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WELCOME TO RAKHINE

MNA opens new routes to western Rakhine State



Grand Cravan Cessna aircrafts are landed at newly opened Manaung Airport. PHOTO: SUPPLIED BY MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT

Aye Min Soe

UPON the opening of a new airport in Manaung, Rakhine State, Myanmar National Airlines (MNA) launched its maiden flights to several destinations in western Rakhine State.

Manaung Airport (Samonete), which was recently upgraded to include a 2000-foot runway, was opened yesterday. Union Minister for Transport U Nyan Tun Aung, Chief Minister of Rakhine State U Mya Aung and other officials attend-

ed the opening ceremony, which also introduced the new Yangon-Manaung-Kyaukphyu-Sittway route and a new Grand Cravan Cessna aircraft.

The airport, whose runway is 4,000 feet long and 100 feet wide, was constructed at a cost

of nearly K4.2 billion (US\$3.2 million).

There are plans to extend the runway another 3,000 feet.

Flights on the new route are scheduled every Monday and Friday. MNA has also offered chartered flights to the afore-

mentioned destinations, offering aerial views of beautiful beaches along the Rakhine coast.

MNA aims to provide easy travel options to the Rakhine State, where local people are currently relying on waterways to travel between towns.—GNLM



Light trucks parked at an unofficial auto market in Yangon. PHOTO: NAY LIN

Right - hand drive cars restricted

AUTO sales have become sluggish following the new vehicle import policy issued by the Road Transport Administration Department, according to an auto dealership in Hlaing township, Yangon Region.

"Prices are going up for right-hand-drive cars while the sales of left-hand-drive cars are at a stand still," Ko Tun Tun, an auto dealer said, adding that the price rises ranges from K500,000 to K1 million.

The department introduced a new import rule for 2016 that bars

the imports of right-hand-drive cars, saying that the measure is aimed at easing traffic congestion and improving traffic safety.

The left-hand-drive vehicles are more compatible with the existing traffic systems in the country, according to economic adviser to the Minister for Commerce Dr Maung Aung.

The Road Transport Administration Department said it would permit imports of brand new left-hand-drive vehicles as of 2016.—*Min Thit*

Cauliflower farmers eyes organic market

LOCAL farmers in Seikphyu Township are seeking opportunities to penetrate the organic produce market with their pesticide-free crops.

While harvesting cauliflowers which were grown nearly organically except for the use of some pesticides when the plants are young, the farmers have pinned hopes on the organic market for higher income from their crops.

“When an organic market booms, we are ready to practice fully organic methods, said a farmer from Chaungmagyi Village in Seikphyu Township.

The farmers uses cow manure and waste from sesame oil mills after the mills are done producing edible oil from it.

As part of efforts for encouraging organic crops in the country, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation set up an modern organic farm in Nay Pyi Taw, educating farmers across the country about organic farming. — *Soe Lin Naing (IPRD)*



Cauliflower farming in Seikphyu Township.
PHOTO: SOE LIN NAING

Traditional martial arts wants to kick start interest



Children learn Myanmar traditional martial arts in Mandalay.
PHOTO: THIHA KO KO

THE Myanmar Martial Arts Sub-Committee of Mandalay Region plans to promote public interest in traditional martial arts through a wide range of activities, said trainer U Aung Naing Tun.

“As a first step, we made arrangements to spread the country’s martial arts among people in Mandalay as a sport,” he added.

“The new programme is being drafted for the benefit of all people, especially women and the elderly, to correct their misunderstandings about martial arts. Most of people think only young people can perform martial arts,” he said.

U Aung Naing Tun added: “We will educate people on the

important role of martial arts in helping people maintain their physical health and fitness.”

Martial arts instructors are now working to disseminate traditional combat practices among local young people, another trainer said.

As part of this effort, a two-week basic martial arts training programme was opened at the Aungmye Mandalay Sports Ground in Mandalay Region free of charge, with the organisers planning to organise trainings in the townships throughout the region. Myanmar’s traditional martial arts known as ‘Thaing’ is expected to be popular again among the youths in the future, said a trainer. — *Thiha Ko Ko*

New School building handed over

A NEW school building dedicated to the fallen Japanese soldiers of WW II and school-furniture have been donated by a Japanese company.

Representatives handed the building over to officials of the Basic Education Department at No. 80 Basic Education Primary School at Nyaungbinshio village in Meiktila Township on Wednesday.

During the handing over, an official of the Township General Administrator Department made a speech and an official of the Township Education Department spoke words of thanks to the donors.

On the behalf of the donors, Daw Thida, project manager of AMDA, said the aim of the Ici-yoshi company of Japan’s donation in Meiktila Township was to

memorialise the fallen Japanese soldiers of the WWII and the locals of Meiktila who sheltered and provided care to wounded and fleeing Imperial Japanese Army troops.

Documents relating to the new school building and the extended building were handed over to the Headmistress Daw Yin Myaing of BEPS No.80. — *Thein Myint Kyaw (Meiktila)*

Cultivation and production of opium decreases for two consecutive years

THE Myanmar government has announced that the cultivation and production of opium in Myanmar has dropped for two consecutive years.

According to statistics from the UNODC, the cultivation of opium dropped from 57,800 hectares in 2013 to 57,600 hectares in 2014 and production slipped from 870 metric tons to 670 metric tons during the same period.

In 2015 the cultivation of opium continued to decrease to 55,500 hectares and production went down to 647 metric tons.

The decrease was due to cooperation among the Central Committee for Drug Control and Elimination, different levels of administrative bodies, armed ethnic groups, international organisations and civil society organisations. — *Myanma News Agency*



In this file photo, members of local battalion and people in eastern Shan State destroyed poppy plants. PHOTO: AH BYAY

Human trafficking penalties to remain unchanged

Human trafficking can be combatted by raising wages

Khaing Thanda Lwin

NO plans have been made to increase penalties for people involved in human trafficking, as the country's current Anti-trafficking in Persons Law was written based on the laws of the ASEAN countries, said Police Col Khin Maung Hla of the Anti-trafficking in Persons Division.

The range of penalties for human trafficking offenders is described in sections 24, 25, 26 and

27 of Chapter 9 of the Anti-trafficking in Persons Law, enacted in 2005.

According to the law, one convicted of trafficking women, children or youths shall be sentenced to at least 10 years in prison, while a person convicted of trafficking other persons shall receive a sentence of three years.

Police Col Khin Maung Hla said those sentences are already longer than those handed down in neighbouring countries.

To amend the loopholes in all sections of the 2005 law, the Central Body for the Suppression of Trafficking in Persons, in cooperation with local and foreign experts, reviewed it throughout 2015.

Major amendments were made to Section 3 of the law. The amendments pertain to the submission of clear and convincing evidence, providing care for victims and rehabilitation programmes.

The amendments to the law will be enacted next year after they are approved by parliament, he said.

"The number of human trafficking cases will decline if the country can create more job opportunities and pay the same salary rates as in the neighbouring countries," the police colonel said.

According to official figures, more than 2,000 traffickers were brought to justice between 2006 and December of this year.



Police Col Khin Maung Hla.

Thai diplomat promises to convey protestors' demand to King of Thailand

Ko Moe

FOLLOWING a protest against the death sentence handed down to two Myanmar men, a diplomat from the Thailand Embassy in Yangon promised to convey the demands of protestors to the King of Thailand.

Mr. Chatnopol Aksorn-sawad, holding the position of Consul at the Royal Thai Embassy in Yangon, told the protestors that he would forward the demand for appeal by the Myanmar people to the King of Thailand as

soon as possible.

Ko Nyein Chan, one of five protestors who met with the diplomat at the embassy, said Mr Chatnopol told them that he can not interfere in the justice system of Thailand but he can convey the demands of the Myanmar people to the King and the people of Thailand in sympathy with the feelings of the people Myanmar and in maintaining good relations between the two countries.

The diplomat received the five protestors around 4 pm.

Hundreds gathered outside the embassy yesterday calling for

justice for the two migrant workers who received the death sentence following their conviction of the 2014 murder of two young British tourists.

According to sources, the protestors presented an open letter and a letter of protest with signatures to the Thai Embassy in Yangon. A few hours after the death penalty verdict was delivered at the Thai court on Thursday, Myanmar government officials wrote on their Facebook pages, stating that the government will assist the accused by following an appeals process.

Adequate medical care for detained student protesters discussed at meeting

THE provision of adequate healthcare services to detained protestors was the main topic at a meeting between the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission and relevant organisations.

On 23 December, delegates from the Justice Trust, All Burma Students Union, Letpadan Justice Committee and the National Network for Education Reform met with the MNHRC's members U Zaw Win, Dr Nyan Zaw, Dr Daw Than Nwe and Daw Mya Mya in Yangon.

They discussed issues relat-

ed to medical care for students and people who participated in a campaign to protest against the National Education Law over the past nine months.

Executive Director Mr Rorger Normand from the Justice Trust, member of All Burma Students Union Aung Nay Paing, U Tun Oo and Daw Khin Khin Yu from the Letpadan Justice Committee and Dr Kyaw Thu from the National Network for Education Reform participated in the discussion.—*Myanmar National Human Rights Commission*

Myo Gyi Multipurpose Dam to open on 1st January

Myo Gyi Multipurpose Dam constructed on the Zaw Gyi River in Ywa Ngan Township of Southern Shan State is scheduled to open on 1st January.

The dam is located 1 mile north of Myo Gyi Village in Ywa Ngan Township.

Union Minister for Agriculture and Irrigation U Myint

Hlaing inspected the preparation for opening the dam on 24 December.

Construction of the main dam, hydropower plant, canal and inflow of water for power generation have been completed.

Work on construction of the dam began in 2005-06. The dam will supply water to 82,000 acres of farmland currently ir-

rigated by Zawgyi Dam and 33,000 acres in Meikhtila Plain as well as will generate 30 megawatts of electricity.

Its water storage capacity is over 350,000 acre-feet and the watershed area is 725 square-miles.

The dam now has already stored over 140,000 acres feet of water.—*GNLM*

Management course for mid-level officers concluded

THE Central Institute of Civil Service (Phaunggyi) has completed the updating of the management skills of middle level officers during their one-month course.

This is the 51st time the Central Institute of Civil Service has conducted the course.

Altogether 83 mid-level officers including deputy directors and assistant directors from the

ministries and the central bodies attended the course, most of whom are men.

The conclusion ceremony took place at the Central Institute of Civil Service (Phaunggyi) in Hlegu in Yangon yesterday.

Present on the occasion were faculty members including Rector U Nyi Nyi San of the Central Institute of Civil Service and trainees.—*GNLM*



Christians gathering at Pyinmana St. Michael Roman Catholic Church sing and listen to religious Christmas songs - traditional Christmas carols. PHOTO: MNA



Baptist Church on Christmas Day in Pyinmana, Nay Pyi Taw. PHOTO: MNA

AIIB formally established in Beijing

BEIJING — The China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a complement to existing international financial system, was formally established yesterday in Beijing and expected to start operation early next year.

“The AIIB is legally established as the Articles of Agreement take effect today,” said Lou Jiwei, China’s Minister of Finance.

The Articles of Agreement outlines the financial share of each founding member as well as rules for policymaking, governance structure, and business and operational systems for the bank. It became effective once the legislatures of 17 members, who hold a combined 50.1 per cent stake in the bank, ratified the agreement.

