliament), said the Caspian Sea is an enclosed body of water and any changes to it would endanger its ecology.

Water transfer from the Caspian Sea is a threat to the sea and should the project goes into effect the sea level will drastically drop and it will be dried out, Shaeri warned.

By implementing the scheme other provinces such as Tehran, North Khorasan, and other central regions would request water transfer from the Caspian Sea which would be a threat to the sea.

He further explains that carrying out this plan is an “ultimate betrayal” as it carries huge environmental and economic consequences.

In addition to environmental damages to the sea water transfer from the Caspian Sea can endanger the forests as well, he lamented.

The project will breed environmental and social consequences both for the donor and recipient basin as such plans are proved to be environmentally unsustainable.

Mohammad Torbatinejad, who is the spokesman for agriculture committee of Majlis said on January 9 that 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.

■ **Forests, national land areas are in danger**

Aziz Abesi, an environmental expert, has also mentioned the environmental, social and economic impacts of the scheme.

“Installing pipes and building roads would definitely cause irreparable damages to the sensitive ecology of Hyrcanian forests,” he warned.

Moreover, as Alborz mountainous region is prone to earthquakes and land subsidence the pipes can easily break and salt water can cause damages to the national land areas, he added.

■ **The dangers facing the environment**

According to the U.S. National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health, the positive impacts include adding new basins for water-deficient areas, facilitating water cycle, improving meteorological conditions in the recipient basins, mitigating ecological water shortage, repairing the damaged ecological system, and preserving the endangered wild fauna and flora.

However, the negative impacts include salinization and aridification of the donor basins, damage to the ecological environment of the donor basins and the both sides of the conveying channel system, increase of water consumption in the recipient basins, and spread of diseases, etc.

As water transfer has enormous ecological risk, it is necessary to comprehensively analyze the inter-basin water balance relationship, coordinate the possible conflicts and environmental quality problems between regions, and strengthen the argumentation of the ecological risk of water transfer and eco-compensation measures.

In addition, there are some effective alternative measures for water transfer, such as attaching importance to water cycle, improving water use efficiency, developing sea water desalination, and rainwater harvesting technology, etc.

23,000 housing units completed in quake-stricken Kermanshah

SOCIETY **TEHRAN** — Some 23,000 housing units were completed in quake-stricken regions of the western province of Kermanshah, deputy director at the Islamic Revolution Housing Foundation has said.

On November 12, 2017, a destructive earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale hit Sarpol-e Zahab in Kermanshah. Some 90,000 houses were partly or completely damaged by the tremor. Sadly, the quake took over 660 lives and left more than 10,000 injured.

Retrofitting and reconstruction of the houses in the quake-hit villages is 90 percent completed, IRIB quoted Azizollah

Mahdian as saying on Thursday.

By the end of the current [Iranian calendar] year some 26,000 housing units will be completed in villages affected by the earthquake, Mahdian added.

Low-interest housing loans were allotted to all the victims of the earthquake and there is no one left, he highlighted.

He went on to say that reconstruction of the urban areas is completed by 70 percent and the houses in these areas will be also completed by the end of spring or summer.

He also stated that increased costs of construction materials is what delaying the completion of the houses.

Mysterious mass fish deaths spark alarm in Australia

More than a million fish are thought to have been killed, including huge cod up to 80 years old, in a river in Australia amid an unusual algal bloom following drought conditions.

The cause of the algal bloom, which is the second to hit the Darling River at Menindee in New South Wales in a month, is the subject of furious debate over weather patterns and the management of dams.

Ecologists fear the impact could be so severe whole populations of local native fish may have been wiped out.

According to the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI), toxic blue green algae is to blame.

A government spokesperson said on Tuesday only heavy rain in the area will flush the algae out of the river basin.

Native species including bony bream, Mur-

ray cod and perch are among those affected.

At the time of the first incident in late December 2018, in which 10,000 fish are estimated to have been killed, WaterNSW and the DPI blamed drought.

This time, the DPI admitted the events were “unprecedented” and said the drought conditions were then exacerbated by cool weather.

The DPI’s fisheries manager Iain Ellis said: “I’ve never seen two fish kills of this scale so close together in terms of time, especially in the same stretch of river.”

“In both cases it’s when the algal bloom has been disrupted.

“The first time due to a storm, and in this case, by the cold front that went through.”

The department said it believes the temperature drop would have killed the huge

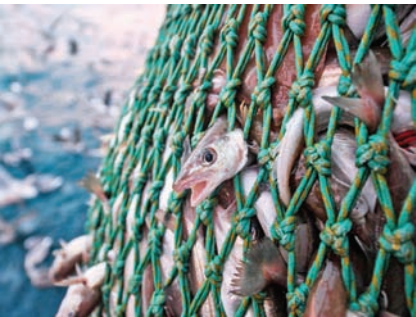
algal blooms, and the plants then decompose, siphoning off all the dissolved oxygen in the water and effectively suffocating the fish.

But anger remains over the management of the water system, with locals pointing out fish over 80 years old have survived droughts and cold spells in the past.

Senator for the state of South Australia Rex Patrick said: “The Darling River is going into cardiac arrest and both the governments are asleep at the wheel of the ambulance,” the senator said, according to ABC news.

He also urged the state and federal governments to allow water being held in nearby dams to flow down the river system to meet “basic needs” of humans and livestock.

Footage of distraught local men Rob McBride and Dick Arnold, holding the bodies of huge dead fish and blaming the govern-



ment, have gained more than 2 million views.

“This is bloody disgraceful, this is the most disgusting thing I’ve seen in my life,” Mr McBride tells the camera.

“This has nothing to do with drought, this is a man-made disaster brought to you by the New South Wales government and the federal government.”

(Source: *The Independent*)

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

A ← → ع

Iran outlaws private ownership of wild animals

Iran has outlawed the private ownership of wild animals, including cheetahs, lions and tigers, and will fine or imprison anyone parading the wild animals in public, YJC reported on Wednesday.

“If a person seen in public walking an exotic pet, will be fined up to 800 million rials (about \$20,000) and could face up to three-year term of imprisonment,” Department of Environment’s (DOE) director for hunting and fishing Ali Teymouri has said.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“-ery, -ry”

■ **Meaning:** a place for

■ **For example:** At one time, I would have everything I owned dirty before I would go to the **laundry**.

PHRASAL VERB

Make something into

■ **Meaning:** convert or change into

■ **For example:** We’re going to make our garage into a playroom.

IDIOM

Come to your senses

■ **Explanation:** to start to think clearly and behave sensibly

■ **For example:** She finally came to her senses when she saw that public transport was faster than driving in the city.

U.S.: Syria withdrawal has begun; Russia doubtful

➡ “I can confirm the movement of equipment from Syria,” the unnamed official was quoted as saying by AFP, but declined to provide further details “for security reasons.”

The so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that the coalition had started scaling down its presence at Rmeilan airfield in the northeastern province of Hasakeh.

“On Thursday, some American forces withdrew from the Rmeilan military base in Hasakeh province,” said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-based monitoring organization.

“This is the first such pullout of American forces since the U.S. president’s announcement” of a full troop withdrawal from Syria last month, he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reacted to the allegation, saying he thought the United States wanted to stay on in the country.

Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told reporters that if the claims were true the territory previously controlled by the U.S. should be transferred to the Syrian government.

“In this regard, establishing dialogue between the Kurds and Damascus takes on particular significance. After all, the Kurds are an integral part of Syrian society,” she said.

Zakharova also said Russia remains committed to an agreement it had struck with Turkey to stabilize a de-escalation zone in Syria’s Idlib province, but Moscow is worried by an increase in the number of ceasefire violations there.

