Popularity of K-pop growing in Kuwait

Japanese yakuza arrested in Thailand after tatts go viral

Chelsea spurn chances in stalemate with Arsenal

Three MPs file to grill Sabeeh
Prison hunger strike and Amiri amnesty

The Kuwait Human Rights Society issued a report on the hunger strike by some prisoners in Kuwait. Such a move by prisoners is universally known, as the prisoner sees that this is the only means he has to express his demands. It is a nonviolent act that is used by prisoners, especially activists and politicians, in countries around the world to protest against the deprivation of their rights. But do these strikes lead to a positive end? KHRS is committed to the standards of humanitarian organizations internationally as per all treaties and conventions on human rights, which call to preserve a prisoner's dignity and allow him to express his right in any peaceful way.

The prisoners held in state security cases (related to freedom of opinion) announced that they will launch hunger strikes in order to achieve their demands and obtain their rights in the same manner as others. They want the authorities to activate article 87 of the Kuwaiti penal code and demand an inclusion in the Amiri amnesty (half-term) similar to other amnesty cases. The hunger strikers issued a statement in which they stressed that Kuwait must respect freedom of expression. Accordingly, prisoners considered their detention to be contrary to international law and international covenants and treaties which the government has to comply and abide with.

Hunger strikes have become a common expression for prisoners in penal institutions to express their tragic situation. Hardly a month passes without an announcement by prisoners somewhere in the world of a hunger strike, which increases the concern of defense bodies and human rights activists and fears of their families.

I think the hunger strike in Kuwait reflects a negative image of Kuwait regionally and internationally, because it reveals an improper face of the state's dealing with its citizens, especially those who object to its policies or the way of running the state. They find themselves in prison with criminals convicted over drugs, murder and theft, and are not treated any better, as if they are murderers or drug dealers.

We have an annual and humanitarian gesture in Kuwait that is a pure right of HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, known as the Amiri pardon. It is an initiative of the Amir through an annual Amiri amnesty decree for immediate release or reduction of penalties and fines. The justice ministry, the judicial department, the public prosecutor's office, the Amiri Diwan and the interior ministry work on the processing of this humanitarian gesture.

The prisoners' strike occurred for a reason, and I hope that the reasons will be looked into and perhaps end this disturbing subject once and for all. We are a small community and a country of goodness, mercy and humanity. Soon, Kuwait will celebrate its independence and liberation from the Iraqi invasion. This is an opportunity for all to celebrate.

Why expats avoid police stations in Kuwait

The police's sworn duty is to protect and serve the community, regardless of nationality, and often the men in uniform go above and beyond the call of duty to implement their social responsibilities. Many Kuwaiti police officers are doing their job diligently and deserve our highest respect and salutations.

We've witnessed many positive gestures these days by the Kuwaiti police, especially on the busy roads of the country. We see them helping motorists in trouble, especially on highways or major thoroughfares. They also don't think twice to help women on the roads.

When my car tire burst in the middle of Road 30 a few months back, I drew the attention of police in minutes. This is one of the busiest highways in Kuwait, and staying there exposed for long can be deadly. Gladly, I saw a police vehicle pulling aside and rushing towards the back of my car, preventing more accidents. Two police officers offered help - one to change the tire and the other to man the traffic.

On another beautiful morning, I saw a police officer saving a cat crossing the street. I also witnessed a police officer helping a disabled person climb the pedestrian bridge. There are countless kind acts demonstrated by police officers in Kuwait, who really deserve our praise.

Visiting a police station, however, can be daunting for many expats. We are often ignored, or rudely told to wait or come back another day. Even when we are trying to stay inside the law by reporting a crime, a car accident or a lost/stolen driver's license, the police at the station aren't always helpful.

Case in point: Once I was involved in a minor traffic accident somewhere in Khaitan, and we were told to follow the police officer to the police station. After two hours of waiting there, we were told to come back the following day, only because the police officers who were in charge of preparing the report were busy talking with friends over cups of tea.

In another instance, the tires of a friend's car in Farwaniya were deliberately deflated at least five times in two weeks by his neighbor. I asked him to report the matter to the police, so the culprit could be held accountable, but he said he would rather keep quiet than report such acts to the police. He had his reasons - can you blame him?

There are many reasons why expats would rather keep quiet and not refer their cases directly to the authorities. When my car was towed for illegal parking and held by traffic authorities, it remained in the impounding area for weeks, merely because of miscommunication. They told me to go to the traffic police in Jahra, and I remember going there for three consecutive days.

Asian expats, for example, do not want to deal directly with authorities because of the language barrier. They are not sure if they can relay the message to the police properly or if they will be understood. I remember a police officer once told me to communicate with him only in Arabic, "since we are living in an Arab country". With due respect to many good English-speaking police officers in the country and those who are helping expats immeasurably, sometimes we have to learn the language or bring an Arabic translator along in order to make a complaint.

If you are a law abiding member of the society - whether expat or citizen - visiting the police station should be a simple and easy matter. But for expats, just getting a police officer to listen your issue or problem can sometimes be an impossible task. Many just give up or never bother to report petty crimes in the first place.
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The average adult spends around one third of his or her life at work. The countless hours, days, weeks, months and years often slip by without one realizing. The environment in which one works, therefore, can have a real and substantive impact - both positively and negatively - on how one views their life.
In this new series, Kuwait Times looks at work environments by examining our own offices and our employees' desks. KT staff spend long hours at work and in the field, editors and reporters both go out to research and interview and then return to their desks to write and file before deadline. Between time-sensitive stories, long investigative reports that need to be checked and corrected, and the availability of the necessary images, the time goes by lightning speed, either preceded or precedes us.

However, not everyone wants to decorate his office, some people like to stay clean as they are, while beautiful decors are lost among piles of paper at some. What is important is that the employee feels comfortable and familiar in order to accomplish his work.

Do you have a desk or an office? Do you work outdoors or in a space shared with others? Maybe you work in a government office sharing a desk or station with many others? Maybe your 'desk' is a taxi cab or hospital exam room? How do you make your workspace your own? How do you add personality and decoration to make it more friendly and a happy place you enjoy being? Let us know!

Kuwait Times invite readers: Send us photos of your work environment for our series. Email high res jpegs to Local@KuwaitTimes.com.

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At the start of the second millennium, the Korean wave began to sweep Arab media through television dramas and anime movies, which had been spreading like wildfire across the world since the 1990s. This was subsequently followed by the invasion of South Korean pop music, or K-pop, especially among post-millennials.

Kuwaiti teenager Dana Hussain's passion about K-pop music pushed her, like other netizens, to read more about her favorite bands and follow their news. However, this wasn't enough for her. The 13-year-old girl conducted a survey on the popularity of the most famous Korean band in her school - BTS - and got a response from 74 students. Fifty students from the participating group had heard about the band, which makes us question why would someone be so obsessed about music they can't understand?

K-pop is a term that encompasses all types of traditional and modern Korean music. Meanwhile, modern K-pop is a unique musical genre. One song may comprise of hip-hop, pop, rock, rap and electric, while preserving the Korean musical heritage. The artistes are recruited by entertainment agencies such as JYP, SM, Cube Entertainment and Big Hit Entertainment. The process is extremely rigorous, where artistes undergo daily intensive dancing and singing drills. Some band members are banned from dating to maintain their popularity among their fans around the world.

“It is impossible to see someone in real life as perfect as a K-pop idol. They are of the highest quality standard,” gushed Dana. The perfection of the form and content of Korean pop music is an industry, and a normal human being cannot be this perfect. It really is unreal. A teenager may enter a maze of questions about his own self-worth if he isn’t following in the steps of his favorite idols, or his friends who resemble them. “My sister and I now prefer to borrow our parents’ tops because they appear loose on us. The baggy outfits of Korean pop stars are trending nowadays,” she told Kuwait Times.

It took Dana a long time to fall in love with Korean music. At first, she didn’t quite like it. Later, many of her friends encouraged her to give it another chance. This is scarcely a model that shows us how trends are spread, grow and last for a long time. In general, the shift of the world into a small village paved the way for the globalization of arts, music and literature. It also created a broad audience of devotees on the Internet.

It is also important to understand the positive aspects of the Korean wave, or Hallyu. More people are receptive to their culture and language. “I can read Korean alphabets and a few words. Also, I constantly read the translated lyrics on YouTube. The more I listen, the more I memorize its syllables,” Dana enthused.

The new Korean pop is a fusion of Western musical genres, yet pop stars hold on to the Korean culture, which has a clear impact on the lyrics they sing. It's mostly about emotions, love and even the things we see around us, a consequence of moral values that were adopted thousands of years ago by the Korean people. Nonetheless, there’s an exception to every rule.

Dana loves to listen to BTS, Got7, Loona, Twice, Red Velvet, Zico and Black Pink. “Their lyrics are beautiful and catchy! But I have noticed that some teenagers hate BTS because of their ongoing feud with the EXO band. Others like to listen to K-pop, but they don’t recognize the names of the bands they listen to,” she exclaimed.
MoCI, PAI adopt new criteria for distributing industrial land

1,036 blocks in Shadadiya to be given to applicants

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Minister of Commerce and Industry Khaled Al-Roudhan announced the adoption of new standards for the distribution of industrial land by the board of directors of the Public Authority for Industry. He disclosed that 1,036 industrial blocks will be distributed in the coming months according to these standards.

Roudhan said at a press conference held yesterday at PAI that the new standards and the evaluation of the industrial projects will be based on three basic criteria: Industrial capital, which means the size of the capital used in technology, machinery and equipment, in addition to the volume of energy used to operate the plant. This will form 20 percent of the total standards. Industrial priority of the quality of investment and products makes up 30 percent.

The third criterion is value added to the national economy, which includes the volume of products to be achieved in addition to the size of national manpower working in the project and its service to other local projects, as well as the actual production volume. He said this standard will have 50 percent weightage of the total distribution standards.

Roudhan said the distribution of the 1,036 industrial blocks will be in the Shadadiya industrial area, adding that it will contribute to enhancing the role of the industrial sector in Kuwait to diversify sources of income and increase domestic output. He announced plans to encourage upgrading the quality of existing and future factories.

Roudhan said the blocks will be distributed to entrepreneurs who meet the new settlement criteria so that Kuwaiti industrial products can compete globally. "It is not enough for our industry to be for domestic consumption only. Without exports, the industry will not work for the economy," he said. "We will seek to contribute to the new industry to reduce imports of some basic products. The local products should be of competitive quality and exportable quantities that can be sold in world markets and achieve self-sufficiency in crises," he added.

He pointed out that the new criteria for settlement in the new industrial zones were meant to give a great push to PAI to work more freely and quickly to achieve basic objectives, including increasing the increase in exports, providing real job opportunities acceptable to Kuwaitis, diversification of products and focusing on global competitiveness. "We have formed a team that has set a timetable for approval of projects with feasibility studies. It started work three months back and is expected to disband at the end of May and start the actual distributions after approval," Roudhan explained.

Abdulkarim Taqi, General Manager of PAI, said the first criterion in the new standards is industrial capital, which is divided into two parts: Energy conservation, because energy is subsidized and depends on a depleting resource, so saving it will bring great benefits to the economy. It has 50 percent weightage. Machines and equipment out of the total number of productive labor forms the other 50 percent in order to reduce dependence on unskilled labor and encourage dependence on trained labor and thus provide jobs for Kuwaitis.

The second standard (industrial priority) is that it is distributed in four bases: Recycling waste from manufacturing operations (5 percent weightage), 40 percent for export products, 20 percent for products for the local market that replace imports and 35 percent for medicine and technology products.

The third criterion (value added to the national economy) will be divided into five sections - 20 percent weightage for profitability of trade, 15 percent for national employment, 20 percent to use local raw materials and feed the product to other factories, 25 percent for product made for the first time and 20 percent for products that will replace imports.

Taqi said the technical team adopted a time-frame for project approvals, starting by sorting applications at the sector level, then approvals of feasibility studies, followed by applying the criteria to these approvals to get the preliminary results. He said applicants will be interviewed to explain the project, announcing that a committee will be formed by MoCI and PAI in the event of any objections.

KFAS launches Innovation Challenge 2018

KUWAIT: In collaboration with University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and with the participation of teams from 10 private Kuwaiti companies, the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) launched on Wednesday the Innovation Challenge 2018, a unique program designed to develop human capital within the private sector through science, technology and innovation (STI).

Out of the 50 private shareholding companies that applied for the program, 10 were selected after careful evaluation. The National Bank of Kuwait, EQUATE, Petrochemicals, Kuwait Finance House, Agility Logistics, Gulf Bank, KAMCO Investment, TabGo Food, Jadite Group, Boubyan Bank, and Rasameel Investment. Two of these teams, KAMCO and Jadite, are participating for the first time.

At the inaugural dinner of the 2018 Innovation Challenge, KFAS Director General Dr. Adrian Shibah Edlin, noted that teams will learn practical knowledge that can be readily applied to their work. The goal is to develop innovative solutions towards challenges within their companies in four months. He reflected on some of the success stories of past Innovation Challenges, where participants have been able to translate the outcomes of the training they acquired into the development of new initiatives, demonstrating the power of STI as a tool for business development and growth. The Innovation Challenge is customized for the private sector in Kuwait. The program utilizes experiential learning methodologies to equip participants with skills and tools to successfully undertake innovative approaches to business challenges faced in their work environment, he added.

The Challenge, currently in its fourth year, has developed significantly over the past few years, and much of its success can be attributed to the diverse learning modalities and the use of proven educational approaches in promoting innovative ideas, shifting from traditional business norms, he said.

Senior Associate Dean, UCLA Anderson School of Management, Alfred E. Osborne, Jr. said: “I believe that this kind of partnership – reaching across nations and bringing together the best that academia and business have to offer – is a powerful template for the way we can create positive change in our world today. We are grateful for the confidence that KFAS is placing in UCLA - because you are trusting us with the development of your human resources. And however great a nation’s wealth, industrial might, technological prowess or geological resources, its people will always be its most precious asset.”

As a result of previous participation in the program, Boubyan Bank introduced its first interactive teller machine in Kuwait as an innovative service to their clients. They are also one of the first banks to establish an internal innovation center. The program also prompted EQUATE to establish two internal innovation centers, which accelerated the promotion of innovation culture within the company. The program started in January and will be ending in May 2018.

The Executive Education Center at the UCLA Anderson Center is a world-renowned institution in the United States, that has traditionally been known for its excellence in capacity building, coaching and training initiatives, including promoting and designing innovation worldwide. The program, which is designed and funded by the foundation, will include workshops and seminars led by experts from UCLA. Most of the workshops will be held in Kuwait; however, as a part of the program, the team will attend workshops on the UCLA campus and visit high-profile companies in Los Angeles such as Disney and Snapchat. The program aims to advance the knowledge and skills of the participating teams through simulation, comparative studies and distance learning.
Local

Bahraini King receives Kuwaiti Defense Minister

KUWAIT: Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Issa Al-Khalifa received Kuwait’s First Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah at Al-Salik Palace on Wednesday. Sheikh Nasser relayed the greetings of HH the Amir and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to King Hamad, a Defense Ministry statement read. The visiting Kuwaiti official underlined the depth of historic relations built on solid foundations between the neighboring countries.

Meanwhile, General Commander of the Bahraini Defense Force Field Marshal Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmad Al-Khalifa and Sheikh Nasser met yesterday to discuss an array of mutual issues, mainly military ones. During the meeting, Sheikh Nasser Sabah commended deep relations between Kuwait and Bahrain, stressing mutual willingness to further promote and develop them in all fields. He also spoke highly of the continuing development of the Bahraini Defense Force in the fields of practical and scientific training, according to a ministry statement. The meeting was attended by the accompanying delegation of the Kuwaiti first deputy prime minister and defense minister and a host of Bahraini high-ranking officers, Sheikh Nasser arrived in Manama on an official visit to Bahrain at the invitation of Bahrain’s Crown Prince, Deputy Supreme Commander of the Bahrain Defense Force and First Deputy Prime Minister Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa.

Three MPs file to grill Sabeeh over five issues

Speaker lists motion for Jan 23 session

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem yesterday declared that an interpellation motion against Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Hind Al-Sabeeh will be listed in agenda of the parliament’s next session on Jan 23. In a statement to journalists at the parliament building, the speaker said he received the motion from MPs Al-Humaidi Al-Subaei, Khaled Al-Otaibi and Mubarak Al-Hajraf, addressed to the minister in her capacity.

Legislative procedures have been taken, he said, noting that HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and Sabeeh, who is also minister of state for economic affairs, were notified about the planned inquiry. The three MPs earlier delivered the motion to the speaker to question the minister over five issues. — KUNA

FM meets Indian counterpart, receives envoy’s credentials

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah meets his Indian counterpart V K Singh. — KUNA photos

Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled also received the credentials of India’s new ambassador to Kuwait K Jeeva Sagar. During the meeting, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled wished the new ambassador best of luck in his new duty, and more developed relations between both friendly countries. — KUNA

MoE addressing concerns of special needs students

By Meshaal Al-Rmez

KUWAIT: The education ministry’s assistant undersecretary for private and specialized education affairs, Abdul Mohsen Al-Howailah said all educational officials give due care to students with special needs and disabilities, be they motor, sight, hearing or mental. Speaking after presiding over an open meeting including students, parents, teachers and a number of principals, Howailah stressed that curriculums will be amended to conform to various disabilities. He added teachers of students with hearing disabilities will have to learn sign language.

Illegal camps razed

Municipality PR Manager Abdul Mohsen Alhakhail said municipal inspectors have removed 423 illegal camps, and so far 1,063 camps have been legally licensed.

National celebrations

The Ahmadi governor yesterday presided over a meeting with the national anniversaries’ committee to discuss its preparations for the upcoming national festivities, due to be launched on Jan 29 by hoisting the Kuwait flag, until Feb 22.

Operations begin at Sabriya Jurassic oil, gas field: KOC

KUWAIT: Kuwait Oil Co announced on Wednesday the immediate launch of operations at Al-Sabriya field, which will produce Jurassic oil and gas. The field is the first of three similar projects, which have been under construction, and will “contribute to the gradual increase of gas and oil production,” the state-run firm said in a statement.