As long as at least 10 signatories, and no less than 50 per cent of the capital contribution, obtain legislative approval, the agreement will become effective.

The establishment of the AIIB marks a milestone in the reform of global economic governance system, Lou said.

The AIIB will be operational after board of directors and executive council meet for the first time. The meetings are slated to run from 16 to 18 January in Beijing, according to Lou. The bank’s president will be officially appointed and the management team will be in place at the meetings.

The bank will start recruiting new members, Jin Liquan, the bank’s president-designate, said in an interview with Xinhua, adding that members of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) could apply to join the AIIB.

The bank will always be open to new membership, Jin said. The bank, headquartered in Beijing, now has 57 members.—Xinhua

Japan, RoK ministers to meet Monday over ‘comfort women’ issue



Flowers are placed on a memorial wall commemorating the late former South and North Korean “comfort women” at the “War and Women’s Human Rights Museum” in Seoul, South Korea, in July 2015. PHOTO: REUTERS

TOKYO — The Japanese and South Korean (RoK) governments said yesterday their foreign ministers will hold talks in South Korea on Monday in a bid to seek a breakthrough on a row

over so-called comfort women.

In Tokyo, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida made the announcement a day after being instructed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to visit South

Korea by the end of this year.

Abe agreed last month with South Korean President Park Geun-hye to speed up talks to address the issue of women, including women from the Korean Peninsula, who were procured for the Imperial Japanese Army’s wartime brothels.

Differences over the long-stalled comfort women issue had prevented Abe and Park from holding a one-on-one meeting after they took office in 2012 and 2013, respectively.

South Korea has been calling on the Japanese government to accept its legal responsibility and settle the comfort women issue in a manner acceptable to the survivors, such as through an apology and compensation.

Japan maintains that the issue of compensation was fully settled under a 1965 treaty with South Korea that normalised their diplomatic ties.—Kyodo News

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India-led efforts give boost to UNSC reforms in 2015

UNITED NATIONS — The long-pending UN Security Council reform process got a much-needed breakthrough after efforts led by India resulted in the adoption of text-based negotiations in 2015, a year that also saw the world body grappling with the emergence of Islamic State, climate change and refugee crisis.

India’s was the strongest voice among the UN membership that called for text-based negotiations to move the snail-paced UNSC reform process forward to reflect the realities of the 21st century.

Unrelenting diplomatic efforts by India and other nations resulted in a significant achievement when the General Assembly adopted by consensus in September a negotiating text that contained positions of

UN member states on Security Council reforms and how the powerful 15-nation body should be expanded in its permanent and non-permanent categories.

India termed as “historic” and “path-breaking” the adoption of the document, saying the decision put the inter-governmental process formally on an “irreversible text-based negotiations path” and changed the “dynamics” of the negotiations on achieving UNSC reforms.

The adoption of the text also gave a boost to India’s bid for a permanent seat in the revamped Council. India was among the first to seek a conclusion of the reform process by the 70th anniversary of the United Nations.

Underscoring that the pro-

cess to expand the Council “cannot be seen to be an exercise ad infinitum”, India had said a results-based timeline is crucial to achieve a concrete outcome and felt that the 70th anniversary of the UN, being commemorated this year, is an appropriate milestone to propel the reform process, which should be completed within the next one year.

The 70th anniversary of the UN also provided an opportune platform for the world leaders to come together and hammer out solutions to tackle growing global challenges of terrorism, sustainable development and climate change.

The ambitious 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda that aims to end poverty, hunger and assure gender equality and build a life of dignity for all

over the next 15 years was adopted in the presence of world leaders including Pope Francis and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Modi also made a strong for “climate justice” in his address to world leaders at the high-level sustainable development summit in September as he underlined the need for common but differentiated responsibility in tackling climate change and for assuring equity for developing countries, who he said should not be condemned for their developmental activities.

Modi’s call for climate justice formed the bedrock for India’s negotiations at the crucial Climate Change Summit in Paris earlier this month when after two weeks of intensive negotiations.—PTI

Nepal seeks China’s support to escape energy crisis

BEIJING — Nepal’s foreign minister asked China yesterday for help in dealing with an energy crisis that crippled the landlocked country over the past three months and China said it would look at the request favourably.

The Himalayan nation, which serves as a natural buffer between China and India, adopted its first post-monarchy constitution in September hoping this would usher in peace and stability after years of conflict. But for the last three months, protesters have blocked trucks coming in from

India, leading to acute shortages of fuel and medicine. Nepal has blamed New Delhi for siding with the protesters, a charge India denies.

Speaking in Beijing after meeting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Nepali Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa said he had asked China to consider the long-term trade in petroleum products.

“I’m very happy to note the government of China has instructed the concerned petroleum export authority to be in touch and discuss issues related

with the long-term trade of petroleum products with Nepal,” he told reporters. Wang, standing next to Thapa, said China was willing to look at ways with Nepal to help resolve its energy problems.

Nepal had been almost totally dependent on India for overland supplies following earthquakes this year that killed nearly 9,000 people and blocked crossings from China.

China reopened a border crossing with Nepal in October and said it was using it to send in the supplies.

Old rivals India and China

have used aid and investment to court Nepal for years.

“For Nepal, there is no need to play each other. We have our own type of relations with India. Similarly, we have our special relations with China.

So, I think we are very happy with that and will continue in future with that, strengthening relations with both countries,” Thapa said.

Wang said Nepal could become a place for win-win cooperation between China and India, rather than “a sports field for competitive games”.—Reuters

As Islamic State threat mounts on its doorstep, Indonesia scours a jungle



A police billboard showing a list of individuals, including the country's top militant Santoso (top L), wanted in relation with terrorism cases in Poso, Indonesia's Central Sulawesi Province, on 19 December.

PHOTO: REUTERS

POSO — Indonesian forces are mobilising for a manhunt in steamy jungles on the far-flung island of Sulawesi to flush the country's most-wanted man from his hide-out and deal a pre-emptive blow to Islamic State. The real threat could be much closer to home.

Militant leader Santoso, the first Indonesian to publicly pledge loyalty to the radical jihadist group that holds swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq, has eluded capture for years. He has until 9 January to surrender.

But while the army girds for action just south of the equator, alarm bells are ringing in the

capital, Jakarta.

Raids by security forces across the populous island of Java last week netted several Islamic State supporters and foiled a string of attacks. Police said the men arrested were just foot-soldiers and their leaders are still on the run, plotting attacks on government leaders, officials and buildings.

Sidney Jones, a Jakarta-based expert on Islamist militants at the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict, says there is only a slim chance in Indonesia of an Islamic State attack like last month's bloodshed in Paris, but the threat is growing under the government's

nose. "While the police and army have been focussed on going after Indonesia's most-wanted terrorist, Santoso, in the hills of Central Sulawesi, ISIS has succeeded in building a network of supporters in the suburbs of Jakarta," she wrote in a commentary last month, using a common acronym for Islamic State. She said homegrown militants have mainly targeted the police in recent years, but there may now be a shift back to Westerners and soft targets.

Australian Attorney-General George Brandis, who was in Jakarta this week to bolster security coordination, told the Australian

newspaper he had "no doubt" Islamic State was seeking to establish a "distant caliphate" in Indonesia.

Indonesia was the second most popular tourist destination for Australians in 2014-15, official data shows, with 1.12 million journeys — a large number to the resort island of Bali.

The bombing of two night-clubs in Bali that killed 202 people, mostly tourists, was among a spate of attacks during the 2000s in Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population.

Police have been largely successful in destroying domestic militant cells since then, but they now worry the influence of Islamic State could bring a return of jihadi violence.

Officials believe there are over 1,000 Islamic State supporters in Indonesia. Estimates of the number who have returned from Syria range from 100 to 300, though this includes women and children. The government worries that Santoso, who has run militant training camps from the tree-covered hills of the Poso regency where he hides and posts videos on radical websites, could be an ideological lightning rod for combatants returning to Indonesia.

Jones told Reuters that Santoso had developed an international reputation in Islamic State circles, with contacts among fighters in Syria. "This is one of our priorities because there are lots of networks in other areas affiliated with Santoso," said national police spokesman Agus Rianto, adding that authorities could target him because they knew roughly where he was.—Reuters

India readies plan to clean Delhi's air, but won't focus on vehicles

NEW DELHI — India is devising a plan to combat smog in the capital New Delhi, the world's most polluted city, two senior officials said, but the government is stopping short of targeting the powerful transport industry.

Instead, the plan will call for enforcing bans on what some environmentalists regard as relatively minor sources of pollution, including burning of garbage and construction dust.

The World Health Organisation said last year that 13 of the world's 20 most polluted cities were in India, with New Delhi the worst.

In the absence of concerted government action on battling pollution, courts have stepped in, banning the sale of luxury diesel vehicles and demanding a tax on trucks entering the city.

The federal plan, which the two officials said would be

made public within two weeks, will be one of the government's first attempts to come up with a broad solution to the problem.

Under the plan, they said, the government will enforce a ban on burning garbage and tyres in Delhi and its three surrounding states; require that construction sites are covered with curtains; and clean road dust.

The measures are "by and large" reiterations of older rules that have rarely been enforced, the officials said.

Environmental activists said the moves were cosmetic.

"It's a piecemeal approach," said B. Sengupta, a pollution campaigner and former government scientist, when he was told of the plan. "It will not drastically improve the air."

Experts said the city of 16 million needed a permanent ban on diesel cars, which are seen as

polluting, and other measures to reduce spiralling vehicle emissions. Campaigners are calling for steps like a parking cess and an annual tax on all cars.

"Vehicular emission is a major contributor of overall toxic pollution and is a concern due to its direct exposure to the population," said Anumita Roychowdhury, executive director of the Centre for Science and Environment think-tank. The government officials said there wasn't yet enough evidence to be sure about how much vehicular emissions contribute to pollution.

"Vehicular emission is a major contributor of overall toxic pollution and is a concern due to its direct exposure to the population."

Anumita Roychowdhury

Executive director of the Centre for Science and Environment think-tank

Evacuation order lifted for southwestern Japan island residents

YAKUSHIMA — A local government in southwestern Japan lifted an evacuation order yesterday for most of Kuchinoerabu Island nearly seven months after a volcanic eruption on the remote island with a population of about 130.

According to the local government of Yakushima in Kagoshima Prefecture, some of the islanders who have evacuated to nearby Yakushima Island will leave the same day for Kuchinoerabu, about 1,000 kilometres southwest of Tokyo.

Mt. Shindake on the island erupted on 29 May, forcing all residents to leave the island.—Kyodo News

Iran calls on China to join the fight against the Islamic State

DUBAI — China should play a more active role in fighting Islamic State, a senior figure in a body that advises Iran's Supreme Leader said on Thursday, according to the country's Fars news agency.

China relies on the Middle East for oil supplies, but tends to leave diplomacy there to other permanent members of the UN Security Council — the United States, Britain, France and Russia.

"China can significantly help the regional peace and stability by becoming more active in the fight against the Islamic State," said Mohsen Rezaei, who has the title of Secretary of the Expediency Council, after meeting members of a Chinese delegation in Tehran. China has called for greater coordination after attacks in Mali and Paris and the downing of a Russian warplane by Turkey, but has long said there is no military solution in Syria, with state media criticizing the West and Russia for air strikes. But this month a Chinese-language song purportedly released by Islamic State put Chinese officials on alert that they need closer global cooperation against Islamist militancy. Beijing warns that some members of the Muslim Uighur ethnic group, from the western region of Xinjiang, have joined Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.—Reuters

Refugee girl who cried after Merkel comments can stay in Germany

BERLIN — A 14-year-old Palestinian girl who burst into tears when Chancellor Angela Merkel told her she might be deported has been granted a residency permit to stay in Germany until October 2017, mass-selling daily *Bild* reported on Thursday.

