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Iraqi, Iranian chief diplomats hold talks

TEHRAN — The foreign ministers of Iran and Iraq had a phone conversation on Saturday, during which they discussed issues of mutual interest as well as the latest regional and international developments. During the conversation, Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohammed Ali al-Hakim underlined the need for expansion of co-operation between the two countries in all

areas, IRNA reported, citing a statement by Iraq's Foreign Ministry. The statement said that both Hakim and his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Javad Zarif, expressed their willingness to boost bilateral relations. It came ahead of a visit to Baghdad by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on March 11 along with a large economic delegation. **→2**

A day of pilgrimage to Shah-e Cheragh

TEHRAN — Shah-e Cheragh ("King of Light") is a major mausoleum and pilgrimage site in the touristic city of Shiraz, southern Iran. The dazzling shrine of mirrored tiles is where Sayyed Mir Ahmad, one of brothers of Imam Reza (AS), is laid to rest. Each day, it draws hundreds of the faithful

from all over the country or even abroad. The mausoleum boasts architectural elements and motifs from various centuries and its courtyard and tilework represent relatively modern embellishments from the late-Qajar period. Its blue-tiled dome is flanked by dazzling gold-tipped minarets. **→10**

Intl. rights groups denounce Riyadh's decision to try jailed women activists

International human rights groups have censured the House of Saud regime over its decision to put on trial women's rights activists detained in last year's crackdown, after holding them for nearly a year without charge. The state-run Saudi Press Agency (SPA) said on Friday that the ultra-conservative kingdom's public prosecutor was preparing the trials of the detainees as it had concluded its investigation. The prosecution office, however, did

not specify the charges nor gave a date for the court proceedings. More than a dozen activists were arrested last May, and held on suspicion of harming the country's interests and offering support to hostile elements abroad. At the time, international rights groups reported the detention of prominent female activists among the detainees, who had previously campaigned for the right to drive and an end to the kingdom's male guardianship system. **→13**

Assad's visit to Tehran sign of unwavering Syrian-Iran ties: expert

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
By Payman Yazdani

TEHRAN — Touching upon Iran's important role in Syrian victory over Washington's destructive proxy war, Anthony Cartalucci says Bashar Assad's visit to Tehran is a sign of unwavering Syrian-Iran ties.

Syrian President Assad made an unannounced visit to Iran on Monday. He met with Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani to discuss the planned

U.S. troop withdrawal from his country and efforts to set up a buffer zone in northern Syria. Assad's visit to Tehran was one of his rare trips to abroad since the crisis broke out in the country in 2011.

His visit to Tehran had a clear message. To know more about the issue we discussed President Assad's visit to Iran with Bangkok-based geopolitical researcher Anthony Cartalucci.

Here is full text of his interview with Tehran Times:

■ What is the message of his visit to Iran?

A: Syrian President Bashar Al Assad's visit to Iran - the first visit anywhere except for Russia since the war began in 2011 - is highly significant. It is a sign of unwavering Syrian-Iranian ties. It is also a very public message about the central role Iran has played in what is essentially a Syrian victory over Washington's destructive 8 year proxy war. It says that Iran is a regional player - that it played a role in defeating terrorist organizations including Al Nusra and the self-proclaimed Islamic State in ways the nearly 20 year U.S.-led "War on Terror" has categorically failed to do. **→7**

The effects of U.S. oil sanctions on Venezuela

By Heshmatollah Rahnama

TEHRAN — Progressively, the sanctions against the Venezuelan government produce an expansive wave that affects the interests of the United States and its foreign policy, despite the reassuring projections that the Energy Information Administration (EIA) of that country has communicated to reduce concerns about the global impact of the freezing of Venezuelan assets on US soil by the Treasury Department.

On Monday, January 28th, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announced coercive measures against the main Venezuelan companies operating in the United States, accusing them of "helping prevent Maduro from continuing to divert Venezuela's assets and preserve these assets. for the Venezuelan people The executive order places the institutions of the entity, including the Central Bank of Venezuela (BCV) and PDVSA as the target of sanctions.

In addition to blocking \$ 7 billion worth of assets, the ban on US and allied companies to negotiate with PDVSA would result in a loss of \$ 11 billion additional, no more for exports.

In an analysis published by the EIA, it is denied that sanctions against PDVSA will have significant consequences on the operation of U.S. refineries. Apparently, the oil companies that supplied Venezuelan oil were reducing their imports by providing for this scenario. **→7**

In Doha talks, Taliban call for withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan

By Syed Zafar Mehdi

TEHRAN — Hectic negotiations are underway between a delegation of the Afghan Taliban and U.S. officials in Doha to hammer out a solution to the protracted Afghan war.

While the U.S. team is led by special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, the Taliban delegation is headed by Qatar bureau chief Sher Abbas Stanikzai. Taliban deputy chief Mullah Baradar is also participating in the talks.

The two sides have held several rounds of negotiations in Qatar, UAE and Pakistan over the past many months even with no let-up in violence across the country.

According to sources, there are many points of disagreement between the two sides at this stage, particularly on the issue of the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from the war-ravaged country.

A senior member of the group was quoting

saying in media that they expect the ongoing negotiations to lead to the drawdown of all foreign forces from Afghanistan, allowing Afghans to peacefully negotiate an end to years of hostilities.

After two days of intense deliberations starting Tuesday, the two sides took two-day break and resumed talks on Saturday. The pause was meant to conduct 'internal deliberations' and seek opinion of their respective leaderships, said reports. **→6**



PERSPECTIVE

Hanif Ghaffari
Political analyst

John Bolton must confess to his failure

The U.S. National Security Advisor is having difficult days. John Bolton has not been able to achieve his goals toward the Islamic Republic of Iran. Many American analysts say the National Security Advisor to the Trump government has become the symbol of the White House's failure in the international system. Of course, this is not the first time John Bolton has become the symbol of Washington's failure in the world!

Bolton was one of the influential officials in the country since the start of the war in Iraq in 2003, by the George Walker Bush administration until 2008 (when the neocons in the United States were at the head of the political and executive equations of the country). Bolton and his entourage have repeatedly become the symbol of the failure of the United States in the West Asia region.

However, Bolton's defeat in the United States is now far broader! John Bolton, the U.S. National Security Advisor, continues his anti-Iranian negotiations in various fields. In recent months, he has been busy discussing the presence of Iran in Syria and, on the other hand, engaging in negotiations with other countries over Iran's sanctions. But the existing evidences suggest that the U.S. National Security Advisor is not going to succeed in this regard.

Bolton's remarks comes at a time when China, India and Turkey are refusing to comply with U.S. secondary sanctions against Iran. Under such circumstances, even Trump's close friends (some of whom are opposed to the presence of Bolton at the White House) and many traditional Republicans doubt Bolton's success in confronting Iran. It's to be noted here that John Bolton was the main advocate of George W. Bush invasion to Iraq in 2003.

However, after a while it became clear that he and the other conservatives had stuck Washington in a terrible mire. By the end of the Bush presidency, Bolton has become the symbol of the defeat of the U.S. President both inside and outside the country. Such a fate is already expected for Trump and Bolton. Many international affairs analysts believe that John Bolton, the current national security adviser in the United States, will soon become a symbol of the failure of the Trump government. **→13**



ARTICLE

Syed Zafar Mehdi
Journalist
from New Delhi

Khan outmaneuvers Modi with his statesmanship

It appears that better sense has prevailed between the two warring South Asian neighbors - India and Pakistan - with military belligerence coming to a halt, at least for now.

Over the past one week, war hysteria and saber-rattling had assumed alarming proportions in the region with both sides conducting 'surgical strikes', putting millions of lives at risk.

It all started on Tuesday morning when India said its military had conducted 'surgical strikes' in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, claiming to have killed more than 300 militants and dismantling their sanctuaries.

Pakistan debunked the claim, saying Indian aircrafts ventured into the Pakistani territory only to beat hasty retreat, dropping payload in Balakot area of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

Media reports and eye-witness accounts later confirmed that Indian bombings had not damaged any buildings or killed any militants, rather had destroyed trees in the area with forest cover.

Early Wednesday morning, Pakistan reportedly launched air raids in Indian-controlled Kashmir, downed two Indian aircrafts and captured one Indian pilot. The aircrafts had ventured into the Pakistani territory and had caught fire, but one of them managed to head back to the Indian side.

Soon videos of Wing Commander Abhinandan being captured and dragged by an angry mob in Pakistan's border region were circulated over social media. Later his interview in Pakistani army custody was shared widely, in which he praised the treatment given to him by the Pakistani army.

The videos created sensation in Indian media circles with people calling for his release. Many hashtags appeared on Twitter and Facebook and suddenly the reality of war and its unsavory implications dawned on those who were vigorously cheering for a no-holds-barred war.

As per Geneva Convention 1949, Pakistani government was supposed to return him to India once the hostilities were over. But the country's premier, who had earlier extended an olive branch to his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi, made a surprise announcement during his address inside Pakistani parliament on Thursday. **→6**



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Funeral held for comedy writer Kashayar Alvand

Mourners attend Salat al-Janazah, the Islamic funeral prayer, held for screenwriter Kashayar Alvand in the courtyard of the Iranian House of Cinema in Tehran on March 2, 2019.

Alvand who was mostly known for popular comedy series such as "Noqtachin", "Barareh Nights" and "Paytakht" died of a heart attack last Thursday. He was 51.

MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS



UN chief, Zarif deliberate about major developments

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres had a telephone conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Saturday.

Guterres and Zarif discussed the major regional and international developments, Tasnim reported.

In September 2018, President Hassan Rouhani held a meeting with Guterres on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

In the gathering, Rouhani urged the UN to do its duty to fully uphold international law in such a way that no country could arbitrarily violate international regulations and UN Security Council resolutions.

He also voiced Iran's readiness to work with the UN on regional and international issues and help settle conflicts in Syria and Yemen.



Tehran felicitates Senegal, Nigeria on successful polls

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi on Friday offered congratulations to Senegal and Nigeria on holding presidential elections successfully.

Qassemi wished success for Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria and Macky Sall of Senegal who managed to be re-elected as the presidents of their respective countries after securing the majority of the votes, the Foreign Ministry website reported.

He also expressed the hope that Tehran's ties with Abuja and Dakar would develop in light of the results of the recent elections in the two West African states.



'Some Arab states fund Daesh transfer to Afghanistan'

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Deputy Chief of the Khatam-al-Anbiya Central Headquarters said on Saturday that certain "foolish heads" of Arab countries in the region have been financing the transfer of Daesh terrorists to Afghanistan by the United States.

"Such measures are some sort of struggling so that they can achieve some of their goals, but they will never be realized," Brigadier General Ali Shadman said, emphasizing that the Islamic Republic regards Daesh and its overlords defeated.

Shadman said the enemy tries to follow the same plot it hatched in Iraq and Syria, which will be to the detriment of China, Russia and all regional countries, Tasnim reported on Saturday.



Voters' demands not met yet: Tehran city council chairman

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Mohsen Hashemi, chairman of the Tehran city council, says the demands of those who voted in the 2017 city council elections have not been met yet.

"In the 1396 (2017) elections, people had a record turnout and the number of the votes were three times more than the previous elections, but the people's demands have not been met yet," Hashemi said in an interview with Mehr published on Saturday.

He also said he has no plans to run for president in the 2021 presidential elections.

"Basically, I do not think about the presidential elections," Hashemi stated.



Tehran slams UN rapporteur

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Tehran has criticized Javid Rehmam, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, for his propaganda against the Islamic Republic, stressing that designation of a special rapporteur for the country is not justified.

In a statement on Saturday, Iran's Human Rights Office lashed out at Rehmam for his "hostility, propaganda and lies" against Iran in interviews with different media, including the BBC, stressing that he should only report to the UN and is not allowed to be involved in media and propaganda issues, Fars reported.

It added that Rehmam's behavior indicates that designation of a special rapporteur for Iran "only shows the double-standards and political deception of the UN Human Rights Council".



Pakistan calls for Iran mediation to resolve conflict with India

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Pakistan's embassy in Tehran has called on the Iranian government to play an active role in resolving Islamabad's tension with New Delhi and help find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

"Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in Tehran would like to urge the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran to play an active role in de-escalating tensions and promoting a peaceful resolution of the issue," according to a statement from the embassy released on Friday.

Decision on Palermo postponed to next calendar year

Rezaee says Expediency Council's decision on Palermo is dependent on FATF and Europe's conduct

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — A member of the Expediency Council said on Saturday that the fate of the bill on UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, also known as Palermo Convention, was not decided during the council's meeting which was held earlier in the day.

Gholamreza Mesbahi-Moghadam said making a decision on the issue will be postponed till the next Iranian calendar year, which will start on March 21, Mehr reported.

He added that the council members thoroughly discussed the content of the bill and finally voted to postpone the decision-making.

Abbas-Ali Kadhodaei, spokesman for the Guardian Council, also pointed to the CFT and Palermo bills, saying no one is afraid of holding a referendum on the bills.

Government officials, including Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, have said there is no guarantee that the economic situation would get better if Iran joins the FATF problems will increase if Iran fails to ratify it.

The ratification of the CFT (the convention against the financing of terrorism), and Palermo, which are prerequisites to join the FATF, has faced stiff opposition by some Expediency Council members. The opponents, who hold the majority in the council, argue that many ambiguities surround the CFT.

The opposition to the CFT is so strong that some political activists, who favor joining the FATF, have proposed a referendum on the bill.



But, Kadhodaei said, "Until the legal authorities have not fulfilled their duties, holding a referendum is not appropriate because currently the Expediency Council is still examining the bills."

"Regarding Palermo, the issues found in its content by the Guardian Council were fixed but the issues raised by the [council's] Supervisory Board still persist and according to the constitution, we submitted those issues as the council's," he said, adding, "Therefore,

those issues, after the Majlis and the council disagreed on them, were sent to the Expediency Council and are being examined there."

"Also regarding the CFT, the problems we raised have not been fixed and are on the agenda of the Expediency Council," Kadhodaei explained.

Majid Ansari, a member of the Expediency Council who was vice president for legal affairs in President Rouhani's first administration, is of the proponents of holding referendum on the FATF.

Tehran calls Britain's move against Hezbollah 'irresponsible'

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iran on Sunday strongly condemned Britain for listing Lebanon's Hezbollah resistance movement as a terrorist organization, calling London's move "wrong and irresponsible".

Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said the British government's move comes at a time when Hezbollah has a very large social and popular base in Lebanon.

"Like other parties in the country, Hezbollah has an active and constructive presence in the elections and official activities of the Lebanese government, including municipal elections and trade unions elections," Qassemi explained, the Foreign Ministry website reported.

Qassemi said Hezbollah currently not only has several seats in the parliament, but also is part of the Lebanese cabinet and has been backed up by a large group of the Lebanese and regional people thanks to its brilliant history of defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon against the Zionist regime's occupation and aggressions.

"In order to understand the facts, we advise the British government to check the number of Hezbollah's votes in the

recent parliamentary elections and other elections," Qassemi remarked.

"Hezbollah itself has been a victim of Takfiri and Zionist terrorism. In addition to the positive and effective role it played in preserving the territorial integrity of Lebanon in the past decade, it has been one of the pillars and main elements of the fight against terrorism and terrorist groups like Daesh (ISIS) and their defeat in the region."

The spokesman said certainly the wrong act of the British government cannot diminish this role and will not affect the will and faith of Hezbollah and its supporters to continue fighting terrorism and Zionism in the region.

Qassemi added, "The Islamic Republic of Iran considers Hezbollah a legitimate force that plays an effective and undeniable role in contributing to the political stability and security of their country."

The Foreign Ministry spokesman added, "Tehran believes that putting Hezbollah on the terrorist list is a wrong and irresponsible act that not only does not contribute to the stability and security of Lebanon, but in violation of the international law ignores a large group of people of an independent state and their real representative."

Negative elements fail to harm Tehran-Islamabad ties: Pakistan FM

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, has said despite efforts by some negative elements relations between Iran and Pakistan are growing stronger.

Talking on Dunya TV broadcast on Saturday, he said security cooperation between Iran and Pakistan continues to grow.

The chief Pakistani diplomat said his country strongly condemned the terrorist attack in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province and also felt the pain of Iranians.

A car laden with explosives hit a bus carrying members of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps in the country's far southeast on February 13, killing 27 border guards and injuring 13 others.

The suicide attack against the IRGC took place on a highway near the city of Zahedan, close to Iran's borders with Pakistan.

Following the attack, Iranian Deputy Interior Minister

Hossein Zolfaghari said the Pakistani government had not met Iran's expectations in countering terrorism.

Zolfaghari said Pakistanis have taken some actions, however they are not enough.

"We are cooperating with Iran on the issue and Iranians are fully aware of our efforts in this regard" said Qureshi.

"I had a detailed telephone discussion with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif after the attack," he noted.

In the wake of the deadly terrorist attack, the Iranian Foreign Ministry summoned Riffat Masood, the Pakistani ambassador to Tehran.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi said Iran had "explicitly conveyed" to Masoud that Tehran expects Islamabad and its military "to make a serious and decisive action" against Jaish al-Adl and its base inside Pakistan. Qassemi also said the ministry asked Pakistan

Iran once again dismisses UAE's islands sovereignty claim

POLITICS **TEHRAN** — Iran has once more rejected claims by the United Arab Emirates over the sovereignty of three of its islands in the Persian Gulf.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi, issued a statement on Saturday, said, "There is no doubt about Iran's sovereignty over the three islands (Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb), and the Emirates' claims will not leave any impact on the legal status of these islands which belong to Iran."

The Tunbs were in the dominions of the kings of Hormuz from 1330 until 1507 when they were invaded by Portugal. The Portuguese occupied the island until 1622, when they were expelled by Shah Abbas. The islands were part of various Persian Empires from 1622 to 1921, when they were occupied by the British Empire.

In his statement, Qassemi lashed out at UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan for his Saturday's claims and allegations against Iran.

The UAE foreign minister, in a recent meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Abu Dhabi, called on Iran

'Decision dependent on FATF and Europe conduct'

Also on Saturday, Mohsen Rezaee, secretary of the Expediency Council, said the council's final decision on the bills will be dependent upon the FATF and Europe's conduct and whether they act in a "constructive manner" toward Iran.

"For the next year, we have the examining of the two bills on the agenda, and in the meantime, the FATF's conduct will be noted because on the one hand it praises Iran's measures and on the other it has had some ambiguities," he remarked.

Rouhani has said failure to join the FATF is a kind of self-sanctioning.

Speaking at a gathering on Feb. 26 in Tehran, Rouhani argued for better relations with the world, especially in banking section, saying, "If we break off our relationship with the Financial Action Task Force, our banking activities in the world would face problems."

He said, "If some want to build walls around the country, it would make things harder for the government... We ask everyone, no matter their political party or faction, not to build walls around the government because this wouldn't be to the benefit of the people."

MP Mohammad Kazemi, a member of the Majlis Legal and Judicial Committee, told ISNA on Saturday that joining the FATF will rob the opportunity from the U.S. to invent excuses against Iran.

"A ratification of these bills (Palermo and the CFT) will sideline the United States," he remarked.

to stop what he called spread of chaos and sectarianism across the Middle East.

The UAE has long been a main supporter of militant groups in Syria, assisting the Saudi proxy war on Bashar al-Assad's government through major financial contributions.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said the UAE foreign minister's remarks against Iran were "incorrect and repetitive".

"The allegations raised by the Emirati official against the Islamic Republic of Iran are lies and incorrect and repetitive," he said, adding, "Some states have been used to raise such allegations to cover up the damages created by their policies in the Muslim world."

Iran also called on the Emirates to look at his behavior in Yemen.

"... I advise this Emirati official to take a look at the situation in Yemen and the humanitarian crisis in the country created by the military aggression of the Emirates and several other countries and understand the real meaning of his country's interference in other Islamic countries and the harmful humanitarian and material impacts of aggression against Yemen."

to take "immediate and necessary measures" to identify and arrest the attackers.

In his Saturday interview, Qureshi stated that there are elements which are trying to create misunderstandings between the brotherly countries of Iran and Pakistan but have failed miserably.

"Iranians are very mature people who have centuries-old civilization, they are not ignorant of Pakistan's efforts to help them," added Qureshi.

He went on to say when some Iranian border guards were abducted in the past, Pakistan took a prompt action and recovered five of them and handed over them to Iranian authorities.

"Iranians know what actions we are taking to recover the rest of captive border guards," he noted.

Qureshi reiterated his statement that Iran is Pakistan's friendly neighbor and despite all negative attempts both countries enjoy strong brotherly ties.

Iraqi, Iranian chief diplomats hold talks ahead of Rouhani visit to Baghdad

I → Iran is one of the major trading partners of Iraq. Baghdad has resisted pressure by the Trump administration to cut economic ties with Iran since Washington reintroduced sanctions against Iran last May. Iran and Iraq have agreed to trade in euros.

Relations between Iran and Iraq have increased greatly since the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003. Iran was the first country that recognized the governing system in Iraq after the Saddam fall.

Also on Friday, the Turkish ambassador to Baghdad highlighted the importance of the Iranian and Turkish presidents' visits to Iraq.

Ankara believes that the consensus among the three countries will prevent

foreign interventions in the region, so it is highly important, said Fateh Yildiz, speaking to the Iraqi Alforat Television Network.

Yildiz also said the Turkish president's visit to Baghdad will take place after city councils elections, which will be held in late March.

He predicted that Erdogan's visit to Baghdad will pertain to issues of mutual interest, including water, expansion of relations, Turkey's participation in reconstruction of Iraq, opening new consulates in the Iraqi cities of Najaf and Kirkuk, fighting terrorism and the issue of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Regarding Turkey's military presence in Bashiqa, northern Iraq, he said their presence is solely aimed at training.

Kashmir shelling resumes after release of captured Indian pilot

Indian and Pakistani soldiers again targeted each other's posts and villages along their volatile frontier in the disputed region of Kashmir, killing at least five civilians and two soldiers, and wounding several others, officials on both sides said on Saturday.

Fighting resumed overnight into dawn on Saturday, leaving two siblings and their mother dead in Indian-administered Kashmir.

The three died after a shell fired by Pakistani soldiers hit their home in Poonch region near the Line of Control (LoC) that divides the Himalayan territory of Kashmir between the two nuclear-armed rivals, police said.

The children's father was critically wounded and has been admitted to hospital.

In Pakistan-administered Kashmir, a man and a boy were killed by Indian shelling in Nakiyal, said Nasrullah Khan, a hospital official. Khan said a man was also wounded in the Tatta Pani area.

The Pakistani army said in a statement that two of its soldiers were killed in Nakiyal in an "exchange of fire while targeting Indian posts undertaking firing on civilian population".

Separately, a police official in Rawalakot, speaking to Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity, said that a man had been wounded and three homes destroyed in the Indian shelling overnight.

Also in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, government official Umar Azam said the Indian troops with heavy weapons "indiscriminately targeted border villagers" along the LoC.

Both countries' officials used the routine description for the military confrontations, saying their soldiers retaliated "befittingly" and blamed the other for "unprovoked" violation of the 2003-ceasefire accord at several sectors along the Kashmir frontier, targeting both army posts as well as villages.

Tensions have been running high since Indian aircraft crossed into Pakistan on Tuesday, carrying out what India called pre-emptive



raids on the camps of Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM/The Army of Muhammad), which claimed a suicide bombing in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed at least 40 Indian troops last month.

Rebel groups have been fighting Indian rule since 1989 and demand that Kashmir be united either under Pakistani rule or as an independent country. Anti-India sentiment runs deep in the region, and most people support the rebels' cause against Indian rule while also participating in civilian street protests against Indian control.

Pakistan retaliated to the Indian air attacks by shooting down a MiG-21 fighter jet on Wednesday and detained its pilot, who was returned to India on Friday in a "peace gesture".

Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman crossed the Wagah-Attari border at around 9:00pm local time (16:00 GMT) on Friday, hours later than expected.

A press statement by Pakistan's foreign ministry said Varthaman has been returned

to India and that he was treated "with dignity" during his custody.

Varthaman had become a national hero after purported footage that went viral showed him being beaten by locals after being shot down before Pakistani soldiers intervened.

His polite refusal to proffer more details than necessary -- "I am sorry major, I am not supposed to tell you this" - won the handlebar-moustached pilot particular sympathy in India.

His release came two days after he was captured following a rare aerial engagement between the nuclear-armed rivals over the disputed region of Kashmir, divided between the two countries since 1947.

