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Tuesday, 20 March 2018



State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi inspects the Honour Guard as she arrives in Canberra, Australia. PHOTO: MYANMAR NEWS AGENCY

State Counsellor in Canberra

STATE COUNSELLOR Daw Aung San Suu Kyi arrived in the Australian capital of Canberra yesterday and was welcomed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

As the State Counsellor arrived at the Parliament House in Canberra, the guard

of honour fired a 19-gun salute and saluted her.

The State Counsellor then signed the guest book and was escorted by PM Turnbull into the guest hall of Parliament House. The State Counsellor and PM Turnbull then took a commemorative photograph

together.

Later, the State Counsellor attended the Myanmar-Australia bilateral meeting in the Parliament Hall. Accompanying the State Counsellor were Union Ministers U Thaung Tun and U Kyaw Tin, Myanmar Amba-

sador to Australia U Tha Aung Nyunt and other officials.

Myanmar and Australian leaders talked about developing bilateral relations, the Rakhine situation and how Australia could contribute to making the situation better.

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\$80-million loan from ADB passed by 533 votes to 4

In yesterday's Pyidaungsu Hluttaw meeting, a strong majority of MPs voted to pass a motion to secure a loan from Asian Development Bank.

The Ministry of Construction's motion to borrow a US\$-80 million loan from Asian Development Bank (ADB) for the Greater Mekong Sub-region Corridor Towns development project was passed with 533 for and four against votes and three abstentions.

In his explanation, Deputy Minister for Planning and Finance U Maung Maung Win said the loan was for the development of Hpa-An, Myawady and Mawlamyine that are on the Greater Mekong Sub-region East-West economic corridor and are border towns.

These towns have the potential for further development. These towns were selected for the development of the Greater Mekong Sub-region East-West economic corridor.

This will benefit the people of the three cities in acquiring sufficient water, installing a more systematic waste disposal system, maintaining historical buildings in these cities and encouraging their socio-economic development, said the Deputy Minister.—Myanmar News Agency ■



'BANK OF THE YEAR IN MYANMAR 2017'

Awarded by Financial Times (The Banker)

Pyidaungsu Hluttaw

Union-level officials seek Pyidaungsu Hluttaw nod to procure loans

By Aung Ye Thwin,
Aye Aye Thant

UNION Minister for Transport and Communications U Thant Sin Maung explained to the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw yesterday about using the emergency fund of Ks6,426 million, included in the 2017 Union Budget Law, sent by the President. The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw speaker asked the Hluttaw to put the matter on record.

This was followed by members of union-level organisations explaining to the Hluttaw the 4.5-billion Thai baht loan for Myanmar, provided by the Neighbouring Countries Economic Development Cooperation Agency (NEDA).

In his explanation, Deputy Minister for Planning and Finance U Maung Maung Win said NEDA was an organisation operating under the Ministry of Finance of Thailand, which cooperates in financial matters with neighbouring countries. The loan period is for a total of 30 years, of which 10 years is the grace

period and the repayment period is 20 years. The interest per annum is 0.1 per cent, while the interest payment has to be done twice a year, totalling 60 times. The principal has to be repaid twice a year, totalling 40 times. Fifty percent of the loan is to be spent on services and products from Thailand.

The Ministry of Construction is working to procure the loan, and it plans to pay the interest and principal from road tolls collected, as well as by including the principal and interest payment in the budget for the ministry. The union minister requested the Hluttaw to approve the loan of 4.5 billion baht from NEDA.

Following the explanation, the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw speaker requested the MPs who wanted to discuss the matter to enlist their names.

Next, Deputy Minister U Maung Maung Win explained the Joint Bill Committee's report on their findings and remarks on the 2018 Union Tax Bill, as well as the discussion of the MPs on the



Yesterday's Pyidaungsu Hluttaw discusses procuring loans and income taxes of private businesses. **PHOTO: MNA**

The existing tax (and related) laws make it difficult to assess investment and the purchase of movable and immovable items.

matter. The Deputy Minister said private businesses had not paid taxes on their business incomes.

These were not illegal incomes, and so, they were not concerned with the money laundering law, but they were unable to use this money for investment, as the tax was not paid.

The existing tax (and related) laws make it difficult to assess investment and the purchase of movable and immovable items. At the same time, this hidden money is affecting the economic development of the country, said the Deputy Minister.

Tax support groups that were formed in townships, union ministerial departments and states/regions will jointly ex-



Deputy Minister for Planning and Finance U Maung Maung Win. **PHOTO: MNA**

pose people who are not adhering to the tax law, and thus, the Deputy Minister urged the Hluttaw to approve the 2018 Union Tax Bill.

The matter of obtaining 22

million euros loan and a 5-million euro in aid from French development agency Agence Francaise de Development for the general maintenance and upgrade of the capacity works of the Ministry of Health and Sports National Health Laboratory (NHL), sent by the President, was then discussed by Dr. U Than Aung Soe of Minhla constituency and Dr. San Shwe Win of Yekyi constituency.

The members of union level organisations also explained the \$340-million loan from ADB and \$20-million loan from ASEAN Infrastructure Fund for the Ministry of Construction to develop the roads in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region, which was sent by the President. ■



Deputy Speaker of Amyotha Hluttaw U Aye Tha Aung cuts the ceremonial ribbon to commemorate 44th Mon State Day in Mawlamyine. **PHOTO: MNA**

44th Mon State Day ceremony in Mawlamyine

THE 44th Mon State Day ceremony was held in Mawlamyine Town city hall yesterday morning. Also present at the ceremony were Amyotha Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U Aye Tha Aung, Union Minister for Ethnic Affairs Nai Thet Lwin, Mon State Chief Minister Dr. Aye Zan, the Mon State Hluttaw speaker, State Hluttaw representatives, ethnic affairs ministers from states/regions, state-level departmental heads, ethnic literature and culture

groups and the ethnic national people.

At the ceremony, Mon State Chief Minister Dr. Aye Zan read a message sent by the President on the occasion of the 44th Mon State Day ceremony. Following this, U Aye Tha Aung and Nai Thet Lwin also delivered speeches. Next, distinguished persons from the state were presented with prizes by State Chief Minister Dr. Aye Zan, and the ceremony concluded with an entertainment pro-

gramme of dances and songs performed by the ethnic nationals.

After the ceremony concluded, another ceremony on the opening of the Mon State Day exhibitions was held in Thanlwin Park, Bokone Ward, Mawlamyine Town, at 11 a.m., where U Aye Tha Aung, Nai Thet Lwin and Dr. Aye Zan cut the ceremonial ribbon. Along with the attendees, they then visited the exhibition. — Myanmar News Agency ■

State Counsellor in Canberra

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The State Counsellor then met with Bill Shorten, leader of the Australian Labour Party, which is the opposition party in the Australian Parliament. They discussed Myanmar's democratic transition and also talked about developing bilateral relations and the Rakhine situation.

Later, the State Counsellor and her entourage travelled to the National Arboretum, where the State Counsellor planted a *Pinus roxburghii* (Chir Pine) in honour of Myanmar-Australia relations. This was followed by the State Counsellor meeting with Myanmar citizens living in Australia at the Albert Hall, Canberra. The State Counsellor explained the reforms taking place in Myanmar, the peace process and national reconciliation, the situation in Rakhine and how Myanmar expatriates could help contribute to making it better.

The State Counsellor then answered questions raised by the attendees at the ceremony. Myanmar's Ambassador to Australia U Tha Aung Nyunt then handed over the donation money collected from the Myanmar community in Australia to the State Counsellor for humanitarian assistance in Rakhine.

Later that night, Union Minister for the Office of the Union Government U Thaung Tun, and Union Minister for International Cooperation U Kyaw Tin attended a dinner hosted by Aust-Cham (Australia Chamber of Commerce) member companies, which are investing in the various sectors in Myanmar, at the Hyatt Hotel. At the event, the Union Ministers explained about Myanmar's political and socio-economic development and then answered questions posed by Australian companies —Myanmar News Agency ■



State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is welcomed by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull in the Australian Parliament. **PHOTO: MNA**

Amyotha Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U Aye Tha Aung inspects Mon State Hluttaw

AMYOTHA Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U Aye Tha Aung arrived in the Mon State Hluttaw yesterday afternoon and met with Mon State Hluttaw Speaker Daw Tin Ei, Deputy Speaker Dr. Aung Naing Oo, State Hluttaw representatives and officials.

At the meeting, the Amyotha Hluttaw Deputy Speaker first delivered a speech, and then the Mon State Hluttaw speaker introduced him to the State Hluttaw representatives.

Next, the Mon State Hluttaw Deputy Speaker explained the State Hluttaw, and the Amyotha Hluttaw Deputy Speaker responded to matters raised by the Hluttaw representatives. —Myanmar News Agency ■

Free eye surgery offered to local people in Rakhine State

Shwe Karuna Foundation, a local philanthropic organization offered a free eye surgical treatment for cataract patients at a clinic in the capital Sittway in Rakhine State on Monday.

The free eye surgery started today and will last until 21 March, according to the organizer. Jointly organized by the Ministry of Health and Sports, Shwe Karuna Foundation's medical team is expected to treat more than 300 cataract patients throughout Rakhine State.

"The cataract surgery is being performed by a fourteen

member medical team led by Eye Specialist Prof. Dr. Khin Ohnmar Khaing from Yangon Eye Hospital. The medical team consists of nine surgeons, a glass expert and four nurses. We have already provided medical checkup for as many as 700 patients," said U Tin Nyein Oo, information in charge from the foundation.

This is 12th free eye surgical treatment given by the foundation in Rakhine State. Accommodation for the patients who will receive eye surgery is provided in Sittway. —Tin Tun ■



India hands over last batch of locomotives to Myanma Railways

THE Indian government's engineering consultancy company RITES Ltd. handed over the final batch of six YDM-4 diesel-electric locomotives to Myanma Railways during a ceremony in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday.

