Gov’t steps up nutrition programme efforts

STATE Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has called for conducting a survey to collect data on nutrition in order to effectively carry out a national nutrition strategy in the country.

Speaking at the Cross-Ministry co-ordination meeting on national nutrition strategy held at the Pyitharyar Hall in Pakokku, Magway Region yesterday, the State Counsellor urged the ministries and departments taking part in the nutrition programme to take the opinions of the people about the programme into consideration so as to achieve success in the drive.

In performing educative tasks, the target cannot be reached as expected if it is one-sided. It needs to give due regard to our citizens so that we can perform the progress of the citizens effectively. And, in implementing the tasks, systems suitable to the regions need to be utilized, she added.

“The programme to provide nutritious food is a part of the process of our country’s development,” she said, adding that supplying sufficient nutrition to children is largely concerned with the situation of parents.

She has also urged fathers to get involved in the programme, as the nutrition of children and mothers is closely tied to that of the fathers.

The State Counsellor also stressed the need to hold such meetings frequently so as to be able to decide which types of projects need to be implemented, as no research work has been found on nutrition in the country.

Afterward, Union Ministers Dr Aung Thu, Dr Myo Thein Gyi, Dr Myint Htwe, Dr Win Myat Aye and Chief Ministers Dr Aung Moe Nyo, Dr Zaw Myint Maung and allied organizations clarified further processes to be implemented on nutrition in the years to come.

State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi also visited Sanpyaygi village in Pakokku township and attended an event in the monastery that explained to pregnant women the importance of supplying nutritious food to infants under 2 years of age, and also inspected exhibits on nutrition for expectant mothers and infants.

During the visit, the State Counsellor met with expectant mothers and members of an international microfinance banking service organisation, enquiring about education and health matters.

At the meeting with mothers and local peoples, she clarified that nutrition is meant for the long period of a child.

Most regard bringing up children as a mother’s duty. In fact, every member of the family is responsible for the development of the health of the family. Only if parents are conscientious will offspring be brought up with conscientiousness, she said.

The government is not even at the neonatal stage. However, we are not hesitant to do our work and we will exert efforts to the satisfaction of everybody.

State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi
VP U Myint Swe receives Vice Chairman of General Electric

U Myint Swe, Vice President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, received a delegation led by Mr. John G. Rice, Vice Chairman of General Electric (GE) based in United States, at 9 am on Wednesday at the President’s Office in Nay Pyi Taw.

During the meeting, they discussed matters concerning human resources developments and improvement in leadership skills in energy, electricity and health sectors. Also present at the meeting were U Kyaw Tin, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Dr Tun Naing, Deputy Minister for Electrical Power and Energy and officials.—Myanmar News Agency

Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker meets with Speaker of Britain’s Lower House

U Win Myint, Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, who is currently in Britain, had discussions with the Rt. Hon. Mr. John Bercow, Speaker of the Lower House at Westminster Tuesday afternoon.

In the meeting, the two Speakers talked about increased cooperation and friendship between the two Parliaments, the development process of the parliaments and legislative work of the Parliament.

Present at the ceremony were U Saw, chairman of the Hluttaw committee on the original rights of citizens, members of the Drafting Law U Zaw Win, U Sai San Thim, member of the Hluttaw Opportunity Committee, Dr Shwe Pon, member of the international relations committee, U Kyaw Zwa Win, the Myanmar ambassador to Britain and responsible officials from Hluttaw Office.

In the evening, the Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw spoke with HE Mr Alok Sharma, deputy minister for Foreign Affairs and Common Wealth at the office of FCO Minister, attended by U Saw and U Kyaw Zwa Min.

In addition, the Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw and party discussed with Rt. Hon. Mr. David Evennett MP and Mr Roy Stone, Principal Private Secretary to the Government Chief Whip at Portcullis House of the Lower House at 11:30 am and in the afternoon with Rt. Hon. HE Mr. Charles Walker, MP, chairman of Procedure Committee on Parliament affairs and legislation.

— Myanmar News Agency

Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker receives IPU Technical Cooperation Program Manager

AMYOTHA Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than received the Technical Cooperation Program Manager, Ms. Norah Babic, from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), at 1:30 pm yesterday at the Amyotha Hluttaw Building in Nay Pyi Taw.

During the meeting, they discussed providing of assistance for Hluttaw development by IPU. The meeting was attended by Amyotha Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U Aye Tha Aung and officials of Amyotha Hluttaw.—Myanmar News Agency

Vice President U Myint Swe poses for photo together with the General Electric’s delegation. Photo: MNA

MYANMAR GAZETTE

Head of service organisation appointed

The President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has appointed U Min Chit Oo, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Union Minister’s Office, Ministry of Transport and Communications as Principal of the Central Institute of Transport and Communication on probation from the date he assumes charge of his duties.—Myanmar News Agency

U Maung Maung Lynn concurrently appointed as Ambassador to Cyprus

THE PRESIDENT of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar has appointed U Maung Maung Lynn, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the State of Israel, concurrently as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the Republic of Cyprus.—Myanmar News Agency

U Myint Swe presents credentials to President of South Africa

U Myint Swe, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the Republic of South Africa, presented his Credentials to His Excellency Mr. Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, President of South Africa, on 24 January 2017, in Pretoria.—Myanmar News Agency

Legal Affairs and Special Cases Assessment Commission Chairman receives GE delegation

Thura U Shwe Mann holds talks with Mr John G Rice. Photo: MNA

At the meeting, they discussed the Myanmar Investment Law and its rules, matters related to cooperation in electricity, energy, health and aviation sectors, human resource development and progress in democratic transition in Myanmar.

— Myanmar News Agency
Training course for voting booth supervisors conducted

A TRAINING course on the process for voting booth in-charges for the by-election in April was opened at the Office of the Union Election Commission in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday morning.

At the opening ceremony, U Hla Thein, chairman of the UEC said: "In 2015, a working manual for in-charges and deputy in-charges of voting booths was issued. Based on the manual with amendments revised, the present course will be conduct for the by-election in 2017. For an election to be successful, there are two parts divided for voting booth in-charges and deputy in-charges to perform. Only if the two parts are in harmony with each other, will the election be successful. Courses on the working process for sub-commissions at different levels to perform were conducted. Now is the time for in-charges and deputy in-charges of voting booths. In holding free and trustworthy elections, efforts and rightful performance of in-charge and deputy in-charge play an important role, similar to the sub-commissions at different levels. Due to failure to perform as described in the manual in the 2015 general election, there were some weaknesses. In the 2017 by-election, there are 2.15 million voters for the 19 vacant posts in 22 townships. As there are 2,000 voting pools, 4,000 in all — 2,000 in-charges and 2,000 deputy in-charges will be given training courses. For the 2017 by-elections, courses will be conducted two times to two divided groups. Today's training will be attended by 46 people representing sub-commissions at different levels in regions and states, while the second course will be conducted for 40 people."

To be discussed at the course will be: assessment of the basic knowledge of the by-election; the types of conducting courses and lessons; responsibilities and authorities of in-charge and deputy in-charge of voting booths; preparations for the election; opening and closing of the voting booths; the process of voting and supervising voters to enter booths in queues with discipline; confirmed and objected votes; counting votes and tasks after counting votes.

Trainees, including in-charges and deputy-in-charges, will have to undergo this process again in March, in which a demonstration will be conducted in order to be very clear about the process, it is learnt.—Myanmar News Agency

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Government cracking down on illegal trading

The Union government is planning to take stringent measures against illegal trading in order to prevent the smuggling of contraband, which causes a great loss of revenue, said U Kyaw Win, Union Minister for Planning and Finance.

"It is essential for the nation to control contraband but it must be carried out in a systematic way by taking lessons from previous arrangements. We firmly believe it will be successful if arrangements are made in collaboration with the Customs Department, respective regions, state cabinets and aligned departments," said U Kyaw Win at a meeting on coordinating arrangements for controlling contraband at the Ministry of Planning and Finance yesterday.

"Due to the smuggling of contraband, the State has suffered a great loss of revenue. And these contraband goods include foodstuff that is hazardous to health and commodities of bad quality," he added.

In addition, illegal smuggling can also be alleviated with the opening of the two checkpoints. "The criticism that there can be bribery and corruption cases has been reported. Arrangements have been made to solve the critical reports. For traffic jams not to take place at the checkpoints, multiple teams will be formed as necessary to check at the gates, instead of one team," he said.

Following the approval of the Government of the State, the team will carry out the tasks — issuing daily press releases through media, recording by CCTVs, using Mobile-X-ray equipment, checking trucks carrying goods that become easily spoof at the place of loading and unloading, examining in detail upon receipt of tip-offs given by informants, posting examiners at designated places to stop incidences of bribery, allowing media to observe at the check-points, issuing daily press releases of arrests and seizures of contraband and awarding bounties of up to 50 per cent to informers whose information leads to an arrest," said the State Counsellor.

Kyakhkyoe pilgrimage vehicles will not be examined unless information has been received that there is contraband aboard. Sale and purchase of contraband in the country will result in arrest in accord with the tax laws.

Merchants who fail to abide by the rules and laws will be arrested, and if staff has been found to have been involved in bribery and corruption, they will be severely punished, the minister said.

The Union minister has urged regional and state governments and departments to co-operate for the success of the project.

