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Exclusive exhibition of Iranian products opens in Tashkent

TEHRAN — An exclusive exhibition of Iranian products opened in Uzbekistan capital city Tashkent on Wednesday and will wrap up on Friday, Shata reported.

The inaugural ceremony of the exhibit was attended by Hamid Zadboum, the head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), and Bahman Hosseinzadeh, the managing director of

Iran International Exhibitions Company, as well as Uzbekistan's deputy minister of investment and foreign trade.

Zadboum and Hosseinzadeh have travelled to Uzbekistan accompanying an Iranian trade delegation and are also planned to take part in the 13th meeting of Iran-Uzbekistan Joint Economic Committee on Thursday and Friday. →4

Iran: PGCC statement on islands insult to national sovereignty

TEHRAN — The Iranian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday deplored the anti-Iran statement by the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) as baseless and a repetition of old allegations, saying claims of ownership over the Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf is insult to national sovereignty.

"A few regional countries, which have thus far been providing supports

for unwise policies, should respond to the public opinion that what have they done so far except creating and reinvigorating the Takfiri terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen as well as paving the ground for alien countries to enter the Persian Gulf?" Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi asked in reaction to the statement issued by the PGCC in its 40th meeting in Riyadh on Wednesday. →2

UN: The third party is involved in killing Iraqi demonstrators

UN mission in Iraq said in a report that the third party is involved in the premeditated killing and kidnapping of some demonstrators.

Previously the Iraqi Defense Ministry announced third party brought gas bombs to kill protesters.

A "third party" is responsible for the horrific murder and targeting of protest-

ers and security forces in order to create chaos and strife, it added.

Also, leader of Iraq's Asaib Ahl al-Haq group, which is part of the country's Popular Mobilization Forces or Hashd al-Sha'abi, said Washington and Tel Aviv are members of "a third party" that has been behind many deaths during the recent unrest. →13

U.S. halts military training for Saudi students after shooting

U.S. bars former Saudi diplomat from entering country

Training of all Saudi Arabian military personnel in the United States was stopped until further notice after a Saudi airman shot and killed three people last week at a base in Florida.

The Pentagon's decision will have far-reaching effects on visiting Saudi personnel, including grounding more than 300 Saudi Arabian military aviation students as part of a "safety stand-down".

The Pentagon later on Tuesday said the move would also affect infantry personnel and all other Saudi military training, other than classroom lessons. Such coursework, which includes English-language classes, will continue.

Mohammed Alshamrani, a 21-year-old lieutenant in the Saudi Royal Air Force, opened fire in a classroom at Pensacola Naval Air Station in Florida on Friday, killing three American sailors and wounding eight other people before being shot dead by police.

A senior Pentagon official said the move was

intended to allow for a broader review of security procedures that would eventually apply to all of some 5,000 international military students in the U.S.

The safety stand-down only applied to the some 850 visiting students from Saudi Arabia.

The FBI has said it believes Alshamrani acted alone before he was fatally shot by a deputy sheriff.

"I don't have any evidence to suggest that there is a larger ring or larger conspiracy," a military official said.

■ Saudi-American alliance

The shootings have again raised questions about the U.S. military relationship with Saudi Arabia, which has come under heightened scrutiny in Congress over the war in Yemen and Saudi Arabia's killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi last year.

U.S. military leaders have sought to portray the attack as an isolated incident that would not affect the overall U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Navy spokeswoman Lieutenant Andriana Genualdi said the safety stand-down and operational pause began on Monday for Saudi Arabian aviation students. She said the grounding included three different military facilities: Naval Air Station Pensacola, Naval Air Station Whiting Field, and Naval Air Station Mayport, all in Florida state.

"Given the traumatic events, we feel it is best to keep the Royal Saudi Air Force students off the flying schedule for a short time," Genualdi said.

Alshamrani was on the base as part of a Navy training programme designed to foster links with foreign allies. He had started training in the U.S. in 2017 and had been in the Pensacola area for the past 18 months.

A group that tracks online extremism has said Alshamrani appeared to have posted criticism of U.S. wars in predominantly Muslim countries and quoted slain al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden on Twitter hours before the shooting spree. →13

Terrorists, White Helmets transport chemicals to the Idlib

In coordination with the so-called "White Helmets" terrorist group and the supervision of Turkish and European experts, the terrorists of Al-Nusra Front organization transported a shipment of chemicals packed in cylinders containing toxic chlorine gas towards the cities of Saraqib and Maarat al-Numan, south of Idlib.

The mentioned cylinders reached the two regions from outside Idlib governorate by two cars belonging to the "White Helmets" terrorist group, the Russian Sputnik Agency quoted local sources as saying, adding that the transfer pro-

cess was supervised by experts from Al-Nusra terrorists who have French, Belgian and Turkish nationalities.

The sources added that the cylinders arrived last Wednesday at dawn to the city of Saraqib and were stored in one of the headquarters of the Takfiri organization south of the city of Idlib, while the other cylinders headed to the area of Maarat al-Numan.

The sources quoted a member of the "White Helmets" group as saying that the process of transferring the "cylinders" to their new locations

was carried out in conjunction with a local leader of the terrorist "Al-Nusra Front".

Many documents, which were found by the Syrian Arab Army in the areas liberated from terrorism where the White Helmets operate, confirmed the organization's engagement with terrorist organizations and its support for them with preparing and promoting the use of chemical weapons against civilians, like what happened in Eastern Ghouta in Damascus countryside several times and in areas in Aleppo where the Syrian Arab Army was falsely accused. →13



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Mourners bid farewell to pop singer Turaj Shabankhani

TEHRAN — Pop singer Turaj Shabankhani, famous for his song "Bahar Bahar" (spring, spring), was laid to rest in the Artists Section of Tehran's Behesht Zahra Cemetery on Wednesday.

Shabankhani was suffering from a type of lung disease and passed away on Monday at the age of 69.

His funeral procession took place in the courtyard of Tehran's Vahdat Hall and was attended by large number of musicians and cultural officials.

Poet Mohamad-Ali Bahmani, the writer of "Bahar Bahar", made short speech at the funeral service, calling Turaj a very good and kind person. →16



EDITORIAL

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Why the official death toll in recent events has not been announced yet

The main question that has been raised in regard to the events of the past few weeks that followed the gasoline price reform is about the number of the dead and why it has not been announced yet?

Opposition media, focusing on the death toll, pursue a completely biased agenda to create mistrust in people and incite international organizations to issue human rights resolutions against Iran.

Intentionally announcing false figures, such as 350, 500, or even thousands by Trump are just a few examples of rumors and propaganda campaign by the opposition media.

Now the question is whether there are no official statistics about the number of those killed, or if there is, why it takes so long to be announced.

Our investigations show that the exact number of the dead is available to the relevant organizations, but it has taken some time to be announced, as it requires exact analysis of why and how they were killed.

In other words, the establishment not only is not indifferent to this important issue, but it is seriously seeking to clarify the various aspects of the matter so that the rights of the dead and also their families are not disregarded.

In this regard, we can mention the letter by the Supreme National Security Council to the Leader of the Islamic Revolution. The content of the letter as well as the Leader's response to the letter has been already published in the media. Given the importance of the issue, the letter has made detailed suggestions; if confirmed, based on which the decision will be made in accordance to the way they were killed.

In fact, if the government were to take no responsibility for the killings, it could immediately announce the death toll. The Leader's strict order for observing Islamic mercy and accurately assessing the pros and cons of the issue have necessitated careful examination. This obviously prolonged the process. →3



ARTICLE

Afshin Majlesi
Tehran Times journalist

Tribal tourism gives chance to discover another face of Iran

For both domestic and foreign travelers, tribal tourism is all about opening eyes to new places, traditions, cuisines, beliefs, and ways of life.

Also called ethno-tourism, ethnic tourism or tribe tourism, it lays the ground for you to feel indigenous people by living with a nomad or rural family or enjoying an independent stay. However, as the name implies, it's a trip for recreational purposes rather than being an expedition for anthropological research!

There are many tourists from all over the world who tend to observe the lifestyle of these hardworking people and spend a few days watching activities such as milking, yogurt making, buttering, oiling, woolen, carpeting and much more. Many Iranian and foreign tourists are interested in sleeping in the nomadic black tents.

For some, it's a great opportunity to learning more about the world and yourself. Some other may say, in our globalized age, seeing indigenous cultures with the naked eye yields more memorable and authentic experience. And for others, tribal tourism may simply be a kind of nosy exercise to discover people whose appearance and way of life look very different to their own.

And finally, for indigenous communities, it brings financial benefits and cultural exchange. From another point of view, tribal tourism has its own challenges; it can cause immense damage to the environment for intense.

Varied natural setting of the country never disappoints visitors when it comes to tribal tourism as the culturally-diverse country is home to many regional people including ones with Turk and Arab elements in addition to the Kurds, Baloch, Bakhtyari, Lurs, and other smaller minorities such as Armenians, Assyrians, Jews and others.

Language, music, indigenous cuisine, clothing, songs, anecdotes, crafts, live performances, and local rituals such as celebrations and wedding ceremonies have always spurred many to experiencing life among the tribes. →10

Zarif calls foreign interference in Afghan peace talks ‘unacceptable’

POLITICAL d e s k TEHRAN — Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said foreign interference in the Afghan peace talks is “unacceptable”.

“Peace is for the Afghans and must be managed by the Afghan government, and Taliban must be part of this process,”



Zarif said on Monday that Iran supports an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process with the participation of all political groups and factions.

“We support an Afghan-owned and Afghan-led peace process with the participation of all political groups and factions including the Taliban with the Afghan government in the center,” he said during a speech at the Ministerial Conference of Heart of Asia

Countries in Istanbul, Turkey.

He added, “We believe the United Nations could become active to bring all domestic groups as well as international partners of the Afghan government under one umbrella to facilitate this process.”

In a meeting with Afghanistan’s Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Uzbekistan on November 1, Iranian First Vice President Es’haq Jahangiri said that people in Afghanistan should decide their own fate, reaffirming Tehran’s support for Afghan-Afghan peace talks.

Iranian commander visits Pakistan Navy’s training, research centers

TEHRAN (Tasnim) — Commander of the Iranian Navy Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi paid visits to several training and research centers of the Pakistan Navy in the southern port city of Karachi.

On the second day of his visit to Pakistan, Rear Admiral Khanzadi and his accompanying delegation visited the PNS Qasim, a major marines base, a shipyard and several naval training and research centers in Karachi.

Speaking on the sidelines of the visits, Khanzadi said training is the best and most effective component of learning and enhancing experience in peacetime.

“During these training interactions and ties (between the navies of Iran and Pakistan), all the capacities and capabilities of the two navies can be shared in all areas...,” he added.

In an earlier meeting with his Pakistani counterpart Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi, Rear Admiral Khanzadi called for efforts to boost naval cooperation between the two Muslim neighbors.

Khanzadi pointed to Iran’s presidency of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), saying Pakistan has played a constructive role in collective cooperation among the IONS members.

He added that Iran is looking forward to the Pakistani Navy’s participation in a joint maritime security exercise.

Expressing Iran’s readiness to send warships to the ports of Pakistan for friendly visits, Khanzadi said the two nations have great potential for growth in the shipping industry with their strategic ports, such as the Gwadar Port and Chabahar.

The Iranian commander also warned against hostile attempts to create division among regional nations, stressing that the region would be much safer without the presence of foreign forces.

For his part, the Pakistani admiral highlighted the cultural and religious commonalities between the two neighbors, saying that a maritime corridor that links China to Pakistan provides a perfect economic opportunity for the region and for Iran’s ports.

Iranian and Pakistani naval forces have in recent years promoted cooperation and staged several joint drills in the Indian Ocean and the Sea of Oman.

Internet users shocked by new Google ban on Press TV

Internet users, including Press TV’s followers on social media platforms, have reacted with shock and dismay to Google’s most recent attack against the Iranian news network.

On Tuesday, the U.S. tech giant blocked access to Press TV’s YouTube account for a fifth time since the network signed up with the video-sharing platform in 2009.

Google also hit Hispan TV, another Iranian news network, with a similar ban. Last time, Press TV and Hispan TV came under attack by the company in April.

On no occasion, though, has Google served the networks with any notification before pulling the plug on their services. Nor has it provided any clear explanation.

Soon after Press TV’s website carried the news on Google’s new ban, users created lengthy comment streams in the feedback section running below the story.

“The ugliest shame in press freedom [is] to silence the voice for voiceless,” said a user going by the name of “The Truth Hurt For Arrogants,” repeating Press TV’s slogan.

Patricia, another user, regretted that “the truth is too much for Google to handle,” while Truth is bitter expressed hope that “the truth shall prevail over falsehood.”

Another user also asked, “What Google is going to achieve by this move since Press TV has captured hearts and minds of millions of people around the world?”

Another user said Google was not a “multinational company,” adding, “It’s an extension of U.S. government and it should be treated as such.”

“The puppets, no wonder Russia and China have their own intranet,” a user identifying as Zea Mays 2 commented on the Twitter post sharing the website’s report.

“This is what Corporate Cannibalism is all about! They are the most savage form of Colonial Savages!” one user said in a comment posted under the story.

“Google will never censor anything pro-Israel,” Abdul noted in a comment on Press TV’s website, while Tony Gosling tweeted, “Pro-Zionist BBC still available.”

Foreign Ministry to PGCC: Statement on Iranian islands is insult to national sovereignty

Mousavi calls PGCC remarks on Iran’s decision to reduce JCPOA commitments a ‘historic joke’

POLITICAL d e s k TEHRAN — The Iranian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday deplored the anti-Iran statement by the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) as baseless and a repetition of old allegations, saying claims of ownership over the Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf is insult to national sovereignty.

“A few regional countries, which have thus far been providing supports for unwise policies, should respond to the public opinion that what have they done so far except creating and reinvigorating the Takfiri terrorist groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen as well as paving the ground for alien countries to enter the Persian Gulf?” Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi asked in reaction to the statement issued by the PGCC in its 40th meeting in Riyadh on Wednesday.

Mousavi added, “What have they done so far for de-escalation of tensions in the region?”

The Foreign Ministry spokesman indirectly suggested that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are behind such statements against Iran by the PGCC.

PGCC includes Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

“Repeating baseless claims in the statement are result of pressures exerted by a few member states of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council which have used their entire attempts in the last recent decades to prevent expansion of multilateral cooperation in the region,” Mousavi pointed out.

The Foreign Ministry official also said certain PGCC countries are responsible for creating mayhem in Syria and Yemen through their rash approaches.

“They, due to their narrow-minded opinion, not only have been the cause of looting their neighboring countries’ wealth but have paved the way for the alien countries’ interference in this vital and sensitive region.”

He further said, “A few number of the council’s members intend to continue their own unwise policies to ruin the cooperation



opportunity created by Iran’s proposed Hormuz Peace Endeavor whose aim is restoring security and stability in the region.”

The spokesman suggested that “other regional countries should not allow them to do so.”

Pointing to policies by senior Iranian officials to bolster regional security over the past long years, Mousavi said, “Offering non-aggression treaty, regional dialogue assembly and ultimately the Hormuz Peace Endeavor are among Iran’s plans to materialize the idea of regional cooperation.”

The Iranian Foreign Ministry official also held Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners responsible for the disaster in Yemen.

The UN says over 24 million Yemenis are in dire need of humanitarian aid, including 10 million suffering from extreme levels of hunger.

The war has also taken a heavy toll on the country’s infrastructure, destroying hospitals, schools, and factories.

“Those countries whose irresponsible meddling in other countries’ internal affair

has ended in widespread massacre of innocent civilians, women, children and the old and has also spread insecurity and terrorism in the region, are now trying to externalize their self-made problems to evade any international punishments for their open violation of international law and committing war crimes,” Mousavi stated.

The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) said in a report published in early November that the Saudi-led war on Yemen has killed more than 100,000 people since 2015. It said the figure included 12,000 civilian deaths in directly targeted attacks.

The United States and the United Kingdom are the main supporters of Saudi Arabia in the war, providing the kingdom with billions of dollars in arms sales, training, logistical support and targeting assistance for airstrikes.

■ ‘Insult to territorial sovereignty’

Mousavi also underscored Tehran’s position that the three islands of Abu Musa and Lesser and Greater Tonbs are inseparable parts of Iran.

“Any claim on these three islands is considered by Iran as an act of interference in the country’s internal affairs and insult to our territorial sovereignty.”

He said, “Iran strongly condemns such statements.”

■ “Historic joke”

Mousavi also mocked the statement by the PGCC in which it criticized Iran for scaling down its undertakings under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), saying it is a “historic joke”.

“The countries that applied their entire efforts and wealth against the JCPOA are now opposing Iran’s legitimate measures.”

Iran has started to reduce its commitments to the JCPOA in response to the abrogation of the nuclear deal by the U.S. and the return of sanctions.

In early May, Saudi Arabia, a longtime U.S. ally, said it “supports and welcomes” U.S. President Donald Trump’s decision to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal.

“The kingdom supports and welcomes the steps announced by the U.S. president towards withdrawing from the nuclear deal... and reinstating economic sanctions against Iran,” the Saudi Foreign Ministry said at the time.

Mousavi further condemned the countries that embarked on providing open support for the U.S. economic terrorism against Iran and said the PGCC’s stance in this regard contradicts the good-neighborhood policy.

On Tuesday, Saudi Arabia’s King Salman opened the PGCC summit by calling for regional unity to confront Iran and secure energy supplies and maritime channels.

“Our region today is passing through circumstances and challenges that require concerted efforts to confront them as Iran continues its aggressive actions that threaten security and stability...,” he said.

In a televised speech, he also urged the global community to address Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Guterres says UN is unable to verify weapons used in Saudi oil attack were from Iran

POLITICAL d e s k TEHRAN — United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Tuesday that the UN is “unable to independently corroborate” that missiles and drones used in attacks on Saudi oil facilities in September “are of Iranian origin”.

“At this time, it is unable to independently corroborate that the cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles used in these attacks are of Iranian origin,” he wrote in the report, seen by Reuters.

Yemenis launched drone attacks on Saudi Arabia’s oil installations on September 14, disrupting half of the country’s oil supply.

Washington and Riyadh claimed Iran was behind the attacks. Tehran has said blaming Iran for the attack is part of

a larger game against Iran in line with Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign against Tehran.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in September that “even the Saudis themselves don’t believe the fiction of Iranian involvement” in the attacks on the Aramco oil facilities, citing Saudi Arabia’s retaliation attack on Hodaideh in Yemen as a reason.

In a post on his Twitter account, Zarif said it was “curious” that the Saudis, who had blamed Iran for the September 14 air raids on two major Saudi oil facilities, had retaliated against Hodaideh in violation of a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement signed in Stockholm in December 2018.

“Since the Saudi regime has blamed Iran—baseless as that is—for the attacks on its oil facilities, curious that they

retaliated against Hodaideh in Yemen today—breaking a UN ceasefire. It is clear that even the Saudis themselves don’t believe the fiction of Iranian involvement.”

In a letter to the UN Security Council, Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations Majid Takht Ravanchi said, “It has become a standard practice of certain officials of the United States who, following any incident -- no matter where and by whom -- without exception, immediately and without any investigation and evidence, declare Iran as the culprit.”

Takht Ravanchi added, “This ‘maximum deception’ campaign is in line with and a living example of the so-called ‘maximum pressure’ policy of the United States against Iran.”

Iran ready to send warships to Atlantic Ocean: military official

POLITICAL d e s k TEHRAN — Habbollah Sayyari, the deputy army chief for coordination affairs, said on Wednesday that the Iranian Navy is capable of sending its fleet of warships to the Atlantic Ocean.

Sayyari, in an interview with Tasnim in the port city of Konarak, said, “Our fleet enjoys full readiness for presence in the Atlantic Ocean as we did it in the past years when the hegemonic powers drew a 12000-mile line and said that Iran is not allowed to cross that line. We entered and sailed round Africa to enter the Atlantic Ocean to prove that we can.”

“We are planning to have a similar presence to move along the Atlantic Ocean altitude to go forward in the free seas as much as the international maritime law permits,” he added.

The Iranian Navy has been conducting anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since November 2008, when Somali raiders hijacked the Iranian-chartered cargo ship, MV Delight, off the



coast of Yemen.

According to UN Security Council resolutions, different countries can send their warships to the Gulf of Aden and coastal waters of Somalia against the pirates and even with prior notice to the Somali government enter the territorial waters of that country in pursuit of Somali pirates.

The Gulf of Aden — which links the Indian Ocean with the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea — is an important energy corridor, particularly because Persian Gulf oil is shipped to the West via the Suez Canal.

Iran and Iraq are in the same front: Baghdad ambassador

POLITICAL d e s k TEHRAN — Saad Abdul Wahab Jawad Qandil, the Iraqi ambassador to Tehran, said on Wednesday that Iran and Iraq are in the same front.

According to Tasnim, he said in a conference in Tehran that foreign plots are at work to cause chaos in the region.

The United States has not hidden its anger over the friendly ties between Tehran and Baghdad. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also made efforts to undermine relations between Iran and Iraq.

Iran rushed to the support of Iraq when ISIS (Daesh) launched a sudden and rapid attack against Iraq and captured large swathes of the Iraqi territory in the summer of 2014.

Mohammad Mehdi Boroumandi, deputy chairman of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, said on Monday that Iran spares no effort in helping the Iraqi people. “The Islamic Republic of Iran wants Iraq, as a neighboring and friendly country, be in peace. So, [Iran] will spare no effort in helping the Iraqi people,” ISNA quoted him as saying.

He also called on all Iraqi groups to make efforts in line with protecting their

country’s territorial integrity.

Protests in Iraq began on October 1 over the failing economy and demand for political and anti-corruption reforms. The rallies have, however, turned into violent confrontations on numerous occasions.

According to the Iraqi parliament’s human rights commission, more than 300 people have been killed in the country.

In an interview with the Mehr news agency published on Monday, Hassan Danaeefar, the former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, said that it is the Iraqi people who should decide about the destiny of their own country. “The Islamic Republic of Iran has always wanted peace, welfare and progress for Iraq and also peaceful life for all Iraqi groups,” he said.

The former ambassador also noted that despite what the enemies claim, Iran enjoys “credibility” and not “influence” in Iraq.

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians visit Iraq during the Arbaeen rituals every year. The Arbaeen ritual, which is considered the greatest gathering in the world, highlights cultural and religious affinities between the Iranian and Iraqi nations.

Rouhani says Iran will surmount sanctions

Press TV — Iranian President Hassan Rouhani says his administration is determined to surmount the sanctions against the country through different means but will not compromise its red lines.

“We should either bypass the sanctions or compel the enemy to repent, and the administration is determined to frustrate this plot (sanctions) both through boosting domestic production and other different means like negotiations,” Rouhani said at a weekly cabinet session in Tehran on Wednesday.

“But in doing so, the administration will act in line with the establishment’s red lines and will not cross them,” he added.

Tensions have soared between Iran and the U.S. since last year, when President Donald Trump pulled Washington out of the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and the P5+1 group of countries consisting of the United States, the UK, France, Russia, and China plus Germany,

and reimposed the sanctions that had been lifted under the deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In response, Iran has so far rowed back on its nuclear commitments four times in compliance with Articles 26 and 36 of the JCPOA, but stressed that its retaliatory measures will be reversible as soon as the European signatories — France, Britain and Germany — find practical ways to shield mutual trade from the U.S. sanctions.

Since then, Trump has on various occasions indicated his interest in starting renewed talks with Iran to achieve a new deal over the country’s nuclear program, but Tehran has rejected his calls saying any such talks could be only possible if Washington returned to the JCPOA, lifted all sanctions on the country and engaged in talks only within the frame of the P5+1 group.

President Rouhani said last week that Iran has been left with no choice other than resistance against those

who have brought it under sanctions, but the country has, at the same time, left an opening for negotiation.

“We have no choice other than resistance and steadfastness in the face of those who impose sanctions, but have not shut the door to negotiation either,” Rouhani said during an address in Tehran on December 4.

“We believe that wrongful and oppressive sanctions should be lifted first, and then the issue of negotiation can be addressed,” he added.

■ Resistance key to foiling U.S. plots against Mideast

Elsewhere in his remarks, Rouhani said the U.S. plots against regional countries will fail through their resistance.

“Undoubtedly, the Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese and Iranian nations can resist their (Americans’) plots, and the Iranian nation has been and will be the forerunner in this regard,” he said.

Russia, Iran discuss war on terror

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergei Naryshkin has exchanged views with top Iranian Intelligence Ministry officials about cooperation in fight against terrorism, says SVR spokesman Sergei Ivanov.

“Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergei Naryshkin has concluded his visit to Tehran. He discussed ways to boost cooperation in the fight against international terrorism and common security threats with senior officials at the Iranian Intelligence Ministry,” Ivanov pointed out, TASS reported on Wednesday.

Naryshkin also held a meeting with Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani. The parties exchanged views on global and regional security issues, as well as on cooperation between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Iran, Russia and Turkey have said they are concerned about the increased presence of terrorist groups in Syria’s Idlib province.

The trio also said they rejected attempts



to create “new realities on the ground, including illegitimate self-rule initiatives” and that they were opposed to the illegal seizure

and transfer of Syrian oil revenues, Reuters reported on Wednesday.

They made the remarks in a joint state-

ment after talks in Kazakhstan, pledging to coordinate actions aimed at eliminating the militants.

Commenting on the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, the three nations said it should be governed by a sense of “compromise and constructive engagement” without foreign interference and externally imposed timelines.

In line with their security cooperation, Iran, Turkey and Russia launched the Astana peace talks on the Syrian crisis.

The Astana peace talks were launched on Jan. 23-24, 2017 with the aim of putting an end to the Syrian conflict.

Kazakhstan has hosted multiple rounds of talks on Syria since January 2017, backed by the three power brokers, most of which involved delegations from the Syrian government and opposition.

The 14th round of talks kicked off in Nur-sultan (formerly called Astana) on Wednesday, with a focus on technical issues, in the northern part of Syria, the area of Idlib, and the banks of the Euphrates.

Why the official death toll in recent events has not been announced yet

1→ The letter divided those killed into several groups. It suggested that based on current legal frameworks, ordinary citizens who were not involved in the riots but were killed are considered as “martyrs” and therefore their families will receive stipends by the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs.

It is also suggested that blood money be paid to those who lost a family member and those who were killed during the protests.

In the case of those who were killed in armed clashes with security forces, the situation and background of their families is going to be examined. The Leader of the Islamic Revolution has even ordered that the families of this group, who were suspected of committing violent acts, be treated with Islamic mercy.

Classifying victims into each group will create different conditions for the families. Therefore, it is natural that the process of examining why and how they were killed requires

upmost accuracy and precise analysis.