Also present at the ceremony were Union Minister of Transport and Communications U Thant Sin Maung, Indian Minister of State for Railways Rajen Gohain, deputy ministers U Kyaw Myo and U Tar Oo, Indian Ambassador to Myanmar Vikram Misri, Technical Director of RITES Ltd. Mukesh Rathore, and other officials from the Ministry of Transport and Communications.

U Thant Sin Maung mentioned 18 locomotives were purchased with loans procured from India's EXIM Bank. He thanked the Indian government, EXIM Bank and RITES Ltd. for aiding in the development of Myanmar's railways.

Next, Mr. Rajen Gohain and Indian Ambassador Mr. Vikram Misri delivering the opening speeches. Next, General Manager of Myanma Railways U Min Aung and Mukesh Rathore



Officials from Myanma Railways and India's railway ministry pose in front of YDM-4 locomotive. **PHOTO: MNA**

explained the mechanics of the locomotives.

Mukesh Rathore then handed over the documents for the locomotives to the Managing Director of Myanma Railways U Thurein Win. The officials then sprinkled ceremonial water on the locomotives. The new YDM-4 locomotives have a microprocessor-based control. The location of the locomotives, their travelling speed and status can be monitored with software download-

ed from the factory. In addition to this, the control unit can be linked with a laptop to keep track of the locomotive's status.

India handed over the first batch of six locomotives in July 2017, another batch of six in November 2017 and the last batch on 6 February 2018. The 18 new locomotives will be used on Yangon-Mandalay, Mandalay-Myttha and Yangon-Mawlamyine railways. —Myanmar News Agency ■

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Photo exhibition in Bagan

A photo exhibition titled "Bagan, A Different World" will be held in Nyaung-U from 23 March to 27 March.

The exhibition will display a large number of historic photos shot by photographers from all over Myanmar. The exhibition will be held at two locations. The first location is the southern stairway of the Shwezigon Pagoda, this show is between 23 and 25 March, the second is at the precinct of the Ananda Pagoda which will occur on 26 and 27 March.

—Myanmar Digital News



Number of historic photos will be displayed in the photo exhibition in Bagan. **PHOTO: SUPPLIED**

Rural road commissioned into service in Hpa-an

A newly completed rural concrete road in a model village in Hpa-an, Kayin State has been put into service.

At the ceremony held this morning, Kayin State Minister for Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation U Saw Myint Oo and U Tun Zaw Chit, Director from the Department of Rural Development formally opened the new road. A local resident spoke words of thanks after the minister gave an opening speech.

Afterwards, local authorities from the Department of Rural Development presented commemorative flags to the minister. The 1000 ft long and 12 ft wide road was constructed with Ks. 15.6 million of which Ks. 10 million were

funded by the Department of Rural Development and Ks. 5.6 million was contributed by local people.

Construction of the road began on 5 February 2018. Village development programs are being carried out in 45 villages throughout Hpa-an Township. Later, the minister and his entourage attended an opening ceremony for a bridge in Thayetgon Village.

The 20 ft long and 18 ft wide rural bridge was built mostly from reinforced concrete at a cost of Ks. 13 million— Ks. 10 million was financed by the Department of Rural Development and Ks. 3 million was donated by local people.—Myanmar Digital News

Farming methods disclosed to farmers to extend tropical tuber crop cultivation

THE Department of Agriculture in Kayin State has been conducting an activity to increase farmers' awareness of agriculture in order to generate higher income by growing elephant foot yams.

Members of the department visited two villages in Kyaik Done Town on 17 March to share information about the proper growing methods of the vegetable tuber crop, the standards of better quality tubers and marketing processes to promote agricultural awareness and education of the elephant foot yam.

The tropical tuber crop can be grown under trees naturally, so farmers can grow it next to different crops. They do not need to use fertilizer, so production costs are lower.

U Than Tun Naing, a farmer who grows elephant foot yam,

said that the price of dried elephant foot yam is up to Ks.8500 in Kyaik Done.

"People from Mudon and Mawlamyine in Mon State and Tharmanya village in Kayin State mostly buy the tubers. They consume it as a meat substitute," he said.

U Zaw Naing, head of the Department of Agriculture in Kyaik Done Town, said "If we can produce yam based products by using advanced technology, we can enter international foreign markets so that farmers would get more income." Currently, local people make the yam powder by employing traditional methods.

The tropical tuber crop is grown in Kayin State, and there are more than 3000 acres of the crop. It yields about 1500 viss an acre.—Myanmar Digital News ■

Over 160 tonnes of illegal Kanyin timber confiscated in Katha

AUTHORITIES have confiscated more than 160 tonnes of Kanyin timber near Thapyaypin Village, Katha Township, Sagaing Region, on 18 March, according to the Katha Township Forest Department.

Acting on a tip-off, a combined team of officers and staff from the Katha Township Forest Department raided the

Wai Inn riverside place near Thapyaypin Village, Katha Township, and seized 107 logs of Kanyin timber, weighing 160.016 tonnes, said U Tin Tun, head of the township Forest Department.

The authorities plan to move the timber to a safe place.—Maung Chit Lin (Indaw) ■



Officials from Forest Department inspects seized illegal Kanyin timbers near Thapyaypin village, Katha Township.

Photo: Maung Chit Lin (Indaw)

UMFCCI forms Myanmar Ethnic Entrepreneurs Association for sustainable development

May Thet Hnin

TO encourage ethnic entrepreneurs and sustainable development in their regions, the Myanmar Ethnic Entrepreneurs Association (MEEA) was formed last Saturday at the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) office in Yangon.

MEEA is made up of some 27 ethnic entrepreneurs, including Bamar, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Chin, Shan, Rakhine and Mon ethnic groups.

“The main objective is to encourage ethnic entrepreneurs and develop interaction among them in the underdeveloped areas.

MEEA will try to link them with financial institutions,” said U Min Banyar San, vice chairman of Mon State Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who was selected as general secretary of MEEA.

The UMFCCI formed MEEA, in cooperation with the Ethnic Affairs Ministry and United Nations Global Compact Network, as Myanmar’s ethnic entrepreneurs

are integral to bring about socio-economic development in the country.

Tourism, agriculture and livestock sectors will be given priorities in the implementation process, as the ethnic regions have poor basic infrastructure, such as power and transport. Additionally, MEEA will help link the entrepreneurs with foreign investors, said U Min Banyar San.

“Regional instability is the main challenge to inviting investors. However, a sustain-

able development project is compulsory across all ethnic areas, and so, we will make self-help efforts to establish the businesses,” he added.

U Zaw Aye Maung, Rakhine Ethnic Affairs Minister of Yangon Region government, noted that the association aimed to facilitate business, education, health and socially sustainable development activities in the regions and states. Cooperation among the ethnic entrepreneurs can help build trust and Myanmar’s peace process.

Dr. Aung Tun Thet, advisor of UMFCCI, suggested that the ethnic entrepreneurs expand tourism businesses, improve border trade and organise traditional food, apparel and handicrafts events on an enormous scale, by joining hands with the related ministries, commerce and trade organisations.

Ethnic entrepreneurs will execute the businesses with the help of related state and regional entrepreneurs’ associations, UMFCCI and the officials concerned. ■



A labourer unloading rice from a ship at Botahtaung Jetty. **PHOTO: PHOE KHWAR**

Agro product exports increase by \$160 million

THE export of agricultural products from 1 April to 2 March this fiscal year (FY) reached US\$2.78 billion, registering an increase of \$160 million compared with the same period last FY, according to the trade figures released by the Commerce Ministry.

Myanmar’s main agricultural exports are rice and broken rice, pulses, corn and rubber. Myanmar exported more than 3.2 million tonnes of rice and broken rice to foreign markets, at an estimated export value of \$1.03 billion. Meanwhile, rubber exports fetched \$170 million, while some 1.2 mil-

lion tonnes of pulses brought in \$807 million. Corn exports were worth more than \$272 million.

To boost its exports, the Commerce Ministry is drafting the safeguard law to protect domestic production against competition from imports and also drafting an anti-dumping and countervailing law to prevent non-competitive import practices, such as “dumping,” whereby foreign companies undercut Myanmar’s domestic producers by flooding the market with cheap surplus goods, often of inferior quality. The laws are intended to regulate the quality of import products

and protect local producers from price gouging.

To boost exports, Myanmar has recently established commercial attachés in China, India, Thailand, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Switzerland, and Belgium. It also has a permanent representative in the World Trade Organisation.

The Commerce Ministry is endeavouring to help farmers deal with challenges and high input costs, procure pedigree seeds, as well as counter high cultivation costs and erratic weather problems. —Zar Lin Thu (AMIA)■

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- Market Place by City Mart (Junction City)
- City Mart (Aung San Stadium)
- City Mart (47th street)
- City Mart (Yankin)
- City Mart (China Town)
- City Mart (Myay Ni Gone)
- City Mart (FMI)

- City Mart (Junction Square)
- City Mart (Junction Maw Tin)
- City Mart (Sule Square)
- City Mart (Star City - Thanlyin)
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State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi meeting with Myanmar community in Canberra yesterday (News on Page 1). **PHOTO: MYANMAR NEWS AGENCY**

SG Min Aung Hlaing honours soldiers, families for thwarting off attackers

Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing met with officers, soldiers and families from Tanai cantonment in Shaduzut Village on 18 March.

During the meeting, the Senior General said the Tatmadaw was not fighting ethnic nationals and religions but was defending the peace and stability of the country, administrative machinery of the government, and life and property of the people.

Later, the Senior General and his wife presented the officers, soldiers and families with a Buddha image, bibles, cash and food.

The Senior General's wife also presented the cantonment's maternal and child welfare association with cash, while the officials presented books, journals, sports equipment and cash donations.

