President U Htin Kyaw, Cambodian PM hold talks in Phnom Penh

The most important thing for the peace process is for all national ethnic armed groups to sign the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement: H.E. Mr. Hong Liang

Following is the interview with Ambassador of China to Myanmar Mr Hong Liang.

Khin Maung Htwe, Win Win Maw, Myat Sandi

As the saying goes, “Friends are chosen, but neighbours come with the house.” According to the historical record saying that during the reign of King Liu Qi of Han Dynasty, a Chinese delegation went to Afghanistan via Myanmar and another record stating that an ancient Myanmar musical troupe visited Changan (now, Xi'an) in 801 during the Han dynasty, is proof that China-Myanmar relations had lasted for nearly 2000 years.

Yangtze and Ayeyawady Rivers can prove bilateral co-operations in various sectors. Myanmar was among the first countries to recognize establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and Myanmar supported the PRC’s efforts to join the United Nations as a member country, from the very beginning.

Following the friendly state visit of Chou En Lai, Premier of PRC to Myanmar in June, 1954, China-Myanmar relations improved to such a high level and the two countries were able to issue bilateral communiqué on the “5 Principles of Peaceful Co-existence.”

Successive leaders from both sides have been fostering the relations of brotherhood. At such a time, the Myanmar News Agency has conducted an exclusive interview with H.E. Mr Hong Liang, the Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China to Myanmar.

Interviewer: Please let me know your attitudes towards the current China-Myanmar relations.

Ambassador: After forming the new Myanmar Government, Mr Wang Yi, the incumbent Minister of Foreign Affairs of PRC visited Myanmar as the first-ever Foreign Minister. That trip was made to stress the important role of China-Myanmar bilateral co-operation. And it showed that the Government of the People’s Republic of China supported the new Myanmar Government.

At the invitation of Li Keqiang, the current Premier of the State Council of the PRC, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the State Counsellor, paid a State Visit last August. The trip was of great success. During the visit, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi friendly discussions with Mr Xi Jinping, President of PRC, Mr Li Keqiang and Mr Zhang Dejiang, Speaker of Chinese Parliament.

Leaders from both countries agreed to implement the project, “One Belt One Policy,” together. That is, with the rapid development of China, it can help and create Myanmar People develop more than ever, and leaders from both sides agreed to implement bilateral co-operation in sectors such as the economy, agriculture, health and so on.

Besides, leaders of both to Cambodia for promotion of Buddhism and holding meetings of the joint-commission of the two countries.

Following the meeting, President U Htin Kyaw met with Myanmar diplomats, MPs, scholars and members of the Cambodia-Myanmar Friendship Association, businessmen and Myanmar nationals in Cambodia.

At the meeting, he called on them to obey the laws in Cambodia as they are living in the country.

He has also urged Myanmar families in Cambodia to make use of their knowledge and experiences gained in Cambodia for the development of Myanmar when they return to their home country.

In the afternoon, the Myanmar delegation led by President U Htin Kyaw left for Siem Reap by special flight and visited the Angkor National Museum.—Myanmar News Agency

Mr. Hong Liang. PHOTO: WIN SANDI

countries have an important agreement. It is essential for Sino-Myanmar co-operation to help upgrade the economic and social development of the Myanmar people. Last year, the Chinese embassy in Myanmar implemented many projects to help promote the living standards of the Myanmar people.
New playgrounds to be built in Yangon in FY2017-18

THE Yangon City Development Committee plans to develop new playgrounds in the city within the next fiscal year, according to the YCDC’s Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department.

Plans are underway to establish 12 more playgrounds in the commercial hub Yangon, with the committee planning to upgrade two parks including a park in Dagon Myothit Township (South).

The department demanded to get Ks1.6 billion budgets from the region government to implement its project in 2017-2018 FY.

The YCDC spent around Ks2 billion funds on upgrading of nine football grounds plus three parks in the largest city this financial year.

The Playgrounds, Parks and Gardens Department is now repairing a space located beside the river in Kyimyindaing Township as a public relaxation area.

The current project is expected to be finalized at the end of this FY.

Since 2013-2014 FY, when the YCDC started to implement the improvement of parks for public, the committee has stopped the collection of entrance fees from people and allowed them to visit the park free of charge.

The YCDC upgraded a total of 23 parks in the city during the three fiscal years, removing some commercial structures constructed in the park.

Retired professor Killed at home

A retired Professor was murdered in his house in Dagon Township on February 4.

The body of old man who was punched with something was found in the blood on the floor of the apartment-20 located in No 292-B, Shwedagon Pa-goda road.

His wife who went out found he was dead and police investigated the site.

The victim’s name is U Tun Aung was murdered while his wife named Dr Daw Phwe Phwe was going out.

According to the investigation, he is a merchant and the two stays at the apartment as their children live in Singapore. The police filed a case under the act-302 and investigate and hunt the murder.—Myanmar News Agency

Mine deactivated on Union Highway in northern Shan State

SECURITY forces deactivated a remote controlled mine on the Lashio-Muse Road in northern Shan State yesterday.

Workers who were carrying out repairs on the road found the mine near the Mile Post 269/5 and informed the security forces. The security forces also discovered another mine with two detonators and one battery at the site where the remote controlled mine was planted.—Min Min Zaw (MNA)

Man arrested for drug trafficking in Lashio

SHAN STATE police on Wednesday arrested a young man after he was found in possession of a cache of yaba pills as well as drug-related equipment and substances to produce the drug.

Anti-drug Squad No. 24 stopped a motor vehicle suspect-ed of containing drugs driven by Kyaw Lin, also known as Yan Shin Kwin, 28, near a toll gate in Lashio, northern Shan State, Wednesday evening.

Police confiscated 60,000 yaba tablets and laboratory equipment commonly used for manufacturing the illicit drugs.

An investigation is being made by local authorities in an effort to arrest others involved in the case, a police officer said.

Investigators say that the suspect resides on Khineshwewah Street in Ward-5 in Lashio.

Action is being taken against the suspect under Section 15/19 (a)/20 (a)/21 of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Sub-stances Law.—Myitmakha News Agency

Teak logs seized in Moemauk Township

TROOPS of the Tatmadaw seized illegal teak woods weighing about 2.7 tonnes in an area clearance operation in Moomauk Township, Kachin State, yesterday.

The troops intercepted and searched a Pajero car driven by Aung Tun Aye near Panmu Village in Moemauk Township on 3rd February and discovered 49 teak logs.

The drivers Sai Kyaw, Soe Min Htun, Ar Tea and Aik Sai and the other four are Naung Kham, Kyaw Min Tun, Shan Lay and Aik Lay.

The eight men and, four vehicles and illegal timber will be transferred systematically to Kengtung Police Station and the Forest Department.—Myanmar News Agency

Four trucks carrying illegal timber seized

FOUR trucks carrying illegal teak weighing about ten tonnes were seized near Kengtung Township in Northern Shan State yesterday.