Obviously, there must be a specific difference between the one who is supposed to be considered a martyr, the one who was killed in the riots, and the person who took arms against security forces.

Needless to say, the opposition groups, which released false reports about the death toll during the riot, do not care about people and are trying to fish in the troubled waters.

Google blocks Press TV, Hispan TV’s YouTube accounts



POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — Press TV says access to its YouTube channel has been blocked for the fifth time by Google in its most recent attack against the Iranian news network.

“On Tuesday, the U.S. tech giant blocked access to Press TV’s YouTube account for a fifth time since the network signed up with the video-sharing platform in 2009,” Press TV’s website announced on Wednesday.

It said Google has not provided any clear explanation.

Google also hit Hispan TV, another Iranian news network, with a similar ban.

Back in April, Google blocked Press TV and Hispan TV’s access to their official accounts on its platforms, including YouTube and Gmail, without prior notice, citing “violation of policies”.

“Your Google Account was disabled and can’t be restored because it was used in a way that violates Google’s policies,” Google told Press TV in a message.

The Google ban seems to be in line

with the U.S. government’s pressure on Iran and an all-out propaganda campaign against the country, which includes targeting Iranian media.

Back in January, Press TV anchor Marzieh Hashemi was detained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) at St. Louis Lambert International Airport in Missouri.

The journalist, a 59-year-old American-born Muslim convert who has lived in Iran for years, was jailed in the U.S. for days and later released on January 23 after some 10 days of detention without charge.

A U.S. federal court failed to indict the journalist, who was arrested as a material witness in an unspecified criminal proceeding, of any crime.

Hashemi’s detention prompted condemnation in the U.S. and abroad, sparking rallies in several countries, including the United States.

While in detention, she was forced to remove her hijab and was only offered non-halal food.

14th round of Astana talks on Syria held in Kazakhstan



TEHRAN (MNA) – The 14th round of the Astana talks on Syria was held on Wednesday in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan’s capital.

This round of talks, hosted by the city of Nur-Sultan, was attended by delegations from the guarantor countries, namely Iran, Russia, Turkey, alongside the UN Special Envoy to Syria, as well as the Syrian government and the opposition, as well as observers from Lebanon, Iraq, and Jordan.

Following bilateral, tripartite and quartet meetings with delegates attending the 14th Astana talks, Iranian delegation headed by Senior Assistant to Iran’s Foreign Minister Ali-Asghar Khaji held separate meetings with delegations from Syria and Lebanon on the latest issues.

During bilateral meetings with Syrian and Iraqi delegations, the sides discussed the latest developments in Syria, especially concerns about the return of ISIL and the need to fight against terrorism, the latest situation in the Euphrates, Idlib, Constitution Committee and extradition

of detainees and abductees.

Following the activities of this round of Astana talks, first, the second meeting of delegations of the three guarantor countries was held in a bid to set the final document of the 14th round, then, a quadripartite meeting was held with the participation of the delegation of the guarantor countries plus UN Special Envoy to Syria Geir Pederson.

At the end, the closing session of this round of Astana talks was held with the participation of all delegations.

The talks on Syria, known as the Astana process, were launched by Russia, Turkey, and Iran in January 2017 to bring all warring parties in Syria to the negotiating table to complement the UN-sponsored peace talks in Geneva. So far, 13 meetings have been held.

Cooperation between the guarantors of peace in Syria has also been able to preserve the territorial integrity and national sovereignty and independence of Syria.

IRGC censures distortion of military official’s reaction to Israeli threats

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — The spokesman for the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) said on Wednesday that Second Brigadier General Morteza Qorbani’s reaction to the Israeli foreign minister’s military threats against Iran have been distorted and misunderstood by media outlets.

Ramezan Sharif was responding to distortion of Qorbani’s remarks in reaction to Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz,

who had claimed on Sunday Israel would destroy Iran’s nuclear missile program, if no one else does.

Also on Sunday, Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett had threatened to make Syria a Vietnam for Iran, vowing to prevent the Iranian military’s permanent base inside Syria.

Some media outlets had claimed that Qorbani has said, “If the Zionist regime makes the slightest mistake against

Iran, we will destroy Tel Aviv from Lebanon, and there is no need for Iran to lift missiles and equipment.”

“With regard to conducted investigations, Qorbani’s speech had been distorted and later was misunderstood by media outlets,” the IRGC spokesman pointed out.

Sharif also dismissed reports that Qorbani is currently serving as advisor to the IRGC chief, saying he is cooperating with the Armed Forces “in another field”.

Lawmaker says Iran to further reduce JCPOA commitments

‘No hope for implementation of INSTEX’

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — A member of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee has said Iran will continue to reduce its commitments under the 2015 nuclear pact, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), without hesitation.

“Iran, despite all the threats, will take the next step in reducing its commitments to Barjam (JCPOA),” ISNA on Wednesday quoted Alaeddin Boroujerdi as saying.

Boroujerdi also said the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) is responsible to decide on the issue.

The fact of the matter is that the other side has violated the deal, he said.

“Regardless of the U.S. withdrawal from Barjam, the Europeans have not fulfilled their commitments and are condemned in any inter-

national court,” the veteran lawmaker added. Under the nuclear agreement Iran signed with the 5+1 nations in July 2015, Tehran agreed to put limits on its nuclear activities in exchange for termination of economic and financial sanctions. The IAEA was tasked to monitor Iran’s compliance with the agreement.

But in May 2018 U.S. President Donald Trump pulled his country out of the JCPOA and reinstituted sanctions on Iran.

Iran and the remaining parties launched talks to save the JCPOA after the U.S. withdrawal, but the three EU parties to the deal (France, Britain, and Germany) have failed to ensure Iran’s economic interests.

Iran started to partially reduce commitments under the nuclear deal exactly a year after the U.S. abandoned the deal and imposed the harshest ever sanctions on the country

under the “maximum pressure” policy. At the time Iran announced that its “strategic patience” is over.

So far, Iran has taken four steps in that regard.

However, Tehran has repeatedly said its measures will be reversed as soon as Europe finds practical ways to shield the Iranian economy from sanctions.

■ **‘No hope for implementation of INSTEX’**

Boroujerdi also said Iran has no hope that INSTEX will be implemented by the Europeans.

“We have no hope to implementation of INSTEX by Europeans.”

INSTEX is a barter mechanism devised by the three European states party to the JCPOA to circumvent U.S. sanctions on Iran.



Boroujerdi, who served as deputy foreign minister in the 1980s and 1990s and chairman of the Parliament National Security and Foreign Policy Committee for more than a decade, said “Europeans, through repeated hollow promises, are avoiding their responsibility to implement Barjam.”

Iran foils major foreign cyberattack: minister

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — Communication and Information Technology Minister Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi announced on Wednesday that Iran has foiled a very big organized cyberattack on its electronic infrastructure. Azari Jahromi said the cyberattack was launched by a foreign government.



“We recently faced a highly organized and state-sponsored attack on our e-government infrastructure which was...repelled by the country’s security shield,” Azari Jahromi told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

The major attack was repelled by the security shield known as the Dejfa firewall, the minister added, according to Tasnim.

“It was a very big attack,” Azari-Jahromi said, adding that details would be revealed later.

U.S. officials told Reuters in October that the United States had carried out a secret cyber strike on Iran after the Sept. 14 attacks on Saudi oil facilities, which Washington and Riyadh claimed Iran was responsible for.

In a post on his Twitter account back in June, Azari Jahromi said Iran had managed to thwart about 33 million cyber-attacks against its sensitive sites last year (March 2018-March 2019).

“Last year, we neutralized not a single strike but 33 million attacks with the Dejfa firewall,” he wrote, stressing that the U.S. tries hard but has not carried out a successful attack.

Back in October, head of the Civil Defense Organization Brigadier General Gholam Reza Jalali said Iran is taking legal action against the U.S. over repeated cyberattack attempts and threats, while it is putting in place robust security measures to protect its vital infrastructure.

“The Americans have repeatedly threatened and mounted cyberattacks against us,” Jalali told Tasnim.

Austria seeks to preserve nuclear deal: diplomat

POLITICAL **TEHRAN** — Stefan Scholz, the Austrian ambassador to Tehran, said on Wednesday that Austria seeks to preserve the 2015 nuclear deal, formally known as the JCPOA.

“The Austrian government is interested in preserving the JCPOA and we believe that Europeans must fulfil their promises and uphold Iran’s economic benefits,” he said during a meeting with members of Sanandaj’s city council.

He noted that Austria, as a member of the European Union, is making efforts to save the JCPOA.

Austria and Geneva hosted the nuclear talks between Iran, the 5+1 group, and the European Union, which led to the conclusion of the JCPOA in July 2015.

Josep Borrell, the new EU foreign policy chief, said on Monday that the signatories to the nuclear deal should adopt a united stance to preserve the deal.

He also said on Saturday that “collective responsibility” is needed to stop the JCPOA from breaking apart.

“We have a collective responsibility to preserve #IranDeal,” Borrell tweeted.

A meeting of the JCPOA Joint Commission was held in Vienna on December 6.

Borrell added, “Following the Joint Commission, as a coordinator, I support the call for full implementation & to reverse the recent negative trend.”

U.S. President Donald Trump quit the nuclear deal in May 2018 and introduced the harshest ever sanctions on Iran as part of his administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran.

Under the JCPOA, Iran promised to put limits on its nuclear activities in exchange for termination of economic and financial sanctions.

Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China, and Iran have been trying to salvage the pact. However, Europeans’ efforts to protect trade with Iran against the U.S. sanctions have yielded nothing concrete so far.

On May 8, exactly one year after the U.S. abandoned the deal, Tehran announced that its “strategic patience” is over and began to partially reduce its commitments to the agreement at bi-monthly intervals.

In the first stage, Iran announced that it will not limit its stockpile of the nuclear fuel to 300 kilograms allowed under the deal. On that date (May 8) Iran’s Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) said if the remaining parties to the JCPOA, especially Europeans, devise a mechanism to protect Iran from the sanctions’ effect in the two-month deadline it will reverse its decision.

But since European parties missed the deadline, on July 7 Iran announced that it has started enriching uranium to a higher purity than the 3.67%, thereby starting the second step.

Again, as Europe missed the second 60-day deadline, Iran moved to take the third step, removing a ban on nuclear research and development (R&D).

In the latest step, which started on November 6, Iran began injecting uranium gas into 1,044 centrifuges at the Fordow nuclear site. It was done at the presence of inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).



STOCK MARKET

TEDPIX	339386.6
IFX	4385.65

Sources: tse.ir, Ifb.ir

CURRENCIES

USD	42,000 rials
EUR	46,582 rials
GBP	55,197 rials
AED	11,437 rials

Source: cbi.ir

COMMODITIES

Brent	\$63.87/b
WTI	\$58.90/b
OPEC Basket	\$65.57/b
Gold	\$1,467.70/oz
Silver	\$816.70/oz
Platinum	\$925.65/oz

Sources: oilprice.com, Moneymetals.com

'No need for red meat imports this year'

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Managing Director of Iran's Central Union of Animal Farmers says there is no need for imports of red meat this year (ends on March 19, 2020), due to surplus production, IRNA reported on Wednesday.



Pointing out that the country's red meat output meets almost 90 percent of the domestic demand every year, Saeed Soltani Sarvestani said: "This year, however, we don't need to import any red meat since our production has exceeded demand."

To support domestic production, importers and suppliers of red meat in the country should purchase the mentioned surplus livestock from producers rather than importing it, so that it could benefit both producers and consumers in addition to protecting national interests, Sarvestani said.

The official further noted that due to ample supply of the mentioned commodity, the prices have also witnessed a significant decrease in the past few weeks.

He cited lower consumption and prevention of live livestock exports as the main reasons for the increase of live livestock in the country.

Last year, about 895,000 tons of red meat was produced in the country and more than 160,000 tons of the commodity was also imported into the country.

Iran is among the leading consumers of red meat in the Middle East region with lamb being the most sought after.

However, the consumption per person is around a third of what is normally seen in countries like the U.S. and Australia, mainly due to the prohibition of pork in Islamic law.

The major part of Iran's red meat imports comes from countries like Brazil, where Iranian supervisors directly control culling methods to ensure they comply with religious rules.

India's economic recovery critical for oil in 2020

India's economy is suffering its worst cyclical downturn for more than a decade, which is weighing heavily on global oil consumption, and until the economy improves, prices are unlikely to see a sustained increase.

If the monetary and fiscal stimulus succeeds in pushing the economy out of its current trough, faster growth would play an important role in rebalancing the oil market in 2020.

Between 2008 and 2018, India's oil consumption increased at an annual average rate of just over 5% or an extra 200,000 barrels per day each year.

The South Asian giant accounted for 15% of all the growth in petroleum consumption worldwide over the last decade. Only China was a more important source of incremental demand.

The health of India's economy is therefore crucial to the evolution of the production-consumption balance, and at the moment the economy is very sick.

Like most middle-income countries, measuring the size of India's economy and its growth rate, accurately and in real time, presents formidable challenges.

But hard data on auto sales and electricity generation point to an economy currently experiencing a severe slowdown or outright recession.

Passenger vehicle sales have been falling this year at the fastest rate for more than two decades, down by around 8% between September and November compared with the same period a year earlier, according to the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers.

Plunging vehicles are both a symptom of economic stagnation and contribute directly to slower growth in demand for road fuels.

Electricity generation, another real-time proxy for economic growth, is also falling at the fastest rate for well over ten years, according to data from the Central Electricity Authority.

Power consumption was down more than 7% in the three months between September and November compared with the same period a year earlier.

The slump has been so severe it has forced an aggressive policy response. The Reserve Bank of India cut its benchmark repo rate five times this year by a total of 135 basis points.

(Source: business.financialpost.com)

Exclusive exhibition of Iranian products opens in Tashkent

1 → As reported, 37 Iranian renowned companies are participating in the mentioned exclusive exhibition.

Addressing the inaugural ceremony of the exhibit, TPO Head Hamid Zadboum said, "This exhibition is a valuable opportunity for strengthening cooperation between the two countries' private sectors."

He also stressed that Iran and Uzbekistan are seriously determined to expand and strengthen their long-term economic and trade cooperation and also their joint investment programs.

Addressing the same ceremony, Bahman Hosseinzadeh, the managing director of Iran International Exhibitions Company, announced his country's readiness to boost cooperation with Uzbekistan for holding exhibitions.

He also invited Uzbek companies to attend Iran's international exhibitions to showcase their capabilities in the Iranian market and promote trade ties between the two countries.

The official further expressed hope that some fruitful agreements will be signed between Iranian and Uzbek sides through B2B meetings that the exhibition of Iranian products in Tashkent is providing.

Expressing satisfaction over launching a direct flight line between the two countries,



Iran's International Exhibitions Company Managing Director Bahman Hosseinzadeh (1st L) and TPO Head Hamid Zadboum (2nd L) cut the ribbon on an exclusive exhibition of Iranian products in Tashkent on Wednesday.

Hosseinzadeh said that it will definitely lead to more trade and tourism cooperation between Iran and Uzbekistan.

The 13 meeting of Iran-Uzbekistan Joint Economic Committee will be attended by Iranian Industry, Mining and Trade Minister

Reza Rahmani.

TPO Head Hamid Zadboum, who has already traveled to Tashkent for taking necessary measures prior to the meeting, visited Uzbekistan's deputy minister of investment and foreign trade on Tuesday.

Chabahar-Muscat ferry line to resume operation

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — A direct ferry line between Iran's Chabahar port and Oman capital is planned to resume operation within a month, IRNA reported on Wednesday, quoting a deputy with the Ports and Maritime Department of Sistan-Baluchestan Province (where Chabahar port lies).

Ferries with the capacity of transporting 240 people and 40 vehicles will operate in the mentioned line which is going to be re-launched after a two-year hiatus, according to Hassan Ebrahimi.

After launching services to Qeshm Island and Bandar Abbas in Iran in 2016, Oman's National Ferries Company (NFC) launched a direct ferry line from Muscat to the port of Chabahar, located in southeastern Iran in the Sea of Oman, in November 2016.

Iran and Oman have also launched four direct shipping lines between the two countries' ports.

Earlier this week, the two countries signed a maritime cooperation agreement, aiming for boosting maritime transportation between the two sides.

The agreement was signed in a ceremony attended by senior officials from



both sides including the Iranian Minister of Transport and Urban Development Mohammad Eslami and Oman's Minister of Commerce and Industry Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, and heads of the two countries' ports and maritime organizations.

Under the agreement, Iranian traders and businessmen interact constructively with their Omani counterparts, and regular shipping lines will be established between the two countries, while the two sides will also provide facilities for using each other's ports.

Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy traveled to Iran on top of a trade delegation to attend the 18th meeting of Iran-Oman Joint Economic Committee in Tehran.

China strongly opposes U.S. unilateral sanctions against Iran: envoy

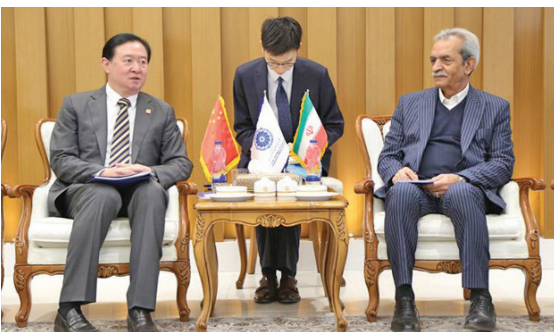
ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — Chinese Ambassador to Iran Chang Hua voiced his country's strong opposition with the U.S.'s unjust and unilateral sanctions against Iran in a meeting with the Head of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Gholam-Hossein Shafeie.

The ambassador who was accompanied by a trade delegation in his visit to ICCIMA, said the Chinese government supports Iran's efforts to safeguard its legitimate economic interests, IRIB reported on Tuesday.

"This support is not only in words, it has been proven in practice," Chang Hua stressed.

He noted that in recent years the two countries have announced plans for increasing bilateral trade, saying: "To achieve this goal, the two countries must benefit from comprehensive and strategic assistance in the sense that the two sides not only cooperate in politics and economy, but also increase their cooperation in the cultural, military and health spheres as well."

Mentioning the banking issues between the two countries,



Chinese Ambassador to Iran Chang Hua (L) holds talks with Head of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Gholam-Hossein Shafeie in Tehran on Tuesday.

Hua said "We have to take necessary measures to find the right path for bilateral development," adding, "So we are

CBI governor meets with Iranian bankers

ECONOMY **TEHRAN** — The Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) held talks with the managing directors of the country's banks in a CBI's periodic meeting, IRIB reported on Tuesday, citing CBI public relations office.

Headed by CBI Governor Abdolnasser Hemmati, the meeting covered a variety of issues including managing the country's cash flow, the need for acceleration of the completion and implementation of a one-time password (OTP) plan for all the bank accounts, and the operationalization of a productive credit certificate plan (Locally known as GAM).

Speaking in the meeting, Hemmati emphasized the central bank's strong determination for controlling and managing the cash flow in the country, saying that as from Wednesday, the ceiling for every person's money transactions in a 24-hour period will be limited to 1 billion rials (about \$23,800).

He also called on all the attendees to seriously pursue the implementation of the one-time password (OTP) plan.

Back in August, Hemmati said CBI's current programs are mainly focused on

During the meeting, the official referred to the significance of investment making by the two countries' traders and industrialists in the other country in line with the agreements between the two sides' senior officials.

Back in August, Uzbekistan's Prime Minister Abdulla Nigmatovich Aripov had said that his country welcomes Iranian investors and private sector's contribution to its economy.

Making the remarks in a meeting with Iran's First Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri and Iranian Transport Minister Mohammad Eslami, the Uzbek prime minister also said that the level of trade between the two countries has increased in recent months compared to the same period last year, however it is still not at the level it should be.

Jahangiri, for his part underlined the great economic capacities of Iran and Uzbekistan, saying that the two countries should take necessary measures to remove barriers to the trade development between the two countries so that the two sides could reach a comprehensive agreement on trade cooperation as soon as possible.

"The two countries' economies can complement each other and Iran is ready to expand its relations with Uzbekistan in all areas," the official added.



controlling liquidity and supporting domestic production.

Speaking in the 30th edition of Islamic Banking Conference in Tehran, the official mentioned some of CBI's major plans and programs for the current Iranian calendar year (began on March 21).

The official underlined the significant impact of the bank's new policies on the country's currency market and economy, noting that "reforming the country's banking system is a long-term process which cannot be achieved overnight."

Hemmati stated that CBI has neither overlooked nor postponed reformation of banking system and the bank has always had the modification of the banking system on its agenda.

currently negotiating to resolve the financial and banking problems, on which I cannot elaborate at this time."

He further noted that currently, there are more than 100 Chinese companies operating in Iran, however these companies are facing some problems that requires the Iranian authorities to cooperate to resolve them.

Emphasizing that economic cooperation between Iran and China could be increased with the aim of entering the markets in the region, the envoy said the Chinese government is to take necessary measures so that banks of the two countries could be able to facilitate the financial exchanges between Iran and China.

Shafeie for his part, stated that Iran-China bilateral relations are exceptional in all areas including economic and political aspects, adding that considering the existing capacities of the two countries it is possible to increase the trade ties even more.

He pointed to banking and insurance issues as the major problems facing Iranian businessmen in collaboration with China, and said "despite negotiations on the issue, there were still problems that had to be resolved."

The EU needs a strong economy to claim its role on the world stage

The process of European unification shows that its current leaders are neglecting the economic foundations of an essentially political project.

The long journey toward a united Europe began in the early 1950s when, with generous help from Washington, the French and the Germans decided to renounce centuries-old enmities by putting together their coal and steel resources. At that time, coal and steel were considered the ultimate instruments of war, and their common management meant a guarantee of peace and reconciliation on a devastated and impoverished continent.

A few years later, the success of the French-German coal and steel venture led to a truly epochal event: A customs union among France, Germany, Italy and the three Benelux countries, enshrined in the Treaty of Rome in March 1957. Officially, that customs union was known as the European Economic Community, but most people called it quite correctly the Common Market.

At a stroke of a pen, the Europeans created the world's new political entity, exercising its power through a quasi-free trading regime within the six countries, with a porous trade wall toward the rest of the world.

The political character of the customs union logically followed from a common regulatory framework to manage free trade and to coordinate economic policies, while maintaining unified trade and economic relations with the outside world.

Having no doubt about the political dimension of the customs union, the British decided to stay out of a community of nations "determined to lay the foundations of an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe" — the key statement in the preamble to the Treaty of Rome.

Almost twenty years later, London changed its mind and joined the booming customs union, thinking that "opt-outs" would limit its membership to a free-trade area without large sovereignty transfers to European institutions. Ultimately, that miscalculation, and more than four decades of British soul searching, have led to the decision to leave the European Union.

The British will be leaving at a time when France and Germany are trying to forge a strengthened European economic and political community. That is a difficult work in progress, where the French sense of urgency and its political (over)drive are hitting against

Germany's ponderous pragmatism, political instability, ominous social divisions, and strands of extremism, xenophobia and racism.

Underlying all that are permanent cross-currents of Paris-Berlin rivalry. A great deal of calm and wisdom will be required to overcome that dangerous obstacle to an apparent French-German determination to work together.

But there are two things that France and Germany share in their analysis: (a) the European Union is totally sidelined on the world stage, and (b) the recognition that the two countries — acting alone — cannot defend their vital economic and political interests.

A flourishing EU economy

A French-German effort is needed to create a flourishing EU economy. That would provide the best foundation for the union's stronger political structure.

Predictably, that objective is now beyond reach in a moribund EU economy, where sluggish growth and high unemployment are wasting human and (physical) capital resources. Partly as a result of that, the European industries are manufacturing the products of yesteryear, and relying on American

and Chinese service sector, information and telecommunication technologies.

The fact that the EU does not have its own 5G technology is a case in point. But more traditional products also show the backwardness of EU industry: While the Germans keep tearing themselves up about hopelessly outdated diesel cars, the Dutch just bought — after extensive testing — 259 electric buses from Chinese manufacturer BYD.

The rest of Europe cannot be far behind as a captive market for foreign-produced electric cars and 5G industrial platforms, among other things.

Sadly, Germany won't budge. It is sitting on huge surpluses in trade and public finances, and steadfastly refusing to step up investment spending to produce technologies of the future.

France and Germany must lead the EU to stronger economic growth and a more competitive global posture. That would strengthen the union's political system, beat back Euroskeptics and guarantee an EU place at the table where the big powers make decisions about the emerging new world order.

(Source: hellenicshippingnews.com)

‘Plan for development of Iran’s southern oil fields underway’

E N E R G Y **TEHRAN** — National Iranian South Oil Company (NISOC) has started implementing a program for maintaining and enhancing oil production in 28 reserves operated by the company, ISNA reported on Wednesday, quoting NISOC managing director as saying.

“The program which is comprised of 27 investment packages for oil production maintenance and enhancement in the 28 reserves NISOC operates will be completed within 24-30 months,” Ahmad Mohammadi said.

He emphasized the maintenance and enhancement of production in the said oil fields, as well as employment, promoting domestic production and social responsibility as the most important goals of the implementation of this important national program.

“About 70 percent of the program is implemented in Khuzestan province [southwestern Iran] and 30 percent in other neighboring provinces in the vicinity of the National Ira-



nian South Oil Company’s territory,” he said. According to the official, in the prepara-

tion and implementation of this program, promoting domestic production through

the use of domestic work force, domestic technology and Iran-made equipment has been a priority for NISOC.

Earlier in August, NISOC finalized three new development packages worth 39 trillion rials (about \$928.5 million) for maintaining and developing southern oil reservoirs.

According to NISOC Director of Technical Affairs Sadeq Fatholahi, Iranian Oil Ministry has prepared 34 development packages for the country’s oil reservoirs, 27 of which worth \$4.3 billion are aimed for southern regions.

The reservoir engineer noted that of the total 27 development packages considered for the southern regions, six projects worth 44 trillion rials (nearly \$1.1 billion) were being carried out by Iranian companies.

“Developing the region’s 28 reservoirs will add 250,000 barrels of new capacity to the region’s oil output while the same amount [250,000 barrels] is also saved through preventing production decline and enhancing recovery rate,” Fatholahi said.

3000MW to be added to Iran’s power generation capacity by March 2020

E N E R G Y **TEHRAN** — Iranian Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian says the country’s power generation capacity is going to be increased by 3000 megawatts (MW) by the end of the current calendar year (March 19, 2020).

Speaking on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting on Wednesday, Ardakanian noted that in the remaining three months of the current Iranian calendar year nine major projects are planned to be inaugurated in different provinces across the country.

According to the official, the mentioned projects will be inaugurated as a part of a major program called “A B Iran” [the acronyms A and B stand for water, electricity in Persian], in which 10 trillion rials (over \$238 million) of projects will be inaugurated in each of the country’s provinces, on average.