Reem Sahwil began to cry during a televised discussion forum in July when Merkel told her that Germany could not admit everyone who wanted to live there.

Merkel stroked Sahwil on the back, drawing mockery online from critics who accused her of looking clumsy and lacking empathy. A video clip of the exchange went viral and started the hashtag #merkelstreichelt (merkelstrokes).

Sahwil has now been granted a residency permit lasting until 17 October, 2017, *Bild* said it had learned from the immigration of-

ficie in the northern city of Rostock. "Merkel's girl can stay here!" *Bild* screamed in a headline in its Thursday edition, adding that Sahwil was excelling at school and that her parents and brother could also stay.

"I am pleased that Reem's residency status has been clarified," Lorenz Caffier, interior minister for the northern state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern told *Bild*. "The period of uncertainty is over and she can stay here."

There was nobody immediately available to comment at the Rostock immigration office when contacted by Reuters.

Sahwil's crying episode was a low point this year for Merkel, who has since been named person of the year by both *Time* magazine and the Financial Times after opening Germany's borders back in August to refugees, many fleeing war in the Middle East.—Reuters



German Chancellor Angela Merkel listens to a Palestinian refugee girl who gave her name as Reem during a forum discussion organised by the Chancellery in the northern city of Rostock, Germany. PHOTO: REUTERS

Spanish don't want election re-run



Voters queue at a polling station during voting in Spain's general election in Barcelona, Spain, on 20 December. PHOTO: REUTERS

MADRID — Less than one third of Spaniards want a re-run of last Sunday's election, which resulted in a stalemate, with two-thirds favouring a pact between parties, a poll showed on Thursday.

Just seven per cent of those surveyed said they would change their votes in a fresh election, while 87.1 per cent said they would vote the same way.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's conservative People's Party (PP) won the most votes in Sunday's election but lost its parliamentary majority, with the opposition Socialists (PSOE) in second place.

Both lost ground to newcomers, the liberal Ciudadanos and

left-wing Podemos.

Only 1.4 per cent of PP supporters would change their vote in a new election while 6.8 per cent of those who backed the PSOE would vote for a different party, the poll showed.

Of those surveyed, 27 per cent said they would prefer to see Rajoy remain as prime minister while 26 per cent said Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias should replace him.

The poll of 1,200 people was carried out on Monday and Tuesday by Inyemark for the television channel La Sexta.

In his traditional Christmas address to the nation, King Felipe called for tolerance of polit-

ical diversity.

The monarch, whose approval ratings are far higher than any politician's, warned of the dangers of one group imposing its ideas on others.

"(This) has only led us historically to decadence, impoverishment and isolation. This is an error of our past which we must not commit again," he said, in an apparent reference to Spain's 1939-1975 Francoist dictatorship.

King Felipe called for economic growth which provides "dignified work ... and allows inequalities, accentuated by the depth of the economic crisis, to be reduced.—Reuters

NEWS IN BRIEF

Gypsum mine collapse traps 25 in east China

JINAN — A gypsum mine collapsed in east China's Shandong Province yesterday, trapping 25 people underground, local authorities said.

Altogether 29 people were working in the shaft when the collapse happened at about 7:56am at the gypsum in Baotai

Township, Pingyi County, a county government spokesman said.

Four had been lifted above ground, the spokesman said.

Rescuers are struggling to reach six others whose locations have been confirmed, while the

other 19 remain missing, the spokesman said.

The accident at the mine, owned by the Yurong trade company, was likely caused by another collapse that hit a neighbouring gypsum goaf, he said.

No further details were provided.—Xinhua

150,000 people displaced by floods in South America

MEXICO CITY — As many as 150,000 people were believed to have been displaced in three South American countries due to severe flooding, local media reported Thursday.

Flooding sparked by days of

torrential rain in Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina led officials to evacuate tens of thousands to shelters.

Paraguay was the worst hit of the three countries, with around 100,000 people evacuat-

ed up to Wednesday after the Paraguay River burst its banks.

The severe floods have killed five people, including four people in Paraguay and a young boy in Argentina who was electrocuted.—Xinhua

Over 100 killed in gas plant explosion in Nigeria

ABUJA — Over 100 people were killed in a gas plant explosion in Nnewi, southeastern Nigeria, local media reported Thursday.

The explosion occurred

Thursday morning local time at the Inter Corp Oil Limited plant, a subsidiary of Chikason Group, as a truck was discharging cooking gas without waiting for the manda-

tory cooling time, Vanguard daily reported.

The victims were locals who had come to fill up their gas cylinders and passersby.—Xinhua

Smoggy Christmas eve in Italy prompts emergency measures

ROME — Italy's two largest cities, Rome and Milan, adopted emergency measures on Thursday to lower air pollution levels during the Christmas season.

Ambient pollution detectors in both cities have registered high levels of micro particles dangerous to health. In some neighbourhoods the levels were over the limit for more than 50 days.

Officials in Rome had already banned the most polluting, older type of vehicles from circulating in a large part of the city.

They announced on Thursday that as of Monday, all vehicles, regardless of type or age, would be allowed to circulate only on alternating days depending on the last number of their license plates, odd on one day, even on the other.—Reuters

Gunman killed by police in shooting at US mall on Christmas Eve

WASHINGTON — A gunman has been shot dead Thursday by police who responded to reports of a shooting at a mall in Charlotte, North Carolina, US media reported.

The shooting resulted from an altercation involving a group of people inside the Northlake Mall, which was crowded with people on last-minute shopping for holiday gifts on the Christmas

Eve, according to the reports.

One person pulled a gun and opened fire and injured one of the men, various reports quoted witnesses as saying. The shooting occurred near the Apple store inside the mall.

The gunman was shot and killed by an officer from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department who responded to reports of the shooting.—Xinhua

Coalition planes pound ISIS in Iraq's Ramadi to aid attack



Smoke rises above a building during an air strike in Ramadi city, on 24 December. PHOTO: REUTERS

BAGHDAD — Coalition air forces pounded positions held by Islamic State in Ramadi on Thursday, Iraqi military statements said, in support of government troops seeking to retake the western Iraqi city and push on to drive the militants from key population centres.

Warplanes from the US-led coalition carried out 27 strikes against insurgent position in the last district they hold in the centre of the Sunni Muslim city, which lies on the river Euphrates some 100 km (60 miles) west of Baghdad, according to a military statement on state TV. The long-awaited drive to dislodge the militants from Ramadi, the loss of which in May dealt a blow to government efforts to root out Islamic State,

started early on Tuesday. Army commanders said on Wednesday the battle would take several days. If captured, Ramadi will be the second major city after Tikrit to be retaken from Islamic State in Iraq. Success would provide a major psychological boost to Iraqi security forces after the militant group seized a third of Iraq, a major OPEC oil producer and US ally, in a sweeping advance last year.

No ground advance was made on Thursday morning as the troops focused on clearing explosives, a local commander said, asking not be identified. The troops secured the vicinity of the district captured on Tuesday, Hay al-Dhubbat, TV said.

The control of major pop-

ulation centres in Iraq and Syria allows Islamic State to maintain a revenue base, controlling oil resources and large, fertile agricultural areas, and possibly plan attacks outside its core territory.

Col. Mohammed Ibrahim, a spokesman for the War Media Cell, said on Wednesday the distance to the Ramadi government complex, the target building in the city centre, is 1,700 metres (just over one mile), and the presence of civilians is slowing progress.

Progress has also been slow because the government wants to rely entirely on its own troops and not use Shi'ite militias in order to avoid rights abuses such as occurred after the recapture of Tikrit from the militants in April.

Local Sunni tribes have not been involved directly in the assault, but have been active in support activities across the province — a contrast to the US-backed Tribal Awakening campaign 10 years ago when they united to drive al Qaeda elements from Anbar. Joint operations command spokesman Yahia Rasool told Reuters on Wednesday the city would be handed over to Anbar police and local tribes after it was fully cleared and secured.

The ultimate aim for the government is to drive Islamic State from Mosul, Iraq's largest northern city, and Falluja, which lies between Ramadi and Baghdad, as well as large areas of Syria — the core of what it has declared to be a caliphate.—Reuters

Israeli forces kill four Palestinian assailants in West Bank

JERUSALEM — Israeli forces killed four Palestinian assailants in separate incidents in the occupied West Bank on Thursday, the army said, as a 12-week surge in street violence showed no sign of abating.

In the latest in a wave of almost daily assaults, a knife-wielding Palestinian hurt two guards on Thursday near a Jewish settlement in the West Bank and was shot dead, the army said.

In other locations in the West Bank, another Palestinian was shot dead while trying to stab a soldier with a screwdriver, and a third after injuring a soldier in a car-ramming, the army said.

Near Qalandia in the West Bank, Israeli troops carrying out an arrest raid shot two Palestinians who fired at them from within a crowd of rock- and petrol bomb-throwing protesters, the army said. Local medics said a Palestinian was killed and six wounded. The army said two soldiers were hurt in the incident.

Among drivers for the bloodshed have been access to a contested Jerusalem shrine, stalled peace talks and a 31 July arson by suspected Jewish zealots that killed a Palestinian toddler and his parents, an incident which Israeli authorities have not yet cleared up.—Reuters

Clashes persist in Turkey's southeast; PKK militants killed in attack on police

DIYARBAKIR — Three Kurdish rebels were killed in clashes with police in Turkey's southeastern city of Diyarbakir on Thursday, security sources said, and shots and shellfire could be heard around an area that has been focus of an army offensive against rebels.

Turkish police fired tear gas and sprayed water on hundreds of people after they attempted to march towards the city centre carrying the coffin of two Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants killed in another incident this week.

The three were killed in clashes with special forces in Diyarbakir's Yenisehir district after the PKK launched an attack on security forces, security sources said.

Four mainly Kurdish southeastern towns that have seen heavy fighting since Turkey launched an

offensive 10 days ago against the militants remained under curfew, with Diyarbakir's historic district of Sur entering its 21st day under the ban.

Figures from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) show at least 31 civilians have been killed in fighting, while state media said 168 PKK militants were killed during the campaign, backed by tanks and thousands of troops.

Turkey's mainly Kurdish southeast has been engulfed in clashes since a two-year ceasefire between the PKK and Ankara fell apart in July, reviving a conflict that has crippled the region for three decades, killing more than 40,000 people.

This time the PKK has shifted fighting from its traditional countryside bases to towns and cities, setting up barricades and digging trenches to keep security forces

away, in a battle in which civilians have also become targets.

In the southeastern town of Cizre bordering Iraq, people sat in winter sunshine while gunfire and shelling rang out from Turkish tanks pounding PKK targets inside the city. Bags of rubbish piled up on the street and children played, hopping on the barricades, Reuters TV footage showed.

Residents, banned from leaving their houses for the past 10 days in Cizre, came out to buy from street vendors.

The renewed Kurdish insurgency has aroused deep concern with Turkish leaders who see the rise of Syrian Kurdish groups backed by the United States in fighting Islamic State. Some fear the emergence from chaos in the area of a contiguous Kurdish state occupying Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian territory.

