

Iran says it will keep what it has in Syria **2**

Renewables capacity up 96% in 9 months on year **4**

Iran held by Iraq in lackluster match **15**

Five cineastes to receive Fajr lifetime achievement awards **16**

#FreeMarziehHashemi

American-born Press TV anchor Marzieh Hashemi imprisoned in U.S., denied hijab, halal food



© File photo

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Zarif says Iran is a reliable friend of Kurds

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said that he held “fruitful” talks with Kurdish officials in Erbil and said Iran is a reliable friend of Kurds.

“Delighted to be in Iraqi Kurdistan, long-time & close partner of #Iran. Constructive & fruitful talks in Erbil with KDP Pres @masoud_barzani,

KRG @PMBarzani & KRG SC Chancellor @masrou_barzani. Huge interest in meeting with business community. Iran is a RELIABLE friend of Kurds,” he tweeted on Tuesday.

Zarif on Tuesday made a tour of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq to review and reiterate close ties between the Islamic Republic and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). **->2**

Tehran condemns ‘illegal’ arrest of journalist in U.S.

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qassemi in a Wednesday statement condemned the Washington government for arresting Marzieh Hashemi, a U.S.-born Iranian journalist, upon her arrival in the U.S.

“We condemn the U.S. government’s illegal arrest and inhumane treatment of Marzieh Hashemi, a Press TV journalist and anchor, in Washington, D.C.,” Qassemi said.

The detention of the American Muslim citizen without any excuse and humiliating and treating her inhumanely is a typical example of the behavior of an apartheid regime with its non-white citizens, he added.

The spokesman said the Islamic Republic calls for the immediate and unconditional release of Hashemi and the due observance of her rights. **->2**

Russia, Syria Kurds reject ‘safe zone’ under Turkish control

U.S.-backed Kurdish militants have rejected Washington’s proposal for the establishment of a “security zone” under Turkish control along the Syrian side of the two countries’ border, saying it infringes on the sovereignty of the Arab country.

Aldar Khalil, a Syrian Kurdish politician and co-chair of the Democratic Society

Movement, told AFP on Wednesday that the Kurds would accept the deployment of UN forces along the separation line between Kurdish militants and Turkish troops to ward off a threatened offensive.

“Other choices are unacceptable as they infringe on the sovereignty of Syria and the sovereignty of our autonomous region,” he said. **->13**

Lack of any documentary evidence of Russian penetration in U.S. electoral system: Entessar

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
By Mohammad Ghaderi & Javad Heirannia

TEHRAN — Nader Entessar, professor emeritus of political science from university of South Alabama says that “I agree with the notion that the US hegemony as a global superpower has been, and will continue to be, challenged by developments in the international arena.”

He adds that “There has not been any verifiable evidence of the Russian government’s infiltration of the U.S. electoral system.”

Entessar says “Whatever interference may have occurred in the 2016 U.S. presidential election has been linked to attempts by private, and in some cases very amateurish attempts, by some

individuals in Russia.”

Following is the full text of the interview:

■ Shall we think of Russia collusion case as a mere political plot to destroy Trump or Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections is a fact?

A: Given the gravity of the political charges against Trump and the damage being inflicted on American body politics, I think this affair is more than the usual political game played between the two ruling political parties in the United States. However, the investigation is still ongoing, and we cannot make any definitive judgment based on what has been made available publicly.

■ Robert Mueller is a Republican. So his defiance against Trump might show that the

disaster is even beyond the imagination. What’s your opinion on this matter?

A: Mr. Mueller is a dedicated professional with a long record of law enforcement service at the highest level. Mueller has been appointed to various Senate-confirmed positions by both Republican and Democratic presidents during his long career in the U.S. government. I am not sure what the Mueller investigation will reveal once it is completed, but so far Trump’s vituperative outbursts have not derailed the Mueller investigations, and Mr. Mueller has stood his ground.

■ In regard with some leaked information to the media, could it be something more than a political interference to change the result of the election? Could it be a sign of a deep security infiltration? **->7**

EU failure to implement SPV could worsen current situation: Italian expert

By Payman Yazdani

TEHRAN — Dr. Pastori Gianluca says U.S. secondary sanctions are jeopardizing the JCPOA and the EU failure to offer a meaningful implementation of the SPV could only worsen this state of things.

The Spokesman of Iranian Foreign Ministry Bahram Ghasemi said on Tuesday that Europe has not yet informed when it is going to launch the promised financial mechanism known as the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) in order to help Iran continue business under U.S. pressures.

“The Europeans have yet to finalize the financial mechanism,” Ghasemi said in reaction to rumors that the European Union is going to launch the promised financial mechanism known

as the Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) by the end of January.

Ghasemi said that while the European side has repeatedly expressed its political willingness to implement the SPV, it has delayed implementing it many times so far, which is unjustifiable and unacceptable to Iran.

The spokesman further added “based on their statements so far, they have obtained the desired results by now.”

The issue was discussed with professor of Milan Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Dr. Pastori Gianluca.

Here is the text of our interview with him:

■ Is EU able to make operational the SPV (Special Purpose Vehicle) despite the U.S. opposition?

A: Talking about the SPV mechanism is quite difficult since its operational architecture is still unclear. According to the rumors, it seems that, from a theoretical point of view, it could be useful in solving the financial difficulties of trading goods on the international markets without moving dollars, relaying either on some form of barter or on non-dollar transactions. However, solving this problem does not address the companies’ main fear: being sanctioned because they trade with Iran. The outcome is linked to the exposure to the U.S. market of the different companies; small and medium sized enterprises, without a U.S. nexus or without significant exposure to the U.S. could benefit from the SPV; large or heavily exposed ones probably no. **->7**

ARTICLE
Hanif Ghaffari
Political analyst

Nancy Pelosi and her dual approaches

In her remarks, the United States House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, asserted that Trump’s border wall campaign has nothing to do with border security. She said it’s one of the U.S. President’s plans for energizing his conservative base, and in this way, he aims to distract the country from the various scandals dogging his administration.

“I don’t even know if the president wants the wall. I think he just wants a debate on the wall. And he’s having some difficulty with it,” Pelosi said during a press briefing at the Capitol.

“He keeps increasing the amount of money; increasing the amount of beds; increasing the obstacles to finding a solution — because I don’t think he really wants a solution,” Pelosi said. “I think he loves the distraction that this is from his other problems,” She added.

Pelosi, along with Senate Minority Leader, Chuck Schumer, noted that they disagree with Trump over building a physical border Wall, which according to them, would be expensive and ineffective.

“Democrats and the president both want stronger border security. However, we sharply disagree with the president about the most effective way to do it ... Most presidents have used Oval Office addresses for noble purposes. This president just used the backdrop of the Oval Office to manufacture a crisis, stoke fear, and divert attention from the turmoil in his administration,” said Schumer in answer to Trump’s recent remarks.

On the other hand, Pelosi is among those who are seriously standing against Trump’s impeachment. This dual approach taken by Pelosi towards the White House, and the fact that the House speaker and other Democrat leaders have argued against the serious consideration of Trump’s impeachment, may lead to conflicts inside the Democratic Party in the future.

“We have to wait and see what happens with the Mueller report. We shouldn’t be impeaching for a political reason, and we shouldn’t avoid impeachment for a political reason. So we’ll just have to see how it comes,” Said Pelosi.

However, Pelosi’s remarks were not unprecedented! When Pelosi was the House Minority Leader in years between 2016 and 2018, she opposed the idea of impeaching Trump. **->7**

ARTICLE
Haniyeh Sadat Jafariyeh
Tehran Times Journalist

Getting around sanctions with crypto-rial

In April 2018, the Central Bank of Iran banned domestic banks and people from dealing in foreign cryptocurrency because of money laundering and financing risks.

However, the CBI decided to take a more moderate stance toward the digital money and blockchain technology following the imposition of a new round of U.S. sanctions, hoping that the digital technology would facilitate Iran’s international money transfers and let the country evade the sanctions.

Meanwhile, as an oil producer with an oil-reliant economy dominated by petrodollars, Iran settled on the plan to utilize cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology to make up for any drop in oil revenues due to the economic sanctions designed to cut its oil sales.

Moving on the same track as China, Russia and Venezuela, Iran also hopes that blockchainization of state-backed fiat would lead to the demise of the dollar and put an end to the tyrant U.S. policies.

Under the toughest U.S. sanctions ever and blacklisting of Iran from the Belgium-based international financial messaging system (SWIFT), the country’s plan to create an indigenous cryptocurrency is improving incrementally and thanks to highly dynamic nature of the cryptocurrency, it can act as a good means for Iran to skirt certain sanctions through untraceable banking operations.

The CBI has been working with domestic knowledge-based companies to develop a digital currency, called crypto-rial, supported by HyperLedger Fabric technology.

As reported, the Informatics Services Corporation, affiliated to the CBI but run by the private sector, has accomplished development of rial-based national cryptocurrency and when the CBI approves the uses of national cryptocurrency, it will be issued to financial institutions such as banks to test payments and internal and interbank settlements.

Transactions at the state-backed virtual currency are carried out on an online ledger called a blockchain, just the same as Bitcoin, but since the infrastructure is privately-owned it will not be possible for people to mine it. **->4**



Hossein Moheb Ahari, actor of “T for Tickle”, dies at 67

ARTICLE **TEHRAN** — The prolific stage and screen actor Hossein Moheb Ahari who starred in numerous memorable TV series, movies and plays such as “T for Tickle” and “Off Limits” and “Health Alley”, passed away at a Tehran hospital on Wednesday after a lengthy battle with lymphoma, Persian media announced. He was at 67.

The illness was diagnosed eight years ago. However, he never stopped his professional activities over these years. Earlier last December, he played his last film role in director Afshin Hashemi’s drama “Bye, Shirazi Girl”. **->16**

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



General Baqeri meets Azeri president

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iranian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Hossein Baqeri met with Azeri President Ilham Aliyev on Wednesday.

The two exchanged views about a range of issues, including ways to boost cooperation between the two neighboring countries in various defense areas.

Heading a high-ranking delegation, the Iranian top general arrived in Azerbaijan earlier on Wednesday to meet with senior officials of the country, Tasnim reported.

A military-defense memorandum of understanding (MoU) was slated to be signed at the end of General Baqeri's visit to Azerbaijan.

Iran and Azerbaijan have accelerated efforts in recent years to forge closer partnership in various areas.



Iran says it will keep what it has in Syria

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iran will keep what it has in Syria, the commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) said on Wednesday, defying Israeli threats that Iranian forces might be targeted if they do not leave the country.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Tuesday that Israeli forces would continue to attack Iranians in Syria unless they quickly get out of there.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran will keep its military and revolutionary advisers, as well as its weapons in Syria," Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari said, ISNA reported.

Jafari called Netanyahu's threats "a joke", and warned that the Israeli government "was playing with the lion's tail."



'Zaghari-Ratcliffe provided with best conditions'

POLITICS TEHRAN — Responding to recent allegations by the British government against the Islamic Republic, Tehran Prosecutor Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi has said Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and other convicts being held in Iranian prisons for security offenses are provided with the best conditions, including using phone calls, meeting with families and medical care.

Speaking with a number of reporters in a local ceremony on Wednesday, Jafari Dolatabadi called on Western governments to stop interfering in the judicial affairs of Iran, saying, "Zaghari-Ratcliffe and several other security convicts are kept in prison for very serious offences," Mehr reported.



No date set for establishing SPV: Qassemi

POLITICS TEHRAN — The Europeans so far have not announced a date for establishing the special purpose vehicle (SPV), Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said on Tuesday, Mehr reported.

SPV is a financial mechanism that the European Union has proposed to facilitate trade with Iran by bypassing U.S. sanctions.

"From Iran's perspective, the European side has had a considerable delay in establishing this financial mechanism," Qassemi said, adding, "This delay, no matter what reasons are behind it, is not acceptable."

He added that Europeans have repeatedly emphasized their political determination for establishing the SPV. "According to their statements, they have reached relatively good results."



Ambassador holds talks with Russian official on bilateral ties

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iranian Ambassador to Moscow Mehdi Sanaei met on Wednesday with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Grigory Karasin, to discuss bilateral ties and cooperation, especially in the Central Asian and Caucasian regions.

During the meeting, the two sides also conferred on the relations between Russia and Central Asian countries as well as the Caucasus, as well as the prospects of bilateral relations in various bilateral, regional and international spheres, Mehr reported.

Zarif says Iran is a reliable friend of Kurds

1 -> He met with KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani. Zarif hailed the ties between Iran and the Republic of Iraq as well as the KRG as "age-old, outstanding, and constructive" and said the trade relations are expanding.

Barzani described bilateral relations between Tehran and the KRG as very significant and called for closer cooperation in various areas, including economy and trade.

Zarif tweeted on Tuesday, "Good to be back in Sulaymaniya to participate in a joint business forum. Extensive, friendly conversations with Deputy KRG PM @qubadjit. Hosted delightful dinner with leaders of almost all Kurdish parties. Rare opportunity for inclusive dialog."

"While in Sulaymaniya, also paid tribute to late President of #Iraq Jalal Talabani—not merely a close, personal friend but also an admirable, patriotic statesman who played vital role in promoting Iraq's territorial integrity & regional relation. He is sorely missed on both sides," he said in another tweet.

'U.S. played no role in defeat of Daesh in Iraq, Syria'

POLITICS TEHRAN — Iran's foreign minister said on Wednesday that it was the Syrian and Iraqi people who defeated Daesh and the U.S. played no role in this respect.

In a conference in Karbala, Iraq, Mohammad Javad Zarif said that victory in defeating Daesh in Iraq and Syria was an achievement for the people of the two countries which has nothing to do with the U.S.

In an interview with the Arabic-language al-Mayadeen news channel on Monday, Zarif said the presence of U.S. forces in Syria has been ineffective, stressing that the American troops never entered real and meaningful battle against the Daesh terrorist group.

"The U.S. has not fought against the Daesh at all and its presence in Syria was not in line with the interests of the Syrian nation or agreed by the (country's) government," he said.

Armed forces in Iraq and Syria, backed by popular mobilization units and Iranian military advisors, have managed to flush Daesh militants out of their last strongholds in both countries, declaring full victory over



the notorious group in November 2017. ■ 'U.S. has no right to limit Iran-Iraq cooperation' Zarif also said that Iran and Iraq have

expanded cooperation in energy sphere and the U.S. has no right to limit it. On December 20, the U.S. granted Baghdad a 90-day extension to a waiver

on abiding by the sanctions that were re-imposed on the Islamic Republic in November.

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

The top Iranian diplomat also held talks with Secretary-General of Patriotic Union of Kurdistan KosratRasul.

In this meeting, Zarif hailed the important role of the late PUK leader Jalal Talabani in the national unity of Iraq and the Kurdistan region.

In the meeting, the two sides expressed support for increasing economic and trade cooperation between Iraq's Kurdistan, particularly Sulaymaniyeh, and Iran, as well as efforts by private sector firms and entrepreneurs to deepen bilateral cooperation.

In the meeting, the two sides also discussed regional issues including the current developments in Syria, and political solutions to problems.

Tehran condemns 'illegal' arrest of journalist in U.S.

1 -> Marzieh Hashemi, a journalist and anchor working for Iran's English-language Press TV television news network, was detained and imprisoned in the United States for unspecified reasons.

American-born Hashemi, most famous for anchoring news programs and presenting shows for Press TV, was detained upon arrival at St. Louis Lambert International Airport in St. Louis, Missouri, on Sunday, her family and friends said, according to the network's website.

Press TV has learned that she was transferred by the FBI to a detention facility in Washington, D.C. The U.S. officials have so far refused to provide any reasons for her

apprehension either to her or her family.

Hashemi, born Melanie Franklin, had arrived in the U.S. to visit her ill brother and other family members.

Her relatives were unable to contact her, and she was allowed to contact her daughter only two days after her arrest.

Hashemi, who has been living in Iran for years and is a Muslim convert, has told her daughter that she was handcuffed and shackled and was being treated like a criminal.

The journalist also said that she had her hijab forcibly removed, and was photographed without her headscarf upon arrival at the prison.

Hashemi has only been allowed to wear a T-shirt, and is currently using another one to cover her head.

Furthermore, she has been offered only pork as meal - which is forbidden under Islamic law - and even denied bread and any other halal food after refusing to consume the meat.

Hashemi told her daughter that the only food she has had over the past two days has been a packet of crackers.

Hashemi's family members and media activists have launched a social media campaign with the hashtags #FreeMarziehHashemi and #Pray4MarziehHashemi in support of the detained journalist.

Rouhani hails Iran's achievements in space tech

POLITICS TEHRAN — President Hassan Rouhani on Wednesday hailed Iran's success in launching a satellite into space as a great achievement, saying trivial shortcomings will be addressed within months.

On Tuesday, Iran launched a satellite, dubbed Payam, into space. The satellite, however, failed to reach the orbit in the final stage.

"We've had good achievements in launching the satellite, but trivial shortcomings also existed," Rouhani said, addressing a joint conference of the cabinet ministers and provincial governors in Tehran.

He said the nation should know that Iran has succeeded to enter the space, which is very important for the country's agriculture, environment, intelligence gathering and preserving the forests and pastures.

He also pointed to the U.S. maximum pressure campaign against the Iranian nation, saying Iran, with all its power, will resist the pressure which has targeted its revenues, transportation and banking relations.

Calling on his ministers and provincial



governors to make every effort to counter U.S. sanctions, Rouhani said, "The Americans are concerned about the Iranian nation's capabilities and are seeking to impose maximum pressure [on Iran], but these pressures will be fruitless."

The Americans are seeking to cut off Iran's ties with other countries on different pretexts, he said. "However, we must expand these relations through different ways."

The president also pointed to the efforts made to resolve Iran's banking issues, saying, "With regard to banking transactions, we are in a better place compared to two months ago, but we still need to take more measures."

Tehran summons Dutch ambassador over embassy attack in Hague

POLITICS TEHRAN — The Foreign Ministry on Tuesday called in Dutch Ambassador to Tehran Jacques Werner to express Iran's protest over a recent attack on the Islamic Republic's embassy in The Hague.

A senior Iranian Foreign Ministry official on Monday conveyed Tehran's strong protest over the attack to the Dutch envoy, the ministry said in a statement on Tuesday.

It added that the Iranian official pointed to similar attacks by "some anti-revolutionary and separatist elements" in the past and criticized the lack of pre-emptive and decisive measures by the Netherlands' police and judicial authorities.

He urged the Dutch government to take firm action in line with its obligations under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961) and ensure the security of the Iranian embassy and its diplomats in The Hague and prevent the recurrence of such incidents.

The Dutch ambassador, for his part, expressed his regret over the attack and presented a report on measures taken by his country's police regarding the perpetrators of the incident.

Werner said he would inform his gov-



ernment of Iran's protest.

Turkish state-run Anadolu Agency quoted Dutch media as saying that a group demonstrating against the murders of two Iranian dissidents in the Netherlands attacked the Iranian embassy in The Hague late Wednesday and were arrested for public disorder.

Some of the protesters reportedly hurled stones and objects at the embassy and tried to enter the building by climbing over its fence.

Police arrested four suspects, including the son of Ahmad Mola Nissi, a leader of the separatist group Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA), which is regarded as a terrorist organization by Iran.

Iran's satellite launch not against intl. law: Russian diplomat

POLITICS TEHRAN — Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said on Tuesday that Iran's action in launching satellite is not against international law.

Iran attempted on Tuesday to launch Payam satellite into orbit but the rocket's third stage failed to provide enough speed to reach the orbit.

"All the experts know that satellite carriers and non-nuclear surface-to-surface ballistic missiles are different structurally from missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads," he told reporters, according to IRNA.

He noted that there is no reason for criticizing Iran's



missile program.

"Iran is never doing an action contradicting international regulations when it tests its missiles", he said.

He noted that Resolution 2231 of the UN Security Council has not considered any ban on using ballistic missiles' technologies for Iran and it has only demanded it to avoid launching missile capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

"Therefore, criticizing Iran for its missile program is wrong and we know it irresponsible move, as it leads the global community to astray purposefully and knowingly," he said.

Iran has repeatedly said its missile program is purely defensive and its missiles are not designed to carry nuclear warheads.

Qom seminary elites warn against joining FATF

POLITICS TEHRAN — A number of Qom seminary elites wrote a letter to Ayatollah Sadeq Amoli Larijani, the chairman of the Expediency Council, warning that Iran's accession to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) will lead to the enemies' complete dominance over Iran's banking system.

In an open letter published on Wednesday, the Qom seminary elites pointed out that in the event of joining the FATF, the enemies can obtain banking information which will then be used to impose more effective sanctions against the Iranian nation, Mehr reported.

They also stated that the FATF has not considered any privileges for Iran for joining the body, which makes this deal "irrational".

FATF has given Iran a February deadline to complete the necessary reforms regarding its removal from



the task force's blacklist.

A bill to amend the anti-money laundering law had been approved by the cabinet ministers on November 8, 2017 and sent to the Guardian Council after a ratification by the Majlis.

However, the Guardian Council, after studying the bill, sent it back to Majlis after finding some faults with it. The Majlis insisted on its ratification and sent it to the Expediency Council, which acts as an arbitration between the Majlis and the Guardian Council.

Iran not to allow prying in its missile program: MP

POLITICS TEHRAN — Ali Najafi Khoshroudi, the spokesman of the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, has said that Iran will let no country interfere in its defense and missile programs.

"Our missile technology and defense program is our country's business and no country has the right to interfere in them," he told ISNA in an interview published on Wednesday.

Iran attempted on Tuesday to launch Payam satellite into orbit but the rocket's third stage failed to provide enough speed to reach the orbit.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed in a statement that Iran's failed attempt to launch the satellite demonstrates the Islamic Republic's intent to develop missiles able to reach as far as Europe.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that Iran's satellite launch



was actually part of the country's attempt to develop intercontinental ballistic missile.

Khoshroudi said that Iran has the right to reach advancement in satellite technology through relying on its own capacities.

"The U.S. cannot apply double standards in this respect. Other countries, including the U.S., enjoy advanced technologies, but it [the U.S.] seeks to deprive Iran of its right," he said.

He added that the U.S. has certain political views on Iran and resorts to double standards in line with its actions against Iran.

UN Security Council approves up to 75 Yemen truce monitors

The United Nations Security Council unanimously approved Wednesday the deployment of up to 75 observers to Yemen's port city of Hudaydah for six months to monitor a cease-fire and redeployment of forces by the warring parties.

The draft resolution calls on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to "expeditiously" deploy the United Nations Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement (UN-MHA), led by retired Dutch General Patrick Cammaert.

The draft resolution also "requests Member States, particularly neighboring States, to support the United Nations as required for the implementation of UNMHA's mandate."

Yemen's warring parties, namely Houthi Ansarullah movement and the Saudi-backed former government, agreed the truce in the Houthi-held port in Sweden on December 13.

The UNSC last month authorized an advance monitoring team led by Cammaert and asked Guterres to recommend a larger operation as the group's mandate expires on January 20.

Yemen's Houthis say the UN chief monitor of Hudaydah ceasefire has exited the agreed course of truce.

The spokesman for Yemeni Armed Forces said Tuesday that the Saudi-led military coalition had on more than 437 occasions breached the UN-brokered truce in the strategic port city of Hudaydah over the past 72 hours.



Brigadier General Yahya Saree said Saudi troops and their mercenaries have lobbed a total of 316 mortar shells at various residential neighborhoods of Hudaydah during the mentioned period.

Last week, Houthis' chief negotiator, Mohammed Abdulsalam boycotted the UN-led ceasefire monitoring team in Hudaydah,

accusing the head of the team of pursuing "other agendas."

Abdulsalam said Cammaert had "exited from the course of the agreement by implementing other agendas."

Hudaydah, a lifeline for millions of Yemenis, has seen some of the heaviest fighting in the Saudi-led aggression, which began

in March 2015.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched the Hudaydah offensive in June but have been facing strong resistance from Yemeni armed forces — led by the Houthis — as well as the city's residents.

The Saudi war has killed tens of thousands of Yemeni people and made the country the world's worst humanitarian disaster.