While conducting an area clearance operation in the township, the troops of the Tatmadaw stopped and searched the four vehicles about six miles east of Kengtun and discovered the illegal 33 logs of timber. The troops arrested eight men including three drivers who were on board.

The drivers Sai Kyaw, Soe Min Htun, Ar Tea and Aik Sai and the other four are Naung Kham, Kyaw Min Tun, Shan Lay and Aik Lay.

The eight men and, four vehicles and illegal timber will be transferred systematically to Kengtung Police Station and the Forest Department.—Myanmar News Agency

Crime NEWS

189,000 amphetamine tablets seized in Maungtaw

A local anti-drug squad seized 189,000 pills of amphetamine from two motorcycles at the Six-mile checkpoint in Maungtaw, Rakhine State, yesterday.

The members of the squad searched a motorcycle driven Maung Than Win and another one driven by Zaw Min Tun and discovered 97,500 tablets from each vehicle.

In an interrogation, the drug traffickers said that they were hired by Soe Win, brother of Ma Than Ye, who was on board of the motorcycle driven by Zaw Min Tun when the police stopped it, to transport the stimulant tab-lets to his home in Mawwayawdy Village in Maungtaw Township.

But, Soe Win managed to escape when the members of the anti-drug squad searched his house.

The squad has opened a file against the four suspects under the anti-narcotic law at the Py-innya Police Station in Maung-taw Township.—Min Min Zaw (MNA)

Photo MNA (News on Page-1)
Discuss on Direct Flight from Bagan to Thailand

MANDALAY Region Chief Minister discussed with H.E. Dr. Somkid Jatusripitak, Deputy Prime Minister of Thailand for the plan of direct flight from Thailand to Bagan, known as the tourist destination. The two-country ministers met at the Amazin Bagan Resort in NyaungU township to promote the two country tourism taking advantage on Bagan region.

Thai Deputy Prime Minister said Myanmar should take lesson from Thailand tourism industry for the best and the worst. Myanmar should consider not only for tourism development alone but also try to sell local product to the visitors. He added that hotel business men will be benefit if tourism alone becomes developing and local would not get any advantage from that.

After discussion, Mandalay Region Chief Minister U Zaw Myint Maung served lunch to Thailand’s Deputy Prime Minister and group at Bagan Thitipuitsaya Hotel.

Thai Deputy Prime Minister took Balloons ride on Bagan to enjoy the beautiful scenario the area in the morning and visited pagoda at the afternoon. He enjoyed the sunset from Makara Queen commuter in the Ayeyawady River at the evening.—Myanmar News Agency

Mon students sing Mon National Day welcoming songs at State Counsellor’s residence

AS a gesture to welcome the Mon National Day, students from the Literature and Cultural Association of Mawlamyine University sang traditional songs of Mon ethnic people at the residence of the State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday.

The troupe was led by Daw Kyin Than, Chairperson of the Shin Saw Pu Women Entrepreneurs’ Association and wife of Union Minister for Ethnic Affairs Naing Thet Lwin.—Myanmar News Agency

Vice President U Henry Van Thio tours Chin State to review the development activities

THE Vice President made his first stopover at the General Hospital in Tonzang Township to receive the presentation of the hospital organization structure, staff strength and treatment services and the most common diseases in the area, which were presented by the Head of the Hospital. The Vice President then gave encouragement to the patients who were receiving treatment and gave them cash assistance.

During the visit to Natzan Bridge construction site in Tonzang Township which links Tonzang and Kyikha township, he reviewed the status of implementation of the bridges projects and developments in the area presented by U Win Khaing, Union Minister of Construction.

“Transportation is the most important for local development. If transportation is getting better in the undeveloped area, it will cause rapid commodity flow and also assist in local development,” said the Vice President who told the managers that the projects need to be safe, of high quality and to be timely.

The Vice President also met with the people from Tonzang at the township stadium to listen to the feedback given by the people on education, health, electricity and transportation, and he gave his support to the use of solar plates for electricity generation in the villages.

Continuing on his tour, the Vice President visited Rhi Dil Lake in Rikhawdawar township where responsible officials presented the environmental condition of the lake, water flow situation and the activities for its sustainability. He advised that the lake needs to be checked in detail for its sustainability without affecting the environment and to develop tourism based on that lake.

He also checked the condition of the bridge that links Myanmar and India. He later inspected the theater and patient halls in the 100-bed Hospital in Tiddim Township and presented cash assistance to the patients before meeting with township people at the stadium where he handed over MMK 10 million together with stationary to be utilized for education and health.

He said that the aim of the tour was to know the situation at the ground level regarding natural disaster preparedness and to help the needs of development as much as he can. “Government is making efforts by applying various ways to develop the country which is left behind in everything,” he said.

He also warned that the shifting cultivation system can impact on the environment so that long-term growth trees should be cultivated. He advised that coffee plantation should be done by Individual or groups which had been successful in Chin State since a long time ago.

Myanmar will be the most developed country according to the World Bank and people participation is needed to reach that goal, he urged the public at the township stadium by adding that 21 century Panglong conference will be held again to achieve internal peace and national reconciliation.

During the tours, Union Minister for Border Affairs, Lt-Gen Ye Aung, Dr Aung Thu, U Win Khaing, Dr Win Myat Aye, Chin State’s Chief Minister Salai Lian Luai, Deputy Ministers, and responsible officials accompanied the Vice President.—Myanmar News Agency
Japanese manufacturer opens new facility in Myanmar

YANGON — Japan’s Kubota Corp. opened its import and sales facility in Myanmar Friday, vowing to support the Southeast Asian country’s growing farm machinery market and expand its dealer networks with access to quality products.

Located in the Japanese government-backed Thilawa Special Economic Zone on the outskirts of Yangon’s commercial capital Yangon, Kubota’s new $10 million facility that started operations on Friday will also do some assembly.

An artisan making item cast or wrought from bronze, copper, and brass is hired at Ks12,000 to 15,000 a day. Those assistants who are still learning are paid Ks8,000 a day. This job allows them to earn well, it is learnt.

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tastic development of the agricultural industry in Myanmar.

“We are sure that business activities of KMCL will support and contribute for further economic development and agriculture mechanization in Myanmar, with our accumulated knowledge and experiences as number one comprehensive agriculture product manufacturer in Japan,” he said.

Kubota Myanmar was established in 2015 with a registered capital of $23.8 million. The company offers the sales of tractors, combined harvesters, rice transplanters, power tillers, diesel engines and construction machinery, the statement said.–Kyodo News

External trade value up by over US$130m as of 27th Jan

THE external trade value as of 27th Jan fetched US$16,434,428m — whereas the border trade value was US$5,973,804m. The sea trade value this FY declined by US$21.23m compared to that in last FY, resulting from the drop in import value. However, the border trade value with the neighboring countries via 16 border trade camps increased by US$151,432m.