In a tweet, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, welcomed the pilot home, saying "the nation is proud of his exemplary courage".

Before the pilot was released, Pakistani television stations broadcast a video of him, looking cleaned up and thanking the Pakistani army for treating him well.

■ Pakistanis sign petition seeking Nobel Peace Prize for Imran Khan

Elsewhere, more than 300,000 people have signed online petitions calling for Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan to receive a Nobel Peace Prize after he freed an Indian pilot in a bid to defuse tensions with his country's arch-rival neighbor.

The capture of Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman had become the focus of renewed hostilities between the nuclear-armed rivals which have alarmed the international community. Tensions have soared since a suicide bombing in Kashmir last month claimed by Pakistan-based militants killed 40 Indian paramilitaries.

The hashtag #NobelPeaceForImranKhan began trending on Twitter on Thursday after Khan unexpectedly announced that the captured pilot would be released as a "peace gesture".

Two similarly-worded campaigns on the change.org platform launched by users in Britain and Pakistan called for Imran Khan to be nominated for next year's prize "for his peace efforts and dialogues in the Asian region on diverse conflicts".

They have gained more than 240,000 and 60,000 digital signatures respectively.

Pakistan's information minister Fawad Chaudhry on Saturday also submitted a resolution in the country's parliament demanding Khan be given the award for his contribution to peace in the region.

"Imran Khan played a sagacious role in de-escalating tension between Pakistan and India," the resolution said.

In his speech announcing Abhinandan's release, Khan referred to the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war as he called for talks with New Delhi.

Thousands of people around the world are allowed to make nominations for the Peace Prize, including members of Parliament and government ministers, former laureates and some university professors.

(Source: AFP)

Russia's geopolitical rivals preparing for high-tech wars in Space: Russian Gen. Staff

Chief of the Russian General Staff and First Deputy Defense Minister, General Valery Gerasimov has stated that modern conflicts are characterized by attracting means of economic, political, diplomatic, informational pressure, as well as a demonstration of military power in the interests of enhancing the effectiveness of non-military measures.

Russia's geopolitical rivals are preparing to wage wars against a "high-tech adversary", using high-precision air- and space-based weapons and actively conducting information confrontation, General Gerasimov stated at a conference on developing a military strategy.

"Therefore, the search for rational strategies for waging war with a different adversary is of paramount importance for the development of the theory and practice of military strategy. We need to clarify the essence and content of military strategy, the principles of prevention, preparation for war and its conduct", the Chief of the General Staff noted.

He stressed that under these conditions, the Russian Armed Forces must be ready to conduct wars and armed conflicts of a new type using "classical" and "asymmetric" methods.

It is necessary to further develop the forms and methods of using the armed forces, primarily in the sphere of strategic deterrence, as well as to improve the state defense structure, he noted.

Gerasimov went on to say that the program for staffing the Russian Armed Forces with contract servicemen is proceeding as planned.

"By the end of 2025, their number will reach 475,000 troops, and the need for conscription of citizens will be reduced", he said in a speech at a general meeting of the Academy of Military Science.

Today, the officer corps of the armed forces is staffed with trained professional personnel, he said.

"All the commanders of military districts, integrated combined arms forces, air force and air defense units, as well as 96 percent of the commanders of combined-arms units and formations, have combat experience", Gerasimov recalled.

The nuclear triad, which plays a key role in maintaining strategic parity, has noticeably strengthened, he noted.

"The share of modern weapons in our nuclear component has reached 82 percent", Gerasimov said.

The complexity of modern weapons makes it almost impossible to organize their production in a short time in the event of a war, therefore everything should be produced and commissioned in the required quantity in peacetime,

the Chief of the General Staff said.

"We must, by all means, ensure technical, technological, and organizational superiority over any potential adversary", he said.

This requirement should be key in setting targets for the defense industry to develop new types of weapons, allowing enterprises to conduct long-term planning, Gerasimov said.

Gerasimov continued by saying that the U.S. and its allies have set an aggressive vector in their foreign policy, and are working on offensive military actions.

The U.S. and its allies aim to eliminate statehood in countries they dislike, which is evidenced by developments in Venezuela, he noted.

"The United States and its allies have determined the aggressive vector of their foreign policy. They are working on offensive military actions, such as global strike, a multi-sphere battle, they are using the color revolution technology and soft power. They aim to eliminate the statehood of countries they dislike, undermine sovereignty, change the legally elected bodies of state power", Gerasimov has stated.

He cited Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine as examples of such a strategy.

"At present, similar actions are being observed in Venezuela", the Chief of the General Staff noted.

It is necessary to further develop the forms and methods of how the armed forces will be used, primarily in the sphere of strategic deterrence, as well as improving the state defense structure, he added.

He further elaborated that the Pentagon has begun developing a new warfare strategy focused on actively using the protest potential of a fifth column to destabilize the situation in the targeted countries while simultaneously striking the most important strategic facilities with high-precision weapons.

"The Pentagon has begun to develop a fundamentally new strategy of warfare, which has already been dubbed the Trojan Horse. Its essence lies in the active use of the protest potential of the 'fifth column' for the destabilization of a situation while simultaneously attacking the most important facilities with high-precision weapons", Gerasimov told reporters.

Russia is ready to deal with any of the new strategies, he stressed.

"In recent years, [Russian] military scientists, together with the General Staff, have developed conceptual approaches to neutralize the aggressive actions of potential opponents", the Chief of the General Staff noted.



He stressed that the basis of Russia's response is an active defense strategy, which, given the defensive nature of Russia's military doctrine, provides for a set of pre-emptive measures to neutralize threats to the security of the state.

"The justification of the measures that are being developed should constitute the scientific activity of military scientists. This is one of the priority areas for ensuring state security. We must be ahead of the enemy in the development of military strategy, one step ahead", the Chief of the General Staff added.

The statement comes after the Venezuelan opposition on 23 February attempted to force the U.S.-sponsored aid into Venezuela through its borders with Colombia and Brazil, both of which support the opposition that sparked clashes between Venezuelan officers and pro-aid protesters. President Nicholas Maduro condemned the unauthorized aid delivery as part of Washington's attempts to intervene in Venezuela and remove him from power, saying the opposition and longtime U.S. ally Colombia had gathered special gangs of bandits at the border.

Earlier in February, the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that the United States had suspended its obligations under the INF Treaty and triggered the six-month withdrawal process unless Russia comes back into compliance with the pact. The following day, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Moscow had also suspended its participation in the treaty in response to the U.S. move.

The INF Treaty banned the U.S. and Soviet Union (later Russia) from deploying ground-launched cruise and ballistic missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,400 miles).

(Source: Sputnik)

and Russia serve Syria's interests and that Damascus would not "compromise" its ties with Tehran in any negotiation.

On Friday, Syria strongly denounced a decision by the British government to put Hezbollah on its list of terrorist organizations.

A source at the Syrian Foreign Ministry said the move confirms Britain's "deep-seated historical hostility against the Arab nation, as Britain is the godfather of fragmenting the Arab nation."

(Source: Press TV)

At least 23 Afghan security forces killed in Taliban attack

At least 23 Afghan soldiers were killed in an attack on a military base in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan, say officials.

The pre-dawn assault on Shorab military base - one of the largest military installations in the country - lasted for several hours and was claimed by the Taliban.

It was the Taliban's third attempt to overrun the base in the past 48 hours, according to officials.

"The operation is over, 23 security forces killed, 15 injured and 20 insurgents killed," Ghafoor Ahmad Jawed, a spokesman for the Ministry of Defense said.

Omar Zwak, a spokesman for the provincial governor, also confirmed the toll. The United States advise and assist mission, which works alongside Afghan troops, also operates from the base but in a separate area of the complex. The U.S. and international forces present at the base were safe as the Taliban could not breach the walls of their compound, according to security officials.

■ Repeated raids

Clashes between the Taliban and the government troops backed by foreign forces have not subsided even as the U.S. and Taliban are holding talks in Qatar to seek a negotiated solution to end Afghanistan's long war.

Afghan forces are taking heavy casualties on the battlefield. President Ashraf Ghani said in January that 45,000 members of the country's security forces have been killed since he became the leader in September 2014.

Repeated raids on Camp Shorab, a sprawling base situated on what used to be Camp Bastion, the former British airbase, and Camp Leatherneck, the old U.S. Marine Corps base in Helmand, have underlined the Taliban's ability to target critical security installations. The Taliban said its fighters were engaged in clashes with the U.S. and Afghan forces at Shorab base.

"Heavy clashes continue as tens of members of the enemy forces had been killed or were wounded," Qari Yousuf Ahmadi, a Taliban spokesman, said in a statement.

The U.S. President Donald Trump has said he plans to reduce the U.S. forces as talks with the Taliban progress.

In addition to 14,000 Americans, some 8,000 troops from 38 other countries in NATO's Resolute Support mission provide training and support for Afghan forces.

The Taliban controls large areas of Helmand. The province is a source of much of the world's illegal opium supply. During more than a decade of international intervention, it was the deadliest province for foreign troops, claiming nearly 1,000 lives. (Source: Al Jazeera)

U.S., S. Korea to replace spring exercises with smaller drills

The United States and South Korea are expected to announce that they will not carry out large-scale spring joint military exercises, replacing them with smaller-scale drills, the U.S. officials said on Friday.

The U.S. officials have long said the spring exercises, known as Foal Eagle and Key Resolve, would be reduced in scope.

However, one of the officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said a formal announcement was expected in the coming days. The official said the decision had been made for some time and was not an outcome of the latest summit between the U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The Foal Eagle field exercise, which usually involves thousands of combined ground, air, naval and special operations troops, takes place every spring. Key Resolve is a computer-simulated exercise. The news was first reported by NBC News.

The United States and South Korea have suspended a number of military exercises since the first summit last year between Kim and Trump to encourage talks with North Korea.

The leaders met this week in Hanoi for their second summit but the talks collapsed on Thursday without any agreement or immediate plan for a third meeting between them or their delegations. Speaking with reporters after the summit, Trump said military exercises were "very, very expensive".

"I was telling the generals, I said: Look, you know, exercising is fun and it's nice and they play the war games. And I'm not saying it's not necessary, because at some levels it is, but at other levels it's not," Trump said.

The Pentagon has said that another exercises that was suspended last year, known as Freedom Guardian, would have cost around \$14 million.

The U.S. military has a budget of more than \$700 billion.

(Source: Reuters)

Turkish FM: U.S. to sell Patriots to Turkey

Turkey and the United States are in talks over Washington's offer to sell a Patriot missile defense system to Ankara, Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said.

"The United States said they could sell Patriots, and the delegations are negotiating", Cavusoglu was quoted as saying by news agency Anadolu.

Cavusoglu's comments came after Bloomberg reported that Turkey had rejected a U.S. proposal to deliver a Patriot missile system by the end of the year.

During negotiations, the United States said it could deliver one system earlier, following Turkish objections to the delivery times, Cavusoglu said according to Anadolu. He added the possibility of joint production or a transfer of technology were also important for Ankara. While offering the Patriots to Turkey, the United States has warned its NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) ally against buying a Russian missile defense system, saying it cannot be integrated into NATO air defenses.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said Turkey remains committed to the deal for the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile defense system. "They (S-400s) will be delivered towards the end of this year in autumn. We bought S-400s because we could not purchase Patriots," Cavusoglu said.

The U.S. officials have said that if Turkey proceeds with the S-400 purchase, Washington would withdraw its offer to sell the \$3.5 billion Raytheon Co missile package, and could block the sale of fighter jets to Turkey and impose sanctions.

(Source: TRT)

Syria: U.S. knows where ISIL leader is, denies Iran, Russia rift

Syria says the United States and Turkey know the whereabouts of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh) leader Ibrahim al-Samarrai, also known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

In an interview with Lebanon-based al-Mayadeen television channel on Friday, Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations Bashar al-Ja'afari said terrorism is used as a tool by its sponsors and financiers.

He also accused the U.S.-led coalition, which is bombarding what it calls ISIL positions, of transferring ISIL elements.

"Algerian authorities arrested hundreds of terrorists on its borders with Niger, and after interrogating the terrorists it was revealed that they had come from Aleppo's countryside, wondering who transported these terrorists from Syria to the Algerian-Niger borders," Ja'afari said.

"Americans and Turks know where Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is."

The Syrian envoy further denounced a recent deal clinched between the U.S. and ISIL, under which Washington received "tens of tons of gold" in exchange

for allowing terrorists out of Syria's Dayr al-Zawr Province.

Ja'afari said the West is working "to prolong the crisis in Syria" and that the administration of the U.S. President Donald Trump is seeking to keep up "investing in terrorism" in Syria and Iraq in order to pursue its agenda in the region.

He also hailed relations between Syria, Iran and Russia as "excellent," noting that talks about a rift among the trio are just "media propaganda."

Ja'afari stressed that relations with Iran

STOCK MARKET	
TEDPIX	164370.3
IFX	2099.41

Sources: tse.ir, Ifb.ir

CURRENCIES	
USD	42,000 rials
EUR	47,765 rials
GBP	54,427 rials
AED	11,437 rials

Source: cbi.ir

COMMODITIES	
Brent	\$65.07/b
WTI	\$55.80/b
OPEC Basket	\$65.28/b
Gold	\$1,294.45/oz
Silver	\$15.27/oz
Platinum	\$836.25 oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

NEWS IN BRIEF



220 companies to attend Iran’s intl. exchange expo

ECONOMY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Some 220 companies will take part in the 12th International Exhibition of Exchange, Bank and Insurance of Iran, IRIB quoted a member of the board of Securities and Exchange Organization (SEO) as saying in a news conference on Saturday.

The exhibition which is to be held from April 22 to 24 at Tehran Permanent International Fairgrounds is the most significant event in domestic capital market, banking and insurance sectors, according to Saeed Fallahpour.



700 kilometers of freeways to be inaugurated in 2 months

ECONOMY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Some 700 kilometers of freeways will be inaugurated throughout the country within the next two months, Iranian Transport Minister Mohammad Eslami announced, Mehr news agency reported on Saturday. Two months ago, Iran’s Deputy Transport Minister Kheirollah Khademi had announced that more than 12,000 kilometers of roads and railways were under construction throughout the country.

The official has previously announced that road account for 90 percent while railway account for 10 percent of transportation in Iran.

More women in the workplace could boost economy by 35%, says Christine Lagarde

Employing more women and tackling sexism in the workplace is the key to making the world economy richer, more equal and less prone to devastating financial collapses, according to the head of the International Monetary Fund.

In an interview to mark International Women’s Day next week, Christine Lagarde said some countries could boost the size of their economies by 35% if they abandoned discriminatory laws and took advantage of the skills women had to offer.

The IMF’s managing director said she welcomed the success of the #MeToo movement but added that tackling sexual harassment was part of a bigger problem.

“I didn’t see #MeToo coming but I welcome it immensely,” Lagarde told the Guardian. “Sexual harassment is only scratching the surface. Violence against women is still a massive issue and we are not just talking about low income countries: it is in all societies. It has to be discussed, addressed and fought against. There are some terrible things happening to women.”

Lagarde has made female empowerment a key goal for the IMF since joining the Washington-based organisation in 2011, but says she is bracing herself for a backlash against women as a result of the #MeToo campaign.

“I worry that firms won’t employ people because of the political risk; because they think a women or a minority might cause trouble they will employ somebody else. I have not seen it happening, but it is on my radar.”

She said it was taking time for her message that women were good for the economy to get through. She said 88% of countries had restrictions against women in the workplace embedded in the constitution or law. “Some forbid women from doing specific jobs, 59 countries have no laws against sexual harassment in the workplace and there are 18 countries where women can be legally prevented from working.

“Things are changing. There was a time when women in the economy, women in employment, women in finance were not seen as macro-critical. That’s no longer the case.”

IMF research, Lagarde said, suggests that banks would be more stable if there were more women on their boards. “What we have observed is that when there are more women the banks’ capital buffers are larger, the number of non-performing loans is smaller and the risk indices are lower. It is not causality but it is a strong correlation.”

The fund’s recent research has shown that the benefits of gender equality in the workplace are even more beneficial than it was originally thought. Women bring new skills to the workplace, she said, and help to boost productivity as well as the size of the workforce. In countries ranked in the bottom 50% for gender equality, the gains are thought to be substantial: an increase in the size of the economy by 35% on average.

(Source: The Guardian)

Tehran to host 7th meeting of INSTC’s coordination council

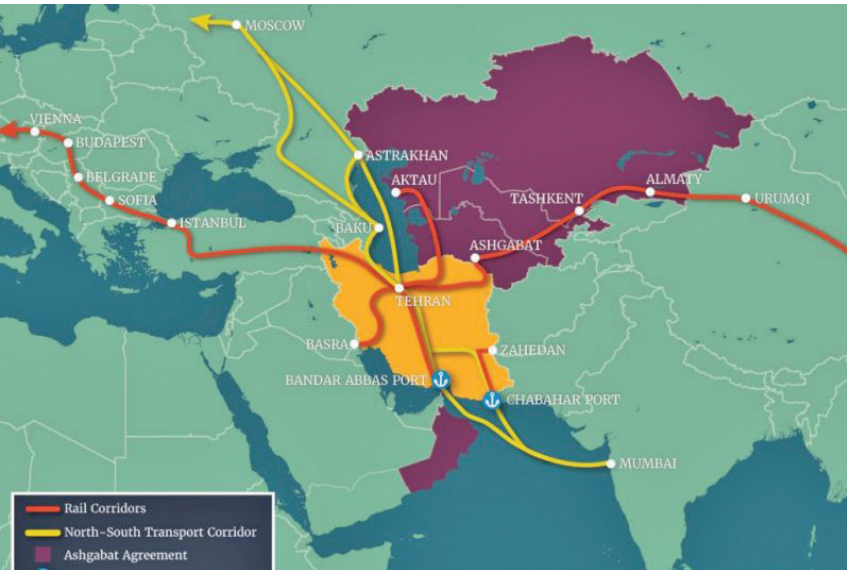
ECONOMY d e s k **TEHRAN** — The seventh meeting of the coordination council of International North South Corridor (INSTC) will be held in Tehran on March 4 and 5, the news portal of Iran’s Ministry of Transportation published.

In a press conference held at the place of the ministry on Saturday, Amin Tarafo’, the director general of the international corridors department of the ministry, elaborated on the programs of the meeting which will be participated by the representatives of the 14 member countries.

The meeting is to be hosted by Iran’s Transportation Ministry and will be attended by the deputy transport ministers of the member countries, the official said.

He mentioned facilitation of the transportation procedures in the INSTC as the main objective of the meeting.

The official also said that door-to-door transport and facilitation of insurance procedures will be the two major issues to be discussed by the coordination council in the meeting.



INSTC is a 7,200-km-long multi-mode network of ship, rail, and road route for moving freight between India, Iran, Af-

ghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia and Europe.

The route primarily involves mov-

ing freight from India, Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia via ship, rail and road.

The objective of the corridor is to increase trade connectivity between major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Tehran, Baku, Bandar Abbas, Astrakhan, Bandar Anzali, etc.

Russia, Iran and India signed the agreement for the NSTC project on May 16, 2002. All three countries are founding member states on the project. Other important member states include Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Belarus with other states having varying levels of involvement.

Given its location in the INSTC, Iran’s southeastern port of Chabahar is of high significance in the INSTC project.

India and Iran have a long-standing agreement, signed in 2002, to develop Chabahar into full deep sea port. The port has the ability to handle cargo ships bigger than 100,000 tons and industry analysts have highlighted there are long term plans to integrate Chabahar with the NSTC.

South Pars phases 13, 22-24 anticipated to be inaugurated in 3 weeks

ECONOMY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Phases 13, 22, 23 and 24 of developing Iran’s South Pars gas field are anticipated to be officially inaugurated by the end of current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2019), a deputy director in Pars Oil and Gas Company (POGC), which is in charge of developing the gas field, announced.

Reza Dehqan, the deputy director of POGC for development and engineering affairs, made the remarks while visiting the onshore refineries of phases 13, 14, 22-24 along with POGC

Managing Director Mohammad Meshkinfam, POGC official website published.

Dehqan put the progress of phases 13, 22-24 at 94 percent and said given that the offshore platforms of these phases have been put into operation and also their refineries are ready, the phases are expected to be inaugurated by the yearend.

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

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

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



Italy main European importer of Iranian goods in 2018

ECONOMY d e s k **TEHRAN** — Purchasing €2.9 billion of goods from Iran, Italy was the biggest importer of Iranian products in 2018, Tasnim news agency reported on Saturday, citing the data released by European Union’s statistics agency Eurostat.

The country’s imports from Iran in 2018 was 31 percent of the total of European countries’ imports

from Iran. However, the figure registered an annual decrease of 13 percent in 2018 from its previous €3.36 billion in 2017.

According to the data published by Eurostat, Germany with exports of €2.7 billion to Iran, i.e. 30 percent of the total exports of EU to Iran, was the main European exporter to Iran last year, the same report added.

Germany’s exports to Iran showed eight percent decrease in 2018 in comparison with the preceding year when the figure stood at €2.95 billion.

In 2018, after Italy, Spain (€2.02 billion) and France (€1.53 billion) were respectively the major importers from Iran while Italy (€1.68 billion) and France (€895 million) were the main exporters after Germany to Iran.

Canada approves Huawei extradition proceedings, China seethes

The Canadian government, as expected, on Friday approved extradition proceedings against the chief financial officer of Huawei Technologies Co Ltd, prompting a furious reaction from China.

Meng Wanzhou, the daughter of Huawei’s founder, was detained in Vancouver last December and is under house arrest. In late January the U.S. Justice Department charged Meng and Huawei with conspiring to violate U.S. sanctions on Iran.

Meng is due to appear in a Vancouver court at 10 a.m. Pacific time (1800 GMT) on March 6, when a date will be set for her extradition hearing.

“Today, department of Justice Canada officials issued an authority to proceed, formally commencing an extradition process in the case of Ms. Meng Wanzhou,” the government said in a statement.

China, whose relations with Canada have deteriorated badly over the affair, denounced the decision and repeated previous demands for Meng’s release.

U.S. Justice Department spokeswoman Nicole Navas Oxman said Washington thanked the Canadian government for its assistance. “We greatly appreciate Canada’s steadfast commitment to the rule of law,” she said in a statement.

Legal experts had predicted the Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau would give the go-ahead for extradition proceedings, given the close

judicial relationship between Canada and the United States.

But it could be years before Meng is sent to the United States, since Canada’s slow-moving justice system allows many decisions to be appealed.

A final decision will likely come down to the federal justice minister, who will face the choice of angering the United States by rejecting the extradition bid, or China by accepting it.

Professor Wesley Wark of the University of Ottawa’s Graduate School of Public and International Affairs said “the Canadians will take a beating throughout this whole process” from China.

“I suspect the Trudeau government is desperately hoping that the Americans reach a deal with the Chinese,” he said by phone.

U.S. President Donald Trump told Reuters in December he would intervene if it served national security interests or helped close a trade deal with China, prompting Ottawa to stress the extradition process should not be politicized. Last week Trump played down the idea of dropping the charges.

After Meng’s detention, China arrested two Canadians on national security grounds, and a Chinese court later sentenced to death a Canadian man who previously had only been jailed for drug smuggling.

(Source: Reuters)

Trump asks China to lift tariffs on U.S. farm products

U.S. President Donald Trump said he had asked China to immediately remove all tariffs on U.S. agricultural products because trade talks were progressing well.

He also delayed plans to impose 25 percent tariffs on Chinese goods on Friday, as previously scheduled.

“I have asked China to immediately remove all Tariffs on our agricultural products (including beef, pork, etc.) based on the fact that we are moving along nicely with Trade discussions,” Trump said on Twitter, pointing out that he had not raised tariffs on Chinese goods to 25 percent from 10 percent on March 1 as planned.

“This is very important for our great farmers - and me!” Trump said.

Farmers are a key constituency for Trump’s Republican Party, and the U.S. president’s trade war with China has had a heavy impact on them. Beijing imposed tariffs last year on imports of soybeans, grain sorghum, pork and other items, slashing shipments of American farm products to China.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said this week that U.S. trade negotiators had asked China to reduce tariffs on U.S. ethanol, but it was not immediately clear whether Beijing was willing to oblige.

Trump’s post on Twitter came several hours after the U.S. Trade

Representative’s office said that it would delay the scheduled hike in tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese goods.