The imposed war initially consisted of an airstrike campaign but was later coupled with a naval blockade and the deployment of ground mercenaries to Yemen.

Jordan agrees to host Yemen talks about prisoner exchange

Jordan has announced that it will host a round of UN-brokered negotiations between delegates from Yemen's Houthi Ansarullah movement and representatives loyal to former Yemeni president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi to discuss a prisoner swap deal between the two warring sides.

The Jordanian Foreign Ministry announced in a statement on Tuesday that the kingdom had accepted a request from UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths to host the talks. The statement, however, did not say when the meeting would take place.

Jordan received a request from Griffiths last Thursday to host a "specific meeting" between officials from the former Yemeni government and Ansarullah movement.

(Source: agencies)

U.S. envoy due in Islamabad as Afghan peace talks falter

United States Special Envoy on Afghan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, is due to arrive in the Pakistani capital Islamabad for talks with the country's civilian and military leadership, as the Afghan Taliban threaten to pull out of peace talks that could see an end to the 17-year Afghan War.

Khalilzad is expected to land in Islamabad on Thursday, although the envoy's schedule has been fluid in recent days after his visits to New Delhi, Beijing and Kabul, with brief stops in Dubai, since embarking on his regional tour earlier this month.

The U.S. envoy's visit to Pakistan comes as the Afghan Taliban on Tuesday threatened to pull the plug on direct negotiations with the U.S., accusing the country of duplicity in a statement issued to the media.

"If [the U.S.] seeks to avoid accepting the legitimate demands of Afghans and under various excuses wishes to pursue its colonial and military objectives in the guise of peace... it means it has a lack of interest in finding a peaceful solution to the Afghan problem," read the Taliban statement.

In advance of Khalilzad's visit, senior U.S. State Department official Lisa Curtis has been holding meetings in the Pakistani capital.

Curtis is expected to accompany Khalilzad on his engagements with the government of Pakistan, a country the U.S. considers to have a key role in bringing the Afghan Taliban to the negotiating table.

In December, US President Donald Trump told Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan that he considered Pakistan to "[have] the ability to deny the Taliban sanctuary on its territory", in a letter requesting Afghanistan's eastern neighbor for its "support and facilitation" for the Afghan peace process.

Pakistan denies that it holds direct influence over the Afghan Taliban, an armed group that has been fighting U.S.-led NATO forces in Afghanistan since 2001, and which the Afghan government considers to be backed by Islamabad.

Pakistan has long advocated for a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan, the U.S.'s longest-ever war — reaching more than 17 years of fighting.

"Pakistan's long-standing position to give peace and reconciliation a real chance in Afghanistan has become the basis

of an international consensus," said Pakistani Foreign Office spokesperson Muhammad Faisal at a recent press briefing.

The Pakistani Foreign Office has acknowledged the country's role as a "facilitator" in the Afghan peace process in several statements, but denies having direct control or influence over the Afghan Taliban.

'Let us pray that this leads to peace'

Direct talks between the U.S. and the Afghan Taliban recommenced in July last year, with senior U.S. State Department official Alice Wells meetings with representatives of the armed group in Qatar's capital, Doha.

A second meeting, this time with Khalilzad, was held in October, also in Doha. This was followed by a third two-day meeting last month in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which also included representatives from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the UAE.

The talks have fulfilled a long-standing demand from the Afghan Taliban, who refuse to negotiate with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's civilian government, terming it a "puppet regime" of the U.S.

Efforts by the U.S. to include Afghan officials in the latest peace talks have met continued resistance from the armed group.

Following the last round of talks, Pakistan's Prime Minister Khan said his country would do "everything within its power to further the peace process".

"Pakistan has helped in the dialogue between Taliban and the U.S. in Abu Dhabi. Let us pray that this leads to peace and ends almost three decades of suffering of the brave Afghan people," he said in a tweet.

On Tuesday, UK-based broadcaster, the BBC, reported that Pakistan had detained a senior Afghan Taliban official in a possible bid to pressure the group to return to the negotiating table.

Hafiz Mohibullah, who served as religious affairs minister when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, was arrested in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar, the broadcaster reported.

Shortly after the news broke, the Afghan Taliban issued a statement accusing the US of "exerting unlawful pressure by enticing other countries".



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It is unclear where the talks now stand, with the Taliban accusing the US of expanding the agenda beyond the earlier agreed upon remit of a withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan and a commitment to "prevent Afghanistan from being used against other countries", according to the Taliban statement.

"The Islamic Emirate warns the United States that if the current state of affairs continues and America sustains her insincerity, then the Islamic Emirate will be forced to stall all talks and negotiations until America ends her unlawful pressures and maneuvering and steps forward towards true peace," the Taliban said.

(source: Al Jazeera)

Abbas raps Israeli occupation as Palestine takes over G77 chairmanship

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has denounced Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, as he assumes the chairmanship of the largest bloc of countries at the United Nations.

Abbas made the remarks at a ceremony marking the handover of the chair of the Group of 77 (G77) from Egypt to Palestine at the UN headquarters on Tuesday.

"I am pleased to take over today the chairmanship of the Group of 77 on behalf of the Palestinian people and the State of Palestine," he said. "It is a great responsibility that the State of Palestine will bear with complete humility."

The Group of 77, a coalition of 134 mainly developing countries and China, was founded in 1964. It initially had 77 members, but currently represents some 80 percent of the world's population.

At his Tuesday's speech, Abbas blasted Israel for hampering the development in the Middle East through its occupation policy.

"Israel's continued colonization and occupation of the State of Palestine undermines our development and capacity for cooperation, coordination and obstructs the cohesive future development of all peoples of the region," he said.

Abbas also stressed his commitment to a "peaceful solution" to the decades-long



Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which "brings an end to the occupation and the realization of the independence of the state of Palestine with East Jerusalem [al-Quds] as its capital."

The Palestinian president further condemned the scourge of terrorism "in all its forms, colors, and types" regardless of who perpetrates it.

"Terrorism takes place worldwide on a daily basis. It is an epidemic and I therefore call on all countries of the world to cooper-

ate, to put an end to terrorism, to uproot it," he added.

Palestinian officials hailed Palestine's G77 chairmanship as a step towards the country's full UN membership.

Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki announced that Palestine is consulting with the UN Security Council member states about its membership bid despite the U.S. threat to veto the measure.

"The moment we conclude the process, we will present the application," he told U.S.

television network CBS.

Moreover, Saeb Erekat, the secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), described the Palestinians' chairmanship of the G77 as a "historic step that was made by the sacrifices of our people and their long struggle for freedom."

The move, he added, "signifies the recognition of the international community of Palestinian statehood and our right to self-determination."

Despite the reality under Israel's military occupation, Palestine can play a significant role within the global system. The Palestinian people have a tremendous potential to share with the rest of the international community."

In November 2012, the UN General Assembly upgraded Palestine's status from "non-member observer entity" to "non-member observer state" despite strong opposition from Israel.

Since then, the Palestinians have joined dozens of international organizations and agreements as part of a campaign to garner support for the recognition of their homeland as a sovereign state.

Last October, the General Assembly voted to temporarily elevate Palestine's status at the UN so that it could take over the rotating chairmanship of the G77 for 2019.

(Source: Press TV)

May faces confidence vote as Brexit goes down to the line

Prime Minister Theresa May's government faced a no confidence vote on Wednesday after the crushing defeat of her Brexit divorce deal by parliament left Britain's exit from the European Union in disarray just 10 weeks before it is due to leave.

Lawmakers voted 432-202 against her deal, the worst defeat in modern British history, triggering political chaos that could lead to a disorderly exit from the EU or even to a reversal of the 2016 decision to leave.

With the clock ticking down to March 29, the date set in law for Brexit, the United Kingdom is now in the deepest political crisis in half a century as it grapples with how, or even whether, to exit the European project it joined in 1973.

After the first British parliamentary defeat of a treaty since 1864, opposition Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn called a vote of no confidence in May's government, to be held at 1900 GMT on Wednesday.

The small Northern Irish DUP party which props up May's minority government and refused to back the deal said it would stand behind May in the no-confidence vote. Pro-Brexit Conservatives also said they would support her.

"I have no doubt that the prime minister will win that and then she can focus on trying to thrash out something with the EU and parliamentarians," James Cleverly, a lawmaker and deputy chairman of the Conservative party, told Reuters.

"My fear is that parliament could lose its head and put the whole Brexit process at risk, which I think would be a catastrophic error," said Cleverly who supports Brexit.

Germany, the most powerful member of the EU, called for new talks between Britain and the bloc, whose leaders warned of the dire consequences of a no-deal Brexit that business leaders fear will sow chaos through supply chains across Europe and beyond.

Labour's finance minister-in-waiting, John McDonnell, said May could eventually get a deal through parliament if she negotiated a compromise with his party.

New Deal?

That still leaves Brexit up in the air. May's humiliating loss appeared to catastrophically undermine her two-year strategy of forging an amicable divorce with close ties to the EU after the March 29 exit.

Sterling GBP=D3 jumped by more than a cent against the U.S. dollar on news of May's defeat on Tuesday and was holding close to that level on Wednesday.

Ever since Britain voted by 52-48 percent to leave the EU in a referendum in June 2016, the political class has been debating how to leave the European project forged by France and Germany after the devastation of World War Two.

While the country is divided over EU membership, most agree the world's fifth largest economy is at a crossroads and its choices over Brexit will shape the prosperity of future generations for years to come.

Other members of the EU, which combined has about six times the economic might of the United Kingdom, called for discussion but indicated there was little chance of fundamental change to the deal May had negotiated.

Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said there was not much time left to find a Brexit solution and that "the time for playing games is now over."

He told broadcaster Deutschlandfunk there needed to be new talks between Britain and the EU, adding that in the end the issue of a backstop solution for the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland needed to be discussed.

No BREXIT?

EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said a disorderly Brexit was more likely while Donald Tusk, the chairman of EU leaders, suggested Britain should now consider reversing Brexit altogether.

Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage said Britain was probably heading for a delay and another vote on EU membership.

"I think and I fear that we are headed on a path towards delay and probably, yes, a second vote," Farage said.

Bank of England Governor Mark Carney speaks to lawmakers in parliament's Treasury Committee on Wednesday.

If parliament did vote that it had no confidence in May's government, there is a 14-day grace period in which to pass an act of confidence in a new government.

If there is no vote of confidence in that new government, then a new election must be held within about 17 working days, according to the Institute of Government.

Damascus ready to work with new UN envoy to rekindle inter-Syrian talks: Muallem

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem says the Damascus government is prepared to cooperate with the United Nations' new envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, to facilitate inter-Syrian peace talks aimed at finding a political settlement to the ongoing foreign-sponsored crisis in the country.

During a meeting in the Syrian capital Damascus on Tuesday, Muallem welcomed Pedersen's appointment as the UN chief's new top envoy for Syria, emphasizing that the Syrian government is willing to help the veteran Norwegian diplomat succeed in his mission.

Muallem went on to say that UN-brokered Syria peace talks will benefit the war-battered nation as it will put an end to terrorism as well as the illegal presence of foreign forces on Syrian soil, and will effectively preserve Syria's unity, sovereignty and independence.

Pedersen, for his part, expressed his pleasure to visit Damascus since being appointed last October, pointing out that he plans to listen carefully to the views of the Syrian government for the success of his mission and move towards a political solution to the Syrian conflict.

He then briefed the Syrian foreign minister on the meetings and activities that he aims to undertake during his tenure in a bid to activate Syria's political process, underscoring that the process should be led by the Syrian government otherwise it will bear no fruit.

The new UN envoy for Syria also highlighted that he would make all efforts to ensure a political solution, and that he will take into account the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and relevant Security Council resolutions.

(Source: SANA)

STOCK MARKET

TEDPIX	165595.0
IFX	1983.55

Sources: tse.ir, Ifb.ir

CURRENCIES

USD	42,000 rials
EUR	47,911 rials
GBP	54,000 rials
AED	11,439 rials

Source: cbi.ir

COMMODITIES

WTI	\$51.52/b
Brent	\$60.22/b
OPEC Basket	\$56.26/b
Gold	\$1,291.90/oz
Silver	\$15.65/oz
Platinum	\$805.15/oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

NEWS IN BRIEF



New petrochemical projects to go operational by yearend

ENERGY TEHRAN — Two new petrochemical projects will start operating by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 22), IRIB reported on Wednesday quoting an official at NPC.

According to the Director of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC)'s Projects Ali-Mohammad Bosaqzadeh, the mentioned projects namely Kaveh Petrochemical complex and the first phase of Bushehr petrochemical complex located on the shores of Persian Gulf in southern Iran are currently at experimental production stage.



40 new CNG stations to go operational next month

ENERGY TEHRAN — National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company (NIOPDC) will put 40 new compressed natural gas (CNG) filling stations into operation throughout the country during the Ten-Day Dawn (February 1-10, marking the victory anniversary of the Islamic Revolution), Hamid Qasemi Deh-Cheshmeh, director for CNG project of NIOPDC, announced.

He said with these new stations coming on stream, the number of CNG stations in Iran will reach 2,449, Shana reported on Wednesday.

NIOPDC plans to increase the share of CNG in the country's fuel consumption pattern to 20 percent in the near future.



Over \$16b of tax revenues earned in 9 months

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Iran's tax incomes during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21, 2018) stood at 680 trillion rials (about \$16.19 billion), Head of Iran's National Tax Administration (INTA) Seyed Kamel Taqavi-Nejad announced.

The official said that the figure shows 10 percent rise from the tax income earned during the same period of time in the previous year, IRNA reported.

As previously announced by the Central Bank of Iran (CBI), the country's tax income rose 14.1 percent during the last Iranian calendar year (ended on March 20, 2018) to reach 1.15 quadrillion rials (about \$27.3 billion).

The Iranian government earns budget from various sources including the revenues and offering capital assets and divesting financial assets to the private sector.

President Hassan Rouhani's economic strategy is to significantly reduce the government's dependency on oil and instead collect tax more systematically.

Renewables capacity up 96% in 9 months on year

ENERGY TEHRAN — The capacity of generating electricity from renewable sources in Iran has increase 96 percent during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 21-December 21, 2018) from the same time span in the past year, IRIB reported on Wednesday citing energy ministry's news portal (known as Paven).

The report put the country's renewable capacity at 670 megawatts (MW) in the nine-month period of this year which is planned to hit 1,141 MW by the yearend (March 20, 2019).

In the next five years, Iran is aiming for a 5,000 MW increase in renewable capacity to meet growing domestic demand and expand its presence in the regional electricity market.

In Iran, renewables account for just six percent of energy generation, versus natural gas' 90 percent share.

Switzerland to host next joint economic committee meeting with Iran: envoy

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Swiss government is planning to host the next Iran-Switzerland Joint Economic Committee meeting, the portal of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) quoted the Swiss ambassador to Tehran as saying.

As reported, Markus Leitner made the remarks in a meeting with Mohammadreza Modoudi, the acting head of TPO, on Tuesday in Tehran.

The officials met in order to discuss mutual trade and also the progress of the payment mechanism which Switzerland is trying to open

to export foodstuff and pharmaceuticals to Iran. Mentioning the Swiss economy minister's remarks about the Iran payment channel, Leitner said "Although we are determined for establishing the payment channel but the Swiss ministry of economy has not made any guarantees and the minister's remarks were misinterpreted by the press."

Modoudi for his part expressed appreciation for the European country's efforts in keeping trade with Iran and called for further expansion of ties.

The TPO head noted that even though the



Swiss ambassador to Tehran Markus Leitner

European private sector is feeling threatened by the U.S. sanctions but Iran expects the European governments to reduce tariffs on Iranian commodities to facilitate trade to some extent.

Modudi further mentioned Iran's rising trade with its neighboring countries and said, having 15 neighboring countries Iran's foreign trade will continue its upward trend and the U.S. sanctions cannot impede that.

Over \$924m of state-owned shares divested since last March

ECONOMY TEHRAN — Iranian Privatization Organization (IPO) has offered 38.826 trillion rials (about \$924.4 million) of state-run shares to the private sector since the beginning of the present Iranian calendar year 1397 (March 21, 2018), IRNA reported.

On January 1, Mohammadreza Pour-Ebrahimi, the chairman of the Parliament Economic Committee, told IRNA that the national budget bill for the next Iranian calendar year 1398, which starts on March 21,



2019, has envisaged transferring 50 trillion rials (about \$1.19 billion) worth of state-run shares to the private sector.

As previously reported, in its planned budget for the current Iranian calendar year, the Iranian government expects to earn some 106 trillion rials (about \$2.5 billion) of income from divesting shares of state-run companies to the private sector.

In a TV program two months ago, Mir Ali Ashraf Abdollah Pouri-Hosseini, the head of IPO, said: "Some 60 percent of the target

for divesting state-run shares to the private sector envisaged in the budget law for the present year has been already achieved."

He also said that IPO still lagged behind its set target due to the number of state-run companies which had been decided to be privatized.

In late May, 2018, IPO published the list of the enterprises that their shares are planned to be transferred to the private sector by the end of current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2019).

Getting around sanctions with crypto-rial

I → In fact, Iran is mainly aimed at testing the potentials of blockchain and crypto technology in running its financial system, making banks able to use the tokens as a payment instrument in transactions and banking settlement at the first phase of the blockchain banking infrastructure. The country seems inclined to enjoy the new virtual currency businesses which includes little notice or footprint and has also prepared the required infrastructure for trading cryptocurrency in its stock exchange.

However, in spite of the CBI's prohibition from trading cryptocurrencies, Iranians had commenced using cryptocurrency and Bitcoin mining for transactions with the rest of the world before its use was banned by the CBI in the country.

Individuals and businesses in Iran have had access to virtual currency platforms through "Iran-located, internet-based virtual currency exchanges; U.S. or other third country-based virtual currency exchanges; and peer-to-peer (P2P) exchangers," according to reports.

But the U.S. embargo on a number of cryptocurrency exchange platforms, including Binance and Bittrex, restricted Iran from receiving services, however, no assets belonging to Iranians were blocked. U.S. sanctions have also ensnared Iranian bitcoin traders.

Furthermore, in December, the U.S. Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, known as Fincen, issued a warning in an advisory to assist U.S. banks and other financial actors such as cryptocurrency exchanges in identifying "potentially



illicit transactions related to the Islamic Republic of Iran," Bitcoin.com reported.

Fincen claimed that since 2013 Iran's use of virtual currency includes at least \$3.8 million worth of bitcoin-denominated transactions per year. The organization noted that "while the use of virtual currency in Iran is comparatively small, virtual currency is an emerging payment system that may provide potential avenues for individuals and entities to evade sanctions."

Fincen believes that P2P cryptocurrency exchangers are a significant means through which Iran can dodge economic sanctions.

Following the Fincen's announcement, the United States lawmakers introduced a bill (HR 7321) to impose more sanctions on Iranian financial institutions and the

development and use of the national digital currency, Cointelegraph reported.

The act prohibits transactions, financing or other dealings related to an Iranian digital currency, and introduces sanctions on foreign individuals engaged in the sale, supply, holding or transfer of the digital currency.

In the wake of the U.S. restrictions, thus, cryptocurrency trades are limited into Iran's domestic market and not possible at the international level and Bitcoin is sold at a significant premium relative to the global average price in Iran.

Unfortunately, the basic and premier regulations of using cryptocurrencies have not been ratified in Iran and Iranians are obliged to refer to stock exchange shops abroad to do their crypto-transactions, most of which are American obedient to U.S. regulations and of course, sanctions.

To make using cryptocurrency and blockchain technology legal and official in the country, the Iranian government is drafting a policy framework by the help of the CBI and the Stock Exchange Organization which clarifies all its regulations and policies over cryptocurrency and mining.

Being legislated, it is believed that SWIFT can be replaced by the digital money, i.e. the rial-pegged national currency, and transactions would be done faster and at lower prices.

Due to a lack of required regulations, cargos of equipment for mining cryptocurrency are seized by the customs administration. They are said to be released as soon as the government legalizes cryptocurrency use in the country.

ECB lays out bad loan deadlines for Eurozone banks

The European Central Bank has warned banks that it expects them to hit stringent targets for cleaning their balance sheets of bad loans.

The central bank's regulatory arm, the Single Supervisory Mechanism, has started to write to banks to tell them how much capital they should hold against old loans that have turned sour. Each of the Eurozone's big lenders will be told how long it has to cover loans that have been more than seven years in default.

High volumes of non-performing loans are one of the biggest problems left over from the region's financial crisis, and Italy is seen as one of the countries with the biggest burden. Shares in several mid-sized lenders in Italy fell by at least 5 percent on Tuesday after the ECB's demands were reported by Il Sole 24 Ore, the Italian newspaper.

During the second quarter of last year almost 10 percent of Italian loans, worth €159bn, were deemed non-performing. Across the Eurozone as a whole the stock of outstanding sour loans was 4.4 percent.

Growth in Italy has stagnated and investors, concerned about the anti-establishment Eurosceptic government's spending plans, are threatening to push up Rome's borrowing costs. Higher government borrowing costs would affect Italian banks because they hold much of Rome's debt, forcing them to raise more capital.

"Fundamentals have been deteriorating in the aftermath of Italy's government change last May," said Ignacio Cerezo, an analyst at UBS.

The ECB's demands come as Italy is weighing the bailout of Genoan lender Banca Carige, which would be the 12th Italian bank in three years to need a public rescue or merger with a larger rival to stave off failure. The ECB took control of Carige this year after it failed to



raise capital to meet regulatory demands. Italy's anti-establishment, Eurosceptic government has suggested it could be nationalized.

Shares in mid-sized lender UBI Banca were down 7 percent in early trading on Tuesday. Banco BPM fell 6.5 percent, and Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena was down 5 percent.

Shares pared earlier losses after a number of lenders played down the impact of the ECB's update guidelines. Banca Intesa Sanpaolo, UBI, Banco BPM and BPER Banca said they did not expect any significant impact on their financial targets.

The ECB believes that it has given banks enough time to grapple with the problem. The SSM forewarned banks last summer that it would begin to make concrete its "expectations" for when banks should deal with their older non-performing loans.

It first raised the issue of expecting banks to fully cover their exposures to non-performing loans in the spring of 2017.

However, Matteo Salvini, Italy's deputy prime minister and leader of the Eurosceptic League party, seized the opportunity to accuse the ECB of a "new attack" against Italy's financial system. "Transparency is needed to quash the suspicion that the ECB is making political use of its power," he told Ansa, the Italian news agency.

(Source: Financial Times)

China just injected a record amount of money to stimulate its economy

China's central bank on Wednesday pumped a net 560 billion yuan (\$83 billion) into its banking system — a record amount of money injected in one day — in a sign that the economy may be facing enormous stress.

The yield on the 10-year Chinese government bond fell below 3.1 percent on Wednesday afternoon, its lowest in more than two years, according to financial database Wind. Yields fall when bond prices rise, and a decline in yields typically signals expectations of a slowdown in economic growth.

"At present, it is the peak of the tax period, and the total liquidity of the banking system is declining rather quickly," the People's Bank of China said in a statement on its website. The central bank did not immediately respond to CNBC's faxed request for comment on Wednesday's record cash injection.

Liquidity — or the ease by which assets can be turned into cash — is particularly important for companies needing to pay taxes while maintaining regular operations. For more than a year, many Chinese businesses have already been struggling with sluggish economic growth, increased financing difficulties and greater obligations to provide benefits for employees. The Chinese New Year holiday, when most companies shut down for at least a week, is also less than three weeks away.

Zhao Bowen, research director at Beijing-based Blue Stone Asset Management, said in a statement to CNBC that enterprises are expected to pay more than 1 trillion yuan in taxes this week, marking the peak period of tax payments. A historically low level of fiscal deposits and the expiration of 390 billion yuan in medium-term lending are also contributing to tighter financial conditions overall, he said.

"At the moment, the government's position is to push back against the downward pressure on the economy, and take a good

first step at that in the first quarter," Zhao said, according to a CNBC translation of his Mandarin-language comments. He added the central bank is also working to loosen overall credit conditions and coordinate its moves with an expected large issuance of local debt.