Trump has said he agreed to submit areas under the control of Kurdish militants to Turkey, prompting outrage among the community in northern Syria and warnings by the U.S. politicians that Washington was betraying its allies in the region.

The U.S. officials are now sending contradictory signals on the plan, prompting Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to say on Thursday that his country’s planned military operation against Kurdish militants in Syria would not depend on an American withdrawal.

The U.S. Secretary of Defense Mike Pompeo stressed on Thursday that the alleged U.S. withdrawal from Syria was not “a change of mission.”

“Let me be clear: America will not retreat until the terror fight is over,” he said, adding, “For our part, our airstrikes in the region will continue as targets arise,” he said in a speech at the American University in Cairo.



Meanwhile, the U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton on Sunday outlined conditions for the U.S. troop departure from Syria, including a provision that Turkey should guarantee the safety of the People’s Protection Units (People’s Defense Units/Yekineyên Parastina Gel/YPG) Kurdish militants in Syria.

Those conditions enraged Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who refused to meet Bolton on his visit to Ankara early this week.

“It is not possible for us to accept and stomach the message Bolton gave from Israel,” Erdogan said.

“Regarding this matter, Bolton has made a serious mistake and whoever thinks like this has also made a mistake. It is not possible for us to make compromises on this point,” he added.

Pompeo’s remarks in Cairo also appeared to contradict Trump’s announcement, drawing immediate criticism from Middle East experts as well as officials who served under former U.S. president Barack Obama.

“We learned that when America retreats, chaos often follows. When we neglect our friends, resentment builds. And when we partner with our enemies, they advance,” he said.

“The good news is this: The age of self-inflicted American shame is over. And so are the policies that produced so much needless suffering. Now comes the real new beginning,” Pompeo added.

Media reports on Thursday said a draft

paper outlining the U.S. plans for withdrawing from Syria included leaving troops in place at a position near the Iraqi and Jordanian border.

Most of the U.S. forces are concentrated in the northeast of Syria, but soldiers also maintain a base near southern Syria in an area known as al-Tanf, on the Iraqi border.

Israel has reportedly lobbied for the Trump administration to reconsider pulling troops out of al-Tanf, and according to the London-based Middle East Eye online portal, the U.S. withdrawal plan would leave soldiers there.

“The U.S. is not withdrawing from the base at al-Tanf at this time,” it quoted a Turkish official, citing a document which was presented in Ankara by Bolton early this week.

The U.S.-led coalition, which includes countries such as France and Britain, was formed in mid-2014 to supposedly counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist outfit’s expansion after it proclaimed its self-styled “caliphate”.

■ **Syrian Army foils attack in Hama, terrorists take full control of Idlib**

Meantime, the Syrian Army has repelled a terrorist attack violating a truce in the northern countryside of the Hama province where al-Qaeda-linked terrorists are expanding control.

The Syrian forces carried out “concentrated bombardments” against terrorists who sought to infiltrate government-held terri-

tory from the direction of the Tal al-Sakhir town in Hama, reported Syria’s official news agency SANA on Thursday.

The Syrian forces reportedly retaliated with proportionate fire in response to the breach.

Based on last year’s demilitarization truce, all terrorist forces were supposed to withdraw from points of contact with the Syrian army, but never did.

Moreover, terrorists aligned with the Turkish-backed National Front for Liberation (NFL) have frequently violated the deal by launching attacks in Hama.

The terrorist incursions have, however, failed to make any gains.

■ **Al-Qaeda-linked terrorists expand control in Idlib**

Elsewhere, the al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Organization for the Liberation of the Levant/Levant Liberation Committee/Tahrir al-Sham/HTS) terrorist group has effectively gained control over Syria’s last major terrorist-held stronghold after the NFL accepted a surrender deal on Thursday.

The NFL was forced into the deal after facing heavy losses in more than a week of bloody fighting between the two terrorist alliances.

Under the new deal, an HTS-backed civil government will gradually be given authority over all terrorist-held regions in Idlib, including the remaining occupied territories of the Hama and Aleppo provinces.

NFL terrorists have, however, been permitted to hold on to their military bases in Idlib.

Some of the Turkish-backed forces plan to rejoin other NFL forces in Syria’s occupied northwestern region of Afrin.

It is not clear whether the HTS, which has been ambiguous towards the demilitarization deal in the past, seeks to uphold the agreement in the future.

Syrian forces, however, expanded troop presence along the terrorist-held territory as a precautionary measure earlier this week.

Iran, Russia and Turkey act as the guarantors for the all-out ceasefire regime in Syria.

The deal has so far helped significantly decrease violence in country. Related talks have also paved the way for the formation of a constitutional committee.

Iran and Russia have been supporting the Syrian government in its anti-terror operations at the request of Damascus.

(Source: agencies)

U.S. blocks Israeli sale of used F-16s to NATO member Croatia over upgrades

The United States has blocked the Israeli regime’s sale of 12 used F-16 jet fighters to Croatia in a deal worth \$500 million over demands that Tel Aviv removes electronic modifications it has made to the war planes.

“Israel has officially informed us that it cannot get an approval from the United States for delivery of the planes to Croatia,” Croatia’s Defense Minister Damir Krsticevic announced in a Thursday press conference in the capital Zagreb following a meeting with a visiting Israeli delegation.

According to Croatian media reports, the problem came up because the war planes had been refitted with Israeli technology, depriving American weapons makers the opportunity to update and service the decades-old fighter jets.

The U.S. reportedly insisted that the Israeli regime must strip the jets of the upgrades it had made -- including electronic and radar systems -- prior to transferring the aircraft.

Croatia, however, declined to purchase the planes without the Israeli modifications, declaring that it will cancel the order for the F-16 Barak combat aircraft, which were to replace the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) member’s aging fleet of Soviet MiG21 jetfighters.

“Israel failed to overcome the opposition of the United

States to the sale of 12 planes to Croatia, and the \$500 million deal will apparently be canceled,” the Croatian Defense Ministry emphasized in a statement.

“Unfortunately, we have not been able to realize the deal because of problems that could not have been expected and are not under the control of the countries,” said the chief of Israeli war ministry, Udi Adam, in the press briefing in Zagreb on Thursday.

Eager to sell the planes, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly even raised the issue with the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during their meeting in Brazil earlier this month.

Despite all efforts, however, the State Department blocked the transfer of arms to the Balkan nation. It did not provide comments on the report because it was on furlough due to the persisting U.S. government shutdown.

Moreover, a senior Israeli official told the U.S.-based Axios news outlet that former Pentagon Chief James Mattis had rejected a personal request from Netanyahu to give the acquisition his personal approval.

Apart from the Israeli regime, several other countries also participated in the bidding process for the warplane deal, including Greece, South Korea and Sweden.

drawing, a spokesman said.

Trump’s national security adviser, John Bolton, this week tried to make the case for guarantees that Turkey would not harm the People’s Protection Units (People’s Defense Units/Yekineyên Parastina Gel/YPG) after the withdrawal. That earned a stiff rebuke from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Turkey considers the YPG a terrorist organization and sees Washington’s

support for it against the ISIL as a betrayal.

“When the time and place comes the terrorists here will be buried in the ditches they have dug, as was done in previous operations,” Akar said in a speech to military personnel at a brigade command center in the province of Sanliurfa, referring to two other cross-border campaigns that Turkey has carried out in Syria.

(Source: agencies)



Meanwhile, Croatia’s Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic announced earlier this week that Zagreb would not accept any other deal except the original Israeli offer which it accepted last March.