There is a trade deficit of US$3,741,842m as of 27th Jan in this FY since the import surpassed the export. There were trade deficits of US$91.9 million in 2012-2013, US$2,555.5 million in 2013-2014, US$4,912.559 million in 2014-2015 and US$5,407.464 million in 2015-2016 respectively, according to the statistics released by the Central Statistical Organization (CSO). The government is trying to reduce the trade deficit by lowering the imported items, except for essentials, according to the second five-year National Development Plan.

Myanmar exports agricultural products, livestock, fishery products, forest products, minerals, manufacturing and other products while capital goods, consumer goods and raw industrial products are imported into Myanmar, it is learnt.–Ko Khant

Myanmar-China border trade value down by over US$27million

THE trade value of Myanmar and China as at 27th Jan in this fiscal year 2016-2017 was down by US$27.66million when compared to that in the similar period of last FY as the trade value at Muse border trade camp which has the largest trade volume out of all 16 border camps declined by nearly US$30million, according to the statistics of the Commerce Ministry.

Myanmar-China trade value from 1st April to 27th Jan in this FY reached US$4,842.166million whereas that in the similar period of last FY hit US$4,869.831million.

Myanmar and China trade is flowing in and out of these border trade camps: Muse, Lweje, Chin Shew, Kan Pike Tee and Keng Tung.

Out of five, Muse and Keng Tung border trade camps are found to have the decrease in trade value. But, the trade values have risen in the remaining three camps.

The trade values of 27th Jan in this FY were US$ 4,133.631m in Muse, US$ 149.084m in Lweje, US$ 477.119m in Chin Shiwe Haw, US$ 78.279m in Kan Pike Tee and US$ 4,035m in Keng Tung respectively, according to the Commerce Ministry. In the same period, the trade values via 16 border camps, Muse, Lwejel, Kanpiketee, Chinshinaw, Tamu, Reed, Myawady, Tachilek, Kengtung, Kawthaung, Myeik, Heekhi, Mawtaw, Maese, Sittway and Maungtaw totalled US$ 5,973.804m, with an export value of US$ 3,720.716m and an import value of US$2,253.088m. The figure is up by US$ 151.432m than that of last FY, it is learnt.–Mon Mon

Real estate rental market within YCDC areas thriving

THE real property market for rent in the townships within the areas of the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) looks healthy with the price on the rise in spite of the low-cost housing complex being developed in suburban Yangon, said the real estate agents.

The real estate market for rent in the townships within YCDC’s areas is flourishing, which is seen better than those in the townships in downtown Yangon, said a real estate businessman.

The prices of the real property in the townships near the downtown—Bahan, Kyimyindine, Aikon, Yankin and Sanchaung are on the upward trend. The houses and apartments in those areas are highly demanded for rent. Rental market for realty is outstripping sales market in Yangon. The apartments in the satellite townships of Yangon are highly rented, according to an announcement released by house.com.mm.

Over 1,000 high-end apart-ments with the services provided were developed in Yangon, targeting the foreign businessmen staying in Myanmar. During this year, Daewoo Amara, Junction City and Kanthaya housing complexes including the cleaning and other necessary services will be totally built for rent, it is learnt.–BEO
TOKYO — The Japanese and US defense chiefs on Saturday took a united stand against security challenges in the region, agreeing to beef up their bilateral alliance and step up involvement in the situation in the South China Sea where China’s assertiveness is seen as a concern.

The meeting was the latest in a series of talks that involved US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis who was the first member of the Cabinet of US President Donald Trump to visit Japan. Mattis was seen as trying to address any possible concerns Japan may have about the Trump administration, reaffirming fully the US commitment to the defense of Japan and even hauling at a press conference Saturday that Japan’s cost-sharing burden for hosting US forces is “a model” for other nations to follow.

Whether the United States will demand an increase in financial contributions has been a concern for Japan as Trump demanded during his presidential campaign that Japan, South Korea and other US allies pay a larger proportion of the costs of US troops deployed in these countries — or else defend themselves.

Japanese Defense Minister Tomomi Inada, who attended the press conference with Mattis after their talks, said the issue was not discussed. Mattis said he thought Japan was “on the right track” as he watched the defense budget grow under Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government amid the worsening security situation.

The two agreed during their talks to beef up the deterrence power of the alliance and to closely cooperate to deal with the security challenges, which Mattis said ran from “the threat of nuclear and missile provocations by North Korea to increasingly confrontational behavior by China in the East and South China seas.”

“The US-Japan alliance is critical for ensuring that this region remains safe and secure, not just now but for years to come,” Mattis said at the press conference, while assuring that President Trump’s administration places a higher priority on this region and specifically on long-term alliances like Japan.

As he did in meetings on Friday with Abe and Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida, Mattis promised that the US defense commitment extends to the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which China claims and calls Diaoyu.

Turning to the situation in the South China Sea, where China is stirring concern through its island construction and military buildup in disputed areas, Inada offered her support for a US freedom of navigation operation in the waters and said she agreed with Mattis on the need to step up their involvement there.

The US defense secretary said that “freedom of navigation is the absolute” and indicated that the operation will continue. At the same time, he added “At this time, we do not see any need for dramatic military moves at all.”

Matsui came to Japan as part of his first overseas trip as the Pentagon chief, which also took him to South Korea, another key US ally. Mattis and Inada agreed to also lay up tri-lateral defense cooperation involving South Korea.

The trip came ahead of the 10 February summit meeting between Abe and Trump in Washington. Tokyo is apparently gauging how Trump’s “America First” agenda will affect the bilateral alliance, while it has been baffled by his position on trade and currency issues.

Under the Japan-US security treaty, around 54,000 US troops are stationed in Japan, enabling the United States to respond to contingencies in the Asia-Pacific region.

Japan’s so-called host-nation support covers costs for base workers, utilities and other items and totals nearly 200 billion yen ($1.8 billion) annually. Tokyo has maintained that the Japan-US alliance is a mechanism that provides benefits to both countries and that the costs are being “appropriately” shared. —Kyodo News
UN lifts sanctions on notorious Afghan warlord

KABUL — The United Nations Security Council has dropped sanctions against Afghan strongman Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, potentially paving the way for the notorious warlord to return openly to Afghanistan.

The Afghan government welcomed the UN’s decision made on Friday as a “major step toward peace and stability in Afghanistan,” said Mohammad Akram Khpalwak, a political advisor for President Ashraf Ghani.

“This was a demand of the people and government of Afghanistan,” he told Reuters on Saturday. “It is a major step for the peace process between Hezb-i-Islami and the government of Afghanistan.”

In removing Hekmatyar from the list of people sanctioned for their ties to al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and other militant groups, the UN unfroze his assets, and dropped a travel ban and arms embargo against him. Hekmatyar’s whereabouts have been unknown since he signed the peace deal with Ghani in September via a prerecorded video from an undisclosed location.

With the UN sanctions now removed, government officials expect Hekmatyar to eventually return to the Afghan capital, despite the continued controversy.