"At present, it is the peak of the tax period, and the total liquidity of the banking system is declining rather quickly."

The central bank's record cash injection of 560 billion yuan into the banking system on Wednesday came through "reverse repurchase agreements," or buying short-term bonds from some commercial lenders so banks have more cash on hand. Sales of the bonds are called "repurchase agreements" and both measures comprise the central bank's "open market operations."

Records from financial database Wind showed the second-highest level of one-day net injections dates back to January 2016, when China's economy was also experiencing difficulties.

At that time, the central bank gave no explanation on its website for why it was putting so much money into the system. But on Wednesday, it said the move was done "in order to maintain reasonable and sufficient liquidity in the banking system."

"We do believe the PBoC is stepping up monetary easing, but we should not confuse seasonal (open market operation) moves with long-term liquidity injections," Ting Lu, Nomura's chief China economist, said in an email. "This reflects an increasing caution of the PBoC to stabilize interbank rates and bond yields to offset potential liquidity shocks."

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced in January that the government is also cutting its reserve requirement ratio — the amount of cash that banks have to hold — later this month. There were four such cuts in 2018.

(Source: CNBC)

Oil steady on supply optimism but economic worries loom

Oil prices steadied on Wednesday after climbing about 3 percent in the previous session on expectations that OPEC-led production cuts will tighten supply and that possible Chinese stimulus might help the global economy. Brent crude oil futures were at \$60.70 per barrel at 0940 GMT, up 6 cents or 0.1 percent.



"Prices climbed very much in line with global stock markets, which received some support from indications by Chinese officials that Beijing is considering an economic stimulus package," consultancy JBC Energy said. But mounting signs of an economic slowdown in China and across the globe may yet keep oil prices in check. (Source: Reuters)

West Texas Intermediate crude futures were down 7 cents, or 0.13 percent, at \$52.04 a barrel.

"It seems the oil market is looking at Saudi Arabia's aggressive supply cuts and Chinese aggressive stimulus," said Jonathan Barratt, chief investment officer at Probis Securities in Sydney.

China's central bank on Wednesday made its biggest daily net cash injection via reverse repo operations on record.

Markets took the announcement as evidence that authorities are shifting to a policy of easing to counter a slowdown in the world's second-biggest economy.

On Tuesday, China's National Development and Reform Commission signaled it might roll out more fiscal stimulus.

Earlier this week, China reported poor December trade data, with exports and imports contracting from a year earlier.

White House estimates showed on Tuesday that the U.S. economy is taking a larger-than-expected hit from a partial government shutdown.

The outlook for the global economy darkened further after Britain's parliament on Tuesday shot down Prime Minister Theresa May's deal to leave the European Union.

Fundamentally, oil markets are receiving support from supply cuts by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, including top exporter Saudi Arabia, and major non-OPEC producer Russia.

"OPEC production cuts will limit inventory builds to those justified by higher demand, which should settle the market in a sustainable range above \$70 per barrel," Standard Chartered bank said.

However, surging U.S. crude production, which hit a record 11.7 million barrels per day late last year, threatens to undermine the OPEC-led efforts.

(Source: Reuters)

China's CNOOC holds LNG offshore as warm winter cuts spot demand



China's state-owned CNOOC is temporarily storing liquefied natural gas (LNG) in a tanker off South Korea as a warmer than usual winter cuts expected spot demand for the fuel, industry sources said on Wednesday.

China faced a severe winter gas shortage last year after switching millions of households to natural gas from coal for heating, prompting Chinese companies this winter to secure supply well ahead of time, they said.

However, the winter so far has been relatively mild and weather data from Refinitiv Eikon largely points towards warmer than usual temperatures ahead, leaving suppliers with high levels of inventory.

The LNG tanker "Neo Energy", which has a capacity of about 150,000 cubic meters, loaded the super-chilled fuel from the Bontang plant in Indonesia on Nov. 15 and has been floating the cargo since then, data from Refinitiv Eikon showed.

The vessel is currently anchored fully laden at Jiseop in South Korea.

China is the world's second largest LNG importer, but its storage facilities have lagged increasing demand, prompting the

government to urge gas producers to build more underground storage.

Storing LNG on tankers is generally seen as riskier than holding crude oil on the water, given higher storage costs and the fact that LNG cargoes degrade over time by evaporating.

Storing the cargo offshore is part of CNOOC's policy of ensuring that supply is available in case of an emergency, a source familiar with the matter said, declining to elaborate.

Trade sources said the company may have overbought cargoes in anticipation of a winter supply crunch after suppliers were left scrambling last year to find enough cargoes.

"Chinese companies have learnt their lesson from previous years and were adequately prepared this time," a trader familiar with the Chinese market told Reuters.

CNOOC spent \$10 million in late 2017 to lease two tankers including the Neo Energy to store an emergency stash of the fuel under a short-term agreement to meet last winter's demand, Reuters reported.

(Source: Reuters)

U.S. set to become consistent net oil exporter by late 2020: EIA



The U.S. will become a consistent net petroleum exporter late next year, the government has forecast, an astonishing shift that reflects surging domestic crude oil production.

The country will ship out more crude oil and liquid fuels than it imports by September 2020 and the net export total will surpass 1m barrels a day by December 2020, the Energy Information Administration said in a monthly energy outlook issued Tuesday.

The prospect raises the stakes for members of the OPEC cartel and allied producers struggling to stabilize oil markets in the face of U.S. shale supplies, which can accelerate quickly when prices rise.

West Texas Intermediate crude was trading at \$51.73 a barrel in New York on Tuesday, down more than 30 percent from its peak last year but still a profitable level for leading producers in shale basins.

The EIA forecast, its first short-term projections for 2020, said U.S. crude oil production would rise to average 12m bpd in 2019 and 12.9m bpd in 2020 after

breaking historical output records last year, the independent analysis agency said. By December 2020 production would reach 13.4m bpd.

The U.S. will continue to import nearly 5m bpd more crude oil than it exports, EIA said. But growth in simultaneous crude oil exports — helped by the abolition of federal export restrictions in 2015 — and in outbound shipments of refined fuels such as petrol and diesel would cement its status as a net exporter.

The U.S. in late November reported one week in which it was fleetingly a net petroleum exporter for the first time in decades. The EIA's new forecast sees that anomaly becoming the norm.

The EIA said U.S. gross exports of natural gas will increase by more than half between 2018 and 2020, as exports of liquefied natural gas climb in that period from about 3bn cubic feet per day to 6.8bn cu ft/d thanks to new liquefaction terminals opening along the Gulf of Mexico coast.

(Source: Financial Times)

Permian shale oil boom holds good news and bad news for OPEC

The year has barely begun but it's already shaping up nicely for OPEC, with crude rebounding sharply after the worst fourth-quarter performance since 2014.

A new production cuts deal with Russia and thawing U.S.-China trade relations have given the market a boost. But for the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, good news

often comes hand-in-hand with bad news. For that, look no further than the Permian basin.

The biggest shale play in the U.S. is set to pump 3.8 million barrels a day this month, according to Energy Information Administration data. That's more than the United Arab Emirates, OPEC's third-largest producer.

The cartel's decision to cut its own production

has actually thrown a "lifeline" to companies in the U.S. by stabilizing crude prices, according to Saudi Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih. This is a dark cloud on OPEC's horizon, but there's some good news.

Prolific output from Texas and New Mexico is placing serious pressure on infrastructure. The region isn't equipped to handle such production

levels and could only ship around 3.5 million barrels a day at the end of 2018, according to Bloomberg Intelligence.

Shale drillers will need about \$31 billion in new pipeline construction during the next five years to keep up with output, according to Wells Fargo Securities LLC analysts.

(Source: Bloomberg)

Oil markets could see deficit in 2019

The oil supply surplus is "starting to reverse," according to a new report from Bank of America Merrill Lynch.

The investment bank noted that oil prices had collapsed in late 2018 not only because of an oversupply problem, but also because of other "non-fundamental factors," including the selloff of long positions by hedge funds and other market managers, as well as fear and uncertainty in broader financial markets. Still, the bottom line was that the oil market saw a glut once again emerge in the fourth quarter.

However, "now the 1.3m b/d surplus in 4Q18 is starting to reverse," Bank of America Merrill Lynch analysts wrote in a January 10 note. In fact, the bank says that the OPEC+ cuts could translate into a "slight deficit" for 2019. "With investor positioning reflecting a bearish set-up, Brent prices have already bounced back above \$60/bbl, and we retain our \$70/bbl average forecast for 2019," BofAML wrote.

Oil price forecasts vary quite a bit, but a dozen or so investment banks largely agree that the selloff in late December, which pushed Brent down to \$50 per barrel, had gone too far. BofAML is betting that Brent rises back to \$70 per barrel.

However, the investment bank issued a rather significant caveat. This assessment is based on the assumption that the global economy does not take a turn for the worse. BofAML analysts said that Brent could plunge as low as \$35 per barrel if global GDP growth slows from 3.5 percent to 2 percent.

At this point, it is anybody's guess if the global economy slows by that much, but there is a growing number of indicators that at least suggests such a deceleration is possible. The recent data from China showing a shocking slowdown



in both imports and exports is discouraging. Exports fell 4.4 percent in December from a year earlier, while imports crashed by 7.6 percent, suggesting that the world's second largest economy is starting to weaken a bit.

Nevertheless, the oil market fundamentals, as they stand, do not look overly bearish. Bank of America Merrill Lynch estimates that supply from OPEC+ will fall by a whopping 2.6 million barrels per day (mb/d) in the fourth quarter of this year compared to the fourth quarter of 2018. That figure includes the 1.2 mb/d of agreed upon cuts, plus substantial losses from Iran and Venezuela. Those significant declines, combined with slower U.S. shale growth and a steady increase in demand, should be enough to tip the oil supply balance into deficit territory, BofAML concludes.

"On a net basis, we see aggregate [year-on-year] global oil supply growth of just 400 thousand b/d in 2019 and a deficit building into the summer months," the bank said.

Moreover, the supply surplus that did emerge in late 2018 was much smaller than the one that occurred between 2014 and 2016. The most recent surplus totaled perhaps 200 million barrels, compared to around 1-billion-barrel surplus in the 2014-2016 period, according to Scotiabank. In that context, erasing the glut should be easier to achieve.

As such, top OPEC+ officials do not seem overly concerned. "Market sentiment today is being shaped by undue concerns about demand, underestimation of the impact of agreed supply cuts, and a misreading of the supply-demand trends which causes counterfactual actions by financial players," Saudi oil minister Khalid al-Falih said at the Atlantic Council's 2019 Global Energy Forum in Abu Dhabi.

"In other words, if we look beyond the noise of weekly data and vibrations in the market, and the speculators' herd-like behavior, I remain convinced that we are on the right track and that the oil market will quickly return to balance," he said.

One of the key variables to watch is Iran's oil exports levels. Waivers granted to countries importing oil from Iran expire in May. The top U.S. official dealing with Iran sanctions, Brian Hook, hinted at the same conference in Abu Dhabi that the American government wouldn't be as lenient this time around. "All I can say is that certainly when we have a better supplied oil market, then that will put us in a better path to [reducing Iranian crude exports] to zero," Hook said.

(Source: oilprice.com)

U.S. envoy defends his threats to Nord Stream 2 firms amid German backlash

In an interview with the German outlet Rheinische Post, U.S. Ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell defended his threatening letters to the companies involved in the Russian-European venture Nord Stream 2, saying that their wording does not differ from what Washington publicly states. However, he refused to comment on any specific punitive measures that the U.S. government might impose.

He pointed out that he sees protecting his fellow citizens and defending his homeland's interests as a diplomat's central responsibility, and as the U.S. government and Congress have clear reservations about energy security and the geopolitical impact of Nord Stream 2, he will continue to push U.S. policy.

He stated that the U.S. would not take part in any conversations about the pipeline as a reliable, market-based energy supplier. As the diplomat claimed, the problem with Nord Stream 2 is that it is not an economic venture, but a project that was developed "for only one reason": to create an alternative route for transporting Russian gas on its way to Europe that does not pass through Ukraine.

"So the question is whether European governments want to become more dependent on a country that uses chemical weapons to kill a political opponent in Europe. Will Europe become more dependent on a country that has invaded a sovereign state and illegally annexed a territory?" he insisted, as quoted by Rheinische Post, hinting at the allegations about poisoning Sergei Skripal in Britain, which Russia has strongly refuted, and the reunification with Crimea.

According to his claims, there is a danger that Russia might once again decide to use energy as a weapon against Europe or to show other "destructive behavior". It would unlikely target Germany, but would affect its eastern neighbors, he warned, saying that European unity is at stake because of the project.

He has claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin wanted to end the transit of Russian gas through Ukraine, saying that Nord Stream 2 and Turk Stream 2 would enable him to do so.

He agreed that Europeans have to decide for themselves how and from where they import energy resources, but also claimed that many EU governments are against the project, pointing at the EU resolution condemning Nord Stream 2.

"Germany should take into account the concerns of the other EU member states and its neighbors, regarding the negative impact of the pipeline project on them", he said, welcoming critical opinions of some politicians and business leaders, heard in Germany, according to him.

The German newspaper Bild on Sunday reported that Grenell had sent warning letters to German companies over their participation in the Russian-European project Nord Stream 2, which was likely coordinated with the U.S. authorities. He requested that they consider the danger to European energy security, which is how the U.S. views the project, and "the reputational costs and sanctions risk".

Both conservative and left-wing German politicians have unanimously lambasted U.S. Ambassador Richard Grenell and called on the country's government to react. The Russian Foreign Ministry lashed out at him for trying to scare off German firms working on the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

"It is part of a larger campaign... to contain Russia globally... Of course, it is unacceptable and it is not what an ambassador should be doing, it is, in fact, the opposite of that", Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

Nord Stream 2 is a joint venture of Russia's Gazprom and five European companies: French Engie, Austrian OMV AG, UK-Dutch Royal Dutch Shell, German Uniper, and Wintershall.

(Source: Sputnik)

Saudi Arabia sees domestic energy use falling, plans renewables push

Saudi Arabia expects domestic energy consumption to fall by 1.5 million to 2 million barrels of oil equivalent per day by 2030 as a result of moves a year ago to hike gasoline and electricity prices, the energy minister said on Tuesday.

Khalid al-Falih also told an energy industry event in Abu Dhabi that Saudi Arabia planned to issue tenders for at least 12 renewable energy projects this year, as part of a push by the world's biggest oil exporter to diversify its energy mix.

He did not give details of the tenders but said they would "stimulate investor, manufacturing and developer activity across the entire value chain."

The desert kingdom aims to develop about 60 gigawatts (GW) of renewable energy capacity in the next 10 years, including 40 GW of photovoltaic solar power, three GW of concentrated solar power and 16 GW of wind power the minister said.

Saudi Arabia, which has said it is implementing a deal with Japan's Softbank to develop solar power, wants to boost its power generation from renewables and cleaner gas-fired plants.

The kingdom, which burns about 700,000 barrels per day of oil for electricity in the hottest months from May to August, has hiked the price of gasoline and electricity for its citizens in a bid to curb domestic use of crude so it can export more.

"Since reforms were put in place, we have noticed a growing public interest in energy efficiency, and a clear change in behavior," Falih said, adding gasoline demand fell 8 percent in 2018 compared to 2017 and electricity demand also dropped.

"We expect that energy efficiency efforts combined with energy price reforms would reduce our local energy consumption by 1.5 to 2 million barrels of oil equivalent per day by 2030 compared to a business-as-usual scenario," he told the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week in capital of the United Arab Emirates.

He did not give a total consumption figure. "Over the coming decade, liquids burning in our utilities will be virtually eliminated, while the share of gas capacity will grow from around 50 percent currently to nearly 70 percent, which will be the highest among the G20," the minister said.

The Energy Ministry would work with the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), in its push to develop renewable power capacity, Falih said.

"The PIF and its selected partners will develop 70 percent of the total renewable energy capacity with the objective of accelerating the localization of our manufacturing capability," he said, adding the ministry would tender for 30 percent.

State-run Saudi Aramco had identified more gas resources in the kingdom and would be working to develop unconventional gas reserves found in the east of the Ghawar field, Falih said.

Unconventional gas refers to reserves requiring advanced extraction methods, such as those used in the shale gas industry. Saudi Arabia aims to export gas by 2030, industry sources say.

(Source: CNBC)

As world powers fail to work together, global risks grow more dangerous



By Børge Brende

There is an unfortunate reality to our current geopolitical landscape. The world faces the threat of three primary hazards: one immediate, one long-term and one latent. Yet as these risks manifest, cooperation among stakeholders is being overtaken by antagonism. In many ways, the same polarization exists at the global level just as it does at the societal level in the United States and across Europe, where there is the perception that cooperation is a threat to, rather than an avenue toward, prosperity.

In the immediate term, geo-economic fault lines have grown between allies and non-allies alike: trade disputes among powers escalated last year, and political divisions across the Atlantic are testing Europe's market union. According to the World Economic Forum's latest survey of 916 experts, policymakers and industry leaders, 91% of respondents believe the risk of economic frictions will increase in 2019 among major powers.

This fraying of partnerships comes at the very moment when close coordination is needed for the resiliency of our global economy. While the U.S. economy remains strong, there are signs of global over-borrowing and softening of foreign markets. Global debt reached a record high in the first quarter of last year — \$247 trillion in nominal terms — and we have already seen the earning expectations of companies drop as sales in some countries slow.

In the face of these economic headwinds, we are ill-prepared to stave off the next downturn. In October, the International Monetary Fund revised downward its growth projections for 2018 and 2019, citing potential economic disruptions of trade disputes. We seem to have forgotten that global economics is not a zero-sum formula, but rather one where trade grows markets and increases the size of the pie. A key lesson in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis was that global collaboration is the critical ingredient to turning markets back around.

At the same time, growing wedges between countries will make addressing our most important long-term risk — environmental degradation — all but impossible. The category of climate change ranked as the leading risk over a ten-year horizon in our survey, but we are seeing difficulties in maintaining consensus when it comes to addressing the issue. And rather than increasing our ambition when it comes to reducing emissions, we are already falling short of the targets set in the Paris Agreement.

The results of climate inaction are already clear: last year was the fourth-warmest on record after several years of warming temperatures, extreme weather events have plagued Europe and the United States, and animal populations are in record decline. As bad as these facts are, in the longer term, the results will be catastrophic. An estimated 800 million people live in over 570 coastal cities that could experience flooding and economic disruption due to a sea-level rise of half a meter by 2050. Our economic and societal health are at risk unless we find a way to take meaningful joint action.

A hardening geopolitical divide is also increasing the risk of technological threats — a latent risk that we still do not yet fully appreciate. The financial toll of cybercrime will be enormous: 74% of the world's businesses can expect to be hacked in the coming year and loss due to cybercrime is predicted to reach \$3 trillion by 2020 — the size of the British economy. This does not include the security threat posed to critical infrastructure or the political threat to governing institutions. Nor does it account for the emerging risk of artificial intelligence.

Though respondents to our survey cited cyberattacks as both high in impact and high in likelihood over the coming decade (behind only climate-related issues), there is no unified framework for cybersecurity law, despite it being a global problem that exists beyond traditional boundaries; instead, nations build their laws on their own, often leaving others vulnerable as a result. This makes it more difficult to protect individuals, businesses and public resources from digital attacks, and harder to prosecute those responsible. The landscape is akin to aviation safety in the days prior to 9/11, when individual airports in the United States handled their own protection measures. What is needed instead is meaningful agreement at the global level on a standard around data protection and incident reporting.

While the risks facing the global community require specific, distinct solutions, they cannot be solved in a go-at-it-alone manner. At a time when there is criticism of global institutions, we need to reaffirm the importance of a well-functioning multilateral system. A critical lesson of the post-World War II era has been that goals that once seemed impossible can be a reality. Historic achievements over the past seven decades, such as cutting the percentage of people who are living in extreme poverty by more than a half, increasing global average life expectancy by 22 years and mitigating conflict between global powers, have only been possible through a cooperative framework. Similarly, the urgent challenges we face today of economic uncertainty, climate change, and threats associated with new technologies, can only be solved through coordinated action.

It is clear that the ultimate global risk is for geopolitical divisions to harden. While there is room to make improvements to our global system, unless we find a way to restore global cooperation this year, we will be unable to truly solve our world's most urgent challenges.

(Source: Time)

Erdogan displays political prowess in deflecting Trump threat

By Jasper Mortimer

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan demonstrated his political skills today when he eschewed attacking the U.S. president for threatening Turkey and changed the Syrian debate from wiping out the Kurdish militia to erecting a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Erdogan spoke a day after President Donald Trump posted a tweet about the U.S. withdrawal from Syria, in which he threatened to "devastate Turkey economically if they hit Kurds." The comment provoked an outcry. Opposition politicians and centrist media joined the government in condemning Trump for his heavy-handedness.

Erdogan himself is fond of aggressive rhetoric and bluster intended to mobilize nationalists and frighten his enemies. So when he mounted the podium to address his party's legislators in parliament today, observers expected him to respond to Trump in kind.

Instead, Erdogan focused on a different part of Trump's tweet, where the American president had written: "Create 20 mile safe zone."

Erdogan said this was a proposal he had first made to President Barack Obama, and that he had discussed it with Trump in a phone call on Monday night. Trump had endorsed the idea and suggested the dimension of 20 miles deep.

Erdogan told the legislators the zone "will be formed by us" but, in comments to reporters later, he said there was no decision to erect such a zone yet.

"If the coalition forces, and the United States especially, if they give us logistical and financial support with the condition of protecting the people's safety there, we would accomplish such a safe zone," Erdogan said.

"We can provide services, especially TOKI," Erdogan told reporters in parliament's corridor, referring to the acronym for Turkey's state housing agency. "My plan would be to build two-story houses with gardens of 500 square meters so the inhabitants could begin a new life."

He added such a buffer zone "would also block migration completely," an idea that



Erdogan himself is fond of aggressive rhetoric and bluster intended to mobilize nationalists and frighten his enemies.

would appeal to European members of the U.S.-led coalition in Syria.

He said Turkish and U.S. officials would negotiate the details of the zone.

NTV reported that Erdogan would also discuss it when he goes to Russia Jan. 23 for talks with President Vladimir Putin as part of the Astana process for Syria, which includes Iran. The Russian leader has also suggested a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border, but one erected by Syrian government troops.

Russia is opposed to Turkey's intervening in Syria. It argues the departing U.S. troops should be replaced by Syrian government forces so that Damascus regains control of northern Syria.

Referring to the threat in Trump's tweet, Erdogan told legislators, "The message given by Trump upset me and my friends. Yesterday we had a phone call with Trump. It was a positive conversation."

Hours later, Erdogan's chief adviser, Ibrahim Kalin, told the press, "The issues of economic threats have been left behind as they were concluded nicely during the phone call."

For weeks the Turkish president has been telling his country that the army would be going into northeast Syria to eliminate the Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG). And over the weekend he said the Turkish armed forces had completed their preparations for such an offensive.

Turkey sees the YPG as a pack of terrorists as it is the sister organization of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Turkish Kurdish insurgents. But the United States has found the YPG an effective fighting force against the fighters of the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group.

When a reporter asked Erdogan if the YPG would have any role in the buffer zone, he replied, "They are terrorists. Can we leave this area to the terrorists?"

But there is one issue that Erdogan did not address at all: the fact that in large swaths of such a buffer zone, Syrian Kurds, not Arabs, would be in the majority. If Turkey plays the leading role in erecting and maintaining such a zone, Turkish administrators would find themselves dealing with people whose relatives have served in the YPG and who support the YPG's political wing, the Demo-

cratic Union Party (PYD).

Last week the co-chairman of the PYD, Shahoz Hasan, said that if Turkish forces enter northeast Syria, they would be opposed. "We will be ready," Hasan said, referring to Kurdish fighters.

It is unlikely that if Turkish forces cross into Syria with the declared aim of setting up a buffer zone, the YPG will meekly retreat 20 miles to the south.

Turning to an issue among Turkey's Kurds, the solitary confinement of the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, has provoked a hunger strike by a legislator of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), Leyla Guven.