In the southeastern town of

Dargecit inside Mardin Province bordering Syria, PKK militants carried out an attack late on Wednesday on a civilian house, killing two people and wounding two others, *Hurriyet* newspaper reported. The house belonged to

relatives of ruling AK Party members, the paper said.

The PKK, which launched its insurgency in 1984, is designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.—Reuters



Plainclothes policemen react during a protest following a funeral ceremony for Kurdish militants in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir, Turkey, on 24 December. PHOTO: REUTERS

OPINION

Education reform starts with teachers

Kyaw Thura

THESE days, education plays a key role in serving as a common yardstick for measuring growth as well as an instrument of enabling the country to keep abreast of modern scientific and technological standards. It is through education that we can rejuvenate the crippled economy and ensure the moral regeneration of our people.

It is safe to assume that education is a cornerstone in major human development. In other words, money spent on education is money very well spent indeed, given its returns and benefits. We need education to look after ourselves, raise our families, do business, defend our country and most importantly of all conserve our environment.

We have witnessed first-hand the negative effects the declining education standards have had on the country's development in terms of health, culture and economy. When it comes to the education reform, nobody else plays a greater role than teachers, considering their constant close contact with students, our children. Unfortunately, the number of teachers who still stick to rote learning is not small.

Such out of date and unpractical approaches present a great barrier to our educational reform. Teachers should be aware that their insistence on rote learning

creates an environment of intimidation, coercion and blandness.

All in all, the reform in the country's education sector needs but a push in the right direction. That's why whoever cannot help should not stand in the way of educational progress. Now is the time for every teacher to play an active part in their right place by contributing to the advancement of societal values.

Write for us

We appreciate your feedback and contributions. If you have any comments or would like to submit editorials, analyses or reports please email thantunaungnlm@gmail.com with your name and title.

Due to limitation of space we are only able to publish "Letter to the Editor" that do not exceed 500 words. Should you submit a text longer than 500 words please be aware that your letter will be edited.

Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE)

Htun Tin Htun

NON-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) programmes being implemented and gradually expanded in the Republic of the Union Myanmar received greater international/national recognition, credibility and appreciation. For such great achievement, we can all be proud. All leaders and facilitators from the Myanmar Literacy Resource Center (MLRC)/Ministry of Education and the partner individual well-wishers/donors, UNICEF and International NGOs and partner local NGOs/CSOs in Myanmar and participating youth are greatly and wholeheartedly honoured for their initiatives, innovative approaches and active participation.

In fact, everyone has the right to education. As spelled out in the three separate paragraphs of Article 26, the right to education has several different facets, both quantitative and qualitative. Moreover, questions concerning its implementation are to a considerable extent bound up with questions of interpretation. 'Everyone has the right to education', the Declaration proclaims. But

what does this mean? The right to any kind of education? At any time? Who shall provide it? That these questions are not easy to answer is in part a measure of the changed circumstances in which the right to education has come to be applied. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up, only a minority of the world's young people had access to any kind of formal education, let alone a choice among different kinds, and little more than half of the world's adults could read and write a simple passage about their everyday lives. For those who drew up and adopted the Declaration, it was vital to ensure first that access to and participation in education should be universal: 'Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stag-

es', and 'Elementary education shall be compulsory'. At the same time, 'Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit'.

Educational opportunities have greatly increased in the years since the Declaration was proclaimed. A majority of the world's young people now go to school, and participation informal education beyond the elementary and fundamental stages has expanded. Four out of five adults in the world today are estimated to have at least some simple literacy skills. Although the absolute number of illiterate adults in the world is larger than it was in 1948, it is now estimated to be falling, and the percentage of illiterate adults in every region of the world has significantly declined. Yet, despite these advances, it is uncertain how much real progress has been made.

Realize that the problem is not just one of assessing trends in opportunities for access to education. The right to education was conceived from the beginning as having a qualitative as well as a quantitative aspect. 'Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms', proclaims the second paragraph of Article 26. 'It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace'. How well have these purposes been fulfilled? Are people's literacy skills, for example, whether in industrial or developing countries, adequate to enable them to participate fully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their society? And what of tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups?'

In this regard appropriate mechanisms and conditions for

the choice need to be established. There remains too the question of choice: by whom, and how, are the purposes and contents of education to be decided? 'Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children', proclaims the third paragraph of Article 26. While this of course was never intended to imply the right to choose an education that would be inconsistent with the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights itself, since Article 2 of the Declaration proclaims that 'Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration', it nonetheless recognizes that within the broad limits of Article 2, and of Article 26 itself, there can be different approaches to the purposes and contents of education. How widely today, though, have appropriate mechanisms and conditions for the exercise of such choice been established?

Lifelong learning is important so that all mankind should have easy access to learn knowledge and skills required to raise and improve the quality of their lives. There is the question of education's boundaries, indeed, the meaning of the notion of 'education' itself. If it is the case that 'the time to learn is now the whole lifetime', and that education is a 'continuum, coextensive with life', as suggested for example by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, then 'education' cannot be taken to mean just 'schooling'. While not denying the importance of schooling, the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, 1990) essentially defined 'basic education' as action designed to meet 'basic learning needs'. Yet, beyond the satisfaction of such 'needs', what is it that everyone has the right to? Any and all action designed to meet 'learning needs'? Equal opportunity to learn? Equal educational opportunity? Education throughout life? Learning throughout life? All such possibilities? These and

other related questions have all been raised at one time or another over the past half century since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed, as will be seen later in this report. They cannot really be avoided if the basic principle of 'Everyone has the right to education' is accepted. By considering the extent to which the worldwide expansion of education over the past half century, and successive stated commitments by the international community to ensure the implementation of the various aspects of the right to education, the progress towards the realization of this right needs to be emphasized.

Promote peoples' participation in education for all programmes is of useful and supportive. Every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs. These needs comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem-solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning. The scope of basic learning needs and how they should be met varies with individual countries and cultures, and inevitably, changes with the passage of time.

Responsibility to respect is important element for sustainable education development. The satisfaction of these needs empowers individuals in any society and confers upon them a responsibility to respect and build upon their collective cultural, linguistic and spiritual heritage, to promote the education of others, to further the cause of social justice, to achieve environmental protection, to be tolerant towards social, political and religious systems which dif-

fer from their own, ensuring that commonly accepted humanistic values and human rights are upheld, and to work for international peace and solidarity in an interdependent world.

It is noteworthy that another and no less fundamental aim of educational development is the transmission and enrichment of common cultural and moral values. It is in these values that the individual and society find their identity and worth.

Myanmar Quality Basic Education Programme (QBEP), representing the second phase of MDEF, builds upon its predecessor to address the urgent need for sustainable improvements in access, equity, quality and management in Myanmar's basic education sector in order to accelerate progress towards achieving Millennium Development Goal Two: "Ensure that children everywhere, girls and boys alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling." Special emphasis will be placed on ensuring children from vulnerable and marginalized areas of basic education, and to ensure that children who drop out of primary schools have a minimum education though alternative learning opportunities. In achieving the right of all children to primary education of good quality, there will be strong economic returns for individuals, their families and the wider community as well as progress in all aspects of human development, poverty reduction and towards the realisation of the full range of children's rights, thus I have learned.

About the author

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Devotees prohibited from applying gold leaves outside Alaungdaw Kathapha



A reclining Buddha image in Alaungdaw Kathapha Cave at Alaungdaw Kathapha National Park.

PHOTO: TUN KO KO (YINMARBIN)

THE BOARD of Trustees of Alaungdaw Kathapha Cave has prohibited the applying of gold leaves on the statute of Alaungdaw Kathapha and outside the cave.

The decision came about at the meeting of the Members of the Sangha from four townships in Yinmarbin District on Tues-

day.

The members also discussed the measures to be taken for the cleaning of the cave and supplying power to the cave and road.

There is at the cave a reclining figure called the Maha Kathapa or Maha Kassapa, one of Buddha's saintly disciples, and it is believed that his remains are

kept under the shrine.

The Alaungdaw Kathapha national park has an area of 1,605 square kilometers making it the largest national park in Myanmar. The park consists of the Patolon Reserve Forest and the adjoining Taungdwin Reserve Forest.— *Tun Ko Ko (Yinmarbin)*

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor

Anthropogenic pressure, rapid industrialization, unplanned infrastructure developments, pushing agricultural lands into forested areas, illegal infringement and illegal land deals under the patronage of different political parties have been seriously impacting the forest cover across South and South East Asia. While one of the largest landmass in the region, India has been celebrating positive increase in Indian forest acreage based a recent government forest survey; a dismal state of Indian forests across wildlife sanctuaries in India have been recently released by the Rediff Labs [<http://www.rediff.com/news/report/rediff-labs-are-indias-wildlife-sanctuaries-on-the-decline/20150602.htm>] in an article entitled: The real story behind the growth of India's Wildlife Sanctuaries (last updated June 3, 2015). While the Forest Survey of India survey indicates positive forest growth; the latter suggests negative growth of forests in varying degrees in different sanctuaries in every Indian states except Tamil Nadu, Mizoram and Punjab between 2006 and 2014. If in spite of stringent forest and conservation laws, highly organized forest division with regular forest surveys being conducted, monitored and studied; India has been suffering serious forest losses over the past few decades; one could well make an educative estimate of the degradation of forest resources in adjoining smaller nations across South and SE Asia. Unless a joint and comprehensive action for forest conservation is adopted by both the SAARC and ASEAN eco-zones including rehabilitation of forest resident and remote rural communities where applicable; stringent monitoring and enactment of laws preventing cross border wildlife trafficking, poaching and illegal wildlife trade very little is expected in terms of saving the majestic forest resources of South and SE Asia in the next two decades.

Thanking you

Sincerely yours

Saikat Kumar Basu

Apt 6-409, 43 Street South,

Lethbridge AB Canada T1J 4B3

Dekkhinathiri Township youths receive mechanical training

THE Rural Development Department has conducted a mechanical training course in Shwekheinn Village Tract, Dekkhinathiri Township, in order to provide youths with career opportunities.

More than 20 youths from three villages are participating in the training course, which launched on 11 December and will end on 30 December.—*Shwe Kouk Ko*

Crime News

More than 120,000 yabba pills seized



Aung Than Naing is seen with seized goods.

PHOTO: MYANMAR POLICE FORCE

ACTING on tip-off, a combined team comprising an anti-drug squad and local police searched a home in Maungdaw, Rakhine State, on Thursday and discovered 99,000 yabba pills (a synthetic-amphetamine based narcotic)

Charges have been filed against Aung Than Naing, the owner of the house, by local police.

A local anti-drug squad in Lashio discovered 55.5 grams of heroin and 5,950 yabba pills at a house in Mannar Village, Humon Village-tract, Lashio Township, on

Wednesday.

The police arrested Li Shauk Te, the owner of the house, Yan Sinyo, Hun Lauk Yun and Kyaw Htwe who were found at the scene.

Local police further seized 15,760 yabba pills hidden in a motorcycle which was en-route from Laukkai to Chinshwehaw on Wednesday.

Charges have been filed against one Tar Li, the driver of the motorcycle, and Ma Shauk Htwan a passenger, under the Anti-narcotic Act.— *Myanmar Police Force*

Four phone thieves found



Ye Win Maung, Moe Hti, Kyaw Zeya and Nay Lin Htike with evidences. PHOTO: MYANMAR POLICE FORCE

POLICE have filed charges against four men suspected of robbery, including stealing a Huawei phone and an Honor phone from a couple at Hlaingthaya Township.