In December 2017, the KIA armed group attacked the cantonment headquarters but were repulsed by officers, troops and families, who defended the headquarters courageously. A ceremony to hoist and install a diamond bud, vane and golden umbrella atop the Thousand Yahanda Shin Pin Myat Pagoda on Shwemoe Mountain, Mainar Village, Waingmaw Township, Kachin State, was held yesterday morning.



Senior General Min Aung Hlaing greeting with Tatmadaw members and attendees. **PHOTO: MNA**

Sanghas led by Myitkyina Town Dhamma Rakhita Wuntho Monastery patron Sayadaw Agga Maha Pandita Agga Maha Gandawasaka Pandita Sasanadhaja Dhamma Cariya Bhaddanta Kaytumala graced the ceremony, along with Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla, Kachin State Chief Minister Dr. Khet Aung, senior Tatmadaw officers and their wives, Northern Command Commander Maj-Gen Nyi Nyi Swe, state ministers, departmental officials, invited guests and the local people in attendance.

Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief and his party hoisted

the diamond bud and vane on to the pagoda with a ceremonial flying horse drawn carriage, and the Sanghas consecrated the pagoda. After the ceremony, Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief and his wife and other attendees offered "soon" to the Sanghas.

The Shwemoe Taung (mountain) pagoda is some one mile north of Bala Min Htin Bridge over the Ayeyarwady River and was constructed with money donated by Tatmadaw (Army, Navy, Air) families and the people. The pagoda is 77 feet high and has a statue of Buddha made from granite, obtained from the Shwemoe Mountain.— Myanmar News Agency ■

Negotiations to implement highway bus terminal underway in Dala

THE Yangon Region government is negotiating to implement a highway bus terminal on the land owned by Inland Water Transport in Yangon Dala Township, according to a report in Myawady Daily yesterday.

The highway bus terminal project site, which is suitable for the purpose, is near the Cherry jetty.

The regional government has surveyed the land and is designing a master plan, in cooperation with the Yangon City Development Committee.

Currently, there are six highway bus lines supervised by the Yangon Region Transport Authority (Highway), running between Dala, Pyapon, Dedaye and Bogale townships, and there

are some 14 other bus lines running between Dala and Kyaiklet, Dedaye, Pyapon, Bogale and Maubin townships in the Ayeyawady Region.

As these bus lines are operated by private operators for profits, the YRTA is planning to take over the bus lines for the convenience of passengers.

Moreover, operators have complained that they are unable to make profits by operating buses in Dala, Twantay, Kawhmu and Kungyangon, as CNG filling stations are absent in these areas, and so, buses have to be operated with diesel.

Recently, the YBS No. 48 started running between Dala and Twantay and No. 50 between Dala and Kungyangon.—GNLM ■

Central Bank of Myanmar Governor receives ICBC Yangon Branch CEO

THE Central Bank of Myanmar Governor U Kyaw Kyaw Maung received He Bi Qing, chief executive officer (CEO), Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC), Yangon Branch, and a delegation at Gangaw Hall, Central Bank of Myanmar, Nay Pyi Taw, yesterday morning.

At the meeting, matters related to the operations in ICBC,

Yangon Branch, the work done in 2017 and its progress, the works conducted to strengthen the AML/CFT, cooperation with private banks in Myanmar and clearing of cross border accounts with the RMB were discussed. Also present at the meeting were deputy governors U Soe Min, U Soe Thein and U Bo Bo Nge. — Myanmar News Agency ■



Central Bank of Myanmar Governor U Kyaw Kyaw Maung poses for the documentary photo together with ICBC Yangon Branch CEO He Bi Qing in Nay Pyi Taw. **PHOTO: MNA**

N Korea 'in talks to free US detainees' as diplomacy escalates

SEOUL — North Korea is in talks with the US and Sweden to release three jailed Americans, reports said, as diplomatic activities intensified ahead of Pyongyang's planned summits with Washington and Seoul.

The release of the three Korean-Americans is under discussion through multiple channels more than a week after President Donald Trump agreed to meet the North's Kim Jong Un, the reports said.

Pyongyang has yet to confirm it even made the US summit offer — relayed by Seoul envoys who had met Kim in Pyongyang — but South Korea said he had "given his word" about his commitment to denuclearisation.

Trump's stunning announcement has triggered a race to set a credible agenda for what would be historic talks between the two leaders.

Seoul-based MBC TV station reported Sunday that Pyongyang and Washington had "practically reached" a final agreement on the release of US citizens Kim Hak-song, Kim Sang-duk and Kim Dong-chul.

"They are hammering out details over the timing of the release," it quoted a South Korean diplomatic source as saying.

The negotiation was held through the North's mission to



North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho leaves a Swedish government building in Stockholm on March 16, where the issue of three Americans held in the North was raised, according to reports. **PHOTO: AFP**

the United Nations and the US State Department — an unofficial avenue of communication dubbed the "New York channel", the source said.

CNN said the prisoners' release was also discussed at three-day talks in Stockholm between the North's Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho and Swedish counterpart Margot Wallstrom that ended on Saturday.

Sweden represents Washington's interests in the North. It raised the issue of American detainees to "move things in the right direction", CNN quoted one source as saying.

Kim Dong-chul, a South Korea-born American pastor, has been detained by the North since 2015 when he was arrested for spying. He was sentenced to 10 years' hard labour in 2016.

Kim Hak-song and Kim Sang-duk — or Tony Kim — were both working at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, founded by evangelical Christians from overseas, when they were detained last year on suspicion of "hostile acts".

- Diplomatic flurry -

Reports of their possible release come amid a flurry of diplomatic activities involving Pyong-

yang and Washington along with Seoul and other US allies.

During a visit to Pyongyang by Seoul's envoys earlier this month, Kim reportedly offered to meet Trump, with the US president subsequently agreeing to talks by May. No specific time or venue has been set.

Kim also agreed to hold a summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-in next month — the third ever between the two Koreas — according to the envoys. And he reportedly offered to consider abandoning his nuclear weapons in exchange for US security guarantees.

South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said in an interview aired on Sunday that Kim was "taking stock" after Trump's surprise decision to accept the invitation, but that a channel of communication had been established. She said Kim had "given his word" on his commitment to denuclearisation.

"But the significance of his word is quite, quite weighty in the sense that this is the first time that the words came directly from the North Korean supreme leader himself, and that has never been done before," Kang told CBS's "Face the Nation".

Nothing has been offered to the North Koreans to engage in negotiations, she said.

The Stockholm talks overlapped with another meeting between the national security advisers of the US, South Korea and Japan.

US National Security Advisor HR McMaster, the South's Chung Eui-yong and Japan's Shota Yachi met in San Francisco over the weekend and vowed "close policy coordination" for the weeks ahead, Seoul's presidential office said.

They agreed that peace on the Korean peninsula hinges on the success of the two planned summits, vowing "not to repeat the failure of the past", it said in an apparent reference to previous botched nuclear disarmament negotiations with the North.

Also on Sunday a senior North Korean diplomat arrived in Finland for talks on peninsula issues with former officials and academics from the US and South Korea.

The sudden rapprochement comes months after the North staged its most powerful nuclear test and test-fired missiles capable of reaching the US mainland.

Kim and Trump traded colourful threats of war and personal insults, which heightened global concerns of another conflict on the peninsula once reduced to ruin by the 1950-53 Korean War. —AFP ■

World needs 'greener' water policies as demand rises: UN

UNITED NATIONS — Governments should focus on "greener" policies to improve the supply and quality of water as climate change and a growing global population threaten the water security of billions, the United Nations said on Monday.

In its 2018 World Water Development Report, the UN calculated that an estimated 3.6 billion people — nearly half the global population — live in areas where water can be scarce at least one month per year.

And this number could rise to 5.7 billion by 2050, the report warned.

"If we do nothing, some five billion people will be living in areas with poor access to water by 2050," said UNESCO Director General, Audrey Azoulay, at the presentation of the report in

Brasilia.

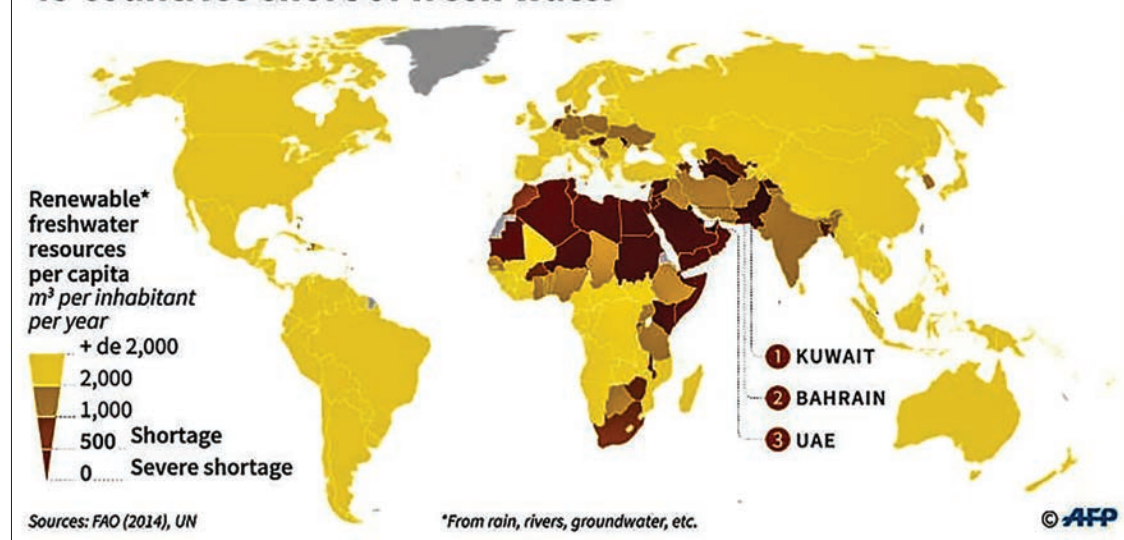
"This report proposes solutions that are based on nature to manage water better. This is a major task all of us need to accomplish together responsibly so as to avoid water-related conflicts," she said.