Last week, the HDP issued a statement saying that Guven's condition had reached "a life-threatening stage." Having begun fasting on Nov. 8, Guven has lost about 15 kilograms, can no longer walk without assistance, and cannot drink liquids — including water.

The statement said "at least 171" other prisoners had joined the hunger strike "in order to terminate the isolation imposed on Imrali" — a reference to the island where Ocalan has been held since he was captured in 1999 and later sentenced to life in prison for separatism and terrorism.

On Saturday, Abdullah Ocalan's younger brother, Mehmet Ocalan, who bears a striking resemblance to Abdullah, was allowed to visit the founder-leader of the PKK, NTV reported it was Abdullah Ocalan's first visit in two years. Omer Ocalan, a nephew of Abdullah and a legislator for the HDP, told the press that the government had invited Mehmet to Imrali.

"This visit happened thanks to the efforts of Leyla Guven and the other political prisoners" on hunger strike, Omer Ocalan said. Whether Guven would now resume eating was "her own decision," he added.

Al-Monitor contacted an HDP legislator, Ayse Acar Basaran, who is in touch with Guven, and asked if Mehmet's visit would end the hunger strike.

Basaran replied by text message: "This visit does not mean the solitary confinement has been lifted. For that reason the hunger strike will continue."

(Source: Al Monitor)

Imposed sanctions, a rollercoaster ride for resilient Iranians for four decades

By Bashir Esmaili

It's been frenetic days with much ups and downs for the people of Iran; just like a rollercoaster ride whose peaks and valleys are determined by international events, a ride that thrills them one moment and devastates them the next. For us Iranians, this is nothing new as we have lived with the ride for decades; however, the ride sometimes gets so intense that fear and hopelessness towards the future pressure us more than ever: just like these days. Anyone would get fed up with such a condition, even the strong and resilient people of Iran as they long for a lasting period of stability and peace.

Some may think the Islamic Republic of Iran has imposed such conditions on its people. For instance, Mike Pompeo along with other neoconservatives within the U.S. political apparatus claimed that the reasons for escalating international pressures on the people of Iran include the "regime's adventurism" in the Middle East as well as supporting resistant groups which they assume terrorist. Ironically, the Saudi ruling family also claims the same thing about Iran. On the other hand, Netanyahu has been busy publishing wild videos of him wherein he talks of the Iranian "water crisis" and soccer team in an attempt to unify the Iranian people against their establishment.

Is it really the Iranian establishment which is bringing about the imposition of sanctions and international pressure by adopting erroneous foreign policy? Let's find an answer to the question through the lenses of geopolitics and National Security and territorial integrity.

Living among the wolves
Iran is located at one of the most critical geopolitics of

the world. She neighbors some 15 countries—a number beaten by only Russia and China. Iran has neighbors who are not only aggressive but also wish to see the downfall of Iran. This is not an only contemporary issue: the threat has been there for centuries, sometimes more intense and at times decreased. Even though the ancient civilization of Iran has always miraculously survived, Iran of today looks like someone who has been stumbling but has not given up.

If Iran were—let's say—in Scandinavia in place of Norway or Denmark, any unfavorable move within the international order would be rendered as adventurism? Nevertheless, Iran being located at the heart of the chaotic Middle East where issues such as oil, the establishment of the Zionist regime and the presence of the US, Britain and France's fleets have worsened the traditional problems of the region, she is thrown into an imposed situation which requires the establishment to take a responsive reaction.

Deterrence in the face of a disturbed balance of power
When Israel unveiled their ultra-modern F 35 fighter jets not long ago, new military power dimensions of the Zionist regime were revealed. On the other hand, the Saudi air force possesses a growing collection of advanced war planes including the Squadron F 15—which happens to be the biggest squadron of the world, second only to that of the United States. This is while the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force has been struggling with sanctions and sabotage for the past few decades—since the 1979 Revolution to be precise—coming from the enemies who have accelerated their military power and equipment on a daily basis.

This unequal balance of power leaves Iran with missile power and regional asymmetric combat forces—such as the

Lebanese Hezbollah, as her only deterrent options. This is exactly what the West introduces as Iran's tool of adventurism and interference in regional affairs; promising her if she gives up on supporting these resistance groups in the Middle East, it will ease the economic siege and sanctions.

Well, can any country enjoy deterrent power against enemies armed to the teeth without missiles and 'guerrillas'? Iran has not attacked a single country in centuries, yet it has been regularly invaded or menaced by others, sometimes leading to the loss of land—and of course soldiers.

The U.S. Secretary of State and his counterparts say if the Iranian "regime"—located at such a chaotic region—gives up on its deterrent power, they will lift sanctions and pressures.

Once upon a time, after the end of the Cold War, NATO denuclearized Ukraine over the promise of guaranteeing her security. The new government in Ukraine, dreaming of economic boom with the help of the West, embraced the offer with open arms. Today, after about three decades since denuclearization of Ukraine, the country is not only one of the most impoverished economics of Europe but also divided!

In the international system, security of a nation is neither up for negotiation nor can be compromised—particularly for Iran given the critical geopolitical location. Iran has always come out of the toughest crises victorious; it will once again do—just like the previous millenniums.

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After four weeks, the president is starting to look for a way out

As long as the Democratic Party can stay out of the line of fire Trump can only lose

There is an inevitability about the deadlock in the United States responsible for the longest shutdown of (parts of) federal government. As we wrote when the shutdown, which is now in its 22nd day, had just started, "these things are resolved when the heat of public opinion becomes too great for one side to bear".

Well, public opinion has not been going Donald Trump's way. Since mid-December his approval rating has been shifting slightly but steadily against him. The all-important metric is who gets the blame for the impasse. More Americans blamed President Trump for the shutdown than blamed congressional Democrats from the start, but since Christmas the proportion blaming the president has risen from an average of 45 per cent to 49 per cent.

The other factor, which was emphasized when the U.S. stock market dived over the holiday period, is the economy. As we report today, U.S. markets are increasingly worried by the effect of the shutdown on the prospects for growth this year.



No wonder that, underneath the bluster, there are signs that the president is looking for a way out of the standoff. This week he managed to contradict himself within minutes on the question of whether or not he would

declare a state of emergency, allowing him to pay for his wall on the Mexico border without congressional approval.

So far Nancy Pelosi, the leader of the Democrats in congress, has played a tough

and careful game. She knows that the president has picked a fight with reality and that as long as the Democratic Party can stay out of the line of fire he can only lose. He refuses to accept that he ever claimed that Mexico would pay for the wall, and he plainly hoped that its value as a symbol of his determination to restrict immigration would be enough to sustain him in his clash with congress.

But the Democrats in congress have not given him the chance to paint them as soft on immigration, making the case that there are better uses for \$5bn in paying for firm but compassionate immigration control. Again, they are on the right side of public opinion, which opposes the wall by about a 20-point margin.

So Trump is in a tight spot. The wall is of huge symbolic importance to his enthusiastic supporters, but most American voters see it as a waste of money. He is running out of time to compromise with reality.

(Source: Independent)

Lack of any documentary evidence of Russian penetration in U.S. electoral system: Entessar

1 → A: We need to wait until the Mueller investigation has run its course before we can make any firm judgment. The Mueller report could indeed be very damaging to Trump's presidency, or it could simply prove to be just a bump on the path of Trump's presidency. We simply cannot separate fact from fiction at this point, and speculating about what Mueller will uncover belongs to the category of political gossip.

■ If we are to accept the assumption that Russia infiltrated the U.S. governance structures, what do you think of the origins of this interference?

A: So far, there has not been any verifiable evidence of the Russian government's infiltration of the U.S. electoral system. Whatever interference may have occurred in the 2016 U.S. presidential election has been linked to attempts by private, and in some cases very amateurish attempts, by some individuals in Russia. In other words, the publicly available evidence does not demonstrate the infiltration of the U.S. elections by the Russian government entities.

■ Some experts believe that the relations of Trump's family members, especially Jared Kushner, with a big multinational Mafia is the origin of such a vast infiltration into different layers of the U.S. political system and information structure.

A: The Kushner family has indeed been



involved in unsavory and underhanded business and political dealings. So, it is possible that Jared Kushner may have played an important role in the alleged Russian infiltration of the U.S. political system. But we need to have verifiable evidence and not speculation to determine Jared Kushner's role in this

affair. Robert Mueller's investigation or other investigative reporting may unearth some evidence about Kushner's shenanigans.

■ A look at the U.S. policies since 2016 shows how its position as a superpower has been undermined while at the same time, Russia has been strengthening its international

position. What's your opinion on this matter?

A: I agree with the notion that the U.S. hegemony as a global superpower has been, and will continue to be, challenged by developments in the international arena. However, I do not believe that Russia's position has been strengthened in a major way at the global level. The Soviet Union was a global superpower; the post-Soviet Russia is a regional power. As such, it has not been able to offer effective countermeasures against America's global domination.

■ Less than one year, some western media revealed that some people in Kushner's inner circle (such as Senator Tom Cotton) had relations with Mossad and spied on the U.S. Senate intelligence committee. At the same time, some other media talked about Russia's infiltration into Mossad and even their infiltration into Israel and the U.S. security intelligence structures. Do you think that there are any relations with the Russia collusion case and other infiltration claims?

A: Again, what you have mentioned could be true, and the Mueller investigation may indeed unearth some of the accusations against Jared Kushner and his inner circle. These are explosive charges that require verifiable empirical evidence. Until and unless we have such evidence, media speculation will not be very helpful.

Nancy Pelosi and her dual approaches



1 → This is while with a majority of seats in the House of Representatives, Democrats can initiate impeachment proceedings against Donald Trump. The fact that some Democrat leaders have opposed Nancy Pelosi's Minority leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives is rooted in the same reason. In any case, it seems that Pelosi prefers scenarios such as "making a political deal with Trump" to "Confrontation with the President". Nancy Pelosi argues that Democrats' direct confrontation with Trump, and in particular the impeachment of the President of the United States, will lead to the anger of some American citizens, and the Democrats will be accused of posing a blow to the American political and social equations. However, it seems that some Democrats do not agree with Nancy Pelosi's opinion! Politicians such as Bernie

Sanders believe that Trump is not politically negotiable. They believe that any compromise reached between Democrats and Trump will hold a bad result for them in the U.S. 2020 presidential election.

At any rate, there's plenty at stake: Amid this crisis, Trump has come with the idea of declaring a national emergency at the border, a move that could free up wall funding without the Congress approval.

Trump is demanding \$5.7 billion for new wall construction; Pelosi and the Democrats have offered \$1.3 billion for border security measures, but have opposed construction of any new physical barriers.

"If this doesn't work out, probably I will do it. I would almost say definitely," said Trump.

The U.S. government shutdown, which is resulted from the disagreements over border wall funding, is still ongoing. Trump is demanding \$5.7 billion for new wall construction; Pelosi and the Democrats have offered \$1.3 billion for border security measures, but have opposed construction of any new physical barriers. In spite of this, Trump has previously claimed that he's ready to hold the shutdown for months and even years! If Pelosi surrender in the face of Trump's demands, she would be regarded as a defeated figure inside the U.S. political circles.

Zarif's regional tours meant to capitalize on growing distrust toward U.S.: analyst

TEHRAN (Tasnim) — An American political commentator praised the timing of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's recent visits to regional countries, including India and Iraq, saying the trips were "an attempt to capitalize on the growing distrust toward the U.S."

"Zarif's trip is an attempt to capitalize on the growing distrust toward the U.S.," John Stepling, who is based in Norway, told the Tasnim News Agency in an interview.

"And after (U.S. Secretary of State Mike) Pompeo's nearly insane speech in Cairo, it is likely good timing on the part of the Iranian leadership," he added.

Stepling is a well-known author, playwright and an original founding member of the Padua Hills Playwrights Festival, a two-time NEA recipient, Rockefeller Fellow in theater, and PEN-West winner for playwriting. He is also a regular political commentator for a number of media outlets around the world.

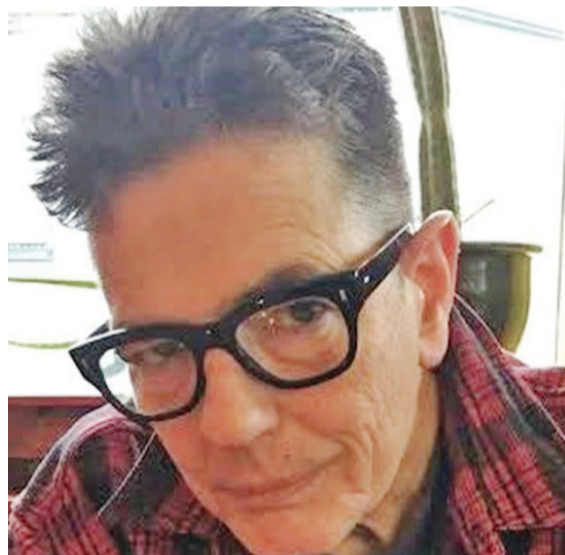
Following is the full text of the interview:

■ As you know, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif at the head of a high-ranking economic and political delegation recently made official visits to some regional countries, including India and Iraq as well as Iraqi Kurdistan. His trips come against the backdrop of Iran's efforts to boost its foreign trade in the U.S. sanctions era. What do you think about the objectives behind Zarif's visits? Is Iran moving toward its traditional allies?

A: It is difficult to comment on Zarif's trip without also, simultaneously commenting on Pompeo's trip. Zarif's trip is an attempt to capitalize on the growing distrust toward the U.S. And after Pompeo's nearly insane speech in Cairo, it is likely good timing on the part of the Iranian leadership.

■ The Iranian top diplomat's trips were concurrent with the barnstorming tour of Pompeo that took him to eight countries in one week. Jetting from capital to capital, meeting with kings, princes, and presidents, Pompeo's goal was to get Arab countries to work together to roll back Iranian influence in the region. What is your take on that? What does the concurrence mean?

A: Let's start with Pompeo's speech in Cairo because it may go down as one of the most virulent and toxic statements of U.S. imperialism in history. It also suggests Pompeo, the rabid Dominionist evangelical Christian that he is, may not be the any less extreme or unbalanced than John Bolton. Remember that Pompeo, like Betsy DeVos and Larry Kudlow and Rick Perry, just to name a few, is part of a huge evangelical contingent in Washington. These are guys who have their weekly prayer meeting -- which serves to keep Evangelical



Christianity at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy -- well, and domestic, too --- but this is something that gets far too little coverage. I say that because Dominionists --who are the extreme lunatic fringe end of the spectrum of Christian thought -- believe in the Rapture, believe in angels, and believe Christians should rule the world. Have "Dominion" over it. Pompeo in particular it seems holds a deep animosity toward other religions. And most all against Islam.

Now notwithstanding Trump's statement about pulling troops out of Syria, the U.S. almost certainly is not going to do that. It may provide sleight of hand maneuvers to hide the fact that, if anything, this pull-out will more likely be some form of escalation. Israel may well take up the slack, for one. The other possibility is that Trump goes ahead and privatizes the war. Eric Prince famously has suggested himself as Viceroy for Iraq or Afghanistan. The colonial policies of the West have resurfaced in a big way.

Bill Van Auken wrote of this visit... "Pompeo introduced himself as the personification of Washington's role in promoting "goodness" in the Middle East, noting in his opening remarks that the visit to Egypt was "especially meaningful for me as an evangelical Christian" and sharing with his audience that "In my office, I keep a Bible open on my desk to remind me of God and His Word and The Truth."

The U.S. does not spend billions to build bases and infrastructure to then later just leave. There is too much at stake for them in the region. Rare earth minerals in Afghanistan, and oil and natural gas, and in Syria, there is simply the strategic location, but also it has ideological symbolism, not to mention logistical importance. Besides which the U.S. has wanted Assad gone and they feel embarrassed by the Syrian people and by Assad himself. Remember, too, the U.S. has been targeting Syria for decades. So, Syria cannot be separated from Iran when speaking of U.S. intentions. The U.S. leadership right now, meaning not so much Trump, but his "advisors" like Pompeo and Bolton and Gina Haspel and the joint chiefs -- these are the anti-Iranian hardliners among the neocons. They are also, all of them, very close with the Likud government in Israel. They are very pro-Israel regardless. And they know Israel serves as the enforcer for U.S. plans in the region. Now, Zarif's trip was reasonable, and likely will have achieved at least some of what it sent out to do. No nation in the region actually supports or wants U.S. bases and troops on their soil. But the danger here is Pompeo and his delusions. We are talking about a guy who is a zealot, a near-Mafia like figure, albeit one who thinks angels speak to him, who is being supported in DC by the equally irrational John Bolton.

■ Nearly a week after Pompeo's visit to Iraq and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, Zarif went to Baghdad, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. He was warmly welcomed by top Iraqi officials and the Kurdish leaders. During a Tuesday meeting with Zarif, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani praised Iran's support for the Iraqi Kurdish people during attacks by the Daesh (ISIS or ISIL) terrorist group and said the Kurds will never forget Tehran's backing. What do you think about the economic and political achievements of Zarif's visits?

A: The Kurdish question is both complex and opaque. The U.S. predictably threw the Kurds under the bus. The Kurdish leadership is split anyway. There is not going to be a Kurdish state. Not anytime soon, anyway. Erdogan and Turkey are NATO allies. The U.S. needs their air bases. They need Turkish assistance overall. They are not going to cause a dangerous breach in diplomacy with Turkey just because they promised the Kurds something. One would think the Kurds might have learned to stop trusting the U.S. by now. The U.S. has been invading and occupying (which they call "liberating") countries in this region for seventy years. It's what they do regardless of who is president.

Israel's not so secret program to arm terrorists in Syria

TEHRAN (FNA) — The whole world is in the know how that the Israeli army has been, from day one, and still is providing large amounts of cash, weapons and ammunition to foreign-sponsored Salafi-Takfiri terrorists operating in Syria.

Even the Israeli army chief admits. Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot has just confirmed that the Israeli military indeed has provided and continues to provide weapons to various terrorist groups operating in Syria. This is not the first official confirmation from the army chief. Back in September Israeli media also reported that Israel has armed as many as 12 terror factions. Those reports were quickly censored by the Israeli military, however. But there have long been reports of Israel's backing for the terrorists in Syria. This includes supplying arms, training, medical treatment, intelligence sharing and aerial backup. Photos of Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu visiting Al-Nusra terrorists under treatment in Israeli field hospitals surfaced the media some 4 years ago.

Mind you, the terror outfits have been confirming such support for a while as well, saying they are given large amounts of money and aid as well. Even Syria has confirmed

capturing arms and munitions with Hebrew writing on them held by the terrorists and Qaeda-allied rebels. By late 2018, however, Syria made major gains in this part of the country, ultimately forcing the Israeli-backed terrorists to surrender, with some negotiating relocation to Idlib.

Then again, that does in no way mean that this not so secret Israeli program to aid and abet terrorist groups inside Syria is now behind us. Quite the opposite, the Zionist regime continues to arm its terror proxies on the pretext of "self-defense". This is likely an attempt to justify the legality of this criminal partnership in the failed regime-change war, in which Israel has long claimed neutrality. In reality, Israel's claims of neutrality are only superficial, with the regime officials having repeatedly expressed a preference that ISIL and other Qaeda-allied terror groups impose regime change rather than the Syrian government surviving.

For that to happen, Israel has also opened its borders with Syria in order to provide medical treatment to the Nusra Front and Al-Qaeda militants wounded in the ongoing war. These terror groups are still receiving medical treatment and still

fighting the Syrian government, and have never bothered Israel since the collective regime-change campaign began several years ago with a helping hand from the United States and its regional allies.

After all, Israel never views Al-Qaeda and its allies as enemies -- just like the US and Saudi Arabia. Mind you, this policy hasn't caused any tension with the United States or its regional allies either, because they also refuse to fight Al-Qaeda and Nusra Front fighters in Syria. They are also there to affect regime change.

This should surprise no one. Despite Trump's rhetoric of troop withdrawal, white House officials say American occupying forces will stay in Syria. And Amos Yadlin, the former military intelligence chief, once said Hezbollah and Iran "are the major threat to Israel, and that those terrorist elements who control some of the border on the Golan aren't attacking Israel. This gives you some basis to think that they understand who is their real enemy - it isn't Israel".

It all says why the Israel-Syria border area along the occupied Golan Heights has remained largely quiet, why Israel still pounds Syrian Army positions in the seven-year con-

flict, and why it is safe to conclude that ISIL and Qaeda-allied terrorist groups are indeed backed by Israel AND the United States, which is Israel's main ally in the region.

Sadly, the United Nations is yet to take any legal measures to stop this never-ending madness. The failure of the UN system and, separately, of the International Criminal Court to hold to account Israel, the United States, and their regional allies and terror proxies or prosecute their war crimes and crimes against humanity has also done lasting harm. This is all about the inaction of the Security Council amid all the reports published and official acknowledgements by the American and Israeli officials.

The human cost aside, the military intervention in Syria by Iran and Russia at the Syrian government's request has been a strategic success for the people of Syria and a defeat for all terrorist groups and their American-Israeli-Saudi sponsors. This has ultimately assured a long-term regional peace and security, a lasting victory over various terror groups, and has re-established Syria as an influential Middle East player despite the reconstruction challenges ahead.

EU failure to implement SPV could worsen current situation: Italian expert



1 → ■ How do you see the future of JCPOA, if the EU fails to make SPV operational?

A: Since the beginning, the success of the JCPOA was linked to the possibility to re-launch the Iranian economy. Today, U.S. secondary sanctions are jeopardizing this result and the failure to offer a meaningful implementation of the SPV could only worsen this state of things. On the other hand, the establishment of the SPV mechanism is of great political significance in itself. As Ms. Mogherini said, it provides the Iranian leadership with the incentive to remain committed to the JCPOA; at the same time, is another sign of the European willingness to support the nuclear deal despite U.S. opposition. Worth noting, the U.S. administration has already announced its readiness to 'aggressively pursue our remedies' if there are transactions that go through [the SPV mechanism] that have the intent of evading our [U.S.] sanctions'.

■ Can Iran's economic transactions and operations with other JCPOA signatories Russia and China materialize Iran's goals under JCPOA?

A: Iran's trade relations with Russia and the PRC, as well as with India and other countries, can play an important role in dealing with Teheran's economic needs. Russia and China have little political incentive in supporting the U.S. position and -- not surprisingly -- they have already expressed their favor to the SPV mechanism. Stronger ties with Russia and China can also be a 'backup option' in the event of an SPV failure. The implementation of China's One Belt One Road initiative is another potentially positive development for the Iranian economy. However, as far as one of the aims of the JCPOA was establishing better relations between Teheran and the U.S., strengthening the existing ties with Russia and/or China is of little or no avail.

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Tobacco use in Iran up sevenfold in decade

HEALTH TEHRAN — Tobacco use in Iran has increased by seven times over the past decade, growing from 2,000 tons to 15,000 tons, said Tehran University of Medical Science vice chancellor for social affairs.

"It is necessary to devise plans to prevent and control the widespread usage of tobacco in the country," Abdolrahman Rostamian remarked on Tuesday.

According to IRNA, Rostamian said in many countries high taxes are levied on cigarettes to control its usage, and the same policy should be adopted in Iran.

"Currently, tobacco tax revenue for the next Iranian calendar year (starting March 21) is estimated at 28 trillion rials (around \$666 million) but it should grow to 150 trillion rials (around \$3.5 billion)," Rostamian noted.

"In most countries, tobacco duty rate is up to 75%, but in Iran it is only 20%. This is among the issues that the members of Iranian Parliament (Majlis) should pay special attention to," he further remarked.

"Currently, there are 16 tobacco factories in the country and up to 100 trillion rials (around \$2.3 billion) are annually spent for purchasing cigarettes. To make the matters



worse, 35 trillion rials are annually spent for treatment of the diseases that are caused by smoking," he regretted.

According to Rostamian, 90% of cancers are caused by smoking cigarettes. Smoking also accounts for 25% of heart failures that

result in death. Smoking is also a risk factor for osteoporosis and bone fracture.

"It is more than necessary to reduce the supply of cigarettes in the country. We should come up with policies to ensure that people under 18 are banned from purchasing

cigarettes. Besides, only the suppliers who have a special license must be allowed to sell cigarettes," said Rostamian.