Tai Kyaw alias Moe Hti, 18, Kyaw Zay Ya alias Shwe Ngar, 18, Nay Lin Htike alias Kalargyi, 18, and Ye Win Aung alias A Nge Kaung, 18, were stopped and interrogat-

ed in Hlaingthaya Township, in Shwe Than Lwin Industrial Zone, on 15 December.

An investigation led to further counts of robbery, which they committed with Ba Gyan and A Shay Gyi in Industrial Zone 2, Hlaingthaya Township, last month.

The local police station is now taking action against them.— *Myanmar Police Force*

Taxi robbers taken down

FOUR men have been charged with robbery after stealing and looting a taxi, according to the police station in Dagon Seikkan Township, Yangon Region.

On 18 December, two men allegedly hired a taxi at Mingalar Market, agreeing to pay K7,000 to get to Yuzana Garden City. Upon arrival to Ward 61 of Dagon Seikkan Township, the two men asked the taxi driver to stop, with one of them wielding a knife. They took

K30,000 from the driver, as well as the driver's licence, before forcing the driver out and stealing the car. The driver informed the police station of the incident.

During the police investigation, an officer from the Pyay police station received information that a taxi was sold by 4 men in Pyay, but the buyer cancelled the deal when he learned the car had been stolen in Yangon. Police later found the car abandoned near

Nawaday Bridge, Pyay, on December 20.

Police investigated Photote (aka Zaw Min Tun), 25, and Aung Kyaw Naing, 18, at their home at Thanhlyin Township on 21 December. The two men admitted to looting and trying to sell the car with two other people.

The local police station is holding the two men while police search for the other two suspects.— *Yangon Police Force*

UK sees fastest growth in consumer lending since 2007

LONDON — Lending by British banks to consumers grew last month at its fastest rate in more than eight years, the British Bankers' Association said on Thursday, figures which are likely to catch the attention of the Bank of England.

Overall consumer credit lending rose by 5.7 per cent in the 12 months to November, the fastest rise since March 2007.

The BoE has said it is watching credit growth as Britain's economic recovery goes into its third year.

But officials say they do not believe Britain's recovery is over-reliant on borrowing and they have not yet introduced higher capital requirements for banks.

Howard Archer, an economist with IHS Global Insight, noted the faster consumer lending figures came a day after official data showed a fall in Britain's household savings ratio to its equal lowest rate since 1963.

"This will fuel concern that consumers are borrowing more and saving less to finance their spending, which is likely a consequence of relatively high consumer confidence and extended low interest rates," Archer said.

The Bank of England has kept interest rates at 0.5 per cent since early 2009 and pricing in financial markets sug-



A christmas shopper walks through Covent Garden, central London on 22 December. PHOTO: REUTERS

gests that investors think it could keep them there for another year. Most economists have said they expect a first rate hike in May 2016.

The BBA figures showed that banks' net credit card lending rose to 318 million pounds from 149 million pounds in October, while lending for personal loans and overdrafts also increased.

Mortgage approvals for house purchase totalled 44,960 last month, up from 37,407 in November last year but down a touch from 45,463 in October, the BBA said.

"These statistics show the continued strength of the mortgage market, with monthly new lending higher than at any time over the past seven years,"

BBA chief economist Richard Woolhouse said.

Gross mortgage borrowing of 12.8 billion pounds in November was 28 per cent higher than a year earlier, the BBA said.

Woolhouse also said net lending to companies was expanding, particularly in the wholesale and retail sectors, as businesses took advantage of record low interest rates.

The BBA figures are a good guide for trends in broader Bank of England lending data, which will next be published on 4 January.

The BBA numbers exclude lending by mutually owned building societies, which accounts for almost a third of mortgages.—Reuters

Fiat Chrysler recalling 570,000 SUVs for fire risks

WASHINGTON — Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV said on Thursday it will recall 570,000 SUVs for fire risks in two campaigns linked to problems with vanity mirror wiring and a low-pressure hose.

Fiat Chrysler made the recalls at a time when its safety efforts are under scrutiny from US regulators. Earlier this month, it agreed to pay another \$70 million in fines for failing to report vehicle crash deaths and injuries since 2003.

The Italian American automaker said on Thursday it is recalling 477,000 2011-2012 Jeep Grand Cherokee and Dodge Durango SUVs after the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration opened an investigation in May to determine if vehicles serviced in a prior related recall were at risk for fires.

Fiat Chrysler said overheating was reported in 0.02 per cent of vehicles serviced in the previous recall. Fiat Chrysler said if the recall procedure was "not followed precisely, may leave vehicles susceptible to a short-circuit, creating a potential fire hazard."

Dealers will secure wiring in the overhead lining of the SUVs with a new adhesive.

Fiat Chrysler also said it was recalling 93,000 2015 Jeep Compass and Patriot SUVs to inspect and in some cases replace a clamp that secures a low-pressure return

hose. The company said clamps in some vehicles produced during a five-month period this year may be out of position, which could allow rapid loss of power steering fluid — a fire hazard. Owners may also have trouble steering.

The recalls cover about 413,000 SUVs in the United States, 32,000 in Canada, 16,000 in Mexico and 108,000 outside North America.

Fiat Chrysler said it is not aware of any related injuries or crashes connected to either new recall.

NHTSA earlier this month said Fiat Chrysler's failure to report crash deaths and injuries since 2003 stemmed from problems in its electronic system for monitoring and reporting safety data, "including improper coding and failure to account for changes in brand names," rather than intentionally withholding information.

In July, Fiat Chrysler agreed to a \$105 million settlement for mishandling nearly two dozen recall campaigns covering 11 million vehicles, including a \$70 million fine. It agreed to a three-year consent agreement and monitoring by former Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater.

Fiat Chrysler has recalled around 12 million vehicles this year in the United States in more than 40 separate recalls, a record for the automaker.—Reuters

Japan November factory output seen down for first time in three months

TOKYO — Japan's factory output probably fell in November for the first time in three months and retail sales also likely slipped, a Reuters poll showed, pointing to a slow recovery for the stagnant economy.

The nation's industrial production likely fell 0.6 per cent in November from the previous month, the poll of 20 analysts found, after rising 1.4 per cent in October and 1.1 per cent in September.

"Inventory adjustments have been progressing and there is some recovery in exports, while domestic demand remains weak," said Tatsushi Shikano, deputy chief economist at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley.

"It's still too early to say there's a steady recovery in factory output but I think it has already hit bottom."

The trade ministry will announce factory output figures on 28 December at 8:50am (27 December at 2350 GMT).

Retail sales data, a key gauge of consumer spending, will also be published on Monday at that time.

The poll pointed to a 0.6 per cent drop in retail sales in November from a year earlier following 1.8 per cent growth in October.

"Other consumer sales-related data such as department store sales have shown weak figures, partly due to weather-related factors," said Takeshi Minami, chief economist at Norinchukin Research Institute.

"But I think the basic trend of consumer spending is towards a recovery, since wage conditions aren't too bad, although it is not strong."



A humanoid robot works side by side with employees in the assembly line at a factory of Glory Ltd., a manufacturer of automatic change dispensers, in Kazo, north of Tokyo, Japan, in July 2015. PHOTO: REUTERS

The government plans record spending in its fiscal 2016 budget to help revive the economy, while policymakers have been putting pressure on compa-

nies to divert more of their record profits to capital spending and wages, seen as key drivers of economic growth.

Last week, the BOJ fine-

tuned its stimulus programme to ensure it can keep up or even accelerate its money-printing to achieve its inflation target.—Reuters

India adds more cancer, HIV/AIDS drugs to essential medicines list

MUMBAI — India has revised its list of essential medicines to add drugs for diseases ranging from cancer and HIV/AIDS to hepatitis C, in a move aimed at making them more affordable.

The update to the National List of Essential Medicines (NLEM) is just the third since it was compiled in 1996.

It increased the list to 376 medicines from 348 and includes drugs ranging from analgesics and antivirals to contraceptives, cardiovascular and anti-tuberculosis drugs.

Reuters reported in April that more HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis medicines were likely to be added to list, which is posted on the Central Drug Standard Control Organisation's website.

"The NLEM 2015 has been prepared adhering to the basic principles of efficacy, safety, cost-effectiveness; consideration of diseases as public health problems in India," a notice on the website said.

India had been criticised because the former list left out some life-saving drugs.

The new list takes cues from the World Health Organisation's 2015 list of essential drugs, which



Children display ribbon cut-outs tied to balloons during an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign to mark World AIDS Day in Kolkata in 2014. PHOTO: REUTERS

the United Nations agency defines as those that satisfy the priority healthcare needs of people and ensure affordability.

The revision comes after months of deliberations by a committee of experts formed by the central government last May.

Views of the pharmaceutical industry and NGOs were also considered, the CDSCO said.

The committee recommended that the list, which is effective immediately, be revised every three years.

In initial thoughts, industry

executives said they were yet to study the list's impact.

"We will be seeking clarification and a better understanding of its implications," said Ranjana Smetacek, director general of the Organisation of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI) which

represents large foreign drugmakers. The Indian Pharmaceuticals Alliance, which represents large local drugmakers, did not respond to requests for immediate comment. It is likely that medicines in the new list will be brought under price control, as was done with the previous list, some in the industry said.

Drug pricing is a contentious issue in India, where about 70 per cent of people live on less than \$2 a day and health insurance is inadequate. India contributes roughly 1 per cent of its total gross domestic product to healthcare, among the lowest levels of funding in the world. Industry executives say drug prices in India are also among the lowest in the world. India's drug pricing regulator has struggled in the past year to implement price caps and expand them to cover more drugs. When it fixed prices of about 100 medicines citing public interest last year, the industry fired back with lawsuits.

The government soon curbed the NPPA's powers, restricting it from fixing the price of medicines not on the essential medicines list.

Price caps cover roughly 30 percent of the drugs sold in India. —Reuters

China develops heavy-ion medical accelerator



PHOTO: XINHUA

LANZHOU — Chinese researchers have developed a heavy-ion medical accelerator to be used in radiotherapy for cancer, researchers said Thursday.

A recent test of the machine's beam was successful, marking the end of China's dependence on imported equipment, according to researchers with the Institute of Modern Physics under the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which is based in northwest China's Gansu Province.

The researchers said the newly-developed machine is able to accelerate carbon ion beams to 400 mega electron volts per nucleon and provide

slow and resonant non-linear extraction.

Modern day cancer radiation treatments employ heavy-ion accelerators to bombard a target with high-energy electrons to kill cancer cells.

The institute started developing the machine from May 2012 after six decades of research. Currently only one Chinese hospital, based in Shanghai, has imported the expensive equipment from abroad for cancer treatment.

As soon as the accelerator passes evaluation and inspection by the China Food and Drug Administration, clinical tests will start before the machine is finally put into full use for therapy. —Xinhua

Physical labour linked to disability after retirement

PARIS — People who toil away in physically demanding jobs may find that aches and pains follow them into retirement, limiting daily activities in their golden years, a study from France suggests.

Men who had strenuous jobs during their working years were 70 per cent more likely to experience at least some daily limitations during retirement than their peers who had not had physically demanding careers, the study found.