Present at the coordination meeting were Deputy Minister for Planning and Finance U Maung Maung Win, ministers from Cabinets of Kayin State, Bago Region, Mon State and Shan State and responsible officials.—Myanmar News Agency

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National Level Political Dialogue for Regions (Taninthayi Region) successfully concludes

NATIONAL Lift Political Dialogue for Regions (Taninthayi Region) continued for the third day at Dwayne University yesterday morning.

Chairman of the Supervisory Committee for National Level Dialogue for Taninthayi Region U Saw Lu Kar delivered an opening speech at the meeting, saying that peace is the goal of the national and political dialogue were read out at the meeting.

Afterwards, Vice Chairman Phyo Saw Kwe Htoo Win of the UPDEC thanked all those involved in organizing the dialogue and said that peace does not necessarily mean an end to war but the security of ethnic people in their daily lives and peace and national reconciliation and improvement of lives of ethnic people are synonymous.

Then, Chairman of the Peace Commission Dr Tin Myo Win said that the political dialogue is important and that political dialogue are being held in accordance with the provisions of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement before saying that he was glad to witness that the political road map for the union peace is not difficult for them to abide by, before thanking organizers of the dialogue.

Political papers, economic papers and papers on land and natural resources submitted with additional comments on the second day of the dialogue were read out at the meeting.

A TRAINING course on the process for voting booth in-charges for the by-election in April was opened at the Office of the Union Election Commission in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday morning.

At the opening ceremony, U Hla Thein, chairman of the UEC said: "In 2015, a working manual for in-charges and deputy in-charges of voting booths was issued. Based on the manual with amendments revised, the present course will be conducted for the by-election in 2017. For an election to be successful, there are two parts divided for voting booth in-charges and deputy in-charges to perform. Only if the two parts are in harmony with each other, will the election be successful. Courses on the working process for sub-commissions at different levels to perform were conducted. Now is the time for in-charges and deputy in-charges of voting booths. In holding free and trustworthy elections, efforts and rightful performance of in-charge and deputy in-charge play an important role, similar to the sub-commissions at different levels. Due to failure to perform as described in the manual in the 2015 general election, there were some weaknesses. In the 2017 by-election, there are 2.15 million voters for the 19 vacant posts in 22 townships. As there are 2,000 voting pools, 4,000 in all — 2,000 in-charges and 2,000 deputy in-charges will be given training courses. For the 2017 by-elections, courses will be conducted two times to two divided groups. Today’s training will be attended by 46 people representing sub-commissions at different levels in regions and states, while the second course will be conducted for 40 people."

To be discussed at the course will be: assessment of the basic knowledge of the by-election; the types of conducting courses and lessons; responsibilities and authorities of in-charge and deputy in-charge of voting booths; preparations for the election; opening and closing of the voting booths; the process of voting and supervising voters to enter booths in queues with discipline; confirmed and objected votes; counting votes and tasks after counting votes.

Trainees, including in-charges and deputy-in-charges, will have to undergo this process again in March, in which a demonstration will be conducted in order to be very clear about the process, it is learnt.—Myanmar News Agency

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Gov’t steps up...
Myanmar, China discuss stability, rule of law in border areas

THE 14th Myanmar-China border areas management and cooperation contract implementation meeting was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs U Kyaw Zeyar and Director-General of the Department of Boundary and Ocean Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mr. Ouyang Yujuing acted as co-chairmen of the meeting.

At the meeting, they discussed stability and rule of law, management, border affairs, border trade and economic cooperation in border areas.—Myanmar News Agency

Fundraiser on 28 January to provide healthcare for Naga people

POPULAR singers and models will perform at a fundraising show to be held in Yangon later this month to raise money for rehabilitation relief to the Naga people who have been adversely affected by serious infectious diseases, organisers say.

In cooperation with the Council of Naga Affairs, Mari Cole, a model and actress, will organise the charity event on 28 January at the National Theater on Myomaungyang Street.

“I wish to help my people through both long-term and short-term plans. I want to try my best for them, planning to show the culture and tradition of our people through this event,” Mari Cole said.

“This is the main reason to hold the fundraising event to the best of my ability,”

Between June and August of last year, 45 people were killed by measles, a highly infectious viral illness, in Naga-Self Administered Zone in Sagraing Region, according to a spokesperson of the council, saying that people in the area also experienced several fire accidents and loss of farmlands.

“Infants and senior citizens die every year because of lack of health-related knowledge, shortage of food and adequate health-care in the far-flung area,” said U Naw Aung Hsan, a member of the council. He added that it takes two or three days for information about the health situations in villages to reach larger towns due to poor transportation and telecommunications.

Tickets for the event are now available. The price of tickets are Ks5,000, Ks10,000, Ks20,000, Ks30,000 and Ks50,000. Well-wishers may dial 09 4500 833 83 and 09 7745 4893 of Mari Cole.

The fund has already received Ks100,000 contributed by Orchid Hotel and Ks20,000 from another philanthropic organisation at a recent press conference.—Myintmakha News Agency

High prevalence of elephantiasis found in Amarapura

AMARAPURA, a township in Mandalay Region, has been identified as an area with a high prevalence of elephant leg disease (elephantiasis), said Dr Tint Wai, head of the Vector Borne Disease Control Department (Mandalay).

During medical examinations in the township, the team led by Dr Tint Wai found about 60 residents out of 320 were infected with elephantiasis, a disease caused by filarial worms which are transmitted by mosquitoes.

The high prevalence of the communicable disease is directly linked to the wastewater drainage around the township, which have become major breeding sites for mosquitoes, the doctor said.

The lymphatic filariasis (elephant leg disease) can be divided into eight stages starting at stage zero, which shows no symptoms, according to the World Health Organisation. But at stage one, symptoms begin, which include massive swelling of the extremities.

Under the government’s programme to control the spread of lymphatic filariasis across the country, the Ministry of Health and Sports will distribute drugs among public between 20 and 29 January.

The healthcare providers target 4.6 million residents of the Mandalay Region to provide drugs to help prevent chronic infectious diseases under this programme.

Among others, PyinOoLwin District has been recognised as a zone without elephant leg disease.

According to a worldwide study, more than 120 million people are infected with lymphatic filariasis and about 1.4 billion people are at risk of the disease in 73 countries.

It is most common in tropical Africa and Asia.—Nadi Hlaing

New housing for growing YCDC staff

THE Yangon City Development Committee wants to expand housing plans to offer a range of accommodations to its staff depending on the budget, according to a spokesperson for the YCDC’s Pollution Control and Cleansing Department. Although the YCDC developed staff housing in 33 townships in Yangon Region, the accommodation requirements of the employees continued to increase. The committee continues to establish three or more housings a year through its budgets.

Sanitation staff have been appointed at the Pollution Control and Cleansing Department, with the majority of them from the countryside. Collection of waste materials in municipal areas has been carried out by the committee three times a day. Male employees usually have a duty to gather garbage from markets and disposal sites.—209

Japan Grants US$ 398,795 for road upgrading and one school construction

MR. TATESHI HIGUCHI, Ambassador of Japan to Myanmar, and Chairpersons of the Construction Committees from Magway and Ayeawady Regions signed the grant contracts for three projects on 24 January. Under these contracts, Japan’s Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects (GGP) Scheme will provide a total of US$ 398,795 for the Project for Construction of Pur Yakt Basic Education Branch Middle School in Wakema Township, Ayeayarwady Region (USD 120,663); the Project for Upgrading of Sat Su Wa Village Access Road in Aunglan Township, Magway Region (USD 145,870); and the Project for Upgrading of Kayin San Village Access Road in Aunglan Township, Magway Region (USD 132,262). In order to provide a proper learning environment for students, the Japanese Government will support construction of a two-storey Reinforced Concrete Construction (R.C.C.) building with well-furnished 8 classrooms.—GNLM

Opium oil seized in Shan State

A combined team comprising officers and staff seized opium oil from a bus that was bound for Lashio near Khae Ninn toll gate, Shan State (North) on Tuesday.

Acting on a tip-off, the combined team stopped and searched the passenger bus that was en route to Mandalay from Lashio near Khae Ninn toll gate, Naung Mon village and found opium oil weighing 3.182 kilograms from Daw Law Kyo, 63.

“She said she bought it from Lashio town. Daw Naw Kyo was allegedly abusing and be trafficking the drugs,” said an official from the No. 24 anti-narcotic police unit.

Police have filed charges against her under sections 15/19(A)/20(A)/21 of the Anti-Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Laws.—Myintmakha News Agency

AUNG Htay, alias Kyaw Mon from Inn Gynn Myaing village, Myawady township was shot to death on Tuesday by a friend in a hunting accident, according to Myawady Myoma Police.

According to police, Aung Htay was shot dead after a hunting trip, Sithu, Aye Lin and Kyaw Moe. During the hunting trip, Sithu apparently thought Aung Htay was an animal of prey and fired his gun, critically wounding his friend. The other members of the hunting party confirmed to investigators that Sithu mistook Aung Htay for an animal and fired his weapon.

The three friends brought Aung Htay to Mae Sot hospital, but Aung Htay died shortly after his arrival at the hospital.

Crime NEWS

A combined team comprising officers and staff from DKBA ethnic army group from Thae Phyu Chaung village arrested Sithu on Tuesday evening when he escaped from the scene.