In June 2018, an expert with Medical Science Branch of Islamic Azad University said Smoking cigarette accounts for 11,000 deaths annually in Iran.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), evidence from countries of all income levels shows that price increases on cigarettes are highly effective in reducing demand. On average, a 10% price increase on a pack of cigarettes would be expected to reduce demand for cigarettes by about 4% in high-income countries and by about 5% in low- and middle-income countries.

WHO has announced that the tobacco epidemic is one of the biggest public health threats the world has ever faced, killing more than 7 million people a year. More than 6 million of those deaths are the result of direct tobacco use while around 890,000 are the result of non-smokers being exposed to second-hand smoke.

Around 80 percent of the 1.1 billion smokers worldwide live in low- and middle-income countries, where the burden of tobacco-related illness and death is heaviest.

Common pain relievers may worsen C. difficile infection

A study finds that certain pain relievers may promote Clostridium difficile infection. The results may help improve the management of the condition and its symptoms.

Clostridium difficile infection is relatively common and can be serious.

Clostridium difficile, also called C. difficile or C. diff, is a bacterium that causes inflammation of the colon.

This health condition commonly affects older adults in hospitals, and it often occurs after the use of antibiotic medications.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, C. difficile led to almost half a million infections among patients in the United States in a single year.

More than 80 percent of these deaths occurred among people aged 65 years or older.

The medical community considers C. difficile to be a major cause of infectious disease death in the U.S. and the most common microbial cause of healthcare-associated infections in hospitals.

The excess healthcare costs of this condition can reach almost \$5 billion each year for acute care facilities alone.

Anti-inflammatories could promote C. difficile
People who receive treatment with antibiotics have a higher risk of developing C. difficile because these drugs affect the natural flora of the gut.

The use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which reduce pain and decrease fever and inflammation, could also promote C. difficile infection.

The results of a new study that features in the journal mBio provide evidence of the connection between C. difficile and NSAIDs. Researchers from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN led the research in collaboration with scientists at the University of Michigan and the University of Arizona.

The researchers conducted the study using mice that they had infected with C. difficile. They divided the mice into two groups and treated one of the groups with an NSAID called indomethacin prior to infection.

At the end of the observation period, about 20 percent of the mice in the treatment group were still alive, while about 80 percent of the group that did not receive the NSAID had survived.

NSAIDs have a negative impact on the gut

Looking at the results of the study in mice, the researchers determined that even brief exposure to the NSAID prior to C. difficile inoculation increased the severity of the infection and reduced the chances of survival.

Further analysis revealed that the NSAID also altered the microorganisms that live in the digestive tract, called the gut microbiota. Additionally, this drug depleted the production of prostaglandins, which are hormone-like substances that play a crucial role in gastrointestinal health.

"We are always trying to think of modifiable risk factors for the disease," says David Aronoff, a microbiologist and infectious diseases expert at Vanderbilt University and the study leader.

(Source: medical news today)

'Thalassemia patients complain over expensive medicine'

HEALTH TEHRAN — Thalassemia patients are having a hard time as the price of their medicine has quadrupled; whereas, last year the same medicines were free of charge, said head of the Iranian Thalassemia Society.

"We contacted both Majlis (the Iranian Parliament) and the president to take proper measures to lower the price of thalassemia medicine and they have provided the companies with proper funds to do so, but there has been no change in prices," said Meisam Ramezani.

"Thalassemia patients experience severe problems if they don't take their medicine. Every day, we get more than 100 phone calls from thalassemia patients who are complaining about not having access to their required medicine. If the situation doesn't change until the year end (March 20), we will witness many deaths in the next year," Ina quoted Ramezani as saying on Tuesday.

"Foreign Thalassemia medicines are rarely found in local market; besides, they are so expensive that many patients

can't afford to buy them," he added.

"Unfortunately, Thalassemia patients are not supported by governmental organizations. The Welfare Ministry's support packages are only allocated to the people directly supported by State Welfare Organization of Iran and Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, but the packages are not for the people who have special diseases such as Thalassemia or Hemophilia or other hard-to-treat diseases."

However, he added, many such patients are unable to work the same as beneficiaries of the State Welfare Organization.

"Here, there is a vicious cycle. The insurance companies delay in paying the pharmacies, so the pharmacies are incapable of purchasing their required products. Even some health providing centers are in debt to medical companies; all these sectors affect each other, so there is no single entity to blame," he further noticed.

Ramezani also criticized the budget allocated to people with special diseases in the next year, saying the sum allocated to special diseases is even less than the last year's budget

and the inflation has not been taken into consideration in setting the expenditures.

Additionally, he said, the Majlis had named ten disease as special disease, but only seven diseases are accounted for in the budget.

He also referred to an oral medicine for Thalassemia patients, recently manufactured by an Iranian knowledge-based company, saying he hopes that more patients will be encouraged to use them, specifically because they are homegrown and oral medicines are cheaper to produce compared to medicines that require parenteral route of administrations.

In early January, an Iranian knowledge-based company succeeded in manufacturing oral iron chelator, deferasirox, domestically.

Deferasirox is an oral iron chelator. Its main use is to reduce chronic iron overload, also known as transfusional iron overload, in patients who are receiving long-term blood transfusions for conditions such as beta-thalassemia and other chronic anemia.

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sq.m, full, reasonable price

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Farmaniyeh,
4-storey building, 1000 sq.m,
all facilities, \$10000

Zaferaniyeh
Triplex villa, 800 sq.m, built
up, 1000 sq.m land, 12
rooms, \$8500

Niavaran
Triplex villa, 2000 sq.m
land, 600 sq.m built up, spj, all
facilities, \$15000

Darous
Duplex villa, 600 sq.m built
up, 1000 sq.m land, all
facilities, \$8000

Other areas:
Farmaniyeh
Aghdasiyeh
Shahrak Gharb
Shariati-Pasdaran
Valiasre
Tajrish
Jordan
Vanak
Arjantin
Zafar...
nice cases ready to move in.

Achaemenid relief goes on show in Mashhad

HERITAGE TEHRAN — A piece of Achaemenid-era (550-330 BC) bas-relief has been put on show at Mashhad's Khorasan Great Museum, northeast Iran. Several local officials, cultural-heritage experts and academia attended the opening ceremony for the loan exhibit on Tuesday, CHTN reported.



The limestone relief, which depicts a Persian guard, was previously on show at the National Museum of Iran for a 22-day exhibit.

It was returned to the country after 80 years in September 2018 after a U.S. judge ruled it should be returned to Iran. The relic was confiscated from the Park Avenue Armory in New York in 2017 up while it was up for sale.

The relief is originally part of a long line of rock-carved soldiers in the UNESCO-registered Persepolis, southern Iran.

Turkey preparing to get camel wrestling on UNESCO list

A mayor in Aegean province of Izmir on Wednesday said they were preparing to apply to UNESCO for listing the traditional camel wrestling in Intangible Cultural Heritage.

"We are organizing the International Selcuk-Ephesus Symposium on Culture of Camel Dealing and Camel Wrestling between Jan. 17-19, for the third time this year," said a statement by the Selcuk Municipality, quoting Mayor Dahi Zeynel Bakici.

Bakici added that the symposium aimed to place the culture of camel dealing and camel wrestling on a scientific basis and to enable the sports to enter the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

He noted that the camel wrestling held in Selcuk had a different place than other wrestling sports in terms of the field structure, audience, historical and cultural features of the district.

"Culture of camel dealing has always had an important place in the Turkish-Islamic history," Bakici added.

Stating that it was a source of prestige for the camel owners to make their camel race in Selcuk, he added that tournament was being held in compliance with the regulation of the Camel Wrestling Federation.

"We are supporting the camel wrestling, which will be held for 37th time and found place in TIME Magazine cover, in scientific field through the symposium," he said, adding that they wanted to research the culture in scientific manner and carry it to the future with scientific data.

The event will be attended by 124 camels from different cities and districts such as Bodrum, Ortaklar, Soke, Denizli, Canakkale, as well as the hosting district, it added.

(Source: yenisafak.com)



ROUND THE GLOBE

The Trulli of Alberobello

The trulli, typical limestone dwellings of Alberobello in the southern Italian region of Puglia, are remarkable examples of corbelled dry-stone construction, a prehistoric building technique still in use in this region.

These structures, dating from as early as the mid-14th century, characteristically feature pyramidal, domed, or conical roofs built up of corbelled limestone slabs.



Although rural trulli can be found all along the Itria Valley, their highest concentration and best preserved examples of this architectural form are in the town of Alberobello, where there are over 1500 structures in the quarters of Rione Monti and Aja Piccola.

The property comprises six land parcels extending over an area of 11 hectares. The land parcels comprise two districts of the city (quarters or Rione Monti with 1,030 trulli; Rione Aia Piccola with 590 trulli) and four specific locations (Casa d'Amore; Piazza del Mercato; Museo Storico; Trullo Sovrano).

The extent and homogeneity of those areas, the persistence of traditional building techniques, together with the fact that trulli are still inhabited make this property an exceptional Historic Urban Landscape.

Trulli (singular, trullo) are traditional dry stone huts with a corbelled roof. Their style of construction is specific to the Itria Valley in the region of Puglia. Trulli were generally constructed as temporary field shelters and storehouses or as permanent dwellings by small-scale landowners or agricultural laborers.

The trulli of Alberobello represent a dry-stone building tradition, several thousand years old, found across the Mediterranean region.

(Source: UNESCO)

"Cube of Zoroaster" unfazed by subsidence, new research finds

HERITAGE TEHRAN — No threat of subsidence faces the "Cube of Zoroaster", which is a famed ancient quadrangular structure in southern Iran, according to a new research.

Locally known as "Ka'be-ye Zartosht", the "cube" is one of monuments that stand in Naqsh-e Rostam, an archaeological cemetery near UNESCO-registered Persepolis.

"The preliminary results of a data analysis indicate that the splendid monument stands strong, and so far, no subsidence-related issues have been found," ILNA quoted Hamid Fadaei, director of the World Heritage site, as saying on Tuesday.

A lengthened drought period in the region along with excessive use of groundwater are among reasons that ancient site may be threatened by subsidence, the report said.

The limestone structure distances 46 meters from the mountain side, situated exactly opposite Darius II's mausoleum.



Ka'be-ye Zartosht is seen before a rock-hewn tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam, Fars province, southern Iran.

It is rectangular shaped and has only one entrance door and is made of white limestone.

Naqsh-e Rostam, meaning "Picture of Rostam", incorporates memorials of the Elamites, the Achaemenids and the Sassanians. It is where four Persian Achaemenid kings are laid to rest, those of Darius II, Artaxerxes I, Darius I and Xerxes I (from left to right facing the cliff), although some historians are still debating this.

There are gorgeous bas-relief carvings above the tomb chambers that are similar to those in Persepolis, with the kings standing on thrones supported by figures representing the subject nations below.

Beneath the funerary chambers are dotted with seven Sassanian era (224-651) bas-reliefs cut into the cliff depict vivid scenes of imperial conquests and royal ceremonies; signboards below each relief give a detailed description in English.

Iron-Age skeleton, objects unearthed in Gilan

HERITAGE TEHRAN — A human skeleton and objects, dating from the Iron Age, have recently been unearthed from an ancient graveyard in Rostamabad, Gilan province, northern Iran.

A team of Iranian archaeologists has discovered some tomb chambers, one of which contained a human skeleton, a sword and pottery vessels full of animal bones, which may refer to food offering to the deceased person, Tasnim reported on Tuesday.

The skeleton belongs to a male about forty years old, with a height between 160 and 167 centimeters, according to Sara Khalifeh Soltani, a bioarchaeologist from Boston University. Shahram Ramin, who heads the excavation, says that several other tombs have also been yielded the same pre-historical objects, which are about 3000 years old.

In addition to the Iron Age graves, a number of stone tools



have been discovered in a deeper depth, which, according to preliminary examination by archaeologists at the National Museum of Iran, probably date back to Epipaleolithic period, about 12 thousand years old.

The area where the graves were found is located along a highway, close to a newly constructed petrol station. The site was at risk of destruction due to the implementation of a development project.

According to the report, the site probably belonged to a group of people who immigrated into the Iranian plateau from Central Asia in early to mid-2nd millennium BC. The abundance of arms, horse-trappings (as well as horse burials), and spouted vessels among the grave goods are characteristics of this ancient culture.

Gilan is well-known for its rich Iron Age cemeteries such as Marlik that have been excavated over the past century.

Works by female crafters on show in Ardebil



HERITAGE TEHRAN — An exhibit of handicrafts, featuring works by female crafters and entrepreneurs, is currently underway in Ardebil, northwestern Iran.

It showcases works by 12 people in the arenas of embossing, drawing, kilim carpet, metalwork, marquetry, leatherwork and woodwork, CHTN reported.

The Khataei Gallery is hosting the five-

day exhibit, which will be running through January 18.

Last April, Masoumeh Ebtekar, vice president for women's and family affairs, announced that some 75 percent of Iranian handicrafts are produced by females.

Iran's handicrafts exports reached \$107 million in the first half of the current Iranian calendar year (started March 21, 2018), showing 9.5 percent growth year on year.

Over 700 crafters in Yazd engage in traditional ornamentation



HERITAGE TEHRAN — Over 700 artisans are currently working as goldsmiths, crafting traditional ornamentation in Yazd province, central Iran. Annually, large volumes of gold jewelry are exported from Yazd to other provinces and even abroad, CHTN quoted a local official as saying on Tuesday.

There are tens of goldsmith workshops in the province, which is a top tourist destination.

With its winding lanes, forest of badgirs (wind catchers), mud-brick houses, atmospheric alleyways and centuries of history, Yazd is a delightful place to stay, referred to as a 'don't miss' destination by almost all travel associates in the region.

The death of Venice? City's battles with tourism and flooding reach crisis level

Venice's Santa Lucia railway station is packed as visitors scuttle across the concourse towards the water-bus stops. Taking a selfie against the backdrop of the Grand Canal, Ciro Esposito and his friend have just arrived and are unimpressed with what may greet them in future if the Venetian authorities get their way: a minimum city entry fee of €2.50 throughout the year, rising to between €5 and €10 during peak periods.

It is the price of a cappuccino, but for them "it's going too far". "They are using people like a bank machine," says Esposito. "We are in Europe and can travel freely across borders, yet we have to pay to enter one of our own cities."

In earlier times it was the wheeled suitcases that tourists rattled over the cobbles that drew the ire of Venetians — so much so that the authorities pledged to fine anyone caught using one up to €500. That never happened, but now another — more plausible — penalty is being concocted. To manage the impact of the 30 million people who visit the lagoon city every year, the daytrippers — those who come, take pictures, and leave — are to be forced to pay, although it is unclear when the tax will be introduced or how it could be enforced.

Venice may have a centuries-long history of cultivating tourism, devising crowd-drawing events such as the annual carnival, the Biennale international art exhibition and a star-studded film festival, but the advent of mass tourism has left it struggling with how to deal with the near-constant hordes who trudge around its precious sites, through its 11th century basilica, over its famous Rialto bridge, and along its maze of winding calle. The influx is a blessing for the local council's coffers but a scourge on the city's fragile monuments and environment.

Luigi Brugnaro, the Venice mayor who regularly lashes out at uncouth tourists, is increasingly under pressure to act. Not only does he face local elections next year but, in July, Unesco will decide whether or not to put the fragile city — battered by increasingly frequent flooding and swamped in summer by tourists — alongside America's Everglades National Park and the rainforests of Madagascar on its list of the world's endangered heritage sites.

For many Italians, though, the charge is not the answer. Even those who welcome it are skeptical that it will make a real difference. The entrance fee will not apply to those who



Attempts to divert massive cruise ships away from St Mark's Square will take years to complete.

have booked hotel rooms, and visitors already pay a tourist tax of up to €6 per night if they stay in the city.

"If people want to come, then they will still pay to come," says Clelia Tanzarelli, a regular visitor from Rome. "Venice is a very delicate city and there needs to be some plan, but if this is just an extra tax then it won't solve the problem. A better solution would be to limit visitor numbers."

As with the wheeled suitcases, the dilemma is how on earth to turn the plan into a workable and enforceable policy. There have been suggestions that the charge could be added to the cost of arriving in the city either by train, bus or cruise ship, with the respective transport companies passing the proceeds on to Venice authorities.

While it is not possible to drive in Venice, people can arrive in the mainland area of the lagoon and park their vehicle for between €12 and €29 a day. Charging cruise-ship passengers is fairly straightforward — they could pay on the boat or as they disembark — but applying it to other modes of transport and distinguishing between Venice residents and visitors will be more challenging.

"Beyond the announcement, it doesn't seem to have been well thought out," said Dominic Standish, a British academic and author of the book Venice in Environmental Peril? Myth and Reality.

"But the paradox of this measure is that the authorities bemoan tourism and say Venice is becoming like Disneyland, but if they're able to implement it, then it will make the city even more like Disneyland."

The notion of the fee appealing to residents may also backfire. Venetians have held several protests in recent years against a tourism industry which they argue has eroded their quality of life, damaged the environment and driven residents away. On some days the current population of 55,000 (down from about 175,000 in the post-second-world-war years) is dwarfed by the number of tourists.

Brugnaro has said that some of the extra cash from the fee will help fund the cleaning up of rubbish that daytrippers leave in their wake and improve the lives of locals, but many of those same locals are enraged by the idea that the charge would also have to be paid by departed Venetians visiting home and family. Understandably, that is not something they can celebrate.

"It's like adding insult to injury," said Marco Gasparinetti, who leads the Gruppo 25 Aprile activist group. "After forcing thousands of people to leave the city, you now force them to pay to visit their families? The tax would make sense if it was a way to offset the environmental impact of the cruise ships, as other than for cruise passengers, it's very difficult to apply."

In a move to allay environmental concerns, Brugnaro tried to indicate to Unesco in late 2017 that he was getting tough on the cruise ships that, weighing more than 96,000 tonnes, disembark thousands of passengers in the heart of the city. They would no longer be able to sail past St Mark's Square, he announced, and would instead take a less glamorous route via the industrial area of Marghera.

Environmentalists have claimed that waves caused by the cruise ships have eroded the underwater supports of historic buildings and polluted the waters. But the plan is yet to be approved by the national government. If and when that approval comes, work on the new route, which requires the dredging of canals and construction of a new port, would take an estimated four years. And while diverting the ships would better preserve the historic center, the move will do little to address concerns about pollution.

(Source: The Guardian)

There's still one last chance to avoid total climate catastrophe, says study

We've had chances. Lots of chances. But humanity has a history of squandering chances, despite everything we know about climate change. Despite everything riding on us addressing it.

As it happens, the odds may still be in our favor. A new study estimates there's a 64 percent chance that peak global average temperature rise can be kept to below 1.5°C – a crucial threshold we really don't want to cross.

When the 1.5°C temperature rise was first widely proposed as part of the UN Paris climate agreement of 2015, it was set as an optimistic goal – an ideal target to strive for.

If we couldn't hit that target, scientists and thought leaders told us, we needed to then focus on stopping temperature rises from reaching 2°C above pre-industrial temperatures.

Newer scientific assessments suggest that the consequences of even a 1.5°C global temperature rise will have diabolical impacts on the environment we weren't previously aware of.

Optimistic goal

In other words, achieving our optimistic goal is something we should desperately be seeking to do, but can it still be done?

Yes, according to climate scientist Chris Smith from the University of Leeds, but only if our efforts to dismantle the machinery of carbon pollution begin right away.

"Our research found that the current amount of fossil fuel infrastructure in the global economy does not yet commit us to



exceeding the 1.5°C temperature rise limit put forward by the Paris Agreement," Smith explains.

"We are still within the margin of achieving the scenario the model put forward."

In the new study, Smith and fellow researchers modelled a number of hypothetical climate scenarios, including calculating what might happen if all carbon-intensive infrastructure – including all fossil fuel power

Newer scientific assessments suggest that the consequences of even a 1.5°C global temperature rise will have diabolical impacts on the environment we weren't previously aware of.

Comprehensive model captures entire life cycle of solar flares

This visualization is an animation of the solar flare modeled in the new study. The violet color represents plasma with temperature less than 1 million Kelvin.

A team of scientists has, for the first time, used a single, cohesive computer model to simulate the entire life cycle of a solar flare: from the buildup of energy thousands of kilometers below the solar surface, to the emergence of tangled magnetic field lines, to the explosive release of energy in a brilliant flash.

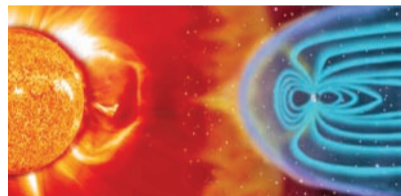
The accomplishment, detailed in the journal *Nature Astronomy*, sets the stage for future solar models to realistically simulate the Sun's own weather as it unfolds in real time, including the appearance of rolling sunspots, which sometimes produce flares and coronal mass ejections.

These eruptions can have widespread impacts on Earth, from disrupting power grids and communications networks, to damaging satellites and endangering astronauts.

Solar flares

Scientists at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) and the Lockheed Martin Solar and Astrophysics Laboratory led the research. The comprehensive new simulation captures the formation of a solar flare in a more realistic way than previous efforts, and it includes the spectrum of light emissions known to be associated with flares.

"This work allows us to provide an explanation for why flares look like the way they do, not just at a single wavelength, but in visible wavelengths, in ultraviolet and extreme ultraviolet wavelengths, and in X-rays," said Mark Cheung, a staff physicist at Lockheed Martin Solar and Astrophysics Laboratory and a visiting scholar at Stanford University. "We are explaining the many colors of solar flares."



To successfully simulate a solar flare from emergence to energy release, the scientists needed to add detailed equations to the model that could allow each region to contribute to the solar flare evolution in a realistic way. But they also had to be careful not to make the model so complicated that it would no longer be practical to run with available supercomputing resources.

Mathematical technique

To address the challenges, Rempel borrowed a mathematical technique historically used by researchers studying the magnetospheres of Earth and other planets. The technique, which allowed the scientists to compress the difference in time scales between the layers without losing accuracy, enabled the research team to create a model that was both realistic and computationally efficient.

The next step was to set up a scenario on the simulated Sun. In previous research using less complex models, scientists have needed to initiate the models nearly at the moment when the flare would erupt to be able to get a flare to form at all.

In the new study, the team wanted to see if their model could generate a flare on its own. They started by setting up a scenario with conditions inspired by a particularly active sunspot observed in March 2014. The actual sunspot spawned dozens of flares during the time it was visible, including one very powerful X-class and three moderately powerful M-class flares.

(Source: phys.org)

Potatoes have a form of 'depression,' but scientists have an idea to cure them

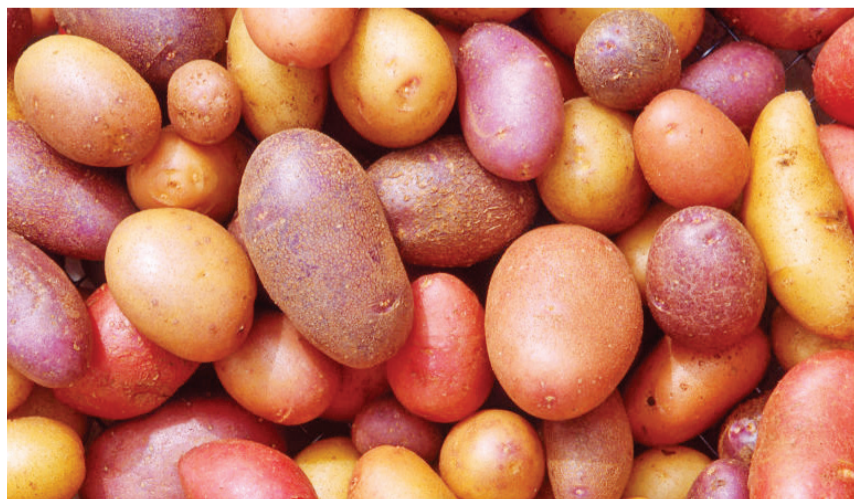
Scientists are trying to revolutionize potatoes and, in the process, cure the tubers' depression, the result of generations of inbreeding.