The remaining two fields are expected to be operational in the coming months. With the new addition, KOC expects the production of gas in the first quarter of the following financial year to reach a daily 500 million cubic feet, with oil production to climb by 200,000 barrels. The accomplishment outlines the company’s commitment to raise its production of gas in order for the country to reach the strategic goal of responding to domestic demand. — KUNA
Harbors key to maritime trade in old Kuwait

KUWAIT: Major ship owners in old Kuwait were known to have their own harbors, which they usually named after them and built opposite their buildings, stores or diwaniyas to moor their commercial dhows as well as others’ after the season concluded. Such wharfs were built by builders who had gained the needed experience and skills by practicing the profession since early childhood. By the beginning of the 20th century, Kuwait’s government started issuing ownership deeds to the owners of these marinas. Wharfs were built by builders who had gained the needed experience and skills by practicing the profession since early childhood. By the beginning of the 20th century, Kuwait’s government started issuing ownership deeds to the owners of these marinas.

Jabri opens Qurain Cultural Festival

KUWAIT: On behalf of HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Minister of Information Mohammad Al-Jabri inaugurated the 24th edition of Qurain Cultural Festival Wednesday evening. Jabri, also President of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature (NCCAL), said that Kuwait, as a longstanding beacon of Arab cultural enlightenment, puts its resources at the disposal of the cultural and artistic movement. Under its wise leadership, Kuwait takes pride in its leading role in promoting all forms of arts, literature and culture, he said at the opening ceremony.

"Kuwait’s contributions to the cultural enlightenment stem from profound belief of its leaders and people in the role of culture in de-radicalization and in curbing extremism, hate and xenophobia," the minister pointed out. Jabri said these jetties always had some dhows moored according to the season. He explained that commercial dhows used to dock after concluding their season in June and remained there until mid-August, while pearl diving ones used to be docked after the season concluded in September, remaining there until mid-May. He added that fishing dhows operated all year long, bringing the daily catch ashore to the fish market.

KUWAIT: Pedophile teacher arrested

KUWAIT: An Egyptian private school physical education teacher was arrested for repeatedly molesting a 12-year-old student, said security sources. The girl said the teacher used to let all her classmates out after class except her, and forcibly kissed and groped her. She added the suspect promised to marry her when she got older, and when she threatened to report him to her mother, he threatened back to report her to the school principal. The girl finally told her mother, who filed a case. The suspect was arrested pending deportation.

Youth escapes abduction

A Syrian juvenile sustained various injuries when he jumped out of a moving vehicle in which three people he knew had abducted him, said security sources. The young man was walking near a Saad Al-Abdullah jogging track when the three suspects grabbed him and assaulted him to prevent his attempts to escape. However, the boy managed to jump from the car and ran to the nearest house, where he called his brother, who picked him up and took him to hospital. A case was filed and the boy provided the police with the suspects’ names and vehicle registration number. They are being summoned for further investigations.

Deadly car ramming

Two citizens were instantly killed and a third sustained critical injuries after their vehicle rolled over along Ahdaly highway, said security sources, noting that the injured person was immediately medevaced to Jahra Hospital, where he was admitted to the ICU. The sources added that an eyewitness reported that someone had deliberately caused the accident and fled the scene before the police arrived, describing him and providing the police with his license plate number. Checking on the suspect, detectives found out he is a Kuwaiti too. A search is on for the suspect. Separately, a GCC national was killed in a crash along Mutlaa highway, said security sources, noting that on arriving at the scene, paramedics found that the man had already died after sustaining very serious injuries.

Jabri opens Qurain Cultural Festival

The current session of the festival is honoring Yassin Shamlan Al-Hasawi - a celebrated Kuwaiti poet and writer, and Fahad Al-Rabiq - a Saudi, Jabri said. The festival, which continues until Jan 29, features a range of artistic performances, formative art galleries, plays, movies, cultural seminars, and workshops on pantomime and story and novel writing. — KUNA
EU powers back Iran nuclear deal

Trump mulls re-imposing sanctions on Tehran

BRUSSELS. European powers yesterday insisted the 2015 deal to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions was working, as US President Donald Trump mulls re-imposing sanctions on Tehran.

The European Union and the foreign ministers of Britain, Germany and France put on a united front to defend the accord after talks in Brussels with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Trump, who has repeatedly condemned the deal and in October refused to certify Iran was complying with it, is expected to decide today whether or not to re-impose sanctions against Iran that were suspended under the deal, thrashed out with Iran over 12 years by the US, Britain, France, China, Germany and Russia. UN inspectors have certified Iran's compliance with the deal nine times, most recently in November, and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said there was "no indication" Tehran was not keeping its side of the bargain.

"It is important now that all parties respect this joint commitment and that our American allies respect it as well," Le Drian said. Iran has said that if the US walks away from the agreement, it is ready to give an "appropriate and heavy response". Zarif took to Twitter after the Brussels meeting to warn that "Iran's continued compliance conditioned on full compliance by the US".

The 28-member EU has condemned the "unacceptable loss of human lives" in the protests and stressed that peaceful protest and freedom of expression are "fundamental rights". — AFP

One of the criticisms leveled at the nuclear deal is that it does nothing to address Iran's continuing ballistic missile program and meddling in Middle East conflicts such as Yemen and Syria. The Europeans say these issues should be kept separate from discussion of the nuclear deal, but in a nod to US concerns, Mogherini stressed they were raised with Zarif at today's talks.

She said they had also brought up "internal recent events" in a reference to anti-government protests in Iran that left more than 20 people dead. Johnson added that it was important for building global support for the nuclear deal that "Iran should be able to show that it is a good neighbor in the region" and show what it can do to help solve the Yemen crisis.

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel even indicated that Iran had agreed to open talks about regional issues, starting with Yemen. Mogherini, who played an important role in crafting the nuclear accord, has vowed to preserve the deal and has lobbied US lawmakers in Washington. US Congress is working on a way to punish Iran for the ballistic missile program and its interference in Middle East conflicts such as Yemen and Syria.

The 28-member EU has condemned the "unacceptable loss of human lives" in the protests and stressed that peaceful protest and freedom of expression are "fundamental rights". — AFP
Tunisia deploys army, makes 300 arrests as violence rages

Protesters burn down security headquarters

TUNIS: Tunisian protesters burned down a regional national security headquarters near the Algerian border, prompting authorities to send in troops after police retreated, witnesses said, as unrest over prices and taxes continued nationwide.

Over 300 protesters were arrested overnight and the army was deployed in several cities to help quell violent protests in Tunisia seven years after the overthrow of autocrat Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in the first of the Arab Spring revolts.

In Thala, near the Algerian border, soldiers deployed after crowds torched the region’s national security building, forcing police to retreat from the scene, witnesses told Reuters.

Tunisia’s unity government – which includes Islamists, secular parties and independents – has portrayed the unrest as driven by criminal elements, and Prime Minister Youssef Chahed has accused the opposition of fuelling dissent.

Rejecting that accusation, Tunisia’s main opposition bloc, the Popular Front, called for a major protest in Tunis on Sunday to coincide with the seventh anniversary of Ben Ali’s fall. Tunisia’s Football Association said it was postponing all weekend matches because of the disturbances.

Many of the protests have been peaceful, however, with demonstrators expressing their anger and frustration over deepening economic hardship since the 2013 uprising.

“It is true that some protesters burned and stole during last night’s protests, but the rulers steal and destroy Tunisia in the morning and at night with their frustrating decisions,” said a teacher who was shopping in the capital and only gave his first name, Mohamed.

“We expected things to improve after Ben Ali was ousted, but it seems that after seven years of the revolution, we’ll give our salaries each month to Prime Minister Chahed for him to spend them,” he said. The 2011 revolt and two major Islamist militant attacks in 2015 damaged foreign investment and tourism, which accounts for eight percent of Tunisia’s economic activity.

Unemployment nationally exceeds 15 percent, and is much higher in some marginalized regions of the interior. Annual inflation rose to 6.4 percent in December, the highest rate since July 2014. — Reuters

Syrian rebels declare counter attack in Idlib

BEIRUT/TANJAN: Rebels launched a counter attack against Syrian government forces and their allies in Idlib province yesterday, seeking to roll back an advance that is fuelling tension with neighboring Turkey.

Fighting raged in the area, where a government offensive backed by Iran-backed militia has gathered pace in the last two weeks, according to rebels and a military news service run by the Lebanese group Hezbollah, which is fighting on the government side. Idlib province is the biggest chunk of Syria still held by rebels fighting President Bashar al-Assad, with a population swollen by Syrians who have fled government advances in other parts of the country. Assad has defeated rebels in many parts of western Syria with critical help from Russia and Iran.

The recent military escalation in western Syria has included an unprecedented attack by a squadron of drones on Russian military bases and has cast a shadow over Moscow’s efforts to convene a Syria peace progress later this month.

The Hezbollah-run news service said the army and its allies were repelling a “fierce assault” by the Nusra Front, formerly al Qaeda’s affiliate in the Syrian war, and groups linked to it.

Rebels fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) said in a statement that they had set up a joint operations room to repel the offensive and to take back areas seized by the government in northeastern Hama and southern Idlib.

“The operation is to hit the belly of the regime deep into liberated territories and to encircle their advancing forces,” said Ahmed Al late Al Rahamon, a senior official in Jaish al Nusair, an FSA faction taking part. — Reuters

Israel approves hundreds of new settlement homes

JERUSALEM: Israel has given final building approval for 352 homes in settlements in the occupied West Bank, an anti-settlement movement said yesterday – construction that Palestinians see as jeopardizing their prospects for statehood.

The Peace Now group said a meeting on Wednesday by a planning committee of Israel’s military-run Civil Administration for the West Bank also moved plans for 770 other settler homes to more advanced stages. Settlements are one of the most heated issues in efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, frozen since 2014.

“I think what Israel is doing is a purposeful, well-planned process of destruction of the two-state solution and possibility of the establishment of a Palestinian state,” Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian lawmaker, said of the committee’s decision.

Palestinians want the West Bank for a future state, along with East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. Most countries consider as illegal the settlements that Israel built in the territory it captured in the 1967 Middle East war. Israel disputes that its settlements are illegal. Its government says their future should be determined in peace talks and that the Palestinians’ refusal to recognize Israel as a Jewish state and declare an end to a decades-old conflict are the real obstacles to peace.

Some 500,000 Israelis live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, areas that are home to more than 2.6 million Palestinians. Hagit Ofran, a Peace Now spokes-woman, said the new round of construction approvals was “not a dramatic change” from last year’s pace, when Israel gave the go-ahead for 6,742 housing projects in the West Bank - a figure described by Peace Now as the highest since 2013.

But she noted that many of the latest housing projects were slated for settlements deep inside the West Bank, especially in places that Israel would need to evacuate in case of a peace agreement - which means our government is trying to prevent a two-state solution.”

Barghouti linked the increased settlement activity to the 2016 election of US President Donald Trump, a Republican who has been less critical than his predecessor, Democrat Barack Obama, of Israel on the issue. “These settlements could have been stopped by the United States,” he told Reuters.

The latest construction plans were first announced by Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman earlier this week.

Asked about them, a US State Department official said on Tuesday there had been no change in policy on settlements and the Israeli government had made clear that going forward “its intent is to adopt a policy regarding settlement activity that takes the president’s concerns into consideration." — Reuters
SOFIA: Bulgaria stepped up its campaign to adopt the euro yesterday, challenging member states to let it into the single currency’s “waiting room” in the coming months or spell out why it cannot join. Speaking to Brussels-based reporters as EU commissioners visited Sofia at the start of Bulgaria’s six-month presidency of EU ministerial councils, the finance minister said he was ready to apply to join the ERM-2 exchange rate mechanism this year even if he had no assurance that the request would be accepted.

Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and finance chief Vladislav Goranov said the European Union’s poorest nation had long met all formal criteria for joining the euro zone and was frustrated that fellow EU states were reluctant to let it in.

“We have done our homework for the euro zone,” Borissov said, noting the lev’s 20-year-old fixed rate against the euro, a non-existent budget deficit and one of the lowest public debt levels in the EU. “Any moment they invite us, we can enter it.”

Bulgaria has been reluctant to repeat the experience of flat rejection of its request to join the Schengen passport-free area and has been in discussions on joining the ERM-2 with the European Commission and the European Central Bank, hoping for an informal green light before lodging its formal application.

However, Goranov said, patience was wearing thin with a lack of clarity from states on why they object. Euro zone officials say that lead economy Germany sees the gulf between Bulgarian incomes with the EU average and concerns over graft and organized crime as reasons to keep it at arm’s length.

Goranov said he now expected to lodge an application by the middle of this year after a biennial EU report on performance on economic convergence, which the EU executive said it plans to publish in May. “We are ready to file a formal application even if we are not convinced that the reply will be ‘yes,’” Goranov said.

“This is not a threat,” he said, noting pressure on the government from Bulgarian businesses to join. “A ‘no’ will also show us what to do in order to get there.” As an example, he cited the fact that Bulgaria’s GDP per capita is about half that of the EU average and said that if euro zone states wanted to set it a target of 70 percent of the average he could accept that. There is no such formal criterion at the moment and some euro zone countries are below that level. — Reuters

SOFIA: Bulgaria to push for ERM-2 membership

Sofia to apply for ERM-2 by mid-year, says FM

SOFIA: A picture taken through a window on Wednesday shows a general view of the National Palace of Culture in Sofia, where the meetings of the Council of Europe will be held. Bulgaria’s capital Sofia was all done-up to host incoming European Union officials for the opening of its EU Council presidency. —AFP
**International**

15,000 Cameroonian refugees flee to Nigeria amid crackdown

**Move poses biggest challenge to President Paul Biya**

ABUJA: More than 15,000 Cameroonian refugees have fled to Nigeria amid a crackdown on Anglophone separatists, the United Nations (UN) refugee agency and Nigerian government officials said yesterday.

The once-fringe English-speaking movement in majority French-speaking Cameroon has gathered pace in the last few months after a military crackdown on protests, leading it to declare independence in October for a breakaway “Ambazonia” state it wants to create.

The move poses the biggest challenge yet to the 35-year rule of President Paul Biya, who will seek re-election this year, and the violent repression he has unleashed has driven thousands of people from English-speaking regions across the border into Nigeria.

More than 5,000 refugees have been registered in the southeastern state of Cross River alone, said Antonio Jose Canhandula, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) representative in Nigeria, at a briefing in Abuja.

A further 6,700 or so Cameroonian refugees have crossed into neighboring Benue state, said Sadiya Umar Farouq, the head of Nigeria’s National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, citing Benue officials. There are also at least 350 refugees in the states of Taraba and Akwa Ibom, said Tamuno Dientye Jaja, deputy comptroller general of the Nigeria Immigration Service.

The refugees are mostly children, women and the elderly, with very few young men, the officials said. “Certainly there are more, how many more we are not able to state,” said the UNHCR’s Canhandula.

“They are still coming, and they are coming daily,” he said. “It is a crisis. More food assistance, education and social services are needed, particularly as a number of the women are pregnant at a young age, were are all issues, Canhandula said.

Nigeria’s Farouq pledged the government’s support. “We are going to do all that we can to bring some kind of relief,” she said.

Nigerian and Cameroonian officials have met to discuss the refugees and those talks are ongoing, she said, although she declined to give details. The separatist movement, including armed radical elements, has strained bilateral relations between the two countries. Last week, Nigerian authorities took 12 leaders of the separatists, including the chairman of the self-declared Governing Council of Ambazonia, into custody after they gathered for a meeting in a hotel in the Nigerian capital Abuja, people familiar with the matter said.

Cameroonian troops last month crossed into Nigeria in pursuit of rebels without seeking Nigerian authorization, leading to diplomatic wrangling behind the scenes. — Reuters

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**Catalan parliament speaker latest separatist to step down**

BARCELONA: Catalonia’s parliamentary speaker said yesterday she would step down as she is investigated for sedition and rebellion over her role in the independence drive, the latest separatist leader to leave their post.

Speaking to reporters in Barcelona, staunchly pro-independence Carme Forcadell said she would not stay in the post despite having been offered to do so after regional elections on December 21 that saw separatist parties retain their absolute parliamentary majority.

“I think this new political moment requires a new person who is, above all else, free of legal proceedings,” she said.

Forcadell was a key figure among Catalan leaders who attempted to break away from Spain, a process that culminated with the regional parliament declaring unilateral independence on October 27.

But this was short-lived as Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy imposed direct rule on the semi-autonomous region, sacked its government, dissolved its parliament and called snap elections.

Forcadell’s decision to step down as parliamentary speaker—she will continue on as lawmaker—comes just two days after one of the main candidates to replace her announced he was leaving politics. — AFP

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**LuxLeaks whistleblower’s conviction quashed**

LUXEMBOURG: A Luxembourg court yesterday overturned the verdict against a “LuxLeaks” whistleblower who was convicted of leaking thousands of documents that revealed tax breaks for multinational firms. Luxembourg’s highest court rejected the conviction against former PricewaterhouseCoopers employee Antoine Deltour, who in March was handed a reduced six-month suspended jail sentence with a 1,500-euro fine.

The LuxLeaks scandal erupted in 2014 and sparked a major global push against generous deals handed to multinational companies, which grew even stronger with new revelations such as the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers Leaks.

“Today is a victory,” Deltour said as he left the courtroom.

The court “has clearly indicated towards a favorable outcome here in Luxembourg”, he added. The tiny EU country’s highest appeal court said Deltour was wrongly accused as he should have been fully recognized as a whistleblower as defined by the European Court of Human Rights. However, the sentence against Deltour’s colleague Raphael Halet, who received a 1,000-euro fine after an appeal, was upheld as the court said he did not fit the whistleblower definition.

Halet said he will be taking his case to the Strasbourg-based rights court, adding: “It will really be up to the judges of the ECHR to decide if I am a whistleblower or not.” The blockbuster leak revealed the huge tax breaks that Luxembourg offered firms including Apple, IKEA and Pepsi, at a time when Jean-Claude Juncker, now head of the European Commission, was prime minister. An appeal court will now hold a fresh trial with new judges tasked to decide a very limited part of Deltour’s case, Luxembourg’s highest court said in a statement. “This decision is a significant step in the protection of whistleblowers in Europe,” Deltour’s lawyer William Bourdon told AFP. “For the first time in Europe, a high court recognizes the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights,” he said.

‘Small step’

Activists demonstrated at the opening of the court proceeding and called for the case’s dismissal and better protection of whistleblowers. “We need comprehensive legislation in all EU countries to ensure that whistleblowers like Deltour and Halet are no longer prosecuted in the future,” said Patricia Moreira, Executive Director at Transparency International. — AFP
Merkel expects ‘tough day’ in crunch German coalition talks

Chancellor needs deal with SPD to secure fourth term

BERLIN: Chancellor Angela Merkel said her conservatives still had high hurdles to clear in yesterday's talks on forming a coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD), who are pressing for accelerated European integration.