Women who did arduous work were 60 per cent more likely to endure limitations during retirement, the research team reports in the journal *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

"Difficult working conditions and especially biomechanical exposures during the working life are associated with pain and other negative outcomes after retirement," lead study author Dr. Alexis Descatha of the French Institute of Health and Medical Research and Versailles St-Quentin University in Garches said by email. "Prevention of bad aging starts by improving working conditions." To assess how physically demanding work might influence life in retirement, Descatha and colleagues began by reviewing survey data collected starting in 1989 from about 15,000 employees of the national gas and electric companies.

About 20 per cent of men and 22 per cent of women reported at least some physical limitations in their daily lives in 1989. Men at the

time ranged in age from 41 to 50 years old and women were 36 to 50. About 11,500 participants were followed until 2012, when they were 66 years old on average. Typically, they had retired around age 55. Among those who remained with the study through the end, about 9,300 had reported no limitations in their daily lives back in 1989. Generally, the participants who stuck with the surveys were healthier, older and reported fewer limitations and less strenuous work at the start of the study.

eases or other medical problems, for example, and then these people might also suffer fewer limitations in retirement. "A part of the results may be due to pre-retirement poor health that is not necessarily due to working conditions but due to other poor living conditions and health behaviour, such as heavy smoking and drinking, low physical activity and obesity," noted Ossi Rahkonen, a public health researcher at the University of Helsinki in Finland who wasn't involved in the study. "These employees may also

"Difficult working conditions and especially biomechanical exposures during the working life are associated with pain and other negative outcomes after retirement."

Dr Alexis Descatha

French Institute of Health and Medical Research

By the end of the study, 12 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women who had no physical difficulties in 1989 did report physical limitations. They were much more likely to do so if they had more often reported arduous labour in surveys during the intervening years.

One limitation of the study, the authors concede, is that it's possible underlying limitations may have made workers more likely to report that their jobs were physically demanding. Stronger, healthier workers might not find arduous labour as demanding as their counterparts suffering from chronic dis-

perceive their work arduous and their functioning poor after retirement," Rahkonen, added by email.

Even so, the study adds to a growing body of evidence linking work that's too physically demanding over too long a period of time to poor health outcomes in retirement, Rahkonen said. "The association between arduous work and subsequent poor functioning and health has been previously reported but this study with repeated measures over the working career confirms the results and convinces us there is an association," Rahkonen concluded. —Reuters

Pope, on Christmas, urges return to essential values

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis led the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics into Christmas on Thursday, urging those "intoxicated" by possessions and superficial appearances to return to the essential values of life.

Celebrating a Christmas eve Mass in St Peter's Basilica, Francis, whose nearly three-year-old papacy has been marked by calls for sobriety and compassion for the less fortunate, said Christmas was the time to "once more discover who we are".

He said everyone should allow the simplicity of the child Jesus, born into poverty in a manger despite his divinity, to infuse their spirit and inspire their lives.

"In a society so often intoxicated by consumerism and hedonism, wealth and extravagance, appearances and narcissism, this Child calls us to act soberly, in other words, in a way that is simple, balanced, consistent, capable of seeing and doing

what is essential," he said in his homily.

The service for about 10,000 people in St Peter's Basilica started with a long chant in Latin, known as the Kalenda, the traditional proclamation of the birth of Jesus.

The great bells of St Peter's then rang out and the pope, dressed in white vestments, kissed a statue of the infant Jesus to start the solemn Mass.

Security was tighter than normal for Christmas, with many police carrying out spot checks in the Vatican area. Everyone who entered the basilica, the largest church in Christendom, went through metal detectors.

The 79-year-old Argentine pope encapsulated in his homily some of the key themes of his papacy: mercy, compassion, empathy and justice.

"In a world which all too often is merciless to the sinner and lenient to the sin, we need to cul-



Pope Francis leads the Christmas night Mass in Saint Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on 24 December. PHOTO: REUTERS

tivate a strong sense of justice, to discern and to do God's will," he said.

Francis, who said earlier this week he had a slight flu, seemed tired and spoke with a slightly hoarse voice at times.

While not changing fundamental Church doctrine, Francis has been calling for a more merciful and less judgmental Church, one that is more compassionate towards groups such as homosexuals and the divorced who have

civily remarried.

Conservatives have criticised some of his statements, such as the now-famous "Who am I to judge" comment about homosexuals who were seeking God and had good will. The conservatives say statements like these only sow confusion among the faithful.

The pope said child Jesus was calling on everyone to rethink the way they treat others.

"Amid a culture of indifference which not infrequently turns ruthless, our style of life should instead be devout, filled with empathy, compassion and mercy, drawn daily from the wellspring of prayer," he said.

On Christmas day, Francis will deliver the traditional "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) message from the central balcony of St. Peter's Square, from where he first appeared to the world after his election on 13 March, 2013.—Reuters

Democratic presidential candidates blast US plan to deport families

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration on Thursday came under fire from Democratic presidential candidates and human rights groups for plans to intensify deportations of Central American migrants by rounding up undocumented families.

Amid a surge in the arrival of unaccompanied children and families from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, US government sources confirmed preparations to detain and deport, starting next month, families that already have been ordered to leave.

The Washington Post first reported on Wednesday that the Department of Homeland Security was considering launching the crackdown in January.

Government sources, who asked not to be identified, said

on Thursday the campaign by DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) marks an expansion from mostly targeting individuals to pursuing families with undocumented members.

A spokesman for Hillary Clinton, who is leading among Democratic candidates seeking the presidency in next November's elections, said she "has real concerns about these reports," adding it is "critical that everyone has a full and fair hearing and that our country provides refuge to those that need it."

An ICE spokesperson, asked why the agency was targeting families, said it focuses on people who pose a threat to national security, public safety and border security, "whether alone or with family members."

Senator Bernie Sanders,

chief rival to Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination, said in a statement, "Our nation has always been a beacon of hope, a refuge for the oppressed ... we need to take steps to protect children and families seeking refuge here, not cast them out."

Another of Clinton's Democratic opponents, ex-Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley, tweeted: "Holiday plans for raids to round up/deport Central American refugees fleeing death are wrong. We are a better nation than this."

Many seek asylum in the United States by claiming their governments are unable to protect them from drug-related or domestic violence.

Support for the deportations came from Republican Senator

Ron Johnson, who chairs the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee. "The primary solution to reducing this ongoing crisis is to eliminate the incentive that results from allowing 95.6 per cent of these illegal immigrants to stay — by humanely and expeditiously returning them to their home countries."

DHS has put a priority on targeting for deportation previously convicted criminals who are undocumented. But it also wants to remove recently arrived Central Americans.

Hispanic-Americans are a growing force in US politics and Democrats hope a strong turnout in November could help them, especially with Republicans campaigning on a vow to seal US borders from illegal immigrants.

Donald Trump, who leads the Republican presidential field, caused an uproar last June, accusing Mexico of sending rapists and other criminals into the United States and saying undocumented immigrants carried "tremendous infectious disease."

Frank Sharry, executive director of the pro-immigration group America's Voice, said the upcoming raids would "be a political nightmare for the Democrats."

Michelle Brané, director of the Women's Refugee Commission's migrant rights programme, said she had not received briefings from the administration. But she worried that some families facing deportation may not have had proper legal representation, especially if their cases sped through the courts.

"It's a pretty traumatic way to break in the new year," she said.—Reuters

More than money: Employees in China demand cleaner office air

BEIJING — It's not only about salaries, promotions and career prospects — many companies in China have found they need to offer cleaner air within their offices to lure and retain staff.

Air quality has deteriorated badly in China's north and east, including in Beijing and Shanghai. Companies, especially multinationals, based in these cities are spending tens of thousands of dollars to install air filtration systems and real-time pollution monitoring devices in their offices.

International market research company J.D. Power has installed new clean air systems at its Beijing and Shanghai offices, an executive said. Auditing firm PricewaterhouseCoopers and British advertising firm WPP Plc are doing the same in their premises.

"If a company is willing to reduce pollution inside, it shows it is responsible and will have good growth," said Shanghai resident Yao Hui, who has decided to leave a Chinese furniture company where she has worked for four months after finding its office had the highest category of pollution on a measurement device she used.

"I'd still have to look for something in marketing, but a clean air environment is an important factor," said the 24-year-old marketing professional.—Reuters



Immigrants who have been caught crossing the border illegally are housed inside the McAllen Border Patrol Station in McAllen, Texas, in 2014. PHOTO: REUTERS

Greece steps up efforts to better face refugee crisis in 2016

ATHENS — Ahead of a harsh winter, Greece, with the support of its EU partners, is stepping up efforts to better tackle the refugee crisis in 2016, which has tested Athens and Europe throughout 2015.

Athens has accelerated efforts to construct more screening centres (hot spots) for the accommodation of refugees while they wait to be relocated to other EU countries.

The overwhelming majority of refugees and migrants from Syria, Afghanistan and other countries views Greece as a transit point on their way to more affluent European countries.

More than 750,000 refugees and migrants landed on Greek shores from January 2015 to early December,

according to the Greek Coast Guard. About 94,000 have been rescued at sea borders, while more than 200 have perished in the Aegean.

In the latest EU summit in Brussels on 18 December, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras reassured that two more hot spots on the Aegean islands with a registration capacity of 2,000 per day will open in two months to add to a screening centre already in operation on Lesbos island. Meanwhile, Greece will cooperate more closely with the newly established EU border and Coast Guard agency to better patrol its borders.

The Greek government has requested EU partners to accelerate the pace of the relocation scheme agreed in autumn. So far less than 100

refugees have left Greece as part of the programme, while the goal set is 66,000 transfers in three years.

The EU ministers adopted the relocation plan in September to relocate 160,000 migrants, as part of a comprehensive approach to deal with the refugee crisis.

Athens has also asked EU partners to check whether Turkey has fulfilled a recent agreement over stemming the migrant flow to re-admit migrants who do not qualify as refugees.

The EU clinched the agreement with Turkey on 29 November, offering 3 billion euros (3.18 billion US dollars) in aid and more promising access for Ankara's membership to the bloc in return for a massive reduc-

tion in illegal migrant arrivals. Economic migrants are not allowed to cross to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and continue their journey to other European countries with refugees. After border controls were strengthened in the FYROM, increased pressure has been put on Greece. Many economic migrants remain stranded in Greece that has been struggling to house a large number of refugees. Greece has required EU partners and its neighbour Turkey to live up to their pledges, stressing that the problem cannot be solved in Greece, but on the other side of the Aegean, before the desperate refugees board the plastic dinghies risking their lives to cross to Europe.—Xinhua

European Union still Cambodia's best export destination

PHNOM PENH — The European Union will continue to remain Cambodia's biggest export recipient, mopping up 2.32 billion US dollars in shipments in 2015, with the US following a close second at 2.07 billion US dollars, local media reported on Friday, citing Commerce Ministry estimates.

The ministry, which based the estimate on export numbers for the first 10 months, reported that the EU's exports were dominated by garments, around 1.9 billion US dollars, with the rest of the shipments coming from textiles, footwear and rice, according to the *Phnom Penh Post*.

The Asia Pacific market, a growing export destination for the kingdom, had 1.1 billion US dollars in imports from Cambodia.

Ho Sivyong, director of the Import and Export Department at the Ministry of Commerce, said that an increase in exports was reflective of both the US and EU having increased confidence in buying from the kingdom.