Many foreign governments, including the United States, praised the accord at the time as a step toward wider peace in Afghanistan.—Reuters

US-backed Syrian force in new phase of Raqqa assault

RAQA PROVINCE, Syria, — An alliance of US-backed militias said it had started a new phase of its campaign against the Islamic State-held city of Raqa on Saturday, aiming to complete its encirclement and sever the road to militant strongholds in Deir al-Zor province.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said in a statement the action was being undertaken with “increasing support from the (US-led) international coalition forces through guarding air cover for our forces’ advances, or via the special teams provided by their special teams to our forces on the battle ground”.

The SDF, which includes the powerful Kurdish People’s Protection Units, launched its multi-phased campaign aimed at encircling and ultimately capturing Raqa in the same area.

A SDF commander told Reuters the forces had so far advanced a few kilometres (miles) in the latest phase, which aims to capture areas to the east of the city, including the highway linking it to Deir al-Zor province.

Deir al-Zor, which is almost entirely in Islamic State hands, stretches all the way to the Iraqi border. A Kurdish military source told Reuters on Tuesday that the goals of this phase included capturing the main highway.

Several hundred US special forces soldiers have been supporting SDF operations against Islamic State in northern Syria. France said in June that its special forces were advising rebels in the same area.

This is the third phase of the Raqqa operation. The first phase targeted areas north of Raqqa city. The second phase, targeting areas to the west of the city, is ongoing, with SDF forces yet to capture the Islamic State-held Euphrates dam.

US support for the SDF has been a point of tension with NATO ally Turkey, which views the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group that has fought a three-decade insurgency in Turkey.

The United States says it is providing training and material support only to Arab elements of the SDF. It supplied them last month with armoured vehicles for the first time to help in the Raqqa campaign.

US President Donald Trump signed an executive order last week requesting the Pentagon, joint chiefs of staff and other agencies to submit a preliminary plan in 30 days for defeating Islamic State.

One key decision awaiting the Trump administration is whether to directly provide weapons to the YPG.—Reuters

Iran vows “roaring missiles” if threatened, defies new sanctions

DUBAI — A Revolutionary Guards commander said Iran would use its missiles if its security is under threat, as the elite force defied new US sanctions on its missile programme by holding a military exercise on Saturday.

Tensions between Tehran and Washington have risen since a recent Iranian ballistic missile test which prompted US President Donald Trump’s administration to impose sanctions on individuals and entities linked to the Revolutionary Guards.

Trump’s national security adviser Michael Flynn said the Washington was putting Iran on notice over its “destabilizing activity”, and Trump tweeted Tehran was “playing with fire”.

“We are working day and night to protect Iran’s security,” head of Revolutionary Guards’ aerospace unit, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh was quoted as saying by Tasnim news agency.

“If we see smallest massstep from the enemies, our roaring missiles will fall on their heads,” he added.

Despite the heated words, US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis said on Saturday he was not considering raising the number of US forces in the Middle East to address Iran’s “mischief”, but warned that the world would not ignore Iranian activities.

Iran’s Revolutionary Guards is holding the military exercise in Semnan province on Saturday to test missile and radar systems and to “showcase the power of Iran’s revolution and to dismiss the sanctions,” according to the force’s website.

Iranian state news agencies reported that home-made missiles, drones, radars, command and control centres, and cyber warfare systems would be tested in the drill.

Iran has one of the Middle East’s largest missile programmes and held a similar exercise in December to showcase its defence systems, including radars, anti-missile defence units, and short and medium-range missiles.

Tehran confirmed on Wednesday that it had test-fired a new ballistic missile, but said the test did not breach the Islamic Republic’s nuclear agreement with world powers or a UN Security Council resolution endorsing the pact.

Iran has test-fired several ballistic missiles since the nuclear deal in 2015, but the latest test was the first since Trump entered the White House. Trump said during his election campaign that he would stop Iran’s missile programme.—Reuters

Turkey says kills 51 Islamic State militants in northern Syria

ANKARA — Turkey hit 59 Islamic State targets and killed 51 militants in northern Syria as part of its ongoing incursion, the Turkish military said on Saturday.

Turkish forces have surrounded the Islamic State-controlled town of al- Bab for weeks as part of an operation that has been going on for more than five months.

Four of those killed were so-called emirs, or local commanders, the Turkish military said, adding that its jets destroyed 56 buildings and three command control centres in the al-Bab and Bzagah regions. Coalition forces also conducted eight airstrikes in the al-Bab region, destroying two defence positions and two armed vehicles.—Reuters
Toyota, Suzuki to form tie-up in technology development

TOKYO — Toshiba Corp is considering issuing preferred shares to raise 300 billion yen ($2.66 billion) to avoid falling into negative net worth when it books a huge write-down on its nuclear business, sources close to the matter said on Saturday.

The losses could set the massive loss on its nuclear operation. It said it planned to sell a stake of less than 20 per cent in the memory chip business.

Toshiba hopes to boost capital by linking the preferred shares to its profitable flash memory operation, as Toshiba is likely to find it difficult to sell shares in itself. Toshiba will hold an extraordinary shareholders’ meeting at the end of March to finalize the spinoff and to seek approval to issue the preferred shares.

A number of recent tie-ups are now studying joint development of electric vehicles.

Toshiba aims to raise 300 billion yen by selling preferred shares

SAN FRANCISCO Snap Inc’s initial public offering is attempting to show a company with a basic math problem: the company’s cost of revenue for 2016 — the amount it had to spend to keep the messaging service running — was $47 million higher than its $405 million in sales.

The high cost of revenue, which in Snap’s case consists mainly of payments to Alphabet Inc’s (GOOGL.O) Google for hosting services, means that, on an annual basis, Snap lost money on every one of its 158 million users in 2016, even before accounting for salaries, office rents or anything else.

Snap revealed in its IPO prospectus, filed with securities regulators on Thursday, that it will pay Google at least $2 billion over the five years. But the cost side of the problem may not be as serious as it seems. The company’s hosting costs are broadly in line with other social media companies.

The cost of revenue per active daily user was $7 cents in the last quarter of 2016, not much higher than the 85 cents that Facebook Inc (FB.O) paid for each of its 1.23 billion daily users in the final quarter of 2016.

Further, while Snap’s cost of revenue was higher than sales on a yearly basis in 2016, the company drastically tightened up hosting costs over the course of the year. While costs were nearly double revenues at the start of the year, by the fourth quarter, when Snap hit 158 million users, the company eked out a small gross margin.

Snap’s bigger math problem is how much revenue it generates per user. The $1.05 per user for the last quarter of 2016 was a massive increase from the 31 cents per user it drew in the same period in 2015. In its IPO filing, Snap said it hopes to increase its revenue per user by focusing on more lucrative advertising markets, like North America, where its revenue per user was $2.15 at the end of 2016, nearly double the global rate. But even those higher rates for Snap pale in comparison to the $7.16 in revenue per user that Facebook brought in in the fourth quarter.