The agreement on buying the planes has not been signed, so there is no financial damage to our budget,” Plenkovic said during a cabinet session on Thursday.

He added, however, that Zagreb was determined to continue with its plans of modernizing its air force.

(Source: Press TV)

Near Syrian border, Turkish defense minister vows operation when time is right

Turkey’s defense minister on Friday pledged to wage a campaign against a United States-backed Syrian Kurdish militia, sharpening focus on a potential conflict the United States has sought to prevent, Reuters reports.

Turkey and the United States, although NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allies, are deeply divided over the implementation of the U.S. President Donald

Trump’s plan to bring home about 2,000 troops stationed in Syria. The plan hinges on Turkish cooperation to secure a swathe of northeast Syria as the United States departs.

While the pull-out has been clouded by mixed messages from both Trump and his administration, on Friday the U.S.-led coalition supposedly against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) terrorist outfit began the process of with-

[United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon],” a Lebanese Army statement said.

Speaker Nabih Berri expressed his concern over the “dangerous” developments. “This is something that must be carefully monitored because it is very dangerous. There is something I know and it will be time to show it,” he told visitors at his Ain al-Tineh residence in the evening.

Berri said he would discuss Israel’s actions with the United States Undersecretary for Political Affairs David Hale, who is due to visit Lebanon next Monday.

The Higher Defense Council of Lebanon said in a statement that it considered “the Israeli actions along the southern border to be an attack on Lebanese territory, which is a clear violation of Article 5 of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.”

The council announced that it would submit a complaint to the Security Council and increase diplomatic contacts to

explain Lebanon’s stance on the Israeli aggressions.

“The Higher Defense Council affirmed Lebanon’s commitment to every inch of its land and water as well as its constant readiness to complete the negotiations to resolve existing border disputes.”

In a statement, the Lebanese Army said Israel’s actions “threatened to resume hostilities,” and it stressed the need for a complete Israeli withdrawal from the Shebaa Farms, Kfar Shuba hills and the occupied part of Ghajar.

Back in December, caretaker Lebanese Transportation Minister Youssef Fenianos announced that the country was set to lodge a complaint against Israel at the UNSC, after airstrikes launched by Israeli war planes targeting Syria threatened civilian airliners flying over the Lebanese airspace.

(Source: agencies)

Large U.S. troop deployment in Kirkuk causes Iraqi outcry

The United States military has made a large troop deployment to military bases near the Iraqi city of Kirkuk, causing outcry among the local population.

The troops have been stationed predominantly at the K1 airbase situated 15 kilometers away from the city, Press TV’s correspondent in Kirkuk said on Thursday.

The deployment is said to have happened on the pretext of countering remaining Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) Takfiri terrorists.

Popular Mobilization Unites (PMU/Hashd al-Sha’abi) spokesperson Ali al-Hussaini denounced the presence of the U.S. forces, saying that the city faced no terrorist threat and Americans had no reason to be there.

“Deploying U.S. forces in Kirkuk or any other city is unacceptable. This is violating the treaty between the U.S. and Iraq,” said Hussaini.

The city experienced relative calm since Iraqi Kurds handed over positions to Iraqi troops in October 2017.

The ISOF (Iraqi Special Operations Forces/Golden Division) deployment was in response to rising tensions after the Iraqi semi-autonomous Kurdistan region (Kurdistan Regional Government/KRG) flag was illegally raised over a political party headquarters building, signaling unfounded Kurdish claims to the city.

The rising tensions in Kirkuk come as the U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo visited the capital of Iraq’s semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan, Erbil, after visiting Baghdad on Wednesday.

“These have been folks that have fought with us and it’s important that we do everything we can to ensure that those folks that fought with us are protected,” said Pompeo during the trip.

The visit was part of a Middle East tour aimed at assuring the U.S. allies of continued American presence in the region despite earlier remarks made by the U.S. President Donald Trump calling for a regional troop withdrawal.

Pompeo seemingly backpedaled from Trump’s earlier statements, saying that “we learned that when America retreats, chaos often follows.”

The statements were, however, later ridiculed by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif who highlighted America’s role in destabilizing the region.

(Source: Press TV)

India probes opposition to granting citizenship to non-Muslims

Indian police on Friday said they are investigating an academic, a journalist and a peasant leader for possible sedition for publicly opposing a proposal to grant citizenship to non-Muslims from neighboring Muslim-majority countries.



Critics have called the proposal blatantly anti-Muslim and an attempt by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to boost its Hindu voter base ahead of a general election due by May.

The cases have been filed amid a wave of protests in the BJP-governed northeastern state of Assam. A small regional party in India quit the ruling coalition on Monday in protest against the plan.

The Modi government is facing growing criticism for stifling criticism, including in the media. A television journalist in the region was jailed last month for criticizing the government on social media.

“We have registered a case against a few people based on certain statements that they made at a public rally in Guwahati,” Deepak Kumar, a police official from Guwahati in Assam, told Reuters.

The three have not been charged.

Many people fear such a move could change the demographic profile of Assam, where residents have for years complained that immigrants from Bangladesh have put a big strain on resources.

Hiren Gohain, an 80-year-old academic, peasant leader Akhil Gogoi and journalist Manjit Mahanta have been accused of criminal conspiracy and attempting to wage a war against the government, Kumar said.

The bill, which seeks to give citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians and Parsis from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, has been passed by the lower house of the parliament.

The bill will be tabled for approval in the upper house in the next session, where it is expected to face resistance from the opposition Congress party. The BJP does not have a majority in the upper house of the parliament.

(Source: Reuters)

Romania: Corruption protest targets EU presidency ceremony

Hundreds protested outside the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest on Thursday, coinciding with a ceremony marking Romania’s ascendancy to the European Union (EU) Council Presidency.

■ **Greek protesters clash with police during Merkel’s visit in Athens**

Meantime, Greek protesters clashed with police on Thursday in Athens, during a demonstration against German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s visit in the country.

Protesters used sticks to attack police officers blocking the street in the center of Athens and police responded with tear gas, as Merkel was meeting Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in his office nearby.

Even though the government banned gatherings and demonstrations in the Greek capital due to Merkel’s visit, hundreds marched on the streets of Athens, chanting and holding banners against the German chancellor.

Protesters said Merkel was not welcome in Greece as she played a “leading role” in impoverishing the Greek people.

This was Merkel’s first visit in Greece after the country exited its bailout programs a few months ago.

(Source: agencies)

Lebanon will issue a complaint at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) over Israel’s building of a wall along their shared border, Lebanese state media reported Friday.

Lebanon’s state-run National News Agency quoted Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil as calling the Israeli move a violation of a UNSC resolution that ended the 2006 war between Israel and the Lebanese Hezbollah resistance group.

The comments came after Tel Aviv placed 25 cement blocks near the illegal Israeli settlement of Miskaf Aam, opposite the Lebanese town of Adaiseh, with six blocks placed on disputed points. In response, the Lebanese Army deployed reinforcements to the area.

“What happened today is dangerous and could spark a security incident,” a political source told Lebanon’s The Daily Star.

The blocks had been placed “without informing UNIFIL

Nottingham Forest part company with manager Karanka

Nottingham Forest have parted company with Spanish manager Aitor Karanka a year after he arrived, the Championship side said on Friday.

Forest are seventh in England's second tier, 12 points adrift of leaders Leeds United and four points off the playoff places.

A former Real Madrid and Athletic Bilbao player, Karanka joined Forest in January last year. The 45-year-old had previously been fired by then Premier League side Middlesbrough.

"Aitor Karanka has asked to be released from his contract as the manager of Nottingham Forest Football Club," Forest said in a statement. "The club have agreed to this request and the terms of departure have been agreed. Both parties wish each other every success for the future."