The offender has had action taken against him under section 302 of the Penal Code by the police.—Myintmakha News Agency
MAEX making efforts to be listed on YSX

Myanmar Agro Exchange Public Limited (MAEX) may soon become a listed company on the Yangon Stock Exchange (YSX). Stock trading was approved for MAEX by Securities and Exchange Commission of Myanmar under the Ministry of Planning and Finance on 11th Jan 2017, but there are still technical and legal changes to be accomplished.

“We will make efforts to be listed on YSX as we have already established ourselves as a public company. We will prepare to be in accordance with the rules and regulations of YSX,” said Director U Thurein Aung from MAEX.

Currently, four companies — First Myanmar Investment (FMI), Myanmar Thilawa SEZ Holdings (MTSH), Myanmar Citizens Bank (MCB) and First Private Bank (FPB) — are trading shares on YSX. YSX gave a trading qualification to these securities: Myanmar Security Exchange Center Company Limited; KBZ Stirling Coleman Securities Co., Ltd; CB Securities Ltd; AYA Trust Securities Co., Ltd; KTZ Ruby Hill Securities Co., Ltd and Amara Securities Co., Ltd.

Shares of MAEX can now be purchased through local securities companies at a share price of Ks10,500.

The company was formed in 2015 with 21 original shareholders, putting in investments of Ks157.29 billion. The company, which is mainly engaged in the fruits, vegetable and flower wholesale market and also preparing for opening of cold storage warehouses, is learnt. — Myitmakha News agency

Myanmar sesame price jumps Ks20,000 per bag due to demand from India

The price of Myanmar’s sesame, known locally as Pan Hnhan, surged to Ks88,000 per three-basket-bag from Ks68,000 due to increased demand from India, said U Soe Win Myint of the Soe Win Myint depot in Mandalay.

It is expected for the price of a commodity to increase slightly when there is more demand, but this month’s jump is unusual, experts said.

“It is a rare case that the price will jump Ks20,000 per bag in only three weeks. The price of this sesame variety hit a four-year-record high of Ks30,000 per bag,” U Soe Win Myint said.

Local consumption of sesame oil is still lower than that of peanut oil. Sesame oil, however, reportedly has more health benefits than the imported palm oil. Sesame plants prefer cold weather, so they are mainly cultivated in areas along the upper Ayeyawady River, Bhamo areas and southern and northern Shan State. — Min Htet Aung (Mandalay Sub-Printing House)

Vessels to run for Kalatan multi-purpose project to arrive Sittway on 27th January

The vessels used for the Kalatan comprehensive project will arrive in Sittway on 27th January, according to the Department of Marine Administration.

Six ships were constructed by Rakhine Inland water transport, with two leaving for Sittway on 21st Jan. The other four will transfer in February. Those ships will be run for the Kalatan comprehensive project, said an official from the Department of Marine Administration.

The ships, 144-feet long and 30-feet wide, have a capacity of about 350 tonnes. Once the project starts, the ships will be used for the transport of commodities from the Sittway jetty to the Paletwa jetty. — 200

Newly harvested pea production results in rise in green gram price

With peas already harvested, the price of green grams went up a bit this week, according to the Mandalay depot. The price of green grams previously placed on the market was higher compared to that in the previous week after newly harvested green grams entered the market.

Additionally, there is a gap of around Ks10,000 per bag between old and new green gram prices. The new green grams fetch Ks115,000 per bag whereas the old ones attain Ks105,000 per bag.

The chick pea market has remained relatively steady. The price of new chick peas (V2) is Ks108,000 per bag, whereas old chick peas fetch Ks110,000 per bag. The prevailing price of new chick peas (Taiwan) is Ks90,000 and the price of the old one is Ks95,000 per bag. Similarly, the pigeon pea market is also steady and normal, with a prevailing price of Ks76,500 per bag. Nevertheless, the price of mung bean dropped a bit compared to last week, resulting from a cool market. The market price of mung bean is Ks980,000 per bag, down by Ks2,000 from last week’s price. — Mon Mon

Foreign investments meet the target in 2016-2017 FY

Foreign investments into Myanmar in the second week of January met the target of US$6 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for the 2016-2017 financial year, according to the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration (DICA).

If Myanmar Investment Commission (MIC) grants permission to investors by March, the FDI could easily reach US$7 billion, the head of DICA said.

“This year, FDI met the expected target. We will try our utmost to check the proposals and grant permission not later than the end of March to reach the target of US$7 billion,” said U Aung Naing Oo, director-general of DICA. The communications sector accounted for about 47.07 per cent of FDI, with 25.5 per cent in the industrial sector, 17.5 per cent in the electricity sector, 3.03 per cent in the real estate sector, 2.82 per cent in the hotels and tourism sector, 2.5 per cent in the livestock breeding sector and 1.59 per cent in other industries, according to MIC.

“We granted permission to the foreign companies based on the old law. We’ve disposed of pending cases in December, and the granted investments amount to US$3 billion. But the proposals are still being submitted, said U Aung Naing Oo.

The Myanmar Investment Commission has approved US$578,575 million worth of FDA to 106 international companies and 41 local companies in the current fiscal year.

Among foreign investors, Singapore-based companies have invested the most, with Chinese companies taking second place. Hong Kong occupies third place, followed by Thailand and Japan, according to MIC. — Myitmakha News Agency
Thai junta gives go-ahead to buy Chinese submarine and tanks

BANGKOK — Thailand’s military government has approved 13.5 billion baht ($380 million) to buy a submarine from China after putting the purchase on hold last year, Thai officials said on Wednesday.

While the Thai army will purchase 10 tanks and auxiliary vehicles from China, in addition to 28 main battle tanks ordered from China last year.

Relations have been strengthening between China and America’s oldest ally in Southeast Asia, particularly since ties with Thailand’s long-time strategic ally needed a submarine.

While the Thai army has also said it would buy two billion baht over three years to buy 10 tanks and auxiliary vehicles from China, according to General Cha-thum Thittasiri, the deputy permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence.

The purchase of the submarine has been put on hold last year in the face of public criticism and questions as to whether Thailand really needed a submarine.

Thai media officials said negotiations with the Chinese government were nearly finalised and the budget had been earmarked to pay for the submarine over six years.

“We are in the process of negotiating but this year there will definitely be a signing agreement as we have the budget,” Navy spokesman Admiral Jungpol Loomprakanon told Reuters.

Jungpol said the submarine would allow the navy to study tactics and how submarine warfare may be used against Thailand.

Maritime security is a hot issue in Southeast Asia given competing claims over the South China Sea, but Thailand is not involved in that dispute.

The Thai army has also set aside two billion baht over three years to buy tanks and auxiliary vehicles from China, according to General Cha-thum Thittasiri, the deputy permanent secretary at the Ministry of Defence.

The purchase is in addition to 28 main battle tanks ordered from China last year. China was the first major power to acknowledge Thailand’s ruling junta following a 2014 coup.

The United States responded by freezing 4.7 million of security-related aid and cancelling some security agreements.—Reuters

China foreign minister says wants to manage disputes with US

BEIJING — China wants dialogue with the new US administration to manage disputes and promote bilateral relations, but only on the basis of respecting each other’s core interests, like the “one China” principle, China’s foreign minister said.

US President Donald Trump, who was inaugurated on Friday, upset Beijing before offering office by casting doubt on the “one China” principle, under which Washington acknowledges Beijing’s position of sovereignty over self-ruled Taiwan.

China views Taiwan as a wayward province, to be brought under its control by force if necessary. However, proudly democratic Taiwan has shown no interest in being ruled by Beijing.

Speaking at a reception for the upcoming Chinese Lunar New Year, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the future direction of Sino-US ties had “attracted attention”.

“We are willing, on the basis of strictly abiding by the ‘one China’ principle and respect of each other’s core interests, to have dialogue with the new US government,” Wang said, in comments posted on the ministry’s website late Tuesday.

China is willing to “increase mutual trust, focus cooperation, manage and control disputes and promote the healthy development of China-US relations”, Cui said. —Reuters

Japan’s budget surplus goal elusive with worsening fiscal health

Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (L), alongside Finance Minister Taro Aso, speaks in a meeting of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy in Tokyo on 25 January, 2017. PHOTO: KYODO NEWS

TOKYO — Japan forecasts a bigger-than-expected primary deficit of 8.3 trillion yen ($73 billion) in fiscal 2020, highlighting the daunting challenge of achieving a surplus that year, the latest estimates by the Cabinet Office showed on Wednesday.

The figure is a sharp revision from its previous forecast of 5.3 trillion yen deficit in July. The government expects tax revenues to be smaller than initially projected in the face of slowing income growth and sluggish consumer spending.

The Cabinet Office said the ratio of the primary balance deficit, which excludes debt-servicing costs and revenue from new debt, to nominal gross domestic product will be 1.4 per cent in fiscal 2020, higher than the 1.0 per cent estimated in July.

The estimates were presented to a meeting of the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy headed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

With an eye to achieving 600 trillion yen in nominal GDP, the government has been struggling to ensure both economic growth and fiscal rehabilitation.

Abe has touted growth in tax revenue in recent years as one of the achievements of his “Abenomics” policy mix but the yen’s appreciation against the dollar is raising the bar for drastically reducing total spending.

Even before fiscal 2020, Japan faces difficulty in attaining its medium-term goal of reducing the primary deficit ratio against nominal GDP to 2 or 2 per cent in fiscal 2018.

In the latest estimates, the Cabinet Office said the ratio would be 2.4 per cent, rather than the 1.9 per cent in the July projection, anticipating a much larger primary deficit of 13.8 trillion yen rather than 10.5 trillion yen.