The notice, due to be published in the Federal Register next Tuesday, says it is “no longer appropriate” to raise the rates because of progress in negotiations since December 2018. The tariff would remain “at 10 percent until further notice.”

In a statement on Saturday, China said it welcomed the delay.

Speaking at a separate briefing in Beijing, a Chinese government official said both countries were working on the next steps, though he gave no details.

“China and the United States reaching a mutually-beneficial, win-win agreement as soon as possible is not only good for the two countries, but is also good news for the world economy,” said Guo Weimin, spokesman for the high profile but largely ceremonial advisory body to China’s parliament.

A tariff increase to 25 percent from 10 percent was initially scheduled for Jan. 1, but after productive conversations with Chinese President Xi Jinping, the Trump administration issued a 90-day extension of that deadline.

Trump had said on Sunday he would again delay the increase because of progress in the talks.

(Source: Reuters)

U.S. personal income posts first drop in over 3 years

U.S. personal income fell for the first time in more than three years in January as dividends and interest payments dropped, pointing to moderate growth in consumer spending after it fell by the most since 2009 in December.

The Commerce Department said on Friday personal income slipped 0.1 percent in January. That was the first decline since November 2015 and followed a 1.0 percent jump in December.

Income was weighed down by decreases in dividend, farm proprietors’ and interest income. Wages increased 0.3 percent in January after rising 0.5 percent in December.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast incomes rising 0.3 percent in January. The Commerce Department did not publish the January consumer spending portion of the report as the collection and processing of data was delayed by a 35-day partial shutdown of the government that ended on Jan. 25.

It reported that consumer spending, which accounts for more than two-thirds of U.S. economic activity, dropped 0.5 percent in December. That was the biggest decline since September 2009 and followed a 0.6 percent increase in November.



Households cut back on purchases of motor vehicles and recreational goods in December, leading to a 1.9 percent plunge in spending on goods. Outlays on services edged up 0.1 percent, held back by a decline in spending on household electricity and gas.

When adjusted for inflation, consumer spending fell 0.6 percent in December, also the largest drop since September 2009, after rising 0.5 percent in November.

The data was included in the fourth-quarter gross domestic product report published on Thursday, which showed

consumer spending growing at a 2.8 percent annualized rate during that period, slower than the third quarter’s robust 3.5 percent pace. The economy grew at a 2.6 percent rate in the October-December quarter after notching a 3.4 percent pace in the third quarter.

The sharp deceleration in consumer spending in December puts consumption on a lower growth trajectory in the first quarter and bolsters analysts’ expectations that the economy will slow down further in the first three months of the year.

Inflation remained benign in December. The personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index excluding the volatile food and energy components rose 0.2 percent after a similar gain in November.

That left the year-on-year increase in the so-called core PCE price index at 1.9 percent. The core PCE index is the Federal Reserve’s preferred inflation measure. It hit the U.S. central bank’s 2 percent inflation target in March for the first time since April 2012.

Moderate inflation and slowing domestic and global economic growth support the Fed’s “patient” stance towards raising interest rates further this year.

(Source: Reuters)

OPEC oil output drops further in February as Saudi over-delivers on cuts

OPEC oil supply fell to a four-year low in February, a Reuters survey found, as top exporter Saudi Arabia and its Persian Gulf allies over-delivered on the group's supply pact while Venezuelan output registered a further involuntary drop.

The 14-member Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries pumped 30.68 million barrels per day (bpd) last month, the survey showed on Friday, down 300,000 bpd from January and the lowest OPEC total since 2015, according to Reuters surveys.

The survey suggests that Saudi Arabia and its Persian Gulf allies over-delivered on pledged supply curbs to avert the possibility of a new glut building up this year. A formal accord by OPEC and its allies to cut supply in 2019 took effect on Jan. 1.

Crude oil has risen to \$66 a barrel after a dip below \$50 in December, boosted by the Saudi move, involuntary curbs in other OPEC countries and the prospect of lower supply from Venezuela after U.S. President



Donald Trump imposed sanctions on its oil industry. OPEC, Russia and other non-members

— an alliance known as OPEC+ — agreed in December to reduce supply by 1.2 million bpd from Jan. 1. OPEC's share of the cut is

800,000 bpd, to be delivered by 11 members — all except Iran, Libya and Venezuela.

In February, the 11 OPEC members bound by the new agreement achieved 101 percent of pledged cuts, the survey found. Among exempt producers, Venezuelan supply fell while Iran, which is also subject to U.S. sanctions, managed to boost exports.

The latest OPEC+ deal came just months after the group agreed to pump more oil, which in turn partially unwound their original supply-limiting accord that took effect in 2017.

February's output is the lowest by OPEC as a group since February 2015, excluding membership changes that have taken place since then, according to Reuters surveys.

The Reuters survey aims to track supply to the market and is based on shipping data provided by external sources, Refinitiv Eikon flows data and information provided by sources at oil companies, OPEC and consulting firms.

(Source: Reuters)

Russia cuts February output deeper to comply with OPEC pact



Russia's oil producers cut their output deeper in February as the nation strives to implement an agreement with OPEC following criticism that it was moving too slowly.

The country produced 43.3 million tons of oil last month, according to preliminary data from the Energy Ministry's CDU-TEK unit. That's equivalent to 11.336 million barrels a day, down 82,000 barrels per day from the October baseline of the OPEC+ deal, Bloomberg calculations show.

Russia's Energy Ministry earlier this week said February output was 97,000 barrels a day lower than in October. Bloomberg's calculation of the country's cuts also differed from official figures in January. The difference may be explained by the methodology, as the ministry uses an individual conversion ratio from tons

to barrels for each field, while Bloomberg uses a unified ratio of 7.33 barrels a ton.

The nation curtailed its January supply by about 47,000 barrels a day from the baseline, according to the Energy Ministry. Russia pledged to gradually implement a 228,000 barrel-a-day reduction and maintain it until the end of the first half.

While members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries have largely stuck to their output caps, compliance among their non-OPEC allies, of which Russia is the biggest, has been less strict. Nevertheless, Russia remains committed to its obligations and will reach the targeted level of cuts by early April, Energy Minister Alexander Novak said this week in an interview with Gazeta.Ru.

(Source: Bloomberg)

U.S. oil rig count falls as prices slide



The number of active oil and gas rigs fell in the United States again this week according to Baker Hughes, despite record-breaking production for the week ending February 22—the second week in a row.

The total number of active oil and gas drilling rigs fell by 9 rigs, according to the report, with the number of active oil rigs falling by 10 to reach 843 and the number of gas rigs gaining 1 to reach 195.

The oil and gas rig count is now just 57 up from this time last year, 43 of which is in oil rigs.

Oil prices were trading up early on Friday as a China-United States trade deal was rumored imminent, with a 150-page document in the works containing the nitty gritty of a deal. Oil prices later crashed, however, with both WTI and Brent falling by more than 2% in the afternoon trading hours as U.S. manufacturing data painted

an unfavorable picture of global energy demand growth. Even Reuters' survey data that showed OPEC's oil production dropped to a four-year low in February was unable to lift prices in the afternoon hours.

WTI was trading down \$1.36 (-2.38%) at \$55.86, while Brent was trading down \$1.41 (2.13%) at \$64.90 at 12:52pm EST—down dollars week on week as well. Another bearish force is U.S. crude oil production, which hit yet another record for week ending February 22 at 12.1 million bpd, according to the Energy Information Administration—the second record for the United States in as many weeks.

Canada's oil and gas rigs saw an even bigger decrease in the number rigs this week. Canada's total oil and gas rig count fell by just 1 rig and is now 211, which is 91 fewer rigs than this time last year.

(Source: oilprice.com)

China says massive shale oil reserves found in north

China has found massive shale oil reserves in its northern Tianjin municipality, Chinese news agency Xinhua reported on Friday.

Two wells at a field have been flowing for more than 260 days, according to Dagang Oilfield, a subsidiary of state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC).

The newly found shale reserves will help boost China's national energy security and economic development, Xinhua quoted CNPC as saying.

According to EIA estimates, China ranks third in the world in terms of technically recoverable shale oil resources, behind Russia and the United States.

Over the past year, China's biggest energy producers have started to tap more tight oil and gas wells, aiming to increase domestic oil and natural gas production at the world's largest crude oil importer.

A PetroChina test oil well at a shale field in western China could finally mean

a strong commercial potential for shale oil for the first time in the world's top crude importer, Morgan Stanley said last month.

PetroChina achieved a daily production rate of 100 tons of oil, or 733 barrels, from the Jimsar oil field in the western Xinjiang province, which suggests that shale drilling could finally have a true commercial potential in China, Morgan Stanley said in a note.

"We believe the Jimsar shale oil discovery is likely to trigger China's shale oil revolution," Morgan Stanley analyst Andy Meng wrote in the report.

The shale boom in China, however, would be just a fraction of the U.S. shale revolution—Morgan Stanley expects Chinese shale oil production could be 100,000 bpd-200,000 bpd by 2025, which is nothing compared to the millions of barrels of oil pumped in the U.S. every day.

(Source: oilprice.com)

Russia ships record high LNG volumes to Europe in February

Russia delivered a record amount of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Europe in February, becoming the biggest supplier of the chilled fuel to the continent for the first time.

A total of 19 cargoes, or 1.41 million tonnes, of LNG from the Yamal LNG plant in Russia's Arctic reached regasification terminals in Europe in February, with the majority of those going to northwest Europe, Refinitiv Eikon data shows.

This is the largest monthly amount of LNG from Yamal to arrive in Europe since the plant was launched in Dec. 2017 and also the first time Russia has become the biggest LNG supplier to Europe, surpassing traditional suppliers, such as Qatar, Nigeria and Algeria, as well as a newcomer, the United States.

The jump in Russia's deliveries to Europe shows how lower-than-expected LNG demand and lower prices in Asia have made Europe a top destination for LNG produced

in the Atlantic basin this winter, a drastic change from the previous winter.

None of the Yamal cargoes found a home in Asia in February, for the first time since May, data showed.

Asian LNG and European gas prices have been almost at parity this winter. This week, the Asian LNG delivery price was around \$0.30 million British thermal units (mmBtu) above the UK front-month gas price, against over a \$2.00/mmBtu premium a year ago.

Russia's Novatek, a major shareholder at Yamal, has arranged a swap of some cargoes this winter to supply its Asian positions with Pacific-sources LNG, instead of delivering cargoes from Yamal to reduce shipping costs amid the low price spread.

Some traders expect the price spread will remain tight throughout 2019, with Atlantic-produced cargoes continuing to come to Europe.

(Source: Hellenic Shipping News Worldwide)

Maduro moves Venezuela's oil firm European office to Moscow

Nicolas Maduro has ordered an office in Europe of Venezuela's state oil firm PDVSA to be moved to Moscow, Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodriguez said on Friday after meeting with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in the Russian capital.

Russia is one of Maduro's key supporters in the political power struggle in the Latin American country sitting on top of the world's largest oil reserves, while the U.S. and many European nations have recognized Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó as the legitimate interim president.

Russia has stood by Maduro for years and has poured billions of U.S. dollars in Venezuela in the form of loans and oil investments, even when all other Venezuelan allies—including China—have shown reluctance to continue lending money to Maduro's regime.

After meeting with Russia's Lavron on Friday, Venezuela's Executive Vice President Delcy Rodriguez said that "President Nicolas Maduro instructed the Lisbon branch of PDVSA to close this office and relocate the office to Moscow."



The relocation of PDVSA's office is part of a broader agreement to boost cooperation with Russia's giant energy companies Rosneft and Gazprom, Russian news agency TASS quoted Venezuela's Rodriguez as saying.

"This is done in line with our plans to expand technical cooperation in the oil production area with Rosneft, with Gazprom. The moment now is the most suitable to do so. We are changing the format of our relations," Rodriguez said, as carried by TASS.

Speaking to the media on Friday, Lavrov said that he discussed with Rodriguez the situation in Venezuela, noting that the Latin American country is a "long-standing and reliable partner" of Russia. Russia reaffirmed its solidarity with the people of Venezuela and its legitimate government, and supported its efforts to defend its sovereignty and independence, Lavrov said, as carried by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Earlier this week, Russia's Energy Minister Alexander Novak said that Russian companies in Venezuela were not experiencing any problems resulting from the escalation in the political situation in the country and had not incurred any losses on the oil they produce there.

(Source: oilprice.com)

China and India lead the world in making the planet greener

At the start of this century, it would have seemed inconceivable for the global hegemonic powers to imagine that the two most populous nations would be leading the world towards a greener future. However, that's exactly what is happening.



Just a decade ago, China and India were being lambasted by the international community for allegedly sabotaging the aims of the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit. However, the two countries have not only been able to turn things around but are now setting an example for the rest of the world.

A recent NASA report highlights how, despite being late-entrants to the list of environmental protection enthusiasts, they have been contributing immensely to making the planet greener over the past two decades.

The report, published in the journal Nature Sustainability on Feb. 11, says the Earth's green leaf area has grown 5 percent since 2000 and currently accounts for over 5 million square kilometers (an area comparable to the size of the Amazon rain forests).

According to Chi Chen, the study's lead author, a graduate researcher at Boston University's Department of Earth and Environment, "Although the nations encompass only 9 percent of the planet's land area enveloped in vegetation, they account for almost a third of the greening — a result which is absolutely in contrast with the widespread conception of land degradation in densely populated countries due to over-exploitation."

The study's lead researcher, Ranga Myneni, in a separate statement, mentioned that he along with his colleagues had identified the greening phenomenon in the mid-1990s with the help of high-resolution data captured from space by two satellites, Terra and the Aqua.

However, to eliminate the uncertainty of the role of human activities over the results, they further tracked the changes occurring in the total land area covered by vegetation over a long period.

In a further blow to the skeptics, the study revealed that China, despite possessing just 6.6 percent of the world's vegetated area, contributed almost 25 percent of the increase in the green leaf area. Out of this, 42 percent is from afforestation and 32 percent from farming activities, thanks to its aggressive tree-planting and forest conservation and expansion programs.

Last year, the Chinese State Forestry Administration pledged to cover almost 23 percent of the mainland's total land area with forests. Additionally, several forestation projects in the northern parts of Hebei, Inner Mongolia and Qinghai, covering 6.6 million hectares (almost the size of Ireland), are underway.

Moreover, China, in line with its commitment to the Paris agreement to cut its greenhouse gas emissions per unit of GDP by 60-65 percent from the 2005 levels, has made significant progress in employment of clean energy. In 2018, it generated a total of 1.87 trillion kWh of clean energy, up 170 billion kWh from 2017.

Notably, in 2015, it surpassed the U.S. to become the largest market for electric cars with over 200,000 registrations. At the same time, solar power cell production in China saw a 100-fold increase between 2005 and 2014, enabling it to lead the world in renewable energy sources.

India, meanwhile, has contributed almost 6.8 percent to the growth of the green leaf area, out of which 82 percent of the total contribution is made by its croplands as a result of intensive agricultural activities. Despite lagging behind in terms of resources, the country has demonstrated a vigorous resolve in restricting its employment of fossil fuels.

It curtailed its carbon emissions by 13.5 percent between 2005 and 2012. Along with the commitment to enhance its agricultural capacity, India aims to shrink its consumption of fossil fuels by a further 40 percent and gradually shift towards sources of renewable energy. Its ambition is to produce 175GW from solar power by 2022.

But on the other hand the U.S., the world's largest economy, has backed down from its commitments made under the Paris agreement, arguing, in 2017, that they would strangle the American economy and lead to major job losses.

This is in sharp contrast with the attitude of China and India who, at a crucial point in the fight against climate change, and despite being the world's most populous nations, are acting as leaders and setting an example for the rest of the world.

Although there is still a long way to go in the fight against global warming, the encouraging results of studies such as this one by NASA can act as a positive incentive for everyone.

(Source: china.org.cn)

Denmark to tender 800-MW offshore wind project this year

The Danish government has selected a site off Nissum Fjord in the North Sea as the location for the first of three 800-MW offshore wind farms to go online by 2030.

The announcement was made after last summer the Danish government reached an agreement with all parties of the country's Parliament to add at least 2,400 MW of offshore wind capacity in support of Denmark's national goal to fully cover its electricity consumption with renewable energy by 2030 and meet a 50% renewable energy target in 2030.

The first of the three proposed plants, which will be Denmark's largest offshore wind farm, will be called Thor and a tender for it will be held this year, the Ministry of Energy, Utilities and Climate said on Thursday. The plant will be connected to the grid between 2024 and 2027.

According to the statement, the specific site off Nissum Fjord was picked "because the location 20 km out on the water gives the Danes the most green energy for the money." Another potential location was the Kriegers Flak offshore wind zone in the Baltic Sea.

The construction phase of the 800-MW project is expected to open 8,200 jobs. Once up and running, the huge wind farm will be able to generate electricity for about 800,000 Danish homes.

(Source: renewablesnow.com)

NEWS IN BRIEF



Russia offers mediation between India, Pakistan

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — It took hectic back-channel lobbying and diplomacy of many regional countries to diffuse tensions between India and Pakistan and avert what could have been a disastrous war.

One of the countries that played a key role, according to sources, is Russia. Moscow, which enjoys good diplomatic relations with both New Delhi and Islamabad, has reportedly offered to mediate between the two warring countries.

Acknowledging the offer, Pakistan's foreign minister Khurshid Mehmood Qureshi said his country was willing to accept Russia's offer, days after a military conflict erupted between the nuclear powers.

According to a report in Moscow Times, Russian President Vladimir Putin in a telephone call to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi late on Thursday said he hopes for a quick settlement of the crisis.

The relations between the two warring countries touched a new low last week following a military showdown triggered by last month's terror attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir. The situation de-escalated on Friday following the release of a captured Indian pilot.



China doesn't recognize India, Pakistan as 'nuclear powers'

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — China has said that it never recognized India and Pakistan as nuclear powers and ruled out extending such a status to North Korea following the unsuccessful second summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Vietnam.

"China has never recognized India and Pakistan as nuclear countries. Our position on this has never changed," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Lu Kang told a media briefing on Friday.

His remarks came in response to a question whether China would recognize North Korea as a nuclear state like India and Pakistan as talks between Trump and Kim broke down over latter's refusal to give up two nuclear processing plants.

NPT was conceived with an objective to prevent nuclear proliferation, work towards full disarmament and promote the peaceful use of nuclear technology.

India has refused to sign the treaty as it found it 'faulty' and a 'club of nuclear haves and have-nots'. Pakistan maintains that it will not sign as long as its regional rival India does not.

China has called for a two-step approach which states that NSG members first need to arrive at a set of principles for the admission of non-NPT states into the NSG and then move forward discussions of specific cases.



At OIC, Indian FM says Pakistan harboring terrorists

INTERNATIONAL **TEHRAN** — Indian foreign minister Sushma Swaraj addressed the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) session in Abu Dhabi on Friday and censured countries harboring terrorists on their soil, without naming Pakistan.

Invited as a 'guest of honor', keeping in view the burgeoning Muslim population in India, Swaraj launched a broadside against Pakistan, saying the countries providing shelter to terrorists must be confronted.

The session took place amidst simmering tensions between India and Pakistan in the wake of 'surgical strikes' and military confrontation over the past one week.

Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi boycotted the meeting in protest over the invitation to his Indian counterpart. Saying Islam and terrorism had no co-relation; Swaraj said terrorism and extremism are given different names and labels, which eventually leads to distortion of religion.

"None of the 99 names of Allah means violence, Islam preaches peace. This menace [terrorism] cannot be stopped only through diplomatic and military means, we have to work within our communities," she remarked.

India was invited to attend the OIC meeting in 1969 too but at that time Pakistan had managed to get the invitation withdrawn.



Massive crackdown on Jamaat e Islami in Kashmir

INTERNATIONAL **TERHAN** — Indian government has launched a massive crack down on politico-religious organizations in Indian-controlled Kashmir following last month's deadly terror attack that killed 44 Indian paramilitary police.

Two days after Indian authorities declared Jamaat e Islami (JeI), a prominent politico-religious organization in disputed Kashmir valley, as 'unlawful organization', the properties of many JeI leaders and workers were sealed on Friday.

Local government officials issued orders of sealing all institutions and properties linked to the JeI on the directions of India's interior ministry.

Indian government has alleged that the JeI was "in close touch" with terror groups and is likely to "escalate secessionist movement" in the Himalayan region.

The notification, banning the group under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, was issued by the interior ministry after a high-level meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, following last month's terror attack in Kashmir.

The decision to ban the organization has been criticized by politicians cutting across the political divide in Kashmir. National Investigation Agency has raided houses of many top separatist leaders including Mirwaiz Umer Farooq in connection with cases related to funding of terrorist groups in Jammu and Kashmir.

After 'surgical strikes', India, Pakistan engage in cross-border clashes

By Syed Zafar Mehdi

TEHRAN — Bearing eloquent testimony to the fragility of relations between India and Pakistan, hours after Pakistan handed over the captured pilot to India, intense shelling resumed on the de facto border.

Late on Friday night, the soldiers of India and Pakistan engaged in fierce clashes along the volatile border dividing the two warring neighbors, sources said.

The clashes resulted in the killing of at least six civilians and injuries to six others on both sides of the divide, officials were quoted as saying by various media outlets.

At the time of filing this report, tensions were running high on the border with armies of both the countries put on high alert, apprehending more clashes.

The latest round of cross-border skirmishes came on the day Pakistan handed over Wing Commander Abhinandan to India as a 'gesture of peace' following days of war-like situation during which the two sides conducted surgical strikes in each other's territory.

On Wednesday morning, Pakistani forces managed to shoot down an Indian fighter jet after it had crossed into Pakistani airspace, following which the pilot — Abhinandan — was captured.

The announcement of his release by Pakistani premier Imran Khan two days later marked de-escalation of the situation, which was widely welcomed in both the countries.

However, barely hours after the captured pilot got a rousing reception back home, in-



tense clashes were reported on the border, cutting short the celebrations.

According to reports, fighting raged on throughout the night on Saturday, leading to death of two siblings and their mother in Poonch district of Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Their death was resulted by a shell fired from the Pakistani side, claimed media reports, quoting police. The father was critically injured. In Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, a government official was quoted saying by AP that Indian troops with heavy weapons "indiscriminately targeted border villagers" along the border, killing a boy and wounding three other people, besides destroying residential properties.

This is not the first time India and Pakistan have been embroiled in border skirmishes and military confrontation. They have fought

two of the three wars over Kashmir and cross-border attacks have been frequent since the partition of erstwhile British India in 1947.

Officials from both countries have routinely accused each other of 'unprovoked' cross-border attacks, in violation of the 2003 ceasefire accord.

The ties between the two nuclear-armed neighbors have worsened in recent years with the intermittent exchange of small-arms and mortar fire along the border.

The violations of the ceasefire accord the two countries signed in 2003 have assumed alarming proportions in recent years. According to conservative estimates, more than 2,000 such violations have taken place since 2011 alone, which often have sparked political, diplomatic and military tensions.

According to analysts, both parties have

failed to holistically weigh the causes and consequences of recurring ceasefire violations and failed to take steps in order to prevent them.

While India maintains that infiltration of militants from Pakistan is the prime cause of ceasefire violations, Pakistan stresses the longstanding bilateral disputes, especially the stalemate over Kashmir, are to blame.

Almost seven hundred miles of approximately two thousand miles border dividing India and Pakistan run through the disputed Jammu & Kashmir region, the bone of contention between the two countries.

The frequent ceasefire violations compound the misery of people living along the border on both sides, who continue to bear the brunt of hostility between the two countries

Several villages are situated along the border in the disputed Kashmir region, some of them in close proximity of the fencing, making them more vulnerable.

According to India's Home Ministry, almost 600 villages are situated within five kilometers of the international border on the Indian side, and about 450 are prone to cross-border attacks.

To effectively address the issue of ceasefire violations, experts believe it is important to formalize the 2003 ceasefire agreement, ratify the India-Pakistan Ground Rules Agreement of 1961, make efforts to develop joint SOPs, completely ban the construction of new military installations and finally to make sincere efforts to resolve the larger political conflict over the disputed Kashmir region.

Khan outmaneuvers Modi with his statesmanship

1 → He announced that the captured pilot will be released on Friday as a gesture of peace. The news spread quickly and was widely welcomed on both sides of the de facto border.