Potato depression is obviously nothing like human depression, of course. Potatoes reproduce through cloning, so their genome is laden with mutations. Those mutations could result in things like stunted growth or shorter lifespans. A team of Chinese scientists looked for a better way to make potatoes reproduce, and along the way learned more about the genetics behind spuds' "inbreeding depression."

You probably have seen sprouts, or eyes, grow out of potatoes. That's how farmers plant new potatoes—by cutting up old ones and letting those eyes germinate into new plants. Generations of cloning means that harmful genetic mutations remain in the genome, but the plants have a buffer against that – most varieties are "tetraploid," meaning they have four sets of chromosomes. If there's a bad mutation on a gene, there are presumably three other working versions of the gene.

Potato seed

Farmers haven't minded growing the potatoes through cloning, rather than from potato seeds with two potato parents, because the potato industry has long thought that the crops grown from clones produced more



potato than those grown from potato seeds with two parents.

But there are drawbacks to these tetraploid potatoes. They could hide lots of different gene combinations in their complex genomes, so the result of mixing that genetic information up in sexual reproduction leads to offspring that are worse-off than their parents, according to one 2016 paper. That can make selective breeding to create new potato lines difficult.

A team of scientists meeting in 2016 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison proposed a new idea—re-inventing the potato as a diploid crop, one with two, rather than four, sets of chromosomes. The researchers would then be able to selectively breed (and then inbreed) the resulting potatoes as is commonly done with other crops, and create fixed lines of potatoes based on color, shape, texture, and other properties that are easier to control.

Scientists identify two new species of fungi in retreating Arctic glacier

Two new species of fungi have made an appearance in a rapidly melting glacier on Ellesmere Island in the Canadian Arctic, just west of Greenland. A collaborative team of researchers from Japan's National Institute of Polar Research, The Graduate University for Advanced Studies in Tokyo, Japan, and Laval University in Québec, Canada made the discovery.

The scientists published their results on DATE in two separate papers, one for each new species, in the *International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology*.

The "knowledge of fungi inhabiting the Arctic is still fragmentary. We set out to survey the fungal diversity in the Canadian High Arctic," said Masaharu Tsuji, a project researcher at the National Institute of Polar Research in Japan and first author on both papers. "We found two new fungal species in the same investigation on Ellesmere Island."

Polar regions

One species is the 10th to join the genus *Mrakia*, with the proposed name *M. hoshinonis*, in honor of Tamotsu Hoshino, a senior researcher at the National Institute of Advanced Science and Technology in Japan. Hoshino has made significant contributions to the study of fungi in polar regions. The other species is the 12th to join the genus *Vishniacozyma*, with the proposed name *V. ellesmerensis* as a nod to the island where it was found. Both species are types of yeast that are well-adapted to the cold and can even grow below 0°C.

The samples of fungi were collected from the unofficially named Walker Glacier. The designation comes from Paul T. Walker, who installed the datum pole that measures the glacier's growth and shrinkage, in 1959. At the time of sample collection in 2016, measurements showed that the

glacier was receding at a rate two-and-a-half times faster than its retreat over the previous 50 years.

"Climate-related effects have been observed in this region over the last 20 years," Tsuji said. "Soon, some of the glaciers may completely melt and disappear."

Fungi species

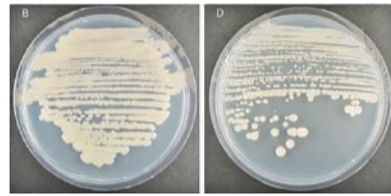
Only about five percent of fungi species have been discovered, but their function across ecological climates is well understood – from the tropics to the Arctic, fungi decompose dead organic material. Each species operates a little differently, but their general role is to reintroduce nutrients from dead plant material back into the ecosystem. If the glaciers melt, the fungi lose their habitat. The results could have catastrophic knock-on effects throughout the ecosystem, according to Tsuji, although more research is needed to understand exactly how the changing climate is influencing fungi beyond destroying their habitat.

Next, Tsuji and his team plan to survey the fungi in Ward Hunt Lake, the northernmost lake in the world. It is on Ward Hunt Island, just off the northern coast of Ellesmere Island, and less than 500 miles from the North Pole.

"Normally, the lake's ice doesn't melt during the summer season. However, the ice melted completely in 2016. We plan to continuously check how the lake's fungal diversity changes," Tsuji said.

Even if we can't come close to bringing about the radical, immediate societal changes this research proposes, we need to absorb the disastrous ramifications of not doing so – and get up to speed on saving the planet as quick as we can.

(Source: sciencealert.com)



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(Source: eurekaalert.org)

Honey bee parasite varroa mites do not feed on bees' blood

In a series of experiments, researchers found evidence that the varroa mites that attack honey bees do not have appetite for hemolymph, or bee blood. What do these parasites feed on?

The Varroa destructor, a parasitic mite that threatens populations of honey bees worldwide, has long been thought to feed on blood like many of its mite and tick cousins.

Findings of new research, however, provided evidence varroa mites do not have an appetite for hemolymph or the bee blood, but instead feed on an organ known as fat body.

The organ plays a role in fat storage. It is also involved in breaking down toxins, production of antioxidants, and management of the bees' immune system.

In a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on Jan. 14, Samuel Ramsey, from the University of Maryland, and colleagues observed where on the bodies of bees the varroa mites tend to attach themselves for feeding.

The idea is if the mites grabbed on to random locations, they were feeding on the hemolymph, which is distributed evenly throughout the bees' body. If the mites preferred a site on the body, it could lead researchers to the preferred meal of the parasites.

The researchers found that when the mites feed on immature bees, they will eat anywhere but in adult bees, the mites had strong preference for the underside of the bees' abdomen.

"Fat body tissue is spread throughout the bodies of immature bees. As the bees mature, the tissue migrates to the underside of the abdomen," Ramsey said.

The researchers also fed the bees with fluorescent dyes: a water-soluble yellow dye and a fat-soluble red dye. If the mites feed on hemolymph, researchers expect to see bright yellow glow in the bellies of the mites after feeding. If they were feeding on fat bodies, the mites' bellies would have red glow.

(Source: Tech Times)

First plants sprout on moon aboard Chang'e 4 lander

China's Chang'e 4 mission already made history when it completed the first-ever soft landing on the far side of the moon. Now, it's accomplished another first: An experimental module on the lander filled with seeds has succeeded in growing the first Earth plants on another world. Eventually, the lander could be home to a miniature ecosystem.

Humans have already grown some plants outside Earth's atmosphere. On the International Space Station, astronauts have long run experiments on plants like lettuce. In 2015, the crew was able to enjoy the first salad ever grown in space. The Chang'e 4 mission is the first instance of humans growing plants on another planet or moon, though.

The Chang'e team loaded the lunar mission with various seeds including cotton, oilseed rape, potato, and Arabidopsis. The hope was the seeds could be grown on the moon and provide data about how plants behave in the low-gravity environment. After landing on the moon on January 3rd, scientists started monitoring the plant specimens for evidence they were germinating. Now, the China National Space Administration confirms cotton, rapeseed, and potatoes have all started growing.



You can see a cotton plant germinating in the above image. The organisms are inside a sealed chamber with an atmosphere, heat, and some shielding to protect them from the harsh radiation of deep space. Although, the plants are probably encountering much more radiation than those on Earth. They're not alone, either. The Chinese team also included fruit fly eggs and yeast. It's unclear how the low gravity and radiation will affect the organisms.

Hypothetically, the plants, fruit flies, and yeast could form a short-lived ecosystem inside the Chang'e 4 lander. The flies (if they hatch) could use the oxygen generated by the plants. Decaying plant biomass would provide a food source for the fruit flies, and the yeast could process the fly waste.

(Source: extremetech.com)

Double star system flips planet-forming disk into pole position

New research led by an astronomer at the University of Warwick has found the first confirmed example of a double star system that has flipped its surrounding disc to a position that leaps over the orbital plane of those stars. The international team of astronomers used the Atacama Large Millimeter/sub-millimeter Array (ALMA) to obtain high-resolution images of the Asteroid belt-sized disc.

The overall system presents the unusual sight of a thick hoop of gas and dust circling at right angles to the binary star orbit. Until now this setup only existed in theorists' minds, but the ALMA observation proves that polar discs of this type exist, and may even be relatively common.

"Discs rich in gas and dust are seen around nearly all young stars, and we know that at least a third of the ones orbiting single stars form planets.

Some of these planets end up being misaligned with the spin of the star, so we've been wondering whether a similar thing might be possible for circumbinary planets.

A quirk of the dynamics means that a so-called polar misalignment should be possible, but until now we had no evidence of misaligned discs in which these planets might form."

Dr. Kennedy and his fellow researchers used ALMA to pin down the orientation of the ring of gas and dust in the system. The orbit of the binary was previously known, from observations that quantified how the stars move in relation to each other.

By combining these two pieces of information they were able to establish that the dust ring was consistent with a perfectly polar orbit. This means that while the stellar orbits orbit each other in one plane, like two horses going around on a carousel, the disc surrounds these stars at right angles to their orbits, like a giant ferris wheel with the carousel at the center.

(Source: sciencedaily.com)

Funeral procession held for Boeing 707 plane crash victims

SOCIETY TEHRAN — A funeral procession was held for members of Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force, the passengers of the Boeing 707 cargo plane, which crashed near Tehran on Monday.



The procession was held on Wednesday in Tehran with high ranking officials as well as army commanders in attendance, IRNA news agency reported.

The cargo plane, with 17 people on board, crashed in Safadasht, near Tehran, on Monday morning, leaving 16 dead and one injured.

The plane took off from Bishkek Manas International Airport in Kyrgyzstan and planned to land at Payam international airport, however, it was forced to make an emergency landing and crashed into a residential complex about 8.30 a.m. local time.

Tehran-Parand metro completion requires \$165m

ENVIRONMENT TEHRAN — Parand metro line, linking Tehran to southwestern suburb areas, needs a total budget of 7 trillion rials (nearly \$165 million) to be completed by the end of the current Iranian calendar year 1398 (March 2019-March 2020), head of Tehran Urban And Suburban Railway Operation Company has said.



The subway line linking Parand to Tehran remained unfinished due to budget deficiencies, YJC quoted Ali Emami as saying on Wednesday.

Referring to the Tehran Provincial Governor entering the issue, he noted that it is scheduled to allocate some fund for providing the required budget amounting

to 7 trillion rials (nearly \$165 million).

"Some 65 percent of the whole project has been completed so far, and the rest will be prepared in case of providing the necessary funds by the end of the next year," he added.

LEARN ENGLISH

Physics

Prof. Brown: Good morning, everybody. Welcome to Physics 101. My name is Ed Brown, and I will be your professor for this semester. Since today is our first class, I wanted to give you an overview of what this course will look like, how you will be graded, and what we will cover this semester. Matt: Will we be focusing more on theoretical physics or experimental physics, Professor?

Prof. Brown: This is an introductory course, and my aim is to give you a broad overview of the field of physics. The term "physics" encompasses many different areas of research and study, and I hope this course will provide you with conceptual understanding of physics, which will prove useful whether or not you choose to further your study in this field.

Prof. Brown: We will begin the course by looking at the fundamental concepts of physics, then by the middle of the semester we will begin exploring the more theoretical side of physics. It is essential that you first have a firm grasp of the fundamentals, so that you can better understand the theoretical concepts when we get to them.

Matt: Will we learn about black holes, wormholes, and string theory?

Prof. Brown: We will learn about the general theory of relativity, including black holes. We will also explore developing theories in quantum mechanics, such as string theory. We will discuss some hypothetical features of space-time, like wormholes.

Prof. Brown: We will also explore some of the more influential developments in the fields of thermodynamics, electromagnetism, and nuclear physics, all of which have had significant impacts on modern life. Now, I am going to have the TAs pass out the syllabus for this class, so you can see how this course will be graded.

Matt: Oh man, looks like this isn't going to be the easy as I thought it'd be!

Key vocabulary

encompass: to include something as a part
conceptual: based on or relating to ideas or concepts
grasp: an understanding of something
black hole: an invisible area in outer space
quantum mechanics: the branch of physics that deals with energy and matter on an atomic level
hypothetical: involving or based on a suggested idea or theory

thermodynamics: a science that deals with the action of heat
electromagnetism: a magnetic field that is produced by a current of electricity
nuclear physics: the area of physics which deals with nuclei

Supplementary vocabulary
academia: the various interests of a university and those who teach there
applicable: something that can be used in real-life situations
gravity: the force of attraction between two objects
ivory tower: refers to those who live in intellectual isolation, often without contact or applicability to the outside world
relevant: knowledge that can be applied to everyday situations

American-born Press TV anchor Marzieh Hashemi imprisoned in U.S., denied hijab, halal food

SOCIETY TEHRAN — Marzieh Hashemi, an American-born journalist and anchor, working for Press TV, Iran's English-language television news network, was imprisoned on as-yet-undefined charges in the United States.

Hashemi, 59, has been detained on Sunday by FBI upon arrival at St. Louis Lambert International Airport while traveling to visit family and is reportedly being denied halal food and her hijab is removed against her will.

According to Press TV she was on a trip to visit her ill brother and other relatives when she was detained at the airport and transferred from Missouri to Washington DC, where she is currently being held in an FBI detention facility.

She and her families are denied any information on the reasons behind her detention by the U.S authorities.

While Hashemi's relatives were not able to contact her, she was only allowed to contact her daughter two days after her arrest.

She has told her daughter that she was being mistreated at the prison like a criminal being handcuffed and shackled. She also said that her hijab was removed unwillingly and was photographed without a headscarf once she arrived at the detention facility and is now only wearing a T-shirt and using another one to cover her head.

Hashemi also told her daughter that she



had only a packet of crackers as food for the past few days as she has only been offered pork meat - which is not halal according to the Islamic law.

Since her arrest #FreeMarziehHashemi, #FreePresstvJournalist, and #PrayForMarziehHashemi have gone viral on twitter.

In twitter some users have condemned U.S. of violating human rights by imprisoning

Hashemi and even compared her to Jamal Ahmad a Saudi Arabian dissident, author, columnist for The Washington Post, who was assassinated at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018 by agents of the Saudi government.

"Illegal detention of #marziehHashemi shows the ugly face of #American democracy and how suppression of free speech is

going on there!" @syedabaqri wrote on his twitter account.?

@Kaneefatima also wrote on twitter "How is the FBI explain away #MarziehHashemi's arrest without charge and the violation of her rights? Waiting for a statement..."

"#MarziehHashemi, is a U.S. citizen. First, give human rights to your citizen. Then, give human rights to people around the world. Step by step!" @Daniel_A110 wrote.

@YJebraily, another ?twitter user wrote "the U.S. regime silenced #MarziehHashemi by kidnapping her, as the Saudi regime silenced #JamalKhashoggi by killing him. Different ways for the same ends."

"Once Again U.S. showed its true face... U.S. has shown that #HumanRights is only a huge mask to hide behind. I am eagerly waiting to see why FBI has abducted #MarziehHashemi. For being Iranian-American? For presenting Truth?" @mm19921992 also twitted.

Hashemi, was born in New Orleans as Melanie Franklin in a Protestant African-American family. In 1979, concurrent with Islamic Revolution, she was a student in the field of broadcasting. After the Revolution she converted to Islam and worked for Islamic newspapers and magazines in the U.S.

She has lived in Iran since 2008 and has worked as a TV presenter, journalist, voice-over artist, and documentarian and the host of Press TV.

Yahya award honors dedicated rangers



ENVIRONMENT TEHRAN — Three dedicated rangers have been selected to receive the Yahya award for their outstanding efforts to safeguard the country's wildlife and environment, Fars news agency reported on Tuesday.

Ataollah Sadeqi form Kordestan province, Ali Akbar Imani Berenjestanaki from Mazandaran province and Hamid Reza Azimpour from Khorasan Razavi province were the three rangers who earned the award.

Bahman Izadi, an environmental activist, who has been active in freeing rangers who are jailed on involuntary manslaughter charges from prison, also received an honorable mention.

Launched in 2014, the Yahya award annually honors the rangers who have gone far in a yearlong to protect the environment, which was first introduced by an Iranian couple, Mojtaba Ramzi and Paridokht Moshkzad, members of the Iranian Cheetah Society, through a generous donation.

Yahya (literally meaning life-giving) award, is named after the devoted ranger, Yahya Shahkooch Mahali, who has been martyred in an armed conflict with poachers.

Some 123 rangers have been killed while protecting the environment since

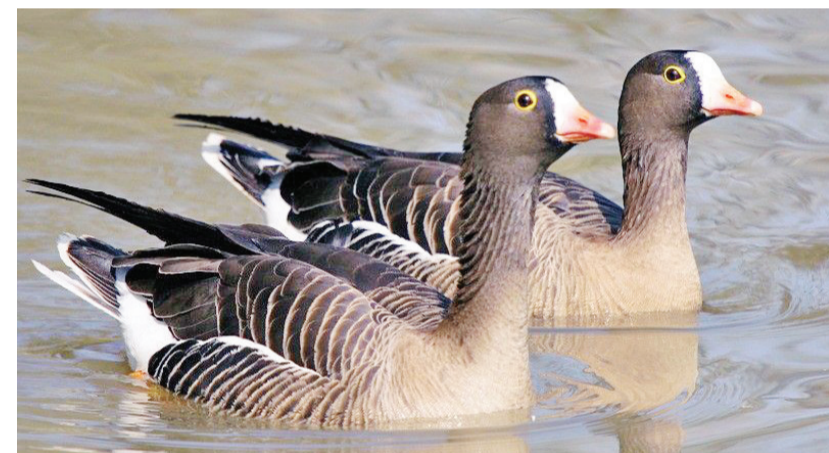
1979 in Iran. While a bill to uphold the rights of rangers, including rules on carrying and use of firearms, has been approved by the judiciary committee of Majlis [Iranian parliament] in late September, it is still waiting for approval.

Multiple deaths and injuries of the rangers occur while trying to safeguard the environment and wildlife. Rangers who risk their lives protecting the environment and wildlife sometimes fall victims by getting into fight with poachers and may either suffer severe wounds, get killed, or charged with involuntary manslaughter.

In April 2018 three rangers were wounded in an armed conflict with poachers in the southwestern province of Khuzestan while patrolling Dez National Park. The three rangers who didn't wear bulletproof vests were shot in the arm and shoulder.

In June 2016, two rangers named Mohammad Dehqani and Parviz Hormozi were killed during an armed conflict with poachers. Moreover, ranger Asadollah Taqizadeh was sentenced to death for killing a poacher in July 2007 in Dena forest. Fortunately in Taqizadeh's case the deceased family spared his life and he got released from the prison in March 2016.

Over 8,000 lesser white-fronted geese wintering in northwest Iran



ENVIRONMENT TEHRAN — about 8,000 endangered population of lesser white-fronted geese were wintering in West Azarbaijan province, northwestern part of the country, head of wildlife monitoring affairs at the provincial department of environment has said.

"The global population of the winter migrant species is estimated at about 20,000 individuals, 8,000 of which are currently wintering in the country," IRNA quoted Omid Yousefi as saying on Wednesday.

The critically endangered species is now only found in one main population in East Asia, with a few birds remaining in the historic Western population, he said, adding that the Eastern population migrate from Siberia to China or Malaysia in winters, while the Western population, wing their ways to winter in Iran.

He went on to say that with regard to the fact that the lesser white-fronted goose is the only small bird at risk of extinction, programs have been drawn up to strengthen their population, so they are protected whenever migrating.

The Lesser White-fronted Goose Life project called "Safeguarding the Lesser White-fronted Goose Fennoscandian population in key wintering and staging sites within the European flyway" was an international European Union LIFE+

Nature project, which aimed to halt its current alarming population decline by implementing concrete conservation actions. The project was underway from September, 2011- April, 2017.

Currently, annual migratory birds' census plan is being implemented in 70 habitats of the birds in the province, he stated, adding that some 60 experts and environmentalists are conducting the census.

Annual census for migratory birds in Iran begins in the middle of the Iranian calendar month of Dey (December 22-January 20), and ends in middle of the month of Bahman (January 21-February 19), through which Iran hosts rare species of migratory birds heading from north to the southern countries due to reduced seasonal temperatures and food availability.

During the aforesaid period, it is anticipated that over 80,000 birds and aquatic animals to be counted in the province, he added.

In December 2018, Majid Kharrazian-Moqaddam, head of aquatic animals and wildlife affairs at the Department of Environment said that the total population of migratory birds took flight to spend the cold season in the country increased by 26.5 percent last winter compared to a year earlier, with increased rainfall averages and accordingly wetlands being filled with water.

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

DOE calls on ISRC to become warning center for environment

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

PREFIX/SUFFIX

"en-, em-"

Meaning: into, on or put into
For example: Do not needlessly **endanger** your lives until I give you the signal.

PHRASAL VERB

Make over

Meaning: to make someone the owner of something legally
For example: Before she died she made over all her property to her children.

IDIOM

Come up roses

Explanation: if things come up roses, the end result is successful or positive, even if there were difficult times
For example: After several disappointments, everything seems to be coming up roses for the tennis player this year.

پژوهشگاه فضایی مرکز اعلام خطر محیط زیست و منابع طبیعی باشد

معاون رئیس جمهوری و رئیس سازمان حفاظت محیط زیست گفت: پژوهشگاه فضایی ایران باید مرکز اعلام خطر در حوزه محیط زیست و منابع طبیعی باشد.

به گزارش گروه علمی ایرنا از پژوهشگاه فضایی ایران، عیسی کلانتری در بازدید از نمایشگاه دستاوردهای بخش فضایی کشور که در روز گذشته برگزار گردید، حضور یافت.

Russia, Syria Kurds reject 'safe zone' under Turkish control

1→ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Tuesday that Ankara would establish the "security zone" in northern Syria proposed by U.S. President Donald Trump, a day after the two leaders held a phone conversation.

Erdogan noted that during a "quite positive" telephone conversation, Trump reaffirmed that "a 20-mile (30 kilometer) security zone along the Syrian border... will be set up by us."

"We could create such a safe zone if coalition forces, especially America, provide logistical and financial support," Erdogan added.

Ankara and Washington engaged in a war of words over the fate of the Kurdish militants in Syria following the planned withdrawal of American troops. Turkey views the Washington-backed militants as terrorists.

Trump threatened to devastate NATO ally Turkey economically if it launches attacks against the Kurdish militants in Syria when U.S. troops leave the Arab country.

In response, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu stressed that Turkey was "not scared of and will not be intimidated" by such rhetoric and that economic threats "will get nowhere."

■ 'Syrian gov. must regain control of north'

Also, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reacted to Washington's proposal and said Wednesday that the Syrian government must wrest back control of the



country's north.

"We are convinced that the best and only solution is the transfer of these territories under the control of the Syrian government, and of Syrian security forces and administrative structures," Lavrov told reporters.

The top Russian diplomat further said Moscow welcomed and supported "contacts that have now begun between Kurdish representatives and Syrian authorities so they can return to their lives under a single government without outside interference."

Lavrov further highlighted the progress in efforts to resolve Syria's seven-year conflict,

and said the focus should remain on Idlib Province -- the last major militant stronghold in the country.

"The Syrian settlement is progressing, though of course more slowly than we would like," he said. "The fight against terrorism must be completed. Now the main hotbed of terrorism is Idlib."

Trump announced the plan to pull U.S. forces out of Syria last month amid plans by Turkey to launch an operation against anti-Damascus Kurdish militants.

The Kurdish militants in northern Syria, who have long enjoyed U.S. support, feel

abandoned by Washington.

The U.S. has been arming and training Kurdish militants under the banner of helping them fight Daesh, but Syria and several other countries see ulterior motives behind the deployment.

Turkey, a key U.S. ally in the region, has repeatedly questioned Washington's deployment of heavy weapons in Syria despite the defeat of Daesh in much of the Arab country.

■ Blast near U.S.-led coalition patrol in Syria

A blast struck near a U.S.-led coalition patrol in Syria's northern city of Manbij on Wednesday, and a war monitor said 14 people were killed including two Americans.