Forest added that first team coach Simon Ireland would take charge until a new manager was appointed.

(Source: AFP)

Arsenal may seek loan deals in January, says Emery

Arsenal are looking at signing players who can ensure a strong finish to their Premier League campaign but the club's transfer activity this month could be restricted to loan signings, manager Unai Emery has said.

The north London club, who have missed out on top-four finishes and Champions League qualification in the previous two seasons, are fifth in the table with 41 points, but Emery said fans could not expect permanent recruits in January.

"We cannot sign permanently. We can only loan players," Emery told a news conference ahead of Saturday's league trip to West Ham United. The Spaniard pointed out the difficulties in recruiting players in the January transfer window but said the club were keeping their eyes open. "I know the club is working on possibilities of which players can help us with big performances like we need now," Emery added.

"If we can find one player who can help us like we need, with the quality and a different player for getting in our squad, we are going to do it."

Arsenal's transfer strategy in recent seasons has seen players run down their contract and leave for free, the latest being midfielder Aaron Ramsey who is set to join Juventus in the close season after failing to agree a new deal.

"I respect his decision a lot. My last conversation with him is very important," Emery said.

"We both spoke about the situation with respect from him and from us. His response has been very good in training and matches with good performances.

"I want his behaviour and his focus to be on West Ham on Saturday."

(Source: Reuters)

Bayern to appeal as Mueller suspended for Liverpool tie

Bayern Munich said Friday they will appeal the two-match Champions League suspension handed to Thomas Mueller which means the Germany international will miss both legs of their last-16 tie against Liverpool.

European football's governing body UEFA handed Mueller a two-match ban on Friday following his sending-off in the 3-3 draw away to Ajax in their final group game last month.

Mueller was shown the first straight red card of his career for kicking Ajax defender Nicolas Tagliafico in the head.

The 29-year-old will definitely miss the away leg at Anfield on February 19, but Bayern hope a successful appeal would mean Mueller could play the return at the Allianz Arena on March 13.

Mueller apologised following the sending-off, insisting he meant to kick the ball. "No, no, of course I didn't mean to do it. It wasn't intentional," Mueller told reporters, but Bayern coach Niko Kovac said the red card was the correct decision.

Mueller has five goals and six assists in 25 matches in all competitions this season.

Like Mueller, Ajax midfielder Maximilian Woeber has also been given a two-match suspension for his horror tackle, in the same game, on Bayern's Leon Goretzka which also led to the Austrian international being shown a straight red.

Woeber will miss both legs of Ajax's last-16 tie against holders Real Madrid.

(Source: AFP)

Manchester City scrap plans to take winter break

Manchester City have scrapped plans for a warm weather training camp because of their hectic fixture schedule, sources have told ESPN FC.

City's first-team squad have taken breaks to Abu Dhabi mid-way through the past two seasons, with manager Pep Guardiola meeting club owner Sheikh Mansour.

But there is no opportunity to do the same thing this spring, with City remaining in contention in four competitions.

They have only one free weekend between now and the end of the season -- Feb. 17-18 -- but that would have to stage an FA Cup fixture if they beat Burnley in the fourth round.

The free weekend also comes just before the Champions League first leg game against Schalke on Feb. 20.

The Premier League clash with West Ham at the Etihad Stadium on Feb. 26 will also need to be rescheduled after City effectively confirmed a place in the Carabao Cup final with a 9-0 victory over Burton Albion in the semifinal first leg.

The Manchester derby at Old Trafford in mid-March would also need to be rearranged should either City or United reach the FA Cup quarterfinals. City face a potential headache to squeeze in all their fixtures with so few matchdays available, particularly when the Champions League resumes.

They have lightened the load a little with the huge victory over Burton, with Guardiola set to put out a second-string side for the second leg against the League One club.

(Source: ESPN)

Tearful Murray plans Wimbledon retirement but says Australian Open may be last event

A tearful Andy Murray on Friday announced he would likely retire this year due to severe pain from a hip injury, saying next week's Australian Open could be the last tournament of a glittering career.

The former world number one and three-time Grand Slam winner broke down at a press conference in Melbourne as he said the pain had become almost unbearable.

"I can play with limitations. But having the limitations and the pain is not allowing me to enjoy competing or training," the emotional Scot said.

Thirty-one-year-old "Sir Andy" said he would like to finish at his home Grand Slam in Wimbledon, but ruefully admitted he might not make it that far.

He will be remembered as the first British man to win Wimbledon in 77 years and as a player who battled his way to the top in a golden era for the game alongside Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal.

"Wimbledon is where I would like to stop playing, but I am not certain I am able to do that," he said.

"I've been struggling for a long time. I'm not sure I can play through the pain for another four or five months.

"Pretty much done everything that I could to try and get my hip feeling better and it hasn't helped loads."

He pulled out of last year's Australian Open to have hip surgery and only returned in June at Queen's Club in London.

He ended the season at Shenzhen in Sep-



tember after only a handful of appearances to concentrate on working his way back to full fitness. But he was knocked out in the second round on his return at Brisbane last week and called it quits on Thursday after less than an hour of a practice match in Melbourne against Djokovic, with his movement clearly hampered.

"I think there is a chance the Australian Open is my last tournament," he said.

While he intends to begin his opening-round match against 22nd seed Roberto Bautista Agut next week, how his body withstands potentially gruelling five-set clashes in energy-sapping heat remains to be seen.

DNA request made in Cristiano Ronaldo rape case



Las Vegas police have asked football star Cristiano Ronaldo to submit a DNA sample as part of their investigation into rape allegations made against him.

The five-time world player of the year -- who plays for Italian league champions Juventus -- has vehemently denied the accusations, and his lawyer Peter Christiansen said the request was standard procedure.

"Mr Ronaldo has always maintained, as he does today, that what occurred in Las Vegas in 2009 was consensual in nature, so it is not surprising that DNA would be present, nor that the police would make this very standard request as part of their investigation," he said in a statement.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department said it had made an official request to Italian authorities, adding it is "taking the same steps in this case as in any other sexual assault to facilitate the collection of DNA evidence".

Former model Kathryn Mayorga, 34, of Las Vegas, made the accusations against the now 33-year-old Ronaldo in a complaint filed last year in the state of Nevada.

She claims after meeting the footballer at a Las Vegas nightclub, he raped her at his hotel suite on June 13, 2009 -- just before he joined Real Madrid from Manchester United for a then-world record 94 million euros (\$108 million).

Mayorga's lawyers have said previously she immediately reported the alleged rape to the Las Vegas police and underwent a medical examination.

A private mediation was organised with

representatives of Ronaldo, Mayorga and their lawyers, where she alleges she was paid \$375,000 to keep quiet.

Ronaldo's lawyers have said that the non-disclosure agreement signed with the former model was "by no means a confession of guilt". Mayorga's attorney has said the model agreed to an out-of-court settlement to keep her name from going public, but was inspired to speak out by the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment.

Her attorney could not immediately be reached for comment, but in the past said the agreement should be made null and void because it was made when she was suffering from extreme psychological duress.

Ronaldo is widely considered one of the greatest footballers in the history of the game, having won the Champions League title five times -- once with Manchester United and four times with Real Madrid.

He also led Portugal to the Euro 2016 title in France.

Juventus signed him last year from Real for 100 million euros (\$115 million), the most ever paid for a player aged over 30.

Ronaldo has long been marketed as a global face of football and his image has become a market mover. When the rape allegations first came to light, shares in Juventus dipped on the stock exchange.