The latest projections were based on the scenario that the Japanese economy will grow 3 per cent or higher in nominal terms and 2 per cent or higher in real terms. In the July-September quarter of 2016, the world’s third-largest economy expanded an annualised real 1.3 per cent.— Kyodo News
North Korean elite turning against leader Kim — defector

North Korean elite are outwardly expressing their discontent towards young leader Kim Jong Un and his government as more outside information trickles into the isolated country, North Korea’s former deputy ambassador to London said on Wednesday.

Thae Yong Ho defected to South Korea in August last year and since December 2016 has been speaking to media and appearing on variety television shows to discuss his defection to North Korea and his life as a North Korean envoy.

“When Kim Jong Un first came to power, I was hopeful that he would make reasonable and rational decisions to save North Korea from poverty, but I soon fell into despair watching him firing officials for no proper reasons,” Thae said during his first news conference with foreign media on Wednesday.

“Low-level dissent or criticism of the regime, until recently unthink­able, is becoming more frequent,” said Thae, who spoke in fluent, British-accented English.

“We have to spray gasoline on North Korea, and let the North Korean people set fire to it.”

Thae, 54, has said publicly that dissatisfaction with Kim Jong Un prompted him to flee his post. Two university-age sons living with him and his wife in London also defected with him.

North and South Korea are technically still at war because their 1950-53 conflict ended in a truce, not a peace treaty. The North, which is subject to UN sanctions over its nuclear and missile programmes, regularly threatens to destroy the South and its main ally, the United States.

Thae is the most senior official to have fled North Korea and entered public life in the South since the 1997 defection of Hwang Jang Yop, the brains behind the North’s governing ideology, “Juche”, which combines Marxism and extreme nationalism.

Today’s North Korean system had “nothing to do with true communism”, Thae said, adding that the elite, like himself, had watched with unease as countries like Cambodia, Viet Nam and the former Soviet Union embraced economic and social reforms.

Thae has said that more North Korean diplomats are waiting in Europe to defect to South Korea.

North Korea still outwardly professes to maintain a Soviet-style command economy, but for years a thriving network of informal markets and person-to-person trading has become the main source of food and money for ordinary people.

Fully embracing these reforms would end Kim Jong Un’s rule, Thae said. Asked if Kim Jong Un’s brother, Kim Jong Chol, could run the country instead, Thae was sceptical.

“Kim Jong Chol has no interest in politics. He is only interested in music,” Thae said.

“He’s only interested in Eric Clapton. If he was a normal man, I’d have to be a very good professional guitarist,”—Thae

Indonesia to probe arms smuggling claims against peacekeepers in Sudan

JAKARTA — Indonesia will on Wednesday send a team to Sudan to investigate allegations that its peacekeepers stationed there with the United Nations tried to smuggle arms out of the country, officials said.

Authorities in Sudan last week stopped 139 Indonesian police officers from flying out of the Darfur region after security scans found guns and ammunition in baggage believed to belong to them.

Indonesian police have denied their officers were trying to smuggle arms.

“What’s clear is the bags that contained the weapons did not belong to the Indonesian unit,” police spokesman Boy Raffi Amar said in a text message.

“An investigation is ongoing involving the UN, Sudan authorities and Indonesian police,” he said.

The Indonesian police officers were part of a United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur and were due to return to Indonesia after completing a tour.—Reuters

Choi Soon-sil, the woman at the centre of the South Korean political scandal and long-time friend of President Park Geun-hye, arrives for a hearing arguments for South Korean President Park Geun-hye’s impeachment trial at the Constitutional Court in Seoul, South Korea, on 16 January 2017. PHOTO: REUTERS

Choi Soon-sil, the woman at the centre of a corruption scandal gripping South Korea angrily protested her innocence on Wednesday, shouting that she had been made to confess as she was forcibly summoned for questioning.

Choi, who has been sought by South Korean authorities and Indonesian police for her supposed link with Samsung Group’s [SAGR.UL] chairman, has all denied wrongdoing.

Park was impeached by parliament in December after accusations that she colluded with Choi to pressure big businesses, including Samsung, to donate to two foundations set up to back the president’s policy initiatives.

Park, 64, remains in office but has been stripped of her powers while she awaits her fate.

Park, Choi and Samsung have all denied wrongdoing.

Prosecutors said on Wednesday they had summoned Samsung Group President Kim Jong-joong and Samsung C&T Corp (028260.KS) President Kim Shin for questioning as witnesses.

Chung has been accused of criminal interference related to her academic record and other unspecified charges.

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Opinion

Khin Maung Oo

NOWADAYS, there is a place attracting most of us. This place is none other than our TV sets with numerous channels broadcasting foreign movies. Being language illiterates, we can enjoy the movies through Myanmar subtitles. When the time comes, we automatically seat ourselves before our television. TV audiences outnumber literature readers.

There are many reasons for today’s youths to be less interested in Myanmar literature. They already have easy access to the social networks such as Facebook and other interactive knowledge on the WWW (World Wide Web). They can entertain themselves spending their time playing on-line games, chatting with friends, or delving into different subjects on various websites for their self-development. In fact, youths are very astute. With each passing day, their knowledge horizon increases, but they begin to neglect reading Myanmar literary works. Here I do not mean to say that they have turned away from books altogether. Though being more interested in informative and educative pieces of writing, they still enjoy reading amusing stories. Very often, I find some boys and girls laughing aloud, while reading books and watching movies. This shows that they have not lost their sense of humor or their feelings.

Making youths read more books is really not a very easy task. The Government or any institution alone cannot perform this duty, without public co-operation. In academic education, reading Myanmar tales, stories, poems and novels—classics and modern—should be compulsory and these should be included in the syllabus. School authorities in collaboration with Parents and Teachers Associations need to make students take part in debates, literary talks and poem-recitation contests with famous writers and special guests invited to supervise and observe. School wall-chart magazines as well can help grow seeds of reading and writing in students. Awarding prizes to outstanding Myanmar language enthusiasts can also encourage their hobbies. This is not a day-dream. There used to be such activities in our schools when we were young. I wish we could bring such practicability back to life in our schools nationwide. Nowadays students are vying for scoring high marks to be admitted to their favorite professional institutes and colleges. Hence high school students and their parents may take no interest to participate in those movements, presently.

It is heartening for us to see some media, institutions and interested persons take an active part in launching activities for the progress of our Myanmar language. Simultaneously, it is essential for the government to give necessary assistance and encouragement to the above-mentioned organizations.

Books can educate us what to do and what not to do in our daily lives and guide the ones who go astray to choose the right path. They can tame the cruel to become kind to others.

Also, books can guide morally corrupt men to become respected citizens in our society. Why are we saying repeatedly to read Myanmar aesthetic literature today? This is because Myanmar youths seem to be losing sight of Myanmar culture and traditions and their knowledge of Myanmar vocabulary is growing weaker with each passing day.

For our youths as well as our literature readers, it will be of great benefit to disseminate our literary works through the Net as soon as possible. Otherwise, a new type of literature would replace our valuable cultural heritage before we recognized it. This does not mean that we do not accept the new.

We could take moral lessons from books throughout our lives. From the literary works we read, we learn to love heroes and men of power, and simultaneously to hate villains and mischievous people. Biographies and auto-biographies inspired us to emulate them. Detective stories teach us how to reason and provided us with different lines of reasoning. And it taught us that crime does not pay. What was conceived in our minds was that violation of the law would lead us to being punished, for sure. Most parents and teachers encourage their children to read love stories, regarding these as forbidden literature. But reading this kind of book gave us tender feelings. It is just a matter of time before the human race becomes extinct if we are devoid of love.

Literary experts, writers, entrepreneurs who have the spirit of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), non-governmental organizations and all interested persons should actively take part in launching a well-planned campaign for sustainable progress of our Myanmar language and literature under the leadership of the Union government.

Youths, Reading Habits, Aesthetic Literature and Moral Development

Khin Maung Oo

FROM day one of my schooling, which started right after the Second World War, we were taught the Morals and Manners lessons as an extra-curriculum subject. Since then I knew how to behave and act properly and understood the values of dignity and honour, and observed them until today. The dignity and honour are the two most important attributes that an individual should possess. Without dignity there wouldn’t be honour and without honour, wealth, ranks and positions mean nothing. Though they may be feared, people without dignity and honour wouldn’t get the respect of others.

Today, not only in our country, but all over the world, we are witnessing the deteriorations in morals, manners, dignity and honour at all levels right from the top down to the lowest levels in every society. To be more blunt, even some heads of states do not observe the norms of dignity and honour expected of them. Their bad manners and low moral values reflect their dignity and honour. However, I will not be going into detail about their bad manners and low moral values as they do not directly concern us.

As for our country, in the past, most people irrespective of their wealth or positions were very conscious of their morals and manners and went to great lengths to observe them and maintain their dignities and honours. They would rather die than let their dignity or honour being degraded. Thus they maintained their dignity and honour at all costs. During the colonization period, many people wouldn’t stoop down to the imperialists. Their dogma was “It’s better to die than to be enslaved!” and had risen up against foreign aggressions though they knew they were outnumbered and outgunned and were no match to the enemies. They upheld their dignity and honour by sacrificing their lives.