Based on the “A B Iran” program, Energy Ministry plans to inaugurate some water, electricity projects across the country every week.

Ardakanian further mentioned the ministry’s allocated budget for the next calendar year, saying that 90 trillion rials (about \$2.14 billion) has been provisioned for the energy ministry in the next year’s budget bill, which indicates an



increase in the water sector.

The official noted that the ministry is mostly relying on its internal incomes (water and electricity revenues) and expressed hope that most of the ministry’s projects scheduled for the next two years will become operational within

their timelines.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Ardakanian said 227 major water and electricity projects worth 330 trillion rials (about \$7.8 billion) are expected to be inaugurated based on the A B Iran scheme, adding that we have requested Russia for a \$5 billion loan, of which so far \$2.2 billion has been paid and used to fund such projects.

He further noted that the new \$2.8 billion will be allocated for funding four major projects including manufacturing of 2,000 passenger wagons for the country’s subways and also construction of a railway between the southeastern provinces of Sistan-Baluchestan and eastern province of South Khorasan, renovation of Ahvaz power plant in southwestern Province of Khuzestan and construction of a hydro-electric power plant in western Iran.

Back in November, Ardakanian headed a delegation to visit Moscow in order to follow up on the issue of Russia’s allocation of \$5 billion of loan for implementation of development projects in Iran.

He met with his Russian counterpart Alexander Novak in Moscow on November 21 and stressed expansion of ties in all areas.

Oil prices wilt on surprise build-up in U.S. crude stocks

Oil prices fell on Wednesday after industry data showed an unexpected build in crude inventory in the United States and as investors waited for news on whether a fresh round of U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods would take effect on Sunday.

Brent futures LCOC1 fell by 44 cents, or 0.7%, to \$63.90 per barrel by 0342 GMT. U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude CLC1 slipped by 33 cents, or 0.6%, to \$58.91 a barrel, down from a more than two-month high reached on Tuesday.

“At this time, everyone was expecting we would have strong draws in the inventory, but it was a build,” said Tony Nunan, oil risk manager at Japanese trading house Mitsubishi Corp.

U.S. crude stocks clocked a surprise rise in the most recent week while gasoline and

distillate inventories also rose, data from industry group the American Petroleum Institute shows.

Crude inventories rose by 1.4 million barrels in the week to Dec. 6 to 447 million, while analysts were expecting a fall of 2.8 million barrels.

U.S.-China trade tensions continue to cloud the outlook for demand, with a Dec. 15 deadline for the next round of U.S. tariffs on Chinese imports approaching fast.

With the market expected to be over-supplied next year on growing shale oil output and new projects coming on stream, any additional tariffs will dent demand and, in turn, prices, said Mitsubishi’s Nunan.

The “big question is how will the demand hold up?” he said.

The “demand slowdown in growth,



a lot of it seems to be coming from the (U.S.-China) trade war. If tariffs go into effect, sentiments will turn bearish again.”

The U.S. is on track to become a net exporter of crude and fuel for the first time on record on an annual basis in 2020, the EIA said, due to a production surge that has dramatically reduced its dependence on foreign oil.

Also adding to global supply, U.S. producers Exxon Mobil Corp (XOM.N) and Hess Corp (HES.N) plan to export the first-ever shipments of crude oil from Guyana between January and February, a milestone for Latin America’s newest oil producer, sources with knowledge of the plans said.

Elsewhere, Venezuela’s crude output in November jumped more than 20% from the prior month to the highest level since the United States tightened sanctions on state oil company PDVSA in August, two people with knowledge of PDVSA data said this week.

Investors are also eyeing other major events this week including the British election on Thursday and U.S. and European Central Bank meetings for further trading cues.

(Source: reuters.com)

Europe’s solar PV sector reports 104% growth in 2019

The steep growth in solar installation is primarily explained by the spectacular decline in cost of solar PV modules, as well as policy measures, according to SolarPower Europe.

With a growth rate of 104%, Europe’s solar photovoltaic industry is experiencing a “boom in installations,” according to statistics published on Tuesday by SolarPower Europe, an industry association.

2019 is one of the best years on record for the solar PV industry, according to the first EU Market Outlook published Tuesday.

With 16.7 gigawatts (GW) of installations added in the region, growth reached 104% in 2019, more than doubling the 8.2 GW that were added the year before, the group said.

“This boom in installations demonstrates that solar in Eu-

rope is on the right track,” said Walburga Hemetsberger, CEO of SolarPower Europe. “We have entered a new era of solar growth, with more new solar capacity installed than any other power generation technology in 2019,” she said in a statement.

Portugal’s huge auction of solar energy broke a world record, with one of the 24 licenses on offer selling for 14.76 euros per megawatt hour (Mwh), the secretary of state for energy Joao Galamba said on Tuesday.

■ Growth in solar installation

The steep growth in solar installation is primarily explained by the spectacular decline in the cost of solar PV modules, according to Aurélie Beauvais, policy director of SolarPower Europe.

But the good figures are also driven by policy measures, with

a deadline approaching for EU countries to meet their legally-binding renewable energy targets for 2020, Beauvais added.

Spain was the largest market in 2019, adding 4.7 GW, followed by Germany (4 GW), the Netherlands (2.5 GW), France (1.1 GW), and Poland, which nearly quadrupled its installation capacity to 784 megawatts (MW).

By the end of 2019, SolarPower Europe said the EU will enjoy a total of 131.9 GW, a 14% increase over the 115.2 GW operating in 2018.

The most powerful floating solar PV plant in Europe was inaugurated in southern France on 18 October, marking another milestone in the development of solar energy.

(Source: euractiv.com)

Creating the OPEC of natural gas

international gas market.

Energy policy researcher Rauf Mummadvov from the Middle East Institute wrote in a recent article on GECF that this is the most fundamental difference between OPEC and the gas organization.

■ Well-developed international market

While there is a well-developed international market for crude oil with price benchmarks and baskets, the market for natural gas is far from international in this sense of the word. Natural gas is certainly traded internationally, but a lot of it is shipped by pipelines, which limits the destinations, and hence, the internationalization potential of the commodity. There is, however, LNG, and LNG is changing things.

As much as a third of all LNG is traded on the spot market, Mummadvov notes, and on this market, prices are not linked to oil benchmarks, which is not the case with long-term gas contracts. This portion of LNG trade could grow: in a buyers’ market spot prices are a lot more attractive than long-

term commitments. Why a buyers’ market? Because of the surge in LNG production and export capacity across the world that caused the oversupply.

This, according to some analysts, is the ripe time to go full OPEC for GECF.

In 2006, five years after GECF was set up, Hadi Hallouche from the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies wrote in a paper dedicated to GECF that the forum was far from a cartel organization, but added that this could change, “particularly in a situation of over-supply in the future.”

■ A situation of oversupply

We are now in a situation of oversupply, and this oversupply is only set to deepen. The conditions seem to be perfect for a gas OPEC, as energy researcher Nikos Tsafos from the Center for Strategic and International Studies wrote in a recent commentary. Like Mummadvov, Tsafos also notes the increase in spot market-traded LNG, the expansion in LNG capacity, and the already present overhang in supply, all of which are factors favoring “OPEC behavior.”

Yet there is one important factor that is likely to discourage this OPEC behavior for the time being. Two of the largest LNG exporters in the world are not GECF members, and they are highly unlikely to become members. These are, of course, the United States and Australia, both of which have been busy boosting their LNG export capacity in the past few years. Today, the U.S. is the fourth-largest gas exporter globally, after Russia, Qatar, and Norway. Norway, by the way, is as unlikely as the other two to join GECF.

So, the time may be ripe for GECF to go into cartel mode, but it’s anyone’s guess if it will go down this road. Its chances of successfully adjusting production levels in a way that would lead to higher prices are questionable because of the distribution of LNG capacity geographically, but also because many GECF members are also OPEC members. They may have just had enough of being restrained in their fossil fuel production already.

(Source: oilprice.com)

Chinese buyers offer to resell LNG cargoes as they struggle with weak demand

Chinese companies are offering to resell liquefied natural gas (LNG) cargoes in the spot market as they grapple with high inventory amid weak demand due to a slowing economy and a milder than usual winter, several trade sources said on Monday.

The world’s second-largest buyer of LNG is currently facing high inventory of the super-chilled fuel in some areas, several sources familiar with the Chinese market told Reuters.

“It’s quite warm in China and the demand is very bad,” one of the sources with a state-owned company said, declining to be named as he was not authorized to speak with media.



He added that about 5 to 7 LNG cargoes are being offered for resale in a month, though this could not be independently verified. Further details were also not immediately available but sources say the main company to offer cargoes for re-sale has been China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

CNOOC did not immediately reply to Reuters request for comment but the sources added that CNOOC has so far sold at least one cargo to a Japanese buyer.

A second source added that buyers in northeast China may be facing ‘tank-tops’ which refers to storage tanks being full.

China does not release any official information on its LNG storage volumes but shipping data by Refinitiv Eikon shows that the country imported the second highest monthly volumes of LNG for the year in November.

The import volumes, however, likely comprise mainly term volumes, which had already been committed for purchase by buyers, or spot volumes purchased earlier in the year, the sources said.

Temperature forecasts for Beijing and Shanghai are expected to be warmer than usual until mid-January, according to Refinitiv’s weather data.

China’s natural gas demand is expected to expand at half the rate this winter compared to a year earlier, as Beijing slows its gasification push due to a weaker economy and competition from cheaper coal, state oil officials said last month.

State-owned companies are also facing additional pressure as their typical customers such as Guangzhou Gas and Guangdong Energy Group are now importing spot cargoes directly from the international market, the sources added.

(Source: reuters.com)

Latin America and the Caribbean announce ambitious new renewables target

Latin America and the Caribbean hold tremendous renewable energy promise. IRENA’s recent ‘Future of Solar Photovoltaic’ report highlighted that the region’s solar energy capacity alone could grow by a factor of 40 by 2050 to more than 280 gigawatts (GW) thanks to an abundant resource endowment and strong enabling policies. Today, during UN Climate Conference COP25 in Madrid, it took a giant leap towards realizing that potential.

A new regional initiative coordinated by the Latin American Energy Organization (OLADE) and announced to the global community during the Chile Energy Day, sets a regional goal of reaching at least 70 percent of renewable energy in electricity by 2030. The target involves reaching a total installed capacity of 312 GW of renewables capacity by that time – a significant proportion of which should come from non-conventional renewable energy.

The move demonstrates Latin America and the Caribbean’s strong desire to capitalize on the opportunities presented by a transition to low-carbon technologies, and to adopt a position of global leadership in the pursuit of climate mitigation and sustainable development.

Speaking at the event and in response to the announcement of the new initiative, IRENA Director-General Francesco La Camera said that several Latin American countries were already in the top ten global renewable energy investment list demonstrating the energy transformation momentum that already exists in the region.

“This initiative encompasses the type of sizable commitment needed in order to keep global climate efforts on track and help achieve the Paris Agreement goals,” he said. “More than 230 gigawatts of its power already comes from renewable sources and several countries make the top-ten in the global renewable energy investment list.”

■ The driving force

Mr. La Camera went on to commend Colombia for its driving force behind the establishment of this new goal, which now has the support of Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Paraguay, Peru, and Dominican Republic while Panama and Brazil are in discussion. He said Colombia’s successful renewable energy auctions which have resulted in the procurement of more than 2 GW are an ‘inspiring example for other countries in the region’. Colombia has proposed a goal of at least 4 GW by 2030 from Non-Conventional Renewable Energies domestically, reaching 74 percent of renewable energy nationwide in the power generation grid.

Countries that have already exceeded a 70 percent of energy from renewables at national level, are still encouraged to join this regional initiative. Partners are encouraged to favor the use of non-conventional renewable energy characterized by their minimal social and environmental impact. Small hydro, solar, wind and organic waste all fit within this framework.

Caribbean islands, together with other small island development states (SIDS), are already suffering the impact of extreme weather events, despite their negligible carbon footprint.

From the frontlines of climate change, they also find themselves at the vanguard of global climate mitigation and resilience action through bold commitments to increasing short term action and long-term energy transition strategies if supported with robust and predictable international finance and other means of implementation. Several islands including those in the Caribbean plan to go 100 percent renewables including Aruba, Dominica, Grenada and Montserrat.

(Source: evwind.es)

By Irina Slav

With global gas supplies growing faster than demand and forecasters warning of a deepening glut, it was only a matter of time before analysts began talking about a gas version of OPEC with the power to control international prices. But is an OPEC even possible?

There is already an organization of gas exporters. It’s called the Gas Exporting Countries Forum and involves a dozen countries, led by Russia, Qatar, and Iran. The list of members also includes Nigeria — Africa’s top LNG producer — Egypt, which has recently staked a claim in the international gas market with a number of discoveries, and Libya.

Of the top 10 natural gas exporters in the world, four are members of GECF, led by Russia, which is the largest exporter of the commodity in the world. That could potentially give the organization enough clout to influence the international gas market the way OPEC does with the oil market. There is only one catch: first, there has to be an

Multilateral forums need to be relevant again

GLOBALTIMES — Unilateralism is on a global upsurge. As the United Nations (UN) embodies international society's pursuit of multilateralism, what solution can it provide to deal with unilateralism? How can China and the UN cooperate to maintain multilateralism worldwide? Global Times (GT) reporter Li Qingqing talked to UN Resident Coordinator in China Nicholas Rosellini (Rosellini) about the issues on December 4.

■ Since its founding, the UN has contributed greatly to world peace and stability. But given the rise of populism and unilateralism now, how would you describe the situation of multilateral cooperation globally? Is it facing a temporary setback or could it be in retreat for a long run?

A: I think all of us have to accept the fact that at the moment, multilateralism is under a lot of pressure. But at the same time, we see an increasing need for multilateralism. We see the challenge of climate change, inequality in the world, unbalanced development between different countries and within countries, and the challenge of achieving The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On one hand, the 2030 Agenda needs a global approach. On the other, there is pressure on multilateralism.

We have to recreate the coalitions which accept that the global challenges need global solutions. We also need multilateral platforms to deliver these solutions. Indeed, multilateralism is under pressure, but if we reexamine where the demand for these global solutions is, and how to update the multilateral platforms to make them relevant again, I think we can make sure that multilateral approaches can continue to be the choice of countries around the world.

■ UN Secretary-General António Guterres said, "The world is fracturing, but no country can repair the cracks in isolation." As unilateralism raises its head, what is the UN's solution to cope with it?

A: We have to redemonstrate that multilateral platforms can still deliver durable global solutions to some of the challenges we are facing. That means we have to be willing to reform, and we have to be willing to listen to the citizenry of the world. The year 2020 sees the 75th anniversary of the founding of the UN, and Guterres is launching a major worldwide campaign to encourage people to participate in the global conversation about the future of multilateralism, the future of the UN and how we need to change to be relevant in the future. We know there are questions that we need to address as a global community, and we know the UN can contribute to addressing some of those challenges. We just have to make sure that we are relevant to address the challenges.

■ Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said during his meeting with Guterres in November that China will continue to uphold multilateralism in the context of complex international situations. How can China and the UN cooperate to maintain multilateralism worldwide?

A: China has already become a very important member of the UN. China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the second-largest contributor to the UN regular budget and the leading contributor to peacekeeping both in terms of money and personnel. So, China really has an important role in the UN. Looking ahead, we want to see that role continue to grow, and we see the importance of collaboration with China.

China, as the second-largest economy in the world, has an important development impact on the rest of the world. We want to explore the opportunities in terms of China's South-South Cooperation as well as its investment in developing countries to see how we can support their alignment with the SDGs.

If we look at China's engagement with the world, some of it is through the UN, and some of it is with countries bilaterally. It is important that we see how to support both China and the partner countries in terms of using the available resources in a way that supports the implementation of the SDGs. The recent Belt and Road Forum, for example, is a very strong commitment to align the Belt and Road investments with environmental, economic and social sustainability. China plays an important role in politics and peacekeeping in the world. I think it will also play an important role in development.

■ The 2019 UN Climate Change Conference, known as COP25, kicked off in Spain on December 2. It discussed whether the promises of the Paris Agreement would be fully implemented. The US has quit the Paris Agreement, to what extent will this affect the global fight against climate change?

A: There is no doubt that we need a big push in accelerating the global effort against climate change. We really need to understand and take actions in terms of the extent of the climate emergency we are facing, and it really needs the contribution of all countries. The level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is well above the limits we are trying to set, which hasn't been seen in 2 or 3 million years. Emissions continue to rise year on year. We are not meeting the Paris Agreement commitments, and we are far away from being able to increase those commitments. The prospect of reaching a global warming stabilization level is quite remote at the moment. This is really worrying for the future of the planet and humanity. As we look ahead, it is important that we do see how we can increase commitments from all countries, in or out of the Paris Agreement.

But of course, we have to recognize these differentiated responsibilities, and we have to take into account the relative economic strength of different countries and the historical level of emissions, so that we can have equity in how the reductions are applied. We hope that we can bring all countries in.

■ You said in October that China's vast experience in dealing with agricultural development challenges, increasing income and avoiding environmental damage is a great resource for the whole world. How can China's experience align with UN 2030 Agenda?

A: China has experience in developing the agricultural sector, agro-industry and the whole agriculture value chain, particularly since the country's reform and opening-up. In the UN 2030 Agenda, there are SDGs about eliminating poverty, hunger and ensuring food security for all. China has already made great contributions in these areas. When we look ahead to the next 10 years, we can see how these experiences can help other countries achieve the elimination of rural poverty and food security.

The question is how can China's experience be customized to be relevant to other countries? China is a vast country. If things in China are scaled up, they need to be brought down to scale in other smaller countries, with different systems of governance and culture.

UNZ — The Julian Assange drama drags on. Though he continues to sit in a top security British prison awaiting developments in his expected extradition to the United States, the Spanish High Court has been given permission to interview him. Assange is claiming that the Spanish company contracted with by the Ecuadorean government to do embassy security in London spied on him using both audio and video devices. The recordings apparently included conversations with Assange's lawyers outlining his defense strategies, which is an illegal activity under Spanish law. The prosecution has also indicted the company director, former military officer David Morales, on associated criminal charges of bribing a government official and money laundering. Morales has said that he is innocent.

Aware that he might be monitored by the British government as well as by other interested parties, Assange would often meet his legal team using a white noise machine or in women's bathrooms with the water running, but the firm, UC Global, anticipated that and planted devices capable of defeating the countermeasures. It planted microphones in the embassy fire extinguishing system as well as in numerous other places in the building. The recordings were reportedly streamed, undoubtedly encrypted, to another nearby location, referred to in the trade as a listening post. The streamed material was also reportedly transcribed and copied at the UC Global offices in Andalusia, but hard copies of the material were made as well on CDs and DVDs to be turned over directly to the client.

The Spanish newspaper El Pais, which has seen much of the evidence in the case, also mentioned how UC Global fixed the windows in the rooms actually being used by Assange so they would not vibrate, making it possible to use laser microphones from a nearby line of sight building to record what was being said. Presumably the listening post also served as the line-of-sight surveillance point.

The British government willingness to let the interview take place is apparently due in part to the Spanish judiciary's claims that it has obtained an overwhelming amount of documentary and other evidence that demonstrates that Assange is basically telling the truth.

And there is inevitably more to the story. David Morales, who managed the project, reportedly returned from a trip to the United States and told colleagues that the UC Global would henceforth be doing some work "for the dark side" at "another league" level. According to the New York Times, which has examined the documents obtained by El Pais and accepted that they are authentic, "In the court filing, the prosecution asserts that Mr. Morales returned from a security fair in Las Vegas in 2015... He signed a contract with Las Vegas Sands, the casino and resort company of Sheldon Adelson, and the pros-



ecution contends that Mr. Morales passed information about Mr. Assange to security officials at the company, saying it acted as a go-between with the C.I.A."

Sheldon Adelson is, of course, the single largest source of funding for the Republican Party and is also widely regarded to be a confidant of the Israeli government and of Benjamin Netanyahu personally. UC Global subsequently worked for Adelson, including managing the security of his yacht whenever it was in the Mediterranean.

According to employees of UC Global, details of the Ecuadorean Embassy operation were tightly held inside the company. Morales would make secret trips to the United States once or twice every month and it was assumed that he was carrying material relating to the recordings, but UC Global staff were advised never to mention his travels to the Ecuadorean staff in the embassy.

The obvious candidate for spying on Assange would be, as both the Spanish government and the New York Times speculate, the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.), as Washington intends to try Assange prior to locking him away for the rest of his life. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, while director of C.I.A., once referred to Assange and WikiLeaks as a "hostile intelligence service," so one should have no illusions about what will be done to him if he ever arrives in the U.S. In one instance cited by El Pais, the U.S. Embassy in London clearly knew what was discussed at a private meeting that had taken place in the Ecuadorean Embassy the day before. And if Washington truly wanted inside information it would have made sense from an espionage point of view to employ the very firm doing security for the embassy as one's mechanism for doing the spying.

But the rest of the story as elaborated on by the New York Times doesn't make sense.

More China-S.Korea coordination needed to break U.S.-N.Korea deadlock

GLOBALTIMES — Amid thawing China-South Korea relations, simmering Japan-South Korea tensions and a US-North Korea deadlock over the Korean Peninsula denuclearization, how will the dynamics of Northeast Asia develop? How can China and South Korea work together to explore new ways to break the denuclearization stalemate? Global Times (GT) reporter Yu Jincui talked to Lee Chang-hyung (Lee), senior research fellow, Center for Security and Strategy, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, during the Fifth South Korea-China Peace Diplomacy Forum held in Seoul on December 4. The forum was co-hosted by Uijeongbu municipal government and the Beijing-based Charhar Institute.

■ Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited South Korea on December 4-5, his first official visit to your country since May 2014, five and a half years ago. How do you see the significance of this visit?

A: First of all, Wang's visit is of great importance to restore China-South Korea relations frozen by the deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea. Because of the THAAD deployment, bilateral relations had for quite a long time been in a stalemate. As a matter of fact, China in the past three to four years has built up its military capabilities to cope with the THAAD. So it's time to restore relations battered by the deployment of the system. The visit is also expected to pave the way for Chinese President Xi Jinping's anticipated visit to South Korea next year. Xi visited Pyongyang in June. If he doesn't pay a visit to South Korea during President Moon Jae-in's term, China-South Korea may further drift apart, which would damage the interests of both countries. Besides, Wang's two-day trip is an opportunity for China to expand its influence on issues such as the Korean Peninsula denuclearization and the establishment of a peace mechanism on the peninsula. China needs the cooperation from South Korea if it wants to bring its influence

into full play in realizing denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Last but not least, Washington has been luring Seoul to join its Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Moon government is under pressure by domestic conservatives who are urging it to become part of the strategy. In such a context, it's necessary for China to ensure South Korea doesn't totally tilt toward the US.

■ It was reported that the US plans to deploy intermediate-range conventional missiles in Asia after its withdrawal from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty and South Korea is a designed destination. Will South Korea agree to host the weapons?

A: Speculation has been swirling about the deployment of US intermediate-range conventional missiles in Japan or South Korea after the US withdrawal from the INF treaty. But as far as I know, the US hasn't raised a deployment requirement to South Korea, nor are there discussions between the two countries. Even if the US demands to deploy the weapons on South Korean soil, South Korea would refuse it. The THAAD system was deployed to counter North Korea's missile threats. But if intermediate-range conventional missiles are deployed, the target is not North Korea, but China. Seoul cannot deny this. Should it agree to host the weapon, China-South Korea relations would break down entirely. There is no reason for South Korea to accept the deployment as it's not intended to defend South Korea.

■ The latest round of negotiations on sharing the cost of maintaining US troops on the Korean Peninsula failed to produce concrete results due to huge differences between Washington and Seoul. Will South Korea accept to pay the sharp rise? Is the 66-year-old alliance in deep trouble?

A: Cost-sharing negotiations should be conducted within the framework of the mutually acceptable Special Measures Agreement (SMA) that has been agreed upon by South Korea and the US for the past 28 years. What

is equally or possibly even more likely that the Ecuadorean government would want to know what Assange was up to since it was taking considerable heat from Washington and London to terminate his asylum so he could be arrested and extradited. The fact that Morales did not want the Ecuadoreans to know about his travels suggests that they already knew about the surveillance. What they did not know was that Morales was sharing the take with someone else.

And then there are the British themselves as possible initiators of the surveillance through some kind of arrangement with Morales. They would most definitely would like to know what was being planned in Assange's defense and going through UC Global would be the easiest way to obtain the needed information. One might point out that there is another obstacle to the C.I.A. "dunnit" speculation, which is that as a general rule Washington does not spy on London and London does not spy on Washington. As the two countries have been for decades major intelligence partners, it is a guideline that is, believe it or not, generally observed. The British would have noticed any attempt to set up an American listening post within line-of-sight of the Ecuadorean Embassy and it would have created a major rift between C.I.A. and MI6, which suggests that the British, Americans and Ecuadoreans might all have been spying on Assange and possibly even sharing the information.

And then there is the Adelson angle, which brings the Israelis into the mix. It appears to be true that Adelson's casinos in China were venues used for targeting corrupt Chinese officials by the C.I.A. as far back as 2010, but it is not imaginable that today's Agency would use the Las Vegas billionaire as a conduit for passing information and arranging

payments to Morales. As one former Agency field officer commented, "This is not the way the C.I.A. constructs an operation, too many moving parts."

If he were indeed a C.I.A. asset, Morales could have used a dead drop or passed his material directly to an Agency officer under cover in Spain before being paid directly for his services. The C.I.A. officer would also be able to monitor and direct the operation through the meetings as is usually the case, which would not be possible if the connection were through Las Vegas Sands security. One might also add that using a trip to Las Vegas as a cut out to conceal espionage activity makes no sense at all, particularly as Morales would have to be crossing international borders carrying on him highly sensitive information that could come to the attention of security concerned about the frequency of his trips. Morales might indeed have believed that he was working for C.I.A. because that is what he was told by Adelson, but that could easily have been a lie.

It is also unimaginable that C.I.A. would use Adelson as he is recognized by the U.S. intelligence services as an Israeli government asset. His loyalty to the U.S. is questionable. He is famous for having said that he regretted serving in the U.S. Army and wishes he had served in the Israeli army instead. He wants his son to grow up to "be a sniper for the Israel Defense Force (IDF)."

That means that anything going through Adelson will wind up in Israel, which suggests that if Adelson is actually involved the whole exercise just might be an Israeli false flag operation pretending to be the C.I.A. Israel does not hate Assange with the fervor of the U.S. government but it certainly would consider him an enemy as he has had a tendency to expose sensitive material that governments would not like to make public. Israel would be particularly vulnerable to having its war crimes exposed, as was the case when WikiLeaks published the material revealing American crimes in Iraq provided by Chelsea Manning.