"There is not much change in the Asian market, but we've seen an increase in agriculture products. We have also started focusing on the African market," he was quoted by the newspaper as saying.—Reuters

Central African Republic postpones key elections for three days



A general view shows a street of the capital Bangui, a day before the arrival of Pope Francis, Central African Republic, in November 2015. PHOTO: REUTERS

BANGUI — Crucial elections in the Central African Republic have been postponed from Sunday until 30 December because preparations are running late, Prime Minister Mahamat Kamoun said on Thursday.

The polls are meant to restore democratic rule in the aftermath of bitter conflict. Mainly Muslim rebels seized power in the majority Christian nation in early 2013, provoking reprisals from Christian militias that triggered a cycle of inter-religious killings. The postponement "is to allow for more successful organisation and ensure these elections are more

transparent, credible and democratic", Kamoun told Reuters. Ballots for the presidential and legislative elections, printed abroad, only arrived in the capital Bangui in the last few days and have yet to be distributed to polling stations across a nation with few roads. Kamoun said a 13 December constitutional referendum had also exposed shortcomings in the training of election workers.

"Most of the poll workers didn't have the level required," he said. "It's absolutely necessary to organise training and find the people we need, especially as the stakes of these next

polls are higher than in the referendum." Elections in the former French colony, where UN peacekeepers and French soldiers are struggling to maintain security, have already been repeatedly delayed. Central African authorities are under heavy international pressure to move ahead with polls to replace the current transitional administration, the second such interim government since President Francois Bozize was toppled in March 2013.

"I would not characterise it as a setback," said UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric. "I think obviously given the very delicate security

situation around the country it's important the elections take place in the best possible way." A UN source, who asked not to be named, said foreign diplomats had proposed a one-week postponement of the polls during meetings with Central African authorities.

Around one in five Central Africans has fled violence in the country, which is rich in diamonds, uranium and gold. About half have left the country altogether.

The fighting between rival militias degenerated into a conflict between Christians and Muslims that has led to de facto partition of the country.—Reuters

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

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Consignees of cargo carried on MV ANAN BHUM VOY NO (150N) are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on 26.12.2015 and cargo will be discharged into the premises of H.P.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.

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California governor pardons Robert Downey Jr. for '90s drug case

LOS ANGELES — California Governor Jerry Brown on Thursday pardoned "Iron Man" film star Robert Downey Jr. for drug and weapons offenses during the 1990s, a largely symbolic gesture that leaves the actor's criminal record intact but restores his right to serve on a jury.

The pardon granted the one-time Hollywood "bad boy," who revived his career as a top box-office star after years of drug abuse and run-ins with the law, commended Downey, 50, for his "good conduct" since leaving prison more than 15 years ago. Downey was arrested in 1996 after Los Angeles County Sheriff's deputies pulled him over in a traffic stop and found a concealed pistol and drugs in the car. Later that year, Downey pleaded no contest — the equivalent of a guilty plea in California — to possession of cocaine, driving under the influence, carrying a concealed weapon in a vehicle with a prior conviction and being under the influence of heroin.

Following his conviction, Downey served one year and three months in prison, with his case closed in 2002 after he bounced back from a number of probation violations and ultimately completed the terms of his sentence and parole, officials said.

Even before his arrest, the actor's legal troubles and his addiction to cocaine and heroin had threatened to derail a promising career marked by an Oscar nomination for his role as the legendary silent film star Charlie Chaplin in the 1992 movie "Chaplin."

The son of filmmaker Robert Downey Sr., he re-emerged in the last decade as one of the most popular and bankable stars in Hollywood, playing a billionaire-turned-superhero as the title character in the "Iron Man" movie franchise and earning another Oscar nomination for his role in the 2008 comedy "Tropic Thunder." In that film, Downey portrayed an aging action movie hero trying to reinvent his persona. The actor told Reuters at the time his model for the role was, "Sadly, my sorry-ass self."

Downey in October obtained a Los Angeles court order "evidencing that since his release from custody he has lived an honest and upright life, exhibited good moral character and conducted himself as a law-abiding citizen," according to his pardon. Representatives for Downey could not immediately be reached for comment on the pardon.—Reuters

Taylor Swift turns elf for Instagram



People dressed as Santa Claus perform next to a wax statue of Taylor Swift during a Madame Tussauds' unveiling ceremony on Christmas eve in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, on 24 December. PHOTO: REUTERS

LOS ANGELES — Taylor Swift has joined in the Christmas excitement by wearing Christmas elf costume. The "Bad Blood" singer took to Instagram to share a picture of her standing still in the iconic green-and-red costume, reported Ace Showbiz.

Wearing the elf onesie, the blonde beauty appeared without makeup on her face. She donned a hat featuring elf ears. In a caption for the picture, Taylor quoted Drake's "Hotline Bling", "You used to call me on my elf phone."

Just hours after Taylor posted the elf picture, she announced on the social media that she had garnered 60 million Instagram followers.

The 26-year-old singer shared with her followers a screengrab of her profile on the social media page. "Well would you look at that," she wrote alongside the picture, before thanking her fans for the new milestone, "Thanks for the 60 million followers situation guys! Merry Christmas indeed.—PTI

Harry Styles could be joining 'Scream Queens': Lea Michele

LONDON — Actress-singer Lea Michele has sparked speculation that Harry Styles is joining her TV show "Scream Queens".

The "Glee" star said she has "heard a rumour" the show's creator Ryan Murphy is in talks with a "male pop star" to join the cast of

horror comedy, and she is convinced the mystery man is Styles.

"I also heard a rumour that he (Harry) may (join the show). I don't know if this is true, but he (Ryan) said at a press thing recently that he is talking to a male pop star to come for next year... If it's Harry Styles, everybody better calm down... I love One Direction. Everybody knows this," she said.

Michele is also adamant Styles would be a good choice for the upcoming movie version of hit stage show Wicked, adding, "I'm also thinking that he should be in the Wicked movie. He's our modern day Mick Jagger.—PTI



Harry Styles. PHOTO: REUTERS

Gigi Hadid 'proud' to be half-palestinian

LOS ANGELES — Model Gigi Hadid is spending her holidays with her close friends, relishing her culture heritage and traditions.

The 20-year-old model took to Instagram to share a photo of her and the hands of some of her oldest friends covered in

intricately-drawn henna designs, reported ET online. "Had the best night with some of my oldest friends last night. Feel so blessed to have a foundation of friendships that will bond us for the rest of our lives.

"...It's so important to be with the families that raised you and the friends that were raised with yours...Check out the last name. Hadid. Half Palestinian and proud of it," she wrote alongside the picture.—PTI



Gigi Hadid. PHOTO: REUTERS

'Grandma got run over' catchy tune was no reindeer game for writer

DALLAS — The man behind the Christmas song, "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer," either the most loved or most loathed of the season and certainly one of its most memorable, has no problems being a one-hit wonder and says the song has been both "my blessing and my albatross."

Randy Brooks, 67, a song writer and son of a church organist, told Reuters Wednesday he may not have left his mark on pop culture had it not been for car trouble in Lake Tahoe.

He was stuck in the resort town in the '70s with his band when he was invited up onstage by headliners Elmo and Patsy Shropshire and played the novelty tune he had written about the senior's improbable death.

Elmo Shropshire immediately asked to record it for the Elmo & Patsy act, Brooks said. Shropshire created copies of the song on 45-rpm records that he sold at his shows until radio DJs began playing it on air.

The rest is history, and for Brooks, a cash cow was born.

"It's paid the college tuition for my two kids," said Brooks, a man much in demand for shows at clubs, nursing homes and parties in December.

He wrote "Grandma" in the 1970s as a satirical response to country star Merle Haggard's sentimental song, "Grandma's Homemade Christmas Card."

There was also a holiday-tune

trend at the time of sentimental songs about a person who winds up dead — but only in the final verse.

Because of that, Brooks said he killed Grandma as quickly as he could in his tune.

Brooks grew up in Kentucky with a passion for music, instilled by his father, a choir director. After graduating from Vanderbilt University, he moved to Dallas where he earned money as a songwriter.

He also performed with local lounge and party bands, where he combined his love of music with a knack for comedy.

As Shropshire's recording gained fame worldwide, Brooks continued writing songs and performing with other musicians. He took a day job with American Airlines that turned into a 30-year gig.

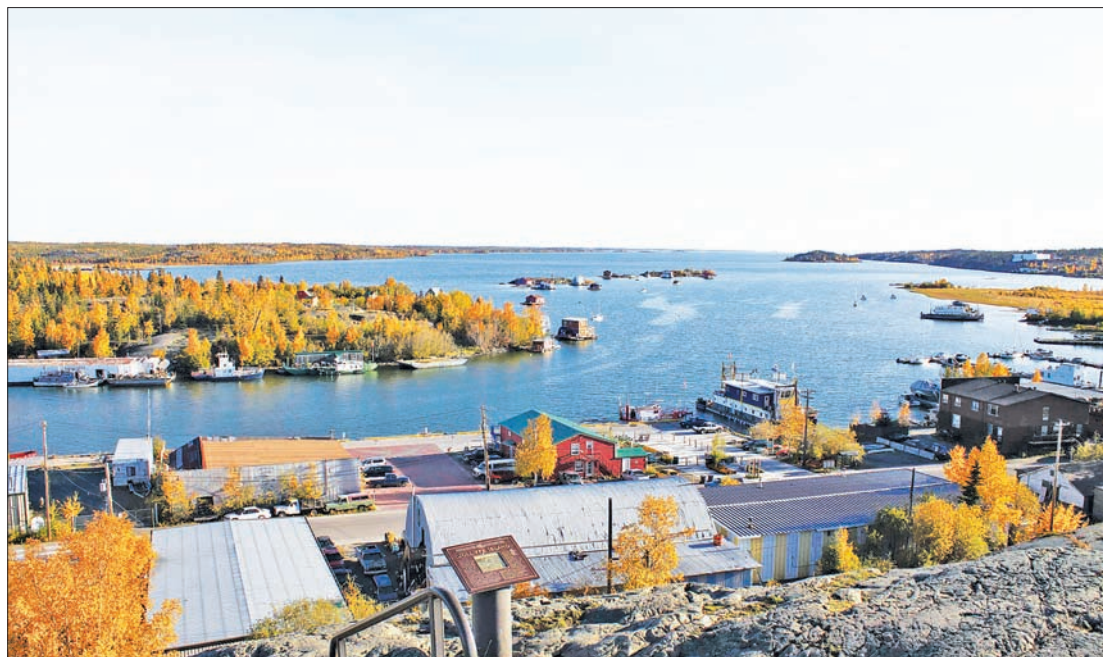
"I was the voice on the phone that said, 'thank you for calling American Airlines customer service.'"

A few years ago, Brooks made his own recording of "Grandma," which he titled, "Randy Brooks' Greatest Hit."

Some of his other ditties, such as "The Dumpster Took My Love Away," never gained much traction.

Still, Brooks has no problem having just the one hit since the song has become his legacy and even earned him a few awards.— *Reuters*

In Canada's far north, warm weather threatens vital ice road



Great Slave Lake and Jolliffe Island are seen from the Pilot Monument in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, on 22 September 2015. PHOTO: REUTERS

YELLOWKNIFE — Each winter, in the far reaches of Canada's north, a highway of ice built atop frozen lakes and tundra acts as a supply lifeline to remote diamond mines, bustling with traffic for a couple of months before melting away in the spring.