Forbes magazine says he is one of just three athletes to be given a lifelong contract by US sportswear manufacturer Nike along with NBA superstar LeBron James and retired basketball legend Michael Jordan.

(Source: AFP)

Lovren banned over social media outburst against Spain

Croatia defender Dejan Lovren has been banned for one international match over comments he made on social media about opponents Spain following his side's 3-2 Nations League win in November.

Meanwhile, Bayern Munich forward Thomas Mueller and Ajax Amsterdam defender Maximilian Woeber will miss both legs of their teams' respective Champions League round of 16 ties after being banned for two European games following red cards last month.

Mueller will sit out the tie against Liverpool and Woeber misses his side's clash with Real Madrid.

Lovren posted a video on Instagram where he appeared to brag about elbowing Real Madrid defender Sergio Ramos and made insulting comments about the Spain team following the game on March 15.

He also told reporters after the match that Spain were "rude on the pitch" and bad losers.

UEFA said that Lovren had fallen foul of a clause in its disciplinary rules which penalises anyone "whose conduct is insulting or otherwise violates the basic rule s of decent conduct."

He was suspended from Croatia's next UEFA competition match, which is the Euro 2020 qualifiers at home to Azer-



baijan in March. Despite the win, Croatia finished bottom of Group A4 after losing their final game to England and were relegated to League B of UEFA's new competition.

Mueller was given a straight red card for a high kick on Nicolas Tagliafico during Bayern's 3-3 draw against Ajax and was banned for two European club matches. Woeber

Perry. World number five Juan Martin del Potro, who has also struggled with injuries and will miss the Australian Open, told Murray to "keep fighting".

"We love you Andy and we want to see you happy and doing well," he added.

Billie Jean King called him "a champion on and off court", referring to Murray's long-time support of women's equality in tennis.

"So sorry you cannot retire on your own terms, but remember to look to the future. Your greatest impact on the world may be yet to come. Your voice for equality will inspire future generations," she said.

Top Australian coach Darren Cahill, who until recently was mentoring world number one Simona Halep, said Murray was an example of the never-say-die attitude that separated the best from the average.

"When you search for examples of 'emptied the bucket to be as good as they could be' there should be a picture of Andy Murray sitting under that quote," he tweeted.

"Remarkable discipline for training, competition, sacrifice, perfection, a little crazy but a legend of a bloke."

Former star Andy Roddick also paid tribute on Twitter.

"I tip my cap to Andy! Absolute legend. Short list of best tacticians in history. Unreal results in a brutal era. Nothing but respect here. I hope he can finish strong and healthy," he said.

(Source: AFP)

Head of Japan's Olympic Committee under investigation in France



The president of Japan's Olympic Committee, Tsunekazu Takeda, is under formal investigation by French prosecutors for suspected corruption related to Japan's successful bid to host the 2020 Olympic Games, a French judicial source said on Friday.

The source said Takeda, a retired equestrian sportsman, was indicted last month by the national financial prosecutor's office in Paris. Prosecuting judge Renaud Van Ruymbeke suspected Takeda of paying bribes to secure Japan's winning bid.

In Tokyo, Takeda said no improper actions such as bribery had taken place in connection with Tokyo's games bid and he had not been indicted by French authorities.

Under French law, indictment means he is now being treated as a "formal suspect" but a full indictment comes only once the case is going to court.

"I apologise for the huge worries that have been brought to the people of Japan, who have given so much support to the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, and in order to put every doubt to rest I intend to continue cooperating with investigations," he said.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) said it had been in close contact with French judicial authorities. Its ethics committee has opened a file on the case and would meet later on Friday.

"Mr Takeda continues to enjoy the full presumption of innocence," the IOC said in a statement.

Takeda is also an IOC member since 2012 and heads its marketing commission. In 2016, French prosecutors announced

an investigation into more than \$2 million (£1.5 million) of payments made by the Japanese bidding committee to a Singaporean consultancy firm, Black Tidings.

In 2017, Takeda and several others were voluntarily questioned by Japanese prosecutors at the request of French authorities in relation to the payments, Kyodo News agency reported at the time. Takeda and the others had denied any wrongdoing, Kyodo said.

Black Tidings is headed by Ian Tan Tong Hon, who is closely associated with Papa Massata Diack, the son of disgraced former international athletics chief Lamine Diack, who is himself facing corruption charges.

Japanese officials said at the time the two payments were legitimate consultant's fees, and a panel commissioned by the Japanese Olympic Committee said in September 2016 that it had found the payments to be legitimate.

Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike said she was "very surprised" by the news of the investigation.

Takeda, 71, has long been involved in the Olympics movement, having competed as a show jumper in the 1972 and 1976 games. His great-grandfather was the Emperor Meiji and he is the current emperor's second cousin.

He has been a member of the Japanese Olympic Committee since 1987 and its president since 2001, helping to coordinate the preparations for several Winter Olympics as a senior member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

(Source: Eurosport)

was dismissed in a separate incident of the same match.

BATE Borisov's Sihnevich Mikalai and Villarreal's Costas Jorda Jaume were also banned for two European matches after being sent off in Europa League games last month.

Olympiakos were fined 90,000 euros (£80,920) following crowd trouble in their Europa League match against AC Milan.

UEFA sanctioned the Greek side over a pitch invasion, the setting-off of fireworks and blocked stairways during their 3-1 win over Milan on Dec. 13 in Athens.

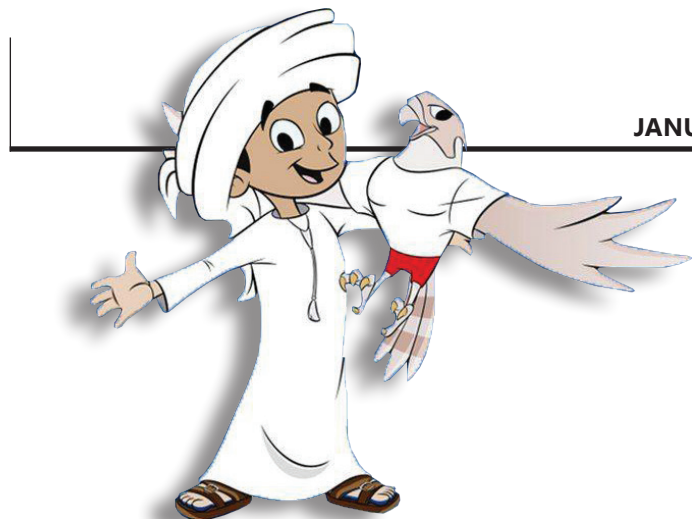
Olympiakos must play their next home match behind closed doors although this was deferred for a "probationary period" of two years.

Milan coach Gennaro Gattuso suggested that Olympiakos threw extra balls onto the pitch and mentioned a "strange trumpet noise" although he said it was not an excuse for their defeat.

Milan were fined 5,000 euros after their fans also set off fireworks.

Paris St Germain and Red Star Belgrade were fined 35,000 euros and 25,000 euros respectively for incidents at their Champions League match on Oct. 3 which the Ligue 1 side won 6-1.

(Source: Reuters)



S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Iran international striker Karim Ansarifard says the match against Vietnam will be Team Melli's second final in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

Iran will take on the Vietnamese team at the Al Nahyan Stadium in Abu Dhabi, the UAE on Saturday.

"Every match is like a final for us. We won Yemen 5-0 in our first final and now we concentrate on our second final against Vietnam," Ansarifard said.

"There will be no easy games for Iran since the teams have progressed a lot. Turkmenistan made life difficult for Japan on Wednesday. We are here to do our best and I believe that Vietnam and Iraq are strong teams and we will not underestimate them," the Nottingham Forest striker added.