So, there is a choice when it comes to considering who might have commissioned the spying on Julian Assange, or it might even have been a combination of players. The sad part of the story is that even if David Morales is convicted in a Spanish court, sources in Britain believe the violation of Assange's rights will have no impact on the move to extradite him to the United States. That will be decided narrowly based on the charge against him, which is exposing classified information, a violation of the Espionage Act of 1917. As the Espionage Act is infinitely elastic and as the preferred U.S. Court for the Eastern District of Virginia has a very high conviction rate, there is little doubt that Julian Assange will soon be on his way to the United States where he will undoubtedly be sentenced to life in prison.

Even if no solution is reached during the upcoming summit, the two countries will continue to explore ways to make a breakthrough in mending ties.

■ Can China play a mediating role in the Japan-South Korea spat?

A: As China insists on the principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, it's unlikely that it would play an active mediating role.

From China's perspective, it hopes to prevent Japan and South Korea totally siding with the US and it values South Korea-Japan-China trilateral cooperation to construct a China-centered regional security architecture. China hopes to link the three countries together through cultural and economic cooperation to check US influence. However, South Korea and Japan could hardly act as China expects. Japan has already played an important role in the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the US. Although South Korea hasn't become part of it, it has not participated in the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative either.

■ How to break the current stalemate in denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula?

A: North Korean leader Kim Jong-un once said Pyongyang would "be compelled to find a new way" if the US persists in imposing sanctions and pressure. What's the "new way?" I believe it doesn't mean North Korea would return to create tension and confrontation by nuclear threat. North Korea now regards itself a nuclear weapon state. It will strive to shun international sanctions and seek economic development under this status.

The best way to solve the peninsula nuclear issue is to keep North Korea and the US to sit on the negotiating table, though it's not easy. In the process of reducing differences and establishing mutual trust between the US and North Korea as well as moving to realize the denuclearization goal, South Korea and China play very important roles. A US-North Korea deadlock can only be resolved by South Korea acting as a promoter and China the mediator.

East Asia At the glance

Asia's 2020 outlook depends on China, India



GLOBALTIMES — Is the Indian economy heading for a hard landing? The answer to the question, to some extent, will determine the trend of the broad Asian economy in the coming year. China, India and Japan together generate a considerable part of Asia's economic activity. Although Japan's economy expanded in the third quarter at a faster-than-estimated rate of 1.8 percent, it is too early to say the economy will recover strongly in the coming year. Japan's economy is still struggling with stubborn deflation and slow growth. It's hard to expect Japan to become an engine of Asian economic growth in the coming year. India has emerged as an Asian economic superpower in the past few years. China and India will be the key drivers of growth for the Asian economy in 2020. However, unfortunately, both economies face downward pressure.

Some observers forecast China's GDP growth may fall below 6 percent next year. Even if this scenario becomes a reality, the country will still be the top contributor to Asian GDP growth in the near term. The 6-percent figure is just a psychological mark that's of little practical significance. Growth of 6.1 percent or 5.9 percent in China makes no big difference for the Asian economy.

The major uncertainty for the Asian economy will come from India. The economy is at risk of a hard landing. India's annual GDP growth fell to a shocking 4.5 percent in the third quarter. What's next? The country's economy is facing the toughest times since Narendra Modi became prime minister in 2014. If the Indian economy continues to slow, market confidence in Modi's management will be tested. The most urgent task for his administration is curbing the downturn and restoring confidence in the market. Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan said recently the current economic slowdown is "temporary" and a result of the ongoing trade war between the US and China, according to Indian news agency PTI.

The trade war may indeed be taking a toll on India's economy, but India needs to look inward at its deep-rooted problems, instead of blaming the trade dispute between China and the US. The pro-reform Modi administration did a good job in recent years in propping up the economy. Hopefully, the Modi economic miracle can continue in the coming years - otherwise, the Asian economy may be in for a bumpy road next year.

■ China's economy to face 6 key challenges

The Chinese economy continues to slow down as it faces multiple pressures in 2019, but it is also showing resilience with the support of a complex set of stabilizing policies. Economic growth has remained in a rational and controllable range this year. 2020 will be a crucial year for China to secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, but the country will face greater challenges, particularly in the following six aspects.

First, external challenges will be more demanding. The global economic downturn and great-power competition have entered new phases, bringing about unprecedented uncertainty to global economic policies. This will not only directly impact China through trade, but it will also negatively influence the open economy by undermining market confidence. In 2020, external demand is expected to continue weakening, the global manufacturing industry is set to slump, China-US strategic competition will enter a new stage, and the 2020 US election will bring further uncertainty to the prolonged trade war between the two countries.

Second, domestic demand is expected to remain weak and may accelerate the economic slowdown. China's net exports have seen rapid growth this year, but domestic demand has experienced a significant decline. The economy is therefore more vulnerable and reliant on external demand, particularly when enterprises don't expand their investment in production and residents don't increase their consumption of durable goods. In the short term, China needs to stabilize foreign trade. The global economic slowdown will make it harder for China to maintain the rapid growth of net exports in 2020, and China must implement more targeted measures to boost domestic demand. More importantly, the decline in production investment does not just concern numbers, but also efficiency.

Third, the slowdown of economic growth may aggravate the current conditions of weak sectors and regions. As pressures mount for small and medium-sized enterprises, local financial risks may worsen. Changing economic structures in some regions may cause unemployment risks. In 2020, enterprises in eastern regions will find it difficult to turn a profit, and those in central regions should expect to see a further slowdown in the growth of revenue. Thus, employment will be at risk in certain regions and sectors. The automobile and mobile phone industries are still in steep decline. The real-estate, construction and information services industries have also contracted significantly. Downward sales and production in these industries mean that they face greater pressure when it comes to employment.

Fourth, the risk of a new round of deflation in the Chinese economy will increase in 2020, which deserves attention and requires preparation. Although the price of food - represented by pork - has risen sharply since the third quarter, driving the consumer price index (CPI) higher, this doesn't mean that deflation will not occur next year. Instead, the continued falls of the non-food CPI, producer price index (PPI) and GDP deflator are highly similar to the initial performances of

previous rounds of deflation. PPI trends from the fourth to the second quarter next year will need to be watched closely. Meanwhile, monetary policy needs to remain prudent.

Fifth, China should be wary of the risks that come with a structural rise in food prices - including pork - and weak overall demand. The prices of pork and other foods will continue to rise next year, leading to negative expectations in the market. Meanwhile, overall domestic demand will remain weak. These two factors are expected to have short-term impacts on the economy, causing severe problems for its macro-management in 2020.

Sixth, mitigated financial risks may recur in 2020. Although the financial sector is clearly moving to provide more support for the real economy, pressure from a poor monetary transmission mechanism still exists. And though financial risks have been mitigated this year, defaults will persist in the future. Particularly alongside the continued economic downturn, financial risks may appear repeatedly. Financial-risk mitigation and prevention will be the core focuses of macro-management next year.

■ Action needed as North Korea deadline looms

There are only three weeks left for the year-end deadline set by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un for negotiations with the US to resolve the Korean Peninsula nuclear standoff. If the US cannot offer a plan satisfactory to both sides, North Korea has warned it will take an unspecified "new path" next year.

Although the US has repeatedly said that this is a unilateral deadline set by North Korea, Pyongyang is bound to fulfill its promises considering the country's system and Kim's authority. The world has no idea what the "new path" is, but it will highly likely not be beneficial to the Korean Peninsula denuclearization. Thus, the US should treat North Korea's deadline seriously and consider restarting talks within the remaining time frame. After talks between North Korea and the US broke down in Stockholm, Sweden, in October, North Korea has been sending signals to the US through Kim's different inspection tours, short-range missile tests and statements by senior state officials. However, the US did not respond or have direct contact with North Korea. Instead, the US conveyed its intention to restart talks through Sweden. The US move shows that it lacks enough enthusiasm for further negotiations.

According to media reports, North Korea may have tested a new high-thrust engine or even a long-range missile at the Sohae satellite launching station. But instead of trying to take measures to calm North Korea, the US flew reconnaissance aircrafts over the Korean Peninsula in recent days. At the NATO summit in London on December 3, US President Donald Trump even called Kim a "rocket man" again and threatened to use military force against Pyongyang.

However, Trump still stressed that he had a good personal relationship with Kim. Trump also made a phone call to South Korean President Moon Jae-in on Saturday. In addition to the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue, there may also be other reasons for which Trump made the call. But this at least shows that the US has to some extent relaxed the severity of the Korean Peninsula issue. Nonetheless, Pyongyang still wishes that Washington change its policies toward Pyongyang. It is important for both sides to translate their expectations into tangible actions, while there isn't much time left.

North Korea's ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) will hold its fifth plenary meeting of the seventh Central Committee of WPK later December, according to North Korean media reports. And Kim is set to deliver the New Year speech on January 1, 2020. The two important political agenda will determine Pyongyang's domestic and foreign policies in 2020, particularly those about denuclearization and how to deal with the US. Given the importance of these two scenarios, a specific group ought to have already been established to draft relevant documents. This means North Korea and the US would have less time to close their deal. As North Koreans have been aware of Kim's year-end deadline through state media outlets, the

country will eventually carry out its promise and its leverage against the US would be medium- and long-range missile tests and nuclear tests.

It is hoped that Washington won't make light of the year-end deadline set by Kim and will work hard to formulate a pragmatic policy toward Pyongyang within a limited time. US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun will possibly visit South Korea later in December to "discuss joint efforts toward progress in the negotiations before the deadline," South Korea's Yonhap News Agency reported on December 4. It is hoped Biegun could bring positive signals from Trump.

If Pyongyang and Washington can hold high-level negotiations before the former makes major decisions and even figure out the possibility for a new Kim-Trump summit, it will help mitigate North Korea's hard-line stance and prevent the situation on the Korean Peninsula from getting worse. In the meantime, it is also hoped that North Korea won't recklessly cross the redline, otherwise it will push its relations with the US to a dangerous precipice and probably trigger a new round of international sanctions.

■ Domestic political infighting takes a toll on Washington's foreign policy

Nancy Pelosi, US House of Representatives speaker, said Thursday the House was proceeding with articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump as he leaves US lawmakers "no choice but to act." House Democrats are reportedly considering articles of impeachment against Trump that include obstruction and bribery. Obviously, impeachment of Trump will become a key topic that dominates US politics in the coming days.

Drafting the impeachment clauses is of key significance. It's the fourth time in US history that Congress has tried to remove a president. The House's decision announced by Pelosi, to a great extent, is based on a report newly released by the House Intelligence Committee. According to the report, Democrats obtained phone records of several major players in the Ukraine scandal, including Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani and Devin Nunes, the intelligence committee's top Republican, showing how they coordinated in the case. It also accused Trump of obstructing the impeachment investigation by preventing witnesses from testifying and refusing to turn over documents requested by Congress.

The impeachment is not only about wrangling between Democrats and Republicans, but also about how the latter would treat Trump. This has made US domestic political struggle more complicated. The 2020 US presidential election campaign is in full swing. Although a number of candidates have thrown their hats into the ring for Democratic nomination, the policies they propose are either bland or controversial.

So far, it's hard for Democrats to charge Trump with treason. The Republican-controlled Senate would not easily approve the impeachment. Such being the case, Democrats' current strategy is to label Trump as "impeached president" before the 2020 general election. But it remains to be seen how much the Democratic Party would benefit from such a practice in the run-up to the election.

A study released in late November found 40 percent of registered voters in Wisconsin, an important swing state, support impeaching Trump, down from 44 percent in October while 53 percent oppose the impeachment, up from 51 percent. It seems that the impeachment inquiry will hardly stop Republican voters from voting for Trump.

Intensified domestic political squabbling has overshadowed China-US relations. The Trump administration plans to hit China-made products with a new round of tariffs on December 15. There is still a lot of uncertainty about whether Beijing and Washington could reach a phase one deal before the date. From the perspective of electoral politics, Democrats have reasons to hinder the Trump administration from reaching any agreement with China that can be touted as a "victory." They want the US public to focus on the impeachment, and would pour scorn on any compromise the Trump government could make in trade negotiations with China. However, no deal

will be reached without compromises. It seems that Democratic politicians have begun to show greater interest in competing with Republicans over being tough on China. A group of senators, including Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, in a signed letter to Trump in late November, urged the US Department of Commerce to suspend issuing licenses to US firms that conduct business with Chinese tech giant Huawei.

Republican lawmakers play a more negative role in China-US relations, many of whom are more ideology-driven than their Democratic counterparts. In November, Republican Senator Rick Scott said in an interview with CNBC that a phase one trade deal isn't going to solve the long-standing bilateral issues. "Communist China wants to control the entire world, including Americans. They're not our partner. They're never going to be our partner under these existing leadership teams," he said.

Republican Senator Marco Rubio is pushing a cold war against China in the financial sector, asking for delisting Chinese companies from US stock exchanges. US financial insiders are worried that if the US begins to restrict global capital flows, other countries will follow suit. Once the trade war escalates into a financial war, the global financial system will be severely jeopardized, which will deal a body blow to the global market. US lawmakers have continuously taken steps to deal with the perceived "China threats." As US China policy adjustments have been intertwined with the country's domestic political fights, "being tough on China" has become Washington's new political correctness. This is definitely not good to the formulation of US policy on China and the effective management of relations between Beijing and Washington.

■ Amazed to witness China's rise first hand

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It was an honor to attend the October 1st celebration in Beijing and to see the proud nation celebrate an amazing rise. My first trip to China was in 1975. I've been back over 140 times over the past 44 years and witnessing China's rise has had a huge impact on my life. To put it simply, China's transformation has been amazing to witness.

In 1974, my father, George Herbert Walker Bush, served as the chief of the US Liaison Office in China. My siblings and I visited our parents in Beijing in the summer of 1975, toward the end of the Cultural Revolution. At that time, almost all Chinese people were poor and the country was isolated from the Western world.

Since the reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, Chinese people have enjoyed incredible benefits. More than 850 million people in China have been lifted out of poverty, and the size of the middle class is growing every day. With the growing wealth, every day freedoms have been constantly expanding as well: the freedom to travel abroad, the freedom to receive the best education anywhere in the world, and the freedom to enjoy a higher quality of life. These freedoms were unimaginable 44 years ago.

As part of my personal commitment to improving closer ties between the US and China, I give speeches as Chairman of the George H.W. Bush Foundation for US-China Relations. In the beginning of September this year, I participated in the "2019 China Development High-Level Forum Symposium" where I shared with the audience how impressed I am with the ability of the Chinese government to quickly and effectively address problems. One great example is the issue of air quality. With industrialization and with more cars on the roads, Beijing's air quality was getting worse and worse. The Chinese central government working with local authorities has made big changes and the air quality has improved significantly.

Likewise, I have been impressed with how the government, all levels, is able to focus resources and change policies to respond to bigger concerns of the people including food safety, housing, transportation, and education. A critical factor in China's success has been the stability of the central government and a reliable policy framework that has developed successive five year plans which have brought unprecedented economic growth and attracted large amounts of foreign investment.

Being a witness to China's peaceful rise has shaped my views on many things. One core belief is that every country has different national conditions and is at different stages of economic development and, as such, there is no single system of government that works for every country. The Chinese system is working well for China and the US system has worked well for the US. To say this in other words, the US system would not work for China, and the Chinese system would not be effective for the US. The US-China relationship has hit a low point. I have advised that Chinese officials directly address concerns that are raised by its critics globally.

President Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. Many in the US allege that the BRI forces smaller countries that receive Chinese investments to become beholden to China in some nefarious way. My impression is that the BRI is a multinational collaboration aimed at helping countries by upgrading their infrastructure including roads, schools, utilities, rail systems, and ports. If true, this is an important message that needs to be shared more widely to offset the anti-China propaganda.

This year also marks the 40th anniversary of the establishment of US-China diplomatic rela-

tions. During my father's life, he often said that the US-China relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the world.

In fact, over these past 40 years, the US and China have both gained tremendously from close business, education, political, and cultural ties. The US economy has achieved steady growth and full employment and American consumers are enjoying affordable, high quality Chinese goods. At the same time, hundreds of millions of Chinese have escaped poverty and China has grown from a low-income country to the world's second-largest economy. Like any bilateral relations, there have been ups and downs over the years. But overall we have enjoyed a classic win-win result. The US-China relationship has entered a challenging period. Problems such as trade issues, intellectual property theft, and market access are serious and need to be addressed. But they ought to be addressed with respectful and deep dialogue.

Sadly, a growing number of Americans regard China's rise as a threat to our economy and national security. The White House erroneously believes that running a trade deficit with China means that the US is losing and China is winning. This kind of zero-sum thinking is wrong.

The truth is that there is far more that we share in common than what divides us. Our deep friendship has been established over a long history and it is my fervent hope that the US-China relationship will return on to the right track in the near future. We need our relationship to become more stable so that together we can address growing global challenges such as terrorism, infectious diseases, and promoting peace and stability in the region and the world.

■ US disgraceful to undermine WTO

Due to US obstruction, the Appellate Body of the World Trade Organization (WTOAB) will likely be unable to function on Wednesday. Normally consisting of seven judges, the WTOAB has been operating with only three judges, the bare minimum, since January 2018, and two of those judges will retire Tuesday. The WTOAB is the most essential tool used to ensure fair trade, and now Washington has successfully upended it. The appellate body was created when the WTO was founded in 1995. Its prominent feature lies in its independence as it's free from political interference. WTO members, regardless of size, are entitled to equal rights of petition and defense. As the US lost many appeals at the appellate level, their dissatisfaction with the legal body increased. Dissolving this court has been a conspicuous goal since US President Donald Trump took office.

The looming demise of the WTOAB will inevitably cause smaller economies to suffer, as the law of the jungle will return. Although members can negotiate disputes in accordance with WTO rules, without a presiding authorized appellate body, it will be easier for powerful countries to gain the upper hand during such disputes.

The US continues to advance its hegemony at the global level. Previous US moves were more about compelling specific countries and some US-led groups to make concessions. Now the US is blatantly forcing the WTO, a supposed international organization, to focus on its national interests.

When WTO members reveal an unwillingness to cooperate, the US stops key WTO sections. If China was a superpower and behaved the same way - undercutting the UN Climate Action, withdrawing from UNESCO, tearing up the Iran nuclear deal, launching large-scale trade wars, retreating from the most significant arms control treaty and undermining the WTOAB, how would Western public opinion slam China?

There are also complaints about Washington's moves among Western public opinion, which are barely heard however. Be it London, Paris, Berlin, or Tokyo, Seoul, Ottawa, everyone has remained silent, indulging the US wanton actions of undermining world order and transforming it to serve its "America first" policy.

Nobody can check the US, but the country will eventually be punished by the rules. US national interests have extended worldwide. An orderly world is more in line with its interests, a highly internationalized country, than a world full of uncertainties. The US actions will increase the expense of realizing its national interests in the long term. The US political system determines the outside world cannot expect the country to quickly overcome political irrationality. Facing US disruption, the international community needs to consider realistic approaches to uphold multilateralism and reduce losses. Other major countries have never truly united when the US has acted unreasonably, nor have they joined hands to make the US pay for its unilateral actions. The main reason is that powers like the EU and Japan are too afraid of the US. They don't even dare to condemn US unilateralism through public opinion.

WTO is a multilateral infrastructure platform affecting many countries' interests. Once the appellate body ceases, can major countries bypass the US to form some alternative arbitration mechanism, allowing the WTO's main framework and functions to continue and allowing most disputes to be resolved in a fair and reasonable manner? When the US bullies weaker countries, major WTO members should at least provide moral support. The US is the most powerful country in the world and yet it is the number one destroyer of order. This is the misfortune of the 21st century. The international community cannot change US attitudes. Thus, the real challenge for the future of globalization is to strengthen coordination and mitigate US influence.

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Blue Origin resets timing for suborbital test flight to space

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin space venture says it's now targeting Wednesday for the next uncrewed flight test of its New Shepard suborbital spaceship, with a cargo manifest that should warm kids' hearts for the holidays.

The company plans to fly thousands of postcards that have been gathered through its educational program, known as the Club for the Future. It'll also send up two student-built art projects inspired by OK Go's geeky music videos.

This will be the 12th New Shepard test mission, and it will mark the flight of Blue Origin's 100th commercial payload to space and back.

Launch from Blue Origin's West Texas spaceport was originally set for Tuesday, but in a tweet, the company said it was postponing liftoff "due to weather conditions."

Blue Origin plans to provide video coverage via its website and YouTube.

Bezos kicked off the Club for the Future program in May, when he unveiled Blue Origin's Blue Moon lunar lander in Washington, D.C. Ever since then, Blue Origin has been collecting "Space Mail" postcards, on which kids can draw or write up their vision for having millions of people living and working in space.

In August, Bezos reported that postcards have been received from 22 countries. "I've seen the messages, and they are so hopeful



and inspiring," he said on Instagram.

The postcards will go up to space and come back down on New Shepard. Then they'll be mailed back to their original senders.

Another kid-friendly payload consists of two experiments that emerged as the winners of an "Art in Space" contest sponsored by OK Go. One project, devised by a trio of New York City students, aims to have bits of material rise up in zero-G and cover a magnetized wire-art sculpture,

mimicking the process of primordial planetary accretion. The other project, proposed by students from Utah, aims to translate cosmic radiation readings recorded during New Shepard's flight into a musical composition.

Blue Origin took note of two other payloads: a science experiment focusing on zero-G's impact on cell biology, developed at Columbia University with guidance from former NASA astronaut Mike Massimino;

and an experiment from NASA's Kennedy Space Center that will test a technology for converting trash and human waste into a mixture of gases that could be used for propulsion or life support.

The main objective of the upcoming flight is to test New Shepard's reusable propulsion module and crew capsule in advance of flights with people on board. The most recent uncrewed trip took place in May.

New Shepard is expected to start carrying people to heights beyond 100 kilometers (62 miles) sometime next year. The first to fly are likely to be Blue Origin staffers. Paying passengers would follow, but the company hasn't yet started taking reservations. Ticket prices are still up in the air, but Blue Origin CEO Bob Smith recently said they'd be in the range of hundreds of thousands of dollars to start.

In addition to the New Shepard suborbital space program and the Blue Moon lunar lander program, Blue Origin is working on an orbital-class New Glenn rocket that could start flying in 2021.

The hardware for New Shepard and for New Glenn's BE-4 rocket engine are currently built at Blue Origin's headquarters in Kent, Wash., which is being dramatically expanded. Eventually, BE-4 production will shift to Alabama, and New Glenn will be assembled in and launched from Florida.

(Source: msn)

The first mission to remove space junk from orbit has just been commissioned

Wherever we humans go, we leave behind a mess. That goes for space, too.

Today, our species is responsible for more than 500,000 pieces of junk hurtling around Earth at phenomenal speeds, and if we don't start actively removing the largest pieces, the risk of collisions will only grow worse.

"Imagine how dangerous sailing the high seas would be if all the ships ever lost in history were still drifting on top of the water," says Jan Wörner, European Space Agency (ESA) director general. "That is the current situation in orbit, and it cannot be allowed to continue."

It's almost as if we need a tow truck to remove all the thousands of failed satellites from our orbit; incidentally,

that's exactly what the ESA is working on.

By 2025, the agency plans on launching the world's first orbiting junk collector, a four-armed robot that tracks down space waste like Pac-Man in a maze.

The first-of-its-kind mission, known as ClearSpace-1, will start out small, collecting only a single piece of space junk to prove the concept works. The target in this case is called Vespa, a leftover remnant from ESA's Vega rocket launch in 2013.

This piece of junk weighs roughly the same as a small satellite and has a simple shape that should make it easy to grab with four robotic arms. Once it's safely in the arms of the garbage collector, it will then be dragged out of orbit

and allowed to burn up in the atmosphere.

Unfortunately, this will also destroy the collector, but in the future, the agency hopes to create a way for the robot to safely eject the rubbish and continue capturing and de-orbiting other pieces.

The ultimate goal is to create a spacecraft that can propel and direct itself in low orbit with a "high level of autonomy", according to the Swiss startup, ClearSpace, which is in charge of designing the machine.

"The space debris issue is more pressing than ever before. Today we have nearly 2,000 live satellites in space and more than 3,000 failed ones," says ClearSpace CEO Luc Piguet.

(Source: msn)

Stardust from red giants



Around 4.5 billion years ago, an interstellar molecular cloud collapsed. At its center, the Sun was formed; around that, a disc of gas and dust appeared, out of which the earth and the other planets would form. This thoroughly mixed interstellar material included exotic grains of dust: "Stardust that had formed around other suns," explains Maria Schoenbaechler, a professor at the Institute of Geochemistry and Petrology at ETH Zurich. These dust grains only made up a small percentage of the entire dust mass and were distributed unevenly throughout the disc. "The stardust was like salt and pepper," the geochemist says. As the planets formed, each one ended up with its own mix.

Thanks to extremely precise measurement techniques, researchers are nowadays able to detect the stardust that was present at the birth of our solar system. They examine specific chemical elements and measure the abundance of different isotopes — the different atomic flavors of a given element, which all share the same number of protons in their nuclei but vary in the number of neutrons. "The variable proportions of these isotopes act like a fingerprint," Schönbaechler says: "Stardust has really extreme, unique fingerprints — and because it was spread unevenly through the protoplanetary disc, each planet and each asteroid got its own fingerprint when it was formed."

Over the past ten years, researchers studying rocks from the Earth and meteorites have been able to demonstrate these so-called isotopic anomalies for more and more elements. Schoenbaechler and her group have been looking at meteorites that were originally part of asteroid cores that were destroyed a long time ago, with a focus on the element palladium.

Other teams had already investigated neighboring elements in the periodic table, such as molybdenum and ruthenium, so Schoenbaechler's team could predict what their palladium results would show. But their laboratory measurements did not confirm the predictions. "The meteorites

contained far smaller palladium anomalies than expected," says Mattias Ek, postdoc at the University of Bristol who made the isotope measurements during his doctoral research at ETH.

Now the researchers have come up with a new model to explain these results, as they report in the journal Nature Astronomy. They argue that stardust consisted mainly of material that was produced in red giant stars. These are aging stars that expand because they have exhausted the fuel in their core. Our Sun, too, will become a red giant four or five billion years from now.

In these stars heavy elements such as molybdenum and palladium were produced by what is known as the slow neutron capture process. "Palladium is slightly more volatile than the other elements measured. As a result, less of it condensed into dust around these stars, and therefore there is less palladium from stardust in the meteorites we studied" Ek says.

The ETH researchers also have a plausible explanation for another stardust puzzle: the higher abundance of material from red giants on Earth compared to Mars or Vesta or other asteroids further out in the solar system. This outer region saw an accumulation of material from supernova explosions.