Merkel, weakened by an election setback in September, turned to the left-leaning SPD to seek a re-run of their so-called “grand coalition” after the collapse in November of talks on a three-way coalition untested at national level. The chancellor, who commands wide respect abroad after more than 12 years in power, needs coalition talks to succeed to avoid further erosion of her personal authority and weakening of German international influence, not least in the European Union (EU).

Speaking at the start of the final day of exploratory talks that could lead to formal negotiations, Merkel said it would be a tough day but she recognized that Germans expected results.

“No solution will be achieved without international cooperation and the cooperation of the United Kingdom, which has also shown interest in seeking a way out,” Espinosa told foreign correspondents in Quito. On Wednesday the Ecuadorian foreign ministry refused to comment on reports that Assange, an Australian national, has been granted citizenship by Ecuador. “The government of Ecuador recently requested diplomatic status for Mr Assange here in the UK. The UK did not grant that request, nor are we in talks with Ecuador on this matter,” the British foreign ministry said in a statement.

Ecuador’s foreign minister said yesterday, Assange has refused to step outside the embassy and claimed he fears being extradited to the US, for Wikileaks’ publication of leaked secret US military documents and diplomatic cables in 2010.

Ecuadorean Foreign Minister Maria Fernanda Espinosa said on Tuesday her government is looking at the possibility of a “third country or a personality” stepping in to resolve the stand-off.

“Ecuador knows that the way to resolve this issue is for Julian Assange to leave the embassy to face justice,” Britain's foreign minister said yesterday. Assange has refused to step outside the embassy and claimed he fears being extradited to the US, for Wikileaks’ publication of leaked secret US military documents and diplomatic cables in 2010.

Ecuadorean Foreign Minister Maria Fernanda Espinosa said on Tuesday her government is looking at the possibility of a “third country or a personality” stepping in to resolve the stand-off.

“No solution will be achieved without international cooperation and the cooperation of the United Kingdom, which has also shown interest in seeking a way out,” Espinosa told foreign correspondents in Quito. On Wednesday the Ecuadorian foreign ministry refused to comment on reports that Assange, an Australian national, has been granted citizenship by the South American country. — AFP

Should the parties fail to reach a deal on Thursday they could extend the talks, though President Frank-Walter Steinmeier is eager for an agreement, keenly aware that businesses want a stable coalition to end uncertainty and avoid another vote.

SPD hurdle

In signs of incremental progress in the talks, negotiators agreed to reduce use of the weed killer glyphosate, draft plans seen by Reuters showed. SPD Secretary General Lars Klingbeil told party members in a video message the party was striving for improvements in labor, health, education and family policy, and on Europe. “We’re fighting for that,” he said in a video message, adding that the final day of exploratory talks would show “whether we can cut through the knot on these big issues”. Participants have described the negotiations as “good”, but SPD leaders need to convince their party members and are offering them a vote on Jan. 21 on whether to proceed. Merkel has ruled with the SPD in a sometimes unwieldy “grand coalition” - or ‘GroKo’ - in two of her three previous terms in office, including in the last parliament from 2013-2017. But both parties bided support in the Sept. 24 election, which saw the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) enter the Bundestag lower house of parliament for the first time. — Reuters
International

Trump blasts immigration ruling, calls court system ‘broken, unfair’

WASHINGTON/NEW YORK: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday blasted the federal court system as “broken and unfair” after a judge blocked his administration’s move to end a program protecting young immigrants brought to the United States illegally by their parents.

A US District Court judge in San Francisco ruled late on Tuesday that Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, which Trump has said he will end, should remain in effect until legal challenges brought in multiple courts are resolved.

Under the administration’s plan, the program for young people commonly known as “Dreamers” would be phased out over a two-year period, beginning in March. “It just shows everyone how broken and unfair our Court System is when the opposing side in a case (such as DACA) ... almost always wins before being reversed by higher courts,” the Republican president wrote on Twitter.

The Justice Department said in a statement it “looks forward to vindicating its position in further litigation.” But the administration did not immediately appeal the decision by US District Judge William Alsup of the Northern District of California. An appeal from that court would typically go to the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals.

Some legal experts predicted the Trump administration would be successful if it appealed the ruling to the US Supreme Court. In December, the country’s highest court granted an administration request to block an earlier Alsup order that called for the release of internal documents related to the government’s DACA decision.

Several experts also said Tuesday’s court ruling could complicate negotiations between congressional Democrats and Republicans trying to reach a deal to resolve the legal status of nearly 700,000 young immigrants covered by the program, which allows them to live and work in the United States. “The ruling could deflate the pressure on Congress to act in the next week and in our view there remains just as much urgency as ever for a lasting fix,” said Michael Tan from the American Civil Liberties Union.

Dreamers “don’t need a protracted battle,” said Michael Tan from the American Civil Liberties Union. “The ruling last night in no way diminishes the urgency of solving the DACA issue,” Schumersaid on the Senate floor. “On this, we agree with the White House.”

John Cornyn, the Senate’s No. 2 Republican, condemned the ruling, but said it would not affect congressional negotiations. “We’re reading the court’s opinion. It strikes me as wildly wrong,” Cornyn told reporters. “If President Obama can create the Deferred Action program, then certainly President Trump can uncreate it.”

Senators urge quick democratic solution

WASHINGTON: Democratic Senate leader Chuck Schumer also urged a quick legislative solution. The talks on DACA have become embroiled in negotiations on funding for the federal government, which expires on Jan. 19. “The ruling last night in no way diminishes the urgency of solving the DACA issue,” Schumer said on the Senate floor. “On this, we agree with the White House.”

John Cornyn, the Senate’s No. 2 Republican, condemned the ruling, but said it would not affect congressional negotiations. “We’re reading the court’s opinion. It strikes me as wildly wrong,” Cornyn told reporters. “If President Obama can create the Deferred Action program, then certainly President Trump can uncreate it.”

Rescuers race against time to find missing in California mudslides

SANTA BARBARA: Rescue crews in Southern California resumed yesterday the arduous task of combing through tons of debris for survivors from deadly mudslides that struck along the state’s picturesque coastal communities. Seventeen people are confirmed dead and another 17 people are missing after a wall of mud roared down hillsides in the scenic area between the Pacific Ocean and the Los Padres National Forest, according to authorities in Santa Barbara County.

“Right now, our assets are focused on determining if anyone is still alive in any of those structures that have been damaged,” Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Bonfield told Los Angeles television station KCAL. Some 500 rescuers using search dogs, military helicopters, and thermal imaging equipment are on scene.

Search and rescue efforts have been slow as crews have to navigate through waist-deep mud, fallen trees, boulders and other debris. “Another tough day in Santa Barbara County as Search and Rescue, Fire and Law Enforcement personnel from across our county and our neighboring counties searched for survivors and evacuated people,” the sheriff’s office said on its Twitter feed late Wednesday night.

The devastating mudslides, which were triggered by heavy rains early on Tuesday, roared into valleys denuded by historic wildfires that struck the area last month. The debris flow from the mudslides has destroyed 100 homes, damaged hundreds of other structures and injured 28 people, said Amber Anderson, a spokesperson for the Santa Barbara County Fire Department. Among the damaged properties were historic hotels and the homes of celebrities including television personality Oprah Winfrey and talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres, who both live in the upscale hillside community of Montecito.

Surrender or be shot in the face, senior US soldier tells IS

WASHINGTON: US troops and their allies will shoot Islamic State militants in the face, beat them to death with shovels or drop bombs on them if they don’t surrender, the US military’s most senior enlisted member has said.

In an eyebrow-raising set of postings on social media Tuesday, Command Sergeant Major John Troxell warned that IS members who refuse to quit will be dispatched with “extreme prejudice,” including via a small shovel known as an entrenching tool. “If they surrender, we will safeguard them to their detainee facility cell, provide them chow, a cot and due process,” Troxell wrote on Facebook. “IF they choose not to surrender, then we will kill them with extreme prejudice, whether that be through security force assistance, by dropping bombs on them, shooting them in the face, or beating them to death with our entrenching tools,” he added.

The post featured a photo of a US soldier holding a shovel and, in case anyone was in any doubt about to slay a man with a small spade, Troxell posted a diagram on Facebook on Wednesday explaining exactly how to do so. Troxell’s chest-thumping remarks quickly attracted a slew of commentary, mostly supportive.

One detractor said on Twitter the message was “bad optics.”

“No, that’s exactly the message that soldier(s) need and love to hear,” another user responded. — AFP
**International**

**Myanmar army changes tack admits killings of Rohingya**

The tales from 655,000 Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh horrify the world

**BANGKOK:** After months denying any wrongdoing, Myanmar has admitted its forces helped kill 10 Rohingya in custody in an apparent bid to blame a few rogue soldiers for what the generals say is a misguided part of an organized ethnic cleansing campaign.

Accounts of mass murder, rape and torture from the 655,000 Rohingya who fled Myanmar's army to Bangladesh have horrified the world. Since the August crackdown the army vigorously denied any abuses, instead locking down access to Rakhine state and accusing critics—including the UN’s pro-Rohingya bias and spreading “false news”.

Then late on Wednesday it suddenly changed tune: an internal probe found four members of the “security forces” helped kill 10 Rohingya militant suspects at Inn Din village on September 2, leaving their bodies in a hastily-dug pit.

It was found that the incident was not submitted to superior levels, it said. The unprecedented acknowledgement, relayed on the Facebook page of the office of army chief Min Aung Hlaing, rippled out across the rights community that has spent months piecing together allegations of numerous atrocities. “This grisly admission is a sharp departure from the army’s policy of blanket denial of any wrongdoing,” said James Gomez, Amnesty International’s regional director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

“Yes, it is the only tip of the iceberg,” he added, urging independent investigation into other allegations. Some observers say the army move is an attempt to retake control of the story after rumors of extra-judicial killings at Inn Din and the surrounding area began to seep out.

The admission came the same day as two Reuters journalists were formally charged by police in court with breaching the Official Secrets Act. The pair, Myanmar nationals Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, have widely covered the military campaign in Rakhine although Reuters has declined to comment on whether they were specifically reporting on the mass grave in Inn Din.

“The military’s admission demonstrates the culpability of soldiers and commanders in mass atrocities,” said Matthew Smith of Fortify Rights, suggesting the arrest of the journalists was a clumsy effort “to cover their tracks”. Khin Zaw Win, of Yangon-based think-tank the Tampadipa Institute, echoed that theory, speculating the army “had no option but to come clean with it.”

In December the US hit General Maung Maung Soe, who led the Western Command in the Rakhine operations, with targeted sanctions. That punishment may have ratted the upper army echelons, speculated Khin Zaw Win about cover-ups “could go bad for them... there could be sanctions against other generals,” he said.

**Swords and guns**

 Until Wednesday the army said its operations had killed around 400 militants in a legitimate defense of the country from Muslim militants intent on taking over Rakhine. Its stance helped curdle a siege mentality inside Myanmar where the Buddhist-majority public has little sympathy for the stateless Rohingya, Inn Din, in Maungdaw district, was engulfed by violence in late August.

On September 1 the 10 “Bengali terrorists” were apprehended after clashes pitting Rohingya against security forces and Rakhine villagers enraged by the murder of a local man by militants, the army chief’s office said in its post.

“Bengali” is loaded term for the Muslim minority who are widely reviled inside Myanmar. The 10 suspects should have been taken to a police station. Instead after a night of interrogation at a school they were killed the next day by Rakhine villagers armed with swords and “four members of security forces” who “shot them with the use of guns”. Their remains were found on December 20. The account chimes with refugee testimony collected in Bangladesh on the Inn Din incident. —AFP

Indian court orders probe into homeless being denied shelter due to lack of ID

**MUMBAI:** Uttar Pradesh state officials must investigate whether homeless people are denied access to shelters because they don’t have identity cards, which they cannot obtain without an address, India’s highest court has ordered. It was the latest criticism of the government’s program to issue each citizen an Aadhaar, an identity card meant to streamline welfare payments and reduce waste in public spending.

The Supreme Court has been holding hearings on the legitimacy of the government’s demand to make the Aadhaar mandatory for a range of services from filing tax returns to booking train tickets.

More than 1 billion of India’s 1.25 billion population have an Aadhaar. Technology experts have raised concerns about the privacy and safety of the data, which includes a residential address, date of birth, fingerprints and iris scans.

Activists say that people without the card are being refused welfare services, with reports of deaths linked to denial of subsidized food when verification failed. In a Wednesday hearing on night shelters, the court asked Uttar Pradesh authorities whether homeless people are being turned away if they do not have an Aadhaar.” How do homeless people get Aadhaar if they have no home or a permanent address?” asked Justice Madan Lokur during the hearing. “Does this mean that they do not exist for the Government of India?”

Additional Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, who is representing the state, told the court that most homeless people in cities come from villages where they have homes and can therefore get the ID card there. Activists say that sending homeless people back to their villages is not a solution, and that states must follow the 2014 Supreme Court ruling that the Aadhaar cannot be a requirement for welfare programs.

“People are dying on the streets because they cannot go into shelters without an ID,” said Shivani Chaudhry, executive director of the Housing and Land Rights Network. “Shelters should not be asking for Aadhaar,” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. There are 1 million urban homeless people in India, according to census data, although charities estimate the actual number to be up to three times higher.

Every year, hundreds die from exposure to the cold or heat on pavements and train station platforms. —Reuters

There were also kidnappings of crew in the southern Philippines, the bureau said. Islamic militants have been increasingly targeting seafarers in the strife-torn region, abducting them and demanding ransoms for their release.

The number of attacks in Bangladesh jumped three-fold to 11 in 2017, with most in Chittagong, the country’s busiest port. The Gulf of Guinea off the west coast of Africa remained an attack hotspot in 2017. Out of 16 incidents of vessels being fired on reported worldwide last year, seven occurred in the gulf.

However there were 10 incidents of kidnapping involving 55 crew members in or around waters off Nigeria, which lies next to the Gulf of Guinea, according to the Kuala Lumpur-based IMB’s report, which was released Wednesday. Waters off Somalia remained dangerous, with nine incidents recorded last year, up from two in 2016. A dramatic attack on a container ship far off the Somali coast saw pirates firing rockets at the vessel after a failed attempt to board it.

“This dramatic incident... demonstrates that Somali pirates retain the capability and intent to launch attacks against merchant vessels hundreds of miles from their coastline,” said IMB director Pottengal Mukundan. —AFP

**Pirate attacks at two-decade low:**

**Maritime watchdog**

**KUALA LUMPUR:** Pirate attacks worldwide fell to their lowest level in over two decades last year, the International Maritime Bureau said, but more than doubled in the Philippines while African trouble spots remained dangerous. A total of 180 incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships were recorded last year, the lowest number since 1995 and down from 191 in 2016, the bureau said in its annual report.

Some countries such as Indonesia, the world’s biggest archipelago nation, saw a drop in incidents, with 43 attacks in its waters last year, down more than half in the past two years.

However a handful of countries witnessed a steady climb in attacks. Twenty-two incidents were recorded in the Philippines, a jump from 10 in 2016, with most of them low-level attacks on vessels anchored at Manila and Batangas, south of the capital, the country’s two busiest ports.

There were also 45 kidnappings of crew in the southern Philippines, the bureau said. Islamic militants have been increasingly targeting seafarers in the strife-torn region, abducting them and demanding ransoms for their release.

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China’s Xi supports progress in recent inter-Korean talks

Japan protests presence of Chinese ship in disputed waters

Shanghai closes Marriott website in China after questionnaire gaffe

Japanese crime boss held in Thailand after ‘yakuza’ tatts go viral

SEOUL: Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday welcomed recent progress in inter-Korean talks during a telephone call with South Korean President Moon Jae-in, the South’s Blue House said in a statement. At Tuesday’s talks, North Korea said it would attend the Winter Olympics in the South next month, and both sides agreed to resolve problems through dialogue and revive military consultations to avoid accidental conflict.

Seoul and Beijing agreed in October to move beyond a year-long stand-off over the deployment of a US anti-missile system in South Korea, a dispute that has been devastating to South Korean businesses that rely on Chinese consumers. Moon made his first visit to China last month. During the 30-minute call, Xi said he supported Moon’s stance that the advancement of inter-Korean ties and the demilitarization of the peninsula should “go in parallel”, Moon’s office said.

“Xi expressed the hope that the cooperation between the two leaders would lead to a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula,” the statement said.

The two leaders agreed to strengthen strategic communication and cooperation, the statement said. It added that the two leaders hoped the latest dialogue effort would lead to a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and the establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula, beyond next month’s Olympics.

In Beijing, the official China Daily cited Xi as telling Moon that China wanted to work with South Korea to “jointly maintain regional peace and stability”. In a telephone call on Wednesday, Moon and US President Donald Trump also said the dialogue “could naturally lead to talks between the United States and North Korea for the demilitarization of the Korean peninsula after the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.”

Washington welcomed the talks as a first step towards resolving the crisis over North Korea’s program to develop nuclear missiles capable of reaching the United States, but it has reiterated that any talks involving the US must be aimed at the North’s denuclearization. However, P’yongyang said it would not discuss its nuclear weapons because they were aimed only at the United States and not its “brethren” in China, Russia and South Korea, showing that a diplomatic breakthrough to the crisis remains far off.

Meanwhile, Japan yesterday protested to China after a Chinese military vessel was detected in waters near disputed islands in the East China Sea, calling on China to avoid actions that could interfere with improving bilateral ties. The Chinese frigate was seen in waters contiguous to Japan’s territory around the islands, known as the Senkaku in Japan and Diaoyu in China, the Defence Ministry said. It did not enter Japanese territorial waters.

A foreign submarine was also detected in the same area on Wednesday as well, it added, without identifying the nationality. Both had left the area by yesterday afternoon.

Japanese submarines are also conducts patrols in the East China Sea regularly. Japan and China have long been at loggerheads over the tiny, uninhabited islands. They are controlled by Japan but claimed also by China. “We want to strongly urge China not to do anything to interfere with improving bilateral ties,” Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told a news conference. Knoti Kanazuga, director-general of the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, met with Chinese ambassador Cheng Yonghua at the Foreign Ministry to express grave concern about the move, the ministry said in a statement. The Chinese ambassador responded to the protest by reiterating China’s stance on the islands, the statement added. —Reuters

Aside from closing down the website, the Shanghai Cyberspace Administration said in a statement that it was shutting the Marriott’s mobile phone application, in a move that would also disrupt bookings.