Over the years, the characters of most of our people have deteriorated. Many people do not seem to know that dignity and honour are the extensions of their morals and manners. The morals and manners of an individual reflect that individual’s character. This character is the foundation of one’s dignity that defines one’s honour. No one will have respect for a person who lacks dignity or honour.

There used to be many dishonourable persons in every field — be it in the government administration, judiciary, education, medical, business, or any endless number of professional fields. Such persons would do anything for their gains without any regards to their honour and respectability. People in high positions should be more careful how they behave, speak and act. Though many may not know these bad manners portray their moral values and are indicators of their low level of dignity and hence affect adversely on their honourability and respectability. If they want to be respected they should behave, speak and act properly.

I consider any form of misconduct that is not inline with work ethics is detrimental to a person’s dignity and honour and would tarnish the image and diminish one’s respectability. While in the service, I abide by the maxim that “leaders must set good examples for the subordinates”. However, such behaviourism as mentioned above would give wrong signals to the subordinates that such things are legitimate and acceptable. In fact they are not by any means. I sincerely hope these people would sooner come to realize their misbehaviours and repent. Only then such undesirable conduct would rapidly vanish from our civil services, various professional fields and business sectors.

Allow me to repeat myself again. Disregards for morals and manners would lead to misbehaviour, which in turn leads to misconduct that would diminish a person’s dignity and hence lessens the honourability and respectability. My opinion is, one doesn’t need to pull rank and demand respect, but if one nurtures dignity and honour by behaving properly, respect would come automatically. By pulling ranks they would earn only fear and disdain, but not respect.

From the literary works we read, from the stories inspired us to emulate are the extensions of the morals and manners in other words the moral values and the mannerisms of an individual. All these attributes are co-related to one another. Thus people, especially those who are in high positions, should have the decency to strictly maintain their dignity and honour by observing the morals and manners that would shape their character and guide their conduct, if they want to be successful and respected. Also intimidating and bullying the subordinates and the public will not bring respect but would be counter-productive.
Foreign Heads of State send felicitations to President U Htin Kyaw

The following are messages of felicitations from Foreign Heads of State / Government sent to President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar U Htin Kyaw, on the occasion of the 69th Anniversary Independence Day of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on 4 January.

From H.E. Mr. Michel Temer, President of the Federative Republic of Brazil

On the occasion of the 69th anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar I have the honour to extend to Your Excellency, in my name, in the name of the people and of the Government of Brazil, the most cordial and warmest congratulations, with renewed wishes for the happiness and prosperity of the people of Myanmar.

From H.E. Mr. Enrique Pena Nieto, President of the United Mexican States

On behalf of the people of Mexico. It is an honour to express to you my warmest congratulations on another year of celebrations for the National Day of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

I wish good health and success for Your Excellency and prosperity and welfare for the people of Myanmar.

From H.E. Mr. Klaus Werner Iohannis, President of Romania

On the occasion of the National Day of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar I have the distinguished pleasure to convey to Your Excellency and to the people of Myanmar the most sincere wishes of health, happiness and prosperity.

I avail myself of this opportunity of expressing the trust that the relations between our two countries will continue to be strengthened bilaterally, as well as multilaterally, to the mutual benefit of the two friendly nations.

Receive, Mr. President, the assurances of my highest appreciation.

Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck of Bhutan visits ancient pagodas in Bagan

HER Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck of Bhutan visited ancient pagodas in Bagan yesterday.

During the tour, the Queen Mother and royal family also took a hot-air balloon trip over Bagan, enjoying the scenic vistas of Bagan.

They paid homage at the Shwezigon Pagoda and offered flowers, water and candlelight. The queen also signed the visitors’ book and donated cash to the pagoda’s board of trustees. They then paid homage to Shwesandaw and Alodawpye pagodas and made similar offerings.

—Myanmar News Agency

Foreign Head of State sends felicitations to State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

The following is message of felicitations from Foreign Head of State / Government sent to State Counsellor, Union Minister for Foreign Affairs Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, on the occasion of the 69th Anniversary Independence Day of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on 4 January.

From H.E.Mr. Jose Serra, Minister of External Relations of the Federative Republic of Brazil

On the occasion of the celebration of the 69th Anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, let me express to Your Excellency my most cordial congratulations and wishes of happiness and prosperity to the people of Myanmar.

Speaker of the Senate of parliament and Speaker of the House of Commons, parliament of Canada send felicitations to Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw U Win Myint and Speaker the Amyotha Hluttaw U Mahn Win Khaing Thanh

The following are messages of felicitations from Speaker of the Senate of parliament and Speaker of the House of Commons, parliament of Canada sent to Speaker of the Pyithu Hluttaw and Speaker of the Amyotha Hluttaw, on the occasion of the 69th Anniversary Independence Day of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on 4 January.

From H.E.Mr. George J. Furey Speaker of the Senate of Parliament, Canada

On the occasion of your Independence Day, it is our distinct pleasure to extend to you and the people of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar our warmest congratulations and best wishes on behalf of the Parliament of Canada. National days offer an opportunity to reflect with pride on past accomplishments and to look with confidence to the future.

As presiding officers, we attach great significance to the value of parliamentary diplomacy. Co-operation between our two parliaments stands to make an important contribution to the strengthening of our bilateral relations. We look forward to future opportunities to further solidify the ties between our institutions.

Please accept the assurances of our highest consideration, as well as our continued good wishes for peace and prosperity for the people of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

From H.E.Mr. Geoff Regan, Speaker of the House of Commons, Parliament of Canada

On the occasion of your Independence Day, it is our distinct pleasure to extend to you and the people of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar our warmest congratulations and best wishes on behalf of the Parliament of Canada. National days offer an opportunity to reflect with pride on past accomplishments and to look with confidence to the future.

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Children, pregnant women in Maungtaw, Buthidaung receive vaccinations

A VACCINATION program is being carried out in Maungtaw and Buthidaung townships, giving inoculations to children and pregnant women in the two villages in Rakhine State to prevent 10 debilitating, and sometimes fatal diseases.

The vaccines given in the two villages prevent tuberculosis, polio, hepatitis, whooping cough, lockjaw, German measles, measles and pneumonia.

Rakhine State Social Affairs Minister Dr Chan Thar and officials visited the vaccination activities at Zeditaung and Nyaungchaung villages in Buthidaung Township yesterday.

“We are giving the vaccination to children and pregnant women from both communities in the villages and explained to locals about the importance of the vaccinations,” said Dr Than Tun Kyaw, Buthidaung Township Medical Officer.

The vaccination programme is being conducted in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Sports, local religious leaders and town elders.

Illegal migrant deported to Bangladesh

A MIGRANT from Bangladesh handed over to Bangladeshi authorities yesterday.

After serving jail term at Buthidaung Prison under the Immigration Law, Mamudur Tarak was handed over to A bul Russel Siddique, Addilir, the officer of Bangladeshi border force No.12 in Teknival, Bangladesh by Myan-
mar immigration team led by U Aung Kyaw Sein, Staff Officer of the Maungtaw Township Imm-
igration and Population Department.

Officers of Bangladesh and Myanmar sign agreement on deporting Bangladeshi nationals. (Photo: MNA)

Illegally manufacturing factories temporarily shut down in Dawei

SOME manufacturing plants yielding unpleasant odors in Dawei were temporarily sus-
pended from production as departmental officials investigated in Dawei in Taninthayi Region, according to the officials from Dawei Township Development Department in Taninthayi Region.

Acting on complaints made by locals, officials investigated the malodorous manufacturing centers during the second week of January. Some plants were temporarily suspended as the stench had spread out to Welkyun Heinhib and Nyaung Yan Wards in Dawei.

“We investigated the plants and gave (factory supervisors) necessary directions. If they don’t follow these directions, we will take action by closing the plants permanently,” said an official from Dawei Township Development Department.

Two rubber plants and one cool storage plant were directed to build storage buildings and filtering ponds within one month. If construction is not completed during the prescribed period, the plants will be shut down, according to the department.

“We will be satisfied if the plants are deodorised. We are worried about our health in the long run. We do not intend to hurt the entrepreneurs,” said a local residing at Welkyun Heinhibward.

Development Department officials will investigate other plants, officials said.

“Villager wounded in mine explosion

A VILLAGER was wounded by shrapnel when a land mine exploded on Monday morning in Mong Ngak Township in northern Shan State. Sai Ngwe Lin, from Pan Ha village, Mong Ngak Township, hit a mine planted by an unidentified armed group near Lwal Pyet village when he was returning from Kunkha village by motorcycle at 11:30 am on Monday.

The victim is undergoing medical treatment at Kyaukme Township People’s Hospital.

Improvised Explosive Devices of TNLA seized

A TATMADAW column seized a hand-made land mine and related equipment on Tuesday morning near Namtu in northeastern Shan State.

The Tatmadaw column found six remote-controlled Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) commonly used by TNLA armed groups, six detonators, a 12-volt battery and related equipment six miles northwest of Namtu at about 10 am on Tuesday.

Members of the Tatmadaw deactivated the IEDs and the Tatmadaw column continues to conduct area clearance operations.

Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker receives Vice Chairman of General Electric

AMYOTHA Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than received a delegation led by Mr. John G. Rice, Vice Chairman of General Electric (GE) Company. The meeting was attended by Amyotha Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U Aye Tha Aung and officials of Amyotha Hluttaw.