"When the planets formed, temperatures closer to the Sun were very high," Schoenbaechler explains. This caused unstable grains of dust, for instance those with an icy crust, to evaporate. The interstellar material contained more of this kind of dust that was destroyed close to the Sun, whereas stardust from red giants was less prone to destruction and hence concentrated there. It is conceivable that dust originating in supernova explosions also evaporates more easily, since it is somewhat smaller. "This allows us to explain why the Earth has the largest enrichment of stardust from red giant stars compared to other bodies in the solar system" Schoenbaechler says.

(Source: Science Daily)

NASA gears up to test fire new SLS Moon rocket in Mississippi



By Paul Brinkmann

NASA is preparing to test fire the largest rocket since the Apollo era at the sprawling Stennis Space Center in southern Mississippi, where the new Space Launch System core is expected to arrive in a matter of weeks.

On Tuesday, work crews were putting finishing touches on gigantic steel flame buckets that will catch and redirect exhaust as the rocket engines are fired for more than eight minutes. The preparation reminds many of the excitement that preceded Apollo.

"I was a test engineer for 20 years and always wondered what it would be like to do something like what we did in the '60s," said Maury Vander, now director of operations at Stennis. "Many people told me it will never happen again. Well now I'll be able to say they were wrong."

The rocket's core stage is about 212 feet high — like a 21-story building. It will be shipped from the Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans on NASA's Pegasus barge.

The core is to spend about eight months at Stennis, where it will be set on Test Stand B-2, bolted down and eventually tested in what's called a green run. Tests are run cooperatively between NASA, Boeing and Aerojet Rocketdyne, which makes the engines.

Although Stennis has been busy over the years, Vander said quiet periods have existed, too, especially after the space shuttle program ended in 2011. Now, however, the space agency and private industry are gearing up to bring in 200 to 300 more people for the SLS test.

Facilities that were built in the 1950s for Apollo and refurbished in the 1980s for the shuttle are being upgraded. The 13,800-acre facility is surrounded by a 125,828-acre buffer zone of limited development because of the loud and destructive shock waves that rocket test fires can create.

On Tuesday, crews worked to add a few more holes in the flame buckets to allow a water flow of 335,000 gallons per minute

to cool the rocket stand during the SLS test.

Eight minutes represents the length of time SLS rockets will burn to lift off the ground and reach 100 miles high, consuming 200,000 gallons of liquid oxygen and 500,000 of liquid hydrogen — which are highly reactive and explosive when mixed.

The propellants are mixed in the four main engines, which are the same RS-25 engines built by Aerojet Rocketdyne that were used on the space shuttle orbiter. Sixteen of the engines were left over after the shuttle program ended, two of which have not been used.

In a real flight, the SLS rocket exhaust would only hit the launch pad for a few moments before lifting off. But the rocket will be held in place during the test fire, meaning the superheated flames could warp the test stand if not cooled. So NASA has completely renovated the stand's high-pressure water system.

Once NASA is satisfied the rocket is safe, it will be lifted back onto the Pegasus barge and shipped to Kennedy Space Center in Florida for launch.

The first SLS rocket is to be launched without a crew sometime in 2020. Only this first Artemis-era rocket will be test fired at Stennis, said Boeing's Mark Nappi, director of SLS core stage testing. After that, SLS rockets will be tested in limited fashion at Michoud and again at Kennedy Space Center.

Software models now enable NASA to run virtual tests to determine if anything is wrong. "We will validate all the systems — avionics, hydraulics, propulsion and so on," Nappi said.

After the stress and pressure of a green run, the rocket will need some two months of refurbishing for the actual launch, Nappi said.

"We will fix any damage that occurred. We suspect we know where some of the damage will be, but we can't expect all of it," he said. "Some of the work will be done here and some will be done at Kennedy Space Center."

Physicists see hints of X17

Everything in our Universe is held together or pushed apart by four fundamental forces: gravity, electromagnetism, and two nuclear interactions. Physicists think they've spotted the actions of a fifth physical force emerging from a helium atom.

It's not the first time researchers claim to have caught a glimpse of it, either. A few years ago, they saw it in the decay of an isotope of beryllium. Now the same team has seen a second example of the mysterious force at play - and the particle they think is carrying it, which they're calling X17.

If the discovery is confirmed, not only could learning more about X17 let us better understand the forces that govern our Universe, it could also help scientists solve the dark matter problem once and for all.

Attila Krasznahorkay and his colleagues from the Institute for Nuclear Research in Hungary suspected something weird was going on back in 2016, after analyzing the way an excited beryllium-8 emits light as it decays.



If that light is energetic enough, it transforms into an electron and a positron, which push away from one another at a predictable angle before zooming off.

Based on the law of conservation of energy, as the energy of the light producing the two particles increases, the angle between them should decrease. Statistically speaking, at least.

Oddly, this isn't quite what Krasznahorkay and his team saw. Among their tally of angles there was an unexpected rise in the number of electrons and positrons separating at an angle of 140 degrees.

The study seemed robust enough, and soon attracted the attention of other researchers around the globe who suggested that a whole new particle could be responsible for the anomaly.

Not just any old particle; its characteristics suggested it had to be a completely new kind of fundamental boson.

That's no small claim. We currently know of four fundamental forces, and we know that three of them have bosons carrying their messages of attraction and repulsion.

The force of gravity is carried by a hypothetical particle known as a "graviton", but sadly scientists have not yet detected it.

This new boson couldn't possibly be one of the particles carrying the four known forces, thanks to its distinctive mass of (17 megaelectronvolts, or about 33 times that of an electron), and tiny life span (of about 10 to the minus 14 seconds ... but hey, it's long enough to smile for the camera).

So all signs point to the boson being the carrier of some new, fifth force. But physics isn't keen on celebrating prematurely. Finding a new particle is always big news in physics, and warrants a lot of scrutiny. Not to mention repeated experiment.

Fortunately, Krasznahorkay's team haven't exactly been sitting on their laurels over the past few years. They've since changed focus from looking at the decay of beryllium-8 to a change in the state of an excited helium nucleus.

Similar to their previous discovery, the researchers found pairs of electrons and positrons separating at an angle that didn't match currently accepted models. This time, the number was closer to 115 degrees.

Working backwards, the team calculated the helium's nucleus could also have produced a short-lived boson with a mass just under 17 megaelectronvolts.

To keep it simple, they're calling it X17. It's a long way from being an official particle we can add to any models of matter.

While 2016's experiment was accepted into the respectable journal, Physical Review Letters, this latest study is yet to be peer reviewed. You can read the findings yourself on arXiv, where they've been uploaded to be scrutinised by others in the field.

But if this strange boson isn't just an illusion caused by some experimental blip, the fact it interacts with neutrons hints at a force that acts nothing like the traditional four.

(Source: sciencealert.com)

New insect species that fed on dinosaur blood found preserved in amber

A previously unknown species of parasitic insect which dined on the blood of dinosaurs 100 million years ago has been discovered preserved in prehistoric amber.

The wingless bugs, found clinging to dinosaur feathers sealed inside two pieces of fossilised tree resin, provide new clues about the origins of lice which feast on modern-day birds.

The 10 insect nymphs were studied by Chinese and American biologists after being discovered in northern Myanmar's Kachin province.

Researchers said the new species, Mesophthirus engeli, had similar bodies to modern lice and latched onto feathered dinosaurs with powerful jaws in the way present-day parasites bite into birds.

Creatures that feed on blood have previously been identified from both the Jurassic period – 201 million to 145 million years ago – and Cretaceous era, 145 million to 66 million years ago.

But despite the prevalence of feathered dinosaurs at this time, insects that fed on their feathers have not been reported until now.

Researchers from Beijing's Capital Normal University and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC said their findings suggested feather-feeding parasites evolved around the same time as the diversification of birds and feathered dinosaurs.

Writing in the journal Nature Communications, they said: "Most significantly, these insects are preserved with partially damaged dinosaur feathers, the damage of which was probably made by these insects' integument-feeding behaviors."

"This finding demonstrates that feather-feeding behaviours of insects originated at least in mid-Cretaceous, accompanying the radiation of feathered dinosaurs including early birds."

(Source: The Independent)

Iran warns against travel to U.S., citing risk of arrest, detention

TOURISM **TEHRAN** — The Iranian Foreign Ministry on Tuesday issued a travel advisory for citizens, particularly scientists, not to visit the United States, saying Iranians may be faced with arbitrary arrest or lengthy detention in inhuman conditions.

“Iranian citizens, particularly elites and scientists, are requested to seriously avoid traveling to America, even to take part in scientific conferences and even having an invitation,” a post on the Foreign Ministry’s website reads.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (not pictured) and his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif attend a news conference in Moscow, Russia May 8, 2019. (REUTERS/Evgenia Novozhenina/File Photo)

It cited, “America’s cruel and one-sided laws toward Iranians, especially Iranian elites, and arbitrary and lengthy detention in completely inhuman conditions” as reasons for the travel advisory. Tensions have heightened between Iran and the United States since U.S. President Donald Trump last year pulled Washington out of the nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions on Iran’s economy. Iran has responded by gradually scaling back its commitments under the agreement.

The Foreign Ministry issued another warning on Tuesday for Iranian nationals to postpone traveling to France amid ongoing protests and civil unrest in the European country.

Miyajima, Japan to impose a tourist tax

Visiting a bucket list destination is getting slightly more expensive as the Japanese island of Miyajima has voted to charge tourists more money to visit.

The island, also known as Itsukushima, is a short ferry ride away from Hiroshima and a popular day trip site for visitors to the area.

It is known for its orange torii gate, a popular photo spot due to the fact that it appears semi-sunken at high tide, and for the 12th-century Itsukushima Shrine.

Taro Matsumoto is the newly elected mayor of Hatsukaichi city, which is in Hiroshima prefecture. He ran on a successful campaign issue of a tourist tax.

At a press conference, Matsumoto told reporters that “it is necessary to secure new financial resources in order to continuously maintain quality of the Island as a tourist spot,” and that he hopes the tax will be implemented by spring of 2021.

About 4.31 million people visited Miyajima in 2018.

The current proposal is for \$1 admission fee to the island.

There are three possible methods for imposing and collecting the tax: charging each visitors traveling by ferry, increasing the tax for the ferry operators or charging tax directly to the visitors when they use facilities on the island.

(Source: MSN)

ROUND THE GLOBE

City of Verona

A world Heritage, the city of Verona is situated in northern Italy at the foot of the Lessini Mountains on the River Adige.

It dates from prehistoric times: a small built-up area that developed between the 4th and 3rd century BC became a Roman municipium in the 1st century BC after which it rose rapidly in importance.

During the 5th century, Verona was occupied by the Ostrogoth Theodoric I, later by the Lombards, and in 774 by Charlemagne. In the early 12th century, it became an independent commune.



It prospered under the rule of the Scaliger family and particularly under Cangrande I, falling to Venice in 1405. From 1797, it became part of the Austrian Empire and joined the Kingdom of Italy in 1866.

The core of the city consists of the Roman town nestled in the loop of the river containing one of the richest collections of Roman remains in northern Italy.

Surviving remains of this era include the city gate, Porta Borsari, the remains of the Porta Leoni, the Arco dei Gavi, which was dismantled in the Napoleonic period and rebuilt next to Castelvecchio in the 1930s, the Ponte Pietra, the Roman theatre, and the Amphitheatre Arena.

The Scaligers rebuilt the walls during the Middle Ages, embracing a much larger territory in the west and another vast area on the east bank of the river. This remained the size of the city until the 20th century.

(Source: UNESCO)

Tribal tourism gives chance to discover another face of Iran

➔ Over the past couple of years, the trend has gained a lot of support and attention in the country by both the government and the private sectors, as well as sightseers and local communities. Each month, several tribal festivals are held across the country. Moreover, tens of collective tours brings visitors to experience life among the tribespeople.

For instance, a number of foreign ambassadors, diplomats, as well as cultural and economic attaches were invited to attend a regional nomadic festival, which was held in northern Golestan province back in November. The festival, however, showcased wide range of regional arts, handicrafts, workshops, souvenirs, culinary traditions and tourist-attraction exhibits and live performances to attendees from China, Greece, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Belarus, the Philippines, Senegal, Bolivia and Mauritania, amongst others.

Experts say that tribal tourism has untapped capacity to attract more and more foreign tourists. Mohammad Javad Azimi, a tourism expert in Kermanshah province, believes that the nomadic livelihoods certifies a kind of functional authenticity that well reflects human interaction with nature.

Many tour operators believe that tribal regions could be deemed as the legacy of human authenticity in its novel cultural and human aspects. In the Iranian culture, literature and public opinion, nomads have always been a proud part of the nation.

Iran’s tourism ministry believes that construction of eco-lodges in rural areas could cater to the trend as it last year set a target to help build 2,000 eco-lodges by 2021.

“Each eco-lodge unit averagely generates jobs for seven to eight people so that the scheme could create 160,000 jobs,” tourism minister Ali-Asghar Mounesan says.

Steeped in history, culture, and nature, the country is a well-known destination for fans of Persian arts, culture and architecture. For mainstream travelers it might be difficult



There are many tourists from all over the world who tend to observe nomadic lifestyle, watching activities such as milking, yogurt making, buttering, oiling, woolen, carpeting and much more.

to figure out which places may be their priority, but here’s a list 20 favorite attractions that you can’t miss on your trip to Iran: Persepolis; the Valley of the Stars; Chogha Zanbil (Tchogha Zanbil); Babak Castle; Nasir ol-Molk Mosque; Anzali Lagoon; Chalus Road; Naqsh-e Jahan Square; Shushtar

Historical Hydraulic System; Bridges of Isfahan; Kashan’s historical homes; Sheikh Safi al-din Khanegah and Shrine; Pigeon Towers; Zoroastrian temple of Chak Chak; Rudkhan Castle; Katala-khor Cave; Hafez Tomb; Hurmuz Island; the Lut Desert and historical sites of Bisotun and Taq-e Bostan.

Austrian ambassador visits tourist sites in western Iran



TOURISM **TEHRAN** — Vienna’s ambassador to Tehran Stefan Scholz on Tuesday visited several travel attractions in Kermanshah province, western Iran.

Scholz, who was accompanied by his family and some embassy staff, toured the UNESCO-registered Bisotun and Taq-e Bostan amongst other sites, CHTN reported.

Inscribed into the base of a towering cliff, Taq-e Bostan comprises extraordinary Sassanian bas-reliefs of ancient victorious kings divide opinions, while Bisotun is a patchwork of immense yet impressive life-size carvings depicting the king Darius I and several other figures. It was the first cuneiform writing that was deciphered in the 19th century.

On the sidelines of this visit, the Austrian envoy expressed his satisfaction over sightseeing in the province, the report said.

Regarding the visits, a local tourism official noted that visits by foreign diplomats and authorities to Kermanshah

province’s attractions could motivate more international arrivals in the region.

Scholz said in October that he believes U.S. sanctions against Iran will be no obstacle in the path of Austrian tourists to travel to the Islamic Republic.

“Austrian arrivals in Iran is not affected by the sanctions and threats,” the envoy told ISNA.

In an interview with the Tehran Times in September, the ambassador remained commonalities and the history of relations between the two nations, saying “Austria and Iran have a long history in common. It’s an incredible special profile that distinguishes us from many other countries. We have 700 years of documented contacts, 500 years of partnership and about 60 years of full diplomatic relations.”

In November 2018, the Trump administration reinstated sanctions on Iran, mainly the ones that had been lifted under the 2015 nuclear deal, in order to batter Iran’s economy.

Fukushima’s tourism comeback: despite disaster, this Japanese destination is ready for tourists again

FUKUSHIMA (CNN) — It’s a brisk autumn morning, and the Mishima overlook in Fukushima prefecture is crowded with photographers, mostly from Taiwan, eager to capture the scenic Tadami Line railway as it crosses the arched Dai-ichi Tadami-gawa Bridge.

Among them is local photographer Ken Hoshi, who has photographed the region more than anyone else and has singlehandedly pioneered grassroots tourism in the area.

After discovering the hilltop viewpoint overlooking the Tadami River, he convinced local authorities to construct stairs for easier access; he’s now lobbying for an elevator for the elderly.

As the train chugs into view at 9:05am, there’s a whirl of clicking cameras as though for a celebrity.

“New industry is difficult to attract, so tourism is the best way to bring development,” Hoshi said through an interpreter.

Knowing that most tourists to Fukushima are Taiwanese wishing to experience autumn and winter seasons they don’t have back home, Hoshi promoted Mishima by organizing competitions in Taiwan of photographs taken of the Tadami Line from the overlook.

He launched Mugenkyo no Watashi tours on the Tadami River, which, using flat-bottom boats similar to those that ferried him across the river as a boy, take in the haunting place where his village once stood, abandoned after a 1964 landslide.

Hoshi is passionate about Fukushima, which, if you stay long enough, seems to be the defining trait of most everyone who lives there.

Many businesses have been passed down for generations.

Luring visitors, however, hasn’t been easy. Fukushima is one of six prefectures comprising Tohoku, a vast, remote and undeveloped region on the northeastern end of Japan’s main Honshu island, which receives fewer than 2% of Japan’s international tourists.

Furthermore, although eight years have passed since the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plant, caused by the massive earthquake and tsunami that struck off Tohoku’s coast, concern over radiation is the most common response you’ll receive if you announce you’re heading for Fukushima. Maybe that’s why just 120,000 foreign



The next Kyoto: For return visitors to Japan who have already been to Kyoto, or for those wishing to escape the crowds, Fukushima is an off-the-beaten-track alternative. Or at least it will be until word gets out.

visitors stayed overnight in 2018, despite the fact that the contaminated evacuation zone now comprises just 2.8% of Fukushima Prefecture.

For repeat visitors who have seen destinations like Kyoto or for those wishing to escape the crowds, Fukushima is an off-the-beaten-track alternative, at least until word gets out.

Japan’s third-largest prefecture but with fewer than 2 million inhabitants, Fukushima is mostly rural, with winding mountain roads, forests, rushing rivers, waterfalls, marshlands and highlands.

Among Japanese, Fukushima is famous for changing autumn leaves, heavy snowfall, historic sites in Aizuwakamatsu that embody the samurai spirit, peach and persimmon trees, local cuisine you won’t find anywhere else, over 130 hot-spring resorts and more than 60 sake breweries.

“It’s our fifth time to Japan, and after following posts on social media and YouTube, we decided to come to Fukushima,” said Natalie Meek from the United Kingdom. “We’re renting a car and spending five days around the Aizuwakamatsu area because there’s so much to see.”

Japan believes so strongly in Fukushima’s comeback, the prefecture was selected for the commencement of the Tokyo 2020

Olympics torch relay, at J-Village, the nation’s top soccer training facility.

Because of J-Village’s location just 12.4 miles from the nuclear meltdown but saved from the tsunami due to higher ground, it was the operational base for 1,000 people dealing with the disaster and is now considered a symbol of revitalization.

From there, the torch will journey north through coastal towns that have steadily recovered since 2011, including Soma, southern terminus of Japan’s newest and longest hiking trail, the 620-mile Michinoku Coastal Trail that passes through four prefectures and was created to promote healing and attract international visitors.

Turning inland, the relay will pass through towns like Fukushima City, prefectural capital and famous for its onsen (hot-spring baths). Just 92 minutes from Tokyo on the fastest Shinkansen bullet train, it offers the Iizaka Onsen area, you can soak your cares away at nine public baths and experience ryokan (Japanese inns) like Nakamura, where 7th-generation innkeeper Hiroshi Abe proudly points out antiques and architectural details, from the lobby’s open-heart fireplace to rooms once used by samurai.

Rates, like throughout Fukushima, are up to 20% lower than what you’d pay in more touristy cities like Kyoto.

South of Fukushima City is the castle town Nihonmatsu, where Daishichi Sake Brewery stands out for devoting more time to sake production than pretty much anywhere else in Japan.

Founded in 1752 and under the helm of 10th-generation owner Hidehara Ohta, Daishichi uses only the time-consuming traditional kimoto method for brewing sake, developed around 1700 but now mostly abandoned in favor of quicker modern practices.

It also developed an innovative super-flat rice polishing technique that assures a high-quality taste.

The result is sake that’s resistant to oxidation and grows and matures over time, making it comparable to wine.

Guided tours with tastings are available. “Minowamon, named after a gate of Nihonmatsu Castle, is our biggest seller because of its excellent flavor and rich, umami taste,” said Ohta. “It pairs well with buttery, creamy dishes.”

Fukushima Prefecture’s most famous castle town is Aizuwakamatsu, which dubs itself Samurai City and is located in Aizu, the westernmost region of the prefecture.

After the Tokugawa shogunate, which had ruled over Japan for more than 250 years, was overthrown and the emperor resumed power, the Boshin War broke out between samurai loyal to the shogun and Imperial forces.

It was here, in Tsurugajo Castle, that the mighty Aizu clan fought and lost the last samurai battle.

Thousands died, including female samurai warriors and the Byakkotai (White Tiger Force), a contingent of samurai teenagers who saw what they thought were flames engulfing Tsurugajo Castle and committed suicide.

Today, Tsurugajo Castle contains a history museum while on its grounds are a traditional garden, teahouse, and 1,000 cherry trees.

Nearby is Aizu Bukeyashiki, where the chief retainer of the Aizu clan, Saigo Tanomo, lived with his family, servants, and soldiers.

The restored 38-room mansion illustrates a grand lifestyle, which ended tragically during the final hours of the Boshin War when Saigo’s wife killed their three youngest children and then committed suicide along with her teenage daughters, sisters and other family members. Saigo, off in battle, lived into his 70s.

I knew the war in Afghanistan was a lie

By Maj. Danny Sjursen

ANTIWAR — Nightmares still haunt me. Sometimes it’s the standard stuff associated with classic post-traumatic stress disorder: flashbacks of horrible attacks and images of my mutilated troopers. More often, though, peculiar as it may sound, I dream that my sociopathic, career-obsessed colonel calls to give me another late-night order to do something unnecessary – usually dangerous, always absurd – the next day.

We never got along; the man distrusted me from the start. To him, my plainly ironclad loyalty to my young soldiers was suspicious. Given his own deep-seated predilection to climb the ranks on the backs of his exhausted subordinates, he assumed I must have ulterior motives. I didn’t. Nonetheless, he kept me around because I knew the region better than most and was capable of impressing visiting generals with tactical briefings. And because, in the main, he found me useful.

It’s not that that lieutenant colonel believed in anything, even the mission in Afghanistan. Deployment was a means to an end for the guy. That said, nearly two decades as an unapologetic climber through the officer ranks had imbued him, not with any real competence – he could hardly spell “Kandahar” – but with an uncanny knack for mind-melding with his bosses. If they fancied a particular mission, he loved it. So in 2011-2012, out in the sticks southwest of the city of Kandahar, when his brigade commander championed democracy-building in the district, my colonel was all in.

For the entirety of our unit’s year in country, the colonel and I battled over the efficacy of imposing democracy (at the tip of a bayonet, of course) in rural Afghanistan. Nevertheless, my repeated and often detailed assertions to him that what the Army euphemistically titled our “governance” operations was doomed to fail were always ignored. After all, the colonel had a career to advance. In the prevailing acquiescence-over-effectiveness Army culture, questioning the basis of his given mission wouldn’t play. Thus it was that this captain would tirelessly toil to implement the boss’s fruitless attempts at promoting democracy in the very district where the Taliban had been birthed. It was a hell of a futile hoot of a year.

So, for the better part of a year, I pretended to promote “democracy” in rural Kandahar, my dense squadron commander pretended to know what that entailed, his commander pretended the endeavor was possible in the first place, and on and up it went – straight to the top, to the White House. Everyone up and down the chain of command put on a show and presented the illusion of “progress.” I knew this, viscerally, as a young captain. Heck, I was complicit in a way. Thus, I found the recent release by The Washington Post of what it titled The Afghanistan Papers equal parts astonishing and unsurprising. The documents – consider them the Pentagon Papers of my generation – present proof-positive that the generals and various U.S. officials misled the public for decades about supposed progress in what they knew was a failing, unwinnable war. The reports left me feeling partially vindicated, but mostly morose. Still, in the vein of the dark humor that helps soldiers survive absurd combat tours, let me recall some true episodes seen from a micro level that substantiate the Post’s macro scoop.

There were times that the war in southern Afghanistan, though horrifically bloody – a 40% casualty rate for our troop of about 100 kids – was incredibly funny. It was tragicomic, really. Though I knew my objections to the colonel were destined to fail, I just couldn’t resist ping-ponging him with flippant pleas of why establishing a Jeffersonian-style representative democracy in the Arghandab Valley was an absurd crusade. Somehow, running sarcastic intellectual circles around the ob-



tuse, knuckle-dragging colonel assuaged my admittedly arrogant and angry tendencies. My evidentiary examples were so farcical that they bordered on fiction.

I thought back on four such vignettes over Thanksgiving weekend, during lunch in a Middle Eastern restaurant on Staten Island shared with my former interpreter from Iraq and two of his Arab friends. They loved my stories about the mad, medieval nature of rural southern Afghanistan. I suppose they found some comfort in knowing their home country, for all its ongoing problems, is wildly modern compared to my former stomping grounds in rural Kandahar.

We had been discussing the prospects for democracy across the post-Arab Spring Greater Middle East. But a few beers deep, sensing that the table needed a bit of levity, I started riffing about the buffoonery of bringing “democracy” to Afghanistan. The stories I told were the very ones I’d once used to pointlessly advise my former boss about the hopelessness of our mission.

Like this one time: I was chatting over some tea with an old man in a nearby, dusty, mud-hut village. I asked the elder his age. He didn’t know; few did. I pressed, asking if he had any sense of what year he’d been born. His reply – “I was birthed during a full moon in the year before the Emir Habibullah Khan was murdered” – wasn’t exactly what I’d expected. I realized that the man didn’t even know what year it was right then, nor did he likely adhere to our Western Gregorian calendar.

Still, being the history geek I am, I returned to base and googled the lineage of various Afghan monarchs. I figured out, based on the information the elder had provided, that he was probably born in 1918, making him, at that point, around 94 years old. In a country with an average life expectancy of about 46 years, this was profound.

The next day, I returned to the village to inform the old man of his actual age. He seemed equal parts surprised and pleased. A few minutes later, he demonstrated that he still had the libido to flagrantly hit on, even offer to buy, one of my handsome young male lieutenants as a sex slave of sorts. I politely declined. (And who says rural Afghanistan isn’t ready for democracy?)