In a Mandarin-language questionnaire sent out to customers a few days ago, Marriott listed Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan as separate countries.

China claims sovereignty over all four of territories, though Taiwan is self-ruled and has democratic elections. The Shanghai government said it had asked Marriott to “take down all relevant content, conduct a thorough check on all contents it posted on its website and online application to prevent anything similar, and address the public’s concern in a timely fashion to eliminate a negative impact.”

It also said Shanghai’s Huangpu district market supervision bureau was launching an investigation into Marriott, as it was suspected of violating China’s cyber security law and advertisement law.

Last year, South Korean companies were hit heavily by Chinese economic retaliation over Seoul’s deployment of a US missile shield system. —Reuters

Japanese authorities have called for his arrest over an alleged role in the shooting of a rival in Japan in 2003, after which he fled to Thailand, married a Thai woman and drifted into a seemingly peaceful retirement. That was until a Thai local posted some photos of the diminutive, frail-looking retiree playing a street side checker game with his intricate gang tattoos on full show and a missing little finger—yakuza members often slice off the tip of a finger to atone for an offence.

The photos were shared more than 10,000 times online and caught the attention of Japanese authorities, who arrested him, and brought him back to Japan to stand trial. —AFP

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The photos were shared more than 10,000 times online and caught the attention of Japanese authorities, who arrested him, and brought him back to Japan to stand trial. —AFP
Delon says he’s ready to die, but his dog must come too.
Elvis fans shook up Sydney's Central station yesterday with hundreds rocking to his famous tunes ahead of a special train trip to outback Australia to celebrate the late entertainer's birthday. Decked out in their glittering best, the fans were heading to Parkes—a small town some 300 kilometers (190 miles) west of Sydney—on the “Elvis Express” and “Blue Suede Express” trains to take part in a five-day festival. “He’s such an icon and he hasn’t lost any of that magic that he used to have,” avid Elvis Presley fan Julie Mellae—who wore an orange wig, tiara and fishnet stockings for the special occasion—told AFP. “In fact, I think he’s developed more, so this festival is like the biggest thing that happens in January. Everyone wants to be on the Elvis train and it’s booked out years in advance.” Elvis impersonators belted out the legendary singer’s biggest hits on a makeshift stage before the seven-hour train pilgrimage, swiveling their hips and blowing kisses to adoring admirers amid loud cheers. The annual extravaganza, in its 26th year, is billed as the southern hemisphere’s biggest tribute to the rock ‘n’ roll legend—who died in 1977—and attracts thousands of die-hard fans. Last year’s event drew 25,000 people to Parkes, more than double the town’s population, and generated millions of dollars for the local economy. The town transforms into a vibrant tribute to The King, who would have been 83 this year, with a street parade and non-stop entertainment to keep visitors jiving. “It’s just everybody’s in a good mood, everybody’s happy, nobody’s cranky,” said David Ward-Smith, who was wearing a specially made “Elvis Festival” T-shirt with his friends on board the “Elvis Express”. “Up and down the streets (in Parkes), it’s Elvis singers. Every 50 meters, it’s somebody else trying hard. Everybody’s just in party mode, it’s a great little atmosphere. It’s like the Olympics every year,” he told AFP.

Parkes, a mining town with a population of more than 11,000, is famous for its radio telescope which played a pivotal role in bringing Neil Armstrong’s 1969 moon landing to the world. But the Elvis Festival, first held in 1993 to coincide with the singer’s birthday on January 8, 1935, has since placed the town on the tourist map and also earned it the moniker of “Elvis Capital of Australia”. — AFP
Veteran French film star Alain Delon said yesterday that he was so sick of the world he would be happy to die now—but he wants his dog to go with him. "I hate the times that we live in, it makes me vomit," said the 82-year-old actor, one of the handsomest men ever to grace the silver screen. "There are people that I hate. Everything is false, and only money counts. I will leave this world without regret," he told Paris Match magazine in a frank, tell-all interview in which he admitted to not being much of a father to his children, one of whom he still refuses to recognize.

Delon, who lives alone outside Paris, said he wants his two-year-old Belgian Shepherd dog, Loubo, to die with him. "If I go before him I will ask the vet for us to go together. He will inject him so he can die in my arms. "I would prefer that rather than leaving him to die of grief on my tomb," said the star of such classics as Visconti's "The Leopard", "The Samurai" and "Purple Noon", which was later remade as the "Talented Mr Ripley". Yet Delon did not rule out making room for the right woman to shares his last days. He said there were about 10 candidates, "but for now none are quite right." He added he might even consider breaking his vow to never re-marry if the right woman "was ready to accompany me to the end."

The actor, who made his name playing pretty boy killers and cads, talked of his fear that he might be dug up after his death for DNA for a paternity test.

"Don't dig me up"
"I've told my daughter, 'Please don't let that happen to me when I'm dead'," he said Delon has long denied he fathered a son with Nico, the late German pop star and muse of Andy Warhol. However, Delon's mother later adopted the boy, making him his half-brother. Yet Delon's own miserable childhood badly marked him, he told the

magazine, “My parents got rid of me when I was four. I found myself with a foster family like an orphan.” “Both of them came running back to me when I was famous. All of a sudden they remembered they had a son,” he said bitterly.

Nor has he forgiven them for signing his army papers so he could be thrown into the bloody Indochina War at 17. “It was them getting rid of me a second time,” he said. Delon put down his tumultuous love life and much of his woes with women to being abandoned. “You cannot get back the love that wasn’t given to me as a child. These are holes that can never be filled. Even when I love a woman, I feel alone. I was only four when I understood that those you love the most can abandon you.” The tell-all interview, over oysters, was conducted by Valerie Trierweiler, the estranged partner of former French president Francois Hollande. She effectively torpedoed his presidency with a bestselling account of their relationship, "Thank You For This Moment", after he left her for an actress. The journalist recently denied that she and Delon were an item.

"Few men loved like me"
The actor admitted that he had not always been the perfect gentleman. “I am like that, I do stupid things, I have been in prison. I was a little thug. All I had was my face,” he said. Yet women have always fallen at his feet, even as a baby, he said. “My mother had to put a sign on my pram, ‘You can look, but you can’t touch!’” “I have been loved all my life,” he said, particularly by the German actress Romy Schneider and Mireille Darc, who died last year. “Very few men have been loved like me.” But Delon said he never slept with Brigitte Bardot, who was the Venus to his Apollo in French cinema of the 1960s.

“Strange though it may seem... given the torrid scenes we did, we were only friends, but good friends," he told Paris Match of the actress, who like him has been a vocal supporter of the far-right National Front party. “I really like her and we share a passion for animals. If she had not her great love of animals I am sure she would have killed herself by now, like so many other great sex symbols. It is very hard for a woman to no longer see desire in men’s eyes.” — AFP
NORTH KOREA'S 'ARMY OF BEAUTIES' SET TO INVADE SOUTH

NORTH KOREA'S 'ARMY OF BEAUTIES' SET TO INVADE SOUTH

Chosen for their good looks and sharp moves, North Korea’s female cheerleaders are a stark contrast to the regime’s menacing nuclear ambitions. Dubbed the “army of beauties” in South Korea, the young North Korean women most often in their late teens or early 20s—have attracted huge publicity whenever they have been sent to the South. North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un’s future wife Ri Sol-Ju was among the group who attended the 2005 Asian Athletics Championships in Incheon. The cheerleaders are set for their fourth appearance in the South after Pyongyang agreed this week to send a delegation to next month’s Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, just 80 kilometers (50 miles) south of the Demilitarized Zone that splits the peninsula in two.

North and South have been totally separated since the end of the Korean War in 1953, with no direct telephone or postal links between them. Any North Korean delegations to its neighbor are carefully chosen by Pyongyang, and their movements are tightly controlled in the South. According to reports, the Winter Olympics group could be accommodated on a cruise ship moored in Sokcho, making it easier to monitor them.

An Chan-il, a defector researcher who runs the World Institute for North Korea Studies, said the cheerleaders are cherry-picked by the regime based on tough criteria. “They must be over 163 centimeters (5ft 3ins) tall and come from good families,” An told AFP. “Those who play an instrument are from a band and others are mostly students at the elite Kim Il-Sung University.”

Samsung phone
The Koreans’ separation makes citizens of the North an object of some fascination for South Koreans. The cheerleaders made their first appearance at the 2002 Asian Games in Busan, hitting the headlines when nearly 300 of them arrived on a ferry dressed in colorful hanboks-traditional Korean dresses—and waving so-called unification flags, a pale blue silhouette of the whole Korean peninsula. Hundreds of Busan residents lined the port to greet them, with several homes also flying unification flags. With their tight choreography—sometimes using props such as fans—the cheerleaders were lavished with attention as they sang and danced in the stands.

In 2005, former North Korean cheerleader Cho Myung-Ae—whose looks had gained her a huge following in the South—appeared in a television commercial for a Samsung mobile phone with South Korean pop star Lee Hyo-Ri. The support was a major ticket draw, and their attendance is good news for the Pyeongchang Games organizers. “It will help with ticket sales,” said Pyeongchang Organising Committee spokesman Sung Baik-You. “It will fulfill our desires for a peace Olympics.”

'Fearful efforts'
But the Northerners’ presence also has potential to create some diplomatic headaches. There are concerns that South Koreans may not be as welcoming as in the past, given their opposition to North Korea’s nuclear program and its increasingly belligerent behavior. And displaying the North Korean flag and playing its anthem are illegal in the South, where they are regarded as symbols of sedition under Seoul’s national security laws, hence the use of the unification flag at past inter-Korean matches. When a North Korean flag was draped over a railing at a North-South football game during the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon it was removed by officials.

The rule will not be enforced within the Olympic venues, where IOC protocol applies, but could become an issue elsewhere. The two teams marched behind the unification flag when they entered the stadiums together for the opening ceremonies of the 2000 and 2004 Olympics in Sydney and Athens, and the 2006 Winter Games in Turin. But if they do so again at the opening ceremony on February 9, it would mean the South’s emblem would not appear on the stadium floor at its home Olympics. How could the South accept that reality, the Chosun Ilbo newspaper asked in an editorial Wednesday, having secured the Games “through tearful efforts after two failures”? — AFP
Major jewelry heists in France

After four million euros ($4.75 million) worth of jewels were stolen from Paris's Ritz hotel, here is a recap of some of France's biggest jewelry heists in the past 10 years.

Customer in Cannes

In January 2017 a man walked into a boutique in the French resort town and was greeted as a customer before pulling out a gun and making off with 15 million euros worth of jewelry.

Switch

A thief posing as a client switches two rough diamonds and two rings, worth around 5.5 million euros, with fakes at a Swiss jeweler's private showroom in Paris in December 2016. He is arrested in Romania the following month.

From the airport

In November 2018 masked robbers hold up two Qatari women in their 60s who are in a chauffeur-driven Bentley having just landed at a Paris airport. Jewels and other items worth more than five million euros are stolen.

Kim Kardashian

The US reality television star is tied up and robbed at gunpoint in October 2016 by thieves who make off with jewelry worth at least nine million euros. She is in Paris for Fashion Week and staying in a luxury residence.

Cannes, again

Four robbers, one wearing the mask of an elderly person, steal 17.5 million euros in jewelry and watches from a boutique in May 2015 just days before the start of the city's international film festival.

Paris airport taxi

In April 2015 thieves make off with a handbag containing four million euros worth of Chanel jewels in a smash-and-grab attack on a taxi between Paris and Charles De Gaulle airport. The victim is a Taiwanese art collector.

Highway hold-up

Around 15 robbers stop two vans at a toll booth on the A6 motorway in March 2015, near the central city of Auxerre, and make off with jewelry worth around nine million euros.

Cannes diamond display

In July 2013 a man armed with a semi-automatic pistol and his head covered with a cloth walks into the Carlton hotel and makes off with jewelry worth around nine million euros.

Others

• In February 2010 a thief steals a handbag with 4.5 million euros in jewels from the daughter of a mayor of Kiev being driven into Paris from an airport.

• In May 2010 armed robbers walk off with seven million euros in gems after taking a jeweler wholesaler and his family hostage in a town near Marseille.

• In July 2009 three men take 15 million euros worth of jewels in a hold-up of a Cartier store in Cannes.

• In May 2009 a lone robber enters the exclusive Chopard jewellery store in Paris's upmarket central Place Vendome and leaves with 6.8 million euros of jewelry.

• Three men steal around 900 pieces from the Harry Winston jewellery boutique on Paris's chic Avenue Montaigne in December 2008. Some are recovered but the loss is estimated at nearly 75 million euros. Fifteen men linked to the crime are eventually jailed. — AFP

FRENCH POLICE RECOVER SOME JEWELS FROM RITZ HEIST

French police have recovered some of the jewels worth over 4.0 million euros looted from the Ritz hotel in central Paris, a police source told AFP yesterday, as officers hunt for two robbers who remain on the run. The gang burst into the five-star hotel on the French capital's glitzy Place Vendome through a rear staff entrance on Wednesday evening and smashed the display windows of jewelry shops on the ground floor.

Three men were arrested as they tried to flee by the way they came in with bags of gems and watches. But they came up against locked doors. “Obviously there is a security system and an alarm in this type of establishment,” a police source said. Part of the loot was recovered after being scattered about during the arrest of the three suspects, while more jewels and watches were found in a bag dropped by one of the two robbers who got away, another source added, without being able to give an estimate for the value of the goods retrieved. The three men arrested, all around 0 years old, are from the Seine-Saint-Denis area north of Paris, and are “well known the police for armed robbery, violence and receiving stolen goods”, a source close to the inquiry said.

The incident took place at around 6:30 pm (1730 GMT). A police team in charge of patrolling the square-home to one of Paris's top jewelry and watchmakers, as well as the justice ministry-was quickly on the scene. Place Vendome has been the scene of several daring jewelry heists in recent years. Security in the neighborhood was beefed up in 2014 but robbers have continued to strike.

Several luxury brands display their jewels in the storied Ritz, famous as the lodging of choice for Coco Chanel and Ernest Hemingway as well as Princess Diana, who stayed there before her death in a car crash in a Paris tunnel in 1997. Wednesday's robbery took place a year and half after the hotel re-opened its palatial doors to guests after nearly four years of renovations and a massive fire. The suspects were wearing gloves and balaclavas and carrying handguns as well as hatchets, according to police sources.

On finding their escape route blocked they tried to transfer the loot through a window to two accomplices waiting outside. One of the two accomplices fled by car. The other made his getaway on a motorbike, dropping a bag of jewels in the process. Yesterday, the source close to the inquiry said the car had been found in the Val d'Oise department, near Seine-Saint-Denis. Contacted by AFP, the Ritz management declined to comment on the robbery.

Long list of heists

The total value of the loot was estimated at 4.0 million euros ($4.75 million), a judicial source told AFP. Interior Minister Gerard Collomb praised the responding officers for the arrests, saying they had “done our police force credit.” France has found itself repeatedly in the headlines for high-profile robberies, particularly in Paris and on the Cote d'Azur. US reality television star Kim Kardashian was the target of one of the biggest heists in recent years, while attending Paris Fashion Week in October 2016.

Five men, some wearing jackets with police insignia, held up Kardashian at gunpoint in a luxury apartment in the central Madeleine district, making off with a diamond ring and other jewelry pieces valued in total at nine million euros. One of the robbers, fleeing the scene on a bicycle, dropped a bag containing the loot through a window to two accomplices waiting outside.

Contacted by AFP, the Ritz management declined to comment on the robbery.

Kim Kardashian

A picture shows the facade of the Ritz luxury hotel in Paris after an armed robbery.—AFP
KNOT A PROBLEM: THAI CAPITAL TACKLES STREET CABLES

Bangkok's Wireless Road may soon live up to its name. Like many streets in the Thai capital, the thoroughfare is festooned with electrical and telecom cables, a black web that hangs menacingly overhead like dystopian Christmas decorations. But Bangkok authorities are now untangling the cables and moving them underground as part of an urban renewal pushed by the Thai junta that seized power in 2014. The aim is to make Bangkok not only safer, but easier on the eyes and less prone to blackouts. Frayed cables—often live—dangle at head-height onto Bangkok's streets, making safe navigation of the already treacherous pavements even harder. Other wires are left to bunch up near pylons, creeping hazardously across the narrow walkways of the city Centre.

Exposure to the elements has also meant the cables are easily damaged, which can cause problems for the city's electrical system. Wireless Road, which got its name from hosting one of Thailand's first radio transmitting stations, is among dozens of streets targeted in the early phase of the de-cluttering campaign.

Large stretches of Sukhumvit Road, a central artery that cuts through high-end neighborhoods and tourist hotspots, have already been cleared since November. “This is a commercial road. We see hotels and foreigners living around here. When they see the beautiful road, they will spread the word,” Prasong Kumpharit, an official with Bangkok's Metropolis Electricity Authority, told AFP. The project has been planned for years, but many suspect it received an unexpected jolt after Microsoft founder Bill Gates visited Bangkok in 2016 and took a disapproving photo of one street's wiry web. The billionaire later deleted the Facebook post, which blamed the cluster of wires on people illegally tapping into the grid. Netizens quibbled with his diagnosis of the cable bunches, which include both telecom connections and power supply wires, but less than a week later the government announced that cleanup was moving forward.

‘No more disorderly stuff’

So far 1,184 utility poles have been removed from three of the city’s biggest roads. Over the next five years authorities plan to strip cables from 39 more streets totaling 127 kilometers, reinstalling the new connections under the road. While there are no hard figures, Bangkok authorities say that is just a fraction of the city’s cables but is still a major improvement on the status quo. “The main advantage we get is the security of the electrical system,” said Prasong. “When the cables are underground, the problem with disturbances that can cause blackouts will be gone.” Thailand’s military rulers have launched a flurry of campaigns to impose some order on their chaotic capital in recent years, including clearing away many of Bangkok’s famous street-food stalls.

But while that decision caused dismay in some quarters, few will shed a tear when the cable clusters disappear. “Taking the wires away is really great. It makes the city clean, clear and pleasant to look at,” Sukanya Phuangdech, a 45-year-old Bangkoker, told AFP from a newly-cleared Sukhumvit Road. “No more disorderly stuff. I feel like people are happier.” Martin Fletcher, a 30-year-old teacher from a newly-cleared Sukhumvit Road. “No more disorderly stuff. I feel like people are happier.”