An ISIL-affiliated web site, Amaq, said an attacker with an explosive vest had struck a foreign military patrol in a suicide attack.

Reuters could not independently verify a report by the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights that 14 people had been killed in the attack including two U.S. soldiers. The coalition could not be immediately reached for comment.

Manbij has been held by U.S.-backed fighters allied to the Kurdish YPG militia since they took it from ISIL in 2016. It is located near areas held by Russian-backed Syrian government forces and by anti-Assad fighters backed by Turkey.

One of the witnesses said there was a "heavy" presence of military aircraft over Manbij following the blast, which took place near a vegetable market.

(Source: agencies)

Putin, Erdogan to discuss US pullout from Syria next week

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will hold talks in Moscow next week to discuss Syria in light of the planned withdrawal of U.S. troops, Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov said Wednesday.

Russia also intends to propose holding a three-way summit on Syria in Russia with Iran and Turkey, Ushakov told reporters at a briefing.

(Source: Reuters)

Russia calls on Japan to recognize outcome of World War Two

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov denied on Wednesday that Moscow was imposing an ultimatum on Japan in talks to end a decades-long territorial dispute, but called on Tokyo to recognize the results of World War Two.

Japan is seeking a peace deal with Russia it hopes will end a dispute over islands captured by Soviet troops in the last days of World War Two, a disagreement that has long soured bilateral relations.

The islands are known as the Southern Kuriles in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has launched a diplomatic campaign to strike a deal with Moscow.

Russia says Tokyo must recognize Russian sovereignty over the islands before progress can be made in peace talks, however.

"These are not pre-conditions, it's just an effort to understand why Japan is the only country in the world which cannot say: 'I accept the results of World War Two in their entirety'," Lavrov told a news conference.

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono held talks about the territorial dispute with Lavrov in Moscow on Monday and Shinzo Abe is to have discussions with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Jan. 22.

Lavrov has said a Russian desire to normalize relations with Tokyo meant it agreed to step up talks about the territorial dispute and the peace deal, but that significant differences remain between the two sides.

Opinion polls show most Russians oppose handing back the islands to Japan, and Russian nationalists plan to stage a demonstration in Moscow this weekend calling on the Kremlin to keep the territory.

(Source: TASS)

'El Chapo' paid ex-Mexican president \$100 million bribe: trial witness

Accused Mexican drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman once paid a \$100 million bribe to former Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, an ex-Guzman associate testified on Tuesday that he previously told U.S. authorities.

Alex Cifuentes, who has described himself as Guzman's onetime right-hand man, discussed the alleged bribe under cross-examination by Jeffrey Lichtman, one of Guzman's lawyers, in Brooklyn federal court. Asked if he told authorities in 2016 that Guzman arranged the bribe, he answered, "That's right."

Reuters could not immediately reach Pena Nieto or his former spokesman for comment. He has previously denied taking bribes.

His former chief of staff, however, took to social media to reject the accusation.

"The declarations of the Colombian drug trafficker in New York are false, defamatory and absurd," wrote Francisco Guzman in a post on Twitter, adding that the Pena Nieto government "located, detained and extradited" the Mexican kingpin.

The allegations are among the most explosive to emerge from Guzman's trial, which began in November and has so far featured testimony of lower-level corruption.

Guzman, 61, was extradited to the United States in 2017 to face charges of trafficking cocaine, heroin and other drugs into the country as leader of the Sinaloa Cartel.

Cifuentes testified that he had told U.S. prosecutors that Pena Nieto initially reached out to Guzman, asking for \$250 million. Cifuentes told the prosecutors that the bribe was paid in October 2012, when Pena Nieto was president-elect, he testified.

Cifuentes also said testified that Guzman once told him he had received a message from Pena Nieto saying he did

not have to live in hiding anymore.

Lichtman had promised jurors in his opening statement last November they would hear how Mexican drug kingpin Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada bribed Pena Nieto and another former president as part of a scheme to frame Guzman. He said Zambada was the real boss of the cartel.

Pena Nieto at the time called the claim "completely false and defamatory."

U.S. District Judge Brian Cogan, however, refused to allow Guzman's lawyers to question Zambada's brother about the alleged bribes last year.

It was unclear how Cifuentes' testimony, which appeared to implicate Guzman, could be used to defend him, though Lichtman homed in on inconsistencies in Cifuentes' memory. Cifuentes admitted that at a meeting last year, he told prosecutors he was no longer sure of the exact amounts of the bribes, but did not elaborate.

Pena Nieto was president of Mexico from December 2012 until November 2018. He was once a rising star in Mexico's long-dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, and was the former governor of the state of Mexico, the country's most populous.

But the president ended his term a much diminished figure, pummeled by conflict-of-interest scandals, rampant crime and a lackluster economy.

While Pena Nieto himself was barred by law from running for second term in 2018, his centrist party suffered a historic defeat at the polls as leftist President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador won in a landslide, relegating the PRI to the role of a marginal player in the new Congress.

Captured by Pena Nieto's government in February 2014, Guzman broke out of prison for a second time some 17



months later, escaping through a mile-long tunnel dug right into his cell.

The jailbreak humiliated the government and battered the president's already damaged credibility, though Pena Nieto personally announced news of the kingpin's third capture when he was again arrested in northwestern Mexico in January 2016.

Colombian-born Cifuentes is one of about a dozen witnesses who have so far testified against Guzman after striking deals with U.S. prosecutors, in a trial that has provided a window into the secretive world of the Sinaloa Cartel, one of the world's most powerful drug trafficking organizations.

Cifuentes earlier on Tuesday had also testified that Guzman asked an associate to pay a \$10 million bribe to a general. The witness said the bribe was never paid and Guzman subsequently ordered the associate killed, though the hit was never carried out.

(Source: Reuters)

U.S., Britain conduct first joint drills in contested South China Sea

The United States and Britain have conducted their first joint naval drills in the disputed South China Sea since China built island bases there, the two navies said on Wednesday, as Washington seeks help from allies to keep pressure on Beijing.

A U.S. Navy guided missile destroyer the USS McCampbell, which is based in Japan, and a Royal Navy frigate, HMS Argyll, which is on a tour of Asia, conducted communication drills and other exercises from Friday to Wednesday "to address common security

priorities", the U.S. Navy said in a press release.

"There's no record in recent history of operations together, specifically in the South China Sea," a U.S. Navy spokesman said.

No such joint drills have been conducted there since at least 2010, he added.

The exercise comes after another British warship, the 22,000 ton HMS Albion, sailed close to the Paracel island chain claimed by China in the South China Sea in August.

It was the first time Britain had direct-

ly challenged China's growing control of the strategic waterway and came after the United States said it would like to see more international participation in such action. Beijing accused London of engaging in "provocation".

The McCampbell this month passed within 12 nautical miles of the same island chain in a freedom of navigation operation, which the U.S. Navy said was to "challenge excessive maritime claims".

China's claims in the South China Sea,

through which some \$3 trillion of shipborne trade passes each year, are contested by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. Neither the United States or Britain has territorial claims in the area.

Pictures of China's island bases released last year appear to show truck-mounted surface-to-air missiles or anti-ship cruise missiles. China's air force has also landed bombers on disputed islands as part of a training exercises in the region.

(Source: Reuters)

'Stupid' to suggest Trump a Russian agent: Kremlin

A top Kremlin aide Wednesday dismissed as ridiculous claims that U.S. President Donald Trump has acted as an agent for Russia amid mounting controversy over his alleged ties to Moscow.

"Why comment on something stupid? How can the U.S. president be an agent of another country?" President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy advisor Yuri Ushakov told a briefing after a journalist if Trump was a Russian agent.

Ushakov said Russia's relations with the U.S. were "at rock bottom" and "nothing has happened in the context of developing them."

Trump himself said Monday that he "never worked for Russia" and told reporters: "It's a disgrace that you even



ask that question."

The U.S. president was responding to a report in The New York Times that said the FBI had opened an investigation into whether he was acting on Russia's behalf soon after he became president.

In addition, The Washington Post reported on what it said were unusual lengths taken by Trump to hide details of his conversations with Putin.

The bombshell reports came as special prosecutor Robert Mueller presses a huge investigation into alleged Russian efforts to influence the 2016 presidential election -- and the possibility Moscow colluded with Trump's campaign.

(Source: AFP)

Nearly 900 killed in ethnic violence in Congo in mid-December: UN

At least 890 people are believed to have been killed in ethnic violence in northwestern Democratic Republic of Congo last month, the United Nations human rights office said on Wednesday.

The toll doubles an estimate provided on Monday by a local priest and a civil society activist who said that at least 400 people had been killed in bloodshed which led the government to cancel voting there in last

month's presidential election.

"According to allegations from credible sources, at least 890 people were killed between 16 and 18 December in four villages in Yumbi territory, Mai-Ndombe province in the west of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in what appear to have been clashes between the Banunu and Batende communities," the U.N. human rights office said in a statement.

Communal fighting and widespread pillaging around the town of Yumbi, a normally peaceful area, led to an estimated 16,000 people seeking refuge by crossing the Congo River into the Republic of Congo, it added.

It was not clear if the violence was directly related to the election, the results of which are disputed. But it pointed to the kind of unrest that can quickly be unleashed.

The UN human rights office said 465

houses and buildings, including schools, a health center, market and office of the national electoral commission, had been burned or pillaged.

"It is crucial that this shocking violence be promptly, thoroughly investigated and the perpetrators be brought to justice," said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet.

(Source: Daily Star)



Gillibrand made the announcement on Tuesday, saying she was launching an exploratory committee for the White House run, which will allow her to legally begin fundraising and organizing her campaign.

"It's an important first step, and it's one I am taking because I am going to run," she said on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. Asked why she wanted to enter the presidential contest, the 52-year-old attorney said, "I'm going to run for president of the United States because as a young mom, I'm going to fight for other people's kids as hard as I would fight for my own."

Gillibrand's leaning towards the left in recent years is marked by her tapping into national causes such as #MeToo movement that mobilize the Democrat vote base.

Political consultant and venture capitalist Bradley Tusk believes that "she's done an excellent job carving out a message and space for herself among the potential candidates."

However, Gillibrand has not always been a firm believer in liberal values.

"Gillibrand won her upstate New York district by running to the right: she campaigned against amnesty for illegal immigrants, promised to restore fiscal responsibility to Washington, and pledged to protect gun rights." The American Conservative commented on her victorious 2006 campaign for Congress.

She has since expressed remorse for her stance on immigration and gun control. "It was something that I'm embarrassed about and I'm ashamed of."

Gillibrand replaced Hillary Clinton in the Senate when the latter was appointed secretary of state in 2009.

(Source: USA Today)

Extracting Moscow lab data taking longer than expected - WADA

World Anti-Doping Agency experts are taking longer than expected to extract testing data from the old Moscow anti-doping laboratory, a spokesperson for the agency told AFP on Tuesday.

The WADA team returned to Moscow last Wednesday, after Russian authorities missed a December deadline to provide access to the lab. When the WADA experts began extracting data on Thursday, it was estimated that the task would take three days.

"No limit was put on the duration of the mission. It is taking longer than had been originally estimated, but the team is facing no specific issues or difficulties in carrying out their task," said the spokesperson on Tuesday, the second and final day of a meeting of its Compliance Review Committee (CRC).

"The large quantity and high complexity of the data, as well as the fact the servers and hard drives being accessed are not all brand new, means it is taking longer than originally anticipated."

In September, WADA conditionally lifted a ban on the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA), paving the way for its reinstatement. One of the conditions was access being granted to the data by the end of 2018. The data concerns thousands of tests carried out from 2011 to 2015 when Russia has been accused of state-sponsored doping.

But when a WADA team arrived in December, Russian authorities raised issues with the certification of their equipment under Russian law.

WADA's CRC began a scheduled two-day meeting in Montreal on Monday. "The CRC meeting will conclude today as planned," said the spokesperson. "At every stage, the CRC has been kept up to date on latest developments in Moscow and it will complete and send its report only once the technical team has concluded its work."

The WADA executive committee, which will decide on the fate of RUSADA, meets on 22 January.

(Source: AFP)

FIFA says in regular contact with AFC over detained Bahraini player

FIFA says it has been in regular contact with the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) over the Bahraini football player arrested in Thailand in November over a prison sentence in his homeland.

The Australian football players' union this week called on the AFC to intervene to help secure the release of Hakeem Al Araibi, who plays in Australia but was arrested in November in Bangkok on an Interpol notice issued at Bahrain's request.

Araibi, who played for Bahrain's national football team and was a critic of the government, had been convicted of vandalizing a police station and sentenced to 10 years in prison in absentia.

He denies wrongdoing. The Bahrain government says Araibi can appeal against the sentence if he returns to the kingdom. Araibi was granted asylum in Australia in 2017 after fleeing Bahrain three years earlier.

Araibi was a vocal critic of AFC President Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim al-Khalifa, a member of Bahrain's ruling family and cousin of the king, when he contested the FIFA presidential election in 2015. FIFA has "been working behind the scenes and have been in regular contact with our national associations and with the AFC about this case", a spokesman said late on Tuesday.

Last week, the governing body said Araibi should be freed and allowed to return to Australia to continue his career.

The AFC has said it was working with groups including FIFA, but declined to comment further.

(Source: Mirror)

Mourinho gagged by Man United as part of £18m pay-off



Jose Mourinho will not be able to lift the lid on his Manchester United sacking when he returns to work as a pundit this week because of a non-disclosure agreement in his severance deal, a source close to the club has told ESPN FC.

Mourinho is set to make his first public appearance since his dismissal from Old Trafford when he returns to work as a Bein Sports analyst for Thursday's Asian Cup group match between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the Premier League clash between Arsenal and former club Chelsea on Saturday.

However, he will not be allowed to discuss the circumstances surrounding his departure from United after being gagged by the club as part of his £18 million pay-off.

Mourinho is the third manager sacked by United in the last five years after dismissing David Moyes in 2014 and Louis van Gaal in 2016. Both received pay-offs which included a non-disclosure agreement -- normal procedure in situations such as these -- after the early termination of their contracts.

Mourinho is set to wait until the summer before returning to management.

Sources have told ESPN FC that the 55-year-old is not interested in taking over at Benfica because it is "not the right time" to return to the Portuguese league.

He has been linked with Real Madrid and Inter Milan -- both former clubs -- as well as the Qatar national team job ahead of their home World Cup in 2022.

La Liga president Javier Tebas, meanwhile, has said he would welcome the return of Mourinho to Spain's top flight. Mourinho won La Liga, a Spanish Supercup and a Copa del Rey during his three seasons at Madrid, before leaving in 2013.

(Source: Soccer.net)

Federer, Nadal stay on track as Sharapova sets up Wozniacki showdown

Roger Federer ground out a tough three-set win to make the Australian Open third round for an incredible 20th straight year Wednesday, with long-time rival Rafael Nadal also safely through in his drive towards an 18th Grand Slam title.

Women's defending champion Caroline Wozniacki also progressed to set up a mouth-watering clash next with in-form former world number one Maria Sharapova.

But it was curtains for South African Kevin Anderson, who slumped out to young American Frances Tiafoe and became the highest seed, at five, to be sent packing so far.

On an overcast day at Melbourne Park, second seed Angelique Kerber, the 2016 winner, and former US Open champion Sloane Stephens joined the big guns in round three, but the women's side also saw a top 10 player crash.

Ninth seed Kiki Bertens, who raced through the rankings last year after winning three titles, was whipped in three sets by Russia's Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova.

Federer might be 37 but he's not showing his age, with British qualifier Dan Evans the latest to fall under his spell as he works towards a third successive Australian crown and 21st major victory.

He defeated Evans at Wimbledon last year with the loss of just eight games, but it was a much harder assignment this time, winning 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 on Rod Laver Arena.

"I think if I could have pulled away earlier in the match it might have been easier," said the third seed. "I think he played very well, it was hard to pull away to his credit."



The Swiss star's Australian achievements so far put him on a par with other six-time winners Novak Djokovic and Roy Emerson -- although the Australian great's victories all came before the Open era.

If he goes on to win the tournament, he will become the first man ever to claim seven or more titles at two Grand Slams, having already won eight Wimbledon.

Nadal had an easier route to round three, outclassing local hope Matthew Ebden 6-3, 6-2, 6-2.

The Spaniard is bidding for his own

slice of history by becoming the first man in the Open era, and only the third in history along with Emerson and Rod Laver, to win each Grand Slam on two or more occasions.

"I played a solid match, I was happy with the way I served. I did a few things very well," said Nadal, who next plays Australian Alex de Minaur. "It is an honour to play here. Was a great atmosphere."

Anderson, beaten by Novak Djokovic in the Wimbledon final last year, was sent home by Tiafoe 4-6, 6-4, 6-4, 7-5.

The fifth seed struggled with an elbow injury early in the clash and couldn't cope with the 20-year-old's power and finesse.

Collision course

Sixth seed Marin Cilic, who lost in the final to Federer last year, had no such dramas, grinding past American Mackenzie McDonald in four sets and next plays Spanish 26th seed Fernando Verdasco.

Dane Wozniacki, who is battling rheumatoid arthritis, steamrolled Sweden's Johanna Larsson 6-1, 6-3 as she bids to become the first woman to defend the title since Victoria Azarenka in 2013.

It set up a tough clash with five-time Grand Slam champion Sharapova, who blitzed past Sweden's Rebecca Peterson 6-2, 6-1. The Russian is in scintillating form and has dropped just three games in her opening two matches.

"I'm really happy with the way I performed," said Sharapova, adding that she was looking forward to the Wozniacki showdown.

"It's a tough third round but I have set up the challenge and I'm ready to go out there and take it."

Meanwhile, three-time Grand Slam champion Kerber dominated Brazilian qualifier Beatriz Haddad Maia 6-2, 6-3 to stay on a collision course with Stephens in the quarter-finals.

Stephens, who endured a horror run at Melbourne Park since reaching the semi-final in 2013, exiting in the first round in 2015, 2016 and 2018, swatted aside former doubles partner Timea Babos 6-3, 6-1.

(Source: AFP)

Murray criticizes LTA for failing to make the most of his success



Andy Murray has criticized Britain's Lawn Tennis Association for failing to build on his success and grow the game over the last decade.

Three-times Grand Slam champion Murray went out of the Australian Open in the first round on Monday, and said the match could be the last of his professional career due to pain in his right hip.

The 31-year-old Scot has been hailed as one of Britain's greatest sportsmen, a double Olympic gold medallist who in 2013 also became the first British man to win a Wimbledon singles title in 77 years.

"I'm not sure Britain has really capitalized on the last seven or eight years of success we've had," the BBC quoted the former world number one as saying.

"Whether it be myself, my brother, Jo (Konta), Kyle (Edmund), the Davis Cup, those sorts of things, I'm not sure how much we've done there," added Murray, who has been critical of the LTA in the past.

"Maybe it's something I should have given more thought to while I was playing but I never felt that was my job to do that."

Murray said he could not understand how the number of people playing tennis had dropped over the past decade despite unprecedented success.

"I know in Scotland that there have not been many indoor courts built in the last 10 years. That seems madness. I don't understand why that is. You need to get kids playing; you need to have the facilities that allow them to do that," he said.

Older brother Jamie echoed the concern to British media as he prepared to start his Australian Open doubles campaign on Thursday.

"My greatest worry was that he would stop one day... and you would look around the country and there wouldn't be much to show for it. And if you go around the country you probably see that," he said.

"And that is sad because how on earth are you going to grow a sport if you can't do it when you've got one of the biggest stars in tennis for the last 10 years, and one of Britain's most prominent sport-people?"

(Source: Reuters)

Warriors erupt for record 51 points in first quarter versus Nuggets



The Golden State Warriors set an NBA record with 51 first-quarter points during Tuesday night's 142-111 victory over the Nuggets.

On top of league and franchise records for points in the quarter, the Warriors also poured in 10 first-quarter 3-pointers -- another franchise record, for any quarter, according to ESPN Stats & Information research.

"It's beautiful, beautiful basketball," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "I don't remember a better first quarter. That was a fireworks show."

The Warriors shot 19-for-25 from the field (76 percent) and finished 10-of-14 from beyond the arc (71.4 percent) in the first quarter. Golden State finished the quarter leading 51-38 and never looked back.

"Obviously, there's not gonna be very many record-setting quarters every night," Warriors swingman Klay Thompson said. "But it shows you what we're capable of when we're hitting on all cylinders. It's beautiful to watch, and it's more fun to be a part of."

According to data from ESPN Stats &

Information, the 51 points are the second most the Warriors have scored in any quarter in franchise history. They registered 57 points in the third quarter of a game against the Sacramento Kings in 1989.

Kevin Durant led the Warriors' offensive explosion in the first quarter with 17 points, going a perfect 7-for-7 from the field, while Thompson scored 13 and Stephen Curry chipped in with 12 of his own.

The Warriors brushed off talk of sending a message to the Western Conference-leading Nuggets prior to the game, but they knew what they had accomplished once it was over.

"We've been paying attention," Curry said. "We know who's been playing well -- and to be honest, we haven't played as well against the playoff teams in the West. We wanna kinda correct that going into the last half of the season. So, this is a big night for us to continue to build momentum. We want to be able to carry this and put a nice little streak together, and we're doing it."

Durant echoed a similar message, saying, "I think they know who we are."

(Source: ESPN)

Can Spurs keep the pace without Harry Kane?

Tottenham have defied the odds to remain alive in three cup competitions and on course for a top-four finish in the Premier League after spending nothing in the summer but staying afloat without injured talisman Harry Kane could be the biggest challenge yet for manager Mauricio Pochettino.

Kane will not even be fit to train until early March after suffering ligament damage in his left ankle during Sunday's 1-0 home defeat to Manchester United.

His absence could not have come at a worse time for Pochettino ahead of a potentially season-defining run of at least 11 games on four fronts over the next seven weeks.

What will Kane miss?

Kane is expected to miss both legs of Spurs' Champions League last-16 tie against Borussia Dortmund, the second leg of a League Cup semi-final at Chelsea and the final should they progress, a trip to Crystal Palace in the fourth round of the FA Cup and the fifth round if Spurs make it through, plus seven Premier League games, including vital clashes in the battle for the top four with Chelsea and Arsenal.

The loss of the World Cup's Golden Boot winner has been exacerbated by the departure of Son Heung-min to the Asian Cup -- potentially for the rest of the month -- leaving Pochettino desperately short of striking options.

Son is Spurs' second top scorer with 12 goals behind Kane's 20 this season. The South Korean has shown his ability to carry the goalscoring burden on the few occasions Kane has been rested and when he was briefly sidelined by right ankle ligament damage last season.



What are Pochettino's options?

Pochettino will now be forced to turn to 33-year-old Spanish striker Fernando Llorente, who has played just over an hour of Premier League and Champions League football all season.

Llorente was strongly linked with a return to Athletic Bilbao this month due to his limited game time but is the only natural striker Pochettino can turn to as the shallowness of Spurs' squad begins to be exposed.

Lucas Moura is another makeshift option who would offer more mobility than Llorente's physical approach and might be better suited if Spurs are not to alter their style drastically for Llorente to feed off crosses.

However, after a bright start to the season, the Brazilian has scored just five goals since August.

Do Spurs have to spend?

Tottenham became the first team in Premier League history since the introduction of the summer transfer window not to have made a single signing by the start of the campaign, and prior to Kane's injury Pochettino expected another window without new arrivals.

The spiralling costs and the wait to enter the club's new 62,000-capacity stadium have hampered Spurs' ability to spend on new players, while Pochettino has previously spoken of the difficulty in recruiting a back-up to Kane.

"It's so difficult to convince good players to come and then be on the bench. Then the problems start," said the Argentine, who has instead prioritised squad harmony.

Chairman Daniel Levy is renowned for not splashing out and is under severe pressure to deliver a move into Tottenham's new home before the end of the season.

However, Levy also has a fine balance to strike. Pochettino is a man in demand, with Manchester United looking for a new manager in the summer, as are a number of his players, most notably Christian Eriksen, who has just 18 months left to run on his contract and is attracting interest from Real Madrid.