Ansarifard, who scored an equalizer against Portugal in the 2018 World Cup, came off the bench as a substitute in the second half.

"We don't care who scores and who becomes the top scorer, what is the most important is that we keep progressing in the tournament. The Iranian fans are always supporting us and it brings positive energy in the competition," Ansarifard added.

Iran sit top of the table after beating Yemen in their opener on Monday. Iraq are second thanks to a 3-2 late win over Vietnam.

Team Melli 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.

Vietnam match our second final: Karim Ansarifard



Nelo Vingada joins Iran's coaching staff



S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Former U23 football coach Nelo Vingada has joined Team Melli coaching staff in the AFC Asian Cup underway in the UAE.

The Portuguese coach has been voluntarily added to Iran staff.

Team Melli are preparing for the match against Vietnam in Group D after beating Yemen 5-0 in their first match.

Vingada is no stranger to the region's football as the 65-year-old coach has already coached Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iran U23 football teams.

Vingada has also headed Iranian most-popular football team Persepolis in 2009.

At the 2014 Asian Games held in Incheon, South Korea, Iran lost 4-1 to Vietnam in their first match which was the team's worst defeat in the tournament. They drew 1-1 with Kyrgyzstan in the next match, resulting in an early exit from the competition which was Iran's worst result in the Asian Games since its establishment.

Vingada had already worked as Carlos Queiroz's assistant during the 2014 FIFA World Cup qualification.

Taqi to officiate Iran v Vietnam: Asian Cup



S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Muhammad Taqi Aljaafari Bin Jahari has been chosen to officiate the match between Iran national football team and Vietnam in Group D of the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

The match has been scheduled to take place at the Al Nahyan Stadium in Abu Dhabi, the UAE on Saturday. Singaporean Muhammad Taqi Aljaafari has been a FIFA listed referee since 2012 and has also refereed a number of AFC Champions

League matches.

Taqi Aljaafari has also refereed matches in the 2017 FIFA U-17 World Cup in India.

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.

Team Melli 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.

Jahanbakhsh targets Asian Cup glory with Iran

Alireza Jahanbakhsh wants to emulate Albion colleague Matthew Ryan - by winning the Asian Cup.

Keeper Ryan lifted the trophy with Australia on home soil four years ago.

Jahanbakhsh's Iran are favourites to win the 2019 tournament, now underway in the United Arab Emirates.

The three-time former champions have not triumphed since 1976 but are strongly fancied after drawing with Portugal and running Spain close in the World Cup finals group stages in Russia last summer.

Jahanbakhsh (below) said: "The Asian Cup is big for us. Yes we made the world Cup finals for the past two tournaments, for the first time in our history, and of course it was nice for the people and a great experience for the players to be facing Spain and Portugal, but the Asia Cup is different.

"We have been the top ranked team in Asia for the past two or three years so there is a big expectation on us - and we



will have a lot of Iranian fans coming to the UAE to watch us.

"We are ranked one and we have to show it. It's also important because we haven't been champions of this competition for many years. Maty Ryan won it last time with Australia so hopefully it's us this time!"

Jahanbakhsh, Albion's £17 million record buy from AZ Alkmaar in Holland last summer, is one of Iran's biggest stars, but the unassuming winger likes to keep a low profile.

He said: "The people back home love their football and following the players who play for the national team abroad. "They always show their love and their encouragement, which is very nice and appreciated, but it's nothing like David Beckham!"

"When I go back to my home town in the north of Iran, people will come up and talk to me and take pictures, and it's the same at the airport, but it's nothing out of control. "I've never craved the attention anyway. I prefer to keep a low profile, to chill when I'm back home and hang out with my family and friends where there's not a lot of people.

"Of course when I'm with the national team there's more interest, with the fans wanting pictures and autographs but I'm always happy to do that because I was a fan once."

(Source: Argus)

Australia beat Palestine to bounce back from Jordan defeat

Defending champions Australia dominated Palestine 3-0 on Friday as they recovered from their shock opening defeat at the Asian Cup and moved within sight of the last 16.

Goals from Hibernian striker Jamie Maclaren, Awer Mabil and substitute Apostolos Giannou put the much-improved Socceroos second in Group B with one game to go.

The Aussies will now go into next Tuesday's final group game against Syria with renewed confidence after banishing memories of their 1-0 upset at the hands of Jordan.

Coach Graham Arnold dropped the under-performing Massimo Luongo and Robbie Kruse in favour of Jackson Irvine and Chris Ikonmidis, who impressed as substitutes against Jordan.

And it was a far more dynamic team that opened their account on 18 minutes, when Celtic's Tom Rogic picked out Maclaren who scored his first international goal with a glancing header

Two minutes later and gold-clad Australia were 2-0 up as Ikonmidis lofted a ball to the far post where Mabil sneaked in unmarked for a first-time finish.



Mabil could have doubled his tally before half-time but he skied his shot after a neat move through the middle involving captain Mark Milligan and Maclaren.

But Australia kept up their assault after the break as Palestinian defender Abdallah Jaber knocked an attempted clearance onto his own crossbar and Irvine headed just over.

The attacks kept coming and substitute striker Giannou, a late call-up after Scottish-born Martin Boyle was injured, nodded a deserving third for Australia in the final minute.

(Source: Thenational.ae)

Tractor Sazi coach Mohammad Taghavi resigns

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Tractor Sazi interim coach Mohammad Taghavi parted ways with the Iranian football club on Thursday.

The 47-year-old coach, who started his work as John Toshack assistant coach in Tabriz-based football club at the beginning of the Iranian league season, replaced the Welshman in September as interim coach.

Under tutelage of Ex-Esteghlal defender, Tractor Sazi got back on track and they are one of the favorites to win their first ever Iran Professional League title.

"I think it's time to say goodbye with popular football team Tractor Sazi. I wish you all the best for the future," Taghavi posted on his Instagram account.

The Iranian media reports suggest that Taghavi will take charge of Nassaji Mazandaran.

He will replace Ex-Team Melli captain Javad Nekounam in the Ghaemshahr-based football team.



Carlos Queiroz to be named Colombia coach after Asian Cup: Report

Iran national football team's coach Carlos Queiroz will become the new coach of the Colombian national team after the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

While there were rumors of Luiz Felipe Scolari possibly taking over the vacancy, the Colombian FA has struck a deal with Queiroz.

The 65-year-old coach will take on his new role once his participation in the Asian Cup with Iran finishes.

Queiroz, who was the former coach of teams such as Real Madrid, Portugal and South Africa, will start his new position in early February.

His official debut with the Colombian national team will come during their next set of friendlies to be held in March.

(Source: Marca)

Mohammadi takes silver at Asian Para Cycling C'ship

TASNIM — Iran's Mehdi Mohammadi wins a silver medal at the 8th Asian Para Track Cycling Championship in Jakarta, Indonesia on Thursday.

The Iranian cyclist finished in second place with a time of 5:23.920 at the C4 - C5 4000m Individual Pursuit.

The gold medal went to Indonesian Muhammad Fadli Imamuddin who clocked 4:56.956.

Sufyan Saori also from Indonesia claimed a bronze medal in this event with a time of 5:13.951.

The 8th Asian Para Track Cycling Championship in Jakarta, Indonesia is being held in Jakarta, Indonesia from 8 to 13 January.

Mario Budimir reaches agreement with Persepolis

Persian Football — Croat forward Mario Budimir has reportedly reached an agreement with Iranian football club Persepolis.

Budimir, 32, will be Persepolis's fourth Croatian player after Mate Dragicvic, Bozidar Radosevic, and Luka Maric.