—Myanmar News Agency

Myanmar students can apply for ASEAN Tourism Scholarships

MYANMAR university students specialising in tourism can apply for scholarships granted by the ASEAN Tourism Scholarships Programme, according to a meeting between Myanmar Tourism entrepreneurs and the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism held at the Myanmar Tourism Federation’s office in Yangon on Monday and a press briefing on ASEAN Tourism Forum to be held in Singapore.

“We will invite the university students specialising in the tourism discipline in Myanmar. Applications for ASEAN tourism scholarships can now be submitted to the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism and relevant departments not later than 31st March 2017,” said Director Daw Khine Mi Mi Tun from the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism.

In addition, preliminary selections for the scholarships will be held in April with the results announced in August.

The students who are awarded scholarships will be selected by the relevant universities, the board of ASEAN Tourism Research Association, ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN Tourism board.
MOGADISHU — Islamist militants rammed a car bomb into the gate of a hotel in Somalia’s capital Mogadishu on Wednesday and stormed inside, killing at least 15 people, government officials said.

Guerrilla rang out as fighters entered the Dayah Hotel, which is popular with politicians. A second blast shook the area shortly afterwards, injuring several journalists and others nearby.

Colonel Abdiraham Hussein, a police officer, told Reuters that security forces eventually managed to secure the building.

“We have rescued the people and concluded the operation at Dayah hotel. The security forces are now inside the hotel and we shall give further details of casualties later,” he said.

Dumie Mohamed, a doctor at Madina hospital, said some of the people taken there were very seriously wounded.

“The preliminary casualty figure is 15 people dead including four security forces and 11 civilians; 51 others were wounded in the two blasts at the hotel,” Security Minister Abdirizak Umar told reporters at the scene.

Reuters pictures showed a huge flame immediately after the blast. Several cars and buildings were destroyed by the explosion. Islamist group al Shabaab, which until 2011 controlled much of Somalia including Mogadishu, claimed responsibility for the attack.

“Well-armed mujahideen (fighters) attacked the hotel, and now they are fighting inside the hotel,” said an announcer on Andalus radio, which is linked to al Shabaab.

The insurgents often launch bomb and gun attacks in the capital in their quest to topple the Western-backed government and impose their strict interpretation of Islamic law on the nation.

In the past two years, African Union and Somali forces have driven the group out of key urban strongholds but it remains active from bases in rural areas.

Somalia swore in nearly 300 members of parliament last month.

The lawmakers are due to pick the president but that vote has repeatedly been postponed.

—Reuters

Kuwait executes prince convicted of murder and six others

KUWAIT — Kuwait hanged seven people at its central prison on Wednesday, including a prince in the ruling Al-Sabah family, according to a statement carried by state news agency KUNA.

It appeared to be the first time a member of the royal family has been put to death in Kuwait, where the emir has ultimate say over affairs of state.

Sheikh Faisal Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah was sentenced to death in 2010 for killing his nephew, another prince, accused of murder was also executed.

The other four men and one woman also hanged hailed from Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia and the Philippines and were convicted of offences ranging from murder, attempted murder, kidnapping and rape.

—Reuters

Jihadists crush Syrian FSA rebel faction in attack — FSA officials

BEIRUT — The jihadist group Fateh al-Sham has taken over areas held by a Free Syrian Army rebel faction in northwestern Syria, effectively crushing it, two FSA officials said on Wednesday.

Fateh al-Sham, formally known as the Nusra Front, launched a major attack on FSA groups in northwestern Syria on Tuesday, including the Jaish al-Mujahideen group which the FSA officials said had been wiped out.

Fateh al-Sham was al Qaeda’s official affiliate in the Syrian war until it officially broke the ties with it last year. The factions it attacked on Tuesday had representatives at a Russian-backed peace conference in Kazakhstan.

—Reuters

Belgium holds seven in hunt for returning Syria militants

BRUSSELS — Security officers detained seven people in Brussels on Wednesday as part of an investigation into whether militants were returning from Syria, prosecutors said.

The people were held for questioning after police searched houses in about eight locations around the Belgian capital, authorities said.

No explosives or weapons were found, they added.

“The investigation relates to the issue of possible returning Syria fighters,” federal prosecutors said in a statement.

A judge would decide whether to keep them detained over the course of the day, prosecutors added, without giving further details.

Europeans fighting alongside jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq have become a major source of concern for European authorities.

Studies have said about 350 Belgians have travelled to join Islamist groups in Syria, making the country one of the largest per capita contributors of jihadist fighters in the conflict.

Prosecutors said the raids and detentions were not linked to ongoing investigations into the November 2015 attacks in Paris and March 2016 bombings in Brussels, when suicide bombers killed 32 people at Brussels Airport and the city’s metro system.

—Reuters

German police search homes in crackdown on far-right extremists

BERLIN — About 200 German police searched a dozen homes in six states on Wednesday as part of an investigation into a far-right extremist group suspected of planning armed attacks against police, Jews and asylum seekers, the chief prosecutor’s office said.

The prosecutor’s office said the early morning raids included searches of the homes of six people believed to have founded the new group, and that of a seventh person who is suspected of helping the group obtain supplies.

“The goal of today’s search measures was to obtain further evidence of the actual creation of a formal group, as well as the alleged planned criminal acts and any potential tools,” the office said in a statement.

There were no details of any arrests. The prosecutor’s office was not immediately available to comment.

It said the suspects were largely connected via social media and were believed to have begun planning armed attacks in the spring of 2016.

The prosecutor’s office did not name the group but German media reported the raids were directed against members of a group calling itself “Reichsbuerger”, or Citizens of the Reich.

The group does not recognise modern Germany as a legitimate state and maintains that the former, far larger “Deutsche Reich” is still alive despite Nazi Germany’s defeat in World War Two.

Germany’s BfV domestic intelligence agency warned last year about a rise in far-right violence after the influx of more than a million migrants and called for concrete steps to avert the emergence of what it called “right-wing terrorist structures”.

The number of far-right extremists jumped to 12,100 in 2016 from around 11,800 in 2015, according to a report in the Tagesspiegel German newspaper which cited security sources.

Officials at the BfV intelligence agency had no immediate comment on the reported numbers.

German authorities broke up a suspected ultra-right militant group known as “Oldschool Society” last year but have warned about the emergence of similar groups elsewhere.

Wednesday’s raids occurred in Berlin and the states of Baden-Wuerttemberg, Brandenburg, Lower Saxony, Rhine land-Palatinate and Sachsen-Anhalt.

—Reuters
Russian Defence Ministry to build over 100 facilities in Arctic region

MOGSCOW — Russia’s Defence Ministry plans to build over 100 infrastructure facilities in the Arctic region by the end of 2017, the ministry’s press service said in a statement on Wednesday.

“Over 100 facilities in the Russian part of the Arctic will be put into operation by the end of 2017. The facilities are located on the territory of the Russian Defence Ministry’s Arctic military bases on the Franz Josef Land Archipelago, the Novaya Zemlya Archipelago, Sredny Island, Cape Schmidt, Wrangel Island and Kotely Island,” the statement reads.

Over 30 facilities are planned to be built on the Alexandra Land Island (the Franz Josef Land Archipelago), including the Nagursky airfield.

“Besides, The Arkhangelsky Tristlinik (or Arctic Trefoil) administrative and residential compound, a unique facility built at a latitude of 80 degrees, is currently under construction in this area,” the statement adds.

In the Rogachevo settlement (on the Novaya Zemlya Archipelago), several technical and social facilities are under construction as well as an airfield.

Over 30 military and social facilities are expected to be put into operation on Cape Schmidt (Chukotka Autonomous Area). Nearly 30 facilities will be delivered on Wrangel Island before the end of the year.

A number of facilities, due to come on stream in 2017, are located on Sredny Island (the Severnaya Zemlya Archipelago).

The Defence Ministry also said that during an ecological clean-up carried out in 2016, Russian troops had collected a total of 6,054 tonnes of scrap metal, 4,778 tonnes of which was moved to the mainland.

On the whole, an area of 161 hectares was cleaned up.—ITAR TASS

Ahead of China’s New Year, Xi pushes for clean, reformed military

BEIJING — Chinese President Xi Jinping has used a traditional visit to outfitting regions before the Lunar New Year to urge the military to ensure they are free from corruption and following party orders on reform and training.

Chinese leaders generally use the time around the festival to make inspection trips around the country where they flag important policy initiatives or areas of concern for the year ahead.

The week-long holiday, starting on the eve of the new year, on Friday, is the most important in the Chinese calendar, when millions of people travel home, many for the only time in the year.

Visiting troops based in Zhangjiakou, a city in Beijing’s neighbouring Hebei province, Xi pressed home his message about the importance of fighting corruption, especially in the armed forces.

“Fully and thoroughly purge the pernicious influence of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou,” state television paraphrased Xi as saying, referring to two senior former officers felled in the government’s fight on graft.

Guo and Xu were both vice chairmen of the powerful Central Military Commission, which Xi heads.

Guo was jailed for life last year. Xu died of cancer in 2015 before he could face trial.—Reuters
US adds extra aircraft to Marine force in Australia

SYDNEY—The United States will send extra military aircraft to Australia’s tropical north this year, a US Marine Corps spokesman said on Wednesday, bolstering its military presence close to the disputed South China Sea.

The Marines’ deployment in the strategic city of Darwin, agreed in 2011, was a critical part of former US President Barack Obama’s “pivot” to Asia amid China’s increased assertiveness in the region. Obama had cemented close ties with staunch ally Australia and gave the US a foothold in the area. President Donald Trump’s new administration has struck a hawkish tone over Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, but it has abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact negotiated by Obama.