Global water use has increased by a factor of six over the past century "and continues to grow steadily at a rate of about one per cent per year," the report said.

And use is expected to rise significantly due to population growth, economic development and changing consumption patterns, among other factors.

"The vast majority of the growing demand for water will occur in countries with developing or emerging economies," the report said.

45 countries short of fresh water



Countries that are short of fresh water. **PHOTO: AFP**

At the same time, the global water cycle was intensifying due to climate change, "with wetter regions generally becoming wetter and drier regions becoming even drier."

- 'Ecosystem-friendly' -

So-called "grey" or man-made water infrastructure — such as reservoirs, irrigation canals and treatment plants — were no longer sufficient to

meet these challenges, said the report's editor-in-chief, Richard Connor.

There is increasingly limited room to build more reservoirs because of silting, environmental concerns and restrictions, as well as the fact that in many developed countries the most cost-effective and viable sites had already been used, the UN argued.

"In many cases, more eco-

system-friendly forms of water storage, such as natural wetlands, improvements in soil moisture and more efficient recharge of groundwater, could be more sustainable and cost-effective than traditional grey infrastructure such as dams."

"Nature plays a unique and fundamental role in regulating the different functions of the water cycle," Connor said. —AFP ■

ASEAN, Australia committed to countering terrorism

THE ASEAN-Australia Summit concluded on 18th March with both sides adopting a joint statement - the Sydney Declaration - which sets out their shared commitment to boost cooperation on various issues.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Government of Australia on Cooperation to Counter International Terrorism signed on 17 March 2018 will deepen and expand our strong existing cooperation.

The signatories agreed to share intelligence and strengthen law enforcement cooperation, among a host of other joint initiatives.

The leaders exchanged views on ways to boost cooperation on security issues, particularly cyber security. The landmark MoU to combat international terrorism inked on Saturday focused on developing capabilities to deal with terrorists' use of technology to spread their ideology.

State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other Southeast Asian leaders signed an agreement at the summit with the Australian government to strengthen cooperation and collaboration

to counter violent extremism and terrorism within the region.

Both sides unequivocally condemned in the strongest terms terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, reiterating their commitment to work together even more closely to enhance regional cooperation to counter terrorism, including to prevent and suppress the flow of foreign terrorist fighters in the region, and address the underlying factors and conditions that contribute to the growth and spread of violent extremism and radicalization.

"Nowhere is far away from anywhere when it comes to terrorism, and none of us can tackle this threat alone," said Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Australia has continuously supported humanitarian aid to Myanmar and is also a valuable ally with ASEAN. In 2016, the ASEAN-Australia summit was held in Laos and

the recent one was held in Australia herself. Relations between ASEAN and Australia reached mutual strategic levels in 2014, and in 2016 the ASEAN-Australian trade value reached USD 73 billion placing it in third place after China and the European Union.

Australia has pledged to contribute humanitarian aid to Myanmar and last year agreed to support an additional AUD 16 million (approx. USD 12.3 million), as well as to follow the recommendations from Kofi Annan's final report on Rakhine State in providing assistance to the area. Since July 2016, Australia has provided USD 18 million in cash assistance to Myanmar.

In all the meetings between Australia and ASEAN, the subject of counter terrorism has been given careful deliberations and Myanmar has been quick to discuss the recent surges of terrorism and violent attacks in her border areas. As Myanmar increases cooperation with her allies and elevates her standing in the international community, then surely goodwill and collaboration will also increase between all stakeholders. ■

Energy Consumption with Sustainable Development in Myanmar

By Khin Yadana

THE energy sector is the totality of all of the industries involved in the production and sale of energy, including fuel extraction, manufacturing, refining and distribution. Modern society consumes large amounts of fuel, and the energy industry is a crucial part of the infrastructure and maintenance of society in the world.

Exploitation of energy

The use of energy has been a key in the development of the human society by helping it to control and adapt to the environment and managing the use of energy is inevitable in any functional society.

In the industrialized world the development of energy resources has become essential for agriculture, transportation, waste collection, information technology and communications that have become prerequisites of a developed society. The increasing use of energy brings about a number of serious problems, some of which, such as global warming, can create potentially grave risks to the world.

Discovery of energy sources

Ever since humanity discovered various energy resources available in nature, it has been inventing devices, known as machines that make life more comfortable by using energy resources.

In this time of globalization

uncertainty one thing we do know is that the world is in need of energy -- and in increasing quantities -- to support economic and social progress and build a better quality of life in the country.

But providing this energy around the globe comes with a responsibility and commitment to developing and using our resources responsibly. Commitments should be made to protect both people and their environment, thereby making positive economic contributions.

Reliable and Affordable energy sources

Energy sector enables the

productivity and services which can enrich the quality of human life in our modern world. For developing nations like Myanmar, the need for reliable and affordable energy becomes more and more crucial and it can also improve and even save our lives.

Moreover, reliable energy can support the development of industry, agriculture, trading and transportation sectors respectively. Also it can help the people escape poverty and create higher living standard. The majority of the countries in the world use energy which comes from hydrocarbons, with crude oil being the dominant source of transportation

fuels and its demands is getting higher and higher.

It is of paramount importance to increase the growing needs of energy consumption including oil and gas because renewables alone cannot meet the demand in the market but all sources of energy are needed to address this problem.

The Yadana Gas project

The Yadana Gas project is one of the biggest gas production fields in Myanmar and is an extension of Yadana gas field, an offshore gas field in the Andaman Sea.

French oil and gas giant Total is the operator of Yadana project with 31.2 per cent interest, while partners own the rest: US Chevron-Unocal is holding 28.3pc, Thai firm PTTEP with 25.5pc and state-owned Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) with 15pc.

This project has been thriving since 1995 and the production started in 1998. Moreover it is still producing with plateau production of 8 billion cubic meters per year.

Energy Sectors in Myanmar

The energy sector plays an important role in the country's economy, with natural gas providing by far its most important

source of income.

However, almost three quarters of the population do not have access to electricity. Building on its abundant natural resources, the authority concerned should find effective ways to bolster its domestic energy infrastructure to power development. Starting from a low base, the country has the opportunity to learn from international experience to find effective solutions that balance the affordability of energy with sustainability and broader access to it.

Environmental Challenges

According to the Ministry of Electricity and Energy, annual need for power consumption of Myanmar is increasing from 15% to 17% annually. In order to distribute electrical power, it needs to implement the Energymix that includes hydropower, coal, natural gas and renewable energy. In implementing the economical hydropower projects, the government is facing some challenges such as environmental issues.

Effective plans should be made

In order to meet the growing power demands of the country, plans are under way to import liquefied natural gas as soon as 2020, and it aims to allay concerns



among businesses about electricity shortages.

According to the records, Myanmar has been one of the major natural gas producers and exported to China and Thailand. But power demand has grown steadily since Myanmar overhauled its economy in 2011 to encourage foreign investment.

Production of usable energy

Producing energy to sustain the needs of the country is an essential social activity, and a great deal of effort goes into this activity.

Efforts should be made to increase the production of electricity and oil, and to explore newer ways of producing usable energy resources from the available energy resources. One such effort is to explore means of producing hydrogen fuel from water and though hydrogen use is environmentally friendly.

Endeavors of Ministry for Electricity and Energy

Myanmar has been blessed by its low-CO2 energy which is quite an issue for the country because it is one of the countries which are most affected by global warming.

As for the Ministry for Electricity and Energy, efforts are being made to set up a proper energy policy and effective plans which can be implemented the process and increase the product of energy sector.

Also the Ministry has planned to establish the joint venture projects for laboratory services to analyse petroleum and petrochemical products and certify them in accordance with the International Organization of Standardization (ISO).

Priority should be made to its energy reforms, harnessing the power of the various stakeholders. Ensuring public support in a sustained and sustainable development of its energy potential while attracting the financial and technical capability of investors will be important.

Moreover, public, private and civil society stakeholders must collaborate and partner in concrete initiatives. ■

Translated by Win Ko Ko Aung

Appointment of Malaysian Ambassador agreed

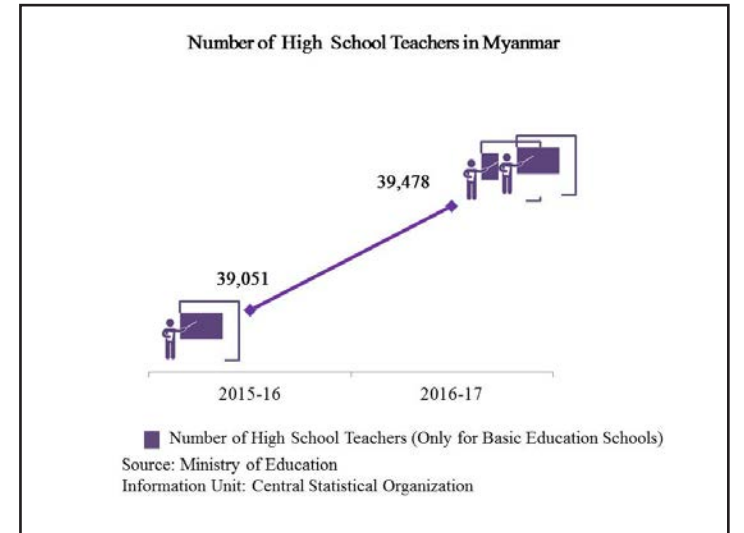
THE Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has agreed to the appointment of Mr. Zahairi bin Baharim as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Malaysia to the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in succession to His Excellency Mr. Mohd Haniff bin Abd Rahman.

Mr. Zahairi bin Baharim was born on 10 February 1972 in Melaka. He obtained a Bachelor degree of Law (Hons.) from the University of Malaya and a Diploma in Public Administration (DPA) from the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) of Malaysia.