“Snap’s issue is not cost, but user growth and revenue per user,” said Ethan Kurzweil, a venture investor with Bessemer Venture Partners who backed startups such as Twitch and Periscope but has not backed Snap. “If they can get revenue per user into the kind of territory they think is possible, the cost of hosting will be a hit to gross margin but it’s not going to be an issue.”

At Snap, cost of hosting sets high bar for revenue growth
Opinion

Dr. Nu Nu Win

In Myanmar, we have a saying, “know one vocation, whether it’s handicrafts or oratory, it can become your livelihood”. These days this saying has more meaning than ever.

For example, we have to pay a high price to our tailors if we want to get beautiful tailor-cut jackets and skirts. The tailor, although she does not have a University degree, she can earn her living using her skill in tailoring. In the same way a motor car mechanic can earn his living with his knowledge about repairing cars. She or he can also become rich one day, because in time these vocations can let them have a high income.

So, it is really important for a person to have training in a particular vocation or a profession.

Nowadays, poor children from poor families cannot go to school and some other children, although they can go to school, become dropouts before finishing the Basic Education. Some have to leave school because their parents cannot afford to let them stay in school due to financial difficulties. In some cases, as the children become a little older, they have to help their families earn extra income due to the financial needs of the family. So they have to leave school.

In Myanmar due to successive years of economic mismanagement under previous administrations, the cost of living became high while good jobs become scarce. Sometimes, natural disasters like the Cyclone Nargis leave many families without parents; in some case many members of the same family lost their lives. In times like these, young girls and boys leave their villages and congregate in Yangon. Some young women get jobs in garment manufacturing factories while many end up in dead end jobs where the working conditions are far from satisfactory. All these young workers work under harsh conditions and save whatever meagre cash they could save to send back to their parents who struggle each day to make ends meet. Sometimes, if one of the parents fall seriously ill or meet with a fatal accident, it could mean total disaster for that family.

Some have to depend on the Monastic Vocational Education Schools, where they can get help from the monk Abbots, who provide not only books and stationeries, but also other necessities as such as school uniforms, slippers and umbrellas. In such schools, children are given breakfast and lunch. So the poorest of all children have to go to these Monastic Education Schools. Some are not even Buddhists, but although they believe in other religions, they can join the Monastic Education Schools till they get a job. Some can become primary school teachers in their own schools after they have passed their matriculation and then continue their study by taking advantage of the Distance Education System. The monk Abbots let them go to University to get a degree. In this way, the poor little ones can become educated to get a job for their living. But, the ones who leave school early, they have to work hard to earn a living.

That is why the writer wants to introduce Vocational Training to the Monastic Education Schools first and as soon as possible. Some already have these kinds of training in their schools, while others do not. If a child can get vocational training while he is still in the primary classes, a vocation that can use local materials available in different regions, and if they could be trained by local teachers, it would truly become a win-win situation. In this way, even if a child has to leave school, he already has a good vocation o support himself. If a child has to leave school early without any vocational training, he has to earn his living in great difficulty. When he cannot face these difficulties, he will turn to dishonest ways to earn his living.

Maybe he will join those criminal vocations to get money. Consequently, if crimes in the country multiply and turn from bad to worse, it will be a great burden for the Union government to maintain law and order and keep the peace in the country. How can a country troubled with crimes and lawlessness and armed conflicts develop without any peace? So, to have some vocational training for a living is a great blessing not only for the individual, but also for the country.

Our national leader, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, realized the importance of Vocational Education well. While meeting with the students and the Principal from the SMVTI (Singapore-Myanmar Vocational Training Institute) (3 December 2016), she stated; “Our country needs vocational training. It plays an important role in the world, failing to be recognized of its importance by many. Most regard only graduates as men of wisdom and educated persons. Education means the qualification to confront the challenges of life. Only if we overcome challenges of life, can we be recognized to be men of wisdom. Failing that, it is difficult for the people who can rely on self-help are endowed with the dignity of a human-being. There is no work void of virtue. Any work for which the value is valuable.”

She not only stressed the value of vocational training, but she also extended the period of the MOU on Vocational Training between Singapore and Myanmar for three years during her visit to Singapore in December 2016.

Under the leadership of a visionary leader like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi who fully understands the value and importance of Vocational Education, the writer also wishes to support the argument that our country needs more and more vocational training schools in all regions and states.

This will go a long way in our efforts to create more jobs and manufacture more products for exports to earn foreign exchange.

Hope to have more Vocational Training schools and institutions for children and youths!

The importance of vocational education

The Budget: What Do Taxpayers Want?

May Thandar Win

IN Nay Pyi Taw, preparations are now well advanced for finalising the budget and Union tax law which will establish the Government’s revenue-raising and spending priorities for the 2017-18 financial year. It is an annual event that always encourages advance speculation. But this year it is being more eagerly anticipated than usual because it provides the first unequivocal indication of what the Government wants to do.

As decision time in Nay Pyi Taw draws near, what do Myanmar taxpayers think is a fair and reasonable amount to contribute to their country’s developments and infrastructure projects?” she says, “and we also need to pay decent salaries to government employees in important sectors like education and health.” Whilst she believes the current tax rates “are not high compared to some international rates, I don’t think our rates should be either increased or lowered in the coming budget.”

Daw Aye Thida is passionate about encouraging individuals and companies to pay their fair share, but some tax advisors enrich themselves by ensuring their clients dodge that obligation.

Maung Moe, owner of the Empress beauty salon and spa in Yangon, dutifully pays her taxes despite being aware that she could pay less by paying for offering a bribe. She says that small business owners often find it difficult to get the right information on tax payment and that they “want to avoid tax, but can’t afford to do so for fear of confrontations with minis-

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In the coming budget, the government should say that “I wish the government could enact and enforce some rules and regulations that concern corruption and reducing the complicat-ed procedures for tax payers.”

Regulation and the cost of compliance can be disproportionately time-consuming and burdensome for small business owners like Ma Yoon Mee, but they are also a concern for large scale employers. “I would like to urge the government to expand the coverage of collecting tax at the base rather than just targeting only the prominent figures or businesses,” says Dr Maung Maung Lay, vice president of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI). He believes that only a tax system that is completely computerized can prevent a budget deficit that “will create inflation which will be a huge impediment for the country’s future” and at the same time reduce sufficent revenue for what he de-scribes as “everyone’s wish” which is “a bigger budget for health and edu-ca-tion.”

Aung Moe Kyaw, Group Chairman of the beverage company, IBTC which includes Grand Royal whisky, also accepts the responsibility for successful companies to make a fair contribution. “We are fully supportive,” he says, “of the existing tax system because it is promoting new products and creating more jobs.”