Marine Corps spokesman Major Chris Logan said there would be an increase in aircraft this year, including sending four MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor planes, which boost the range of the marine force and five AH-1W Super Cobra helicopters.

Logan added that Marine numbers would remain at 2,250. “The size and composition of each Marine rotation to Australia is mutually determined ... and is balanced against other resource commitments and respective national priorities,” Logan said. The number of soldiers sent to Australia’s north has stalled well behind plans for a force of 2,500 by 2020, a goal that was delayed last year from 2017 as originally intended. Australia and the US agreed last October to share more than $2 billion (1.2 billion pounds) in infrastructure investment and other costs linked to the 25-year deployment. They have also discussed basing US long-range B-1 bombers in Darwin, a move which drew concern from China’s foreign ministry. Australia’s defence department did not respond to a request for comment, but said in October that both nations intend to reach the 2,500-marine target “over the coming years”. Evan Graham, director of the International Security Program at Sydney-based think tank the Lowy Institute said the delay in ramping up troop numbers was unsurprising, given slow progress in negotiations on costs. “The infrastructure that will accommodate the enhanced marine presence couldn’t be done before the cost sharing was agreed, and that’s not going to ramp up overnight, that will have to be a steady progression,” he said. Training exercises in 2016 included joint manoeuvres with soldiers from Japan and China and a programme involving officers from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines, the department said then. —Reuters

British police arrest man over abuse directed at Brexit court challenger

LONDON—British police said on Wednesday they had arrested a man on suspicion of sending racial abuse to the woman who won the court battle that means Prime Minister Theresa May must get parliament’s approval before starting the Brexit process.

The Supreme Court ruled on Tuesday that lawmakers must pass an act giving May the authority to invoke Article 50 of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty and begin two years of divorce talks, backing the case led by investment manager Gina Miller.

Miller, 51, who was born in Guyana, received a catalogue of death threats, racist and sexist abuse on social media since her legal challenge became increasingly high-profile last year and it received negative coverage from pro-Brexit supporting newspapers. Miller said last November she had spent 60,000 pounds ($75,500) on her own protection including dealing with attacks on the website of her business.

Britons backed leaving the European Union in a referendum last June after a bitter and divisive campaign, with personal attacks from both camps continuing long after the vote.

On Wednesday, police said they had arrested a 50-year-old man in Knightsbridge, an upmarket area of London, on suspicion of racially aggravated malicious communications.

“The arrest is in connection with a complaint made to police on 6 November by a 51-year-old woman relating to threats made online and a second unrelated complaint believed to have been made by the same suspect in August,” police said in a statement.

Miller confirmed to Reuters the arrest related to the abuse she had suffered.—Reuters

Russian parliament backs draft law easing penalty for domestic violence

MOSCOW—The Russian parliament on Wednesday gave its overwhelming backing to a draft law that would ease some penalties for domestic violence, alarming women’s rights campaigners who fear it will encourage abuse.

A law, which the State Duma or lower house of parliament, passed in its second of three readings by 385 votes to two, would reduce battery of a relative to a civil offence instead of a criminal offence in first instances, when the victim suffered no serious harm.

Those who support the proposed change, including members of President Vladimir Putin’s United Russia party, say they want to protect parents’ right to discipline their children and to reduce the state’s ability to meddle in family life.

“This is a historic vote because in certain countries the state’s role in family life is way too much,” said Andrei Isayev, a deputy representing United Russia. “Today’s vote will end such practices in the Russian Federation.”

Supporters of the amendment say anyone who inflicts serious physical harm will still be criminally liable.

But women’s rights campaigners say it is a retrograde step. —Reuters

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

MV AAL FREMANTLE VOY. NO (16008)

Consignees of cargo carried on MV AAL FREMANTLE VOY. NO (16008) are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on 26.1.2017 and cargo will be discharged into the premises of A.P.T.3 where it will lie at the consignee’s risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

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

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

SHIPPING AGENCY DEPARTMENT MYANMA PORT AUTHORITY AGENT FOR: M/S BEN LINE AGENCIES (S’PORE) PTE LTD.

Phone: 2301185

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

MV WEST SCENT VOY. NO (138N)

Consignees of cargo carried on MV WEST SCENT VOY. NO (138N) are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on 26.1.2017 and cargo will be discharged into the premises of A.W.P.T. where it will lie at the consignee’s risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

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

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

SHIPPING AGENCY DEPARTMENT MYANMA PORT AUTHORITY AGENT FOR: M/S INTERASIA LINES PTE LTD.

Phone: 2301185

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

MV MCC HALONG VOY. NO ()

Consignees of cargo carried on MV MCC HALONG VOY. NO () are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on 26.1.2017 and cargo will be discharged into the premises of M.I.P where it will lie at the consignee’s risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

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

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

SHIPPING AGENCY DEPARTMENT MYANMA PORT AUTHORITY AGENT FOR: M/S MCC TRANSPORT (S’PORE) PTE LTD.

Phone: 2301185

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

MV MCC JAVA VOY. NO ()

Consignees of cargo carried on MV MCC JAVA VOY. NO () are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on 26.1.2017 and cargo will be discharged into the premises of M.I.T.T where it will lie at the consignee’s risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

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

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

SHIPPING AGENCY DEPARTMENT MYANMA PORT AUTHORITY AGENT FOR: M/S MCC TRANSPORT (S’PORE) PTE LTD.

Phone: 2301185
Trainspotting author sees ‘bleak dystopia’ in real life too

EDINBURGH — The author of “Trainspotting”, a grim comedy about young Scottish drug addicts that proved a huge hit in the 1990s and still enjoys cult status, sees “bleak dystopia” in the age of Donald Trump and Britain’s Brexit vote.

The novel by Scottish writer Irvine Welsh, depicting an under-class hit by industrial decline and scornful of conventional values, looks as relevant as ever in an era marked by popular rejection of establishment politics.

“We seem to be in a very bleak dystopian era of ultra-nationalism, and the world has become smaller and suspicious of strangers,” said Welsh, who has published another 10 books since “Trainspotting”, his first novel.

Britain voted to end its 40-year membership of the European Union last June in a shock referendum result many saw as a protest against the established order. Trump’s victory in the US presidential election has been viewed in the same way.

Welsh told Reuters in an interview that such outcomes provided rich material for a writer but said it was “terrible” for ordinary citizens.

Commenting on Trump’s combative inauguration speech, in which he pledged to “put America first”, Welsh compared the president to a “drunken uncle” who gate-crashes a wedding party and makes the groom’s speech for him.

Welsh is back in the headlines this week with the release of “T2 Trainspotting”, a film by director Danny Boyle that picks up the story 20 years later.

It is loosely based on Welsh’s novel “Porno” and is a sequel to “Trainspotting” in which the four anti-heroes — Renton, Sick Boy, Spud and Begbie — question their loyalties and grapple with the consequences of their misspent youth.

The first “Trainspotting” movie, also directed by Boyle, became an era-defining hit after its 1996 release.

With its hallucinatory visuals and pulsating soundtrack, the movie shocked many with its scenes of casual and desperate drug taking, brutally exposing a segment of society that had been left behind by the mainstream.

Welsh, 59, said that since he wrote the book, the impact of automation on jobs had further widened the impact of industrial decline so that it had now spread beyond traditional blue collar communities.

He is from the run-down part of Edinburgh where “Trainspotting” is set, though he now lives in Chicago, returning to Scotland for around three months a year. He said he was not part of the literary scene, preferring to spend time with people from other walks of life.

Welsh said he hoped the current political mood would pass. Though no fan of Brexit, he said the upheaval it had brought provided an opportunity for a deeper and potentially beneficial public debate.

“In the long run it’s going to be ... is there room for everyone, or just the elites? Those are the big questions we are going to have to ask ourselves.”

—Reuters

Key nominations for the 2017 Oscars

LOS ANGELES — Nominations were announced on Tuesday for the 2017 Academy Awards, the highest honors in the movie industry.

The Oscars will be handed out at a 26 February ceremony in Hollywood hosted by Jimmy Kimmel.