He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia in 1996, and has served in the Ministry and the Malaysian Embassies in Lao PDR, Kuwait and Qatar in various capacities. From 2008 to 2011, he served as Principal Assistant Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia. From 2012 to 2016, he served as the Minister Counsellor at the High Commission of Malaysia in Pretoria, South Africa. Since 2016 to date, he has been serving as Undersecretary of the Multilateral Economic and Environment Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia.

Mr. Zahairi bin Baharim is married.

Myanmar News Agency



Invitation to young writers for Sunday section

The Global New Light of Myanmar is accepting submissions of poetry, opinion, articles, essays and short stories from young people for its weekly Sunday Next Generation Platform. Interested candidates can send their works to the Global New Light of Myanmar at No. 150, Nga Htat Kyee Pagoda Road, Bahan Township, Yangon or by email to dce@globalnewlightofmyanmar.com with the following information: (1) Sector you wish to be included in (poetry, opinion, etc.), (2) Real name and (if differently) your penname, (3) Your level of education, (4) Name of your School/College/University, (5) A written note of declaration that the submitted piece is your original work and has not been submitted to any other news or magazine publishing houses, (6) A color photo of the submitter, (7) Copy of your NRC card, (8) Contact information (email address, mobile number, etc.).- Editorial Department, The Global New Light of Myanmar news office

Trump to seek death penalty for drug dealers: WH official

WASHINGTON — US President Donald Trump will present on Monday his plan to combat an opioid abuse epidemic which will include seeking the death penalty for drug traffickers.

The Department of Justice “will seek the death penalty against drug traffickers, where appropriate under current law,” a White House official indicated on Sunday whilst outlining the plan’s main points.

The official did not offer greater detail on how the death penalty could be invoked against drug dealers without amending statutes.

Trump is due to unveil his plan in a speech in Manchester, New Hampshire, a state hard hit by the crisis.

An estimated 2.4 million Americans are addicted to opi-

ates, the narcotics that include prescription painkillers, as well as heroin.

Nationwide, emergency room visits for overdoses from drugs like heroin, fentanyl and prescription painkillers up 30 percent from 2016 to 2017, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said earlier this month. The report found that from July 2016 to September 2017, a total of 142,557 emergency room visits were due to suspected opioid overdoses.

Trump has previously mooted the “ultimate” punishment for drug dealers, and is said to have spoken in glowing terms about the policies of deeply controversial Filipino leader Rodrigo Duterte, who has ordered extra-judicial killings of traffickers.

“If you shoot one person,



US President Donald Trump . PHOTO: AFP

they give you life, they give you the death penalty. These people [who sell drugs] can kill 2,000, 3,000 people and nothing happens to them,” he said.

Many opposition Democrats oppose the idea of executing drug dealers, and changing the law would require an act of Congress.

“We will not incarcerate or execute our way out of the opioid epidemic,” said Democratic senator Ed Markey last week.

“Extreme proposals like using the death penalty only perpetuate a harmful stigma associated with opioid use disorders and divert attention from meaningful conversations and progress on expanding access to treatment, recovery, and other public health initiatives,” he said.—AFP ■

Chemical weapons experts head to Britain in Russia spy case

LONDON — International chemical weapons experts were due to arrive in Britain Monday to collect samples of a nerve agent used to poison a former Russian spy as London accused Moscow of stockpiling the toxin used in the attack.

The poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the English city of Salisbury on 4 March has triggered a crisis with Britain and Russia expelling diplomats in tit-for-tat measures.

London and its allies have blamed Moscow for the attack which left the Skripals in critical condition after exposure to a nerve agent.

Technical experts from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons will visit Britain on Monday to collect samples of the toxin, which London says is a Soviet-designed military grade nerve agent called Novichok.

“These will then be despatched to highly-reputable international laboratories selected by the OPCW for testing with results expected to take a minimum of two weeks,” Britain’s Foreign Office said in a statement.

President Vladimir Putin has rejected allegations Russia was behind the attack.

“It’s complete drivel, rubbish, nonsense that somebody in Russia would allow them-

selves to do such a thing ahead of elections and the World Cup,” Putin told supporters Sunday after winning a fourth term as president.

“We have destroyed all chemical weapons,” he said, adding that Russia was ready to take part in the investigation.

Putin’s comments came after British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson accused Russia of stockpiling the nerve agent used in the attack.

“We actually have evidence within the last 10 years that Russia has not only been investigating the delivery of nerve agents for the purposes of assassination, but has also been creating and stockpiling Novichok,” Johnson told the BBC’s Andrew Marr Show.

- ‘Sarcasm and denial’ -

Johnson said Britain would target wealth linked to the Kremlin in response to the poisoning of the former Russian double agent.

“Where people have obtained wealth by corruption and where we can see a link with the Kremlin, with Vladimir Putin, it may be possible to have unexplained wealth orders and other sanctions on those individuals,” he said.

Johnson said the government was considering something similar to the US “Magnitsky Act” which was adopted in 2012 to punish Russian officials accused of human rights violations.

The act imposed a visa ban and froze the assets of Russian officials implicated in the death of lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, a tax

fraud whistleblower who died in Russian custody in 2009.

Johnson accused the Russians of “smug sarcasm and denial” in response to the accusations, and said the international community was behind Britain.

Moscow’s “malign, disruptive behaviour” internationally was the reason why allies were “inclined not to give Russia the benefit of the doubt,” he added.

Johnson is expected to brief his EU counterparts on the case at a meeting of foreign ministers and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels on Monday.

Russia’s ambassador to the European Union, Vladimir Chizhov, has also insisted Moscow “had nothing to do” with the attack and appeared to suggest that Britain itself may have been the source of the chemical agent.

“When you have a nerve agent, you check it against certain samples you have in your laboratories,” he said on Saturday.

“And Porton Down, as we now all know, is the largest military facility in the UK that has been dealing with chemical weapons research — and it’s actually only eight miles from Salisbury,” Johnson called the accusation “satirical”, adding it was “not the response of a country that really believes itself to be innocent.”—AFP ■



Since the poisoning, the English city of Salisbury has been filled with investigators garbed in protective equipment . PHOTO: AFP

Britain, EU reach deal on post-Brexit transition period

BRUSSELS — Britain and the European Union on Monday reached a landmark deal on a transition phase that will last for nearly two years after the historic Brexit divorce next year, EU negotiator Michel Barnier said.

The two sides also agreed on a “backstop” solution for the thorny issue of the future of the Irish border, just weeks after Prime Minister Theresa May said no British premier could ever accept such an idea.

After an “intensive” weekend of talks in Brussels, Barnier said the two sides were “in agreement on a large part” of the divorce treaty governing the terms of Britain’s departure after four decades of membership.

“We have reached an agreement on the transition period,” Barnier told a press conference with Davis.

The transition will begin on Brexit day — 29 March, 2019 — and last until December 31, 2020, and during that period, Britain “will no longer participate in the European Union decision-making process,” Barnier said.—AFP ■

Putin secures victory in first round of Russian presidential election

MOSCOW — Russia's incumbent head of state Vladimir Putin has secured a victory in the first round of the presidential election held on Sunday.

According to the Russian Central Election Commission, with 99.84% of the ballots counted, Putin has garnered 76.66% of the vote. He has won more votes than he did in the 2012 election (63.6%) and beat his own record set in 2004 (71.31%).

The newly elected president thanked the Russian people for trusting him and promised to work as hard as before but achieve better results.

Director of the Lenin State Farm Pavel Grudinin, nominated by the Communist Party of Russia, is second with 11.80%, while leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is third with 5.66%.

TV personality and socialite Ksenia Sobchak (nominated by the Civil Initiative party) clinched 1.67% of the vote.

Next are head of the Yabloko Party's federal political committee Grigory Yavlinsky (1.04%), chairman of the Party of Growth and Russian Presidential Envoy for Entrepreneurs' Rights Boris Titov (0.76%), Maxim Suraikin, nominated by the Communists of Russia party (0.68%) and head of the Russian People's Union party Sergei Baburin (0.65%).

Vladimir Putin has announced plans to meet with all other presidential candidates. At a meeting with members of his election team, he said that it was important "to pool the efforts of all people, no matter which of the candidates they voted for."

One team

According to Putin, he was grateful "to voters for the choice they made and the trust they have shown," "for their evaluation of the work done in the recent years and the hope they clearly have as they expect us - my expanded team and me, your humble servant - to work as hard as before but achieve better results."

After the results proving Putin's election win were announced, he addressed a concert rally dubbed Russia. Sevastopol. Crimea, which was taking place at Manezhnaya Square in downtown Moscow,



Vladimir Putin. PHOTO: TASS

and thanked his supporters. "You are our team, and I am a member of your team. All who cast their ballots are in our big national team," the president said.

While addressing members of his election campaign team, Putin mentioned his State of the Nation Address to the Federal Assembly, reiterating that the country needed to achieve a development breakthrough. "We can do that, we have achieved a level where it is possible to make a breakthrough," he said. "We must take advantage of this historic opportunity and our achievements in every field in order to do that. But of course, people need to understand what we will be doing," Putin said.

Other candidates

Pavel Grudinin, who was nominated by the Communist Party of Russia and ran for president for the first time, has not yet commented on the voting outcome, however, experts say that his second place is a good result for a newcomer.

Veteran presidential candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy said he was disappointed with his election result. "I am as negative about the recent election as I have been for the 30 years as far as elections go," he said. "There are no equal conditions for all candidates," Zhirinovskiy added. According to him, "athletes and performers were all supporting the same candidate, there were no equal conditions for candidates and all the scandals were staged."

Ksenia Sobchak, who represented the Civil Initiative par-

ty, pointed to the small number of irregularities recorded during the election. "From the legal standpoint, the election was transparent," she said. According to her, she was going on a short vacation after the election though she planned to continue her political career. She said that the congress of a new party — the Party of Change — would be announced in late May.