Budimir, who most recently played at Dinamo Zagreb, will join Persepolis in Qatar training on Friday to pass a medical examination.

Persepolis, who finished runners-up in the 2018 AFC Champions League, are going to strengthen for new season, where the team are pitted against Qatar's Al Sadd and Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia in Group D.

Persepolis also are favorites to win the Iran Professional League for the third successive year.

Iran embassy in Hungary says sports diplomacy priority

IRNA — Iran's Ambassador to Hungary Gholam-Reza Rajabi-Yazdi says sports diplomacy is among priorities of Iranian Embassy's programs in the Eastern European nation.

He said regarding the influential role of sports in connecting nations and getting them together in a healthy and peaceful environment, sports cooperation between Iran and Hungary is among priorities of the programs due to be implemented by Iranian Embassy in Hungary.

He said world states consider sports events as the most influential soft power tool and try to hold competitions to have active presence in the world federations and use sports figures' influence to forge stronger engagement of nations and governments.

He went on to say that the second-round qualifiers to the 2017 CEV U18 Volleyball European Championship – Women, held in Jászberény of Hungary in September and Iranian Free Style and Greco Roman national teams' presence in the 2018 World Wrestling Championships, held in Budapest from October 20 to 28, and also presence of Hungarian wrestlers in the World Clubs' Free-Style Cup Competitions in December along with presence of Iranian National Youth Boxing Team in Hungary World Boxing Competitions are among sports programs of Iran and Hungary.

He added that 2019 will mark a turning point in expansion of sports cooperation between Iran and Hungary as Iranian athletes will take part in table tennis competitions in Hungary next week, Iran's national boxing team will attend Hungary world boxing competitions in February, Iran's Greco-Roman wrestling team will attend Hungary International competitions late February, Hungary's badminton players will attend Ten-Day Dawn competitions, Iranian Paralympics athletes will attend Tokyo 2020 Paralympics qualifying competitions in Hungary.

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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
» Public Relations Office: Tel: (+98 21) 88805807
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No. 18, Bimeh Alley, Nejatollahi St., Tehran, Iran
P.o. Box: 14155-4843
Zip Code: 1599814713



GUIDE TO
SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

If the world favors a group, it grants them the goodness of others, too, and when it rejects them, it robs them of their own goodness.

Imam Ali (AS)

WHAT'S IN ART GALLERIES

Painting

■ An exhibition of paintings by Katayun Giti is underway at Negar Gallery.

The exhibit named "The Heritage of Hint" will run until January 16 at the gallery located at 33 Delaram Alley, Roshanai St. in the Qeitarieh neighborhood.

■ A collection of paintings by Mahsa Mashayekhi is on display in an exhibition at Golestan Gallery.

The exhibition will be running until January 16 at the gallery that can be found at 42 Kamasai St. in the Darus neighborhood.

■ A group of artists, including Sahar Alizadeh, Kurosh Sarmadi, Elham Omid and Samira Nikfarjam, is showcasing their latest paintings in an exhibition at Ace Gallery.

The exhibit titled "Immediacy" will run until January 16 at the gallery located at 1831 Shariati Ave., near the Qeitarieh neighborhood.

■ Paintings by Reza Alizadeh are currently on display in an exhibition at Saye Gallery.

The exhibit titled "Bubble" runs until January 16 at the gallery located at No. 21, 13th Alley, Sanai St. of Karim Khan Ave.

■ Razieh Karimi, Sara Hosseinpour and Mahsa Khahani are displaying their paintings in an exhibition at Sherveh Gallery.

The exhibit titled "Through" will run until January 16 at the gallery, which can be found at 9 Khojasteh Alley, Daemi St. off Fatemi St.

■ Shokuh Gallery is hosting an exhibition of paintings by Faramarz Khani.

The exhibit named "Anima" runs until January 22 at the gallery located at 19 Amir Nuri Alley, North Salimi St. near Andarzgu Blvd.

■ Paintings by Matin Ruintan are on display in an exhibition at Atashzad Gallery.

Entitled "Nature in the Frame", the exhibit will continue until January 20 at the gallery located at 3 North Abbaspur (Tavanir) St. near Vanak Sq.

Photo

■ Photos by Shuresh Mobasheri are on display in an exhibition at the gallery of the Behnam Daheshpur Charity Organization.

The exhibition has been organized to raise funds for patients suffering from cancer. The exhibit entitled "Wena" will run until January 16 at the gallery located at 13 Marmari Alley, off Masjedi Alley, Jabarian St. in the Farmanieh neighborhood.

■ An exhibition of photos by a group of artists, including Bahareh Bisheh, Farid Musavi, Samad Qorbanzadeh, and Hosna Shahrami, is underway at Negah Gallery.

The exhibit titled "Dame" will be running until January 30 at the gallery located at 64 Ghafari St., Jam St., Motahhari Ave.

Graphic design

■ Dena Gallery is playing host to an exhibition of graphic designs by Arash Tanhai.

The showcase entitled "Oblivion" will continue until January 21 at the gallery located at 4 Sussan Alley off Qarani St.

“Special Award” wins honorable mention at Ammar festival

A R T **TEHRAN** — The jury of the 9th Ammar Popular Film Festival (APFF) announced on Thursday that no feature fiction movie deserved the best film award as they awarded “Special Award” by Seyyed Ali Seyyedi an honorable mention.

“Special Award” is about a young boy who dreams of having a bicycle, but his family cannot afford his wish. He enters a cultural competition organized at a mosque that plans to award a bicycle to the winner.

The closing ceremony of the festival, which aims to take a global view of cultural, socio-economic, environmental and political issues that may endanger peace, freedom and justice in the world, was held at Tehran’s Felestin Cinema.

In the mid-length fiction movie category, the award for best film went to “Needle” directed by Yusef Jafari. The film is about a group of volunteers who arrive in a remote village to provide medical services for villagers, among whom no children are present. Consequently, they began a search to track down the children.

The short fiction films “#Don’t Send” by Saman Ghanaemi and “It’s at an End” also received awards.

Several documentary films were also awarded on the sidelines of the festival.

“In the Name of Father” by Mohammad-Taqi Rahmati received the Golden Lantern for Best Documentary on Economic War.

The award for Best Documentary on the Defenders of the Holy Shrines was presented to “Rescue” by Amir-Hossein Noruzi. “Defenders of the Holy Shrines” is applied



Director Sirus Moqaddam (R) accepts an award for his TV series “Paytakht 5” from Ammar Popular Film Festival director Nader Talebzadeh during the closing ceremony of the event at Tehran’s Felestin Cinema on January 10, 2019. (Mehr/Hamid Vakili)

to those Iranian soldiers who fought the Daesh forces in Syria and Iraq.

“The Son the Imam” by Seyyed Mohtasham Ali Naqavi won the award for Best Documentary on Islamic and Global Awakening, while “Once Upon a Time Trump” produced

at the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting was awarded as Best Documentary on Soft War and Cultural Front.

Established by a number of Iranian revolutionary figures, the festival has been named after Ammar Yasir, a close companion of

Prophet Muhammad (S).

Director Sirus Moqaddam was also honored with a Golden Lantern for the fifth sequel he made to his popular TV series “Paytakht”, which was broadcast on IRIB’s Channel 3 during the Noruz holidays last March.