Should Spurs shirk the chance to bring in more firepower and then crash out of the Champions League and both domestic cups before Kane returns, Pochettino will end his fifth season in charge without winning a trophy.

(Source: France24)



Iran held by Iraq in lackluster match



S P O R T S TEHRAN — Iran national football team were held to a 0-0 draw by Iraq at the 2019 AFC Asian Cup on Wednesday but claimed top spot in Group D thanks to a better goal difference.

Team Melli were held to a goalless draw by Iraq but qualified for the next stage as Group D winners thanks to better goal difference at the Al Maktoum Stadium, Dubai.

Carlos Queiroz's team had already defeated Yemen 5-0 and Vietnam 2-0 in their first two matches.

Iran were determined to beat their archrivals Iraq after Persians were knocked out of the Asian Cup in the previous edition on penalties but didn't play good.

"We are very happy because Team Melli advanced to the Round of 16 as the winners. We are here to make our people happy and will do our best in the coming matches," Iran goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand said after the match.

Vietnam also defeated Yemen 2-0 in the same group.

Iran topped Group D with seven points, followed by Iraq and Vietnam with seven and three points respectively.

Yemen remained bottom of the table without any point.

The 2019 AFC Asian Cup is being held in the UAE from Jan. 5 to Feb. 1.

Kyrgyzstan earn first ever win



A superb hat-trick from Vitalij Lux gave Kyrgyz Republic their first ever AFC Asian Cup win, and a fighting chance of appearing in the tournament's knockout stage as the Central Asians defeated the Philippines 3-1 at Rashid Stadium on Wednesday.

Lux scored once in the first half, and twice in the second to seal a historic, and crucial three points for Alexander Krestinin's side, who finished third in Group C behind Korea Republic and China PR.

While Kyrgyz Republic must wait to discover if they are one of the four third-placed teams to advance to the Round of 16, the Azkals fate has been sealed, with three successive defeats bringing their campaign to an end, although Stephan Shroek did make history by scoring their maiden AFC Asian Cup goal.

While the two sides began the match on the same number of points, Kyrgyz Republic immediately assumed the role of aggressors, keeping the Azkals pinned in their own half and creating a string of scoring chances.

Lux was on the end of two early near-misses, and it was the Germany-based forward who gave the Central Asians the lead their dominance had merited in the 24th minute.

The goal - a sweetly struck side foot effort that flew into the highest reaches of

the top corner following Akhmidin Israilov's low, hard cross - was one to savor, and the first for Lux in national team colors since the Akshumkar beat Myanmar to seal qualification for the Finals.

With Edgar Bernhardt an imperious presence in the Kyrgyz Republic midfield, chances to continued to flow, and Philippines goalkeeper Michael Falkegaard's regular interventions were a crucial factor in the tally remaining at one.

Bernhardt-inspired moves saw Israilov fire narrowly over the crossbar, and Lux hit the upright, but despite a tally of 15 shots at goal to their opponents' two, Kyrgyz Republic were unable to add to their lead before the half-time whistle.

The Philippines emerged after the break with their Round of 16 hopes hanging by a thread, and they began to evaporate when Lux buried a wonderful second, turning on a dime and firing the ball into the top corner from Bekzhan Sagynbaev's pass in the 51st minute.

With time rapidly running out for an unlikely Philippines recovery, Javier Patiño forced goalkeeper Kutman Kadyrbekov into an excellent low save, and head coach Sven-Göran Eriksson introduced Phil and James Youngusband into the fray.

(Source: the-afc)

South Korea beat China to win Group C



Son Heung-min made his first and much-awaited AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 appearance on Wednesday as Korea Republic beat China PR 2-0 to make it three wins from three and claim top spot in Group C.

With both teams already through to the competition's knockout phase, Son, who arrived in the Emirates earlier this week after being released by Tottenham Hotspur, captained the two-time champions of Asia as goals from Hwang Ui-jo and Kim Min-Jae saw the Taeguk Warriors set up a Round of 16 meeting against one of the best third-placed finishers from either group A, B or F in Dubai next Tuesday.

After succumbing to their first defeat of the tournament, Marcello Lippi's Chinese side finished second in the group and will now face Thailand in Al Ain on Sunday.

The match started at a frenetic pace, with China goalkeeper Yan Junling reacting smartly to deny Hwang Ui-jo in quick succession and Kim Min-jae heading Son's corner narrowly wide on eight minutes.

A mere five minutes later, Korea Republic were ahead, the influential Son weaving his way into the Chinese penalty area before being brought down by Shi Ke's outstretched leg. Hwang Ui-jo duly dispatched the spot-kick with aplomb to

hand his side an early lead.

China could - and very possibly should - have drawn level in the 19th minute when Jin Jingdao latched onto Zhao Xuri's raking pass but proceeded to sky his shot over the bar with only Kim Seung-gyu to beat.

Shortly after that, Hwang Hee-chan's drilled effort then forced Yan into another fine stop, and in the final noteworthy moment of an absorbing first-half contest, Hwang Ui-jo hit an upright with a wonderful curling effort as Korea Republic's dominance showed no sign of abating.

Within six minutes of the restart, the Koreans had a second, Kim Min-Jae this time finding the target with a bullet header from another pinpoint Son corner. Shortly before the hour mark, Jung Woo-young headed Son's free-kick only just over the bar and then, at the other end, Wu Xi flashed a shot off target when well-placed.

As Son continued to shine until his late substitution, another of his corners resulted in Hwang Hee-chan sending a header agonizingly wide of Yan's far post to leave the score unchanged and both sides reflecting on their contrasting fortunes ahead of the next round.

(Source: Fox Sports Asia)

Mabil: Defeat to Jordan sparked Australia's resurgence

Awer Mabil admitted Australia's opening loss against Jordan at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 shook the defending champions into action and inspired Graham Arnold's side to secure a place in the knockout rounds with subsequent back-to-back victories.

Australia notched up a second win in a row on Tuesday with a 3-2 victory over Syria that took them into the Round of 16 following an earlier victory over Palestine as the Socceroos claimed second place in Group B.

The win over the Syrians in an incident-packed game was sparked by Mabil's second goal of the tournament and the FC Midtjylland striker said the challenges of a demanding group gave the Australians a jolt ahead of their progress to the next phase of the competition.

"It's prepared us very well," he said of the rigors of the group stages. "The first game gave us a reality check and we needed to get things right and we've done that in last two games and we just need to continue that for the do-or-die games. There's a lot to give and it's very exciting.

"I think the first game, the first 20 minutes especially when they scored first, they just defended for their lives and that made it difficult. We realized we needed to change



something and we did that in the last game and we continued today and we're going to continue that in the next game and continue that momentum."

Mabil put the Australians in front against Syria with a sumptuous curling strike from outside the area before Omar Khrbin levelled. Chris Ikonmidis put Australia back in front, only for Omar Al Soma to score with a penalty. But

Team spirit driving Qatar's success

Qatar's strength as a team is why Felix Sanchez's side have been turning heads in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019.

The West Asians showed great mental strength to overcome a stiff challenge from Lebanon to prevail 2-0 on Matchday One, following that up with a 6-0 win over DPR Korea to leave them needing just a point against Saudi Arabia in their final Group E match on Thursday to seal top spot.

Two players who have particularly caught the eye are forwards Almoez Ali and Akram Afif but goalkeeper Saad Al Sheeb, in acknowledging the contributions of the two, said a collective effort is driving Qatar's success.

"Almoez and Akram are very good players and with the help of the other players, have helped Qatar progress. We are one team - whether the 11 players who start, those on the bench and the coaching staff," said the

Al Sadd player.

Ali has five goals to his name - with four of them coming in the win over DPR Korea - while Afif, although having yet to find the net, has been a pivotal player in Qatar's UAE 2019 campaign.

"Our strength, as I said, lies in our team spirit. The coach (Felix Sanchez) has prepared us well, whether in attack or defense." "Our spirit is high as we really want to do well in the Asian Cup. We have worked very

hard and will continue doing so as we want to progress as far as we can in the competition."

Al Sheeb said Qatar are looking forward to playing Saudi Arabia, which he said would be a tough test. "When we came here, it was with the plan of taking it one game at a time. After two wins, our confidence has been boosted. We will prepare well for the match and our aim is to get the three points."

(Source: Four Four Two)

Iranian forward Shahab Zahedi joins Suwon Bluewings

S P O R T S TEHRAN — South Korean football club Suwon Samsung Bluewings have completed the signing of Iranian striker Shahab Zahedi.

The 24-year-old striker has joined the Korean giants from Icelandic IBV.

The details of the contract have not been revealed. Zahedi plays in forward position but can play as a winger as well. Zahedi is a member of the Persepolis Youth Academy and started his football with the Iranian popular football team in 2014.

The 187cm fast-paced striker joined IBV in 2017 as the first Iranian player who plays in Iceland.

Zahedi is also the first ever Iranian player who is going to play at Suwon Samsung Bluewings.

Suwon Samsung Bluewings has advanced to the AFC Champions League quarter-finals for the past eight years.

Iran's Amir Sarkhosh wins gold at 6 Red World Cup

S P O R T S TEHRAN — Iran's Amir Sarkhosh marvelous run in the 2019 IBSF 6 Red World Cup in Doha, Qatar ended with a gold medal.

Sarkhosh defeated Thailand's Thanawat Tirapongpaiboon 7-6 in the final match.

The bronze medal went to Michael Judge from Republic of Ireland.

Sarkhosh had defeated Qatari Bashar Abdulmajeed 6-0, Thailand's Passakorn Suwannawat 6-4 and Pakistani Mohammad Bilal 6-2 on his way to the final.

The first edition of 6 Red World Cup 2019 was held in Doha, Qatar. The 6 Red World Championship is a six-red snooker tournament, played with the six color balls and six reds.

Peyman Babaei joins Azerbaijan's Sumgayit

TASNIM — Iranian forward Peyman Babaei has joined Azerbaijan Premier League football team Sumgayit.

The Machine Sazi forward has signed a two-year loan contract with the Azerbaijani football team.

Sumgayit president Riad Rafiye and Machine Sazi general manager Hooshang Nasirzadeh reached an agreement for the transfer in Istanbul, Turkey on Tuesday.

Babaei started his football career in Tractor Sazi in 2014 and has also played in Tabriz-based football team Gostaresh Foolad. Babaei was also a target to join Tractor Sazi football team.

Iran's Mosadeghpour wins silver at Delhi International Chess Grandmaster

IRNA — GM Masoud Mosadeghpour from Iran claimed a silver medal at the 17th Delhi International Chess Grandmaster Open in Delhi, India on Wednesday.

The Iranian chess player with a rating performance of 2517 came second with eight points behind Indian Erigaisi Arjun.

Ehsan Ghaem Maghami also took part in the competition and finished in eighth place with 7.5 points.

The 17th Delhi International Chess Grandmaster Open was conducted as per FIDE Laws of Chess and FIDE Swiss System with 10 rounds.

IBSF ban Alexander Zubkov for two years

The International Bobsleigh and Skeleton Federation (IBSF) has banned Alexander Zubkov and three other Russian sliders for two years.

Russian Bobsleigh Federation (RBF) President Zubkov has been hit with the sanction alongside Alexander Kasjanov, Aleksei Pushkarev and Ilvir Khuzin.

They had all been serving provisional suspensions after being accused of anti-doping violations at Russia's home Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics, where the country was found to have run a campaign of sample swapping and cheating.

Zubkov won both two-man and four-man gold medals in Sochi while the remaining trio competed together in Russia's second four-man team, coming fourth.

In a sanction separate to the IBSF proceedings, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) has already ruled that Zubkov is obliged to return his medals after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) found him guilty of knowingly participating in the "systematic manipulation" of the anti-doping system.

The case against him is said to be one of the strongest as his sample included "physiologically impossible levels of salt". CAS also ruled that he had provided clean urine before Sochi - a key barometer in establishing guilt of the individual athletes involved.

This stance has now been accepted by the IBSF Disciplinary Panel which had access to CAS reasoned decisions on all four athletes.

All four sliders have been found guilty of using a prohibited substance and the use of a prohibited method - namely urine substitution.

As well as being barred from competition, their bans also cover work as an official, director, officer, employee or volunteer at a National Organization.

This means that the retired Zubkov, Russia's Sochi 2014 flagbearer, should not be allowed to continue as RBF President.

However, he has so far acted defiantly and said he will only return his medals if the IOC ask him personally.

In another twist, a court in Moscow refused to recognise the CAS ruling against Zubkov, saying it should not apply on Russian territory.

All four athletes have also had results and prize money expunged. They have the option to appeal the bans at CAS.

(Source: Insidethegames)

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GUIDE TO
SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

The world is a road for going to the next one, and if it had been created for itself, man would have lived eternally in it.

Imam Ali (AS)

Iranian docs line up for Big Sky festival

A R T TEHRAN — Five Iranian films will go on screen at the 16th edition of the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, which will be held in the U.S. city of Missoula, Montana from February 15 to 24.



"Finding Farideh" co-directed by Azadeh Musavi and Kurosh Atai.

"Aleppo: The Silence of the War" by Amir Osanlu, "Beloved" by Yasser Talebi and "Lotus" by Mohammadreza Vatandust are among the films.

"Skipper Soleiman" by Saadat-Ali Saaidpur and "Finding Farideh" co-directed by Azadeh Musavi and Kurosh Atai will also compete in the festival.

Five cineastes to receive Fajr lifetime achievement awards

A R T TEHRAN — The organizers of the 37th Fajr Film Festival will honor five Iranian cineastes, including prominent actress Fatemeh Motamed-Arya and filmmaker Azizollah Hamidnejad, with lifetime achievement awards.



This combination photo shows five Iranian cineastes who will be honored with lifetime achievement awards during the 37th Fajr Film Festival.

Motamed-Arya is famous for her roles in acclaimed movies such as "The Blue-Veiled" and "Gilaneh" while Hamidnejad directed the award-winning films "Hoor on Fire" and "Tears of Cold".

The award will also be presented to veteran graphic designer Ebrahim Haqiqi who has created posters for the Fajr festival and numerous films in his homeland.

Voice actor Khosro Khosroshahi and film editor Abbas Ganjavi are the other honorees.

The 37th Fajr Film Festival will take place in Tehran and several other Iranian cities from January 30 to February 11.

Spike Lee joins The Killers for protest video over Trump's planned wall

LONDON (Reuters) — Rockers The Killers have teamed up with film director Spike Lee to make the music video for their latest song, "Land Of The Free", a protest against President Donald Trump's planned wall on the U.S.-Mexican border.

The "Do the Right Thing" and "Malcolm X" director was given full creative rein to make the video for the track, which the Las Vegas band describes as "a heartfelt lament inspired by current events and recent national tragedies in the United States".

Lee filmed the video at the end of 2018 around the border, capturing scenes of migrant families as they headed towards "the land of the free", the group said.

It shows migrants of all ages making the journey and at times facing off with security forces.

Lee, who last week was nominated at Britain's BAFTA awards for his movie "BlackKkklansman", has previously worked on other music videos, including Michael Jackson's hit "They Don't Care About Us".

Trump is seeking \$5.7 billion from Congress to build a security wall on the southwest U.S. border, a demand Democrats have rejected. The stand-off has led to the longest partial government shutdown in U.S. history.

Hossein Moheb Ahari, actor of "T for Tickle", dies at 67

I → In an article published at that time, Hashemi wrote, "He brings fervor and happiness when he arrives on the shooting location. He continuously rehearses in order to do his best acting, but the cursed illness has made him a bit tired and he doesn't smile as much anymore."

"The illness should feel ashamed," he added.

In an interview published in July 2018, Moheb Ahari said, "I still hope that I will defeat the illness... I try not to be concerned about it."

Moheb Ahari's was playing a role in director Kianush Ayyari's TV series "87 Meters", which remains unfinished due to his death.

"I'm really happy that I was given the opportunity to play a role in this series," he said in a video recorded on January 1.

"Collaborating with Mr. Ayyari was one of my wishes and I feel like flying," he exulted.

Born in Tehran, Moheb Ahari studied Persian literature at the Faculty of Persian Language and Foreign Languages. In 1974, he also attended acting courses held by director

Arbi Avanesian and acted in many plays and movies.

He was catapulted to fame in 1982 with "Boro Bia Alley", a children's TV series directed by Dariush Moaddebian.

He made his acting debut in cinema four years later in "The Relationship" by Puran Derakhshandeh. He also collaborated in about 30 movies, including "Off Limits" by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and "When We Are All Asleep" by Bahram Beizai.

His credits in TV productions include dozens of series such as "Mokhtarnameh" by Davud Mirbaqeri, "Paytakht 2" by Sirus Moqaddam and "Sarbedaran" by Mohammad-Ali Najafi.

In addition, his portrayal of an exacting teacher who continuously clashes with the class monitor in the children's TV series "T for Tickle" that he directed in 1987 was warmly received by people. As a result, he made a sequel to it in 1990.

In 2003, Beizai chose him to play a role in his play "The Tragedy of Professor Makan



Actor Hossein Moheb Ahari in an undated photo.

and His Wife, Rokhshid Farzin: A Passion Play", which was performed at the main hall of Tehran's City Theater Complex.

In a statement published on Wednesday, Iran's Stage Actors Guild wrote, "Farewell, oh grand patient! Farewell, oh smiling forest!"

Tehran gallery to showcase actor Hamid Jebelli's photos of Masuleh



A poster for Hamid Jebelli's Masuleh 88 exhibition.

A R T TEHRAN — Veteran actor Hamid Jebelli plans to display a collection of photos he has taken from Masuleh, a popular resort in northern Iran, in an exhibition at Tehran's Atbin Gallery.

The actor-cum-director, who is famous for his pleasant acting roles in various films, took the photos while he was acting on location in Masuleh for director Nasser Taqvai's 1988 film "Oh Iran".

"I was in Masuleh to act in the film but the changes of the season and the climate made us stay in the region for one year. I sometimes did the film photography and took photos of the village since I was always carrying my camera with me," he said in a press release published by Atbin on Wednesday.

"The collection including 70 photos has been published in a book named 'Masuleh 88' and a selection of 30 will go on view in the gallery opening on Friday," he added.

Jebelli displayed a collection of his paintings for the first time at Atbin Gallery last year.

The London branch of CAMA — Contemporary and Modern Art Gallery, also hosted an exhibition of photos by a number of prestigious Iranian filmmakers during September 2018, in which photos by Jebelli were exhibited.

Jebelli is also an old hand at the photography of theaters.

The exhibit will be running until January 29 at the gallery located at 42 Khakzad Alley, Vali-e Asr Ave near the Parkway Intersection.

"Sheeple" named best at Iranian Film Festival New York



Farhad Aslani (L) and Navid Mohammadzadeh act in a scene from "Sheeple" directed by Hooman Seyyedi.

A R T TEHRAN — Iranian director Hooman Seyyedi's acclaimed movie "Sheeple" won the best film award at the 1st Iranian Film Festival New York on Tuesday.

The film is about Shahin, a loud-mouthed fellow adopted years ago, who tries to establish his authority in a family run by the iron hand of his drug lord brother.

Asghar Yusefinejad's debut film "The Home" received the Best Artistic or Technical Achievement Award.

The movie tells the story of Sayeh, who has broken off relations with her family after marriage. Her father dies and she returns home to attend his funeral, but in his last will and testament, he has asked that his remains be donated to an academic center for autopsy.

However, Sayeh is diametrically opposed to the idea.

Abbas Amini's award-winning film "Hendi and Hormoz", about an arranged marriage, won the special jury award.

The story of the film is set on the hematite-rich island of Hormoz where Hendi, a 13-year-old girl, is married off to Hormoz, a 16-year-old who is jobless and lives in poverty like most of the rest of the island's inhabitants. When Hendi becomes pregnant, Hormoz turns to a drug smuggler in an effort to ensure his family's livelihood. Iranian veteran director Bahman Farmanara received the audience award for his latest movie "I Want to Dance".

Fourteen Iranian feature, documentary and short films went on screen during the festival, which was organized by Daricheh Cinema, an Iranian film distribution company, and IFC Center, a movie theater in New York City.

Top experts must verify authenticity of artworks for auctions: Aidin Aghdashlu

A R T TEHRAN — Iranian painter and art critic Aidin Aghdashlu has said that a team of top experts must check the authenticity of artworks before they go on sale at auctions.

"Fakes and forgeries do exist in the art world. For example, I wrote an article about a Christie's sale, in which 20 fake works were offered," Aghdashlu told the Persian service of ISNA published on Wednesday.

Pointing to the Tehran Auction, Aghdashlu said that the auction enjoys a world standard.

"Therefore, if there is some criticism about world auctions, the Tehran Auction is no exception," he added.

"In a country like America, about 450 auctions are held and in England about 200, while in our country there is only one auction and this is not enough. Additional art auctions

need to be established in the country to develop greater competition," he noted.

The art critic further noted that artworks vary in price and quality everywhere in the world like Sotheby's and Christie's, which means art auctions are different from art exhibitions and biennials.

"The Tehran Auction enjoys a world standard considering its performance, its artworks and its catalogues, what I believe needs to be done is that the artists, experts and journalists must provide the public with more information about art auctions and how they are being run," he asserted.

The 10th edition of the Tehran Auction was held on Friday, in which an untitled mirror mosaic by Monir Farmanfarman was the most expensive works having fetched 40 billion rials (over \$950,000).



Aidin Aghdashlu in an undated photo. (ISNA/Erfan Khoshkhu)

Carol Channing, Broadway's iconic "Dolly," dead at 97

RANCHO MIRAGE (Reuters) — Carol Channing, who won over audiences with her giddy, guileless charm in signature roles in Broadway's "Hello, Dolly!" and "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," died in her California home on Tuesday at the age of 97, according to her publicist.

Channing died of natural causes in Rancho Mirage after having suffered multiple strokes last year, publicist Harlan Boll said.

In a career that spanned seven decades, the saucer-eyed, raspy-voiced musical-comedy star never shook her association with the role of matchmaker Dolly Levi in the 1964 musical "Hello Dolly!" or gold digger Lorelei Lee in Anita Loos' "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes."

Still, Channing embraced being identified with Lorelei, as well as Dolly, a role that won

her a Tony Award.

"Audiences expect and demand I sing these songs," she once told a reporter of her signature tunes, "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" and "Hello Dolly." "I'm lucky to be so closely associated with both 'Diamonds' and 'Dolly.' ... I'm luckier than most - I have two identity songs."

Channing played each role for years on Broadway and on tours around the world, taking the stage as Dolly more than 3,000 times. As recently as 1996, at age 75, she returned to Broadway following a national and world tour of "Dolly."

"One of Broadway's greatest lights, Carol Channing, has passed on," wrote "Star Trek" actor George Takei on Twitter. "She rejoins the heavens as a new diamond in the night sky, and

as she famously sang, they are a girl's best friend."

Channing was born in Seattle on Jan. 31, 1921, and got her first taste of the theatrical life as a small child at public speaking engagements of her father, a journalist.

After a brief time at Bennington College, Channing had small parts in "No, No, Nanette" and a Broadway failure called "I'm Simply Fraught About You," and also did a small revue.

She worked at resorts in the Catskill Mountains in New York and at Macy's department store before landing the role of the fortune-hunting Lorelei Lee in the 1949 musical "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." She was an unlikely choice for the role. "Everybody was saying, 'She's not 5-foot-2, eyes of blue. She's over 6 feet tall and has muddy brown eyes,'" Channing said. "But Anita (Loos)

stuck to it."

In 1964, Channing found a role equal to Lorelei Lee in Jerry Herman's "Hello Dolly," which became a Broadway classic.

She saw both of her signature stage roles go to younger Hollywood actresses when film versions of the plays were made. Marilyn Monroe played Lorelei Lee and Barbara Streisand had the title role in the 1969 film "Hello Dolly," a colossal flop often blamed for ending the classic era of Hollywood musicals.

Channing won an Emmy and several nominations for television variety specials but her film career was sporadic at best, although she received an Oscar nomination and a Golden Globe for her part in the Julie Andrews musical "Thoroughly Modern Millie" in 1967.