Another veteran politician, Grigory Yavlinsky, who represented the Yabloko party, said that the presidential election had not seemed real.

"It was perfectly clear to us that this procedure had little in common with a real election as the media did not provide equal coverage, there were spoilers and administrative pressure," he said. Yavlinsky added that his major goal as presidential candidate had been "demanding changes" and "pushing for a change in policies."

"We have conducted a fine election campaign - I have seen thousands of young people who believe in another kind of future. I am really happy that I had a chance to meet many of them, as they collected signatures, participated in the campaign and supported us," he noted.

Presidential Envoy for Entrepreneurs' Rights Boris Titov, nominated by the Party of Growth, was dissatisfied with the election result but hopeful that his economic program would serve as a basis for the country's economic development.

Maxim Suraikin, nominated by the Communists of Russia party, said he would have been

satisfied with his election result if he had garnered over 50% of the vote. His election team opposed the official election outcome, claiming that its candidate had actually gained from 1.5% to 2.8% of the popular vote.

Sergei Baburin nominated by the Russian People's Union party said he had no doubts about the convincing victory of incumbent President Vladimir Putin. "The reality is that most of the votes went to the incumbent president," he said. "I have no doubts about that, since even Theresa May [British Prime Minister — TASS] worked for Putin's team, helping to unite all swing voters around him," Baburin noted.

Voter turnout, voting process

According to the CEC's preliminary data, voter turnout has exceeded 67%.

Neither the CEC nor the Interior Ministry recorded any serious irregularities that could have influenced the election outcome.

"If we separate real complaints received by the CEC from false ones, than I saw few real complaints," CEC First Deputy Chairman Nikolai Bulayev said, adding that the CEC "has not received any serious complaints from political parties."

The Russian Presidential Human Rights Council's election monitoring group did not record any serious irregularities, the Council's chair Mikhail Fedotov said.

Only one significant incident has been reported so far, which occurred in Lyubertsy, Moscow region, where a local election commission decided to annul the voting's results over ballot stuffing. Two commission members have been suspended and may face criminal liability.

First presidential election in Crimea

Residents of Crimea, which reunited with Russia in 2014, cast their ballots in the Russian presidential election for the first time. More than 40 international observers from 20 countries were accredited to monitor the Crimean vote.

While addressing a press conference in the Crimean city of Simferopol, the monitors said the vote was an example

of "true democracy."

Finnish human rights defender Johan Beckman said the observers had not seen any irregularities, they had only seen true democracy. He added that in his view, Crimea was the most democratic place on earth.

According to him, the Crimean vote was as transparent as possible and successful. He pointed out that the West's provocations and attempts to interfere in the political processes in Crimea had failed.

Disrupted vote

No serious incidents happened during the vote in the Russian presidential election in foreign countries, but in Ukraine the vote was actually disrupted. Only diplomats had a chance to cast their ballots as law enforcers and radical nationalists prevented other Russian citizens from entering the Russian embassy in Kiev, as well as consulate generals in Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa and Lvov.

On 16 March, Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov announced that "security arrangements at Russian diplomatic missions in Ukraine will not imply access to these facilities for Russian citizens seeking to cast their votes."

Overseas vote

Overseas voter turnout in the Russian presidential election was unprecedentedly high, Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said. At the same time, in her words, the West's attempts at influencing the outcome of the Russian presidential vote were obvious and unprecedented.

"We focused on the information field as the West's flak about our election was obvious and unprecedented," she said. "We expected they would be saying that the vote was non-transparent or something of the kind. So even at polling stations at embassies we focused on information support," Zakharova added.

According to her, special attention was paid to arranging the vote in Syria. "There are currently our military servicemen and experts in Syria, so there was a need to provide them with a possibility to cast their ballots. An early voting took place there," the Russian diplomat said.—Tass ■

Russia's Avangard hypersonic missile system

MOSCOW — On 12 March, 2018, Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yuri Borisov said in an interview with *Krasnaya Zvezda* newspaper that Russia's Defence Ministry had signed a contract on the serial production of the most advanced Avangard hypersonic missile complex.

The Avangard is a strategic intercontinental ballistic missile system equipped with a gliding hypersonic maneuvering warhead.

Maneuvering warhead

According to open sources, the guided hypersonic warhead (the spacehead) of the Avangard intercontinental ballistic missile system is codenamed 15Yu71. It was developed as part of the R&D work "4202" by specialists of the Military and Industrial Corporation "Research and Production Association of Machine-Building" (the town of Reutov) under the guidance of Chief Designer Pavel Sudyukov. Russia's Federal Space Agency acted as the customer for the R&D work "4202."

Compared to traditional warheads of intercontinental ballistic missiles, which follow the ballistic trajectory towards their targets, the maneuvering glider warhead travels a part of its flight path at an altitude of several dozen kilometers in the dense layers of the atmosphere.

While maneuvering along

its flight path and by its altitude, the glider warhead is capable of bypassing the area of the missile defence's detection and destruction capabilities.

The warhead's performance characteristics have not been officially disclosed. Presumably, the glider vehicle is about 5.4m long and develops a speed exceeding Mach 20. The warhead is either nuclear (from 150 kilotonnes to 1 megatonne) or conventional.

According to Strategic Missile Force Commander Sergei Karakayev, the vehicle's body is made of composite materials, which makes it resistant to aerodynamic heating of several thousand degrees and protects it from laser irradiation. The vehicle is equipped with the thermoregulation system developed by the Nauka Research and Production Association.

Trials

On 19 February, 2004, First Deputy Chief of Russia's General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky told reporters that during a training exercise, specialists "tested a space vehicle capable of flying at a hypersonic speed while maneuvering by its flight path and altitude and, therefore, capable of bypassing regional missile defense groupings."

According to unofficial data, the tests of the "object 4202" had been held since 2004 at the



Russia's Defence Ministry. PHOTO: TASS

Baikonur and Yasny spaceports where the RS-18B rocket based on the 15A35 intercontinental ballistic missile of the UR-100NUTTKh strategic missile complex was used as a carrier. According to open sources, the experimental facility's launch equipment for the R&D work "4202" was developed by the Design Bureau of Special Machine-Building (St Petersburg) while the transport and technological equipment set was made by the Design Bureau "Motor" (a branch of the Centre for the Operation of Ground-Based Space Infrastructure).

Media outlets reported in July 2016, citing unnamed sources that the trials of the "object 4202" would be conducted along with the flight development tests of the prospective Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile. In his State of the Nation Address to the Federal Assembly on 1 March, 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted the Avangard missile complex with the maneuvering warhead. As the president noted, "the vehicle approaches the target like a fireball" while "being reliably guided." Strategic Missile Force Commander Sergei Karakayev

said later on 1 March that the trials of the Avangard missile complex had been successfully completed.

According to Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yuri Borisov, the Avangard system was "well tested," although it took great efforts to develop it. According to the defense official, the problem of guiding the vehicle and the issues of its protection were quite acute but solutions were found while the practical tests of this system "confirmed the operability of the approach that was selected."—Tass ■

IMF chief warns 'no winners' in trade wars

BUENOS AIRES — International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde cautioned the United States against putting up barriers to trade in an interview published on Sunday.

"Trade wars leave no winners," she said in the interview with Argentine daily *La Nacion*, responding to a question about President Donald Trump's decision to slap tariffs on imported steel and aluminum.

She said poor countries and poor people in rich countries have benefited from the surge in global trade over the past decade, but acknowledged that

some regions and industries have suffered.

"The effect generated by innovation and trade should be taken into account to remedy that harm, but trying to reduce trade or erect additional barriers won't generate any winners," she said.

Lagarde is in Buenos Aires for a meeting Monday and Tuesday of G-20 finance ministers and central bank presidents.

She said the global economy is in good shape, with 3.9 per cent growth projected this year as well as higher levels of investor confidence.

"That doesn't mean there aren't some clouds on the horizon that we should pay attention to," she said.

Trump's sudden decision earlier this month to impose a 25 per cent tariff on steel and 10 per cent on aluminum has revived fears of a trade war.

He has since extended temporary exemptions to Mexico and Canada, pending renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement.

But the European Union has threatened retaliatory tariffs on US goods unless it is exempted. South Korea also



Argentina's President Mauricio Macri (R) meets with IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde at Olivos presidential residence in Olivos, Buenos Aires on 16 March, 2018. PHOTO: AFP

is seeking an exemption and China has warned it won't stand idly by if its interests are harmed.

Lagarde noted the rise of China as an investor in Latin America, saying it was only natural that the world's second

largest economy would seek partnerships in the region.

"Any country like the United States or Europe might have thought in the past of this region as part of its territory, and (they) are now surprised because it no longer is," she said.—AFP ■

Peace, unity, harmony at core of India's philosophies: PM

JAIPUR — Peace, unity and harmony are at the core of various philosophies in the country, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a message on Monday as a 'chadar' was offered on his behalf at Sufi saint Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti's shrine at Ajmer Sharif.

Union Minister for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi visited the dargah to offer a 'chadar' on Modi's behalf.

Modi conveyed his greetings to followers of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in India and abroad on the occasion of the 806th annual Urs in his message.

Peace, unity and harmony is at core of various philosophies in the country, Sufism is also one of them. When we talk of



Prime Minister Narendra Modi. PHOTO: PTI

Sufi saints in India, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti appears as a symbol of great spiritual traditions.

The service of humanity made by 'Gharib Nawaz' will continue to be

an inspiration for future generations, Modi said.

On the occasion of the annual Urs of the great saint, Modi said he wished for "harmonious co-existence" of various aspects of

Indian culture.

Greetings and best wishes to the followers of Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti across the world on the annual Urs, he added.—PTI ■

Alibaba doubles investment in SE Asia e-commerce firm

BEIJING — Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba said on Monday it will appoint one of its founders as head of Lazada and inject another \$2 billion into Southeast Asia's leading online shopping firm, boosting its regional expansion.