The tables turned quickly and Imran Khan stole the show. Modi, who appeared to be in no mood to retreat, was rendered helpless after Khan announced the release of Indian pilot and advocated dialogue with New Delhi.

Khan displayed the kind of statesmanship you associate only with strong, visionary leaders. Not only did he clinch the battle of 'surgical strikes', he also won the battle of hearts and minds. As one analyst said, he made his Indian counterpart look very small with his statesmanship and political maturity.

The escalation of tensions worked well for Modi, as one analyst remarked, because elections are approaching in India. Modi's supporters had been cheering for war since the Pulwama attack last month in Indian-controlled Kashmir, which was carried out by Pakistan-based Jaish e Mohammad (JeM).

Indian actor-turned-politician Pawan Kalyan on Thursday stirred another controversy by saying that Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party Modi represents, had told him two years ago that there will be war before the 2019 general elections.

"I was told two years ago war will be coming. You can understand from this what kind of situation our country is in," said Pawan, a former ally of the BJP.

Despite calls to avoid war-like situation, Modi gave green signal to his military for a surgical strike early on Tuesday, which was retaliated by Pakistan within 24 hours.

The situation looked dangerous as fighter jets hovered over Kashmir's skies, creating panic among people in the disputed Himalayan valley. While Modi was battling for war, Khan on the other side seemed to be in favor of dialogue.

Writing in The Print, veteran Indian diplomat K C Singh hinted that Khan had trumped Modi in this round.



"Even if the BJP rightly claims that new redlines vis-à-vis Pakistani sponsorship of terror have been laid, the new government in India post-May will have to deal with a shrewd Imran Khan, who has shown the same versatility in office that he showed on the cricket field," he wrote.

Noted Indian novelist and commentator Arundhati Roy writing in Huffington Post said Khan 'acted with dignity throughout the crises. "Whatever anybody's opinion of him, and whatever Pakistan's role has been in the Kashmir conflict, Imran Khan, the Prime Minister of Pakistan has acted with dignity and rectitude throughout this crisis," she wrote in a lengthy essay.

Roy, who is known for her scathing criticism of Modi-led government, holding it responsible for rise in hate crimes against Muslims in India, said his government had "wounded India's soul so very deeply".

Former chief of India's spy agency AS Dulat in an interview to The Caravan magazine said when Modi became prime minister, there was a lot of hope in the (Kashmir) valley.

"But we have messed up Kashmir in the last two and a

half years, since July 2016," he remarked, adding that the present situation is likely to benefit Modi on the political turf.

Like many other top journalists, prominent Indian journalist and author Sagarika Ghose gave credit for de-escalation of war-like situation to Khan.

"With apologies & respect to Modiji, but today he has been outdone and outshone in diplomacy, war strategy and public outreach by a swashbuckling cricket captain @ImranKhanPTI," she tweeted.

Indian filmmaker and activist Anand Patwardan, while demanding resignation of PM Modi and his defence minister for security lapses in Pulwama, Uri and Pathankot, said he felt "sad and helpless at the stupidity that has enveloped my nation".

Pakistani journalist and commentator Mehr Tarar, writing in Gulf News, said one major difference between Khan and Modi was that Khan's leadership is about "learning from the past to work for a better, united and peaceful Pakistan", while Modi's focus is on "ensuring BJP's divisive Hindutva hegemony all across India for the next 10 years".

War frenzy appears to have subdued for now and Khan has reaffirmed his commitment to start dialogue with India. But, according to analysts, there is no likelihood of BJP engaging in any kind of dialogue with Khan-led government in Islamabad before elections.

At the same time, responding to Khan's offer of talks, many people in India have urged him to take strong action against terror groups and their sanctuaries inside Pakistan.

"If PM Khan is indeed honest in what he says, then he should start with dismantling terror infrastructure in Pakistan and now allow Pakistan's soil to be used for attacks against other countries," said Rahul Sharma, a research scholar based in New Delhi, pointing to recent attacks in Indian-controlled Kashmir, Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province and attacks inside Afghanistan.

In Doha talks, Taliban call for withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan

1 → On Tuesday and Wednesday, a source said, discussions mainly revolved around drawdown of U.S.-led foreign forces and the nature of this withdrawal, also the assurance of Taliban to prevent insurgents from using Afghan soil to carry out attacks inside or outside the country.

"When the (American) occupation ends, I think we will have a countrywide consultation with scholars and influential Afghans about the shape of a future government," Taliban delegation's spokesperson Suhail Shaheen was quoted as saying by VOA.

Both sides are hoping to come up with a 'draft agreement' following the conclusion of talks. Ashraf Ghani-led government in Kabul has been sidelined by both the U.S. officials and the Afghan Taliban, which has angered the president and his aides ahead of general elections in the country.

Ghani, who has been calling for Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, has on many occasions expressed unhappiness over the manner in which his government has been undermined by those holding 'talks' about the country's future.

His coalition partner and chief executive Friday said the Taliban should not 'miscalculate the situation', while calling for 'intra-Afghan talks to ensure lasting peace'.

Even many Afghan analysts have questioned the credibility of these talks between the Taliban and U.S. "The U.S. talking to the Taliban with the Afghan people and government shut out is hardly 'Afghan peace talks', tweeted Rohullah Yakobi, a fellow of Human Security Center.

Meanwhile, on the eve of the latest round of Afghan peace talks in Doha, Taliban suicide bombers ambushed a military base in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province on Friday, killing at least 35 Afghan soldiers.

The unremitting violence amidst 'peace

talks' has come under scrutiny with people questioning the wisdom of U.S. officials who are blatantly turning blind eye to bloodshed in the country. The talks and violence, they say, cannot go hand in hand.

"Is this a new U.S. strategy: ignore the brazen and deadly attacks by those with whom they are negotiating with in order to secure a deal,"

asked one Twitter user.

Another issue that has been gaining momentum is the non-inclusion of women in ongoing 'peace talks'.

"The 'peace' talks are meaningless unless they are not inclusive and unless women don't have a voice in these negotiations," women's rights activist Samira Hamidi told Tehran Times,

adding that women in Afghanistan cannot be taken for granted anymore.

According to reports, the next round of talks between the two sides is likely to be held in Islamabad. Pakistan, which enjoys leverage over the insurgent group, played a key role in facilitating Doha talks, according to the country's premier Imran Khan.

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Finnish analyst says European Leaders vassals of U.S. deep state

TEHRAN (Tasnim) — A Finnish political economist and author said despite differences of opinion between the Trump administration and its allies in the European Union on some global issues, EU leaders are “essentially vassals” of the US Deep State.

“The European leaders are essentially vassals of the United States,” Jon Hellevig said in an interview with the Tasnim News Agency.

“They do as the Americans tell, but they are very much frustrated by Trump’s undiplomatic style....,” the analyst added.

Jon Krister Hellevig is a Finnish lawyer and businessman who has worked in Russia since the early 1990s. Hellevig was a candidate in the European parliament election in 2014. He is the managing partner of the Moscow-based law company Hellevig, Klein & Usov. Hellevig has written several books, including Avenir Guide to Russian Taxes (2002, 2003, 2006 English and Russian editions); Avenir Guide to Labor Laws (2002, 2003, 2006 English and Russian editions). Expressions and Interpretations, a book on the philosophy of law and the development of Russian legal practices; Hellevig takes actively part in public discussion of current affairs and social structure contributing with articles and commentary in the media. He regularly lectures at international seminars on various topics.

Following is the full text of the interview:

■ Tensions have grown in recent months between the US and its closest allies in the EU over various issues, including Iran, which was underlined at a recent US-backed conference on the Middle East in Poland that was largely sidestepped by many European governments. What do you think about US President Donald Trump’s foreign policy that has strained the transatlantic relations?

A: I must start with pointing out that there is no Donald Trump’s foreign policy. I mean



we must not personify the US policy with the name of the president. Since they murdered President (John F.) Kennedy, the United States has not been governed by its elected officials. The power in the US belongs to the cabal of the Deep State.

What comes to that foreign policy, it is very much connected with the death throes of the American Empire. The US Deep State elites are in panic as their global power is failing and their debt-ridden economy is about to implode. The US cannot any longer afford its imperial overreach, the wars it is waging and the military bases and navy carrier groups around the world. At the same time China and Russia have risen as economic and military giants. China’s economy is now much bigger than that of the USA – the petrodollar also being at stake – and Russia is now the undisputed leader in 21st century weapons technology.

The US Deep State regime has been for decades trying to establish an absolute global

hegemony, but now, it is too late. But instead of acknowledging that, they are raving like a bull in the china shop of global politics. They have left all their pretense to diplomacy – and Trump is like cast for that role – as they try to bully friends and foes to their desperate geopolitical agenda of aggression. At the same time they want to plug the holes of their sinking economy by their trade wars and by extorting protection money from their NATO allies.

■ The Trump administration’s foreign policies are also slammed by top US officials. Recently, Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi described the administration’s general approach toward Iran, including Washington’s withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal, as “completely wrong”. Do you believe that other US officials would cooperate with the Trump administration in implementing its policies?

A: I would not make much about the seeming division among the top US officials. As I said, they are all puppets of the Deep State,

the Congress very much so. They all agree, on orders from their Deep State handlers, on all the foreign policy issues, as we have now seen in the unanimous support of attempted US coup in Venezuela. Admittedly, in the question of Iran there seems to be a rift. It is possible that the elites are split as to this question, certainly not about their desire to succumb Iran and to affect a regime change there, but about the strategy.

More than listening to Pelosi, I would analyze what the US media says (which constitutes the propaganda machine of the Deep State).

■ The White House made a massive blunder after claiming European leaders applauded when Vice President Mike Pence dropped President Donald Trump’s name in a speech. Pence was speaking at the Munich Security Conference in Germany when he passed on Trump’s regards to the dignitaries gathered. The 59-year-old paused for several moments, waiting for a response, but the crowd remained silent. Do not you think that it is another sign of the strained transatlantic relations? How do you predict the European Countries’ future reactions to the conflicting policies adopted by the Trump administration?

A: The European leaders are essentially vassals of the United States. They do as the Americans tell, but they are very much frustrated by Trump’s undiplomatic style, so no wonder they did not clap.

Trump is a palace hostage of the Deep State. Originally, he was his own man with his own agenda, but he has been tamed by now. But again, I stress, there seems to be a rift within the Deep State between two competing factions, one of them owns Trump while the European vassals take their orders from the other faction. They agree on most issues, but as I said, concerning Iran there seems to be differences in opinion.

A loud message to Washington



TEHRAN (FNA) — On Monday, for the first time Syrian President Bashar al-Assad paid a surprise visit to Iran.

During his stay, the Syrian president met with Leader of Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani and other top officials.

It goes without saying that the goal was to thank Tehran for its support in the Syrian war.

However, the main aim was to show that Iran and Syria, beside their allies, will guard the ‘Axis of Resistance’, come what may. It also sent a clear message to Washington that Damascus will never break ties with Tehran and that Iran will never leave Syria in its war against terrorism and extremism.

This is an important message, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo keeps saying that U.S. forces will work with allies to “expel every last Iranian boot” from Syria. He also says there will be no U.S. money for reconstruction of Syria, and that reinstated U.S. sanctions against Iran are “the strongest in history and will keep getting tougher.”

First of all, Iran has no military bases in Syria but military advisers. They are there at the invitation of the Syrian government and will surely leave the moment Damascus says so.

In addition, Damascus has flatly dismissed U.S. call for a withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria. On the face of it, in Syria’s seven-year-old conflict, Iran has provided vital support to the army and government in their fight against terrorist groups, including ISIL and Al-Qaeda. Iranian forces and Lebanon’s Hezbollah helped Damascus claw back control of major cities and towns from militants and terrorists with a helping hand from Russian airpower. That explains why President Assad says “Whether Iranian forces or Hezbollah withdraw or stay in Syria is not up for discussion because it’s the business of the Syrian government.”

Last but not the least, per international law, Washington cannot claim Iran’s counter-terrorism activities can’t be allowed to continue in Syria, much less threaten that the U.S. is prepared to act unilaterally and impose “the strongest sanctions in history” on Iran unless it takes dramatic steps.

What is true is that Iran has no cutthroat strategy in Syria with the sole purpose to turn the country into a permanent client state to serve its so-called malign interests. Unlike what the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia would like to suggest, Tehran is not building a land bridge from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea to threaten Israel and the entire Middle East.

It’s in fact the ambitious plan by war-party Washington and company to draw a new Middle East map that threatens to destabilize the region. An Iran pull-out from Syria or disengagement from regional issues makes the likelihood of it happening so much more real.

Iran understands the consequences of disengagement. It will create a vacuum that terrorists - including ISIL and Al-Qaeda - would instantly fill. Iran’s enemies are waiting at the gates, ready to fill its place. There is no doubt that without a solid military support from Iran, Syria’s ability to counter terrorist groups would be put at severe risk. It would be a catastrophic blow to regional peace and stability - and a major strategic victory for terrorists and their patrons.

Assad’s visit to Tehran sign of unwavering Syrian-Iran ties: expert

➡ ■ What is the significance of Iran and Syria in foiling the U.S. plots in region?

A: This is one of many key setbacks signaling the irreversible decline of Washington’s unipolar international order. More specifically, Washington’s failure in Syria exposes its declining influence in the region and should have Washington’s traditional allies in the region reevaluating their commitments and investments in aiding and abetting U.S. agendas. The U.S.’ inability to overthrow Syria after serial regime change wars across the Middle East is a sign of weakness Washington has tried and failed to reverse. It will be important for Syria and Iran to consolidate this victory and ensure the patient, systematic eviction of the U.S. from the region continues without allowing an opportunity for a resurgence of the sort of violence and chaos that swept the region in 2011.

■ Could the U.S. and its allies reach their goals in Syria? A: It is likely that as U.S. capabilities degrade in the re-



gion, its “goals” will change from achieving hegemony to preserving what little influence it has remaining. It will do this through subversion, terrorism, and interventionism

whenever and wherever the weakness or miscalculations of its adversaries allow. The U.S. is still capable of prolonging the Syrian conflict - it is still attempting to shield terrorists from their final reckoning in Idlib and has dragged its feet in withdrawing from eastern Syria - and may possibly never withdraw.

Thus while its initial goal was the complete overthrow, division, and destruction of the Syrian state before moving onward to Iran, the U.S. may still be able to prolong the conflict and leave Syria partially divided. This also serves the purpose of forcing Iran to invest heavily in defense spending that could be better used in protecting and growing its economy in the face of persistent U.S. sanctions and economic warfare. Syria and its allies - especially Iran - still have a long fight ahead of them. The U.S. may have failed in its original plans, but its overall objective of eliminating Iran and its allies still drives its Middle Eastern policy.

The effects of U.S. oil sanctions on Venezuela

➡ However, experts in the area say that in the coming weeks it will be possible to see how it will affect the performance of the Gulf Coast industries.

Antoine Halff, principal investigator of the Columbia University Center for Global Energy Policy, explained that “Venezuelan oil is of a unique quality that fits very well with U.S. refineries on the Gulf Coast” and finds an immediate alternative is a difficult task due to several factors.

These refineries located in the states of Louisiana and Texas must be fed for operation with about 30% of heavy oil. Although their costs of production are more expensive, they can compete in the market for the low price of oil, which they have imported into much of Venezuela. According to information provided by the Department of Energy, in 2018 the United States imported an average of 500,000 barrels of Venezuelan crude oil per day.

The director of the UK Energy Institute, Eric Smith, explains that the imported resource represented 2.8% of the 20 million barrels consumed by the United States, but in relation to heavy oil, the percentage rises to 17%. The drop to zero leaves a gap of 3 million and 500 thousand that can not be replaced so easily.

Options to replace the resource are mainly offered by Mexico, Canada, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Mexico and Canada, which are preferred by their border proximity, present specific challenges. Canada does not have a pipeline system that lowers the price of imports from the north to the Gulf coast. The train, currently used for transporting oil, is twice as expensive as other forms of transport. The government of Mexico is currently facing a significant reduction in oil production due to the abandonment of the energy sector and the robbery in its oil pipelines. Work to rebuild national industry and increase production will take at least three years.

For its part, Russia and Saudi Arabia are among the OPEC and non-OPEC countries that have agreed to produce less crude, in order to influence global market prices and sustain barrel prices. Iran, however, elaborates the commercial aggressions that the United States imposed in November 2018.

If OPEC’s efforts to reduce production are consolidated, is directly related to the increase in gasoline. The sanctions against Venezuela, it could contribute to this effect, as happened last year with the blockade against Iran.

The American Automobile Association, which was monitoring the potential impact of sanctions, pointed out that the measures taken in November against the Persian nation had a rebound in gasoline prices “significantly more expensive than in 2017”.

The volatility of unilateral measures ends up being paid by low-income citizens, who must allocate an important part of their budget to



things like gasoline. Even diesel production, an input derived from oil that is used for heating, is at risk by limiting crude oil revenues to US refineries. If there is no option to replace the lack, the price of domestic supplies will increase, affecting low-income households.

To this we must add the distribution systems that are supplied with diesel (trucks, boats and railways) that increase in transport would have an impact on all consumer goods.


On this, we must mention the social work carried out by the Venezuelan government through its subsidiary CITGO, a company that was taken de facto, following the announcement of the embargo.

In Bronx County, New York, the social warming program for low-income people has been running since 2005. The Venezuelan refinery provides this resource to over 40,000 families who do not have the means to pay for private service.

Fuel is supplied to 25 other states, reaching 1 million people with an investment of \$ 500 million.

The U.S. maneuver is transferred to third parties affected by the oil embargo. Thanks to the strategic route of Petrocaribe, traced by Venezuelan foreign policy, the national oil industry has joint ventures and refineries in the Caribbean and Central American countries. The precarious relationship between Washington and the Caribbean countries, which now have to bear the economic shock, allows another scenario not at all desirable for the White House.

The time to press and force a regime change is exacerbated as the bizarre effect of the sanctions affects the White House financially and politically. Threatening a sensitive element like oil, an energy resource that forms the backbone of the global economy, puts at risk the country that currently faces the rest of the world in a clear position of bravado.




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Subject of Tender: (TUBING PIPES 5-1/2"



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★ Tender descriptions:

The Tender holder	Registration No. through national electronic tendering system	Tender No. /Indent No.	Estimated value (Rial)
National Iranian Drilling Company	3190306	TenderNo. PFP/AZD/97/023 Indent No: 48-22-9722005	18,400,200,000

★ Qualitative evaluation of tenders

Method
Based on minimum scoring (60) made in award criterion reflected in the tenders' pre-qualification forms.

- The tenders who have more than four (4) active contracts with NIDC are not allowed to attend in this tender.
- The tenders who have more than two (2) active contracts with same subject (exactly compliance with this subject) with NIDC are not allowed to attend in this tender.

★ Purchasing & Submitting

TenderDocumentDistribution by Company	The distribution of the documents will be started one day after the publishing of second advertisement and ended on the following 15th day thereof.
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div> <p>Distribution Place</p> <p>A) Hall No. 316, 3th floor, Foreign Procurement Dept. (DRILLING PROJECTS), National Iranian Drilling Company, After Airport square, Ahwaz, IRAN. 06134148329 B) Jomhour street, yaghma alley niaz 8th building floor no. - 04 room no 428 -Tehran -Iran - 02166700249</p> </div> <div> <p>Submitting Method</p> <p>Submitting one original Bank Fund Receipt in the amount of ... Iranian Rials under account number 401114004020491 (Shaba No. IR520100004001114006376636) in name of "NIDC Incomes Centralized Fund" issued by I.R. Of Iran Central Bank. Submitting Format Request for the purpose of receiving Tender</p> </div> </div>	<p>Closing date</p> <p>14 Days after the last time of Purchasing</p>
<p>DocumentsReceivingMethod</p>	<p>Address</p> <p>H Hall No.107,1st floor,Tender committee, Operation building, National Iranian Drilling Company, Airport square, Ahwaz, IRAN. Tel: +98-61-34148580 +98-61-34148569</p>

★ Tender Guarantee

Value of guarantee	920,000,000 Rial/ 19,320 Euro
Type of guarantee	<p>• V Bank guarantees or guarantees issued by non-bank institutions that obtain activity license from the central bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran.</p> <p>• V Submitting one original Bank Fund Receipt under account number 4001114006376636 (Shaba No. IR520100004001114006376636) in name of "NIDC saving account" by the central bank of Islamic Republic of Iran.</p> <p>"NIDC saving account" by the central bank of Islamic Republic of Iran.</p>
Duration of credit & quotation	Tender Guarantee and quotation should be valid for 90 days and extendable maximum for onetime in initial validity duration

(Name of department)

More of this & other tenders are accessible by click on:

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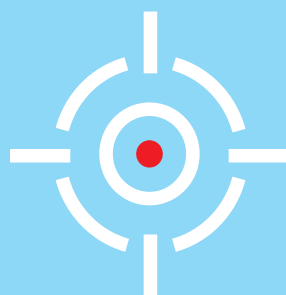
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3,400 infants diagnosed with hearing impairment in Iran last year

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — About 3,400 infants out of one million and 300 newborns in Iran were diagnosed with hearing impairment during the past Iranian calendar year 1396 (March 2017-March 2018), head of the national committee for hearing health said, Fars reported on Saturday.

Mohammad Farhadi added that about 520 thousand hearing impaired citizens are living in Iran and 1,500 infants suffering from profound hearing loss are born in the country annually, he said.

In premature infants, the range of hearing impairment is 20 to 40 percent while the average hearing loss in Iranian full-term infants is 2.7 per 1,000 births, he said.

He said that eleven governmental cochlear implant centers are currently active in Iran.

Over 10,000 Iranians benefit from cochlear implants during past 26 years, he announced.

A cochlear implant is a surgically implanted neuroprosthetic device that provides a sense of sound to a person who suffers severe to profound sensorineural hearing loss.

In July 2018, head of the department of hearing health affiliated with the Ministry of Health Saeed Mahmoudian announced that, and since [the previous Iranian calendar year] 1396 (March 2017-March 2018), out of 1.5 million live births, hearing screening test has been conducted for 1.1 million infants in the health centers and hospitals nationwide, Mahmoudian added.

He said that the Ministry of Health plans to provide a full insurance coverage for infants suffering hearing impairments in current year.



■ World Hearing Day

On World Hearing Day, which is celebrated on March 3, World Health Organization (WHO) pays attention to the importance of early identification and intervention for hearing loss. Many people live with unidentified hearing loss, often failing to realize that they are missing out on certain sounds and words. Checking one's hearing would be the first step towards addressing the issue.

The WHO message is "all people should check their hearing from time to time, especially those who are at a higher risk of hearing loss such as adults above 50 years, those working in noisy places, those listening

to music at high volumes for long periods of time and those experiencing ear problems".

The WHO launched a free app on this occasion that allows people to check their hearing.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics newborn hearing screening can detect possible hearing loss in the first days of an infant's life. If a possible hearing loss is detected, further tests will be done to confirm the results. When hearing loss is confirmed, treatment and early intervention should start immediately. Early intervention refers to programs and services available to babies and their families that help with hearing loss and learning

important communication skills.

Babies learn from the time they are born and one of the ways they learn is through hearing. If they have problems with hearing and do not receive the right treatment and early intervention services, babies will have trouble with speech and language development.

For some babies, early intervention services may include the use of sign language and/or hearing aids. Studies show that hearing-impaired children who receive appropriate early intervention services by age 6 months usually develop good language and learning skills.

Around 466 million people worldwide have disabling hearing loss, and 34 million of these are children, World Health Organization deafness and hearing loss report states. It is estimated that by 2050 over 900 million people will suffer disabling hearing loss.

Hearing loss may be caused by genetic causes, complications at birth, certain infectious diseases, chronic ear infections, the use of particular drugs, exposure to excessive noise, and ageing. However, 60 percent of childhood hearing loss is due to preventable causes.

Unaddressed hearing loss incurs an annual global cost of \$750 billion. Interventions to prevent, identify and address hearing loss are cost-effective and can bring great benefit to individuals.

People with hearing loss can benefit from early identification; use of hearing aids, cochlear implants and other assistive devices; captioning and sign language; and other forms of educational and social support.

Application to check authenticity of food products

HEALTH **TEHRAN** — The Food and Drug Administration of Iran (FDAI) will launch a system on TTAC (Track-n-Trace and Authentication Control) application through which users can check authenticity of food products, an official with FDAI announced, Tasnim reported on Saturday.