Following is a list of nominations in key categories:

**Best Picture**
- “Arrival”
- “Fences”
- “Hacksaw Ridge”
- “Hell or High Water”
- “Hidden Figures”
- “La La Land”
- “Lion”
- “Manchester by the Sea”
- “Moonlight”

**Best Actor**
- Casey Affleck, “Manchester by the Sea”
- Denzel Washington, “Fences”
- Ryan Gosling, “La La Land”
- Viggo Mortensen, “Captain Fantastic”
- Andrew Garfield, “Hacksaw Ridge”

**Best Actress**
- Isabelle Huppert, “Elle”
- Ruth Negga, “Loving”
- Natalie Portman, “Jackie”

**Best Supporting Actor**
- Lucas Hedges, “Manchester by the Sea”
- Kenneth Lonergan, “Manchester by the Sea”
- Barry Jenkins, “Moonlight”
- Mahershala Ali, “Moonlight”
- Jeff Bridges, “Hell or High Water”

**Best Supporting Actress**
- Viola Davis, “Fences”
- Naomie Harris, “Moonlight”
- Nicole Kidman, “Lion”
- Octavia Spencer, “Hidden Figures”
- Michelle Williams, “Manchester by the Sea”

**Best Original Screenplay**
- Taylor Sheridan, “Hell or High Water”
- Damien Chazelle, “La La Land”
- Yorgos Lanthimos and Efthimis Filippou, “The Lobster”
- Kenneth Lonergan, “Manchester by the Sea”
- Mike Mills, “20th Century Women”

**Best Animated Film**
- “Zootopia”
- “The Red Turtle”
- “My Life as a Zucchini”
- “The Red Turtle”
- “Kubo and the Two Strings”

**Best Documentary Film**
- “13th”
- “Life, Animated”
- “O.J.: Made in America”
- “Fire at Sea”
- “I Am Not Your Negro”

**Best Foreign Language Film**
- “A Man Called Ove,” Sweden
- “Land of Mine,” Denmark
- “A Man Called Ove,” Sweden
- “The Salesman,” Iran
- “Toni Erdmann,” Germany

**Best Original Song**
- “City of Stars,” “La La Land”
- “Hello,” Adele, “Moonlight”
- “Beyond the Horizon,” Roger Craig Smith, “Zootopia”
- “I’m Not the Only One,” Sam Smith, “ución”
AKB48 to have sea-based sister group

HIROSHIMA — The Japanese all-girl idol group AKB48 is launching yet another sister group, this time to be based in the Seto Inland Sea area.

STU48 stands for Setouchi the Japanese name of the coastal areas surrounding the sea in western Japan. It will have its theater on a boat that will tour around the body of water, according to the official website of the planned group.

Applications to become members of the new idol group are being accepted until 5 February. Females aged 12 to 22 are eligible.

To drum up applicants, AKB48 members Yuki Kashiwagi and Mayu Watanabe shared the job of visiting the governments of seven prefectures in the area — Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, Ehime, Hyogo, Okayama, Tokushima and Kagawa — on Monday.

"AKB is an idol group comparable to something indispensable to the lives of the Japanese people. I hope the new group will tour the region and add excitement," said Hiroshima Gov. Hidehiko Yuzaki after meeting with Kashiwagi.

The AKB48 family of all-girl pop groups includes SKE48 in Nagoya, NMB48 in Osaka, HKT48 in Fukuioka, NGT48 in Niigata and JKT48 in Jakarta.

— Kyodo News

Sumo: Kisenosato formally promoted as sumo’s 72nd yokozuna

TOKYO — Kisenosato officially became the 72nd grand champion in sumo history on Wednesday after the Japan Sumo Association finalized Kisenosato’s promotion to sumo’s top rank of grand champion in sumo history on Sunday with a 14-1 mark.

"I want to be even more focused," he said after the ceremony. "I have grown as a person and I want to become a yokozuna that is respectable."

"I have to be conscious (of my position) and winning the championship title at the next tournament (is my next goal)," he said. Kisenosato becomes the first Japanese wrestler to be promoted to sumo’s top rank of grand champion since Wakanohana in 1998. Kisenosato won his first championship title on Sunday with a 14-1 mark.

Eight of the last nine yokozuna secured promotion by winning their preceding two tournaments. Mongolian Kakuryu, the last to be promoted to yokozuna ahead of the May 2014 meet, lost in a playoff that January despite finishing 14-1, but won the title in March.

Kisenosato (C front), flanked by his stablemaster Tagonoura (R front) and the stablemaster’s wife, lifts a sea bream, a fish eaten during celebrations in Japan, after meeting with messengers from the Japan Sumo Association who informed him of his promotion to sumo’s 72nd yokozuna in a ceremony at a Tokyo hotel on 23 January, 2017. PHOTO: Kyodo News

Paris Fashion sparkles in Chanel’s hall of mirrors

PARIS — Paris sparkled under Chanel’s stage lights on Tuesday as the French house created a hall of mirrors to showcase its latest couture collection at Paris Fashion Week.

With a reflective runway and mirrored pillars topped with white lilies, Paris’s fashion pack could see themselves and enjoy designer Karl Lagerfeld’s creations from all angles.

They included suits in pastel shades that were given a twist with a tulip silhouette and concealed pockets, complete with brimmed hats worn off the back of the head.

Elsewhere, a sequence silver cocktail dress with touches of purple and pink, belted below the bust, melted into a pink feather skirt dusted with metallic leaves.

Model and Chanel muse Lily-Rose Depp, daughter of actor Johnny Depp and French singer Vanessa Paradis, closed the show in a dusky pink gown, its bouncing ruffles tumbling to the floor.

Depp did a lap of honor with Lagerfeld at the end of the show but the designer, who has headlined the house for over three decades, declined to give any post-show interviews for the first time in many years.

— Reuters
Serena leads semi-final charge of thirtysomethings

MELBOURNE — Only three women can now prevent Serena Williams from clinching a 23rd grand slam title on Saturday, her sister Venus, a younger compatriot and a 34-year-old Croatian she last played nearly two decades ago.

The quartet take to Rod Laver Arena on Thursday with Serena playing Mirjana Lucic-Baroni and Venus facing Coco Vandeweghe at the business end of an Australian Open where upsets have been a daily occurrence.

The seedings have not proved much of a guide in the women’s draw this year, with world number two Serena the sole survivor of the top 12 at the start the tournament.

The head-to-head will not provide much help either when assessing Serena’s match-up against Lucic-Baroni, given their last meeting came in 1998 at Wimbledon when they were both 16.

“It was on Centre Court. That’s all I remember. I remember winning. I was so excited because I was so young. She obviously was super young, too. That’s all,” Serena said on Wednesday after beating Johanna Konta in the quarter-finals.

“We have totally different games now, the both of us. We both have gone through a lot. We both have survived, and here we are, which I think is a really remarkable story.”

As six-times Melbourne Park champion, Serena will be clear favourite, of course, more so because she has reached her 34th grand slam semi-final without losing a set.

Lucic-Baroni’s path to the last four has been more of a battle, as befits a woman who has overcome huge adversity to get back to the top of the game after years in the wilderness.

While Serena missed the back end last season with a shoulder problem, Lucic-Baroni has more immediate concerns about an injury to her left leg.

“I’m going to be just fine,” said the world number 79. “I’m going to recover, do some therapy, and I’ll be fine. I’ll just put some extra taping on and hopefully it will hold me together. I’ll fight hard. I’ll be okay.”

The first semi-final is an all-American affair pitching Venus, the oldest woman in the draw, against 25-year-old surprise package Vandeweghe.

Venus does not have an Australian Open crown in her collection of seven grand slam titles and has reached the final just once, losing to Serena in 2003.

Midfielder Romeu signs new contract with Southampton

LONDON — Southampton midfielder Oriol Romeu has signed a new four-and-a-half-year contract that will keep him at the club until 2021, the Premier League team have said.

The 25-year-old joined Southampton from Chelsea in August 2015 and has made 30 appearances in all competitions under manager Claude Puel this season. He has featured in all but one of their Premier League games so far.

“I couldn’t be any happier to have this new contract with the club,” the Spaniard told Southampton’s website.

— Reuters

Midfielder Coutinho extends contract with Liverpool

LONDON — Brazil international midfielder Philippe Coutinho has extended his contract with Liverpool, the Premier League team have said on its website (www.liverpoolfc.com) on Wednesday.

Although no official details of the new contract were revealed, media reports said the 24-year-old signed a five-and-a-half year extension that will keep him at Liverpool until 2022 and make him the club’s highest-paid player.

“I will work much harder to repay the belief shown in me. I signed this new contract to stay here for a few more years because it’s a great honour for me,” Coutinho said.

“IT gives me great happiness because I was welcomed here with open arms by everyone at the club and the supporters right from my first day.”

Coutinho has scored 34 goals in 163 appearances since he joined the Merseyside club from Inter Milan in January 2013 and has played a pivotal role in Liverpool’s solid first half of the season. Liverpool are fourth in the Premier League standings after 21 games, 10 points behind leaders Chelsea, who they face at Anfield next Tuesday.

— Reuters

Toronto FC star Giovinco gets China offer, says agent

ROME — Italy international Sebastian Giovinco has received “concrete proposals” from two clubs to play in China, Italian media reported on Tuesday.

Giovinco, who will be 30 on Thursday, was the second highest earner in North American Major League Soccer (MLS) last year, receiving more than $7 million from Toronto FC.

“The figures mentioned are far beyond Sebastian’s current wages and that’s an issue because the career of a professional football player is not that long,” agent Andrea D’Amico told Mediaset Premium television, according to the Football Italia website. However, a spokesman for Toronto FC told Reuters that the club had not been contacted by any Chinese Super League teams. Former Chelsea and Scotland defender Craig Burley has advised Giovinco and his agent to drop the China talk.

“If you’re that good, go and play somewhere proper,” Burley said on ESPN. “Go and see if you can get a game in Italy again where you couldn’t get a game before coming to Major League Soccer. “Never mind all this China nonsense. He’s getting paid well enough at Toronto to do what, play against players who are nowhere in the same league.”

The cash-rich Chinese Super League has lured several big name players recently, most recently Argentine Carlos Tevez, who joined Shanghai Shenhua for a two-year deal reportedly worth over $80 million, though the club has not confirmed the figure.

Giovinco was voted the MLS most valuable player in his first season with Toronto in 2015. He moved to North America two years ago from Serie A team Juventus. He has made 21 appearances for the Italy national team.

— Reuters

Photo: Reuters