Alibaba, which already owns 83 per cent of Lazada with two investments totalling \$2 billion as of June last year, has been trying to acquire both online and offline assets to further bolster its business.

Lazada operates in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam and has 560 million consumers in the region.

One of Alibaba's

founders, Lucy Peng, will take over as chief executive officer of Lazada. Peng is already chairwoman of the Southeast Asia firm. "With a young population, high mobile penetration and just 3 per cent of the region's retail sales currently conducted online, we feel very confident to double down on Southeast Asia," Peng said. Lazada founder Max Bittner said Alibaba's "new commitment of capital and resources is good for Lazada and good for the Southeast Asia e-commerce market".

Peng is also the chairwoman and chief executive of Alibaba's affiliate Ant Financial, which is planning a separate public offering.—AFP ■

Two Vietnamese drown in attempt to illegally enter Taiwan

TAIPEI(China) — Two Vietnamese drowned while attempting to enter Taiwan illegally along with three others, the island's coast guard said on Monday. The Coast Guard Administration said its radar system picked up a small object moving quickly off the coast of Taitung County, eastern Taiwan, at 2:17 am and dispatched a patrol team to investigate.

The object turned out to be a speedboat that transported the five Viet-

namese — three women and two men — close to the coast and then transferred them to rubber dinghy, according to local media.

The dinghy reportedly capsized about 20 metres from shore, throwing all its occupants into the sea. Two of the Vietnamese drowned, while the three others were arrested on land, along with two Taiwanese men, according to the coast guard.—Kyodo News ■

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Damaged cargo will be surveyed daily from 8 am to 11:20 am and 12 noon to 4 pm to Claim's Day now declared as the third day after final discharge of cargo from the Vessel.

No claims against this vessel will be admitted after the Claims Day.

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No claims against this vessel will be admitted after the Claims Day.

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No claims against this vessel will be admitted after the Claims Day.

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M.V MCC SHANGHAI VOY. NO. ()

Consignees of cargo carried on M.V MCC SHANGHAI VOY. NO. () are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on 20-3-2018 and cargo will be discharged into the premises of M.I.T.T where it will lie at the consignee's risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

Damaged cargo will be surveyed daily from 8 am to 11:20 am and 12 noon to 4 pm to Claim's Day now declared as the third day after final discharge of cargo from the Vessel.

No claims against this vessel will be admitted after the Claims Day.

**SHIPPING AGENCY DEPARTMENT
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Tales of terror echo round African arts extravaganza

ABIDJAN, IVORY COAST — Very modern tales of religious intolerance, Islamist terrorism and illegal immigration are being heard as African story-tellers tackle the burning issues of today far from the traditional bedtime stories for children.

Story-telling had top billing this week at the 10th edition of the biannual Market for African Performing Arts, known by its French acronym MASA.

About 1,000 artists from over 50 countries gathered in Ivory coast for a week-long festival of music, theatre, dance, comedy, slam poetry and story-telling that wrapped up on Saturday.

Francois Moise Bamba addressed religious intolerance in his performance “No one has a monopoly on God”.

“We have done nothing wrong except say like you that there is only one God,” the story-teller from Burkina Faso says.

“Faith only has value if it leaves room for doubt.”

The leading character in the tale constantly shifts happily and with ease from one religion to another; Catholicism to Islam and Protestantism.

The show struck a chord coming just after eight soldiers were killed on 2 March in the Burkina capital Ouagadougou.

“The inspiration... came well before that,” Bamba admits.

“Every family has stories similar to mine in which my father was a Muslim before becoming



Story-telling had top-billing this week at the 10th edition of the biannual Market for African Performing Arts. A thousand artists from over 50 countries gathered in Ivory coast for a week-long festival. **PHOTO: AFP**

a Christian and I’ve lived with Christian uncles, Muslim uncles and that’s not caused any problem.

“When things such as ‘Islamist’, ‘fundamentalist’ terrorism started I thought ‘you have to do something, you have to say something’,” he says.

“I did not think it possible that someone from Burkina could follow such philosophies, but unfortunately today we see it can happen.”

-Odyssey of illegal immigration-

For Bamba and his team

“Murmurs at the Blacksmith’s”, it became clear there had to be a story on the subject or face living life in an intolerant society.

“I was afraid for a while, but my fear went when I saw they (jihadists) find people having breakfast, peacefully using public transport. They do not choose” who they kill, he says.

Murmurs at the Blacksmith’s perform stories across a range of modern-day issues.

“We try to address topical things, things about the lives we lead today. The stories have a wisdom that transcends time.

You have to use words and actual facts to reach” people,” says Bamba. Obin Manfei who ran the story-telling programme at MASA, analyses the story. “A tale is not just an old story. It’s about adapting the story to society through words,” he says. “There’s the skeleton (of the story) on which to hang the message you want to convey. “The themes are very modern,” he says quoting another Burkina story-teller known as KPG. KPG’s performance called “Kossyam” after the name of the presidential palace in Ouagadougou evokes democratic aspira-

tions and the popular uprising that overthrew the regime of Blaise Compaore in 2014.

During MASA week one of the best-known story-tellers, Ahmed Bouzzine, turned to something of a classic about a Tuareg prince.

- Writing the legends of today

But he does not hesitate to address the big issues of the day and has penned a tale on illegal African immigration to Europe.

“We try to write the legends of today and what will be told in 100 or 1,000 years,” he says.

“I have worked on everything to do with illegal, everything to do with migrants. If we are not there for the story of these people who drown in the Mediterranean or these people who are forced to hide day and night.

“In 1,000 years, we will perhaps be able to tell of this odyssey in an artistic way, because we are talking of an odyssey.”

The role of women in society, corruption, economic development without social progress, youngsters with nothing to do — the subjects are numerous.

But as Bouzzine points out, in any story, however modern, there is always a common initiatory thread. “In any initiation, you teach your neighbours to have values that are always beautiful values, loyalty, goodness, generosity, keeping your word.

“Because if not, very quickly barbarity returns.”—AFP ■

‘Black Panther’ clings to lead, nears an all-time record

LOS ANGELES — Digging in its claws, “Black Panther” has clung to its box-office lead for a fifth straight weekend, taking in an estimated \$27 million in North American theaters while fending off two new films, website Exhibitor Relations said Sunday.

The Disney/Marvel superhero film has now earned a domestic total of just over \$600 million while becoming the first film since “Avatar” in 2009 to hold the top spot for five straight weekends.

“Black Panther,” starring Chadwick Boseman as the superhero king of a utopian African country, has almost singlehandedly kept the year’s box office total slightly above the same period last year. It is only days away from overtaking another Marvel film, “The Avengers,” as the all-time



Chadwick Boseman, seen here in a file photo from January, plays the titular superhero in ‘Black Panther,’ which is continuing to dominate in North American theaters. **PHOTO: AFP**

top-grossing superhero film in North America, Variety reported.

It easily fended off a challenge from Warner Bros.’ newly released “Tomb Raider,” an adventure reboot starring Swedish actress Alicia Vikander as the fearless and ferocious Lara Croft. The movie, also starring Dominic

West and Kristin Scott Thomas, netted \$23.5 million for the three-day weekend.

In something of a surprise, third place went to a low-budget, faith-based drama, “I Can Only Imagine,” which took in \$17.1 million — the biggest net ever for a film from Roadside Attractions.

Made for a modest \$7 million, the movie stars J. Michael Finley as the lead singer of a popular Christian band. Dennis Quaid and Cloris Leachman also star.

In fourth, down two spots from last week, was Disney’s science fantasy adventure “A Wrinkle in Time,” at \$16.6 million, a 50 percent drop from last weekend. “Wrinkle,” the story of a girl’s search through time and space for a missing father, stars Storm Reid, Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon and Chris Pine.—AFP ■

Salman Khan unveils ‘Race 3’ character poster

MUMBAI — Superstar Salman Khan on Monday shared his character poster from his much-awaited film “Race 3”.

The actor, whose character is named Sikander in the film, took to Twitter to reveal his first look.

“Is hafte milata hoon Race3 ki family se... Mera naam hai Sikander (I will introduce you to my Race 3 family this week... My name is Sikander). Selfless over selfish,” Salman tweeted.

The film directed by di-

rector-choreographer Remo D’Souza will hit theatres on Eid in June.

It also features Jacqueline Fernandez, Bobby Deol, Daisy Shah, Anil Kapoor and Saqib Saleem

The previous two installments of the action-thriller franchise had Saif Ali Khan as the main lead but for the third part the makers roped in Salman, 52. Remo D’Souza has taken over the project from director duo Abbas-Mustan.

—PTI ■

Facebook sorry for blocking Delacroix masterpiece over nudity

PARIS — Facebook admitted on Sunday making a mistake after it banned an advert featuring French artist Eugene Delacroix's famous work, "Liberty Leading the People," because it depicts a bare-breasted woman.

The 19th-century masterpiece was featured in an online campaign for a play showing in Paris when it was blocked on the social networking site this week, the play's director Jocelyn Fiorina said.

"A quarter of an hour after the advert was launched, it was blocked, with the company telling us we cannot show nudity," Fiorina said.

He then posted a new advert with the same painting with the woman's breasts covered with a banner saying "censored by Facebook", which was not banned.

Delacroix's subject who brandishes a French flag in the painting is not just any woman — she's Marianne, a national



Eugene Delacroix's famous painting, "Liberty Leading the People", was temporarily banned on Facebook because it depicts a bare-breasted woman. **PHOTO: AFP**

symbol of the French Republic.

Fiorina had already tried twice before in June without suc-

cess to use the painting, which once featured on a franc bank note, in publicity for the theatre.

But by Sunday the US social media giant had a change of heart and apologized "for this error".