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The veteran adapter, now 81, was the brains behind a string of BBC costume dramas, including “Pride and Prejudice”, “Middlemarch” and “War & Peace”, most of which he adapted after retiring from his job as a university lecturer.

He described “Les Miserables”, the sprawling story of Valjean, who spent years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread for his starving sister, as “a huge, intense and gut-wrenching”. “Most of us are familiar with the musical version, which only offers a fragmentary outline of its story,” which reaches its climax during the 1848 Revolution in Paris. “I am thrilled to have the opportunity of doing real justice to Victor Hugo at last,” he said.

Davies also scripted the original British version of the political thriller “House of Cards”, as well as having a hand in the first two “Bridget Jones” films. Weinstein—who founded Harvey Weinstein—has produced or co-produced many other films, including “Shakespeare in Love”, “The English Patient” and “Pulp Fiction”. He was also a partner in the Weinstein Company, which announced its bankruptcy last year after a series of sexual harassment allegations.

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Dominic West to star in TV version of ‘Les Miserables’

The Wire star Dominic West is to play Jean Valjean in a new television adaptation of “Les Miserables” scripted by the master adapter Andrew Davies, the BBC said yesterday. The actor has been cast as the hero of Victor Hugo’s 1862 novel, which is regarded as one of the greatest of 19th century literature. “His epic journey of redemption is one of the extraordinary roles an actor can take on, and I can’t wait to get stuck in to bringing Andrew Davies’ brilliant adaptation to the screen.” The veteran adapter, now 81, was the brains behind a string of BBC costume drama hits including “Pride and Prejudice”, “Middlemarch” and “War & Peace”, most of which he adapted after retiring from his job as a university lecturer.

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As Japan celebrates the year of the dog, electronics giant Sony yesterday unleashed its new robot canine companion, packed with artificial intelligence and internet connectivity. The sleek ivory-white puppy-sized “aibo” robot shook its head and wagged its tail as if waking from a nap when it was taken out of a cocoon-shaped case at a “birthday ceremony” held in Tokyo. Seven-year-old boy Naohiro Sugimoto from Tokyo was among the first to get his hands on the shiny new toy, which he described as “heavy but cute”. “The dog we had previously died... We bought this robot dog as we wanted a (new) family,” he said.

The 30-centimetre (one-foot) long hound-like machine comes complete with flapping ears and its eyes, made of a cutting-edge light-emitting display, can show various emotions. Aibo is also fitted with an array of sensors, cameras and microphones and boasts internet connectivity. The owner can play with the pet remotely via smartphone and even teach it tricks from the office for the faithful hound to perform when its “master” gets home. It builds up a “character” by interacting with people and while not always submissive, it is friendly towards those who are kind to it. What the machine “learns” is stored in the cloud so its “character” can be preserved even in the event of hardware damage. Photos it takes can also be shared.

But by 2006, Sony was in trouble. Its business model was under pressure and it was facing fierce competition from rivals in all fields. The robot dog, an expensive and somewhat frivolous luxury, had to go. Yasuyuki Nakamura, another owner of the new generation Aibo-his third robot pet—said he was happy to see the dog back in Sony’s catalogue. “I had been waiting (for a new aibo). I ordered one as I was happy to see this kind of business was revived,” the 46-year-old said.

A middle-aged couple said they bought the robot for their 25th anniversary this year. Sony plans to release the new aibo overseas as well but no details are set yet. The dog does not speak human languages or perform tasks such as turning a light on. But that is not the point of the product, according to Sony’s Izumi Kawanishi who is in charge of the project. “You don’t think about what the dog can do when you want to get a dog, do you?” he asked reporters. “The point is that it touches a chord (with people),” he said. — AFP

Izumi Kawanishi, head of Sony’s AI Robotics Business Group, removes Sony’s robot dog “Aibo” from a cocoon during its birthday ceremony for new owners who purchased pre-order’s in Tokyo yesterday.

Children play with their pre-ordered Sony robot dogs “Aibo” after its birthday ceremony.

A young boy plays with a pre-ordered Sony robot dog “Aibo”. — AFP photos

Izumi Kawanishi (left), head of Sony’s AI Robotics Business Group, hands over a cocoon containing Sony’s robot dog “Aibo” during its birthday ceremony to new owners who purchased pre-order’s in Tokyo.

Old dog, new tricks: Sony unleashes ‘INTELLIGENT’ ROBOT PET

Izumi Kawanishi, head of Sony’s AI Robotics Business Group, removes Sony’s robot dog “Aibo” from a cocoon during its birthday ceremony.

An owner plays with a pre-ordered Sony robot dog “Aibo” after its birthday ceremony.

‘HeavY but cute’

‘Touch a chord’

Aibo is not the Japanese electronic giant’s first foray into the animal robot entertainment world. Its earlier robot dog was put to sleep more a decade ago—a victim of business restructuring—shocking fans. Sony rolled out the first-generation dog in June 1999, with the initial batch of 3,000 selling out in just 20 minutes, despite a hefty price tag of 250,000 yen ($2,200 at current rates). Over the following years, more than 150,000 units were sold, with numerous models ranging from gleaming metallic-silver versions to round-faced cub-like models.
Lefteovers! Some folks love them, others happily scrape them into the trash. Me, I’m on the love team. Lefteovers speak to me. I’d always rather start a meal with a fridge full of tasty bits of this and that than have to confront a blank canvas of raw ingredients. This recipe tackles one particular challenge: how to repurpose leftover cooked chops, steaks, or roasts.

The answer? Turn them into burgers. “Wait a minute,” you say, “They’ve already been cooked once. Won’t they be dry as dust if you turn them into burgers and cook them again?” Nope, not if you combine the leftover meat with some moist ingredients, such as the spinach and feta cheese listed here.

For Spinach and Feta Burgers with Cucumber Yogurt Sauce, start with 12 ounces of cooked meat - beef or lamb - trimmed of excess fat and any sinew. Cut the meat into cubes roughly 1 inch per side, then pulse in a food processor to chop it to burger consistency. (Be careful not to leave your finger on the pulse button for too long; you don’t want to end up with baby food.) Add the moist ingredients, along with an egg and a bit of panko to bind it all up. If you’re no fan of spinach and feta, you can substitute other cooked (and finely chopped) vegetables and/or cheese.

If you have time, make the burgers early in the day and chill them for a few hours before cooking. This will help them to hold their shape. If you don’t have the time, don’t worry. Just take care to turn them gently as they cook.

One last note: The sauce is a wonderful complement, but you’re welcome to lose it if it doesn’t appeal to you. The burgers are plenty tasty without it.

This recipe’s true miracle is transforming a mere 12 ounces of meat into six full dinner portions, allowing you to save money as well as food. And the new dish is so different from the original that no one will pipe up to say, “What, lefteovers again??”

### Spinach and Feta Burgers with Cucumber Yogurt Sauce

#### For the sauce:
- 1 cup plain Greek yogurt
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 5 ounces baby spinach
- Kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon hot pepper flakes, optional
- 1 large egg
- 12 ounces trimmed cooked meat or cooked steak, or leftover roast meat
- 3 ounces coarsely crumbled feta cheese
- 3/4 cup panko bread crumbs
- 6 pita halves
- Shredded romaine lettuce and sliced tomatoes for garnish

#### Make the sauce:
Peel, halve lengthwise and seed the cucumber. Coarsely shred it and in a medium bowl toss it with a pinch of salt.

Let the cucumber stand for 10 minutes and then add the yogurt, garlic, additional salt to taste; stir well.

In a large nonstick skillet heat 1 tablespoon of the oil over medium-high heat until hot. Add the spinach and a pinch of salt and cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Add the garlic and hot pepper flakes, if using; and cook, stirring, until all of the spinach is wilted, 1 1/2 to 2 minutes. Transfer the mixture to a shallow bowl and cool to room temperature in the refrigerator. Wipe out and re-serve the skillet.

In a food processor, process the egg until it is lightly beaten. Cut the lamb into 1-inch pieces and add it to the food processor. Pulse 6 to 8 times or until the meat is chopped into medium-fine pieces. Add the feta, cooled spinach mixture and 1/4 cup of the bread crumbs and pulse two or three times or until just mixed.

Shape the mixture into six burgers. Spread out the remaining bread crumbs in a soup or pie plate. Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons oil in the reserved large skillet over medium heat until hot.

Dip the burgers into the crumbs to coat them lightly on all sides; shake off any excess crumbs. Add the burgers to the skillet and cook until golden and heated through, about 3 minutes a side.

Transfer the burgers to the pita halves and spoon some of the sauce over each burger. Garnish with the lettuce and tomatoes.

By Sara Moulton

# Leftovers make tasty

## Spinach and Feta Burgers
How the cauliflower can morph into movie night snack food

By Melissa D’Arabian

Years ago, I was attempting to reverse my daughter Valentine’s disdain for cauliflower. She was always my veggie-loving kiddo, so I was stumped by her dislike of one my favorites. Who doesn’t love roasted cauliflower florets, with those crispy caramelized golden edges? She loved artichoke - pulling apart the leaves and scraping them on her teeth. So, why not create a pull-apart version of cauliflower?

I roasted it whole on a lower temperature (about 350 F) for nearly an hour, and then pumped up the heat to 400 F for some browning. I then seasoned the whole head of cauliflower with a little lemon butter or cheese.

The idea worked: all four of my kids had fun pulling apart the cauliflower, eating little florets like finger food.

Over the years, cauliflower morphed from dinner table favorite to movie night snack food, right alongside popcorn. The recipe has changed a little: I’ve found that steaming the cauliflower a few minutes first cuts the cook-time in half and the florets are easier to pull apart.

And, I’ve upped my seasoning, for example slathering on a garlicky cheese mixture spiked with just a touch of hot sauce to remind me of the buffalo wings of my college days, when I thought nothing of downing a half-dozen fried wings, skin and all.

With today’s recipe for Cheesy Pull-Apart Whole Cauliflower, the high-cal buttery and cheesy coating packs a garlic punch, even though each serving has relatively little of it, so healthy eating goals stay on track. And while we’re enjoying movie-time or game-time nibbles, it’s nice to know that we’re actually getting a little nutrition in our bodies, too.

Cheesy pull-apart whole cauliflower
1 medium head of cauliflower (about 1 1/2 pounds), trimmed of leaves
1 tablespoon unsalted butter, softened
2 tablespoons mayonnaise
1/4 cup grated parmesan
2 cloves garlic, pressed or finely minced
1 tablespoon hot sauce or buffalo sauce

Preheat the oven to 400 F.

Turn the cauliflower upside down and gently cut out the bulk of the core, leaving a triangle-shaped indentation at the bottom of the cauliflower. Add an inch of salted water to a large pot and bring to a boil. Place the cauliflower right side up in the pot and cover the pot to steam the cauliflower until tender, but still firm (not mushy), about 7-10 minutes, depending on the size and age of the cauliflower. Test with a slim sharp knife.

Once the cauliflower is done, remove it from the pot and place on paper towels to cool. Meanwhile, in a small bowl, mix together the butter, mayonnaise, parmesan cheese, garlic and hot sauce.

Blot the cooled cauliflower with paper towels. Coat the outside of the cauliflower with the cheesy mixture, using your hands to coat the whole head. Place the cauliflower on a baking tray lined with foil or parchment. Bake until the cauliflower is golden brown, about 15 minutes.

Serve with forks or as finger food.
What does freedom mean to you? This question is asked to you, the player, at a crucial point in 'Pyre's story. As with any game driven by player choice, the words you choose will affect how your character is seen by your companions and the story as a whole. But unlike other games in the visual-novel genre which gives the player somewhere between 2-5 different choices, 'Pyre' gives you twelve different answers and each answer speaks more towards how the player feels in reality than in the game. It might not be an easy question to answer but 'Pyre' never compels you to make the right choices rather it tells the player - the only thing that matters is that we remain free to choose.

To simply categorize 'Pyre' as a visual-novel would be doing the game a grave injustice. It's actually a decisively strange combination that can be simply described as a deep, story-driven RPG sports game. That might sound confused or pretentious on the surface and it’s what kept me from picking up the game ever since its release this summer. But about 30 minutes into the game, I was hooked. The characters, the quirky fantasy setting and the writing had me enthralled from the very start of my campaign.

A league of their own

'Pyre' takes place in 'The Downside' - a dreary yet starkly beautiful land that acts as a sort of prison to a nation known as 'The Commonwealth'. The game begins with you the protagonist (later called the Reader) waking up with no recollection of your past life or the crime that lead you to your exile in 'The Downside'. Almost immediately you're confronted by three wayward companions - Hedwyen the wanderer, Rusky the charming cur (this world's dogs) and the imposing Jodariel (a demon-human hybrid). They too are exiles and decide to aid you more so for curiosity sake rather than the goodness of their hearts. They allow you to come aboard their wagon and travel with them. On your travels, you will earn their trust, find and befriend other exiles, learn about the world's history and most importantly - fight to regain the freedom of your companions and maybe yourself in the ancient ritual of 'The Rites'.

'The Rites' is where the RPG/Sports gameplay comes in. Think of it as a 3-on-3 match where the offensive tactics are similar to basketball while the defensive manoeuvres incorporate a more football-like approach. The match revolves around the Celestial Orb (simply a ball) that must be throw or carried into the opponents Pyre (simply a goalpost) until it is extinguished. Each character has an Aura that can be projected forward, if you or your opponent gets hit or runs into an Aura, they are banished (simply put on the side-lines) for a short period of time. Whoever is holding on to the Orb loses their Aura and thus is vulnerable unless they pass it to a team-mate. You can even fling it to your opponent, make them catch it and then strike them while their defenceless, thus putting them on the sidelines for a short period. The challenge lies in being only allowed to move a single character at a time but you're free to select which member of your team you wish to control whenever you please.

Matches are fast, intense and nail-bitingly close at times. Each character has their own set of abilities and attributes so choosing the right character against the variety of opponents you will come across is never an easy decision. Jodariel for instance is extremely slow but her massive size means she can project her Aura large distances and is able to throw the Orb quickly as well. Sir Gilman, another character you meet in your journey is simply a worm. As such his Aura is almost non-existent but he offsets that by being hard to catch and his valiant nature gives him 'heroic' boosts when his team is behind or banished. Your team will grow into an 8-man roster and his character in it functions and plays completely different from the other. Sport fans will love the different tactics you can use and just how fluid the gameplay feels while RPG enthusiasts can immerse themselves into each of the characters lore and skill-tree abilities, each one connecting itself to the world and its mythos. It is a fascinating amalgamation that works on many levels. But what truly makes all this come together is the story behind it all.

Freedom isn’t free

The main goal of your journey through 'The Downside' is the pursuit of 'The Rites' and by simply participating in them - you are gaining favour towards your ultimate goal - freedom from exile, a chance to go back to 'The Commonwealth'. But freedom, much like any desperately sort after goal, comes with a price.
Once you've completed enough matches against opponents who are seeking freedom for themselves as well, you are sent to participate in a final 'Liberation Rite'.

Here you can only choose one of the companions in your roster to be set free. If you succeed, they are set free and can never be used in 'The Rites'. It is a heart wrenching decision, especially as you grow fonder of your motley crew. You learn their backstories, their hopes and the reason they were sent into exile but only if you ask the right questions. They grow close to each other and to you as well and once you set anyone of them free, neither you nor your other companions might ever see them again.

These evocative choices you find yourself in are those rare gaming experiences you will cherish and remember long after you've walked away from the keyboard.

The story continues to twist and surprise before and after 'The Liberation Rite'. You will find out that each character's backstory carries themes of regret, honor, longing and strife. But one character in particular - the de facto leader of your group becomes the catalyst of the entire plot. Volfred Sandalwood, a humanoid-tree, is not content with simply regaining the freedom of himself or the team he help found. What he truly desires is to end the corrupted, misguided leadership of the 'Commonwealth' and spark a revolution from the inside to end the practice of casting down it's people into exile in the first place. And so what starts of as a simply journey to regain freedom lost becomes a complex plot to ensure freedom is won for all.

There are no 'Game Over' screens in 'Pyre'. Even if you are beaten in every 'Rite' you participate in, the story continues on whether you win or lose. As Volfred reminds you early on in your journey - "the only failure is to stray from the path". As you travel onward, you realize that the entire story is based on that line. 'Pyre' is not content in simply telling 'motivational' quotes to the player, it becomes determined to show them why that approach works in the first place.

It is absolutely stunning game design, one that went greatly under-appreciated when it was released. By the time the player gets to the end, it could play out in almost a countless (yes countless) number of ways. The fact that they tie up all the numerous choices you've made, both big and small, in such a satisfactory way is an achievement in itself. Mix in the gorgeous hand-drawn visuals with one of the best video-game soundtracks I've ever heard and 'Pyre' elevates itself to something way beyond the ordinary. It's one of my most memorable gaming experiences and easily my gaming highlight of 2017.
A male giraffe can weigh as much as a pickup truck! That's about 1400 kilograms.

Although a giraffe's neck is 1.5 - 1.8 meters, it contains the same number of vertebrae at a human neck.

A giraffe's habitat is usually found in African savannas, grasslands or open woodlands.

The hair that makes up a giraffe's tail is about 10 times thicker than the average strand of human hair.

The distinctive spots that cover a giraffe's fur act as a good camouflage to protect the giraffe from predators. When the giraffe stands in front of trees and bushes the light and dark coloring of its fur blends in with the shadows and sunlight.

It is possible to identify the sex of the giraffe from the horns on its head. Both males and females have horns but the females are smaller and covered with hair at the top. Male giraffes may have up to 3 additional horns.

Giraffes are ruminants. This means that they have more than one stomach. In fact, giraffes have four stomachs, the extra stomachs assisting with digesting food.

Drinking is one of the most dangerous times for a giraffe. While it is getting a drink it cannot keep a look out for predators and is vulnerable to attack.

Male giraffes sometimes fight with their necks over female giraffes. This is called “necking”. The two giraffes stand side by side and one giraffe swings his head and neck, hitting his head against the other giraffe. Sometimes one giraffe is hit to the ground during a combat.

A female giraffe gives birth while standing up. The calf drops approximately 6 feet to the ground, but it is not hurt from the fall.

Giraffes have bluish-purple tongues which are tough and covered in bristly hair to help them with eating the thorny Acacia trees.