Aung Moe Kyaw fears that a combination of trade barriers, import levies and higher taxes alongside in-creased levies. In Myanmar, fiscal pol icy is not just about economics but also about social and political factors. “The People’s Republic of China is hoping to participate in the said construction of the Zone actively. As China is a leading country in this zone, the New Yangon Zone and the Northern border area zones very profitably both for China and Myanmar, it is a great time for Chinese engineers and more prospects for careers here.”
Seattle judge blocks Trump's travel ban; White House to appeal

SEATTLE/BOSTON — A Seattle federal judge on Friday put a nationwide block on US President Donald Trump’s week-old executive order that had temporarily barred refugees and nationals from seven countries from entering the United States.

The judge’s temporary restraining order represents a major setback for Trump’s action, though the White House said late Friday that it believed the ban to be “lawful and appropriate” and that the US Department of Justice would file an emergency appeal.

Still, just hours after the ruling, US Customs and Border Protection told airlines they could board travellers who had been affected by the ban.

Trump’s 27 January order caused chaos at airports across the United States last week as some citizens from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen were denied entry. Virtually all while were either temporarily barred, upending the lives of thousands of people who had spent years seeking asylum in the US.

The State Department said Friday that about 60,000 visas were suspended in the wake of Trump’s order, it was not clear Friday night just how many suspensions was automatically retracted or what travelers with such visas might confront at US airports.

While a number of lawsuits have been filed over Trump’s action, the Washington state lawsuit was the first to test the broad constitutional challenge the executive order. Judge James Robart, a George W Bush appointee, explicitly made his ruling apply across the country, while other judges facing similar cases have so far issued orders concerning only specific individuals.

The challenge in Seattle was brought by the state of Washington and later joined by the state of Minnesota. The judge ruled that the states have legal standing to challenge Trump’s order and could help Democratic attorneys general take on Trump in court on issues beyond immigration.

Washington’s case was based on claims that the state had suffered harm from the travel ban, for example students and faculty at state-funded universities being stranded overseas. Amazon.com (AMZN.O) and Expedia (EXPE.O), both based in Washington state, had supported the lawsuit, arguing that the travel restrictions harmed their businesses.

Tech companies, which rely on talent from around the world, have been increasingly outspoken in their opposition to the Trump administration’s anti-immigrant policies.

Judge Robart probed a Justice Department lawyer on what he called the “litany of harms” suffered by Washington state’s universities, and also questioned the administration’s use of the 1898 Alien Tort Statute, attacks on the United States as a justification.

Robart said no attacks had been made carried out on US soil by individuals from the seven countries affected by the travel ban since that assault. For Trump’s order to be constitutional, Robart said, it had to be “based in fact, as opposed to fiction.”

Gulf carrier Qatar Airways will allow passengers barred by an executive order last week to board flights to the United States, after Robart’s order, a spokeswoman told Reuters.

But for some who had changed their travel plans following the ban, the order was not enough reassurance.

In Dubai, Tariq Laham, 32, and his fiancee Natasha had scrapped plans to travel to the US after their July wedding in Poland, where Natasha is from.

Laham said the couple would not reverse their decision.

“It is just too risky,” said Laham, a Syrian who works as a director of commercial operations at a multinational technology company. “Everyday you wake up and there is a new decision.”

The White House said it would file an appeal as soon as possible.

“At the earliest possible time, the Department of Justice intends to file a nationwide stay of this outrageous order and defend the executive order of the president, which we believe is lawful and appropriate,” the White House said in a statement.

“The president’s order is intended to protect the homeland and he has the constitutional authority and responsibility to protect the American people.”

Washington Governor Jay Inslee celebrated the decision as a victory for the state, adding:

“No person — not even the president — is above the law.”

The judge’s decision was welcomed by groups protesting the ban.

“Today’s order demonstrates that federal judges throughout the country are seeing the serious constitutional problems with this order,” said Nicholas Esperti, a staff attorney at the National Immigration Law Centre.

Eric Ferrero, Amnesty International USA spokesman, lauded the short-term relief provided by the order but added: “Congress must step in and block this unlawful ban for good.”

But the fluid legal situation was illustrated by the fact that Robart’s ruling came just hours after a federal judge in Boston decided to extend a temporary restraining order allowing some immigrants to enter the United States.

A Reuters poll earlier this month showed that 51 per cent of Republicans supported Trump’s action while 49 per cent believed it was “unconstitutional.”

At least one company, the ride-hailing giant Uber, was moving quickly Friday night to take advantage of the ruling.

CEO Travis Kalanick, who quit Trump’s business advisory council this week in the face of a fierce backlash from Uber customers and the company’s many immigrant drivers, said on Twitter: “We have a team of in-house attorneys who’ve been working night & day to get US resident drivers & stranded families back into country.”

“I just chatted with our head of litigation Angela, who’s buying a whole bunch of airline tickets ASAP!! #homecoming #fingerscrossed”—Reuters

People hold protest signs after attending Friday prayers, to show solidarity with the Muslim community, at the Islamic Center of Southern California in Los Angeles, California, US on 3 February, 2017.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Air France reopens US flights to passengers hit by travel ban

PARIS — Air France said on Saturday it had reopened US-bound flights to passengers affected by President Donald Trump’s travel ban on nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries, after the executive order was temporarily suspended by a federal court.

“Starting today we are implementing this court decision,” Air France spokesman Herve Erschler said. “Nationals from the countries concerned are being authorised to fly once again to the United States, providing their papers and visas are in order.”

Erschler said American government representatives in Paris had advised local airlines they could resume US-bound services for citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. A federal judge in Seattle on Friday suspended Trump’s week-old executive order barring their travel.—Reuters

China’s Tianjin issues air pollution alert

TIANJIN — North China’s Tianjin Municipality issued a yellow alert for air pollution and activated emergency response measures on Saturday.

According to the city’s environmental protection bureau, the Air Quality Index (AQI) reading passed 200 around noon, with the PM2.5 reading exceeding 350. Such emergency measures included banning heavy duty trucks in the downtown area and suspending dusty construction site work. The bureau said that increased coal consumption, unfavorable weather conditions and fire works were to blame for the smog. The smog will disperse Sunday, the bureau said. Beijing, which is adjacent to Tianjin, issued a blue alert for air pollution on Friday.—Xinhua

Thousands protest in London against Trump’s refugee ban

LONDON — Several thousand people demonstrated outside the US embassy in London on Saturday against President Donald Trump and his temporary ban on refugees and nationals from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States.

Protesters held black banners with blood stains bearing slogans such as “No to Trump. No to War” and “Trump: Special Relationship? Just say no.” at the demonstration against the ban and Trump’s foreign policy.

Trump signed an order just over a week ago putting a four-month hold on allowing refugees into the US and temporarily barring travellers from Syria and six other Muslim-majority countries.

On Friday, a Seattle judge blocked the order but many in Britain are angry about the measure, which they see as discriminatory, and the time it took for Prime Minister Theresa May’s government to criticise it.—Reuters

Five die in fire in Tochigi, north of Tokyo

UTSUWONIYAMA, Japan — Five people were found dead after a fire early Saturday at a restaurant in Oyama, Tochigi Prefecture, north of Tokyo, police said.