The application, which was previously used for medicine, provides several services. Along with scanning the barcode and Checking UID, users have the possibility to check the scratch-code installed on the item in the system for authenticating. It is also possible to obtain information about certain drugs using its name or ATC code.

In reporting section of the application, consumers have access to further information about the product.

The application also provides a facility for shoppers to know more about smuggling of food products, he explained.

Since May 2017, Iranian manufactures are required to include 'traffic light' labels on food packaging to signify the fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt content of the food stuff by the end of summer.

The food items have been tagged with the traffic light labels to help consumers to make healthier choices considering the amounts of unhealthy substances in food items.

The color-coded food labels are intended to help shoppers know at a glance whether a product contains a low, medium or high amount of fat, saturated fat, salt, sugar and calories and make choices for a more healthier and balanced diet.

In December 2018, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences announced that obesity and overweight have grown 5.5 folds over the past four decades in Iran.

Studies show that salt intake of Iranians amounts to 10.6 germs a day which almost doubles global standards.

Unhealthy dietary habits are the key driver behind developing non-communicable diseases and switching from healthy traditional food to fast foods which contain high amounts of fat and sodium and low fiber are the causes of such disorders.

Fast food delivers more calories than decades ago

Fast food fans today are ordering off menus that have grown more apt to make them fat.

Portion sizes have risen dramatically over the past three decades at the most popular fast food restaurants in the United States, a new study has found.

As a result, the amount of calories and excess sodium has also increased among fast food offerings, said lead author Megan McCrory, a research associate professor with the Boston University College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences.

Average portion size nearly quadrupled for fast food entrees, and more than quadrupled for desserts between 1986 and 2016, McCrory and her team discovered.

(Source: webmd.com)

Prenatal vitamins may help decrease autism risk in infants

Prenatal vitamins may help to lower the risk of autism in children, even for high-risk families.

In prior studies, the use of prenatal vitamins, specifically folate (which is taken as a dietary supplement known as folic acid), has been shown to significantly lower the risk of developing autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Now, new research published February 27 in JAMA Psychiatry, claims that the benefits of prenatal vitamins also extend to high-risk families as well.

Families that have a child with autism are at high risk of having another child with ASD.

According to the new study, use of prenatal vitamins cut the risk of developing ASD in younger siblings of children with ASD by half.

"Evidence is building for an important role of gestational exposures, including nutrition, in relation to autism. Research from imaging and other studies of the brain show that processes affected in autism occur during pregnancy. Studies have repeatedly shown that taking folic acid supplements were associated with protection from autism in the general population," Rebecca J. Schmidt, PhD, assistant professor in the department of public health sciences and the MIND

Institute, UC Davis School of Medicine, and first author of the study told Healthline.

■ Prenatal vitamin controversy

Folic acid supplementation, while generally recommended, has not been without criticism.

Research presented by researchers from Johns Hopkins University caused a frenzy in 2016. They found that moms with extremely high levels of folic acid and vitamin B-12 in their blood were linked to an increased autism risk of nearly 18 percent.

(Source: healthline.com)

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Serbia planning for easier travel to Iran: envoy

TOURISM **TEHRAN** — Belgrade ambassador to Tehran, Dragan Todorovic, has said that he is planning to take measures to make travelling to Iran easier for Serbian nationals, ILNA reported on Friday.



Dragan Todorovic, Serbia's ambassador to Iran, in an undated photo

Although it's easier for our tourists to travel to Turkey, we want to do practices that make trips to Iran easier, Todorovic said. Talking on travel interactions with Iran, the ambassador noted that there was no need to obtain a visa for traveling to Serbia [by Iranian nationals] in the past year, but now it requires a visa. But this is certainly not a problem for Iranians traveling to Serbia. They can easily get visas, he explained. In August 2017, Serbia abolished visas for Iranians in a move to boost tourism, improve growth and reach out to non-European markets. The Balkan country received over 15,000 Iranian nationals since the visa-waiver program came into effect. However, it scrapped visa-free entry for Iranians out of concerns that some may "abuse the system" as an avenue to enter other European states.

These ancient artifacts honor Egypt's powerful queens

For centuries, the men of ancient Egypt have been the center of attention, but today women rule over ancient Egypt. A new exhibition, "Queens of Egypt," at the National Geographic Museum in Washington, D.C., highlights the unique ways women wielded power in the land of the pyramids.



With more than 300 ancient Egyptian artifacts on display—from shabtis from Queen Nefer-tari's tomb to statues depicting the leonine goddess of battle, Sekhmet—the exhibit shows the myriad ways that ancient Egyptians worshiped and respected fierce female leadership. Kara Cooney, professor of Egyptology at the University of California in Los Angeles, provides insight into this phenomenon in her recently published book When Women Ruled, an inspiration for the new exhibit. Her examination of female power profiles six ancient leaders—Merneith, Neferusobek, Hatshepsut, Nefertiti, Tawosret, and Cleopatra—and the existing power structure that enabled them to rule thousands of years ago.

(Source: National Geographic)



ROUND THE GLOBE

Cueva de las Manos, Rio Pinturas

The Cueva de las Manos, Rio Pinturas, contains an exceptional assemblage of cave art, with many painted rock shelters, including a cave, with magnificent pictographies surrounded by an outstanding landscape, with the river running through a deep canyon, which were executed between 9,300 and 1,300 years ago.



It takes its name (Cave of the Hands) from the stenciled outlines of human hands in the cave, but there are also many depictions of animals, such as guanacos (Lama guanicoe), still commonly found in the region, as well as hunting scenes that depict animals and human figures interacting in a dynamic and naturalistic manner. The entrance to the Cueva is screened by a rock wall covered by many hand stencils. Within the rock shelter itself there are five concentrations of rock art, later figures and motifs often superimposed upon those from earlier periods. The paintings were executed with natural mineral pigments - iron oxides (red and purple), kaolin (white), and natrojarosite (yellow), manganese oxide (black) - ground and mixed with some form of binder. The rock art, its natural environment and the archaeological sites on this region are some of the very important reasons that made this area a focus for archaeological research for more than 25 years. They made an impact on the observer due not only the deep gorge walls surrounded by a privileged landscape, but also by the artistic compositions, variety of motifs and its polychromies.

(Source: UNESCO)

A day of pilgrimage to Shah-e Cheragh

1 → There is also a modest museum in the northwestern corner of the courtyard, next to the shrine, which showcases shrine-related objects, including some highly prized old Qurans and an exquisite door embellished with silver and gold.

Visitors are welcome to enter the courtyard in the middle of the complex but entrance to the shrine is not usually permitted to non-Muslims. Photography with large digital cameras are not permitted.

Women must wear chador (open cloaks that leave the face exposed) within the whole shrine complex, available for free at the women's entrance.

The mausoleum has underwent various restoration projects over time. It was registered on the National Heritage List in 1939.

Here is a select of comments that visitors to the Shah-e Cheragh have posted to TripAdvisor, one of the most popular travel websites in the world:

■ "Pray place"

So nice place and many people is there for pray and I like here so much, in the night time very nice place. (Liam P. from Rome, Italy; reviewed January 2019)

■ "Just amazing!"

Wonderful shrine, and the attendant

was so kind and helpful...Amazing mirrored spaces, but the colors are derived from the illuminating lights, not the myriad mirrors. If you are in Shiraz, this is not to be missed. (R-R2025 from Macclesfield, the UK; reviewed January 2019)

■ "Most beautiful mosque"

The interior of the mosque is amazing, covered in different color mirrors...a local guide takes you round for free. Not an in depth tour but they are there to answer any questions you may have. (FinnianOD from London, United Kingdom; reviewed December 2018)

■ "Must see"

This place is very famous among tourists and if you are lucky and get a guide, then the visit will be great, free entrance. (Piotr M. from Warsaw, Poland; reviewed October 2018)

■ "Jaw-dropping mirror mosaics"

Decided to drop by this place on my last day in Shiraz. I was completely floored when I entered the first shrine. The entire ceiling and walls are completely covered in multi-colored mirror mosaics or different shapes and sizes giving the impression that the entire place is covered with shimmering diamonds... "Bryan G. from Perth, Australia; reviewed September 2018)



People visit Shah-e Cheragh in Shiraz, southern Iran.

Passage of time an opportunity to build bridge between human beings: UNESCO chief

HERITAGE **TEHRAN** — The passage of time is an opportunity to build a bridge between human beings, UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay has said in message to a Tehran celebration on Noruz.

Noruz is the beginning of a new year and a wave of spring. While we are all eagerly awaiting the warmer days and resurrection of nature again, she said to a gathering of Iranian and regional officials, diplomats and artists at Tehran's Milad Tower on February 28, ISNA reported.

I'm cheerful that you celebrate [in memory of] this event in the fascinating city of Tehran, performing music and other shows, which are in fact a beam of the richness of cultural expressions that spark the lives of millions of people, she added.

Noruz, which usually falls on March 21st every year,

marks the beginning of spring across a vast geographical area including Iran, Azerbaijan, India, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Iraq that share it on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO.

According to the UNESCO, Noruz promotes the values of peace and solidarity between generations and within families, as well as reconciliation and neighborliness, thus contributing to cultural diversity and friendship among peoples and various communities.

Traditions that are practiced in Noruz vary from place to place, ranging from leaping over fires and streams in Iran to tightrope walking, lighting candles at house doors, traditional games such as horse racing or the traditional wrestling practiced in Kyrgyzstan.

Engraved signatures of prehistoric masons found in Iran

HERITAGE **TEHRAN** — Iranian archaeologists have discovered some huge building stones that bear signatures thought to be engraved by prehistoric masons, ILNA reported

The engraved autographs date back to the time of Cyrus the Great, the founder of Achaemenid Empire, which at its greatest extent stretched from the Balkans to the Indus Valley, spanning 5.5 million square kilometers, according to archaeologist Afshin Yazdani.

The huge stones were found in an Achaemenid-era mine in Sivand some 32 km from Pasargadae. Apparently, the stones were left there, since Cyrus the Great passed

away so that his constructing plan never finished, the archaeologist explained.

Yazdani assumes that the new discovery will help historians, anthropologists and sociologists among others to better understand the mechanism and system through which the labor force was employed some 2500 years ago.

Pasargadae is situated on a plain northeast of Persepolis. According to tradition, Cyrus the Great chose the site because it lay near the scene of his victory over Astyages the Mede (550).

In 2004 the ruins were designated a UNESCO World Heritage site.



How to become a 'digital nomad'

By Kristin Wong

Seeing the world while holding down a full-time job sounds too good to be true, but with the right planning, equipment and support, it can be done.

More than 4.8 million American independent workers describe themselves as digital nomads: extended travelers who work remotely with the help of digital tools like a laptop or smartphone, according to a report by MBO Partners, a work force management company.

"It was amazing to have the flexibility to build a temporary home anywhere in the world — as long as it had internet," said Stephanie Lee, a writing consultant who backpacked through Asia for nine months in 2016, using apps like Slack and Google Translate to organize work and travel.

But whether you travel frequently or want to stay put in one country, the logistics of digital nomad-ing can be extraordinarily complicated. Yes, you'll need to store your belongings and sell your car, but here are a few not-so-obvious to tasks to handle before you join their ranks.

■ Get your boss on board

If you don't work remotely already, it might be something you can negotiate with an employer, if you have the kind of job that allows for it. Make the case for your professional value, similar to asking for a raise, then suggest that working from home can boost productivity, using evidence to support your case.

If they're reluctant, suggest working from home once a week with the option to

revisit full-time remote work later. "When that looks successful, gradually ramp up to two or three days per week and finally ask if you can just go fully remote," Ms. Lee said.

Set up your remote office so that you have the tools you need: a Wi-Fi hotspot, a solid pair of earbuds with a mic, and a portable charger, to name a few. List your tasks and what you need to get each one done on the road. At the very least, you'll probably need a meeting app like Zoom, a communication app like Slack, and a project management app like Trello. Establish your working hours when colleagues can get hold of you. Schedule time for exploring, too.

■ Get your documents in order

If you're traveling abroad, make sure your passport is current. Most countries require it to be valid within six months of your last travel date. You might need a visa, but most countries don't require one unless your stay is longer than 90 days. There are exceptions, though, so check the State Department's website for information on each country. If you're overseas living as an expat when you need to renew, you'll have to visit a U.S. embassy in your destination country. The State Department has instructions for applying on its website.

If you're bringing pets, they'll need a vaccination and pet health certificate from your veterinarian, at the very least. Many countries have stricter guidelines, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture lists requirements for each country. Travel can be uncomfortable and dangerous for some pets, so talk to a veterinarian to ensure

you're prepared to fly, take road trips, or live in new environments.

■ Get a physical address

Digital nomads need a home base for mail, bills, banking and employer records. If you don't plan on keeping your own place, this could be a parent or friend's house. Some nomads rent a physical mailing address with services like Traveling Mailbox or Earth Class Mail, which also forward mail to your destination and send email snapshots. You can also temporarily forward mail with the U.S.P.S. Premium Forwarding Service. Alternatively, the U.S.P.S. allows you to put a hold on your mail for up to 30 days.

Set up online access for bank accounts and bills, sign up for paperless statements and ask employers to pay you digitally or via direct deposit. Research your bank's A.T.M. network for taking out cash abroad, and ensure you're using credit cards that don't come with costly foreign transaction fees. Find this information on your bank or credit card company's website, or just call them directly.

■ Pick a destination (and budget for it)

Calculate where you can afford to travel depending on your budget and time frame. (Apps like Destigo and The Earth Awaits will do this for you). Once you know where you want to go, look for long-term lodging with tools like Airbnb, Hostelworld, and Inclusive (which was built for travelers who face racial discrimination). Check reviews with an eye for internet and Wi-Fi access, proximity to public work spaces, street noises and other distractions.

Budget for new expenses like public transportation, coffee shop visits and food — as a tourist, you'll probably want to enjoy a few local restaurant meals. Some of your current expenses might offset these costs. You probably won't need to pay utilities or fill your car with gas every week, for instance. If you won't need your car, switch to a comprehensive-only policy that offers a basic level of protection. Ms. Lee switched her car insurance coverage to "storage mode," which cost \$50 for the year.

■ Get insured

You'll need health insurance, too. "The easiest option for digital nomads is to maintain a home base somewhere in the States and keep an address where they're registered to," said Chad Rixse, a financial planner. "That way they can continue to use their personal health insurance, which often covers health care abroad to a certain extent."

Check your policy to see what health issues are included abroad. Life-threatening emergencies are usually covered, but other incidents probably aren't. Even if your standard insurance covers you in case of an emergency, you'll probably have to pay out-of-pocket for follow-up care. Travel health insurance lasts a few weeks and costs a few hundred dollars. You could also sign up for international coverage with your current carrier, which will run you considerably more. There's also expat insurance — providers like Aetna International and Cigna Global offer plans that cover you while you're working abroad.

(Source: The New York Times)

Increasing methane levels in the atmosphere threaten efforts to fight climate change

Methane is produced by cattle, rotting vegetation, coal mines, fires, and natural gas plants. It is more potent than carbon dioxide but breaks down more easily.

A recent study shows a surge in methane emissions in recent years, after decades of being under control. What could this mean for all the global efforts regarding climate change?

In a new study, the American Geophysical Union said that the methane emissions saw a surge from 2014 to 2017.

Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas that may be produced from cattle, decaying vegetation, fires, natural gas plants, and coal mines. It is more potent than carbon dioxide in terms of causing atmospheric warming but can be found in lower levels than carbon dioxide and breaks down more easily as well.

Methane emissions, particularly from fossil fuels, increased in the atmosphere during the 20th century, but it had been stabilized by the start of the 21st century.

Methane emissions increasing
However, the new study found that methane emissions began increasing again since 2007. The rise accelerated in 2014 and has since continued.

While researchers are unsure as to what exactly caused the increase, they surmise that intense farming in areas such as in Africa and other tropical regions may be involved in that the rising number of



cattle produces more methane.

On the other hand, other experts are concerned that the increase may

be because the natural chemicals in the atmosphere that help break down methane may be changing because of the

Methane emissions, particularly from fossil fuels, increased in the atmosphere during the 20th century, but it had been stabilized by the start of the 21st century.

increase in temperature, thereby making them less able to deal with the gas.

Simply put, it's possible that the planet may be losing its capability to break down pollutants, possibly triggering even more warming.

What could this mean in terms of the global efforts to combat the effects of climate change?

Serious efforts being made

Nations have since agreed to make serious efforts to keep the temperature rise to just 1.5 degrees Celsius, largely by cutting down on carbon emissions.

This was hard enough as it is, but with increasing methane emissions coming into the mix of greenhouse gases, it will be even harder. If there is nothing that can be done about the methane emissions, then it's possible nations will have to cut back even more carbon emissions.

"It is particularly alarming because we are still not sure why atmospheric methane levels are rising across the planet," said Professor Euan Nisbet, one of the study's lead authors, also noting that nations are facing a worrying problem, whether the rise in methane is due to an actual increase in emissions or whether the planet is losing its ability to break down the gas.

As such, it is imperative to unravel exactly what is going on as soon as possible.

(Source: techtimes.com)

First evidence of planet-wide groundwater system on Mars, new study reveals

Mars Express has revealed the first geological evidence of a system of ancient interconnected lakes that once lay deep beneath the Red Planet's surface, five of which may contain minerals crucial to life.

Mars appears to be an arid world, but its surface shows compelling signs that large amounts of water once existed across the planet. We see features that would have needed water to form – branching flow channels and valleys, for example – and just last year Mars Express detected a pool of liquid water beneath the planet's south pole.

A new study now reveals the extent of underground water on ancient Mars that was previously only predicted by models.

"Early Mars was a watery world, but as the planet's climate changed this water retreated below the surface to form pools and 'groundwater'," says lead author Francesco Salese of Utrecht University, the Netherlands.

"We traced this water in our study, as its scale and role is a matter of debate, and we found the first geological evidence of a planet-wide groundwater system on Mars."

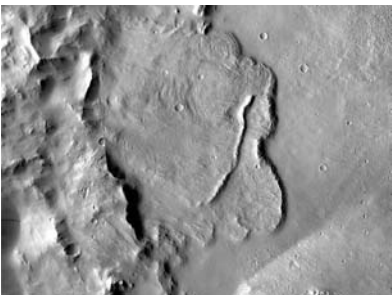
Salese and colleagues explored 24 deep, enclosed craters in the northern hemisphere of Mars, with floors lying roughly 4000 m below martian 'sea level' (a level that, given the planet's lack of seas, is arbitrarily defined on Mars based on elevation and atmospheric pressure).

Presence of water

They found features on the floors of these craters that could only have formed in the presence of water. Many craters contain multiple features, all at depths of 4000 to 4500 m – indicating that these craters once contained pools and flows of water that changed and receded over time.

Features include channels etched into crater walls, valleys carved out by sapping groundwater, dark, curved deltas thought to have formed as water levels rose and fell, ridged terraces within crater walls formed by standing water, and fan-shaped deposits of sediment associated with flowing water.

The water level aligns with the pro-



posed shorelines of a putative Martian ocean thought to have existed on Mars between three and four billion years ago.

"We think that this ocean may have connected to a system of underground lakes that spread across the entire planet," adds co-author Gian Gabriele Ori, director of the Università D'Annunzio's International Research School of Planetary Sciences, Italy.

The history of water on Mars is a complex one, and is intricately linked to understanding whether or not life ever arose there – and, if so, where, when, and how it did so.

The team also spotted signs of minerals within five of the craters that are linked to the emergence of life on Earth: various clays, carbonates, and silicates. The finding adds weight to the idea that these basins on Mars may once have had the ingredients to host life.

Mars' crust

Moreover, they were the only basins deep enough to intersect with the water-saturated part of Mars' crust for long periods of time, with evidence perhaps still buried in the sediments today.

Exploring sites like these may thus reveal the conditions suitable for past life, and are therefore highly relevant to astrobiological missions such as ExoMars – a joint ESA and Roscosmos endeavor. While the ExoMars Trace Gas Orbiter is already studying Mars from above, the next mission will launch next year. It comprises a rover – recently named after Rosalind Franklin – and a surface science platform, and will target and explore Martian sites thought to be key in the hunt for signs of life on Mars.

(Source: phys.org)

Scientists overcome repetitive DNA to sequence the genome of soybean pest

It was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle for which all the pieces are identical, but with only one solution.

Iowa State University researchers overcame the quirks of the soybean cyst nematode's DNA to sequence its genome, paving the way for better management practices to combat the No. 1 pest that threatens Iowa soybeans.

Soybean cyst nematodes are parasitic roundworms that infect the roots of soybeans and can devastate yields in infected fields. Nematode populations build up in fields and stay for years, meaning infested acres become a perennial management concern for farmers.

Crop breeders have studied genes in soybeans that can boost their resistance to the nematodes, but sequencing the nematode genome fills in important gaps in science's understanding of these pests that had remained stubbornly blank for years, said Thomas Baum, senior author of the study and Charles F. Curtiss Distinguished Professor and chair of plant pathology and microbiology.

Virulence of the pest

"Researchers look at resistance on the soybean side of the equation, but it's been difficult getting comprehensive work done on the biology and virulence of the pest because a workable genome had not been available," Baum said. "Our work is a giant step in enabling novel research."

The genetics of the soybean cyst nematode present challenges that kept scientists from assembling the full genome for years. The research team sequenced the genome first by sequencing smaller portions and then piecing those portions together into the full genome. About a third of the nematode's 29,769 genes are repetitive, meaning many of the genes come in multiple copies, said Rick Masonbrink, an associate scientist in the ISU Office of Biotechnology and lead author of the study. The repetitive DNA greatly complicated the sequencing and assembly



process, Masonbrink said.

Andrew Severin, a co-author of the study and manager of the ISU Genome Informatics Facility, likened it to a jigsaw puzzle of a blue sky in which all the pieces are identical in shape and color. It's difficult to figure out how all those repetitive pieces fit together, Severin said. But a method known as long-read sequencing technology made it possible to assemble a high-quality genome.

The fully assembled genome

Now, the fully assembled genome could lead to the development of better pest management strategies, Baum said. Having a fully assembled genome on hand will make it possible for scientists to compare different nematode populations at the gene level.

When the nematodes infect a soybean plant, they battle with the soybean's natural defenses. The genome can help plant breeders understand how the nematodes manage to override the soybean's defenses.

Funding for the research was provided by the North Central Soybean Research Program and the National Science Foundation I/UCRC Center for Arthropod Management Technologies and its industry partners.

Parijat Juvele, an assistant scientist in plant pathology and microbiology; Tom Maier, an assistant scientist in plant pathology and microbiology; and Arum Setharam, an associate scientist in the Office of Biotechnology; are also co-authors of the study.

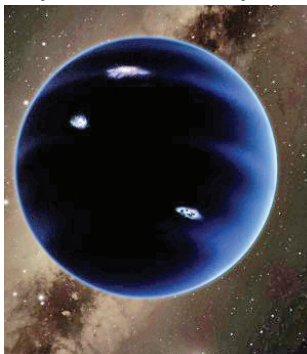
(Source: newswise.com)

New studies support existence of massive 9th planet

Pluto used to be the ninth planet, but it lost that distinction several years back. It became the first of many dwarf planets in the outer reaches of the Solar System, but there's a hint something larger may lurk out there. Scientists have been on the hunt for a true ninth planet since 2014, and a pair of new studies provide more evidence that such an object exists.

The Kuiper Belt exists in the space out past the orbit of Neptune, so Pluto and the other objects in this region of space are often called Kuiper Belt Objects (KBO). While studying the orbits of KBOs discovered in recent years, astronomers Michael Brown and Konstantin Batygin of Caltech realized there was an unusual clustering or orbits. According to the 2014 paper, this suggests the existence of a super-Earth body in the outer Solar System.

Thus far, no one has been able to turn up direct evidence the so-called "Planet Nine" exists, but the new studies add weight to the hypothesis. Fred Adams from the University of Michigan believes that Planet Nine will be spotted within the next 10 to 15 years. In his latest study, Adams used computer models of the solar system's evolution to simulate how Planet Nine might fit into our little corner of the universe.



According to Adams, the analysis suggests that Planet Nine is smaller and closer to the sun than previously thought. The team's model predicts Planet Nine is about five to ten times as massive as Earth and orbits approximately 37 billion miles (60 billion kilometers) away. That estimate makes sense, as astronomers have detected similarly sized planets in other solar systems, but there aren't any among the known planets here.