Then there’s this memory: My troop ran a program we called “cash for work,” through which we’d pay tens of thousands in US dollars per week to put some 1,500 local Afghans to work on small public works projects. The idea was that if we gave the chronically unemployed men jobs, they’d eschew the Taliban’s own version of our program – call it “cash for planting IEDs” – and thus violence would lessen. I knew the inherent limitations of the scheme. It was utterly temporal and unsustainable, would distort the local economy and empower corrupt tribal leaders. I also knew that the Taliban would inevitably skim off the top of the laborers’ salaries. Nevertheless,

I was on board; by then, all I cared about was keeping my troops as safe as possible.

The tasks the Afghans did for us weren’t particularly useful. I had to manufacture much of the work, telling them to clean out irrigation canals, paint yellow divider lines on the district’s one paved road, and paint Afghan flags on the hundreds of concrete barrier walls surrounding the hopelessly indefensible nearby police station. The absurdity of the program was perhaps best illustrated by my troop’s favorite laborer-mascots: “backpack man” and “the ride.” The former was a triple amputee with just one arm. The latter had no arms but carried his one-armed friend on his back to work each day. Both had lost their limbs by stepping on errant, ubiquitous IEDs. Despite their physical limitations, we paid them the same salaries as the other workers. “The ride” would carry “backpack man” to the canal, where that one-armed go-getter would grab a pickaxe and start digging. The whole scene was a macabre inspiration for us all.

Friday was payday for the cash-for-workers. The Army, bureaucratic beast that it is, insisted that we adhere to regulations stipulating that each and every Afghan line up each week and “sign” their names on a standardized form prior to cashing in. (This is despite the fact that it had no qualms about handing out a backpack full of cash.) No one seemed to care when I reminded the bosses that 95% of these guys were illiterate; they had to sign, I was told. So, some Afghans would scribble something random, others would make a thumbprint in ink. One drew a marvelous little chicken next to his name each week. (And who says rural Afghanistan isn’t ready for democracy?)

Another time, the colonel informed me that the time had come to update the local Afghans’ farming techniques. The brigade sent me a nice fellow from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) – an agriculture expert from Kansas – to revitalize husbandry in rural Kandahar. I asked my boss not to bother. Better for the USAID guy to earn his bloated salary from the safety of headquarters than risk his life down in my sector, where soldiers got killed on the regular.

The USAID expert’s plan was to introduce PVC pipe-based irrigation to the district. To that end, he built what he called a “model farm” outside my combat outpost as an example for the Afghans to follow. The local farmers were going to ignore the new technology, or steal the materials, I’d told my colonel. These people were content with their 13th-century-era but fairly functional irrigation methods, I’d emphasized. As expected, the colonel ignored me. When some locals stripped the “model farm” of its materials one dark night, the colonel summoned the Kansan to headquarters. We never heard from him again, the poor, well-meaning guy. (And who says rural Afghanistan isn’t ready for democracy?)

More ludicrous still, my senior commanders decided that our stuck-in-the-Middle-Ages district was ready for some third-wave feminism. In the Army way, they came up with an acronym for a new unit: the Female Engagement Team (FET). The idea was to pluck one of the handful of female staff officers in our male-dominated cavalry reconnaissance squadron and assign her to go on combat patrols and “engage” with local Afghan women, to assess their concerns, and ... well, it was never clear what the squadron would actually do after that. In a bit of particularly ironic slapstick, the young West Point-trained officer chosen was – wait for it! – a New York Jew. The whole charade dovetailed with the preposterous fiction that establishment elites have bandied about: that the original purpose of America’s post-9/11 foray into Afghanistan had anything to do with women’s rights.

When I heard about the new FETs, I felt obliged to remind my colonel that after nine months spent in the villages of the sector, I hadn’t seen a grown woman, given that the local men cloistered their wives as if the entire district were a Catholic convent. I reminded him of the maybe 12-year-old girl in the nearest village I’d taken a shine to months before. She had piercing green eyes, a boisterous personality and had impressively held her own while playing rough games with the village boys. For months, I’d given her candy, dolls and anything else I could scrounge up. My mother started sending toys and snacks specifically for this girl. Then one day, she disappeared. I started asking around about her. Finally, one of the local elders told me what had happened. She’d had her period, he explained, and, as per local tradition, she was immediately clothed in a full-length burka and stashed indoors until her parents could arrange a marriage with, inevitably, some older man. I never saw her again.

Oh, and nothing useful ever transpired from the squadron’s FET experiment. (Who says rural Afghanistan isn’t ready for democracy?)

I can’t help but surmise that the original sin of America’s Afghan war, particularly after the initial 2001 invasion, was the reflexive assumption that within this landlocked Central Asian country, an imposed, Western-style representative democracy could take root. Seen from the relatively cosmopolitan capital city of Kabul, where most American generals and diplomats resided, that might have seemed plausible. However, the “view from Kabul” was different from my perspective from the Afghan version of Appalachian Kentucky.

My vignettes are admittedly personal, local, area-specific and, one might argue, the equivalent of viewing a complex war from 30,000 feet through a soda straw. But humility be damned – I’m also a scholar, and I’m confident in my widely shared assessment that on a macro level, Afghanistan as it stands today remains a mess. And now I’ve got The Washington Post’s Afghanistan Papers in my evidentiary corner. Fact: Nineteen years into America’s longest war, Afghanistan is in a worse state than at any time since the US military invasion. More of the country is contested or controlled by the Taliban than ever before (to such an extent that the US military has decided to stop measuring that inconvenient data). The Afghan government’s revenues can’t pay for its security forces without foreign aid. Local police and army casualties are unsustainable, and the country’s opium crop has had another record bumper crop of a year. None of this bodes well, yet American troops remain and still die there. Worse, this year, no doubt, one of the dead will be a young man or woman born after Sept. 11, 2001. To ask one final time: Who says rural Afghanistan isn’t ready for democracy?

I do.

Saudi murders in Pensacola revive 9/11’s unanswered questions

USATODAY — America’s veiled relationship with Saudi Arabia took another dark turn Friday when a Saudi national opened fire in a Naval Air Station Pensacola classroom and killed three student sailors. When an FBI official described the violence that also left the gunman dead and two deputies wounded as “an act of terrorism,” it offered a reminder that, when it comes to transparency, the House of Saud enjoys a significant exemption from traditional oversight. Just ask the family of entrepreneur Esam Ghazzawi. No wait. They fled Sarasota, in a rush, before anyone had a chance to ask.

Details on what prompted 21-year-old Royal Saudi Air Force second lieutenant Mohammed Alshamrani to start shooting are still being assembled. But between the tragedy in Pensacola, the coordinated assassination and dismemberment of dissident Saudi journalist and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, and the fact that 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudis, questions about the monarchy’s ostensible Teflon coating refuse to abate. Terror attack? Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis calls for gun restrictions after Pensacola shooting.

The FBI’s refusal to declassify the full extent of what it knew, or knows, about the 9/11 hijackers’ links to Sarasota continues to fuel conspiracy theorists’ persistent contention that the federal government is shielding powerful foreign nationals from accountability. In August, U.S. District Court Judge William Zloch ruled the FBI has, for the last seven years, unlawfully withheld certain details of its investigation into what went on at the home of Abdulaziz and Anoud al-Hijji, the son-in-law and daughter of Ghazzawi. A consultant to the Royal Family, Ghazzawi bought the home in Sarasota’s gated Prestancia neighborhood in 1995. U.S. Navy unites Pensacola’s past, present: After attack on Naval Air Station, we all bleed.

The family abandoned their place at the end of August 2001, “quickly and suddenly,” according to an FBI analyst’s note. “They left behind valuable items, clothing, jewelry and food in a manner that indicated they fled unexpectedly without prior preparation or knowledge.”

A 2002 memo from an FBI field agent with the Southwest Florida Domestic Security Task Force noted “many connections” between the al-Hijjis and three of the pilot hijackers — Mohamed Atta, Ziad Jarrah and Marwan al Shehhi. The three learned to fly planes at flight schools in nearby Venice. Records reportedly list them as frequent visitors to the al-Hijji household.

But none of this information made it into the “9/11 Commission Report” released in 2004. Those records were procured through Freedom of Information Act requests by Florida Bulldog, an online investigative journalism watchdog, years after the official books were closed. ‘Federal loophole’: Pensacola gunman legally purchased Glock 45 used in shooting, FBI says.

With support from former Florida Gov. Bob Graham, who co-chaired the Senate committee looking into 9/11, the Florida Bulldog continues to press for an end to the records censorship. In 2012, Bulldog reporters Dan Christensen and Anthony Summers took the Justice Department to court for access to redacted information. Four months ago, Judge Zloch ruled the FBI was within its rights to retain 80,266 pages sought by The Bulldog. But he also ruled that one heavily censored passage about the al-Hijjis “is highly relevant to the plaintiff’s request.”

Last month, Christensen reported that an attorney representing families and survivors of the 9/11 attack stated Khashoggi may have been murdered because of what he knew about 9/11.

James Kreindler said Khashoggi, who was killed at the Saudi embassy in Istanbul in 2018, had met with an investigator with the 9/11 plaintiffs in 2017 and “knew a lot about the Saudi government’s involvement” in the terror attacks. “My belief,” Kreindler added, “is that Khashoggi was killed not because he was a dissident, there are lots of dissidents, but because he was holding this ax over the Saudis’ heads.”

Accused of ongoing genocide in Yemen and going after dissident exiles, the image-conscious Saudis have been on a charm offensive as they transition from an oil economy to a tourist economy. Earlier this year, at a Sarasota Institute of Lifetime Learning lecture in Sarasota, former ambassador to the U.S. Turki al-Faisal reminded his audience that travel restrictions were being lifted. Al-Faisal, the youngest son of the late patriarch Faisal bin Abdulaziz al Saud, failed to mention the Khashoggi controversy in his speech. Backstage, he blamed the assassination on “rogue” elements in the government, and said he had no additional insights into the al-Hijjis’ presence in Sarasota.

“I have no idea what Mr. Ghazzawi has to do with this or that, or if he had anything to do with that, other than what was published in all of the texts that I’ve seen published in the paper,” al-Faisal said.

So far, the Royal Family and heir apparent Mohammed bin Salman have faced no repercussions for their perceived transgressions. Over the summer, the Senate failed to override President Donald Trump’s veto of a bill that would have blocked in \$8 billion arms deal to Saudi Arabia. Former U.S. Department of State Special Representative to Muslim Communities Farah Pandith called “extremism Riyadh’s top export” in Foreign Policy magazine this year, and accused the regime of tying roughly \$100 billion in foreign aid over “recent decades” to spreading Wahhabi religious fundamentalism. “To that end,” wrote Pandith, “they are rewriting history, erasing evidence of the past to favor their own narrative – a move that ideologically aligned extremists in many parts of the world have since copied.”

Taxpayers cough up for more F-35s the pentagon didn’t ask for

At a tick below \$62,000, U.S. median household income is high and rising steadily. Yet this handsome sum is only enough to keep one F-35 stealth fighter in the air for about an hour and a half. This (taxpayer) dollar-guzzling hunk of metal has attracted the ire of fiscal hawks for two decades, yet no one in government—and especially nobody at the Department of Defense—seems keen on shelving it. This is a huge problem. Taxpayers deserve a cost-effective national defense, not bureaucrats attached to shiny boondoggles.

Now we’re finding out that the astronomical costs are driven by problems with the F-35’s Autonomic Logistics Information System (ALIS), which is supposed to help military staff examine technical information and plan military operations. Air Force Magazine reporter Rachel Cohen writes, “DOD is still figuring out when a rearchitected ALIS could become available.” And this is just the tip of the iceberg. On November 13, Robert Behler, director of the Pentagon’s Operational Test and Evaluation Office, testified before the House Subcommittee on Readiness and Tactical Air and Land

Forces that the “Operational suitability of the F-35 fleet remains below service expectations. In particular, no F-35 variant meets the specified reliability or maintainability metrics.” Meanwhile, the program failed to meet the 80 percent mission-capable rate goal set forth by Pentagon leadership.

Service and operational standards remain low as costs continue to climb higher. At a lifetime cost of \$1.5 trillion, the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter is among the most expensive weapons ever devised. Indirect costs are even higher, since the F-35 requires the “cannibalization” of parts from other systems. The Government Accountability Office notes, “According to prime contractor data, to keep aircraft flying despite parts shortages, from May through November 2018 F-35 squadrons cannibalized (that is, took) parts from other aircraft at rates that were more than six times greater than the services’ objective.”

By implication, monies devoted to other Pentagon operations are in fact being diverted to the F-35. The program, then, is less of a money pit than a black hole, sucking in dollars and manpower that

would have been used better elsewhere.

Taxpayers are likely wondering how things got this bad. The Joint Strike Fighter had promising origins back in the 1990s, and when the project’s development contracts were signed in 1996, program “visionaries” genuinely seemed to believe that the F-35 would deliver cutting-edge technology at low costs. Key to its affordability, and replacement of older aircraft, was the shareability of spare parts between the Navy, Marines, and the Air Force. In contrast, having niche aircraft and equipment for different branches of the military drives up costs by proliferating the number of boutique contracts with suppliers. Unfortunately, the simple, seductive appeal of the F-35 did not live up to reality. Retired lieutenant colonel and contributor to The Nation William Astore recounts, “In 2014, the plane’s woeful record finally caught the eye of CBS’s 60 Minutes, which documented how the program was seven years behind schedule and already \$163 billion over budget. The Pentagon, however, simply plunged ahead.”

In the private sector, there are plenty of instances where cost-cutting ideas turn

out to be large cost-drivers. The difference is that, if these initiatives stay the course, their companies will go out of business. Instead of accountability, the Pentagon receives \$680 billion in annual funding with virtually no questions asked. Often, lawmakers approve funds that Defense officials don’t even ask for (i.e. congressional earmarks). An analysis of the fiscal year 2019 Defense Appropriations Bill by the Taxpayers Protection Alliance uncovered that members of Congress had snuck in \$740 million for eight additional F-35s. These are planes the Pentagon didn’t request.

It’s hard to have congressional accountability when it’s Congress that’s enabling excessive and wasteful Pentagon spending. At the very least, these practices must end immediately via a stronger ban on earmarking than what’s already on the books. Lawmakers must also demand more accountability from the Department of Defense and make funding levels contingent on it kiboshing boondoggles such as the F-35. The country simply can’t afford a profligate Pentagon that spends way beyond its means to deliver a piece of equipment that’s deeply flawed.

Iran, Spain to expand cooperation on environmental issues

ENVIRONMENT **TEHRAN** — Iran’s Department of Environment deputy chief, Masoud Tajrishi, and Spanish Secretary of State for Environment, Hugo Alfonso Moran Fernandez, discussed ways to expand environmental cooperation. The two officials met on Tuesday on the sidelines of the 25th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25), which is being held in Madrid on December 2-13.



Iran’s Department of Environment deputy chief, Masoud Tajrishi (second R), and Spanish Secretary of State for Environment, Hugo Alfonso Moran Fernandez (third R)

Tajrishi explained Iran’s plans and actions toward environment protection such as improving energy consumption patterns and enhancing efficiency and productivity of industrial units, while criticizing the U.S. sanctions on Iran’s access to green technologies. He called on Spanish official to cooperate in waste management in industrial and mining units, reducing air pollution and tackling sand and dust storms. The Spanish official for his part welcomed Iran’s environment protection plans and announced his country’s readiness to cooperate with Iran’s public and private sector projects.

FAO, ULRP train Iranian experts on evapotranspiration mapping

As part of the “Integrated Programme for Sustainable Water Resources Management in the Urmia Lake Basin,” the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and Urmia Lake Restoration Program (ULRP) held a 4-day workshop for Iranian experts, trained them on advanced methods to map evapotranspiration of agricultural areas using remote sensing satellite data.

Led by an IHE Delft Institute for Water Education’s scientist, Sajid Pareeth, the workshop was held in Tehran on December 7-10. According to Pareeth, the workshop “train the participants to compute Actual Evapotranspiration (ETa) based on freely available satellite, meteorological and other secondary datasets.” Underscoring the significance of the workshop for the country, Pareeth said that the method presented in the workshop “is very effective for Iran; this expertise is need of the hour to monitor water use in water-scarce situations that we face all over the world, especially in Iran.” “This method will enable Iranian experts to set up a monitoring system to monitor water use by different land-use types, especially irrigated areas at the basin and national levels,” he added. Sara Asadi, a senior researcher in ULRP also stressed that “this method is one of the most widely used worldwide with promising results for applications like water accounting”, contributing to capacity building among Iranian institutions. The outcome of this training “would be very useful for decision making at different scales,” Poolad Karimi, a senior researcher at IHE Delft Institute for Water Education said. At the farmer’s level, the ability to measure evapotranspiration will let the farmers know “whether the water is enough, are the crops suffering from water stress or not and when is the best time for irrigation,” Karimi added. He further said, “On a larger scale at basin level, this information can be helpful for the policymakers to track water use and plan interventions. They would know how much water was used in different areas and how water-saving strategies could be implemented to ensure higher water productivity.”

(Source: FAO)

WORDS IN THE NEWS AIDS conference

(July 08, 2002)
The executive director of UNAIDS has told the BBC that political leaders who don’t take the fight against the disease seriously should be kicked out of office. Dr Peter Piot’s comments came at the start of the fourteenth international AIDS conference in Barcelona. This report from Chris Hogg. Dr Piot has worked hard to ensure AIDS is seen as a political, and not just a health, problem. He points out that it’s now **on the agenda** at world summits, like the G8 gathering of the richest nations. But he warns that elsewhere there are countries **in** what he calls ‘**very serious denial**’ about the **scale** of the problem they face. He said the key **challenge** for the coming months would be to persuade the Russian and Chinese governments **to tackle** the growing problem among their people. He told the BBC that some political leaders should be rewarded for what they are doing on AIDS, but those who don’t do the job should be **kicked out**. The conference here in Barcelona this week will hear **calls** for a greater **commitment to fund** HIV treatment in those countries worst affected by the epidemic. Without it, Dr Piot warns, many will **descend into chaos**.

■ **Words on the agenda:** scheduled to be discussed **in ... ‘very serious denial’:** they are refusing to recognize the problem **scale:** size **challenge:** a challenge is something new and difficult which will require great determination **tackle:** if you tackle a problem, you start dealing with it in a determined way **kicked out:** removed from office **calls:** demands for something to be done **commitment:** if you give a commitment, you promise you will do something **to fund:** if you fund something you provide money for something **descend into chaos:** become affected by disorder

(Source: BBC)

International Mountain Day: natural treasure must be protected

By Faranak Bakhtiari

TEHRAN — Mountains have long been home to people and a source of freshwater, however, they are currently under threat due to climate change and overexploitation, so this is the time to take steps toward protecting the nature’s valuable treasure. Launched in 1992 as part of the action plan Agenda 21 of the Conference on Environment and Development, the International Mountain Day is celebrated annually on December 11.

The increasing attention to the importance of mountains led the UN to declare 2002 the UN International Year of Mountains. The first international day was celebrated for the first time the following year, 2003.

Mountains are home of 15 percent of the world’s population and a quarter of the world’s land animals and plants, in addition to providing freshwater to half of humanity, so their conservation is a key factor for sustainable development.

Because all kinds of precious metals and stones, coal, and other raw materials are hidden in the heart of the mountains, they have always been encroached by human; also due to agricultural lands which are used for forage production, herbs, livestock breeding, production of meat, dairy and all kinds of food.

Unfortunately, mountains are under threat from climate change and overexploitation, as mountain glaciers are melting at unprecedented rates, affecting freshwater supplies downstream for millions of people, so there should be measures to take care of these natural treasures.

This year, International Mountain Day held with a theme of “Mountains Matter for Youth”, which was a chance to highlight that for rural youth, living in the mountains can be hard. Migration from the mountains leads to abandoned agriculture, land degradation and a loss



of ancient cultural traditions.

Education and training, market access, diverse employment opportunities and good public services can ensure a brighter future for young people in the mountains.

■ **Mountains require public, government participation**

Hossein Abiri-Golpayegani, director of green mountain association said that for thousands of years, a significant portion of human communities are living in the mountains and make a living through the mountainous areas, but over the last few decades, human has brought a wide range of mountainous areas under its control for exploitation, which turned to a main concern for the current generation.

Since humans have learned from experience that mountainous areas are one of the lucrative resources, various types of development plans have begun in these areas, and unfortunately sometimes

over-exploitation has caused irreparable damages, which requires a lot of fund to compensate, he lamented.

Referring to Iran’s mountains namely, Alborz, Zagros, Alvand, Binaloud, Damavand, Sabalan, Sahand, Dena and Taftan, he noted that Iran is one of the few countries in the world that is mostly covered with mountainous areas, and natural resources, while this multiplies our task of protecting this valuable ecosystem.

About 90 percent of the world’s drinking water originates from the mountains, which can be stored underground through springs, marshes, wells or through rivers and streams or behind dams, he said.

He went on to add that “pristine forests, rare plant and animal species in the mountainous areas have made this precious ecosystem more valuable.

The good weather in the mountainous areas attracts many tourists in different seasons, especially during hot season, and

even this has led to formation of human civilizations.”

Most of the sites, resorts, waterfalls, caves, monuments, as well as beautiful wildflowers are abundant in the mountains, he stated, adding, the benefits of mountainous areas are not limited to a specific public or private sector, so that the whole people, private and public sectors must work together to protect it.

So many people make a living by working daily in mountainous area, and now if some poachers try to destroy the mountains for their own benefit must be pushed and prevented, he highlighted.

Government can decide on sustainable development of such areas, and locals must consider the national interests of the country and use the natural resources in a proper way and hand it over to next generations, he concluded.

■ **Iran’s mountainous areas**

Nearly, two-third of Iran is covered with mountains, the main mountain chain is the Zagros Mountains that bisect the country from northwest to southeast, many peaks in the Zagros exceed 3,000 meters above sea level, and in the south-central region of the country there are at least five peaks that are over 4,000 meters.

As the Zagros continue into southeastern Iran, the average elevation of the peaks declines dramatically to under 1,500 meters. Rimming the Caspian Sea littoral is another chain of mountains, the narrow but high Alborz Mountains. Volcanic Mount Damavand, 5,610 meters, located in the center of the Alborz, is not only the country’s highest peak but also the highest mountain on the Eurasian landmass west of the Hindu Kush.

The center of Iran consists of several closed basins that collectively are referred to as the Central Plateau. The average elevation of this plateau is about 900 meters, but several of the mountains that tower over the plateau exceed 3,000 meters.

Iran’s two Asiatic cheetahs reach ‘the bitter end’

ENVIRONMENT **TEHRAN** — Two Asiatic cheetahs, kept in captivity at Tehran’s Pardisan Park, have reached the bitter end because they have lost their ability to regenerate and should be returned to nature.

Female Asiatic cheetah, Delbar, and the male one, Kushki have lived in the capital for the past few years.

In 2015, the female Asiatic cheetah once became pregnant naturally but sadly lost her cub.

Last year (March 2018-March 2019), Delbar was physically prepared for mating with Kushki, however, possibly due to Kushki’s old age, the two didn’t breed.

Delbar underwent artificial insemination earlier this year (starting on March 21), which turned out unsuccessful.

Natural mating and artificial insemination has been already tried for Asiatic cheetahs kept in captivity, which sadly failed. Now, fertilizing the female Asiatic cheetah is nearly impossible due to their old age.

Baqer Nezami, conservation of Asiatic cheetah project manager, told IRNA on Wednesday that Delbar and Kushki are 9 and 11 years old respectively, so they have lost their ability to regenerate.

Female cheetahs are first bred at an age of approximately 3 years, reaching maximum reproductive age at 6-8 years, where after fertility declines. Males reach peak reproduction at 6 and maintained this for up to 12 years of age.

In the last few years, many attempts have been made to reproduce the cheetahs, but no success achieved, so it seems better for the two animals to return to where they belong, not to be released in nature as soon as they turn back, he said.

He went on to add that they should be kept in a fenced area in Touran National Park and Miandasht Wildlife Refuge, where they were born.

It is true that the two animals have lost their regenerative ability, but they are valuable species, so if kept in those areas, they may attract other cheetahs, he added.



Responding to the question that is it necessary to transfer them to nature, he said: “It depends on the plan, we have had several meetings to make the final decision, but it no solution came up.”

“Sometimes I wonder why these two animals have been kept in captivity for so many years, and what to do now when both have reached adulthood,” he lamented.

Of course, keeping them in captivity was beneficial because the medical team took care of them and maintained their health, he said, adding, but what makes us sad is that a genetic reserve will be lost.

Elsewhere in his remarks, he noted that “we plan to work on the young cheetah named “Iran” which is three years old and the pregnancy possibility is high, so we will use sperms in the gene bank for artificial insemination.”

ENGLISH IN USE

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A ← → E

Child adoption process to speed up

Child adoption process being piloted in Tehran will speed up, Darioush Bayatnejad, Tehran province welfare organization director has said. Currently, some 2,800 applicants are awaiting adoption process, most of whom are parents not having children or intending to foster a child, he added.

PREFIX/SUFFIX

“alti-, alto-, alt-”

■ **Meaning:** high

■ **For example:** High *altitude* has its most pronounced effect on the rising time of bread.

PHRASAL VERB

Pal up

■ **Meaning:** to become someone’s friend

■ **For example:** She *paled up* with Neil while travelling round Europe.

IDIOM

Crying need

■ **Explanation:** When there is a great lack of something which is urgently needed, there is a crying need for it

■ **For example:** Hospitals claim that there is a crying need for nurses.

پروسه فرزندخواندگی تسريع می شود

مدیرکل بهزیستی استان تهران تاکید کرد: پروسه فرزندخواندگی تسريع می شود.

به گزارش خبرگزاری مهر، داریوش بیاتنژاد اظهار کرد: در حال حاضر بیش از ۲۸۰۰ متقاضی فرزندخواندگی پشت نوبتی پذیرش در بهزیستی استان تهران هستند و خانواده‌هایی که به دلایل پزشکی صاحب فرزند نشده و تمایل دارند که فرزندی را به فرزندخواندگی بپذیرند، عمده متقاضیان سازمان بهزیستی در این خصوص هستند.

EU to discuss recognition of state of Palestine in January meeting

European Union foreign ministers are expected to exchange views next month on whether the 28-nation bloc should recognize Palestine as a sovereign state as the U.S. pushes ahead with pro-occupation policies undermining the prospect of the so-called two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Ireland and Luxembourg are among the EU member states seeking to raise the issue at the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Brussels on January 20, 2020.

Speaking on Monday, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the top diplomats will discuss whether the bloc should modify its Middle East policy following Washington's decision "on the legality of the [Israeli] colonies and some fears that they (the Americans) can continue taking decisions on this in this way."

He was referring to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement last month that the establishment of settlements in the occupied West Bank "is not per se inconsistent with international law."

"Certainly we are in a difficult period in the Middle East Peace Process. We continue holding our position, that is to say a negotiated two-state solution. But for sure if we want a two-state solution we need to help and encourage both parties to enter a



serious and credible negotiation. And this is not the case – really, it is not the case," Borrell said.