The fire broke out at around 1:15 am at a restaurant that was also the home to Kazumi Tanaka’s family. The fire was put out in about three hours.

The police said they have been unable to contact Tanaka, 58, his father Shinya, 87, and wife Michiyo, 60, daughter Chika, 30, and granddaughter Hinako, 9. The police believe the bodies are those of the family members and continue the identification process.

A total of six people lived here but Tanaka’s second son, 23, was away for work when the fire occurred. According to an investative source, the fire is believed to have started in the kitchen.—Kyodo News

Qatar Airways to let barred passengers on US flights after ban blocked

DUBAI — Gulf carrier Qatar Airways will allow passengers barred by an executive order last week to board flights to the United States, after a federal judge blocked the move, an airline spokeswoman told Reuters on Saturday.

President Donald Trump on 27 January suspended the entry of people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. —Reuters
Fat shaming tied to increased risk of metabolic problems

Seattle — Boeing Co has hired a small company to make about 600 3D-printed parts for its Starliner space taxis, becoming key components in the United States manned space program are being built with additive manufacturing.

The company, privately held Oxford Performance Materials, will announce a $10 million strategic investment from advanced materials company Hexcel Corp as early as Friday, adding to $15 million Hexcel invested in May and lifting Hexcel’s equity stake to 16.1 per cent. Oxford and Hexcel said.

Boeing's award of the parts, known as PEKK, also resists extreme stress of a rocket launch and the Starliner from the aspects of materials science company in 2000 and added 3D printing in 2006. It also makes aircraft parts and cranial and facial implants, as well as replacement human vertebrae.

In 2012 it delved into aerospace and defense. Working with NASA, Northrop Grumman Corp and incubator America Makes, it demonstrated printed PEKK could handle temperatures from minus 300 to 300 degrees Fahrenheit among other qualities.

"It’s everything from brackets supporting the propulsion system to internal structures for the air revitalization system," Varholak said of the parts for Boeing’s Starliner.

Printing parts is often faster and less expensive than traditional forging, machining or molding. It requires minimal tooling and touch labor, and allows companies to keep a "digital inventory" of parts, printing as needed, said Terry Wohlers, chief executive of consulting firm Wohlers Associates, which has tracked additive manufacturing for more than 20 years.

Use of 3D technology is surging. Sales reached $1 billion in 2007, jumped to nearly $5.2 billion in 2015 and are expected to hit $26.5 billion by 2021, according to the Wohlers Report, which analyzes the sector.

Several relatively small listed companies such as Stratasys Ltd, 3D Systems Corp, started as a materials science company in 2000 and added 3D printing in 2006. It also makes aircraft parts and cranial and facial implants, as well as replacement human vertebrae.

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Le Pen kicks off campaign, promises French “freedom”

Le Pen, National Front (FN) political party leader and candidate for French 2017 presidential election, attends a news conference in Paris, France, on 26 January, 2017. (Photo: Reuters)

LYON, (France) — France’s far-right party leader Marine Le Pen kicked off her presidential campaign on Saturday, hoping promises to shield voters from globalisation boost her chances at a time of French political turmoil.

In 144 “commitments”, Le Pen proposes leaving the euro zone, taxes on the job contracts of foreigners, lowering the retirement age and increasing several welfare benefits while lowering payroll tax for small firms and income tax.

The manifesto also foresees reserving certain rights now available to all residents, including free education, to French citizens only, hiring 15,000 police, building more prisons, curbing migration and leaving NATO’s integrated command.

The aim of this programme is first of all to give France its freedom back and give the people a voice,” Le Pen said in the introduction to the manifesto.

In a reminder of divisions in the bloc, Hollande, who will step down in May, took a dig at East European states which Paris Com- plains fail to honour commitments — such as taking in asylum-seekers — while accepting big subsidies from Brussels.

Europe isn’t a cash-box, not a self-service restaurant, a Europe where you come and take what you want, that wants to abolish all borders... and the ‘patriotic’ choice which I personally.”

Le Pen’s opponent in the run-off, whom polls say might be Le Pen’s opponent in the run-off, will also hold a rally in Lyon on Saturday to propose a radically different platform.

In the political manifesto puts two opposite proposals,” Le Pen said. “The ‘globalist’ choice backed by all my opponents... that wants to abolish all borders... and the ‘patriotic’ choice which I personally.”

Reports last year’s unexpected vote to take Britain out of the EU and Donald Trump’s election in the United States, the FN hopes to ride the same populist wave to victory.

If elected, Le Pen says she would immediately seek an referendum to leave the EU.

The electoral manifesto is short on macro-economic details and does not give any public deficit or debt targets and does not explain how a Le Pen government would balance raising welfare benefits while cutting taxes.

Le Pen is hoping to benefit from an unpredictable campaign that has seen the favourites drop out one after the other and that has caught up with hitherto favourite Francois Fillon, embroiled in a scandal over alleged ghost jobs for his wife, opinion polls still see her losing the second round.

But that leaves grass-roots supporters undeterred. “The rally will show people are backing the National Front and our ideas,” said Victor Birra, the regional head of the FN youth association.

“We’re fighting to win the 2017 election,” he said, before driving around Lyon to put up posters for the rally. Le Pen and her party are also facing their own scandals, including one over assistants in the European Parliament and investigations over her 2012 campaign financing.

EU founders speak of possible ‘multispeed’ future after Brexit

VALLETTA, (Malta) — German Chancellor Angela Merkel and leaders of other founding states of the European Union spoke on Friday of some countries moving ahead faster than others with further integration.

AFTER a summit in Malta at which all national leaders discussed plans for a formal declaration in March on the future of the bloc following Britain’s departure, Merkel and others offered endorsements of a so-called “multispeed Europe”, which some governments fear could damage EU unity in the wake of Brexit.

Though they disagree on details, Berlin, Paris and many of the 17 other states which use the euro currency are keen to bind the euro zone closer together after years of crisis in which investors have doubted the currency’s survival. But some countries around the periphery of the bloc fear creating a system in which a hard core of states pushes the EU into policies they do not want.

The last few years, Merkel told reporters, showed “that there will be an EU with different speeds, that not everyone will take part in the same levels of integration”.

One area in which governments are divided over the degree of integration is defence. With the departure of long-time sceptic Britain, France and Germany are keen to develop closer EU ties.

The 27 leaders are due to meet without British Prime Minister Theresa May on 25 March in the Italian capital to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding Treaty of Rome.

Before the EU summit, French President Francois Hollande said he thought that the Rome statement could mention “several speeds” as a possible way forward, though he stressed: “European unity is essential.”

In a reminder of divisions in the bloc, Hollande, who will step down in May, took a dig at East European states which Paris Complains fail to honour commitments — such as taking in asylum-seekers — while accepting big subsidies from Brussels.