Another study from Brown and Batygin examines what we know of the clustered KBO orbits. The researchers looked for bias in each observation, finding a one in 500 chance the observations were inaccurate.

That points to something causing KBOs to organize into these skewed orbits. Other teams have suggested the cumulative gravity from many small objects could affect orbits like this.

(Source: extremetech.com)

Scientists discover nightmarish bacteria that eats parasitic worms from inside out

Scientists have come across a new species of bacteria they're calling 'golden death' – microorganisms that can devour their parasitic roundworm hosts in hours by eating them from the inside out.

Rather a gory way to go if you're a parasitic worm, but these Chryseobacterium nematophagum bacteria could prove very useful in helping control the spread of such worms (or nematodes) in plants, animal livestock, and even human beings.

Translated literally, Chryseobacterium nematophagum means "golden bacteria, nematode-eating", a name chosen because of the golden hue that can be seen while the microorganisms are feasting.

Before roundworms attack their final host – an animal or a human – they first feed on bacteria as they develop. Usually those bacteria are disabled before they reach the parasite's stomach, making them harmless.

"This study describes a newly discovered bacterial species, called Chryseobacterium nematophagum – or golden death bacillus – that effectively kills a wide range of important nematode parasites," says one of the researchers, parasitologist Antony Page from the University of Glasgow in the UK.

The 'golden death' bacterium was found by extracting bacteria from free-living roundworms collected in rotting fruit in France and India, and then feeding it to nematode worm larvae of the Caenorhabditis elegans species (often used to study parasitic roundworms).

The C. elegans larvae fed with C. nematophagum bacteria were immobilized within an hour, with half the larvae killed within three to four hours. All the worms had been killed off by the time seven hours had passed, and after 24 hours only the exoskeletons of the worms were left.

It looks like the worm larvae didn't see the threat coming either – C. elegans worms are normally experts at avoiding danger, but they happily stayed on the 'bacterial lawns' cultivated in the lab, feeding on the C. nematophagum bacteria until they got consumed from the inside out.

(Source: sciencealert.com)

Spider silk could be used as robotic muscle

Researchers have found that spider silk produces a strong twisting motion when exposed to humidity, and may be usable for future artificial muscles or actuators.

Spider silk, already known as one of the strongest materials for its weight, turns out to have another unusual property that might lead to new kinds of artificial muscles or robotic actuators, researchers have found.

The resilient fibers, the team discovered, respond very strongly to changes in humidity. Above a certain level of relative humidity in the air, they suddenly contract and twist, exerting enough force to potentially be competitive with other materials being explored as actuators -- devices that move to perform some activity such as controlling a valve.

Researchers recently discovered a property of spider silk called supercontraction, in which the slender fibers can suddenly shrink in response to changes in moisture.

The new finding is that not only do the threads contract, they also twist at the same time, providing a strong torsional force. "It's a new phenomenon," Buehler says.

"We found this by accident initially," Liu says. "My colleagues and I wanted to study the influence of humidity on spider dragline silk."

To do so, they suspended a weight from the silk to make a kind of pendulum, and enclosed it in a chamber where they could control the relative humidity inside.

"When we increased the humidity, the pendulum started to rotate. It was out of our expectation. It really shocked me."

The team tested a number of other materials, including human hair, but found no such twisting motions in the others they tried. But Liu said he started thinking right away that this phenomenon "might be used for artificial muscles."

(Source: sciencedaily.com)

Reduced salinity of seawater wreaks havoc on coral chemistry

New research confirms that drastic changes in ocean salinity from, for example, severe freshwater flooding, as recently experienced off the coast of north-east Queensland from abnormal monsoonal conditions, provoke a similar stress response in corals as extreme heating, resulting in "freshwater bleaching" and if unabated, coral death.

Researchers from the ARC Center of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies at James Cook University (Coral CoE) and University of Technology Sydney (UTS) report that extreme and sudden changes in salinity, or the ocean salt concentration, cause a biochemical response in corals that is similar to marine heatwaves, but in some ways, more damaging to their cells ability to function.

"Corals are sensitive organisms, known to only tolerate slight changes in their environment. Thriving in clear, sunlit waters - the majority of reef-building corals are found in tropical and subtropical waters with a salinity between 32 to 42 parts per thousand," said senior author Prof David Miller of Coral CoE.

"During the recent flooding, there are reports that nearshore reefs were exposed to roughly half the normal ocean salinity."

"Our research shows that this kind of environmental



change causes a shock response in corals that prevents normal cell function."

A biological blueprint

The researchers used the sequenced genome - a biological blueprint - of the common reef-building coral, Acropora millepora to detect changes in the coral's biology.

"Using the sophisticated labs at the National Sea Simulator, we put both young and adult corals under a

salinity stress test to see how they respond to differing salinity concentrations," said co-author Dr. Jean-Baptiste Raina of UTS.

"We found that there was a common response between both coral life-stages - with the younger corals being more sensitive to low salinity conditions, but faring slightly better with exposure over time."

"In general, we found that the coral's cells launch a similar chemical response to reduced salinity as they do for heat stress," Prof Miller explained.

"However, unlike the heat stress response, corals exposed to reduced salinity experience a complete collapse of their internal cellular protein balance, suggesting that their cells are in deep trouble."

Although the central Great Barrier Reef may have been spared mass thermal bleaching due to higher-than-normal ocean temperatures this summer, there are many coastal reefs left battling dramatic changes in water conditions from the massive plumes of floodwater.

With the frequency and severity of heavy rainfall and runoff events predicted to increase by 2050, management interventions to increase the resilience of reefs are needed now more than ever.

(Source: eurekaalert.org)

Tehran to host international congress on social work

SOCIETY d e s k **TEHRAN** — The 2nd international social work congress and the 34th national social work conference with a theme of ‘social work and resilience’ will be held in Tehran on April 18, head of Iran Association of Social Workers has announced.

National social work conference is held annually on the occasion of national social work day, observed on March 20, which is concurrent with the international social work day, ISNA quoted Seyed Hasan Mousavi Chalak as saying on Saturday.

Every year, world social work day is celebrated the third Tuesday of March, and events are organized throughout the month of March, which is the key day in the year that social workers worldwide stand together to celebrate the achievements of the profession and take the theme message into their communities, workplaces and to their governments to raise awareness of the social work contributions and need for further action.

This year, it is celebrated on March 19, with a theme of ‘Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships’, focusing on the social relationships between people’s essential relationships with each other, their environments and their futures.

The conference is organized in partnership with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association, social work universities and the IFSW federation in Asia-Pacific region, Mousavi Chalak noted.

“Representatives from over 10 countries will attend the international congress,” he further added.

The congress will discuss social resilience to train and empower people on dealing with current economic condition and other social challenges, he said, adding that promotion of dialogue culture and human relationships can provide a more enjoyable life along with educational, economic and social components.

He further expressed hope that theses’ topics in PhD and senior university levels pushes toward social resilience in order to provide effective training materials for the public.

Persian leopard cubs found dead in southwestern Iran

ENVIRONMENT d e s k **TEHRAN** — Two Persian leopard cubs have been found dead in Choram county located in the southwestern province of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, the provincial department of environment (DOE) chief has said.

“A group of locals reported the department of environment that two carcasses of leopards with their hands cut off have been spotted,” Mehr quoted Mohsen Jafari Bastami as saying on Friday.

After the report, DOE forces have been dispatched to the area to deliver the carcasses, he added.

There is no clear cause of death yet, while coordination has been made to determine the cause, he concluded.

This is while Tehran Zoological Garden has gone far to use artificial insemination and captive natural mating to breed Persian leopards preventing the precious species from extinction.

The Persian leopard is listed as Endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List; the population is estimated at fewer than 871–1,290 mature individuals and considered declining.

According to DOE, 156 leopards have been killed in Iran from 2005 to 2014, nearly 20 leopards a year. Studies indicate that currently there are less than 500 leopards nationwide.

Persian leopards are mainly threatened by poaching, depletion of their prey base due to poaching, human disturbances, habitat loss due to deforestation, fire, agricultural expansion, overgrazing, and infrastructure development.

In Iran, primary threats are habitat disturbances followed by illegal hunting and excess of livestock in the leopard habitats. The leopards’ chances for survival outside protected areas appear very slim.

LEARN ENGLISH

Cheese Lovers

A: Hello everyone my name is Laurie and I want to welcome you to this course. We will learn all about one of the oldest yet most delicious foods on this planet; **cheese!** Let’s get started! A: Cheese is usually categorized into four types: soft, semi- soft semi-hard and hard. The designation refers to the amount of **moisture** in the cheese, which directly affects its **texture**. Making cheese is an ancient practice, dating back thousands of years, and the home cheese maker can usually find recipes for cheese that falls into any of the four categories.

A: Soft cheese includes cottage cheese, cream cheese, ricotta, brie, bleu, Roquefort, mozzarella, muenster and similar cheeses. These cheeses generally **pair** well with fruit or meats, or can be used as breakfast cheeses in an omelet nor as pasta fillings. They are usually **mildly flavored** and very high in moisture.

A: American, Colby, co-jack and similar cheeses are in the semi-soft category. These are slightly stronger in flavor and cover a wide range of uses. Co-jack cheese, a blend of Colby and Monterey jack is one of the most popular. This allows the sharper flavor of Colby to be combined with the milder jack cheese, and also **melts** better than plain Colby. Grilled cheese sandwiches often use American cheese, and Mexican cheeses such as Asadero and Queso Fresco are becoming more popular.

A: Hard cheeses include Parmesan, Romano, Asiago, Swiss, Gruyere and others. Parmesan and Romano are most familiar as the grated powder used to top spaghetti, but they are also used as accompaniments for fruit, nuts and other appetizer items. Swiss is a popular sandwich cheese and melts well, unlike some other hard cheeses.

■ **Key vocabulary**
cheese: solid product made from milk
moisture: a small quantity of water
texture: the way something feels
pair: to match something
mild: soft, not strong
flavor: the way something tastes
melt: to become liquid

■ **Supplementary vocabulary**
blue: a type of cheese
mature: fully aged
organism: a form of life

National document on rare diseases drafted

SOCIETY d e s k **TEHRAN** — A comprehensive document on rare diseases has been drafted in a collaborative initiative between the Ministry of Health and NGOs active in this field, head of the transplantation and treatment of diseases department at the Ministry of Health has announced.

The document’s main purpose is to have a comprehensive source of information to identify all kinds special and rare diseases, along with offering the most efficient ways of support for the patients, IRNA quoted Mehdi Shadnoosh as saying on Friday.

Although, rare disease plans and programs have been underway in the country since past years, it is essential to have a comprehensive document to reach a common approach acceptable in international level, he stated.

The Ministry took steps toward drafting the document in cooperation with the NGOs active in this field, and it is scheduled to fully prepare the document during the next year, he said.

He went on to say that among rare diseases identified worldwide, 280 are common in Iran.

To raise awareness about the diseases



and observe the rare disease day, the 10th international rare diseases congress will be held in Tehran on March, 2, with a theme of “RARE but not ALONE!” in order to support patients suffering rare diseases

as well as presenting latest scientific and social achievements in this regard, he noted.

Rare Disease Day takes place annually on February 28 worldwide, aiming to raise awareness amongst the general public and

Land subsidence threatening the capital

By Mina Izadi

TEHRAN — Sinkholes and fissures opening up the earth are gradually encircling Iran’s capital city, threatening local infrastructure and people’s homes.

The latest data harvested from Tehran’s satellite cities show that the ground is cracking open in some areas, because of water crisis that has worsened as the groundwater exploitation has increased.

The region is struggling with a three-decade-long drought and growing desertification, as is the whole country.

A 2018 report from Circle of Blue, focusing on water issues in Iran, says the water scarcity in Iran has been deteriorated as the city’s population has grown to 8.7 million. The report also names climate change, population growth, mass migration, political instability, and resource mismanagement as factors pushing the country on its track to absolute drought.

The city has increasingly relied on underground water sources as opposed to rainwater; this has made the water saltier day by day.

At the same time, a great deal of the dwindling water supply gets diverted to thirsty and traditional agriculture.

As a result, land in the area is physically slumping in on itself. The ground around Tehran, sitting 1,200 meters above sea level, has sunk an average of 20 centimeters per year, according to the latest results of an underway project in the city on the restoration of Tehran groundwater sources.

More detailed data provided by Tehran Regional Water Authority, Tehran Districts 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20, comprising the central and southern part of the capital, are more prone to land subsidence compared to the north area.

According to Hassan Razavi, head of the authority says land subsidence in the plains of Varamin, Rey, Tehran, Shahriar, and Moein-Abad respectively reaches 13cm, 25cm, 7cm, 36cm and 25 cm annually, “which is a considerable record compared to the affected areas around the world.”

Based on reports published by local media, during the current fiscal (ending on March 20), five incidents in the capital, three have hit the central plain, namely Qiam Square, Molavi Street, and Khayam Street.

■ Sudden Incidents

The phenomenon which is a normal consequence of excessive groundwater usage and uncontrollable urban development has left the residents of the affected areas in insecurity and fear.

People are worried to be trapped in a sudden pit crater while going out and do not even feel safe while at home.

Several multiple-story buildings have so far devoured by land subsidence incidents, forcing the residents to abandon their homes. Many of others have voluntarily put their houses for sale at low prices to move as soon as possible.

Tehran Bus Company earlier announced that the sudden land settling in Molavi Street, happened earlier in January,

a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line crossing the area inevitably did a path change in order to assure safe trips.

■ Proposed Reasons

The official data from the Energy Ministry show that Tehran is home to merely 2% of the country’s water sources while keeping over 20% of the population. However, water consumption in the capital exceeds one billion cubic meters, one-third of which is siphoned from groundwater sources.

Environmentalists and experts have repeatedly warned that the groundwater consumption rate is way too fast to be replenished naturally.

Once abundant with water, Tehran’s subsurface water was achievable through Qanats.

Qanat is a gently sloping underground channel to transport water from an aquifer or water well to surface for irrigation and drinking. This is an old system of water supply from a deep well with a series of vertical access shafts.

However, with the injudicious water use, numerous Qanats has so far dewatered and filled up with low-quality gravel and soil, comprising a heterogeneous combination and resulting in a weak and loose texture.

Age old water distribution system leaking under the city has deteriorated the issue. Municipal bodies say Tehran’s water distribution network is over 65 years old with huge deficiency, causing over 40% of the flowing water to leak and drain the soil.

Kicks and steady vibrations of drilling tunnels deep in the ground for the expansion of the subway network according to urban experts is the other factor increasing the possibility of land subsidence.

■ Scientific Look

Despite the speculations and analyses, a more scientific look on the matter shows that there are two sorts of land subsidence, namely spot and area subsidence.

Spot subsidence is often the vicious result of urban construction. Drilling tunnels, destroying Qanats or changing their paths, planting deep foundations for skyscrapers, water pipe breakage and surface water creeping into the dewatered and blocked wills are responsible for the emergence of spot subsidence or pit craters in urban areas.

The second type of phenomenon is more of an environmental issue. The main reason behind the area subsidence is water level fall in groundwater sources and densified aquifers.

An aquifer is an underground layer of water-bearing permeable rock, rock fractures or unconsolidated materials (gravel, sand, or silt). Groundwater can be extracted using water well.

When the water in aquifers is sucked up excessively, the forming material of the area becomes denser, creating a land settling on the surface. Also becoming impermeable, it will be hard to replenish the aquifers after its water is siphoned.

While restoring an area hit by spot subsidence is more readily done through urban construction equipment and

techniques, restoring a land which is damaged by area subsidence is a challenging and long-term issue, hard enough to make it almost impossible.

■ Existing Solutions

Rewatering aquifers stretched through the province’s area is proposed as a long-term, but efficient solution to curb the growing problem.

To this end, even a project has been introduced by the Energy Ministry since 2015, titled ‘replenishment of groundwater resources’.

According to reliable data, Tehran aquifer annually faces 40 million cubic meters of water. Head of the project Mostafa Dehghan says feeding the aquifers is one of the most promising ways to skip the worsening land subsidence around the metropolis.

He is of the opinion that if a part of a wastewater treatment facility (sitting in the south of Tehran Province) output is apportioned to the aquifers, it will do a lot of help.

“Currently the wastewater treatment facility produces over 280 million cubic meters of water annually, of which 50million cm would do for rewatering the ground sources,” he notes.

Furthermore, huge manipulation of river paths passing through the city and construction of parks and urban development along the rivers has restricted land’s water absorption capability.

“Fundamental changes in the pattern of parks currently surrounding the rivers’ watershed is needed to make the rivers capable of feeding the ground waters once again.”

Blockage of illegal water wells dug around the province was highlighted like the other measure strictly underway in line with the target.

“Annually over 400 illegal water wells are blocked in the area. The figure has been on an upward trajectory as of 2015. Since then, over 3,000 illegal water wells have been detected and blocked only around the city,” Dehghan says.

Equipping licensed wells with smart water meters can overtly and accurately measure and control the volume of water siphoned out of the groundwater resources.

According to Dehghan, currently, smart meters have been installed on 760 water wells.

Insider experts believe that modernizing agriculture and raising public awareness on judicious water consumption will also contribute to alleviating environmental and urban damages.

Soil stabilization through pounding the weak soil in subsidence-prone areas is also among the suggested solutions to curb the issue.

Though the proposed remedial measures are likely to do a lot of help to recover the desiccating groundwater resources, they should be practiced in long-term projects. However, twenty years of steady efforts in line with the target will most probably turn the situation back to its condition in 3 decades ago.

ENGLISH IN USE

LEARN NEWS TRANSLATION

A ← → E

‘Satellite data efficient to contain environmental issues’

Satellite images and acquisition of various satellite data makes many solutions available to reduce or even prevent environmental issues, while requires a timely utilization, head of Aerospace Research Institute (ARI) has said. Satellite data can be used toward protecting the environment and improving the country’s ecological conditions, which is of great importance, IRNA quoted Fathollah Ommi as saying on Tuesday.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“-derm, -derma, -dermis”

■ **Meaning:** skin

■ **For example:** In animal embryos, the **ectoderm** is the outer germ layer of the embryo.

PHRASAL VERB

Move around

■ **Meaning:** to change where you live very frequently, or living in many different parts of a country

■ **For example:** My dad was in the army, so we moved around a lot.

IDIOM

Count your blessings

■ **Explanation:** to focus your thoughts on all the good things in your life rather than on the negative ones

■ **For example:** Whenever anyone in the family starts to complain, my mother always advises us to count our blessings.

داده های ماهواره ای راهگشای مشکلات محیط زیست

رییس پژوهشگاه هوافضا اظهار داشت: تصاویر ماهواره ای و دستیابی به اطلاعات مختلف فضایی، راه حل های بسیاری را برای کاهش مشکلات محیط زیستی و حتی پیشگیری از آنها در دسترس قرار داده است، دستاوردی که مستلزم استفاده به موقع از این فناوری نوین است.

دکتر فتح الله امی روز سه شنبه در گفت وگو با خبرنگار علمی ایرنا افزود: داده های فضایی راهگشای بسیاری از مشکلات محیط زیستی کشور هستند و در بهبود موقعیت اکولوژیک کشور نقش به سزایی دارند.

Intl. rights groups denounce Riyadh decision to try jailed women activists

I→ Some were later released, but activists have said several of the women were held in solitary confinement for months and faced torture and sexual harassment.

"The Saudi prosecution is bringing charges against the women's rights activists instead of releasing them unconditionally," said Michael Page, deputy director in the Middle East and North Africa division at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

He added, "The Saudi authorities have done nothing to investigate serious allegations of torture."

"Now, it's the women's rights activists, not any torturers, who face criminal charges and trials."

Moreover, Amnesty International (AI) described Friday's announcement as a "shocking sign of the kingdom's escalating crackdown on activists" and demanded "the immediate release of prisoners of conscience."

Samah Hadid, the Amnesty International's Middle East campaigns director, said, "These women's rights activists should be released from detention for their peaceful activism not referred to trial. The Saudi Arabian authorities continue their signature repression."

Among the jailed female rights activists are Aziza al-Yousef, a retired professor at



Riyadh's King Saud University, and Loujain al-Hathloul, who was arrested and held for more than 70 days in custody back in 2014 after she attempted to drive from the neighboring United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Saudi Arabia.

Loujain was one of the activists who faced sexual harassment and torture dur-

ing interrogation, according to her family and rights groups.

Following their arrest, regime-backed newspapers published front-page pictures of some of the activists with the word "traitor" stamped across them in red.

The House of Saud regime overturned the world's only ban on female motorists on

June 24, 2018. The lifting of the prohibition followed a sweeping crackdown on prominent women's rights activists, who had staunchly advocated for the right to drive.

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

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

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

The protests have been met with a heavy-handed crackdown by the regime, with security forces increasing security measures across the province.

Over the past years, Riyadh has also redefined its anti-terrorism laws to target activism.

In January 2016, Saudi regime authorities executed Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, who was an outspoken critic of Riyadh. Nimr had been arrested in Qatif, Eastern Province, in 2012.

(Source: agencies)

In Trump-Russia probe, when does collusion become a crime?

As the United States Special Counsel Robert Mueller has pursued his investigation into Moscow's role in the 2016 U.S. election, legal experts have debated what sort of contacts between the U.S. President Donald Trump's campaign and Russia may have violated the U.S. criminal law.

The U.S. spy agencies have concluded that Russia used a scheme of hacking and propaganda to cause discord in the United States and harm Trump's Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton. Mueller's probe, with several Trump campaign figures already pleading guilty or being convicted, has documented numerous contacts between Russians and people close to the president.

Mueller, who has sought to determine whether Trump's campaign coordinated with Moscow, is preparing to submit a report on his investigation to the U.S. Attorney General William Barr. Trump and Russia have denied collusion and Moscow has denied election interference.

Here is a look at potential crimes Mueller may examine relating to these contacts and other matters.

■ Is there a U.S. federal crime called collusion?

Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani in July 2018 said, "I have been sitting here looking in the federal code trying to find collusion as a crime. Collusion is not a crime, but that doesn't matter because there was No Collusion."

There indeed is no federal crime called "collusion." But collusion is a non-legal way of saying conspiracy, which is one of the most commonly asserted crimes in the U.S. federal courts. Conspiracy is an agreement between two or more people to commit an unlawful act. A conspiracy does not need to have been successful, but the individuals must have taken some action to further it.

Because computer hacking is clearly a federal crime, any Trump campaign official who assented to and encouraged the hacking of Democratic National Committee computers in 2016 could be liable for the crime of conspiracy. The U.S. officials have said Russia hacked the Democratic computers to steal emails that were later released by the WikiLeaks website to hurt Clinton.

"Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing," Trump said during a June 2016 news conference, referring to Clinton emails. "I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press."

The federal conspiracy statute also prohibits agreements

aimed at "impairing, obstructing, or defeating the lawful function of any department of government," under a 1910 U.S. Supreme Court precedent.

This notion of criminal liability, known as conspiracy to defraud the United States, was raised by Mueller in a February 2018 indictment of 13 Russian individuals and three Russian companies, including St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, known for its trolling on social media. According to the special counsel, their "information warfare against the United States" impaired the functioning of the U.S. Federal Election Commission and other government agencies.

Mueller in July 2018 also indicted 12 Russian intelligence officers accused of hacking the Democratic computers.

■ Could Trump campaign links to Russia violate other laws?

Yes. Campaign finance laws prohibit foreigners from influencing the U.S. elections, and presidential candidates cannot legally solicit campaign contributions from foreign nationals. Campaign contributions are defined broadly as anything of value intended to influence the election.

The hacked Democratic emails potentially could fall into that category, if Mueller finds coordination between the Russians and Trump's campaign.

If Trump campaign officials knowingly solicited valuable information from Russians, they may be liable under campaign finance laws, legal experts said. But Trump campaign officials would have a strong defense if they could show they did not know soliciting such help violated campaign finance laws. While ignorance of the law often is not an excuse, criminal violations of campaign finance law are unusual in that they require a showing of willfulness, or knowledge of the law being broken.

■ What other charges might Mueller consider?

Mueller also is looking into whether Trump engaged in obstruction of justice by trying to impede or shut down the Russia investigation, first when it was conducted by the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) and later after the special counsel was appointed in May 2017. There are several federal laws that make it a crime to interfere with a court case or government proceeding.