"Recognition is not an EU competence. It is a responsibility of individual Member States. But we continue, as European Union, supporting a two-state solution. And what we have decided is that in January, we will devote one point of the agenda to deeply

discuss the situation in Middle East and of the Middle East Peace Process," he added. He also noted that the recognition of the Palestine is among the "very much dividing" issues among EU countries.

On Sunday, Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn sent a letter to his EU counterparts and Borrell, saying the only way to save the so-called two-state bid

was to create "a more equitable situation" between Israel and Palestine.

"It is time to start a debate within the European Union on the opportunity of a recognition of the State of Palestine by all its Member States," Channel 13 cited the letter. Such recognition "would neither be a favor, nor a blank check, but a simple recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to their own State."

Asselborn further said that hopes for the two-state solution were "being dismantled piece by piece, day after day."

"The policy of settlement and demolition risks replacing the two-state solution with a one-state reality, marked by perpetual conflict, occupation and unequal rights," he pointed out.

Palestinians are seeking to create an independent state in the territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem al-Quds, with the latter as its capital.

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

The Palestinian national flag was hoisted for the first time at the UN headquarters in New York in September 2015.

(Source: Press TV)

France strikes see massive protests on sixth day as Macron refuses to drop pension reform plans

The French government plans to unveil details of controversial pension reforms on Wednesday, despite six straight days of strikes continuing to cause huge disruption across the country.

Public transport, schools, hospitals and postal services have all been affected, with unions organizing a second round of street protests on Tuesday. Early figures suggest the turnout was about half as big as last week's demonstrations, when an estimated 800,000 people took to the streets.

The French prime minister, Edouard Philippe, will reveal the full details of the pension changes on Wednesday morning, with the apparent drop-off in numbers likely seen as a positive for the government. Mr. Philippe warned that there would be no "magic announcements" bringing

an end to the strikes.

One of France's biggest unions, the CGT, described the proposed pension reforms as a "new blow to the most vulnerable", who have already been hit by recent changes to unemployment insurance.

"Given the depth of discontent, there is a need to get more people on the streets," said CGT's secretary general, Philippe Martinez.

In Bordeaux and Marseille, thousands of protesters waved union flags and held up banners reading, "We have to get rid of Macron". Demonstrations were also taking place in Rennes, Lyon, Nantes and Paris. In the capital, riot police fanned out along the Champs Elysees boulevard in central Paris and barricaded streets leading to the offices of the president, Emmanuel Macron.

The reforms were a key election pledge of Mr. Macron, who claims they are necessary to revitalize France's economy and ease pressure on the country's heavily burdened social-security system. Mr. Macron wants to introduce a universal pension scheme that will unify 42 different public-sector pension schemes that are currently in place. Critics describe the reforms as an attack on workers' rights and claim they will mean most people will have to work longer for less.

"What's at stake goes much beyond simply overhauling the pension system," said Christopher Dembik, an economist at Saxo Bank in Paris. "For Emmanuel Macron, it's about not losing face to the 'old world', to the institutions he vilified during his campaign, and to reassert his ability to reform the country."

(Source: Independent)

U.S. Army will fund rare earths plant for weapons development

The U.S. Army plans to fund construction of rare earths processing facilities, part of an urgent push by Washington to secure domestic supply of the minerals used to make military weapons and electronics, according to a government document seen by Reuters.

The move would mark the first financial investment by the U.S. military into commercial-scale rare earths production since World War Two's Manhattan Project built the first atomic bomb.

It comes after President Donald Trump earlier this year ordered the military to update its supply chain for the niche materials, warning that reliance on other nations for

the strategic minerals could hamper U.S. defenses.

China, which refines most of the world's rare earths, has threatened to stop exporting the specialized minerals to the United States, using its monopoly as a cudgel in the ongoing trade spat between the world's two largest economies.

"The U.S. rare earths industry needs big help to compete against the Chinese," said Jim McKenzie, chief executive officer of UCore Rare Metals Inc (UCU.V), which is developing a rare earths project in Alaska. "It's not just about the money, but also the optics of broad support from Washington."

The Army division overseeing munitions

last month asked miners for proposals on the cost of a pilot plant to produce so-called heavy rare earths, a less-common type of the specialized minerals that are highly sought after for use in weaponry, according to the document.

Responses are due by Dec. 16. UCore, Texas Mineral Resources Corp (TMRC.PK) and a joint venture between Lynas Corp (LYC.AX) and privately-held Blue Line Corp are among the expected respondents, according to company officials and sources familiar with the matter.

The Army said it will fund up to two-thirds of a refiner's cost and that it would fund at least one project and

potentially more. Applicants must provide a detailed business plan and specify where they will source their ore, among other factors.

This latest move by the Army, a division of the Pentagon, comes after a military study earlier this year on the state of the U.S. rare earths supply chain.

The rare earths tension between the U.S. and China goes back to at least 2010, when China limited exports to Japan after a diplomatic dispute, sending prices for the niche metals spiking and fueling concerns across the U.S. military that China could do the same to the United States.

(Source: Reuters)

Ex-U.S. officials helped UAE build secret spy unit: Probe

A group of former U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) operatives and other elite intelligence veterans helped the United Arab Emirates construct secret internet-surveillance apparatus, a Reuters investigation reveals.

According to the probe, whose findings were released on Tuesday, the UAE's Development Research Exploitation and Analysis Department (DREAD), later known as Project Raven, spied on a wide range of targets -- from suspected extremists to human rights activists, dissidents, diplomats and FIFA personnel.

DREAD was set up in an unused airport facility in Abu Dhabi in 2008 by former American counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke, along with ex-NSA officials-turned-contractors.

The program began as an arm of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's royal court and was initially managed by the prince's son, Khalid.

The contractors trained Emirati staff in hacking techniques and created covert computer networks and Internet accounts the UAE could use for surveillance operations.

By 2012, DREAD operatives had targeted Google, Hotmail and Yahoo email accounts to exploit information on targets despite prohibitions against targeting U.S. servers.

"The program's evolution illustrates how Washington's contractor culture benefits from a system of legal and regulatory loopholes that allows ex-spies and government insiders to transfer their skills to foreign countries, even ones reputed to have poor human rights track records," the Doha-based Al Jazeera broadcaster reported.

In an interview in Washington, Clarke said that after recommending that the UAE create a cyber-surveillance agency, his company, Good Harbor Consulting, was hired to help the Persian Gulf country build it.

The plan, he added, was approved by the U.S. State Department and the NSA, and that Good Harbor Consulting followed U.S. law.

"The incentive was to help in the fight against al-Qaeda. The UAE is a very good counterterrorism partner. You need to remember the timing back then, post 9-11," he said. "The NSA wanted it to happen."

Mike Rogers, former chairman of the U.S. House Intelligence Committee, raised concerns that former U.S. intelligence officials are cashing in by working for foreign countries, saying it is time for Washington to impose tougher restrictions on foreign intelligence contracting.

"Outright eliminating those opportunities, I think,



should absolutely be on the table," he said.

Reuters examined over 10,000 DREAD program documents and interviewed more than a dozen contractors in order to chart the UAE spying mission's evolution.

A former DREAD operative said the program hacked the emails of Saudi women's rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul in 2017, after she tried to defy a female driving ban in the kingdom.

(Source: agencies)

Nobel-winning author Handke declared 'persona non grata' in Sarajevo

The Bosnian capital Sarajevo on Wednesday declared Nobel Prize-winning Austrian author Peter Handke "persona non grata" over his support for late Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and denial of the 1995 genocide in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica.

Sarajevo endured a 43-month siege by nationalist Bosnian Serb forces armed by Milosevic during a 1992-95 war following Bosnia's secession from Serbian-led Yugoslavia. About 11,000 people died in the siege, at least 10 percent children, and more than 100,000 overall in the war.

The Sarajevo cantonal assembly unanimously adopted a declaration on Wednesday proclaiming Handke unwelcome after he said in a recent interview that he might visit post-war Bosnia's autonomous Serb region next year.

"His possible visit to our homeland ... would prompt additional rage and humiliation of all victims," read the declaration, which condemned awarding what it called a "genocide denier" this year's Nobel Literature Prize.

Reflecting enduring ethnic divisions in Bosnia, Igor Radojicic, mayor of the Serb entity's de facto capital Banja Luka,

congratulated Handke and invited him to visit. Nationalist Serbs see Handke as a campaigner for their cause.

Sarajevo authorities could not prevent Handke visiting Serb Republic territory, though the declaration would allow them to bar him entry to Bosnia via the capital.

Bosnian Muslims and especially relatives of the 8,000 Muslim men and boys massacred by Serb forces in Srebrenica, Europe's worst atrocity since World War Two, were outraged at the news that the Nobel Committee had honored Handke. Other Balkan countries also criticized the decision.

(Source: Daily Star)

UN: The third party is involved in killing Iraqi demonstrators

➔ Qais al-Khazali told Dijlah TV, an Amman-based Iraqi satellite television channel, on Saturday that the committee set up to investigate the violence is merely an administrative body, and thus cannot identify the "third party" responsible for the killing of demonstrators.

He stressed that "Israel and US have a great role in the third party".

Khazali further said the probe into the deaths in Iraq should not be restricted to the question of who killed the protesters, but also examine who "eased" the way for the killers and who gave them order.

At the start of October, street protests erupted in several Iraqi cities over unemployment and a lack of basic services.

The rallies resumed on October 25 after a pause of about two weeks, but took a violent turn, with some participants vandalizing public property and opening fire on demonstrators during the mayhem.

Over 300 people have been killed in the Iraq unrest since October 1, according to the Iraqi parliament's human rights commission.

Earlier this month, Iraqi Defense Minister Najah al-Shammari told France 24's Arabic-language channel that a "third party" is behind shooting at the Iraqi demonstrators.

"The Iraqi national security forces are not the ones who are killing the protesters," Shammari said, adding, "There is a third party killing the protesters to push protesters to clash with security forces to spread instability in Iraq."

Protests have rocked primarily the capital city of Baghdad and southern areas of Iraq for two months over the failing economy and demand for political and anti-corruption reforms.

The rallies have, however, turned into violent confrontations on numerous occasions, with reports alleging that certain foreign-backed elements have been seeking to wreak havoc on the country.

Since October 1, more than 300 people have been killed in the country, according to the Iraqi parliament's human rights commission.

Iraq's parliament on December 1 formally accepted Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi's resignation.

(Source: agencies)

Terrorists, White Helmets transport chemicals to the Idlib

➔ The Russian Ministry of Defense has many times provided information on the arrival of French and Belgian intelligence agents in Idlib Governorate to prepare for a provocation with the use of toxic chemicals and their meeting with field leaders from "al-NusraFront" and "White Helmets" terrorist organizations in order to coordinate the implementation of a new chemical representation with the aim of accusing the Syrian Arab Army and the Russian Air Force of using toxic substances against civilians.

(Source: Syria Times)

U.S. halts military training for Saudi students after shooting

➔ He is reported to have posted a manifesto denouncing the U.S. as "a nation of evil".

White House National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said the FBI investigation was continuing but that, in his opinion, "it appears to be a terrorist attack".

■ Pilots grounded

Deputy defence secretary David Norquist ordered a comprehensive review to be completed within 10 days of policies for screening foreign students.

Pentagon officials said the security study was being done with the cooperation of the Saudi government.

Alshamrani was armed with a lawfully purchased 9mm handgun. The FBI said on Tuesday he obtained the weapon through an authorised gun seller in Florida in July, through a loophole in federal gun laws that allows foreign nationals - usually unable to buy firearms - to have a hunting license.

The shooting struck a nerve in the U.S. with echoes of the September 11, 2001, attacks, in which Saudi citizens accounted for 15 of the 19 hijackers that flew airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Saudi Arabia remains one of the closest U.S. allies in the Middle East, and President Donald Trump has cultivated its controversial de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz denounced Friday's shooting as a "heinous crime" and said the gunman "does not represent the Saudi people".

Meanwhile, the United States has barred from entering the country Mohammed al Otaibi, who was the Saudi consul general in Istanbul in October 2018 when dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi was slaughtered there.

"The murder of Jamal Khashoggi was a heinous, unacceptable crime," the State Department said in a statement on Tuesday.

The department added that it continued to call on the Saudi government to conduct a "full, fair and transparent" trial to hold accountable those responsible for the assassination, despite the fact that the Trump administration has played down the Khashoggi murder case.

"We will continue to seek all relevant facts, consult Congress, and work with other nations to hold accountable those involved in the killing," the department said.

Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, who was a critic of bin Salman, was hacked to death and his body was dismembered at the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, on October 2, 2018.

US President Donald Trump and other administration officials had offered a weak and feckless response to the murder of Khashoggi and its subsequent cover-up by the Saudi leadership.

There is still no objective accounting – by Saudi or American officials -- of what happened in the consulate, let alone any real accountability.

(Source: al Jazeera)

Lyon’s Depay demands club take action after fan incident

Olympique Lyon forward Memphis Depay says he was spat on by his own fans and has called on the club to take action in the wake of the incident at the end of Tuesday’s Champions League game against RB Leipzig.

Deepay scored the equaliser in a 2-2 home draw that sent Lyon into the last 16 but tempers flared after the players went towards the stands to celebrate with the fans.

Seeing a banner telling club defender Marcelo to ‘go away’, Depay chased the fan carrying it. His team mates ran after him as other fans came down from the terracing.

“The management will have to take responsibility,” Depay was quoted as saying in French media on Wednesday.

“You qualify and you leave the pitch in these conditions? Something is wrong. I chased the fan to tell him to drop the banner. “They spat on us. I’ve never seen that.”

Lyon went through second in Group G with eight points, five behind Leipzig.

(Source: Reuters)

Liverpool FC owner’s plane overshoots runway

Flights have been cancelled after a private plane came off the runway at Liverpool John Lennon Airport.

The airport is expected to be closed for several hours and an inquiry has been launched into what happened when the plane landed at about 06:00 GMT.

Four people were on board the plane but no-one was hurt, a spokesman for the airport has confirmed.

A source at Liverpool Football Club confirmed the private jet was carrying one of the club’s owners, Mike Gordon.

Mr Gordon, who is the president of Fenway Sports Group, was on a flight from Bedford, Massachusetts to Liverpool to attend a regular meeting at the club.

“He was not injured but would like to pass on his appreciation to the staff at Liverpool John Lennon Airport and the emergency services for their amazing work,” the source said.

A spokeswoman for VistaJet added: “We are fully co-operating with the airport and relevant authorities as they investigate further.”

A specialist removal team are on site and will use cranes and airbags to remove the plane from the grass.

The plane could not be removed until officials from the Air Accident Investigation Board deem it safe to do so, the BBC understands.

Passengers due to fly this morning have been advised to contact their airlines for further information.

Some travellers reported four-hour delays while others have had their flights diverted to Manchester Airport.

Eric Henderson, from Preston, was due to travel to Amsterdam for work. “Our flight was due to leave at 07:30. We noticed at ten to that the flight had been moved to 11:40,” he said.

“There was no explanation until we looked out of the large windows on the concourse and saw all the blue flashing lights.”

(Source: BBC)

Lost in translation: swimmer Sun Yang’s doping case hits interpretation snag

Chinese Olympic swimming champion Sun Yang’s anti-doping case, in which he is facing an eight-year ban for missing a drug test, won’t be settled before mid-January because of translation problems, the Court of Arbitration for Sport said.

The Swiss-based court said “some concerns were raised” about the translation of Sun’s testimony from Chinese into English at the one-day hearing on November 15.

The triple Olympic gold medal-winner, who served a doping suspension in 2014, is accused of smashing a blood vial with a hammer following a visit by testers in September last year.

“Although the organization and the schedule of the public hearing was to the satisfaction of the arbitrators and parties’ counsels, some concerns were raised with respect to the quality of the interpretation of Mr. Yang’s testimony,” a CAS statement said.

“The parties are currently preparing an agreed-upon written transcript of the proceedings, including a full translation of Mr. Yang’s testimony, which the panel will work from when deliberating and preparing the arbitral award,” CAS said, adding that the case would not be decided before mid-January.

Sun’s CAS hearing, the first in 20 years that was open to the public, was beset by technical difficulties and interpreting errors between Chinese and English which frustrated lawyers and held up proceedings.

CAS said the private translation service was provided by Sun’s camp and agreed by both parties, adding that it couldn’t hire its own interpreters for reasons of “independence and neutrality”.

Swimming body FINA confirmed in January that Sun had used a hammer to smash a vial containing his own blood sample during the testing session, but acquitted him of anti-doping violations, agreeing that testers had failed to produce adequate identification.

But the ruling outraged the World Anti-Doping Agency which took the matter to CAS, demanding a ban of between two and eight years for missing the out-of-competition test.

(Source: AFP)

Report: Ancelotti in Arsenal talks

Arsenal have reportedly opened talks with Carlo Ancelotti and could reach an agreement with the former Napoli boss as early as this afternoon.

Despite guiding Napoli to the last 16 of the Champions League, that was not enough for Ancelotti to keep his job at the San Paolo.

After moving into pole position to fill the Arsenal vacancy, Tuttomercatoweb claims the Gunners have now approached the 60-year-old, offering him a contract until 2021.

The website adds a final agreement between the two parties could be found later today.

Carletto previously managed Arsenal’s local rivals Chelsea, leading them to a domestic double in 2009-10.

The North Londoners, for their part, are currently ninth in the Premier League, seven points behind the top four.

However, they seem all set for the Europa League knockout stages and conclude the group stage against Standard Liege, on Thursday

(Source: Football Italia)

Liverpool, Chelsea through to Champions League last 16 as Ajax go out

Holder Liverpool safely negotiated Tuesday’s trip to Salzburg to take their place in the last 16 of this season’s UEFA Champions League while Chelsea are also through, but Ajax suffered a shock group-stage exit.

Six clubs secured spots in the draw for the first knockout round in their final group games, with Ajax and Inter Milan the big names to miss out.

Jurgen Klopp’s side just needed to draw in Austria to keep alive their bid to retain the European Cup, and they duly beat Salzburg 2-0 thanks to two goals in two second-half minutes, by Naby Keita and Mohamed Salah.

Keita headed in Sadio Mane’s cross against his former club to put Liverpool ahead in the 57th minute, and Salah then rounded goalkeeper Cican Stankovic to score from an improbably tight angle.

The result allowed Liverpool to progress as Group E winners, with Napoli going through in second place, while Salzburg are out and drop into the Europa League instead.

“What a team,” Klopp told BT Sport. “What an effort. It was a tough game.”

“We scored two wonderful goals. We could have scored six or seven which is crazy. We won the group, we won the game, all good.”

■ Bitter blow for Ajax

Napoli made sure of their progress by trouncing Genk 4-0 in Italy with Arkadisuz Milik scoring a first-half hat-trick, the third goal coming from the penalty spot.

Dries Mertens converted another spot-kick in the second half to seal the win, but the Italian side still sacked coach Carlo Ancelotti in the wake of the game.

There was high drama in Group H as Valencia beat Ajax 1-0 in Amsterdam, Rodrigo Moreno’s

strike taking the Spaniards through to the last 16 at the expense of last season’s semi-finalists, and leaving their hosts stunned.

Ajax had again been impressive this season but were left to rue their inability to win either of their two matches against Chelsea, as Frank Lampard’s team progressed in second place, a point ahead of the Dutch giants, thanks to a 2-1 victory against Lille.

Tammy Abraham and Cesar Azpilicueta netted first-half goals for Chelsea, who held on after Loic Remy pulled one back for Lille.

Chelsea, the 2012 Champions League winners, finish level on points with Valencia but come second due to their inferior head-to-head record.

“The Champions League is where Chelsea belong. We knew it was a tough group. We had to fight and recover after losing against Valencia at home in our first game,” Azpilicueta told BT Sport.

■ Fati makes history

Ajax drop into the Europa League along with Inter, as Antonio Conte’s team contrived to lose 2-1 at home to a makeshift Barcelona.

A win would have taken Inter through, and they were fancied to get the result they required as Barcelona left out a host of senior players, including Lionel Messi, with top spot in Group F already secured.

Carles Perez gave Barcelona the lead midway through the first half, but Romelu Lukaku fired in the equaliser.

Inter then missed chances to score a second and Ansu Fati showed them the way, the substitute netting an 86th-minute winner to stun the home side and become the youngest ever goalscorer in the Champions League at 17 years and 40 days.

That record had been held since 1997 by Ghana’s Peter Ofori-Quaye.



Borussia Dortmund needed to better Inter’s result and they did so, beating Slavia Prague 2-1 to progress in second.

Julian Brandt got their winner after Jadon Sancho’s opener was cancelled out by Tomas Soucek, with Dortmund holding on after Julian Weigl was sent off.

Meanwhile, Lyon went through in dramatic fashion in Group G, coming from behind to draw 2-2 with RB Leipzig.

The Germans were two goals ahead at half-time thanks to two penalties, one scored by Emil Forsberg and the other by Timo Werner.

However, Houssem Aouar’s curler gave Lyon hope just after the break and Memphis Depay levelled matters with eight minutes left.

Leipzig win the group, while the draw proved enough for Lyon to finish second because Zenit Saint Petersburg lost 3-0 to Benfica in Lisbon.

(Source: Eurosport)

Blatter ready to testify in France over 2022 World Cup



Sepp Blatter, the former president of FIFA, told AFP on Wednesday that he had opposed awarding the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, but that he has a “clear conscience.”

Blatter said he is willing to testify to French prosecutors about the 2010 vote in favor of Qatar.

“If they ask me formally then I think I will go to France because I have a clear conscience,” said the 83-year-old who already testified in Switzerland in April, 2017, at the request of the French authorities.

Qatar beat Australia, Japan, South Korea and the United States to win the vote. However, the result has been consistently questioned.

A three-year-old French investigation, was recently entrusted to a Paris investigative magistrate charged with looking specifically for “active and passive corruption”.

Six months ago, Michael Platini, who was vice-president of FIFA and UEFA president at the time, was questioned about his decision to vote in favor of Qatar.

The investigators are particularly interested in a meeting at the Elysee Palace in Paris on November 23, 2010, just over a week before the vote, between French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Qatari prince Tamim ben Hamad al-Thani -- who became Emir in 2013 -- and Platini who subsequently voted for Qatar.

“When Platini said that he would have

voted for Qatar anyway, especially for the development of football, it is not true,” said Blatter.

“We had a consensus within the Executive Committee of FIFA, which planned to award the 2018 World Cup to Russia and the 2022 World Cup to the United States.

“Everything went well until eight days before the election when there was this famous dinner at the Elysee.

“Platini phoned me immediately after. He told me: ‘Sepp, it’s not going to work, we will have a problem for the election.’ President Sarkozy had asked him, suggested, to vote for Qatar,” said Blatter, who reported this telephone conversation to the Swiss judge in April 2017.

“I said to Platini ‘Did he force you?’ He said ‘Not at all, but when a head of state asks you to do something, you do it so I will follow and I will take my friends with me.’”

“His friends were the Cypriot Marios Lefkaritis, the Belgian Michel D’Hooghe who would have voted for Qatar anyway, his son having already had a post in Qatar, and the Spaniard Angel Maria Villar. So it made four voices that tipped the vote.”

Blatter, who was ousted from office in 2015, is serving a six-year ban from FIFA activities because of a separate payment of 2 million Swiss francs (1.84 million euros) to Platini.

(Source: France 24)

Ancelotti sacked despite guiding Napoli to Champions League last 16



Carlo Ancelotti has been sacked by Napoli despite taking the Serie A side to the last 16 of the Champions League on Tuesday with a 4-0 win over Genk.

“Napoli has decided to relieve Carlo Ancelotti of his role as first team coach,” the Italian side said in a statement.

Tuesday’s win over Genk, which saw Napoli finish second in Group E, one point behind Liverpool, broke a nine-match winless run that came amid dressing room unrest and friction between the club, Ancelotti and the players.

Former AC Milan manager Gennaro Gattuso is the favourite to take over at Napoli, who finished second behind champions Juventus last season but are miles off the pace this year.

They sit seventh in the Italian top flight on 21 points, a whopping 17 points behind league leaders Inter Milan and more worryingly eight behind fourth-placed Cagliari, who hold the final spot for next season’s Champions League.

On Monday Ancelotti told reporters that “a coach’s suitcase is always ready” ahead of Tuesday’s match, and as speculation ramped up over the 60-year-old’s future at the southern club he ruled out stepping down after Tuesday’s win.

“Resignation? I have never resigned in my life and I never will,” he said. “My future? The team management will make its assessment.

The club has been in turmoil this season as club owner Aurelio De Laurentiis sank into a bitter row with his players following a series of disappointing results.

The squad refused to bow to De Laurentiis’ demand they be confined to a week-long training camp in November, reportedly receiving a collective deduction to their wages of 2.5 million euros (\$2.7 million) for their disobedience.

Union FIFPro said they would back the players against “further abuse and intimidation”, calling De Laurentiis’ decision to fine his squad “unjustified”.

Ancelotti, who won three Champions League titles as a coach, twice with AC Milan and once with Real Madrid, replaced Maurizio Sarri in July 2018.

He guided the team to a runners-up finish in Serie A last season, when they missed out on the Champions League last 16 on goal difference to eventual winners Liverpool.

“I can’t pretend, the team doesn’t give what it could give,” Ancelotti said on Monday.

“In Europe, we have seen another Napoli, the one I would like to see in the league as well. I am looking for solutions to get out of this difficult period,” he added.

They are without a win in seven Serie A games since October 19 and next play Parma on Saturday.

(Source: Mirror)

Anthony Joshua’s camp plans next steps, targets keeping ‘every belt’

Anthony Joshua owns three of the four major heavyweight titles and isn’t ready to let any of them go.

Joshua has mandatory defenses to fulfill for his IBF and WBO belts after evening up the score on Andy Ruiz this past weekend in Saudi Arabia. Currently, the IBF mandatory challenger is Kubrat Pulev, while former undisputed cruiserweight champion, Oleksandr Usyk, is the WBO mandatory challenger. Joshua promoter Eddie Hearn told ESPN on Monday that they are in the beginning stages of determining Joshua’s next steps.

“He certainly doesn’t want to let [go of the titles] in the ring, or out of the ring,” said Hearn. “The IBF seems to be the one that was certainly ordered first. But I’ll need to speak to Daryl Peoples (president of the IBF), I’ll need to speak to ‘Paco’ (Francisco Valcarcel, the head of the WBO).

“(Joshua) certainly wants to make sure he can keep every belt. So that’s what we’ll be trying to do.”