"The work 'Liberty Leading the People' rightly has its place on Facebook... We have immediately informed the user that his sponsored publicity is henceforth approved," Facebook manager in Paris Elodie Larcis said in a statement.

"In order to protect the integrity of our service, we verify millions of publicity images each week and sometimes we make mistakes," she said.

With over one billion users, Facebook is often challenged over its authorisation or not of content on its site.

On Thursday, a Paris court threw out a case brought by a French teacher who wanted to sue Facebook over his claims that his page was censored when he posted a nude painting by Gustave Courbet.

The court however added that Facebook had made "a mistake" in not specifying to the user the reasons for its move.—AFP

Russia's Arctic: The only place in Europe where one can find diamonds

ARKHANGELSK—Russia's Arkhangelsk Region is the only place in Europe, where diamonds are found. The region has two deposits, which are developed actively. One of them is the Lomonosov field, which is some 100km from the region's capital, Arkhangelsk.

A TASS correspondent went to the deposit to see how "a girl's best friends" are found.

History of Arkhangelsk diamonds

It takes about a couple of hours to get from Arkhangelsk to the deposit named after Lomonosov. The deposit's owner is Severalmaz, a part of Alrosa - the world's leading diamond miner.

The road is crossing the scenic taiga. We stop at a checkpoint to be allowed to the field. All our belongings are inspected, like luggage at airports, then we are checked with an introscope, and then we undergo the breath alcohol test.

"Exhale into the breathalyzer," the guard at the entrance tells us, waiting for the green light to appear. The deposit is an alcohol-free area.

Until the 1930s, nobody could imagine diamonds may be found in Europe. Geologists began to



PHOTO: TASS

eye an option when construction of defense facilities began in Severodvinsk, though the exploration could begin only in the late 1960s. The kimberlite pipe, which could contain the hardest stones, was found along the White Sea. Here, the geologists also found diamonds' companions pyropes, and eventually first diamonds were found much later — only in 1980 — in the amounts, which proved production there would be possible.

Exploration's three stages

The time between the deposit was found to the first European diamonds was 25 years.

Severalmaz's Director General Andrei Pismennyi says it takes processing about one tonne of the ore to find one carat. The company nowadays produces about 4.2 million carats.

The production is in the pit. Before going down, we receive the security instruction: no approaching the vehicles, watch the feet — do not slip and do not take anything off the ground. Everyone wears a helmet, and a Kamaz heavy truck takes us down to the pit's middle, from where the scale becomes more than evident. The pit is about 130 metres deep.

"We are in the pit of the

Karpinskogo-1 pipe - it is not the biggest pipe, and the pit's diameter is about 800 meters, while its target depth would make 320 meters," the director said. "The hydro-geology conditions here are complicated: the water inflow is about 400 cubic meters an hour. If you look at the pit's bottom - pump stations are working down there."

On the pit's bottom we see the kimberlite - the soil, which contains diamonds. It is greenish. Huge excavators are digging it out, and from the top, where we are, the giant diggers and trucks look like toys. Every truck carries 100 tonnes of ore at a time.—Tass

Picasso and Condo works exhibition to open in Hong Kong

HONG KONG—Sotheby's Hong Kong will present "Face-Off: Picasso and Condo" exhibition later this month to showcase 42 works by the two prodigious artists, Pablo Picasso and George Condo.

The exhibition on 16-31 March will include 19 works by Picasso, making it one of the largest exhibitions of works by Picasso. "This exhibition is our debut crossover show, and we are honored to present the visionary spirit of these two artistic giants at the height of Hong Kong's art calendar year, adding yet another remarkable highlight to the vibrant local art scene," Jonathan Wong, Sotheby's gallery director, told the media on Thursday.

Portraiture is considered critical in the oeuvre of both Picasso and Condo. Picasso's works to be displayed this time include Maya with the Boat, Head of Marie-Thérèse, and Man with a Pipe. Condo's works include The Priest, Princess, and The Escaped Hippie.

"By bringing Picasso's works together with those of contemporary artist George Condo, we have created a dialogue and synergy between titans from two distinctly different periods," said Jasmine Chen, a specialist on contemporary art.—Xinhua

Myanmar Lethwei fight in Maungtaw to honour 73rd anniversary of Armed Forces Day

By Kyaw Htike Soe

THE final line-up for a traditional Lethwei event in Maungtaw, Rakhine State was announced on 16 March.

The fight titled “Myanmar Traditional Lethwei Challenge” will be held at Town Hall in Maungtaw at 12 noon on 27 March to honour the 73rd anniversary of Armed Forces Day. It dates back to the resistance against Japanese occupation in 1945. Maungtaw gets a great headliner in Thway Thit Win Hlaing vs Saw Ba Oo.

They faced each other before in the World Lethwei Championship.

It ended up in a draw, but due to the judges decision Saw Ba Oo lost. This time it will be under full traditional rules.

The female Lethwei bouts under Myanmar traditional Lethwei rules will also take place. Also on the card are Linn Yon May and Naw Ohnmar Soe.

Both have been making a name for themselves and a breakthrough seems around the corner.

May was scheduled to appear on a One Championship card but due to some complications May's name was removed from it.

There will be ten other bouts with up and coming fighters during the event. Myanmar Traditional Boxing Federation and National Development Company Group Ltd will jointly organize the Lethwei fight with the endorsement of the Ministry of Health and Sports. ■

Yamanaka wins 1st defence of WBO minimumweight crown

KOBE — Japan's Ryuya Yamanaka defended his WBO minimum-weight crown for the first time on Sunday, defeating Mexico's Moises Calleros by technical knockout.

The fight was the last of two world title fights at Kobe's Portopia Hotel, where Japan's Reiya Konishi failed in his first attempt at a world title.

Calleros, the fourth-ranked contender, suffered a cut around the nose from a wicked right in the second round, and gradually got the worse of the 22-year-old champ's sharp combinations.

By the eighth round, Calleros had little fight left in him and then threw in the towel. Yamanaka, who won the title last August, improved to 16-2 with five wins by knockout. Calleros' record fell to 28-9 with one draw.

“Frankly speaking, I've never felt more relieved after a fight,” Yamanaka said.

Fighting for the WBA's vacant light flyweight title, Konishi,



Japan's Reiya Konishi (L) takes a punch from Venezuela's Carlos Canizales in their fight for the WBA vacant light flyweight title in Kobe on 18 March, 2018. **PHOTO: KYODO NEWS**

the second-ranked contender lost a unanimous decision to Venezuela's Carlos Canizales, the No 1 contender.

Konishi, 24, was knocked down in the third round and ral-

lied but could not win the late rounds he needed to sway the decision. The loss was Konishi's first in 16 pro fights. Canizales improved to 20-0 with one draw. —Kyodo News ■

Messi shines again as Barca down Bilbao, Atletico beaten

MADRID — Lionel Messi delivered another masterful performance as Barcelona sailed past Athletic Bilbao 2-0 on Sunday to take an 11-point lead over nearest rivals Atletico Madrid in La Liga.

After putting Chelsea to the sword in the Champions League midweek, Messi scored for the sixth game in a row against Athletic at the Camp Nou to propel Barca closer to the domestic title.

“Every day he discovers something new, something different, he's very aware of what he has to do, what the team needs from him at each moment,” Barca coach Ernesto Valverde said of Messi, the Spanish league's leading scorer this season with 25 goals.

“Many times it seems that the coach has to teach the players, but what the coach really does is learn alongside them as things go on. We hope to keep on learning together.”

A dominant start from Barca yielded the opening goal after just eight minutes as Messi found Jordi Alba out on the left, his pull back neatly side-footed into the far corner by Paco Al-



Masterful Lionel Messi. **PHOTO: AFP**

cacer, filling in for the suspended Luis Suarez.

The hosts looked a constant threat early on and Philippe Coutinho was denied a second when he rattled the woodwork, while Ousmane Dembele should have done much better with just

Kepa Arrizabalaga to beat.

But the Athletic goalkeeper was powerless to keep out a crunching low drive from Messi on the half hour, the Argentine taking a touch to control a pass from Dembele before lashing home.

Coutinho, the club's record signing, struck the woodwork for a second time as he tried to lob Kepa after latching onto a clever lofted pass from Paulinho, who then smacked a curling shot of his own against the upright.

- Record of invincibility nears -

Barca extended their unbeaten La Liga run to 36 matches dating back to last season, drawing to within two games of the record set Real Sociedad between 1979 and 1980.

“I would love to (break the record) but why carry on talking about it if we can lose, win or draw the next game,” Valverde said. “We're not going to tempt fate. The next match in Seville will be a very difficult trip.” Second-placed Atletico effectively surrendered their hopes of overhauling Barca at the top, as two late goals from 20-year-old Turkey striker Enes Unal handed Villarreal a 2-1 victory over Diego Simeone's side.

Antoine Griezmann converted a first-half penalty after he was impeded by Jaume Costa, before Koke hit the post.

But Unal headed in an 82nd-minute equaliser for the

hosts and turned home a stoppage-time winner as Villarreal climbed up to fifth.

Real Madrid can reclaim third place from Valencia at home to Girona later on Sunday.

Earlier, Sevilla crashed to a 2-1 league defeat to Leganes just days after pulling off the surprise elimination of Manchester United in the Champions League.

The loss means Sevilla are increasingly unlikely to qualify for the Champions League through La Liga this season. Unai Bustinza put Leganes ahead four minutes before half-time with a superb header in their Butarque stadium in the Madrid suburbs. Javi Eraso doubled the lead in the 69th minute.

Mexican international Miguel Layun pulled a goal back for Sevilla in the 90th minute when he was fed by the scorer of both goals in the triumph at Old Trafford, French striker Wissam Ben Yedder.

Sevilla face a torrid few weeks with leaders Barcelona next up in La Liga on 31 March before they host Bayern Munich on 3 April in the first leg of the Champions League quarter-finals.—AFP ■