Pop stars to extend sympathy for Behnam Safavi’s family

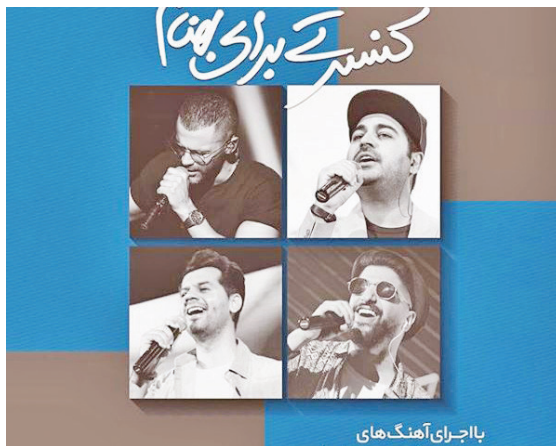
A R T **TEHRAN** — Pop star Sirvan Khosravi along with his brother Xaniar and Shahab Ramezan will perform in a joint concert tonight at the Iranian Conference Hall in Tehran to sympathize with the family of Behnam Safavi, the 35-year-old pop singer who went into a coma last week due to brain cancer.

The performance titled “A Concert for Behnam”, which was announced in an Instagram post by Sirvan on Wednesday, was sold out a day after.

“Behnam’s family has not asked anyone for financial support and also rejected all his friends’ proposals for financial support,” Sirvan wrote.

“I hope that we along with you will give Behnam positive energy and will see him on stage again very soon,” he told his fans.

Earlier in July 2015, Behnam Safavi underwent successful surgery at a Tehran hospital to remove a small tumor from his brain. In early October, his medical team permitted him to hold a concert to raise his spirits



A poster for “A Concert for Behnam”.

sufficiently to allow him to continue chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments.

He appeared on the stage at Tehran’s Milad Tower, performing his concert while sitting in a chair. However, he went into a coma after receiving chemotherapy treatment in December.

In July 2017, he underwent a successful operation performed by Professor Majid Samii and his team in Hanover, Germany as the tumor recrudesces. He returned to Iran to pursue medical treatment in his homeland. However, his family announced last week that he had gone into a coma again.

Safavi’s debut album, “Be My Love”, was released in October 2009 and a song by the same name from the collection soon became a smash hit at that time.

Two years later, he released his second album, “Calm”, which earned him a firm place in the Iranian pop music arena. His latest collection “Extraordinary” was released in May 2014.

TMCA new director appointed

A R T **TEHRAN** — Hadi d e s k Mozafari, the director of the Visual Arts Office of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, appointed Ehsan Aqai the new director of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMCA) on Wednesday.

Aqai replaced Ali-Mohammad Zare’, who held the position since 2017.

Aqai was the principal of the Tehran

Fine Arts School since 2017.

The TMCA is home to works by many august artists of the West, including Claude Monet, Francis Bacon, Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Georges Braque, Alberto Giacometti, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Donald Judd, Andy Warhol, René Magritte, Duane Hanson and Chuck Close, which had been accumulated by Iran’s former empress Farah Pahlavi.

Skydance hires ousted Disney animation head John Lasseter

Los Angeles (Reuters) — U.S. film production company Skydance Media on Wednesday named Walt Disney Co’s former animation head and co-founder of Pixar, John Lasseter, as head of its animation division.

Lasseter, regarded as a modern day Walt Disney because of his creativity and commercial success, left Disney late last year. His exit followed a six-month leave of absence after what he called “missteps,” including unwanted hugs that made employees uncomfortable.

“... We did not enter into this decision lightly. John has acknowledged and apologized for his mistakes and, during the past year away from the workplace, has endeavored to address and reform them,” Skydance Chief Executive Officer David Ellison said in a statement.

In a memo to staff, Ellison said, Skydance employed outside counsel to thoroughly investigate the allegations,

which the company considered serious and warranted its full attention.

However, advocacy groups expressed disappointment at the CEO’s comments.

“By saying Skydance has conducted an independent investigation and then proceeded to hire Lasseter, do they mean to suggest that they are hiring him in spite of the numerous accounts of women and colleagues?” Women In Film, Los Angeles said in a statement.

Hollywood anti-harassment organization Time’s Up in a Twitter post said, “Skydance Media’s decision to hire John Lasseter as head of animation endorses and perpetuates a broken system that allows powerful men to act without consequence.”

Lasseter directed the 1995 hit “Toy Story” and was the creative force behind movie hits like “Frozen” and “Finding Nemo”.

Lasseter, who will report to Ellison, will be based in Los Angeles and start later this month.

“Double” to compete in Irvine Film Festival

A R T **TEHRAN** — Iranian director Ronak Jafari’s short film “Double” will go on screen at the 8th edition of the Irvine Film Festival, which will be held in Costa Mesa, California from March 22 to 28.

The film is about Pegah, a young woman with a red raincoat who is in an eerie marsh in the middle of mysterious mountains all alone. Her true identity is revealed when she coincidentally meets another woman, Matin.



A scene from “Double” by Iranian director Ronak Jafari.

On Woodstock’s 50th anniversary, double the peace, love and music

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - The 50th anniversary of the Woodstock music festival, one of the watersheds of the 1960s counterculture movement, will be celebrated in August with two competing events.

Michael Lang, the co-producer of the 1969 Woodstock festival, announced on Wednesday that the official Woodstock Music and Arts Fair would take place from Aug 16-18 at a motor -racing venue in upstate New York.

Last month the Bethel Woods Center for the Arts, the current owners of the field where the 1969 festival took place, announced it would mark the 50th anniversary with a “pan-generational event” on the same dates.

“The original festival in ‘69 was a reaction by the youth of the time to the causes we felt compelled to fight for - civil rights, women’s rights, and the antiwar movement, and it gave way to our mission to share peace, love and music,” Lang said in a statement.

“Today, we’re experiencing similar disconnects in our country, and one thing we’ve learned is that music has the power to bring people together. So, it’s time to bring the Woodstock spirit back, get involved and make our voices heard.”

The August 1969 Woodstock festival, billed as “three days of peace and music,” is regarded as one of the pivotal moments in music history.

Over three sometimes-rainy days, more than 30 acts - including Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, The Who, The Band, and the Grateful Dead - performed around the clock to a 400,000-strong audience, most of whom watched for free and camped onsite in the mud. The festival was documented in the 1970 film “Woodstock,” which won an Oscar.

Lang did not announce the 2019 performer line-up but said more than 60 musicians would take part on three main stages at Watkins Glenn International, the site of car racing events including NASCAR.

Tintin marks 90th birthday with colonial controversy

BRUSSELS (Reuters) — Tintin will mark his 90th birthday this year with a return to controversy as his Belgian creator’s heirs release a new edition of “Tintin in the Congo”, a work from 1930 that draws accusations of racism.

The boy reporter’s adventure in the then Belgian colony was among the first Tintin stories to be serialized by the artist Herge, and his widow’s firm is launching

a remastered digital version in color to celebrate 90 years since the strip cartoon character first appeared in a Brussels newspaper in 1929.

The publishers dismissed suggestions that the story, which features caricatural black Africans with fat, red lips and wearing loincloths, was problematic: “Dialogue is most important and the work of deconstruction, decolonization, is just

as important,” Robert Vangeneberg told reporters on Thursday.

However, one Congolese, noted Brussels-based comic book artist Barly Baruti, told Reuters that he felt that bringing out a new edition of the work at a time when nationalist and racist groups appear to be on the rise in Europe was questionable: “We really ask ourselves if it is the right moment,” he said.

First issued as a complete album in

book form in 1946, “Tintin in the Congo” features Tintin and his faithful dog Snowy grappling with diamond smugglers and big game hunters.

A Belgian court reject an attempt by Congolese campaigners a decade ago to have the book banned. The judges said it reflected the colonial attitudes of its time and there was no evidence that Herge — who died in 1983 aged 75 — had held racist views.