**Sudoku**

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7 2 4 9
8 3 1 2
4 6 8
8 1 2
2 3 5
1 2 6 8
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Solution
4004 BC (1581-1656).
4. Soghmots of dry regions of Asia and North Africa.
5. The mouth following March and preceding May.
6. (archaic or Scottish) Faithful and true.
7. Released by law or by official or accepted rules.
8. (Scottish) A narrow secluded valley (in the mountains).
9. Submerged aquatic plant having narrow leaves and small flowers.
10. A graphical record of electrical activity of the brain.
11. The longer of the two telegraphic signals used in Morse code.
12. The compass point that is one point north of due east.
13. A small cake kavened with yeast.
14. A detailed description of design criteria for a piece of work.
15. The basic unit of money in Uruguay.
17. (Scotland) A small loaf or roll of soft bread.
18. A Lobithon language.
19. English courtier (a favorite of Elizabeth I) who tried to colonize Virginia.
20. The compass point that is one point east (clockwise) of due north.
21. Sour or bitter in taste.
22. Divulge information or secrets.
23. A Russian river.
25. A radioactive element of the actinide series.
26. The state of being under the control of another person.
27. At risk of or subject to experiencing something usually unpleasant.
29. A heavy odorless colorless gas equal to 0.7958 ampere-turns.
30. A heavy odorless colorless gas formed during respiration and by the decomposition of organic substances.
31. Either of two telegraphic signals used in Morse code.
32. A heavy odorless colorless gas equal to 0.7958 ampere-turns.
33. Having a face or facing especially of nature deities worshipped by ancient Semitic peoples.
34. Of or relating to a member of the Umbrian people.
35. Antibacterial consisting of any of numerous local fertility and plantations that require PABA.
36. Being one more than ten.
37. A member of a Turkic people of North Africa.
38. (architecture) Forming or resembling an arch.
39. Fed beyond capacity or desire.
40. Any of numerous local fertility and plantations that require PABA.
41. A member of a Turkic people of Uzbekistan and neighboring areas.
42. (Old Testament) The first king of the Semitic peoples.
43. Exceptionally good.
44. A detailed description of design criteria for a piece of work.
45. Date used in reckoning dates before the supposed year Christ was born.
46. Title for a civil or military leader (especially in Turkey).
47. Tropical starchy tuberous root.
48. A small pellet fired from an air rifle or BB gun.
49. A soft-finned fish of the family Gobiidae.
50. A unit of magnetomotive force.
51. A poliovirus vaccine consisting of inactivated polio virus that is injected subcutaneously to provide immunity to polioviruses.
52. A bed where seedlings are grown before transplanting.
53. Something or someone that causes anxiety.
54. In bed.
55. Small terrestrial lizard of warm regions of the Old World.
56. Edible starchy tuberous root of taro plants.
57. A rare heavy polynuclear metallic element that resembles manganese chemically and is used in some alloys.
58. An associate degree in nursing.
59. A member of a seafaring group of Arabians.
60. Located inward.
61. The blood group whose red cells contain an antigen that is highly corrosion-resistant.
62. An indehiscent fruit derived from a single ovary having one or many seeds within a fleshy wall or pericarp.
63. A family of North American Indian languages spoken widely in the midwest by Caddo peoples.
64. A city in northeastern India.
65. Panel forming the lower part of an interior wall when it is finished differently from the rest.
66. An organization of countries formed in 1961 to agree on a common policy for the sale of petroleum.
67. Informal or slang terms for mentally irregular.
68. Having a woven pattern.
69. (Babylonian) God of storms and wind.
70. Someone who works (or provides workers) during a strike.
71. God of love and erotic desire.
72. Tilt for a civil or military leader (especially in Turkey).
73. Prohibited by law or by accepted rules.
74. An inflammatory complication of leprosy that results in painful skin lesions on the arms and legs and face.
75. A workplace for the conduct of scientific research.
76. The capital and largest city of Bangladesh.
77. Goddess of fate.
78. A detailed description of design criteria for a piece of work.
79. A hard gray lustrous metallic element that is highly corrosion-resistant.
80. A rotating disk shaped to convert circular into linear motion.
81. Of or relating to a member of the Umbrian people.
82. A town in southeastern New Mexico on the Pecos River near the Mexican border.
83. A loose sleeveless outer garment made from aba cloth.
84. A member of a Turkish people of Uzbekistan and neighboring areas.
85. An associate degree in nursing.
86. A soft-finned fish of the family Gobiidae.
87. A detailed description of design criteria for a piece of work.
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### TV Listings

**Friday, January 12, 2018**

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Aries (March 21-April 19)

Aries, a new project will bring excitement and a need to engage in extensive research. This new endeavor will push the limits of what your team can do; you will seek facts not theories. If you are in public relations or advertising, the heavens are smiling on your ability to reach out and touch the masses with your message. You will have a need to breakaway from the mundane; a free day is what you crave and this just could be the time to do it. You will see something today that will help formulate a commendable idea. Positive energy will be rolling in when you sit down to a meal with family or close friends. Watch your tongue later; everyone is doing their best! Tonight you may feel restless, but close your eyes and breathe, aries.

Taurus (April 20-May 20)

Taurus, your thoughts are on go but beware jumping into situations in haste; unpleasant confrontations could result. Your attitude will seem to be on a rollercoaster; yes it is like, no it is not. You will be the general struggle today. You may find yourself going in directions completely unlike you normally would. Someone will not care for the way you are across and you could take this too much to heart. Take this time to promote will wishes between yourself and other, you can rely on. There is much going on with cooperation and sharing things in life; art in any form, gardening or stewing. You will find relief this evening by pursuing pleasurable things with a like-minded person. Work hard on transferring your thoughts to the positive, taurus.

Gemini (May 21-June 20)

Gemini, you are focused on working with the facts when dealing with work or home issues. You have a talent for matching people with assignments; wonderful results ahead! You will enter into an in-depth research routine for some time. It is the time to observe rather than speak; this will provide an accurate picture. Your humor and lighthearted comments will attract people and could even change the energy of the room. Catch up on your phone calls later today. You have a need to focus on your hard work and immerse study others with in your footsteps. You proceed along the road less traveled every chance you have. An old friend you haven't seen or heard from in years could contact you this afternoon or evening, gemini.

Capricorn (December 22-January 19)

Capricorn, opportunities are everywhere you turn as you enter a new cycle of good luck. Circumstances seem almost too good to be true, but believe in them. You may have to pursue new undertakings on your own or not feeling well. You will continue wishing for respect from a certain individual; think about this is this person really so important you should pull up your tax information together because one important item could be missing. Let your thoughts go to something fun and carefree this evening as you cook a delicious, culturally unique dinner for two, sagittarius.

Sagittarius (November 22-December 21)

Sagittarius, intelligence is high on your list of qualities in a friend, this will become even more important this year. You will be contacted by others with like-minded people to create a campaign for funding purposes. This could mean that you agree to help someone at an indoor flea market or auction this afternoon. Your mood could be quiet today and you may come across as introverted or not feeling well. You will continue wishing for respect from a certain individual; think about this is this person really so important you should pull up your tax information together because one important item could be missing. Let your thoughts go to something fun and carefree this evening as you cook a delicious, culturally unique dinner for two, sagittarius.

Libra (September 23-October 22)

Libra, you are coming out of a dark cycle of self-doubt and perhaps depression. Smile! You are on the straight path to understanding where you have been and where you are going in love and work. Your new interests could involve and opportunity to earn money in a new way, if not primarily then in addition to your job. Someone may comment that you have been hard around and they don't want to include you any longer; let this person go, for a true friend won't desert you. You will make special efforts to feel better about yourself, a new hair or new makeup could help this. Your finances are in better shape than you realized. Take a rest from the research and discover you worked on today, perhaps stargazing with a friend tonight, libra.

Scorpio (October 23-November 21)

Scorpio, just what you need a flawless progress of your work day. A new project will finish before schedule and others will move up as a result; the new methods you employed have proven to be productive. Someone will gain your interest when they pay a quick visit to your workplace. Everyone is fascinated by your unique approach to your work behind the scenes, so you'll be quite the chore. What people think is not important to you now. You want enthusiasm from others regarding your efforts; the feeling of being segregated or not feeling well. You will continue wishing for respect from a certain individual; think about this is this person really so important you should pull up your tax information together because one important item could be missing. Let your thoughts go to something fun and carefree this evening as you cook a delicious, culturally unique dinner for two, sagittarius.

Cancer (June 21-July 22)

Cancer, creating new systems and recruiting the people to operate them is indicated strongly according to the stars; this could be difficult to accomplish in some areas. You will have a need to focus on the facts. You can talk yourself out of doing the right thing. You have a need to be present in all situations you work hard andimmerse study others with in your footsteps. You proceed along the road less traveled every chance you have. An old friend you haven't seen or heard from in years could contact you this afternoon or evening, gemini.

Leo (July 23-August 22)

Leo, you will hear from someone that you have been anxious about. You are not interested in theories; you demand hard, solid facts that will work for you. Your new, improved attitude will be the hallmark of your day. Because of your high standards, you may have set yourself up to be left out of a fun time. A feeling of being alone, on your own and discarded could overpower you; keep your chin up for this will not last long. You have a special, like-minded friend who also wants to make a real difference in the world. It is the time to observe rather than speak; this will provide an accurate picture. Your humor and lighthearted comments will attract people and could even change the energy of the room. Catch up on your phone calls later today. You have a need to focus on your hard work and immerse study others with in your footsteps. You proceed along the road less traveled every chance you have. An old friend you haven't seen or heard from in years could contact you this afternoon or evening, gemini.

Aquarius (January 20-February 18)

Aquarius, getting together for a group task will prove to be quite the chore. What people think is not important to you now. You want enthusiasm from others regarding your efforts; the feeling of being segregated or not feeling well. You will continue wishing for respect from a certain individual; think about this is this person really so important you should pull up your tax information together because one important item could be missing. Let your thoughts go to something fun and carefree this evening as you cook a delicious, culturally unique dinner for two, sagittarius.

Virgo (August 23-September 22)

Virgo, you are making profound changes in the ways your physical world reflects your spiritual self; this is down to a cellular level, as though you are morphing into an entirely different person. You want to make the world a better place; as mahatma gandhi said be the change you want to see in the world. You want to step on toes but you will let your true feelings and opinions be known without apology; others will see the changes in you very clearly. You could weed out nigging, trivial people and tasks that get you nowhere. You will come to the aid of someone who has helped you in the past and you have never forgotten. Your generosity and care of other people is widely known and is deeply appreciated by more people than you realize, virgo.
PALU: Indonesian conservation officials are racing to locate and rescue a saltwater crocodile that has had a motorbike tire wrapped around its neck for more than a year on the island of Sulawesi. The stricken crocodile, measuring around 13-foot long, has been regularly spotted in a river running through Central Sulawesi’s capital, Palu, since 2016. But a recent video shot by a local showed the reptile gasping for air with officials fearing the tire is slowly killing the beast.

Conservationists believe someone may have deliberately placed the tire around the protected animal’s neck in a failed attempt to trap it as a pet. The animal has recently been spotted swimming under a bridge in Palu with excited locals trying to take selfies with the croc in the background. “In the past year, we saw that there’s still enough room for the crocodile’s neck to move around,” head of the local conservation agency Haruna, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, said yesterday. “But we are not going to wait until the tire strangles the animal. We will rescue it.”

Haruna said the agency lacked proper equipment to rescue the animal, adding that their attempts to locate the animal have so far proved fruitless. Authorities are also opposed to using tranquilizer darts on the animal, fearing it might disappear back into the river that is home to more than 20 crocodiles before the drugs take effect. Instead Haruna said his team has built an iron trap which will be placed inside the river when the water level is low.

“We will definitely save the crocodile but at the same time I also need to consider my men’s safety,” he said. The huge Indonesian archipelago is home to a vast array of exotic wildlife, including several species of crocodile.—AFP
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Powerful growth in Germany fuels calls to share wealth

Warning strikes demand 6% pay rise

Defying fears of a new era of protectionism after the US election of Donald Trump, exports grew by 4.7 percent in 2017, compared with 2.6 percent the previous year. Meanwhile, historic low interest rates set by the European Central Bank, a euro that has not strengthened against other currencies in step with the continent's economic recovery, high levels of employment and a broad-based upturn across the 19-nation eurozone all favor continued expansion for Germany.

But the picture is not entirely rosy for Berlin, Brzeski warned. "Strong growth performance has led to reform complacency. Under the surface of strong growth, deficiencies in areas like digitalization, services and education have emerged," he said. "The next government still has the unique opportunity to tackle these challenges in good times and not wait until the bad times have started."

How to spend it

As the statisticians unveiled the nation's economic performance in Berlin's government quarter, Germany's leading politicians gathered in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) headquarters across town. Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives are making a last-ditch attempt to strike a coalition deal with the centre-left SPD—a prospect greeted with reluctance on both sides after four years sharing power cost both parties dearly in September elections. Nevertheless, politicians' mouths are watering at the prospect of having billions of euros of additional cash to pay for tax cuts, public spending or increased investment.

Over four days of talks since Sunday, the negotiators have racked up a wishlist totaling some 100 billion euros for the coming four years, newspaper Rheinische Post reported Wednesday. But many of those hopes could be dashed yesterday, as the finance ministry calculates that just 45 billion euros will be available in federal coffers. It would be a "tough day" of talks, Merkel told reporters as she arrived, vowing to "work constructively to find the necessary compromises".

Warning strikes demand 6% pay rise
China cools US debt talk

LONDON: Worries about a US-led trade war put world stocks at risk of their first two day loss of the year yesterday, while bond markets bounced as China poured cold water on reports that it might stop buying US debt - said it was drawing up laws to ban trading in it. Benchmark government bonds bounced though after China's regulator said it was considering slowing or halting its US bond purchases, was possibly "fake news".

It also helped the dollar to its fourth gain in the last five days against a basket of top world currencies, having suffered one of its worst years on record in 2017.

Against the yen, it added 0.4 percent to 111.83, after hitting a six-week low of 111.27 yen in the previous session when it slumped 1.1 percent, its largest decline in almost eight months. "The de-nial of the China story puts the dollar back where it was," said FXStreet. Commodity markets meanwhile were taking something of a breather after a flying start to the year. Both Brent and US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) oil price futures were hovering just off three-year highs at just under $70 and $64 a barrel, while industrial metals dipped and gold ticked to $1,317.76 after spiking to nearly four-month highs in the previous session. "In Q1, the balance of risk to Brent lies to the downside, with prices overheat-ing, record net-length built into the futures market and fundamentals set to weaken seasonally," BMI Research said in a note. —Reuters

Trade worries, dollar weigh on emerging stocks

LONDON: Emerging stocks fell for a third day and many currencies were under pressure, weighed down by a stronger dollar and jitters over trade protectionism as markets digested the recent rally. MSCI's emerging market benchmark declined 0.3 percent in a third day of falls, pulled lower by heavyweight South Korea where stocks fell 0.5 percent while bourses from Canada and Mexico to South Africa chalked up losses.

Markets were jittery following a Reuters report saying Canada increasingly believes US President Donald Trump will soon announce his intention to withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) treaty. Nerves had also been frayed by a report that China was considering slowing or halting purchases of US Treasury bonds, which sent US yields higher, though Beijing's foreign exchange regulator said the report may be based on erroneous information.

Tom Hainlin, global investment strategist at Ascent Private Capital Management, said the move in Treasury yields was not expected to hit emerging markets, which had started to look "aggres-sive, if not overbought" following a stellar start to the year. "This seems like a natural consolidation," he said, adding that fundamentals still looked good and he expected a decent 2018 in China, the biggest emerging market country. "As you move into 2018 you are seeing record upgrades on earnings estimates so that's a pretty solid base for emerging market investors," he said.

Emerging currencies painted a mixed picture on the day against a stronger dollar. South Africa's rand weakened 0.3 percent in a second day of losses after the new leadership of the ruling ANC said on Wednesday it did not discuss President Jacob Zuma's future at its meeting and would also abandon ship if the US did so.

The euro traded at $1.1945, nearly flat on the day, and holding above Tuesday's low of $1.1916. There was more upbeat data for the shared cur-rency though. German economy grew at the strongest rate in six years last year a preliminary estimate from the country's statistics office showed, although it was slightly under some peoples' forecasts. Commodity markets meanwhile were taking something of a breather after a flying start to the year. Both Brent and US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) oil price futures were hovering just off three-year highs at just under $70 and $64 a barrel, while industrial metals dipped and gold ticked to $1,317.76 after spiking to nearly four-month highs in the previous session. "In Q1, the balance of risk to Brent lies to the downside, with prices overheat-ing, record net-length built into the futures market and fundamentals set to weaken seasonally," BMI Research said in a note. —Reuters

Bonds bounce, stocks struggle, Bitcoin battered

Hang Seng Index at a bank in Hong Kong.—AFP

TOKYO: A pedestrian looks at an electronics stock indicator of the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo.—AFP
Greeks to strike over right-to-strike bill

New law to raise strike requirement to 50%

ATHENS: Greek subway workers, dockers and state-employed doctors plan to strike today in the country’s first major industrial action of 2018, to protest a new law that will restrict their right to walk off the job. Parliament is expected on Jan 15 to vote through the contentious reform, which would tighten rules on declaring work stoppages, a condition set by creditors who have loaned Greece billions since 2010.

At present, Greek unions can call strikes with the support of one third of their members. The new law would raise that requirement to 50 percent, which creditors hope would limit the frequency of strikes and improve productivity that lags about 20 percent behind the EU average, according to OECD data. Strikes are so common in Greece that there is a website dedicated to them. Today’s stoppage is being backed by several unions, including GSEE, the largest private-sector one. “It is essentially scrapping the only weapon workers have left to protect themselves, particularly after collective working agreements were shelved,” said GSEE spokesman Dimitris Karageorgopoulos.

Stavros Kafounis, head of the Commercial Association of Athens, which represents retailers, said strikes amplified the country’s economic problems. “Every time there is labor action in public transport it shuts businesses down, adding to already slow business,” he said.

Bitter pill
A majority of lawmakers are expected to vote in favor of the bill, which will be a bitter pill to swallow for a government dominated by the leftist Syriza movement. With its roots in labor activism, the party swept to power in 2015 promising to end austerity, only to accept another bailout months later. Hundreds of Greeks marched through Athens on Tuesday and confronted authorities demanding the bill be rescinded. Labor Minister Effie Achtsioglou refused.