Hearn also represents Usyk, who made his heavyweight debut on Oct. 12 by stopping late replacement Chazz

Witherspoon in seven rounds in Chicago. If it’s Pulev who gets the first crack at Joshua in 2020, Usyk will most likely face Dereck Chisora “in early March, and then he fights the winner of Joshua-Pulev,” Hearn said.

Joshua’s next fight will most likely take place in April.

“It’s a very tough decision because there’s six countries that are interested in staging his next fight,” said Hearn. “We’re at a stage where it’s very difficult to go backwards financially, in any job, especially for a fighter. The place where he would earn the least amount of money is in the UK.

“But it’s probably his preferential choice in terms of all things being equal -- where would you rather go? 100 percent, back to the UK.”

Joshua, whose parents are both of Nigerian descent, revealed on Monday that somewhere down the road, his goals would also include defending one of his heavyweight belts in Nigeria.

“People had been telling me I should go back for ages,” he told reporters. “It was crazy because they don’t have 24-hour electricity, but they still know me and support me.

“I went to the ghettos of the ghettos, where it’s not all about egos and beef, it’s about people who are hungry to survive.”

He added: “It was one of the best things I’ve done. Africa’s rooting for me for sure, so I would definitely love to fight out there.”

Hearn also mentioned that Joshua would like to return to the Madison Square Garden, where he was knocked out by Ruiz in their first encounter back in June.

While Joshua has three of the major belts, the WBC title will be contested for on Feb. 22 when Deontay Wilder faces Tyson Fury in a rematch of their disputed draw last December. That fight should definitely factor into the future plans for Joshua, but Hearn is dubious.

“We can’t rely on any of these two because we’ve been there before with Deontay Wilder,” said Hearn of the current WBC champion, of whom he said past attempts to make a bout with Joshua were fruitless. “It’s going to be really interesting to see what Wilder says now, because when Joshua had the belts and we were pushing for the fight, he never really said that he wanted to fight Joshua.”

(Source: ESPN)

AFC officials reminisce about 2019 ACL final in Tehran, official says

S P O R T S **TEHRAN** — Amirali Hosseini, director of Persepolis international affairs and relations, says that the Asian Football Confederation officials still remember the final match between Iran's Persepolis and Kashima Antlers of Japan in the 2019 AFC Champions League.

Persepolis failed to win their first ever ACL title after losing to Kashima 2-0 on aggregate.

Now, the Reds have been drawn in Group C along with Qatari giants, Al Duhail SC, Al Taawoun FC from Saudi Arabia and Sharjah FC of the UAE.

Hosseini, who attended the draw ceremony, says that so many AFC officials have not forgotten the second leg in Tehran and are being affected by the atmosphere of the Azadi Stadium.

"We understood that the AFC officials are still thinking about the final in Tehran. We held meetings with AFC general secretary Windsor John and director of the Asian club competitions Pavel Lozanov and they each reminisced about what they experienced in Tehran," he said.

"I also talked to the ceremony's presenter and he said he was thrilled with the atmosphere at the Azadi Stadium and the supporters. He said he has always dreamed of seeing packed Azadi Stadium and is very happy to experience that. He said he has experienced a wonderful day and likes to try that once again," Hosseini said.



Persepolis will start the campaign with a tough match against Al Duhail at the Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium in Doha on Feb. 11. A total of 56 teams will be vying for the 2020 AFC Champions League, with the group

stage divided into the East and West Zones. The 2020 season kicks off with the preliminary stage on January 14 with the two-leg final scheduled for November 22 and 28. Raising the stakes, the upcoming edition

will present the champions, should they not qualify through their domestic league, with an added incentive of a guaranteed spot in the Preliminary/Play-off stage of the 2021 season.

Mourinho bans Spurs players from watching Bayern thrashing



Tottenham Hotspur manager Jose Mourinho has banned his players from watching replays of their 7-2 Champions League home defeat by Bayern Munich earlier in the campaign as they prepare to face the Germans in the reverse fixture later on Wednesday.

Mauricio Pochettino was in charge for the demolition by the German champions on Oct. 1 and while Mourinho, who replaced him last month, has watched video of the match he said he did not want the players reminded of it.

"I forbid any image of it," Mourinho said at his prematch news conference. "I watched it a couple of times: me, my staff and analysts try to go through every single aspect of that but not one single image for the boys. No. Not at all.

"There is a certain way that we try to play football and try to develop our principles of play and we're totally focused on us."

Both teams are already through to the knockout rounds and Mourinho, who has left Dele Alli, Serge Aurier, Harry Kane and Jan Vertonghen at home, said he would use the game to assess several fringe players.

"I arrive in mid-season, without four, five, six weeks to work and know the players -- so we have to do everything while we are running," he added.

"It's very important to me that the players are coachable and open. I think the boys need me and my job is to help them."

(Source: ESPN)

Exceptional 2019 whets Afif's appetite for more success

As Akram Afif gets set to cap a phenomenal 12 months by spearheading Al Sadd SC's challenge in the FIFA Club World Cup, the 2019 AFC Player of the Year is already targeting more success.

The left winger started the year by playing an integral part in Qatar's AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 triumph, as his one goal and 10 assists helped power Felix Sanchez's squad to Continental glory with Afif's partnership with Almoez Ali a major highlight.

Afif, 23 carried that form into the Qatar Stars League, scoring 26 goals and making 15 assists, as Al Sadd won the title for a record-extending 14th time with the player named Best Player of the Season. The Super Cup was also added to the Al Sadd trophy cabinet.

On the Continental front, the Doha-based sided reached the 2019 AFC Champions League semi-finals and Afif's consistency made him a deserving winner of the 2019 AFC Player of the Year.

"I'm happy with what I have achieved in 2019, whether with Qatar, Al Sadd or individually," Afif told the AFC. com in an exclusive interview after receiving the 2019 AFC Player of the Year from AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa in Doha on Tuesday.

The left winger said the AFC Player of the Year award was won with the support of his teammates, dedicating it to his parents for their support and the national team and



Al Sadd coaches for helping him improve.

"This award goes to my parents and I want to thank everyone who supported me," said Afif. "I won the award with the help of the officials, managers and teammates at Al-Sadd and the national team along with the officials at Aspire Academy.

"The coaches who trained me at Al Sadd helped me win

this award - whether it was (head coach) Xavi or Jesualdo Ferreira (former head coach)," he said. "Also the head coach of the national team Felix Sanchez is like a father to me as we have been working together for 15 years."

Afif became the third Qatari player to win the AFC Player of the Year award after Khalfan Ibrahim in 2006 while Al Sadd teammate Abdelkarim Hassan won the award last year.

"It's a great honor for Qatari players to win the Best Player of the Year award for the second consecutive year and I hope that this success will continue in the future," said Afif. "As Qatari players, we always give our best on the pitch and this is reflected with the great success that we had at the Continental stage."

Afif will be hoping for more success with Al Sadd in the FIFA Club World Cup 2019.

"This is the second participation for Al Sadd in the FIFA Club World Cup but it will be the first for several players in the team," he said. "We are looking forward to playing in the competition at home in Qatar.

"We are ready for the competition although we know it will not be easy because things will get harder in each round. We are looking forward to pleasing our fans and hopefully, we can be the surprise package of the competition.

"Personally, I want to continue improving and winning honors."

(Source: the-afc)

Moriyasu targets title in Thailand

Kuala Lumpur: Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu has set his sights on winning the AFC U23 Championship Thailand 2020 next month as the Samurai Blue get set to embark on a historic year in which they will also play the Olympic Games on home soil.

The tournament kicks off on January 8 and will act as the qualifying campaign for the Tokyo Olympics, with the top three sides to book their tickets to the Games this summer, which will be the first to be staged in Asia since Beijing 2008.

But while Japan's place is already secured as hosts, Moriyasu believes that the AFC U23 Championship provides the perfect platform for the future and one which could help fill his side with belief should they repeat their feat of 2016 by claiming the title.

"It's a very important tournament for us because we want to develop the team by winning in Asia and proceed to the Tokyo Olympics with confidence," said Moriyasu.

"[A successful tournament would be] becoming champions, because that shows what we've been doing so far is right and can add confidence to the team."

Japan famously won the 2016 edition in Qatar by coming from two goals down against Korea Republic to seal a 3-2 victory as they also advanced to the Rio Olympics.

Two years ago in China, though, the Samurai Blue delivered a disappointing cam-

paign when, also under Moriyasu, they were eliminated at the quarter-finals after a 4-0 defeat to eventual champions Uzbekistan.

With the other 15 the sides in Thailand desperate for the chance to be part of the world's most renowned sporting spectacle later in the year, the stakes couldn't be higher ahead of the AFC's opening tournament of the year.

"I don't see the difference but the tournament this time will definitely be tougher as all the teams will play to get the ticket to the Olympics," admitted Moriyasu when about the difference between the non-Olympic qualifying tournaments and the Olympic qualifiers.

"Japan has already secured a spot at the Tokyo Olympics but we want to win the championship."

Moriyasu is currently combining the roles of Japan's senior team head coach and that of the U-23 side as he also attempts to secure the East Asians' place at both the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and AFC Asian Cup China 2023.

While the two positions may result in a hectic schedule for the former Sanfrecce Hiroshima coach, it also allows him to see first-hand how the younger players are developing and whether they're ready for the step up to the senior side.

And as Japan's footballing philosophy is almost identical across all age groups,

AFC U23 CHAMPIONSHIP THAILAND 2020			
GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D
A1 THAILAND	B1 QATAR	C1 UZBEKISTAN	D1 VIETNAM
A2 IRAQ	B2 JAPAN	C2 KOREA REPUBLIC	D2 DPR KOREA
A3 AUSTRALIA	B3 SAUDI ARABIA	C3 CHINA PR	D3 JORDAN
A4 BAHRAIN	B4 SYRIA	C4 IR IRAN	D4 UAE

with possession-based football key to their identity, the hope is that success at U-23 level leads to a seamless transition into the senior set-up.

"I consider both teams as one large group of the senior national team. Based on this idea, the reinforcement of the teams is in good progress," explained Moriyasu, whose side came through a qualifying group comprising Myanmar, Timor-Leste and Macau.

"When both teams have activities at the same time, Coach [Akinobu] Yokouchi takes care of the U-23 team. I think the team as well as the individuals are developing as we share the same concept and same ideas.

"I hope each player expresses their char-

acteristics as much as possible [in Thailand], understanding and showing the team concept at the same time."

Drawn in Group B alongside West Asian opposition in the form of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Syria, Japan will kick off their campaign against Saudi Arabia on January 9, before taking on Syria (January 12) and Qatar three days later.

Moriyasu expects tough challenges from all three.

"I believe that West Asian teams have good counter attacks and they have a good transition from tight defense to attack," he added.

(Source: the-afc)

Stramaccioni ready to come back to Iran: agent

Football Players Agent Federico Pastorello informed in a tweet that the Italian coach Andrea Stramaccioni is ready to go straight back to Iran to coach Esteghlal in case the made commitments are fulfilled.

"The great affection shown by Esteghlal fans and their players in the last few days has been extraordinary and left Andrea Stramaccioni deeply touched," Pastorello wrote.

"Andrea's decision to leave Tehran has been deeply considered as well as very suffered, and it has not been due by his intention to sign for any another club of course!!! Such decision has exclusively been dictated by the several, serious and continuous breaches of contract committed by the Club during these months, with reference to which the Club has not given yet any concrete signal to comply with," he claimed.

"Andrea is ready to go straight back to coach what has become his favorite team as long as the club proves with facts its will to respect its commitments and promised made," the agent announced.

Stramaccioni announced on Sunday that he and his staff are terminating the contract with the Esteghlal football team but the club's managers are still trying to find a way to continue work with the successful Italian coach.

Under the guidance of Stramaccioni, Eteghlal could get back to the top of Iran Professional League's table after some four years. Almost all the experts inside the country praise the work of the Italian coach in creating a unified attacking team.

(Source: Gianlucadimarzio.com)



Nikkhah Bahrami among three popular players of Asia

IRNA — Nikkhah Bahrami, Captain of Iranian national team, has been selected among three most popular players of Asia, the Asian Basketball Confederation (ABC) said citing a survey.

The Asian Basketball Confederation (ABC) selected three popular continental basketball players in a poll and voted by basketball fans, including "Samad Nikkhah Bahrami" Iranian star and national team captain.

According to Fiba Asia, Samad Nikkhah Bahrami from Iran, Fadi al-Khatib and Wael Iraqi from Lebanon have been named three popular Asian basketball players.

Nikkhah Bahrami is still in the national team and has managed to reach the Tokyo Olympics with the World Cup.

Iran boys double claim gold at ITF West Asia 13&U Dev. C'ship

TASNIM — Iran's boys doubles took a gold medal at the West Asia Cup 13& Under Developments Championships 2019.

Iranian team Kasra Rahmani and Amir Ali Ghavami defeated Anthony Moukarzel and William Jade from Lebanon 6-3 6-3 in the final match.

Iranian girl Mandegar Farzami had already won the title after beating her compatriot Hana Soltani 6-2 6-0.

In the boys single, Kasra Rahmani had also defeated his countryman Amir Ali Ghavam 6-4 6-0 in the final match.

The competition is being held in Dubai, the UAE from December 5 to 14 with participation of 13 countries.

Greece chasing back-to-back junior men's world water polo crowns

Greece will be chasing back-to-back FINA World Men's Junior Water Polo crowns when action gets underway at the new Al-Nasar Sport Club Kuwait on Thursday.

Who could forget the scintillating final with Croatia in Belgrade, Serbia two years ago when a penalty shootout was required for the gold medal?

Greece secured the shootout with a center-forward goal in the last second of regular play for 7-7 and proceeded to a perfect record from five meters for the 12-10 victory.

Serbia collected bronze and Hungary — minus head coach and a player with red cards — was fourth after the 12-11 encounter.

There are 20 teams gathered again for the 20th version of this event, which started in Milan, Italy back in 1981 when the Soviet Union was victor.

Greece is a two-time winner, claiming gold in Istanbul, Turkey in 2001 when it again bested Croatia. Greece returns with three 2017 champions — Alexandros Papanastasiou, big centre forward Dimitrios Nikolaidis and Konstantinos Gkiouvetsis.

Greece might call itself lucky with the draw; the only two teams from 2017 finishing in 11th (Australia) and 18th (New Zealand). Greece has retained the services of winning coach Theodoros Lorantos, a long-time Greek international.

Croatia has Serbia is its group and Hungary tops Group B with Russia and Canada its main foils.

Montenegro, fifth in Belgrade, tops Group C with Italy (7th) Iran, and United States of America (8th) on 2017 form.

There was some classic play in 2017, especially from the senior players who contested the Budapest FINA World Championships a few months earlier. Much could be said about those players from Gwangju who will double up in Kuwait City — the host city of the 1999 version, won by Italy over Australia.

Italy is the leading team at these championships, having won five titles and taken home two silvers and two bronzes. Only Hungary has more medals — three golds, four silvers and six bronzes.

In opening-day play, Spain-Hungary, Japan-China and Greece-Australia could be standout matches.

The medal finals of the nine-day event will be played on December 20.

(Source: FINA.org)

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GUIDE TO SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

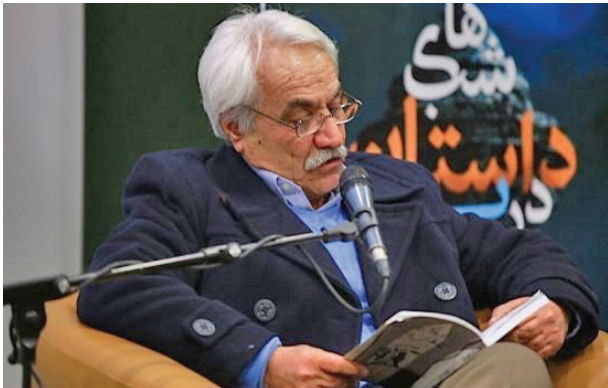
When someone say to another “How lucky you are”, time will at once bring him a black day.

Imam Ali (AS)

Writer Qobad Azaraiin withdraws from Jalal Al-e Ahmad nominations again

CULTURE **TEHRAN** — Iranian writer Qobad Azaraiin once again has announced that he wants his book “Eruption” to be withdrawn from among the nominations for the Jalal Al-e Ahmad Literary Awards.

He announced his decision in a letter submitted to the secretariat of the literary contest on Tuesday, the organizers have announced.



Iranian writer Qobad Azaraiin in an undated photo.

“With great apology from the respected members of the awards and especially Mr. (Mehdi) Qezeli (the secretariat) and the respected jury members, I hereby announce my withdrawal from the nominations for the Jalal Al-e Ahmad Literary Awards,” the letter said.

Azaraiin once in a news item published on November 22 had announced his withdrawal from the contest for personal reasons, however, three days later, he announced that he has reinstated his book as one of the nominees for Awards.

“Following calls from the organizers, I changed my mind and decided to remain among the nominees,” Azaraiin had told the Persian service of ISNA.

Published in autumn 2018, “Eruption” is about the oil eruption in Iran’s oil-rich region of Masjed Soleiman in 1908 when William Knox D’Arcy drilled an oil well in the Middle East for the first time. The story recounts how oil affected the lives of three generations in the region.

Other nominees are “Endlessness” by Mehdi Ebrahimi, “Turning on the One-Way Street” by Mohammadreza Marzuqi, “The Shamelessness Situation” by Hamed Jalali, “Days and Dreams” by Payam Yazdanju and “They’ve Written Us by Snow” by Nasim Tavassoli.

The winners of the 12th Jalal Al-e Ahmad Literary Awards will be announced during a ceremony in Tehran around the second week of December.

Have a Banksy Christmas: his Birmingham reindeer are an artistic miracle

BIRMINGHAM (The Guardian) — Is Banksy the new Charles Dickens? The anonymous street artist’s Christmas creation combines jolly sentiment with genuine compassion in a way that would make the Victorian author of A Christmas Carol tingle all over. What’s more, his latest artwork is both imaginative and thumpingly true — a Christmas cracker with a bang of reality inside.

Banksy’s team of reindeer painted on a wall in Birmingham’s Jewellery Quarter, pulling a bench that homeless people use as a bed, is rightly popular. In a video that underlines his message, Banksy shows a man called Ryan having a drink before positioning a bag as a pillow and lying on the bench — to be, in dreams, lifted in the air by those magic reindeer while the soundtrack plays I’ll Be Home for Christmas. It has so far had nearly three million views on Instagram.

Once again Banksy reaches the parts other artists miss. This is a good painting — the reindeer are nicely three-dimensional and solid enough to make the trompe l’oeil segue from street bench to wonderland work. But the cleverest thing about this bighearted artwork is that it does not depict “the homeless”. By attaching his reindeer to an empty bench, it lets homeless people represent themselves. Banksy not only named Ryan in the video but also thanked the locals who spontaneously brought him a hot drink, chocolates and lighter during the filming of the short video. Presumably not everyone who uses the bench is destitute, so this work of art will be given other meanings — some wag has already added Rudolf’s red nose. That’s street art and it’s kind of wonderful. But in allowing Ryan and others with no home to draw attention to their own reality, Banksy avoids the depressing tendency of art to either abstract them and rob them of identity, or indulge in triteness, or exploit a desperate reality for aesthetic effect.

Tehran FICTS festival announces documentary lineup

A R T **TEHRAN** — The 12th **d e s k** Tehran International FICTS Festival announced its lineup for the documentary section on Wednesday.

A lineup of 15 Iranian and foreign movies will go on screen in this section of the festival, which will be held on the Persian Gulf island of Qeshm simultaneously.

“The Dragon Spring” by Jaroslaw Wszedybyl from Poland about a young man who dreams of becoming a coach of Arsenal London, and “The Bull of Pallonetto” by Luigi Barletta from Italy about the life story of boxer Joe Esposito who fought to build himself a future, are among the films.

The lineup also includes “Rigert” by Vladimir Eysner from Russia about weightlifter David Rigert who won the Olympics, the World Championships and European Championships several times, and “Freddy” by German Bertasio from Argentina about disabled surfer Freddy who doesn’t have legs and one arm but is very successful in his field.

Also included are “That 10 Seconds” by Adel Anisi, “Shahsavar” by Ali Shahmohammadi, “Waterfall” by Ali Shahabinejad and “Serik” by Bahareh Afshari, all from Iran.

The Federation Internationale Cinema Television Sportifs (FICTS) is the organizer of the sports film festival, which is a part of the World FICTS Challenge that runs in 16 countries around the world.

Winners of the festival are scheduled to be honored during a special ceremony on Qeshm Island.

The Iranian edition of the festival will be



A scene from “The Dragon Spring” by Jaroslaw Wszedybyl from Poland.

held in collaboration with Iran’s National Olympic and Paralympic Committee, Iran’s Ministry of Sports and Youth, IRIB, Cinema Organization of Iran and Qeshm Free Zone Organization.

The 12th Tehran International FICTS Festival was scheduled to be held in late June but the organizers postponed it to a later time.

The lineup of the other sections of the festival and the jury members will be announced in the near future.

Vocalist Alireza Qorbani to tour Iran



Iranian vocalist Alireza Qorbani in an undated photo.

A R T **TEHRAN** — Iranian **d e s k** vocalist Alireza Qorbani and his ensemble will begin a concert tour across Iran in late December.

The tour will begin with the northwestern city of Tabriz on December 24 and will continue in Urmia, the capital of West Azarbaijan province on December 27.

The historical city of Qazvin will be hosting the ensemble on December 31 and the central city of Arak will be their last stop on January 3.

Entitled “Sing with Me”, the concert was performed over 30 times in Tehran’s Sadabad Cultural-Historical Complex during May and June.

Photo exhibit to raise funds for child laborers



A poster for “Just Around Here” photo exhibit.

A R T **TEHRAN** — An **d e s k** exhibition of photos by Ali Sufi will open at Tehran’s Ariana Gallery on Friday to raise funds for children living southeast of Tehran and working in the brick kilns there

Entitled “Just Around Here”, the exhibition will display 20 black and white portraits of the children, which have been taken over a period of five years.

The exhibit will be running until December 23 at the gallery located at No. 9 Fereshteh St., off East Maryam St., in the Elahieh neighborhood.

“Hava, Maryam, Ayesha” on screen in Iranian theaters

A R T **TEHRAN** — “Hava, Maryam, Ayesha”, **d e s k** a co-production between Iran and Afghanistan by Afghan director Sahra Karimi, was screened at the Iranian Artists Forum on Tuesday with the producer Katayun Shahabi and director Karimi in attendance.

Karimi’s debut movie is about three pregnant Afghan women from different social backgrounds living in Kabul, each of whom is facing a big challenge in her life and must solve her problem by herself for the first time.

Speaking at the ceremony, Shahabi expressed thanks to the participants, and said that cinema requires teamwork and that no one can do it on her/his own, the public relations team of the film announced in a press release on Wednesday.

“I must also thank the Art and Experience Cinema which provided an opportunity to screen this movie,” she added.

Shahbi added that after screening the film at the Art and Experience Cinema halls, the film will also be available on Filimo, an online VOD service on which users can stream videos online.

Karimi, a filmmaker born and raised in Tehran but



A scene from “Hava, Maryam, Ayesha” by Afghan director Sahra Karimi.

living in Afghanistan since 2012, also thanked Shahabi, who invested in her movie, Mastaneh Mohajer, who edited the film, and the sound engineer, Mohamadreza Delpak,

who collaborated in the project.

“I must also thank my fellow Iranian citizens. I was born and raised in Iran, Iran is my homeland and I am happy you are here to see my movie tonight,” she added.

“Hava, Maryam, Ayesha” does not claim to be a good movie about we are proud that we could make a feature in the unsafe land of Afghanistan despite all the problems in the country,” Karimi, who is the head of the state-run Afghan Film Organization, added.

“We tried to introduce a new narration of Afghanistan to the world. The film was not possible without the assistance of Iranian colleagues. This is film is the joint language of cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan. This shows that we can show our unity to the world through art and cinema,” she concluded.

Government spokesman Ali Rabiei, the former director of the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Mohammad Beheshti, and Shafiq Sharq, the Cultural Attaché of Afghanistan were among the participating guests.

Mourners bid farewell to pop singer Turaj Shabankhani

I → “He had a pleasing voice and when he sang my ‘Bahar Bahar’, he made the song eternal,” Bahmani said.

Poet and songwriter Abdoljababr Kakai also

spoke of his interest in the singer and his great talent in singing.

Singer Simin Ghanem, Shabankhani’s cousin, said that

he made eternal songs and always respected his art of music.

Music expert Abbas Sajjadi called him a man who had a vast knowledge of music.

“Marriage Story” leads mostly white, male Golden Globe nods, De Niro snubbed

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) — Netflix (NFLX.O) divorce drama “Marriage Story” on Monday led a Golden Globes nominations list dominated by movie stories about white men and marked by snubs for actor Robert De Niro and television shows “Game of Thrones” and social justice drama “When They See Us.”

“Marriage Story” scored six nods, including best drama and for actors Adam Driver, Scarlett Johansson and Laura Dern. It was followed by Martin Scorsese’s epic gangster movie “The Irishman”, and Quentin Tarantino’s love letter to Hollywood “Once Upon A Time in Hollywood,” with five apiece.

De Niro, the star of “The Irishman”, was left out of the best actor race, although his co-stars Al Pacino and Joe Pesci won nods for their supporting roles and Scorsese will compete for best director.

“It means so much to all of us — to me, Bob, Joe, Al, and the whole team — to be recognized with these nominations,” Scorsese said in a statement.

The best movie drama category was rounded out with director Same Mendes’ immersive First World War drama “1917” from Universal Pictures (CMCSA.O), terrifying comic book villain “Joker” from Warner Bros (T.N) and papal story “The Two Popes.”

The films nominated for best comedy or musical were Eddie Murphy’s comeback “Dolemite is My Name”, Nazi-era satire “Jojo Rabbit”, murder mystery “Knives Out”, “Once Upon a Time in Hollywood” and Elton John biopic “Rocketman”.

Apple Inc’s (AAPL.O) streaming service landed its first major award nominations for “The Morning Show”, along with its stars Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon.

Yet in the movie race, stories about and by women like including “Harriet”, “Little Women”, “Bombshell” and “Hustlers” were omitted from the major races although some of their stars, including Saoirse Ronan, Jennifer

Lopez, Charlize Theron and Cynthia Erivo won acting nods.

The director field was an all male affair dominated by veterans Tarantino, Scorsese, Mendes, Todd Phillips for “Joker” and South Korea’s Bong Joon-Ho for social satire “Parasite”.

Netflix dominated the nominations across both television and movies, scoring a leading 17 nods in movie fields and 17 in television.

HBO’s medieval fantasy “Game of Thrones” failed to make it into the best TV drama series race, and upcoming movie musical “Cats” scored just one nod, for Taylor Swift and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s original song “Beautiful Ghosts.”