One broadly worded federal law prohibits efforts to "influence, obstruct, or impede the due administration of justice." The effort can be unsuccessful and still be ob-



struction. Obstruction of justice cases are often difficult to prove because they hinge on an individual's mental state. Prosecutors would need to show that Trump acted with a "corrupt" intent, or an intent to impede an investigation.

According to some lawyers, Trump engaged in obstruction of justice by asking former FBI director James Comey in February 2017 to back off an investigation into the U.S. national security adviser Michael Flynn over Flynn's contacts with Russia. Trump eventually fired Comey in May 2017.

Other lawyers have said the obstruction of justice case against Trump is weak because the president could credibly argue he did not actually pressure Comey and that he fired him for reasons unrelated to the Flynn investigation. Trump himself has given differing explanations for the firing, including citing "this Russia thing" as the reason. Some legal scholars have also argued that the president cannot obstruct of justice by exercising his constitutional authority to fire a subordinate.

Under current Justice Department policy first devised in 1973 and reaffirmed in 2000, a sitting president cannot face criminal charges, a view some legal experts dispute. But any accusation against Trump of conspiracy, obstruction of justice or other crime could prompt an impeachment effort in the U.S. Congress to remove him from office. The U.S. Constitution states, "The president, vice president and all civil officers of the United States shall be removed from office on impeachment for, and conviction of, treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors."

(Source: Reuters)

British Muslims urge probe into Tory handling of Islamophobia

The Muslim Council of Britain has called for an investigation into how the ruling Conservative Party handles Islamophobia within its ranks, saying Tories are mostly ignorant of the discrimination and hate against Muslims.

The call issued on Saturday came hours after some insulting comments against Muslims were posted on a Facebook group page related to senior Tory lawmaker Boris Johnson.

It also came after Dorinda Bailey, a conservative council candidate, posted a message on the same page supporting a user calling for bombing mosques.

Miqdaad Versi, a senior member of the Muslim Council of Britain, said it had become a strategy of the Conser-

vative Party to ignore "Islamophobia until it goes away", saying a probe should make clear how much the ruling party is gripped by Islamophobic approaches among its members.

Varsi told the Metro newspaper that Islamophobia had become so "expansive" among the Conservative politicians and party members that Muslim communities were feeling its impact on a "daily basis".

"Just under half of Conservative voters believe Islam is a threat to the British way of life," he said, citing a report by the Hope Not Hate campaign group.

A Conservative party spokesperson said the page launched by followers of

former British Foreign Secretary Johnson was not related to the Conservative Party, saying, however, that if a member posts insulting comments online the party will take action.

However, the accusations come against the backdrop of a clear surge in Islamophobic behavior in the Conservative Party.

Johnson, a main candidate of Tory party leadership in future, sparked huge controversy last summer when he wrote a commentary in the Daily Telegraph and compared Muslim women wearing burqas (A burqa, also known as chadri or paranja in Central Asia, is an enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic tra-

ditions to cover themselves in public, which covers the body and the face.) to "bank robbers" and "letterboxes".

The article caused hate attacks against Muslim women to increase across Britain, a country home to nearly three million Muslims.

The surge in anti-Muslim approaches among Tory members comes at a time when the Opposition Labour Party is under immense pressure to dispel members over their alleged anti-Semitic conduct. The Labour leadership has found it difficult to convince critics that many of its members only oppose Israel and Zionism and have nothing against the Jews.

(Source: Press TV)

Israeli comedian's 'marriage proposal' to Saudi Crown Prince goes viral on Arab social media

An Israeli comedian who joked that she wants to marry the House of Saud regime Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has become a sensation on Arab social media, with some news outlets even reporting her tongue-in-cheek proposal as genuine.

Noam Shuster-Eliassi playfully suggested tying the knot with the Saudi royal during an interview with Arabic-language channel i24.

After lamenting that "nobody likes a tall and strong girl," the unmarried 32-year-old entertainer complained that her family was pressuring her to find a husband, who told her that any man would do, even a non-Jew. Shuster-Eliassi, however, said she was hunting for a real Prince Charming.

"I don't want to [marry] just any person. I want to

shoot high," Shuster-Eliassi told the i24 host. "There is the tall [Syrian President] Bashar Assad. But – no, no, no – he won't work. MBS [Mohammed bin Salman]. MBS is a very tall man and I know that there are now... more relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel," she quipped.

While the joke went unnoticed in Israel, it spread like wildfire across Arab social media, with several news sites even reporting the suggested match – which sounds like the premise of a poorly-conceived romantic comedy, or a deeply deranged Disney cartoon – as a serious proposal.

One Moroccan news site, for example, reported that Shuster-Eliassi "was courting bin Salman and wishing to tie a knot with him."

Her comment circulated widely on the internet after

Faisal al-Qassem, a well-known media personality in Arab states, wrote a Facebook post about the unorthodox union. The joke was later picked up by BBC Arabic and Al-Jazeera.

Shuster-Eliassi has expressed surprise over the attention her seemingly innocuous joke has received.

"I did not expect by any means for it to explode in this way," she told the Times of Israel. "I have never experienced something on this scale."

She speculated that the faux proposal received so much media attention in Arab states because it coincided with a United States-led conference on the Middle East in Warsaw, which senior officials from Israel, the Saudi regime and other Arab states attended.

(Source: RT)

John Bolton must confess to his failure

I→ John Bolton, in his newest attempt against Iran, could not turn the anti-Iranian conference of Warsaw (held in the capital of Poland) into a place for international opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran! The failure of the Warsaw conference brought costs and consequences for the U.S. National Security Advisor and other officials of the country.

What is certain is that John Bolton has no choice but to confess to defeat against Iran. As we can see, John Bolton has started a full-fledged opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran in the economic, political and regional dimensions. Donald Trump seems to have given Bolton full authorization in this regard, but he has not been able to take a practical step forward in confronting Iran.

Yellow Vests march through Paris for 16th week in a row

The Yellow Vest (Yellow Vests Movement/Yellow Jackets Movement/Mouvement des gilets jaunes/ gilets jaunes) protesters have taken to the streets of Paris for the 16th consecutive week. While some enjoyed a friendly chat with police officers, others faced tear gas after trying to break off from a pre-approved marching route.

Unlike previous demonstrations, Paris officials authorized a designated route for Saturday's "Act 16" anti-government marchers – a span of road beginning at the Arc de Triomphe and ending at Place Denfert-Rochereau in the south of the city.

In contrast to the chaotic clashes with police during previous protests, photographs and videos reveal a largely peaceful, orderly demonstration.

Videos taken by an RT France reporter even showed Yellow Vests and French police chatting amiably, with one protester even offering a riot cop a flower.

Police, however, later used tear gas on demonstrators who attempted to defy the pre-approved protest route by marching down New York Avenue.

Similar marches are being held across France, but activists have expressed concern that the movement is losing momentum.

One Yellow Vest group on Facebook has called on demonstrators to return to the movement's "spontaneous" roots with unsanctioned protests held at unauthorized locations.

The Yellow Vest movement began in November 2018 after French President Emmanuel Macron announced controversial tax hikes. Over 2,000 people have been arrested since the demonstrations began, and dozens of protesters have been injured during violent clashes with police.

Macron called for a "return to calm" on Friday, denouncing the "intolerable" violence that has resulted from the weeks of protests.

(Source: RT)

Chlorine likely used in attack on Syria town Douma: OPCW

A chemical weapons watchdog says chlorine was likely used in a suspected gas attack in Syria's Douma in 2018, stressing that it found no evidence of nerve agent at the site.

The use of chlorine by foreign-backed terrorists is a long-known fact, while nerve agents are usually attributed to the Syrian government which surrendered all its chemical stockpile in 2013.

The new report by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) released on Friday, however, did not assign blame for the incident on a Douma suburb in 2018.

The watchdog said there were "reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon has taken place on 7 April 2018."

"This toxic chemical contained reactive chlorine," the Hague-based organization said, noting that it had found no evidence of the use of nerve agents in the Syrian town.

The report was based on a visit by OPCW inspectors to the site of the attack.

The watchdog said it had reached its conclusions based on "witnesses' testimonies, environmental and biomedical samples analysis results, toxicological and ballistic analyses from experts."

The Douma attack occurred at a time when the Syrian army was about to win the battle against the foreign-backed militants there. Witnesses said at least 43 people were killed in the incident.

(Source: Press TV)

Israeli forces injure 17 Palestinians in Gaza

Israeli forces have opened fire at anti-occupation protesters gathering on the edge of the besieged Gaza Strip, leaving 17 people injured.

Palestinian media outlets cited the Gazan Health Ministry as saying that 17 Palestinians had been shot and injured east of Gaza on Friday.

The ministry said that teargas canisters fired by the Israeli forces directly hit a journalist and three paramedics during the Friday rallies.

The Israeli attack on the Palestinian protesters came a day after a United Nations Human Rights Council-mandated investigation found that the regime's forces may have perpetrated "war crimes" or "crimes against humanity" in the campaign against the Palestinians in Gaza.

The Palestinian resistance movement of Hamas has said Israel must be held fully accountable for the crimes it has committed in the besieged enclave.

Tensions have been running high in Gaza since March 30, when the protests started. Palestinian protesters demand the right to return for those driven out of their homeland by Israeli aggression. They also demand a halt to Israel's inhumane blockade of the Gaza Strip.

The clashes in Gaza reached their peak on May 14, the eve of the 70th anniversary of Nakba Day, or the Day of Catastrophe, which coincided this year with Washington's relocation of its embassy from Tel Aviv to the occupied Jerusalem al-Quds.

More than 260 Palestinians have so far been killed and at least 26,000 others wounded in the renewed Gaza clashes, according to the latest figures released by the Gazan Health Ministry.

(Source: Press TV)

Sarri not sure about Kepa’s return to Chelsea team

Chelsea goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga remains the club’s first choice but manager Maurizio Sarri is still uncertain if the Spaniard will be recalled to the starting team for Sunday’s Premier League trip to Fulham.

Arrizabalaga was fined by the club for his refusal to be substituted by Sarri near the end of extra time in Sunday’s League Cup final defeat by Manchester City and he was dropped for Wednesday’s 2-0 league win over Tottenham Hotspur.

“I’m sure in one of the two next matches he will be on the pitch,” Sarri told a news conference, suggesting Willy Caballero could continue in goal after making his first league appearance of the season against Tottenham.

“Kepa’s the first choice, of course, he is very young, he’s improving, we know very well that he can become one of the best goalkeepers in Europe,” Sarri added.

“But in this moment we know that Willy is doing very well. He (Arrizabalaga) is very important in our group and dressing room, so we need to consider him.”

Sarri said Chelsea’s players had to take the opportunity to come closer together after the incident at Wembley last week.

“After a difficult situation, a group is not the same. So there is the opportunity to be better, and you have to take it,” the Italian added.

(Source: Reuters)

Everton looking to dent Liverpool’s title chances, says Keane

Denting Liverpool’s Premier League title hopes will be the added motivation for Everton when they take on their arch rivals in Sunday’s Merseyside derby, defender Michael Keane has said.

Liverpool are unbeaten in 18 games against their neighbours since a defeat in October 2018 and Keane said that hurting the leaders’ chances of winning a first league title since 1989-90 would please Everton fans.

“It’s not the main reason we want to win the game. We want to win the game for ourselves,” Keane told Sky Sports.

“We’re chasing seventh place ourselves, but in the back of our heads, if we can take points off Liverpool and get a win, that will dent their title chances which is great. That should make the fans happy.

“We want to put in a performance and we want to win the game, and we want the fans to be happy. If that’s what they want, then that’s what we want.”

Everton, who were beaten 1-0 by Liverpool in December, are ninth in the table with 36 points and Keane is confident they can climb to seventh and come into contention for a place in European competition.

“Seventh is still within our grasp. We know we’ve got the players capable of getting there, and we know we can put in the performances needed,” the centre back added.

“It’s just a case of being able to do it consistently, which we haven’t done for the last three months so we’re going to have to change and we’re going to have to improve. Hopefully we can do that and find ourselves there come the end of the season.

(Source: Mirror)

Chiellini ‘likes’ Icardi post: Inter FURIOUS with Juve

Inter are furious with Juventus for the behavior of the Old Lady’s captain Giorgio Chiellini. La Gazzetta dello Sport and Il Corriere della Sera reports. Chiellini’s ‘like’ to Mauro Icardi’s latest controversial social media post, in fact, didn’t remain unnoticed. According to both papers, the Nerazzurri didn’t appreciate the action of Juventus’ captain whose social media “like” was judged as a heavy sign of interference between the club and their former captain.

(Source: Calcio Mercato)

Arsenal suffer last-gasp penalty pain as Tottenham finally draw a game

Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang had an 89th-minute penalty saved by Hugo Lloris, missing the follow-up from close range, as Tottenham rode their luck to snatch a point against Arsenal.

Unai Emery raised some eyebrows by making five changes to the side that thumped Bournemouth, including dropping Ozil and Aubameyang to the bench, but it worked as his side defended solidly as a unit.

Their counter attacking game troubled Spurs and they took the lead when Juventus-bound Ramsey capitalised on a mistake by Davidson Sanchez to run through on goal and score.

The home side had a goal disallowed from Kane’s header for off-side and Bernd Leno made a great double save but they were not at their best, similar to the performance in the midweek defeat away to Chelsea.

Spurs continued to adopt a conservative approach in the second half with their tactics and the timing of their substitutions as the Gunners continued to dominate.

Emery’s side did not put the game to bed with Alexander Lacazette spurning a good chance.

And they were punished when Spurs were awarded a penalty when Mustafi shoved Kane in the back despite the striker appearing to be off-side. The England striker kept his cool to tuck home the spot kick.

The visitors looked like they would grab all three points when Sanchez was adjudged to have brought down Aubameyang. But Arsenal’s stop scorer had his penalty saved by Lloris, who goes from zero to hero after his mistakes against Chelsea in midweek.

Sub Lucas Torreira was sent off harshly for a tackle on Danny Rose in the dying seconds as fourth-placed Arsenal remain four points behind their neighbours.

(Source: Eurosport)

Bulls beat Hawks in third-highest scoring game in NBA history



“That was a fun game to play in. Probably one of the most fun games I’ve played in my career,” Young said. “I’m proud of the way we fought even though we came up short.”

Young and DeAndre’ Bembry had turnovers in the final 30 seconds of the third overtime, preventing the Hawks from an opportunity to snap a 155-all tie.

Ryan Arcidiacono’s 3-pointer forced the third overtime.

LaVine’s 3-pointer gave Chicago a 139-138 lead with 1:31 remaining in the first overtime. Following Young’s errant pass for a turnover,

Wayne Selden made one of two free throws to increase the lead to two points.

Young’s tiebreaking, step-back 3-pointer with 2.2 seconds remaining in regulation forced the first overtime. The rookie’s last-second layup tied it at 140 to force the second overtime.

Chicago led 99-88 early in the fourth period before Atlanta rallied. Young’s steal and basket sparked a string of 11 straight points for a 121-116 lead.

The Bulls have the NBA’s youngest roster, with an average age of 24.1 years. The Hawks

made their own statement about youth by starting three rookies. Omari Spellman moved into the lineup as the third rookie, joining Young and Kevin Huerter.

However, it was the Hawks’ oldest player, Vince Carter, who logged the second-most minutes on the team. At 42, Carter is the oldest player in NBA history to play at least 45 minutes in a game.

“You know, I don’t know if Vince is getting younger or what, but he’s had just unbelievable games this year,” Hawks coach Lloyd Pierce said. “He’s just a remarkable example of what our young guys should be and see.”

Hawks forward John Collins, who scored 34 points in an overtime win over the Minnesota Timberwolves on Wednesday, was held out because of flu-like symptoms. Collins was told to rest at home as the team tried to protect other players from becoming ill.

Spellman started for Collins but didn’t return after he was helped to the locker room with a sprained left ankle late in the third quarter.

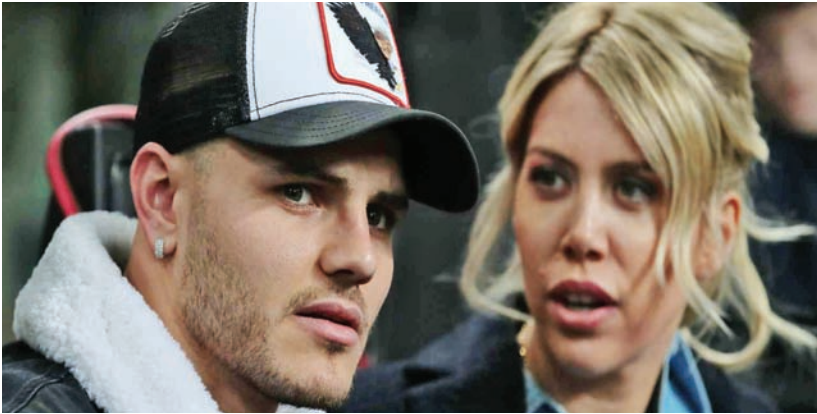
There was a delay with 8:49 remaining when Huerter had a hard fall under the Bulls’ basket and didn’t immediately return to his feet. Huerter walked off the court without assistance and returned to the game.

Otto Porter Jr. had 31 points and 10 rebounds for Chicago.

Len had 24 points and 10 rebounds, and Dewayne Dedmon had 14 points and 12 rebounds.

(Source: ESPN)

Wanda Nara denies putting Real Madrid off Icardi bid



Wanda Nara has denied suggestions that Real Madrid have not bid for Mauro Icardi because the club were put off negotiations due to her behaviour.

Icardi’s future at Inter is looking increasingly bleak, with the striker having been left out of their last five matchday squads after being stripped of the captaincy last month.

The Argentina international posted a lengthy statement on Instagram this week in which he accused Inter’s decision-makers of a lack of respect, although he underlined his love for the club and claimed he has rejected several significant offers in the past.

Despite his affection for the Nerazzurri, it appears likely that the club will sell the striker in the next transfer window, having been unable to reach an agreement over a new contract.

Madrid have long been linked with a bid for the 26-year-old but, according to Marca, they were put off entering into talks last January as they did not want to deal with Nara, Icardi’s outspoken wife and agent.

However, when the same Spanish newspaper asked her about that report, Nara said: “That Mauro hasn’t gone to Madrid because of me, as has been said in Spain, is false and we have a lot of respect for Real Madrid.”

Icardi, who joined Inter from Sampdoria in 2013, is said to have been in discussions over a contract extension for much of the last year. He has two and a half years left on the deal he signed in October 2016, which reportedly contains a relatively low release clause of €110million.

Icardi has scored 15 goals in 28 appearances in all competitions this season but has not played since the 1-0 Serie A win over Parma on February 9.

He complained of knee pain after missing the Europa League win at Rapid Vienna, when head coach Luciano Spalletti said Icardi had withdrawn from the squad himself, but Inter issued a statement to say medical tests could not identify any specific problem.

In Icardi’s absence, Inter were beaten 2-1 by Cagliari on Friday.

(Source: Goal)

Silva hits back at Klopp’s World Cup final taunt



Marco Silva has hit back at Jurgen Klopp’s suggestion that Sunday’s Merseyside derby is Everton’s World Cup final.

Klopp said the 233rd meeting between the local rivals would take on greater significance for Everton because of the circumstances surrounding Liverpool’s 1-0 win at Anfield in December.

Silva, however, believes Liverpool celebrated Divock Origi’s 96th-minute winner as if they had won the World Cup themselves as Klopp was fined £8,000 by the FA for his reaction to the goal.

“I didn’t see [a] big, big difference,” Silva said of December’s derby at a news conference on Friday. “I managed my first derby with Liverpool in December and what I felt was a special match for both teams.

“They celebrated that lucky goal -- a lucky moment they had in the last seconds of the match -- [like it] was a final of World Cup for us and to them. They celebrated more or less the same. I didn’t see a big difference.”

Everton last won a Merseyside derby

in October 2010, having failed to beat Liverpool in their last 18 attempts.

“We have to be ourselves, to believe in ourselves,” Silva added. “It’s a long time, a long period without a win for us as a football club. That shows it’s a difficult match.

“If we can perform on the level we performed last December it will be very good because in that performance we are always close to winning the match.

“If I can sign now to perform in the same way, I will sign straight [away] because that means we will be really close to winning the match. Because in that match we deserved something more.”

Georginio Wijnaldum is expecting a “big fight” at Goodison Park on Sunday afternoon, with Liverpool sitting one point clear at the top of the Premier League.

The fixture has produced 21 red cards in the Premier League era -- more than any other clash -- and Klopp wants his players to channel the intensity of the derby in the correct way.

(Source: Soccer.net)

Sochi resort offers a homegrown alternative for Russian skiers

When Russia spent billions to host the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, many predicted that its flashy facilities would be left to rot.

But five years later the Rosa Khutor resort in the Caucasus mountains is becoming a favourite of Russian skiers, and an alternative to ski trips to Europe.

The resort, which hosted alpine events for the Olympics, was packed on a recent February day, with skiers racing down the slopes as low clouds hung over the mountains.

Dressed in a blue ski outfit with matching goggles, Yaroslava Serdzhuk said that for Muscovites like her, travelling to the resort was an easy holiday.

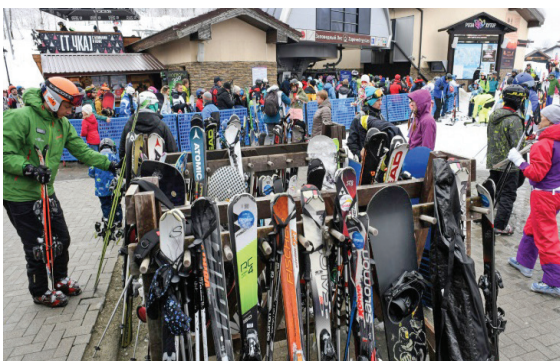
“Coming here doesn’t take a lot of time, money or effort. It’s at the same level as what you can find in Europe, except it’s local,” she said. Evgeny Anichkin, a salesman from Moscow at the resort for a ski trip with friends, spends two or three winter weekends a year at Rosa Khutor.

He flies two and a half hours from the Russian capital to Sochi on the Black Sea, before taking a 45-minute bus or taxi up a brand new road to the resort.

“This station is simply wonderful,” the 40-year-old said, his skis resting on his shoulders after a run down the hill. “There are easy, difficult, wide, narrow trails. People are happy, staff are attentive. It’s very cool.”

Russia poured a record \$41 billion (36 billion euros) into the Sochi Olympics, a showcase event for President Vladimir Putin’s government.

Rosa Khutor has continued as a venue for professional competitions and is hosting events in the Women’s Alpine



Ski World Cup this weekend.

The huge spending was criticised in a country where many still live in poverty and environmental groups accused infrastructure projects for Sochi of encroaching on natural habitats.

■ ‘Crazy rise’

Those concerns still exist, especially over plans to expand the Rosa Khutor resort.

“Not only did they destroy a lot of ecosystems already, but they are planning to expand onto national park territory,” Greenpeace Russia campaigner Mikhail Kreindlin said. But that hasn’t put off Russian tourists.

Rosa Khutor’s deputy chief Alexander Belokobylsky said there was a “crazy rise” in visits in the first two years after

the Olympics.

Numbers have still been rising, by five to seven percent per year, he said, with some 920,000 skiers visiting Rosa Khutor during last year’s season.

“As you can see, doubts over what would happen to Olympic infrastructure were pointless,” Belokobylsky said.

The resort’s main village is in a valley 500 metres (1,640 feet) above sea level. Cable cars take skiers to the top of the slopes at an altitude of 2,320 meters (7,600 feet), with impressive views of the Caucasus and -- in good weather -- the Black Sea.

Belokobylsky said the resort’s target audience is Russians who usually ski in Europe. The ruble has lost almost half of its value against the euro since 2014, making skiing holidays in western Europe expensive for Russians.

“By comparing what they see here to what they see abroad, they are impressed. For many it’s unexpected,” he said.

Inspired by Rosa Khutor’s success, Russian authorities are trying to take this model to other Caucasus resorts.

The government has announced plans to invest 41 billion rubles (\$626 million/547 million euros) to modernize three other ski resorts in the region, including at Mount Elbruz, Europe’s highest peak.

Similarly to Europe, alpine skiing remains a luxury many in Russia cannot afford and accommodation in Rosa Khutor is scarce. According to independent research firm TourStat, only four million Russians -- less than three percent of the population -- practice the sport.