Greece needs to pass the regulation and a raft of other measures for lenders to sign off on a review of progress in its bailout program, which the country hopes to exit this summer. Monday’s parliamentary bill also seeks to introduce electronic auctions that could facilitate foreclosures to wrestle down a mountain of toxic debts weighing on the country’s banks, rationalize spending on state benefits, set targets for selling off assets of power utility PPC, and regulations on the operation of casinos.

One union leader said that, regardless of new legislation, workers would continue to strike. “If they don’t like it let them fire us... or arrest us,” said Spyros Revithis, head of a public transport workers’ union that staged 15 strikes in 2017. “This government is a Trojan Horse of neo-liberalism on labor rights.”—Reuters

Brexit could cost nearly 500,000 UK jobs

LONDON: Brexit could cost the UK nearly 500,000 jobs in a worst-case scenario, according to a study published yesterday which was commissioned by the mayor of London. Britain could lose 482,000 jobs by 2030 if the country crashes out of the European Union, according to research by Cambridge Econometrics. A scenario in which the UK fails to agree a transition deal and future trading relationship with the bloc would also cost Britain £46.7 billion in investment over the same period. The report compares four possible post-Brexit scenarios to the option of maintaining the status quo—already ruled out by the British government—of staying in the European single market and customs union.

In a statement the Europhile mayor accused the government of a “complete lack of preparation” in assessing the impact of Brexit, urging ministers to change their negotiating position and agree to remain in the single market and customs union. A spokeswoman for the Brexit department said the UK and Brussels believe they will “achieve an ambitious deal securing prosperity” for Britain and the bloc, having concluded the first stage of exit talks last month.

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ECB chiefs ‘concerned’ at French credit growth

FRANKFURT AM MAIN: Members of the European Central Bank’s governing council are concerned that rising private-sector borrowing in France could threaten financial stability, minutes from a December meeting published yesterday showed. “It was remarked that loan growth in the euro area’s second largest economy had seen rather buoyant expansion,” according to the minutes, which never identify individual speakers.

“Increasing leverage in conjunction with increased merger and acquisition and leveraged buyout activity raised concerns from a financial stability perspective,” the record added. The rate of credit growth to non-financial businesses across the whole eurozone picked up to 3.1 percent year-on-year in November, a regular ECB survey recently showed. In France, firms’ demand for loans leapt in the months following the election of President Emmanuel Macron, who swept to power in May on a platform of rejuvenating the economy and reorganizing the 19-nation eurozone.

July brought increases of more than 25 percent in demand for credit among both large and small-to-medium sized firms, Bank of France figures show, with a further 22 percent boost for big companies in October. Stoking increased lending across the single currency area has been one of the ECB’s top priorities in recent years. It has set interest rates at historic lows, offered cheap loans to banks and bought almost 2.3 trillion euros of government and corporate bonds, aiming to fire economic growth and coax inflation towards its target of just below 2.0 percent. But some on the governing council have warned that keeping the money sluices open for too long might threaten financial stability, as firms, households and governments could be tempted to borrow more than they can repay. —AFP
S Korea govt sends bitcoin on rollercoaster ride

Gov’t plans to ban cryptocurrency exchanges

SEOUL: Bitcoin and other virtual currencies were sent on rollercoaster rides in South Korea yesterday as the government said it was planning to ban cryptocurrency exchanges, before later backtracking. Justice Minister Park Sang-Ki said Seoul was preparing a bill to shut down the country’s virtual coin exchanges, sending bitcoin and other virtual unit prices into a tasnip.

“The ministry is preparing legislation that basically bans any transactions based on a virtual currency through the trading floor,” he told journalists. Authorities had “grave concerns” over the craze and were aiming to close virtual currency exchanges in the country, he said. “It has started to resemble gambling and speculation,” he added, citing the fact that bitcoin prices are higher in South Korea than globally—the so-called “kimchi premium”.

The hyper-wired South has emerged as a hotbed for cryptocurrency trading, accounting for some 20 percent of global bitcoin transactions—about 10 times the country’s share of the world economy. A series of measures have failed to curb overheated virtual currency speculation in the country and Park said it would be “devastating if the bubble bursts”. He remarks sent bitcoin prices plunging 18 percent on South Korean exchange Bithumb, while ethereum slumped 23 percent.

An official at the Financial Supervisory Service, South Korea’s top financial regulator, said closing local virtual coin exchanges would represent a “very strong measure” against virtual coins and would “effectively suffocate” cryptocurrency transactions within the country. But a cryptocurrency analyst said he was “skeptical” that the justice ministry’s proposal would go into force because of strong market resistance.

TOKYO: A man walks past a poster that informs customers that bitcoin can be used in this shop in Tokyo.—AFP

Tesco reports sales boost, despite high UK inflation

LONDON: Supermarket group Tesco, Britain’s biggest retailer, announced yesterday a rise in sales over the key Christmas period, despite high UK inflation weighing on consumer incomes. But its share price was the biggest loser on London’s benchmark FTSE 100 index, shedding 3.3 percent to 204.9 pence in early deals as its update missed market expectations. Total sales grew 1.8 percent in the 19 weeks to January 6 compared with the corresponding period a year earlier, Tesco said in a statement. They grew by the same amount in the four weeks leading up to December 25, the supermarket added. In the UK, its main market, sales grew more than two percent over the reporting periods. “Whilst inflationary pressures remain in the UK market as a whole, we have continued to work with our supplier partners to help mitigate the impact on our customers,” Tesco said. “As a result, we have passed on less inflation to date than our competitors.”

In Britain, wages are being eroded by Brexit-fuelled inflation according to recent data. Since Britain voted to leave the European Union in June 2016, a drop in sterling-making imported goods more expensive has pushed up UK annual inflation to 3.1 percent, a near six-year high. Tesco said it hopes to completes a takeover of British wholesaler Booker by early March. By purchasing Booker for £3.7 billion, Tesco is bidding to become the nation’s top food business, slash costs and take on German-owned discount retailers.

Tesco is already the world’s third-biggest supermarket chain after France’s Carrefour and global leader Wal-Mart of the United States. Elsewhere yesterday, British food-to-clothing retailer Marks and Spencer said total sales dropped 0.1 percent in its third quarter ending on December 30. Shares were down 2.75 percent at 315.1 pence in morning London trade, making it the second biggest faller after Tesco.

“In recent years the food business has been the bright light of the M&S empire, but its glow has definitely dimmed of late,” noted Laila Khalaf, analyst at stockbroker Hargreaves Lansdown. “That’s probably a result of consumers tightening their belts when it comes to grocery shopping, and the strong performance of supermarket premium ranges suggests when customers are splashing out, they are increasing doing it at (supermarkets) Sainsbury, Tesco and Morrison rather than at M&S.” —AFP
Spain international tourism breaks records for fifth time

Tourist businesses expect a 5.6% growth

MADRID: The number of international tourists visiting Spain broke records for a fifth straight year in 2017, despite Islamist militant attacks in Catalonia and political uncertainty over its independence movement, government statistics showed. Spain, where tourism accounts for around 11 percent of the economy, has seen a surge in international visitors partly due to security concerns in other popular holiday destinations such as Egypt and Turkey.

Preliminary data released late on Wednesday showed the number of visitors arriving in Spain rose 8.9 percent year-on-year to 82 million tourists, which would make Spain the world's second most visited country after France and push the United States into third place. Figures showed that tourist spending also hit a new record in 2017, rising 12.4 percent in the year from 2016.

According to final data for the first 11 months of 2017, also released on Wednesday, British tourists remained Spain's largest group of visitors by nationality, accounting for 18 million tourists, up 7 percent from a year earlier.

Catalonia remained Spain's most visited region in 2017, despite two attacks at major tourist haunts in August which left 16 people dead and more than 100 people injured. Tourism in the region's capital Barcelona dipped slightly after the attacks, then dropped again in October after an illegal independence vote prompted scenes of police violence and mass protests, but it has since rebounded. Tourism has also seen benefits from a boom in renting flats out to tourists via web platforms such as Airbnb. However, this has prompted a backlash in popular destinations such as Barcelona, Palma de Majorca or San Sebastian as locals complain of a drop in long-term rentals and rising prices. The tourism surge has raised business activity in the sector, including increased merger and acquisition interest between hotel groups and expected passenger records at Spanish airports.

On Wednesday, NH Hotels declined a takeover offer by rival Barcelo, an operation which would have created the country's largest hotel chain, though it said it would still analyze future strategic possibilities. The sector will continue to grow in the coming years due to expected economic improvement in visitors' home countries and increased flights and destinations, the tourism association Exceltur said yesterday. "Spanish tourist businesses expect a 5.6 percent growth in their income and 5.3 percent growth in their profits in 2018." Exceltur vice-president Jose Luis Zoreda told a news conference. However, overall sector growth may ease slightly this year to 3.3 percent year-on-year from an annual expansion of 4.4 percent in 2017 due in part to many tourists returning to destinations in North Africa and Turkey, Zoreda said.—Reuters

Tesla faces fresh Norway lawsuit over false advertising

OSLO: Nearly 80 Tesla owners in Norway have sued the US automaker over misleading advertising, saying their electric car did not deliver the promised performance. Norwegian daily Dagens Næringsliv (DN) reported yesterday. The plaintiffs complained that the real power of their Tesla S P85D, a sedan with one of the fastest accelerations in the world, was 469 horsepower and not 700 horsepower as promised by the manufacturer. They want the same compensation as another group of 133 Norwegian Tesla owners who previously sued the company and reached a deal in December 2016.

Tesla agreed to compensate the 133 car owners by paying them 65,000 kroner or by providing them with new equipment, according to the financial daily. "It's the same kind of case that ended up in a compromise the last time," the plaintiffs' lawyer Christoffer Falkeid told the paper. "It's about the power of the car and the mistakes in marketing and in the sales process but I do not want to go into amounts," he added. Contacted by AFP, Tesla declined to comment.

A civil complaint will be examined in April by an Oslo court if no deal is reached until then. According to Norwegian media, another group of 38 motorists also filed a lawsuit against Tesla last fall. Norway, the world leader in electric cars in terms of market share, is one of the largest markets in the world for Tesla. There is a total of 1,201 Tesla S P85Ds in Norway. Last year, Tesla sales in the Nordic country reached 8,465, all models combined.—AFP

EU unveils supercomputer plan to rival China

BRUSSELS: The EU unveiled plans yesterday to raise one billion euros to build superfast computers that catch up with China and others to boost Europe’s economy, make medical advances and fight hacking. China overtook the United States in numbers and performance for supercomputers in a ranking last November, followed by non-EU Switzerland and Japan in third and fourth place. “It is a tough race and today the EU is lagging behind: we do not have any supercomputers in the world’s top ten,” said Andrus Ansip, the European Commission vice president for the digital single market. The European Commission, the EU executive, said it would contribute around 486 million euros ($580 million) for a “High Performance Computing (EuroHPC) infrastructure,” that would then be matched by EU nations. “We want to give European researchers and companies world-leading supercomputer capacity by 2020,” Ansip said in a statement. Brussels says it will help develop artificial intelligence and applications to improve health, security and engineering, plus help forecast hurricane routes and simulate earthquakes.—AFP
Williams scores 50, Durant reaches milestone in loss

Butler shines as Wolves topple Thunder

LOS ANGELES: Lou Williams scored a career-high 50 points as the Los Angeles Clippers spoiled a milestone night for Kevin Durant with a 125-106 victory on Wednesday. Durant became the 4th player in league history to score 20,000 career points, reaching the achievement with a pull-up jump shot late in the second quarter. NBA finals MVP Durant needed 25 points to get to 20,000 and that is the number he finished on at the end of the first half. At age 29 he is the second youngest to do it behind Lebron James.

“LeBron is the all-time greats,” said Warriors coach Steve Kerr of Durant, who finished with 40 points. “There is going to be another one (milestone) in a month. “He’s Kevin Durant. The second youngest to do it. Who is the youngest? Lebron, not had company,” Williams tallled 27 of his 50 points in the third quarter for the visiting Clippers who beat Golden State for the first time in more than three years. Williams also had eight three pointers and seven assists and rookie Tyrone Wallace came off the bench to score a season-high 22 points. “It was hard to stop him,” Durant said of Williams.

“This pull-up three is a cash shot. We were too loose on him and let him go where ever he wanted.” Elsewhere, Jimmy Butler finished with 26 points and eight assists on as the Minnesota Timberwolves defeated struggling Oklahoma City 114-88, handing the Thunder their third consecutive loss. Centre Karl-Anthony Towns tallled 18 points and 12 assists for the Timberwolves who are playing some of their best basketball of the season and have three straight resounding home wins in a row.

“When we start to compete on the defensive end like that we are tough to beat,” said Butler.

Veteran influence

Butler, who is in his first season with Minnesota after coming over from the Chicago Bulls, said he is trying to be one of the veteran leaders on a young team. “Last year this team didn’t understand how important every possession is,” he said. Andrew Wiggins finished with 19 points in 42 minutes of playing time for the Timberwolves. Thunder star Russell Westbrook had a game-high 36 points and 10 rebounds but he didn’t get much help from his supporting cast. Carmelo Anthony continues to struggle with his new team as he finished with 15 points and one rebound. Paul George was the only other Thunder player in double figures with 13 points as Oklahoma City has lost five of their last seven games.

The loss drops the Thunder to 22-20 on the season and into sixth place as they dropped below Portland in the Western Conference standings. Minnesota is on the rise having beaten New Orleans, Cleveland and Oklahoma City in recent home games thanks to their improving defense and consistently solid offence. Minnesota had won seven of eight games before a disappointing East Coast road trip featured losses at Brooklyn and Boston. Then the Wolves beat New Orleans at home and led by as many as 34 points, a season-high high mark to that point. Hosting James and Cleveland on Monday, Minnesota dominated play, led by as many as 41 points on its way to a 127-99 victory.— AFP

Bjorn eyes EurAsia victory with Ryder Cup in mind

PARIS: Captain Thomas Bjorn will look to lead Europe to a victory over hosts Asia in this week’s EurAsia Cup with the event also serving as a dress rehearsal for one of the teams contesting the 2018 Ryder Cup. Le Golf National in Paris will host the 42nd Ryder Cup in September when the Dane will lead a side trying to wrest the title back from the United States, who last won in Europe 25 years ago. With that longer-term goal in mind, Bjorn has six former Ryder Cup players at his disposal in a 12-man team that will take part in the third edition of the EurAsia Cup at the Gleneagles Golf and Country Club in Kuala Lumpur.

The last time the event was played, a European team led by Northern Irishman Darren Clarke romped to an 18 1/2-5 1/2 blowout win over their Asian counterparts in the second edition of the biennial matchplay contest in 2016. The current side includes Englishmen Tommy Fleetwood, who won last season’s Race to Dubai, Tyrrell Hatton, Ross Fisher and Matthew Fitzpatrick, Spaniard Rafa Cabrera-Bello, Austrian Bernd Wiesberger, Ireland’s Paul Dunne, Belgian Thomas Pieters, and the Swedish duo of Alex Noren and Henrik Stenson.

Experienced Englishman Paul Casey and France’s Alex Levy are Bjorn’s two wildcard picks against an Asian side led by three-time European Tour winner Arjun Atwal of India. “We’re very well aware that Asia has never fielded a stronger team than they do this time,” the Dane told reporters this week. “Golf is a strange game. Whatever it says on the paper very rarely comes out on top. As golf in Asia continues to grow at a rapid rate, the amount of players from the region making a positive impact on tours around the world points to a bright future for the sport and adds credibility to the EurAsia Cup. “I think the commitment from the players early on, wanting to play in this event, shows where European golf is,” Bjorn added.

“There’s an excitement about representing Europe. That’s something that says a lot about those 12 players in there. They want to win.” Atwal believes his youthful team, which boasts 11 European Tour titles between them, including multiple winners Kiradech Aphibarnrat of Thailand and India’s S.S.P Chawrasia, has the strength in depth to turn the contest in Asia’s favor. “Definitely everybody knows we are underdogs, except my team,” the 44-year-old said. “There is no such thing as an underdog in matchplay golf. You can be underdogs on paper, but once the matches start, anything can happen.”

“I pretty much picked Tiger’s (Woods) brain a little bit because we are really close. I saw Davis (Love III) at a range somewhere and I kind of told him that I was captaining. So I have an idea of what to deal with and what to expect.” Current Asian Tour Order of Merit leader Gavin Green of Malaysia, his compatriot Nicholas Fang, India’s Anirban Lahiri, South Korea’s Kang Sung-hoon and An Byeong-hun, Thai pair Phachara Khongwatmai and Poom Saksansin, China’s Li Hao-tong and Japanese duo Yuta Ikeda and Hideto Tanihara complete the side. — Reuters

Golf merges as Britain’s dullest sport in a survey

LONDON: Golf has emerged as Britain’s dullest sport in a survey confirming the historic phrase wrongly attributed to Mark Twain that it is “a good walk spoiled”. The YouGov poll-published in Thursday’s edition of The Times-found 70% of the 1,616 adults asked for their opinion adjudged golf to be the dullest only 11% considered it to be exciting. Despite attracting sell out crowds at Wembley for NFL games American Football is considered the second dullest (59%) whilst after the 4-0 Ashes drubbing by Australia there is more bad news for English cricket as it is just behind in third with 58%.

English golfer Matthew Southgate—who finished joint sixth in The British Open last year-concurring with the findings and was not surprised athletics topped the poll in terms of being considered the least dull (28%) and 47% found it exciting. “I probably agree with them,” Southgate told The Times. “The coverage needs to be better. Running is first to the line—that’s pretty self-explanatory—but in golf there’s a lot of time when no one is hitting a shot. Unless you know the rules and the players, it can be difficult to watch.” However, golf officials hit back at the survey. “Golf is unique in that any golfer can play against the best players in the world thanks to the handicap system,” Martin Slumbers, chief executive of the R&A, told The Times. “I would encourage anyone to take up golf and enjoy a true sport for life.” —AFP
Champion Federer to face Bedene at Australia Open

World number one Nadal takes on Estrella Burgos

MELBOURNE: Roger Federer will open his Australian Open title defense against Slovenian Aljaz Bedene next week, while top seed Rafael Nadal, the losing finalist last year, was paired with Dominican Victor Estrella Burgos at the draw yesterday. Women’s top seed Simona Halep of Romania faces Australian wildcard Destanee Aiava in the first round, with second seed Caroline Wozniacki starting out against Halep’s compatriot Mihaela Buzarnescu. Serena Williams will not defend the women’s title having had her first child last year but 2008 champion Maria Sharapova, who failed a drugs test at the tournament in 2016, is back unseeded after a ban and will face Germany’s Tatjana Maria.