This year, the world's busiest ice road is running late. Unseasonably warm weather has set back ice formation on the Tibbitt to Contwoyto Winter Road, named after the first and last of hundreds of lakes on the route.

The road is still expected to open on schedule in late January, but if current weather patterns continue that could mean more work for crews trying to build the ice or cut the road's already short period of operation.

Since its first season in 1982, the road has been vital to a handful of mines scattered across Canada's Northwest Territories (NWT), cut off by a maze of water and spongy tundra, otherwise only reachable by air. Running 400 kilometers (248 miles), it links to three diamond mines, stretching as far as 600 km when it supplied a now-shuttered gold mine.

A shorter season could mean extra costs and inconvenience for moving what amounted last year to 9,000 truckloads of diesel, machines and mining supplies from the NWT's capital city, Yellowknife.

To climate scientists, this year's late freeze could be a harbinger of winters to come. It also raises the alarming prospect of thawing permafrost — the frozen layer of soil covering nearly half of Canada's landmass — which traps methane, a greenhouse gas, which would only hasten warming. This year's warmer temperatures may be connected to the El Niño climate phenomenon, a periodic warming of Pacific Ocean waters that has far-reaching effects.

It is Yellowknife's second

warmest December on record, said David Phillips, a senior climatologist at Environment Canada, Canada's national weather service. So far, the average temperature for this December is just above -15 Celsius, marginally cooler than the -13 Celsius for December 2005, but well above the mean of around -22 Celsius.

The NWT falls largely within the Mackenzie River Basin, an area where winter temperatures have warmed by 4.5 degrees Celsius over the last 68 years. "That's a sea change," said Phillips. "It is just runaway warming."

For Ron Near, a retired Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer who manages the road for a group of mining companies, slow ice formation is a transportation problem.

Despite the warmer weather, he said it is not "panic time," and said he expects the road to start operating by the end of January, with the heaviest loads waiting until a harder pack of ice at the beginning of March.

"It has affected us some, but we're still within guidelines of previous warmer years," he said. "It's just going to take considerably more management this year to have success."

Ice roads cross eight Arctic countries, and Canada alone has 5,400 km of them, critical to unlocking mineral wealth from remote, harsh regions.

In the NWT, a vast land covering more than 1.3 million square km with just 43,000 residents, diamonds were the biggest contributor to the economy last year.

It is no surprise that the territorial government has been pushing a partial all-season road on the southern end of the mine supply route, which could extend the ice road's duration to three months.

The C\$170 million project may find favor with Canada's recently elected Liberal government, which has pledged to spend

about C\$10 billion annually on infrastructure for the next three years.

But it is a long way from the ambitious idea first mooted in the late 1950s by then-Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, who campaigned for a "road to resources" running through NWT's Mackenzie Valley and connecting to the Arctic coast.

More than a half century later, that vision for a Mackenzie Valley Highway remains elusive. There is a road in the south that extends as far as the town of Wrigley, and a C\$300 million road is being constructed to connect the far north town of Inuvik with Tuktoyaktuk on the Arctic coast.

But there is no road connecting those two ends, a highway that proponents say would assert Canada's Arctic sovereignty, but would likely cost more than C\$1.7 billion to build. And advances on the Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk project are slow because construction occurs only in winter to minimize permafrost damage. More than half the NWT permafrost is sporadic, or discontinuous. It is easily disturbed, which in turn produces ground thaw and instability.

Some 1,700 gigatonnes of carbon are held in permafrost soils globally in the form of frozen organic matter, researchers from the universities of Cambridge and Colorado said in September. If that methane and carbon dioxide were released, it would increase the risk of catastrophic weather, or loss of agricultural land, causing up to \$43 trillion in economic damage globally by 2200, the study calculated.

By mid-century, rising temperatures may reduce the land in Canada suitable for ice roads by 13 per cent, or 400,000 square km, concluded researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles in a 2011 study published in *Nature Climate Change*.—*Reuters*

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(26-12-2015 07:00 am ~ 27-12-2015 07:00 am) MST

Today Fresh

07:03	Am	News
07:26	Am	Great Shwedagon- The Religious Insignias Of pagodas In Myanmar
07:45	Am	Five-Star Ocean Liners in Myanmar Waters
08:03	Am	News
08:26	Am	Travelogue: A Tour in Korea (Ep-6)
08:42	Am	Thread Charm "A Kayin Threading Ceremony"
08:50	Am	Sagaing: Youth Leader
09:00	Am	R.A.T Race
10:45	Am	Pursuer of Duty & Dream: Linkar Yi Kyaw

(11:00 Am ~ 03:00 Pm) - Friday Repeat (07:00 Am ~ 11:00 Am)
(03:00 Pm ~ 05:00 Pm) - Today Repeat (07:00 Am ~ 09:00 Am)

05:03	Am	News
05:26	Am	Jade Pagoda: Weirawsana
05:44	Am	Pursuer of Duty & Dream: Linkar Yi Kyaw
06:03	Am	News
06:24	Am	Marvelous Solo Cane Ball Playing
06:42	Am	A Chance to Change Their Future

Prime Time

07:03	Pm	News
07:25	Pm	Moyingyi Wildlife Sanctuary
07:43	Pm	A Traditional Doctor
07:49	Pm	Today Myanmar: Yangon Stock Exchange
08:03	Pm	News
08:25	Pm	Hanthawaddy U Win Tin "A Fearless Man" (Episode-1)
08:48	Pm	Myanmar Masterclass "Artist Pann Kyi"

(09:00 Pm ~ 11:00 Pm) - Today Repeat (05:00 Pm ~ 07:00 Pm)
(11:00 Pm ~ 03:00 Am) - Friday Repeat (07:00 Am ~ 11:00 Am)
(03:00 Am ~ 07:00 Am) - Today Repeat (03:00 Pm ~ 07:00 Pm)
(For Detailed Schedule - www.myanmaritv.com/schedule)

Anchors away as PGA Tour players adapt to change

LOS ANGELES — Just two weeks remain before PGA Tour players have to adapt to a ban by golf's rulemakers on long putters being anchored to the body and Tim Clark is among those who expect "some challenges along the way".

South African Clark, one of the leading critics of the rule change along with former major winners Adam Scott, Keegan Bradley and Webb Simpson, has been using the anchored technique for 18 years and the same putter for more than a decade.

Clark was publicly vocal in his opposition to the proposal when it was first suggested in December 2012 but says he "will be just fine" with a revamped putting method when the 2015-16 PGA Tour resumes early next month. "Nearly two decades of putting one way, I don't think many guys out here that have putted with a short one for that long would like to switch to something else that they haven't used," the 40-year-old told Reuters.

"There's going to be some challenges along the way but I feel what I'm going to do will be just fine, though you're only going to really know



Webb Simpson makes a pitch out of the bunker on five during the final round at Quail Hollow Club, Charlotte, NC, USA, in May 2015.

PHOTO: REUTERS

when you start in competition.

"The major switch for me to the short putter is a lot of muscle memory and retraining of how you use a putter. I'm going to try and do something that's not vastly different to what I've been doing in the past."

Clark, who has landed two

career victories on the

PGA Tour, has not

qualified for the open-

ing event of 2016

— the winners-only

Hyundai Tournament of Champions to be played at Kapalua on the Hawaiian island of Maui from 7-10 January. The South African's first opportunity to test out his new putting technique in competition will come the following week, at the Sony Open in Honolulu.

Like Clark, 2012 US Open champion Simpson was opposed to the rule change, repeatedly citing the lack of evidence in the PGA Tour's 'strokes gained over

the field' putting statistic to support the suggestion that anchoring gave players an advantage.

"To change something that drastic, it needs to be based off facts and not what certain people think the tradition of the game looks like," said American Simpson who switched to the belly putter in 2004.

"Very few people ranked in the top 20 in strokes gained in recent years have been using either a belly putter or a long putter."

However, Simpson, 30, a four-times winner on the PGA Tour, says he is prepared for the rule change.

"I've been working with a short putter for quite a while," he said. "I expected the day to come and I wanted to be ready. I didn't want to be shocked."

Former world number one Tiger Woods, a 14-times major champion who ranks among the game's greatest players, has always adopted a purist approach when it comes to putting.

"The art of putting is swinging the club and controlling nerves, and having it as a fixed point is something that's not in the traditions of the game," said Woods.—Reuters

Klopp a fan of Leicester's near-perfect style

LONDON — Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp is full of admiration for Leicester City's style of football which has propelled the Midlands club to the top of the Premier League.

Leicester lead Arsenal by two points at Christmas after a breathtaking opening half of the season which has seen them top the scoring charts with 37 goals in 17 games.

"They play nearly perfect counter attacking football, very quick," Klopp, who replaced Brendan Rodgers at Anfield in October, told a news conference on Thursday.

"I have big respect for (Leicester manager) Claudio (Ranieri) and the whole squad of Leicester."

Ranieri visited Borussia Dortmund's training ground last season when Klopp was still in charge, and the two managers clearly share a similar football philosophy.

"It's always interesting to talk to people like him and that's what we did," Klopp said. "There's big respect from both sides. He will always stay successful in his managerial career." Leicester have benefited from no European distractions this season, and a relatively light injury list, although Klopp says the Foxes are deservedly leading the title race.

"I'm not surprised (about their progress)," he said. "That's how football works, you need to use and take your chances. That's what they do."

"They don't need too many chances to score goals. They have two obvious strong strikers with perfect runs, no injuries, can go all week and they have a long week to train and recover."

"It's really deserved and I'm not surprised anymore, nobody is. It's no coincidence, it's really hard work. "They deserve the run they are in. It's good defending and nearly perfect counter-attacking football, it's really quick and high quality." Jamie Vardy (15) and Riyad Mahrez (13) have combined to score 75.7 per cent of Leicester's league goals this season, with Algerian Mahrez twice on target in last week's 3-2 victory against Liverpool's Merseyside neighbours Everton.— Reuters



PHOTO: REUTERS

Man United players 'fighting' for Van Gaal, says Rooney

LONDON — Manchester United players are right behind under-fire manager Louis Van Gaal and are determined to get their season back on track, captain Wayne Rooney said.

The Dutchman, according to media reports, is facing the sack following United's exit from the Champions League earlier this month amid a six-match winless run which has led to fan unrest.

"We are fighting for the manager and trying to get results to turn this around," Rooney told Sky Sports on Thursday.

"You have a lot of people talking about things they believe are happening, when in reality the people writing that stuff don't know anything that is happening."

Van Gaal, whose side face Stoke City away on Saturday, walked out of his pre-match news conference after five minutes on Wednesday after calling on the assembled media to apologise for their treatment of him.

Rooney joins England teammates Ashley Young and Phil Jones, along with goalkeep-

er David de Gea, who have spoken positively about the dressing room atmosphere under Van Gaal.

"We regularly have meetings with the players. Myself, and the other senior players in the squad, and with the manager — we are working together and trying to come to the best solution to help us win football matches," he said.

England's leading goalscorer conceded confidence at Old Trafford was low and that he himself was under pressure after a failing to score in his last five league games. United have dropped to fifth in the Premier League, nine points off top spot.

"I know my performances can be better, I know that. I'm working hard to improve that and try and do my best for the team," Rooney said.

"It is not nice, obviously, getting criticised every week, every game. It is tough for the players to deal with. "We are proud people, we are proud to play for Man United and when it's not going right then it is hard to take." —Reuters