(Source: Reuters)

Iranian cyclist Faraz Shokri wins silver at Al Adaid Desert Challenge

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Iranian cyclist Faraz Shokri claimed a silver medal at the fourth edition of the Al Adaid Desert Challenge, which took place in Khor Al Adaid Area in Qatar.

Frederic Gombert from France won the gold medal and the bronze medal went to Serbian cyclist Aleksandar Roman.

The prestigious event has brought more than 500 participants together, competing for a stake of the 50000 USD offered by the organizers.

The cyclists need to cross seven sand dunes over a 38.5km route to reach the finish line. It also includes a running race.

The cycling race at Al Adaid Desert Challenge is recognized by the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI), world governing body of cycling, as an XCP-Class 3 Race.

The event, which is organized in association with the Qatar National Tourism Council and with support from the Qatar Cycling Federation and the Ministry of Culture and Sports, has established itself as one of the top off-road cycling races in the region.

The number of international cyclists has significantly increased this year.

“We welcome all the participants to the fourth edition of Al Adaid Desert Challenge, and we are really happy with this incredible turnout from Qatar and all over the world. We are also proud with the Qatari participation, as we will see more than 90 cyclists and runners, men and women taking part in this year’s edition,” Jamal Rashed al-Khanji, Managing Director of Al Adaid Desert Challenge, said.



Iran edge past Belarus in Kuban Spring Women U19

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — The Iranian girls started the 2019 Kuban Spring Women U19 Tournament on a high note on Friday.

Iran edged past Belarus 1-0 in their opener at the “Sputnik-Sport” Stadium in Sochi, Russia.

Fatemeh Shaban scored the only goal of the match in the 4th minute.

Katayoun Khosrowyar’s girls will face hosts Russia on Sunday.

“We are very happy with our performance against Belarus. I feel good to win against all odds! Thank you girls and of course to all their fans,” Khosrowyar said.

Earlier on the day, Russia humiliated Azerbaijan 7-0. The format for the tournament will be a single



group of four teams, where each participant will play all opponents.

Based on the results of three rounds, the champion and prize-winners of the “Kuban Spring-2019” will be determined.

In 2008, the “Kuban Spring” began a new countdown. The tournament was transformed into the international festival of women’s youth teams, having received support from FIFA.

Iran prepare for the AFC U19 Women’s Championship Thailand 2019 Qualifiers Round 2, where they have been drawn in Group B along with hosts Vietnam, two-time champions Korea Republic and Lebanon.

The Round 2 Qualifiers will be played over three matchdays from April 26 to 30.



Esteghlal winger Sayyadmanesh misses Al Dhail match

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Esteghlal football team winger has missed his team’s opener in the 2019 AFC Champions League.

The Esteghlal prodigy suffered a muscle injury in the match against Foolad on Thursday.

Sayyadmanesh has been ruled out for

three weeks.

Esteghlal will start the ACL new season with a match against Qatari giants Al Dhail in Group C in Doha’s Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium.

Al Dhail are one of the favorites to win the group in the current season.

Al Ain of the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s Al

Hilal also are in Group C.

The 2019 AFC Champions League group stage is scheduled to be played from 4 March to 22 May 2019.

A total of 32 teams compete in the group stage to decide the 16 places in the knockout stage of the 2019 AFC Champions League.

Ex-Iran goalie Haghighi and Esteghlal striker Mensha banned until further notice

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Former Iran and Persepolis goalkeeper Alireza Haghighi and Esteghlal Nigerian striker Godwin Mensha have been suspended from all football activities until further notice.

Haghighi broke Esteghlal sporting

director Ali Khatir’s nose after a brawl in Tehran’s Enghelab Complex on Wednesday.

Khatir has filed a lawsuit against Haghighi over the conflict.

Haghighi was training in Enghelab Complex with his goalkeeping coach when

the brawl erupted.

After the official walked into the turf, the former Persepolis goalkeeper got into a verbal argument with Khatir and reportedly headbutted him in the nose.

The 30-year-old goalie is without a team after parting company with Swedish

club GIF Sundsvall.

Also, Esteghlal forward Mensha has been banned until further notice after attacking a fan after his team’s match against Foolad in Ahvaz on Thursday.

The fan had reportedly pulled his Mensha’s hair outside the Ghadir Stadium.

The fans at the Azadi Sports Complex continued to roar on even after the FIBA World Cup Asian Qualifiers match between Australia and their beloved Team Melli had concluded. Iran had not only managed to secure an 85-74 win over the Boomers, they had also clinched their FIBA Basketball World Cup 2019 spot.

The crowd clapped in unison with their brave warriors on the hardwood, chanting out the name of their proud nation.

Among the players on the court who had just braved their way through a tough game was Mohammad Jamshidi.

“Oh my god, that game, I will never forget about it!” Jamshidi exclaimed. “This kind of win is a lifetime memory and the joy we brought to the fans and to the country is amazing. We needed to win to reach a spot for the next FIBA World Cup, and we achieved our goal to go to China this summer and compete at the world stage. The game was intense, we remained focused and we did one of our best games of the campaign, so that was amazing for us. We are very, very happy to be qualified, this race was very tough but we fought through it and we got our spot.”

Iran were among one of the final 4 teams in the Asian Qualifiers that were on the hunt to secure one of the three remaining tickets to the World Cup. The race had gone down to the final game which were all played simultaneously, leading to exciting finishes all around similar to the showdown in Tehran.

“I think it was very intense and great to compete in this kind of format,” says Jamshidi. “Asia zone has so many teams that can play at a high level now, that is such a great thing for Asian basketball and for basketball [all over the world] in general. This format is also good for the fans, as they were able to see their national team frequently, which is always nice. I really enjoyed the intensity and the fight for the qualifying spots during this campaign, and everyone had the potential to go to China 2019. The teams that qualified, including us, had to play at their highest level and fight to win during every single game.”



Iran stumbled early on in the qualifiers with a loss to Iraq, but regrouped to a strong finish. They had to crank it up a notch in the final stretch of 3 crucial games against the Philippines, Japan, and Australia, which they succeeded by coming away with 2 wins. Jamshidi’s quality production was key in Iran winning the crucial games versus the Philippines and Australia.

In the first 9 games of the Qualifiers, Jamshidi averaged 6.7 points and 2.4 assists per game. Over the course of the final 3 games, the 1.99M (6’6”) guard boosted his output to 28.0 points and 5.3 assists per contest.

“I was focused on helping the team and trying to impact the game as every teammate would do,” explained Jamshidi of his outburst. “When you play for the national team, you only want the best and you want to put all of your energy for the jersey and for the country. That is how I feel when I play for the national team and I am happy to have helped the way I did during this campaign and to be impactful in important games, like the last one against Australia, which was the most important of the qualifying campaign. It was our final, our last opportunity to make it to China 2019, and I am glad and satisfied to have done a great game to help my team win.”

Jamshidi poured in 25 points and 4 assists while knocking down 10 of his 11 free-throw attempts en route to Iran’s victory over Australia and their World

Cup qualification. It will be Iran’s third straight trip to the World Cup, the longest active streak in the Asian region. For Jamshidi, it will potentially be his second consecutive World Cup appearance after putting up 5.8 points per contest in Barcelona at the 2014 edition of the tournament.

“That would be amazing to compete in this competition for the second time in a row. Competing for your national team is always great and being able to participate in this kind of competition is such a great opportunity to help Iran show to the world that our national team is full of talents. We are still far away from the beginning of the competition, but yes, that is a goal for me to help Iran have a great run next summer in China,” Jamshidi says.

In the past two FIBA Basketball World Cups, Iran has finished with identical 1-4 records as a proud representative of Asia. They will be back at that stage once again in September at China to showcase to the world how good they can be. Jamshidi states that Iran’s goal at the World Cup will be to make the country proud by playing their best in China. The skilled wingman acknowledges that the level of talent all over the world keeps on rising higher and higher, but he feels that they might be able to make some noise when game time comes.

“It’s going to be a great experience and I can’t wait to be there. Playing against the best teams and the best players in the world is something unique, and we don’t do it often so we want to learn and play good basketball at the FIBA World Cup 2019,” Jamshidi says.

There’s still a long way to go before the FIBA Basketball World Cup 2019 and a part of that journey includes the World Cup draw in Shenzhen, China on March 16. Jamshidi says that he doesn’t have any preferences on who he would like to see Iran be grouped with, knowing that all teams will be solid since every qualified team will be very competitive. His focus is less on who he might be playing against and more on the opportunity to be there.

“I am excited for the overall experience and for playing at the world stage representing my country.”

(Source: FIBA)

Iran wins WT President’s Cup title

MNA — Iran senior taekwondo team gained the title of the 3rd World Taekwondo President’s Cup Asian Region, underway in Kish Island.

Gaining five gold medals, two silver, and one bronze and aggregate point of 763, Iran won the men’s senior event.

Jordan ranked second with two gold and one bronze (279 points). South Korea and Kazakhstan stood next with 128 and 89 points respectively.

The 3rd WT President’s Cup kicked off on February 28 and finished on March 3 at Kish Olympic Sports Complex in the southern Iranian island.

This is a G2 event where first to third athletes will add 20, 12, and 7.2 points to their Olympics ranking.

Iran Football Federation chief nominated for AFC elections

IRNA — Football Federation President of the Islamic Republic of Iran (FFIRI) Mehdi Taj has been nominated for the 29th election of members of the AFC Executive Committee (for a four-year term, 2019 – 2023) slated to be held in Kuala Lumpur on April 6.

Taj has been nominated for AFC vice president post for central Asia.

The positions for which the elections will be held are AFC President and FIFA Vice President, Five AFC Vice Presidents, Six FIFA Council Members, one of whom shall also be an AFC Female Executive Committee Member, a total of five AFC Female Executive Committee Members, one of whom shall also be a FIFA Council member and a further nine AFC Executive Committee members, AFC reported.

According to the AFC official website, Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa (Bahrain), Saoud A.Aziz M A Al-Mohannadi (Qatar) and Mohamed Khalfan Matar Saeed Alromaiti (UAE) have been nominated for AFC president and FIFA vice president posts.

Meanwhile, Semetei Sultanov (Kyrgyzstan) and Mehdi Taj (Iran) are nominees for AFC vice president post.

Persian Gulf Marathon in Kish Island knows winners

MNA — The 1st Persian Gulf Marathon and the third edition of ‘I run Iran’ took place Friday in Kish Island and winners of different categories were announced.

More than 500 runners from some 20 different countries participated in the event, including male and female runners from Australia, Canada, USA and UK.



The marathon was held in three different distances of 42km, 21km, and 10km in both males’ and females’ categories. Iranian runners grabbed all medals of the event.

Mohammad Jafar Moradi (males’ 42km), Javad Seyyedi (males’ 21km), Hamid Kamali (males’ 10km), Afsaneh Faridi (females’ 42km), Parisa Arab (females’ 21km) and Fatemeh Sereshti (females’ 10km) bagged gold medals of the tournament.

Brent Weigner, a 69-year-old USA runner from Kansas, marked Iran as his 170th country in his world marathon.

Previous editions of ‘I run Iran’ at the ancient capital of Persepolis (2016) and in the modern capital of Tehran (2017) attracted athletes from 45 different countries.

The ‘I run Iran’ mission started in 2015 by 45-year-old Dutchman Sebastian Straten, director of Iran Silk Road travel.

First hand he experienced an enthusiastic crowd while street running during his 4-years stay in Iran. The project is aimed at promoting long-distance street running in Iran. It intends to inspire a young population of 80 million Iranians to Run for Fun. Watching foreign athletes run in their own country will make them want to follow in their footsteps.

ACL: Ravshan Irmatov to take charge of Al Dhail v Esteghlal

TASNIM — Uzbek referee Ravshan Irmatov will officiate the match between Al Dhail of Qatar and Iran’s Esteghlal.

The Iranian giant will face star-studded Al Dhail in Doha’s Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium on Tuesday in Group C of the competition.

An international official since 2003, the 41-year-old ref has officiated in three World Cups in a row.

He was also involved in the London 2012 Olympics, the FIFA Club World Cup on three occasions and the Confederations Cup.

Irmatov has been named the Best Referee in Asia in four consecutive years (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2014).

The Uzbek referee officiated Iran and Iraq match in the 2019 AFC Asian Cup group stage, where two teams played out a goal-less draw.

Also, Hettikamkanamge Dilan Perera from Sri Lanka will officiate the match between Persepolis of Iran and Pakhtakor of Uzbekistan.

Persepolis will host Pakhtakor on Tuesday in Tehran’s Azadi Stadium in Group D of the competition.

Dilan Perera also officiated the match between Persepolis and Al Sadd of Qatar in the last season, where Persepolis defeated the Qatari giant 1-0 in the preliminary round.

Hettikamkanamge Dilan Perera, 40, is a Sri Lankan professional football referee.

He has been a full international for FIFA since 2004. Perera has refereed some matches in AFC Champions League

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GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Victory depends on determination, which in turn depends on thought, which in turn depends on keeping secrets.

Imam Ali (AS)

Iranian institute launches intl. awards to honor calligraphy works on Hazrat Fatima (SA)

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — The Mirase Yase Yasin Cultural Institute has established awards to honor the best Persian and Arabic calligraphy works from across the world on Hazrat Fatima (SA), daughter of Prophet Muhammad (S).

The Yase Yasin International Calligraphy Awards will be held biennially, Mirase Yase Yasin director Meqdad Salehi said during a meeting held at Mashhad's Homa Hotel last week.

The meeting was attended by calligraphers and executives of calligraphy associations from Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates.

The first edition of the awards will be held in nastaliq, naskh and thulth, three styles of calligraphy, on February 14, 2020, which is the birthday of Hazrat Fatima (SA).

Calligraphers from across the world should send their works to the cultural institute until December 22, 2019.

The organizers also plan to award 18 calligraphy works honorable mentions.

Salehi said the winning works will be retained by the Mirase Yase Yasin Cultural Institute in order to showcase them in a museum that the institute plans to establish in a few years.

The meeting was followed by the opening of an exhibition of calligraphy works by Iranian artists about Hazrat Fatima (SA), which the institute has accumulated over the past decade.

Hungarian animator István Orosz to lecture at Tehran Intl. Animation Festival

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — Hungarian animator, graphic designer and painter István Orosz is scheduled to deliver a speech during the 11th Tehran International Animation Festival.

The lecture program titled "From Graphic to Animation" will be held at the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA) on Tuesday, the organizers announced on Saturday.

Orosz, 68, who graduated from the University of Arts and Design in Budapest, is also known as a stage designer, poster designer, printmaker and illustrator.

He is a professor at the West Hungarian University, a co-founder of the Hungarian Poster Association, and a member of the Alliance Graphique International and the Hungarian Art Academy.

The 11th Tehran International Animation Festival will open today at the IIDCYA.

A lineup of top animations from across the world will be competing in the festival, which will continue until March 7.

Winners of Intl. 100-Second Film Festival honored

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — The winners of the 12th edition of the International 100-Second Film Festival were announced during a ceremony at Tehran's Andisheh Hall on Friday.

Four films were honored as winners in the international section.

Among the films is "Running Sushi" by Stepan Etrych from the Czech Republic, which is about four sushi athletes in a running competition.

"Sand Signs" by Italian director Hermes Mangialardo about a child, who draws things he has dreamed of on the sand, was another winner.

The Animated films "Cycle" by Alex Ishida from Japan, about the director's experience of cycling from Tokyo to Kyoto, and "Picnic" by Omer Mirac Tunc from Turkey, about an unusual family picnic in a park, also received awards.

In the national competition, "Gone..." by Samaneh Fazlollah Asadi was picked as best film.

The film is about immigrants and the sacrifices they made in their lives.

"Stop" by Pegah Ansari received the special jury award, while "Diaper" by Mohammadreza Sa'adati won the audience award.

"Stop" is about a man and a woman who are made to rethink their relationship by a word from an angry flower boy.

"Diaper" depicts a man who can't afford to buy diapers for his toddler.

The Art Bureau of the Islamic Ideology Dissemination Organization is the organizer of the festival, which was held at the Azadi Cineplex on February 27 and 28.



"Picnic" director Omer Mirac Tunc (C) from Turkey and "Sand Signs" director Hermes Mangialardo (R) from Italy received their awards from a jury member during the closing ceremony of the 12th International 100-Second Film Festival at Tehran's Andisheh Hall on March 1, 2019. (Mehr/Asghar Khamseh)

Winners of Flying Turtle Awards announced

C U L T U R E d e s k **TEHRAN** — The winners of the Flying Turtle Awards, which are annually presented to top children's writers in Iran, were honored during a ceremony held at the Book City Institute in Tehran on Wednesday.

The organizers presented Silver Flying Turtles to three books during the ceremony attended by writers, illustrators and translators.

"Padishkhwargar 3", a five-volume series by Arman Aryan that contains stories inspired by Avesta, the holy book of the Zoroastrian, won one of the awards.

Another Silver Flying Turtle went to a Persian translation of New York-based writer Brendan Wenzel's "They All Saw

a Cat" by Keivan Abidi Ashtiani.

A Persian translation of Swiss author Lorenz Pauli's "Pass Auf Mich Auf" (Take care of Me) by Negin Katal was also honored with a Silver Flying Turtle. The book has been published with its original illustrations by Mirjam Zedelius.

The Book City Institute and the Children's Literature Studies Periodical are the organizers of the Flying Turtle Awards.

The jury panel in a statement released for this year's edition announced that after seven years of judging, children books have been facing a new situation that needs to be seriously taken into consideration.

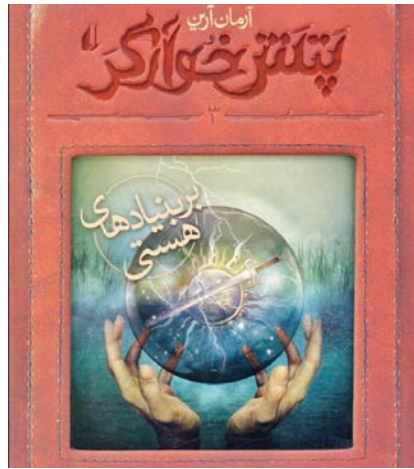
"One can hardly find a book by a Persian

author written over the past year, which can easily have the honor to win a Flying Turtle Award," the jury said in a statement.

"Is the status of translation better? We are sorry to say that the translation does not differ with book compilation, and finding a book which enjoys good quality has been hard," they added.

The jury also asked Iranian families and organizations involved with children to purchase books by Persian authors and donate them to children as Noruz gifts in order to support original Persian books.

In addition, writer Hushang Moradi Kermani and illustrator Mehrnush Masumini were honored with Flying Turtle Special Medals for their lifetime achievements.



A cover of "Padishkhwargar" by Arman Aryan.

Sepehr Imanpur wins top prize at 7th Damonfar Visual Arts Festival

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — Sepehr Imanpur has won the top prize at the 7th Damonfar Visual Arts Festival.

Mohammad-Hossein Khatami and Mohaddeseh Taheri shared second prize, and Atieh Shafei and Homa Khosravi shared third prize of the festival dedicated to artists under 25 years of age.

The honoring ceremony held at Tehran's Mellat Cineplex on Friday was attended by Deputy Culture Minister for Artistic Affairs Seyyed Mojtaba Hosseini and Visual Arts Office director Hadi Mozaffari.

The art festival is organized by the Damonfar Company, the Iranian representative of France's Pebeo and Germany's Faber-Castell, two companies that manufacture art materials.

Damonfar Managing director Seifollah Puya-Rad expressed happiness over organizing the event despite the current adverse economic situation in the country.

Veteran Iranian painter and art expert Aidin Aghdashlu, who presided over the biennial jury, also said, "I am surprised to see how good young artists work and this is a great hope," he said.



Young artist Sepehr Imanpur (2nd R) poses with organizers after accepting his award at the 7th Damonfar Visual Arts Festival at Tehran's Mellat Cineplex on March 1, 2019.

"I sometimes see some masterpieces that I wish could be my works. Sometimes, I say I wish I had painted them. But the right thing is that artists should work for their own dreams and transfer them to us," he added.

Aghdashlu also asked all the young artists not to forget modesty.

"Modesty is a favor from God that is not bestowed upon every individual. Humbleness is a clear indication of intelligence and only

a cultured person can learn to be modest. Because he/she knows what is going on in this world and can measure his/her relation to the world and find out where he/she stands. But a person who does not know what is happening in the world cannot be modest since he/she considers himself above others," he asserted.

Juergen Braun, a Faber-Castell official also attending the ceremony, expressed his happiness over attending the 7th edition of the festival.

The festival also honored Manuchehr Motabar, famous for his distinguished figurative arts, for his lifetime achievements.

A selection of 110 paintings by 57 artists has been put on view this year at the biennial, which will run until March 8.

The top artist Imanpur will get an opportunity to travel to Germany to visit the Faber-Castell factory.

The event is also organized in collaboration with Tasvire Shahr Institute, a cultural organization based in Tehran, and European manufacturers of fine art products Winsor & Newton, Quilo and Canson.

Actress Katherine Helmond of TV's "Soap", "Who's the Boss?" dies at 89

NEW YORK (Reuters) — Actress Katherine Helmond, a seven-time Emmy Award nominee who played lusty matriarchs on the hit television sitcoms "Soap" and "Who's the Boss" from the 1970s into the 1990s, died last month at the age of 89, her talent agency said on Friday.

Helmond, who also delivered a memorable turn as a vain woman obsessed with plastic surgery in director Terry Gilliam's dystopian film "Brazil" (1985), died Feb. 23 at her Los Angeles home due to complications from Alzheimer's disease.

"My beautiful, kind, funny, gracious, compassionate, rock," Alyssa Milano, who starred alongside Helmond in "Who's the Boss", said on Twitter. "You were an instrumental part of my life. You taught me to hold my head above the marsh! You taught me to do anything for a laugh! What an example you were!"

Helmond was in her 40s and had already been nominated for a Tony Award for her work on Broadway before landing a starring role on "Soap," a prime-time parody of daytime soap operas that ran on the ABC network for four seasons from 1977 to 1981.

She then starred on "Who's the Boss?" on ABC with Milano, Tony Danza and Judith Light from 1984 to 1992, followed by recurring roles on sitcoms "Coach" starring Craig T. Nelson from 1995 to 1997 and "Everybody Loves Raymond" with



Actress Katherine Helmond arrives at the world premiere of Disney Pixar's computer animated film "Cars" at the Lowe's Motor Speedway in Charlotte, North Carolina, May 26, 2006. (Reuters/Davis Turner)

Ray Romano from 1996 to 2004.

"Katherine Helmond was a remarkable human being and an extraordinary artist; generous, gracious, charming and profoundly funny," Light said in a statement. "She taught me so much about life and inspired me indelibly by watching her work. Katherine was a gift to our business and to the world,

and will be deeply missed."

On "Who's the Boss?" Helmond played Mona Robinson, the man-crazy mother to Light's character, an ad executive who hires retired baseball player Danza as her housekeeper.

Helmond won two Golden Globe awards in 1981 for "Soap" and in 1989 for "Who's the Boss?" She never won an Emmy but was nominated four times for "Soap", twice for "Who's the Boss?" and once for "Everybody Loves Raymond."

Helmond also appeared in director Alfred Hitchcock's last movie, "Family Plot" (1976), and in Gilliam's films "Time Bandits" (1981) as an ogre's wife and in the visually striking "Brazil" (1985) as the plastic surgery aficionado.

In one "Brazil" scene, she sits in a chair chastising her son, played by Jonathan Pryce, over his lack of ambition while a doctor stretches her face into ridiculous contortions and covers it in plastic wrap. "Already, she's twice as beautiful as she was before," the surgeon proudly announces.

Helmond was born on July 5, 1929, in Galveston, Texas, and attended the fundamentalist Christian Bob Jones University. She later became a Buddhist.

Helmond took a variety of roles on stage and TV but her career took off after being nominated in 1973 for a Tony Award for her performance in Eugene O'Neill's "The Great God Brown."

NEWS IN BRIEF



"Once Hamoun" to compete in Water Docs festival

A R T d e s k **TEHRAN** — Iranian director Mohammad Ehsani's documentary "Once Hamoun" will go on screen at the 8th edition of the Water Docs Film Festival in Toronto, Canada.

The film reviews the numerous environmental and social problems caused by the shrinkage of Lake Hamoun in the southeastern Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchestan.

The festival will take place from March 21 to 24.