Williams’s sister Venus, who lost to her sibling in the final last year, is seeded fourth and the 37-year-old was handed a tricky first encounter against Swiss former world number seven Belinda Bencic, who is 17 years her junior. Men’s third seed Grigor Dimitrov will face a qualifier, with Alexander Zverev, ranked fourth, playing Italian Thomas Fabbiano but with 2014 champion Stan Wawrinka, returning after surgery, in his section of the draw. Young gun Zverev had little luck in his first Australian Open draw as a top five seed with either Wawrinka, who plays Richardas Berankis, or Novak Djokovic potentially standing in his path in the quarter-finals.

Six-times Melbourne Park champion Djokovic, seeded 14th after missing the back end of last season with an elbow injury, will take on American left-hander Donald Young in his first match with mercurial Frenchman Gael Monfils looming in round two. Federer also has Milos Raonic, Juan Martin del Potro, David Goffin and Tomas Berdych in his quarter of the draw, while Nadal would appear to have the easier section, although former US Open champion Marin Cilic looms as a last-eight opponent. If the draw goes to seed, Dimitrov would face American Jack Sock in the last eight, with ailing world number five Dominic Thiem, who withdrew from Kooyong because of illness on Thursday, taking on Zverev.

Britain’s Andy Murray and Japan’s Kei Nishikori have already withdrawn from the championships and women’s world number three Garbine Muguruza has twice pulled out of tournaments over the last two weeks due to leg cramps and a thigh problem. The Wimbledon champion is scheduled to play on France’s Jessica Peguehet in the first round, while French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko was paired with veteran Francesca Schiavone and US Open champion Sloane Stephens will take on China’s Zhang Shuai.

Australia’s sole men’s seed, Nick Kyrgios, takes on Brazilian Rogerio Dutra Silva and local women’s 18th seed Ashleigh Barty takes on Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka.

Bouchard puts buttock pain behind for first win of 2018

MELBOURNE: Struggling star Eugenie Bouchard won her first match of the year yesterday, posting a 6-2, 6-0 defeat of Australian teen Destanee Aiava at the Kooyong Classic in Melbourne. The Canadian had gone down in three group matches last week at the Hopman Cup in Perth, where she suffered a buttock injury, and was eliminated in the first round at Hobart on Monday, denting her Australian Open preparations. “I was happy to be out there in a pretty official-feeling match,” said the 23-year-old. “There were stands, a crowd, and an umpire. It was like a practice match but kind of real.”

With time running out for her to be ready for the opening Grand Slam of the year, the 2014 Wimbledon finalist, now ranked 58th after a dismal last season, eagerly accepted a late invitation for a hit-out at Kooyong, a non-tour event. Bouchard, who made the Australian Open semi-finals in 2015 and the quarters a year later, said her game was a work in progress after changing her routine and coaches in the off-season. “It’s progressing,” she said. “I was just focusing on myself and the things I have to work on throughout the match.”

The Canadian, who said her buttock injury was now fine, added that she was keen to eliminate all memories of a poor 2017 campaign. “I don’t want to feel any continuation of 2017, it really wasn’t a good year for me. I worked hard in the off-season, changing some things,” she said. In other matches at the exhibition event, France’s Richard Gasquet won his second match, overcoming Australian Matthew Ebden 6-4, 7-6 (7/4). “It was perfect in these conditions,” the 33-year-old said. “I’m preparing my game to be ready for the Open and to perform there.” Gasquet, who has never gone past the Australian Open fourth round, added: “I’ll keep up the training. I have no injuries and am feeling great.”

World number five Dominic Thiem, meanwhile, withdrew from his scheduled match as he recovers from illness, disrupting his Grand Slam plans. The Austrian arrived late in Melbourne from Doha after pulling out prior to last weekend’s Qatar Open semi-final with Gael Monfils after contracting a virus. He lost in straight sets to Novak Djokovic on Wednesday and decided against playing any more matches. Thiem’s substitute, Russian Andrey Rublev, beat Lucas Pouille of France 3-6, 6-1, 6-4. “I only arrived yesterday,” said Rublev, who made the Doha final. “I’m happy to be here and pleased with my preparation after this match. ‘We’ll see what happens in a couple of days (at the Open).’ — AFP
Clouds lift; North Korea boosts Pyeongchang Winter Olympics

Outlook is suddenly much brighter for ‘Peace Olympics’

SEOUL: Pyeongchang Winter Olympics organizers are entering their final preparations with renewed confidence after neighboring North Korea ended months of speculation by confirming its attendance, immediately easing fears over security and ticket sales. With one month to go, the outlook is suddenly much brighter for the “Peace Olympics”, which had been rocked by the drugs ban on Russia’s team and concerns over potential disruption by the nuclear-armed North. North Korea, which boycotted the 1988 Seoul Summer Games, this week agreed to attend its first Olympics in the South, during talks which defused soaring tensions over its nuclear programme and missile tests.

France, Germany and Austria had all voiced fears about competing in Pyeongchang during the stand-off with North Korea, which lies just 80 kilometers (50 miles) away from the Olympic site across a heavily fortified border. “Security concerns over the North’s nuclear threats during the Pyeongchang Olympics have evaporated at a stroke,” Park Sung-Bae, a sports industry expert from South Korea’s Hanyang University said. “No one would now think the North could lob nuclear bombs over the heads of its own athletes.”

North and South Korea’s Olympic officials will meet at the International Olympic Committee’s headquarters in Switzerland next week to hammer out the details of the North’s participation. The North Korean delegation is expected to run into the hundreds, even though figure skaters Ryom Tae-Ok and Kim Ju-Sik are their only two athletes who qualified to compete—and subsequently missed a deadline to register for the Games. The IOC has said it will consider offering wildcards to North Korean athletes. Cross-country skiers and speed skaters are understood to be among those who could benefit.

According to reports, the North Koreans-including its “army of beauties” female cheering squad—could be accommodated on a cruise ship off the nearby coastal city of Sokcho. “There has been plenty of speculation on whether North Korea would participate or not, but now that it’s been confirmed, we’ll have to be prepared that much more,” said Lee Hee-Beom, head of the organizing committee, according to Yonhap news agency. “Accommodation for athletes and other officials is all ready. Since the cheering and performing squads will also make their way, we’ll have to make our preparations accordingly.”

Missing in action

The news of North Korea’s involvement is highly welcome for Pyeongchang after Russia’s team was barred en masse by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) last month over a wide-ranging doping conspiracy. Pyeongchang will also be missing top ice hockey stars, as the National Hockey League (NHL) is banning players who pass through a Russian-financed programme and missile tests.

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Putin’s Sochi price tag cost Winter Games dear

LONDON: The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics skewed the future of the Games because the estimated $50 billion budget bankrolled by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s government has put off future bidders. The view is shared by Hugh Robertson, the then British sports minister responsible for delivering the 2012 London Summer Games and former International Olympic Committee (IOC) marketing director Michael Payne, speaking ahead of next month’s Pyeongchang Games.

A St Moritz and Davos 2026 candidacy in Switzerland and bid by Austria’s Innsbruck were last year fatally halted by adverse results in referendums. “Stories emanating out of Sochi costing $50 billion were misleading as the vast majority—$48 billion—lay in regeneration of the region not the Games,” said Robertson, who is now chairman of the British Olympic Association (BOA).

“People can draw the wrong conclusions from those figures and it doesn’t encourage bids, especially if they are put to referenda as the cost can be dangled as an argument against,” Payne said. The error could have been nipped in the bud if then IOC president Jacques Rogge had stepped in and clarified the difference between the cost of the event and the funds used for developing the region. “Of course the alpine valleys in Austria and Germany, they say ‘we watch the Games and we love to participate in them but we can’t afford to host them at that price’, said Payne.

Payne, who moved on after the 2004 Olympics to fulfil a similar role for Berne Ecclestone in Formula One, said the IOC had to seize the initiative in the battle of social media and the airwaves. “I just don’t think they have got control of the communications debate, which is critical to the referenda,” he said. “The Games are in good shape but the road to finding hosts is a work in progress and they are fixing it but it isn’t yet fixed.” Payne says a more volatile electorate—as shown in the Brexit result—has complicated the process and neither political parties nor sports organizations understand the new dynamic. Robertson, a former soldier who served as a junior Foreign Office minister before stepping down from parliament at the 2015 election, said Bach needs to take the Games back to their old values. — AFP

‘Global shift’ as Olympics set up shop in Asia

SHANGHAI: When the cauldron ignites in Pyeongchang on February 9, it will open a sequence of three Olympic Games in Asia over the next four years—highlighting the region’s growing clout, and also the declining interest among Western powers in holding the multi-billion dollar events. After next month’s Winter Games in South Korea, Tokyo will take centre stage in 2020 and Beijing will organize the 2022 Winter Olympics—becoming the first city to hold both a Winter and Summer Games.

South Korea (Seoul 1988), Japan (Tokyo 1964, Sapporo 1972, Nagano 1998) and China (Beijing 2008) have all hosted Olympics before, but clearly the appetite remains strong. Outside the region, enthusiasm is patchier—a fact that was underlined when Rome, Hamburg and Budapest all withdrew from the running to hold the 2024 Summer Games. Last September, 2024 hopeful Los Angeles lost out to Paris but was instead awarded 2028, four years ahead of the normal schedule—a move perceived as the International Olympic Committee locking in a high-profile bidder while it still could.

Beijing-based Mark Dreyer, an expert on China’s sports industry, said Asia’s Olympic hat-trick signals “a global shift of power”: “If we had three consecutive Olympics in the West, people would not say it was so remarkable,” Dreyer, founder of the China Sports Insider website, said. “But the fact that it is in Asia—these are the countries that are able to bid for these events because they cost a hell of a lot of money and often lose a hell of a lot of money.” The Asian countries are able to do this in a way that a lot of the Western countries are no longer able to.

“The vibrancy of these economies,” particularly China and Japan, versus the West, people have been struggling; that’s why we are seeing a shift towards the East.” —AFP
BARCELONA: Troubled Spanish champions Real Madrid stumbled to a 2-2 draw with third-tier Numancia on Wednesday but qualified for the King’s Cup quarter-finals 5-2 on aggregate.

With a comfortable first-leg advantage, Zinedine Zidane rested much of his first team, making 10 changes from the line-up that struggled to a disappointing draw at Celta Vigo on Sunday to fall 16 points behind league leaders Barcelona.

Madrid opened the scoring in the 11th minute, Vazquez heading home Dani Carvajal’s deep cross when left unmarked at the back post. Numancia hit back in the 45th minute, Vazquez heading home Dani Carvajal’s late winner completing a Villarreal comeback that was not enough to send the hosts through.

Zinedine Zidane rested much of his first team, with substitute Guillermo, just on for Vazquez, who was sent off in the dying minutes for a cynical foul to stop Isco that earned him a second yellow card. Earlier, Leganes reached the quarter-finals for the first time in their history after losing 2-1 at Villarreal but progressing on away goals after their 1-0 first-leg win at Butarque.

Leganes winger Nabil El Zhar scored a decisive chip to break the deadlock, with Dani Carvajal’s well-taken strike and Denis Cheryshev’s late winner completing a Villarreal comeback that was not enough to send the hosts through.

Last season’s King’s Cup runners-up, Alaves beat third division Fomenta 2-0 to wrap up a 5-1 aggregate win thanks to second-half goals from Ermedin Demirovic and Alfonso Pedraza. Yesterday, Levante hosted Espanyol, Cadiz traveled to Sevilla and holders Barcelona welcomed Getafe to the Nou Camp. —Reuters

Spanish champions book Cup quarter-finals on aggregate

Olympics: Winter sports explained

PARIS: A record 102 gold medals will be awarded in 15 sports disciplines at the Winter Olympic Games in Pyeongchang, South Korea from February 9-25. AFP takes a brief look at the medal events and how those sports disciplines work.

Alpine skiing
Alpine skiing is divided into speed events and technical events. The downhill and super-G, run over one leg, provide the speed while the giant slalom and slalom, held over two legs, showcase technique. The alpine combined brings together the downhill and slalom.

A new event in 2018, the National Team Event, sees teams of four (two men, two women) competing against one another on parallel slalom courses. Alpine skiing accounts for a total of 11 medals.

Biathlon
Eleven gold medals (five for men, five for women, one mixed)

Bootsieh
In the four-man bobsleigh, two-man bobsleigh and two-woman’s bobsleigh, competitors ride a steerable sled down an ice track at speeds averaging 135 kph. A brakeman and pilot make up the two-person bob to which two pushers are added for the four-man format.

Cross-country skiing
Competitors compete for a total of 12 gold medals—six for men and six for women—over snowfield courses that include an equal measure of climbing, descending and flat racing in various race formats. Two styles of skiing are on show—classic style which involves competitors pushing their skis ahead in a forward movement, and skate style, whereby competitors move ahead by pushing sideways in a skating motion.

Curling
Curling offers three gold medals at the 2018 Games—men’s team, women’s team and mixed doubles (introduced for the first time in Pyeongchang). Four competitors in the team events each glide polished granite stones along a so-called curling sheet of flat ice with the aim of placing their stones closer to the target, or house, than the opposition. Each team has eight stones per round, or end. Games usually run to 10 ends. Players can use brooms to sweep the ice to ease the passage of their stones.

Figure skating
Skill and grace combine as competitors compete for marks from an international jury who rule on accuracy and artistry. Five gold medals are at stake in men’s and women’s singles, ice dance, pairs, and the team event.

Freestyle skiing
Unlike alpine skiing, the freestyle version belongs to the extreme sports category and is all about artistry — aerial acrobatics including flips, spins and twists performed while gliding down the ski slopes on various course formats. Ten gold medals are offered in Moguls, Aerials, Ski Halfpipe, Ski Cross and Ski Slopestyle. —AFP

Zidane’s credit running out for failing to shake Real up

MADRID: Zinedine Zidane’s ability to manage the tempestuous Santiago Bernabeu dressing room has always been seen as one of his main strengths but with Real Madrid struggling, his good relations with his “galacticos” is starting to look like a liability.

Real have slipped a remarkable 16 points behind Barcelona in the Spanish league and sit in the unfamiliar position of fourth in the standings, with their hopes of retaining the title long gone. A place in next season’s Champions League is also far from secure as sixth-placed Villarreal, who have a strong record against Real, visit the capital on Saturday trailing the faltering European and Liga champions by only four points.

Anything but three points against Villarreal, who have taken seven off them in their last four games, would pile more pressure on Zidane despite his eight trophies in two years as Real coach. The Frenchman was slammed in the Spanish media after the 3-0 loss at home to Barcelona and there was no let up after Sunday’s 2-2 draw with Celta Vigo or Wednesday’s 2-2 draw with second-tier Numancia in the King’s Cup - even if Real won on aggregate.

An article in Wednesday’s edition of newspaper El Pais berated the coach for persisting with the same team selections and tactics after disappointing results. “Zidane has preferred to not anticipate risks and has bypassed any uncomfortable diagnosis, no matter how obvious,” it said. “Zidane has kept faith in his starting players, with (Karim) Benzema despite the anger of the supporters, with Marcelo and his intrepid adventures, with Kroos and his downward displays.”

“ar the coach’s declaration on Tuesday that he would not “throw anyone in the mud” has been taken as another sign that he is not strong enough to make the tough decisions his team need. Zidane’s unwillingness to shake things up can be traced to Real’s limited activities in the last transfer window. According to media reports, the club pulled out of a bid to sign French teenager sensation Kylian Mbappe to avoid upsetting Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Gareth Bale, who have already mustered 10 league goals between them this term. — Reuters
Chelsea frustrated by Arsenal 0-0 stalemate

Wilshere suffered ankle injury in Chelsea draw

Liverpool, without Coutinho, out to halt City march

Mancini wants to fulfill dream as Italy’s coach
Neymar strikes as PSG book League Cup semis

Montpellier snatch a 1-0 win at Angers

PARIS: Neymar scored a second-half penalty as four-time defending champions Paris Saint-Germain toiled before overcoming 10-man Amiens 2-0 to reach the semi-finals of the French League Cup on Wednesday. PSG were again without leading scorer Edinson Cavani, who also missed Sunday's French Cup rout of Rennes after returning late from his Christmas and New Year break in Uruguay.

Amiens' hopes of springing an upset were heavily undermined by the dismissal of goalkeeper Regis Gurtner on 34 minutes for a foul on Kylian Mbappe after charging out of his area. And Neymar eventually made the visitors' numerical advantage count by winning and converting a spot-kick eight minutes into the second half at the Stade de la Licorne. Mbappe, earlier denied by a fingertip save from Jean-Christophe Bouet, was then thwarted by a combination of the substitute keeper and the crossbar before firing another effort narrowly wide.

Marquinhos also struck the woodwork after connecting with a cross from Giovanni Lo Celso, but Adrien Rabiot wrapped up another effort narrowly wide.

The system was conceived by Markos Kern, a Munich-based creative entrepreneur. "With our system, squash will in time become the first to achieve a full merger between sport and technology in truly real time - with data instantly available to fans and players,” he said. Tour chiefs hope to incorporate technology for automated calls on the out lines, data instantly available to fans and players, ” physical characteristics such as movement, speed and distance covered by players during games will also be shown, alongside tactical elements such as heat maps and ball tracking data. German developers interactive SQUASH (iSquash) launched new technology last year that can project interactive training modules on the front wall of the court.

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Amiens’ hopes of springing an upset were heavily undermined by the dismissal of goalkeeper Regis Gurtner on 34 minutes for a foul on Kylian Mbappe after charging out of his area. And Neymar eventually made the visitors’ numerical advantage count by winning and converting a spot-kick eight minutes into the second half at the Stade de la Licorne. Mbappe, earlier denied by a fingertip save from Jean-Christophe Bouet, was then thwarted by a combination of the substitute keeper and the crossbar before firing another effort narrowly wide.

Marquinhos also struck the woodwork after connecting with a cross from Giovanni Lo Celso, but Adrien Rabiot wrapped up another effort narrowly wide.

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Chelsea frustrated by Arsenal 0–0 stalemate