“Europe isn’t a cash-box, not a self-service restaurant, a Europe where you come and take what you need, where you take your structural funds or get access to the internal market and then show no solidarity at all in return,” he told reporters. — Reuters

Australian foreign minister says US refugee swap proceeding

SYDNEY — Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said on Saturday that a controversial refugee resettlement deal with the United States would go ahead, despite US immigration officials postponing interviews with asylum seekers.

Bishop reported on Friday that US officials had pulled planned second-round interviews with detainees in an Australian camp on the Pacific island of Nauru, suggesting Washington is already blocking progress on a controversial refugee resettlement deal.

Detainees and an official source said interview dates were pulled on Saturday, hours after US President Donald Trump signed an executive order that suspended the US refugee programme for 120 days and stopped visits by travellers from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Bishop said both countries were still working through the details of the agreement, which sparked a rare diplomatic spat between the two staunch allies, with Trump berating Australia’s prime minister in an angry phone call.

“The agreement is to be honoured by the Trump administration (so) I’m pleased this agreement will continue,” Bishop told reporters in Western Australia.

“We remain in contact with the Trump administration and our embassy in Washington is also working with US officials and we expect that vetting process would be as tough as Australia’s vetting process in terms of health and security checks,” she added.

Bishop said “my understanding is that interviewing and vetting is still taking place”, without providing any further details.

Several detainees on Nauru showed Reuters the cancelled interview dates in their online applications, while a source said the second-round interviews had been postponed while officials tried to work out what was meant by the “extreme vetting” announcement by the White House.

Under the refugee swap deal, agreed in the final months of Barack Obama’s presidency last year, Australia would take up to 1,250 asylum seekers. In return, Australia would take refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. — Reuters
Mattis says no need for dramatic US military moves in S China Sea

TOKYO — US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis on Saturday played down any need for major US military moves in the South China Sea to contend with China’s assertive behaviour, even as he sharply criticized Beijing for “shredding the trust of nations in the region.”

“At this time, we do not see any need for dramatic military moves at all,” Mattis told a news conference in Tokyo, stressing that the focus should be on diplomacy.

In his Senate confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said China should not be allowed access to islands it has built in the contested South China Sea. The White House also vowed to defend “international territories” in the strategic waterway.

But how the United States would achieve that has been unclear, including whether it would have a military dimension.

Analysts have said Tillerson’s remarks, like those from the White House, suggested the possibility of US military action, or even a naval blockade. Such action would risk an armed confrontation with China, an increasingly formidable nuclear-armed military power. It is also the world’s second-largest economy and the prime target of Trump accusations of stealing American jobs.

Mattis suggested that major military action was not being currently considered.

“What we have to do is exhaust all efforts, diplomatic efforts, to try to resolve this properly, maintaining open lines of communication,” Mattis said, in his most complete remarks on the issue to date.

“And certainly our military stance should be one that reinforces our diplomats in this regard. But there is no need right now at this time for military maneuvers or some that like that, that would solve something that’s best solved by the diplomats.”—Reuters

Regional party chief urges Fillon to drop French presidential bid

PARIS — French presidential candidate Francois Fillon faced mounting pressure from his own conservative camp to withdraw from the race on Saturday, as a senator from The Republicans party warned it could split if he refused to bow out.

Senators Bruno Gilles, head of the party’s influential Bouches-du-Rhone region, said in a radio interview that party faithful had “turned the page” and overwhelmingly wanted a change of candidate. Fillon, 62, has been embroiled in a deepening scandal since satirical newspaper Le Canard Enchaine reported he had paid his wife hundreds of thousands of euros of public money for work she may not have done.

He denies the allegations, but they have rocked his campaign. An opinion poll published overnight showed the former front-runner is now set to trail in third behind far-right leader Marine Le Pen and independent centrist Emmanuel Macron in the first round of the election on 23 April.

“This scandal is doing us more damage every day, and we can’t wait another two weeks,” Gilles told France Bleu Poulevradio.

“There are presidential and legislative elections at stake and, beyond that, the survival of our political party.”

He added: “This could go as far as a party split.”

Fillon, a former prime minister, vowed on Friday to fight on despite public calls from a growing number of Republican lawmakers and officials for him to step aside.—Reuters

Participants attend protest rally against wildlife farming in Nepal

Participants attend a protest rally against wildlife farming in Kathmandu, capital of Nepal, on 4 February, 2017. The protest is against the possibility of fur farms, bile farms, circuses, mini zoos, meat farms, slaughter houses and experiments on animals due to wildlife farming. Photo: Xinhua

Regional party chief urges Fillon to drop French presidential bid

Mattis says no need for dramatic US military moves in S China Sea

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Expect “Fifty Shades Darker” to go even further, says Jamie Dornan

LOS ANGELES — Fifty Shades of Grey” star Jamie Dornan said fans of the erotic box office hit could look forward to more action when the sequel, “Fifty Shades Darker”, reaches theaters next week.

The Northern Irish actor and co-star Dakota Johnson reprise their sadomasochist relationship in the follow up to the 2015 hit, which made $571 million worldwide.

“We pull out all the stops,” Dornan said at the world premiere of “Fifty Shades Darker” in Los Angeles on Thursday.

“If you’re making a sequel to anything, I think there has to be some kind of advancement on the first, you have to go a bit bigger in a lot of areas, and I don’t think this film is any different.”

“Fifty Shades Darker”, based on the second book in the trilogy of novels by E L James, begins its global roll out from 8 February.—Reuters

Will be true to my beliefs during Super Bowl show, says Gaga

HOUSTON — Lady Gaga revealed few details on Thursday of what viewers can expect from her much anticipated Super Bowl halftime show, but the outspoken singer assured she would remain true to her beliefs and passions.

An advocate for lesbian, gay and transgender rights and a champion for inclusion, Lady Gaga’s 13-minute concert on Sunday has generated speculation over whether she might use the spotlight to rebuff US President Donald Trump’s controversial appointments and policies, including travel restrictions targeting seven Muslim-majority nations.

“The only statements I will be making during the halftime show are the ones I have been consistently making throughout my career,” Gaga told a standing room only press conference.

“I believe in passion for inclusion, I believe in the spirit of equality and the spirit of this country — one of love, compassion and kindness.

“So my performance will uphold those philosophies.”

Not once during what appeared to be a carefully scripted news conference did Trump’s name come up. Certainly Lady Gaga would have no shortage of causes to protest, including Trump’s plans to build a wall between Mexico and the United States, a large portion of which would cut across Texas, and legislation introduced by a Texas Republican state senator to limit public restroom access for transgender people.

“I think that music is one of the most powerful things the world has to offer no matter what race or religion or nationality, sexual orientation, gender that you are it has the power to unite us, so this performance is for everyone,” said Gaga, a six-time Grammy Award winner.

“I want to, more than anything, create a moment that everybody that is watching will never forget.”

One of the most memorable and controversial halftime shows ever occurred the last time the Super Bowl was held in Houston in 2004, when Janet Jackson suffered a “wardrobe malfunction” exposing one of her breasts to millions of viewers.

Lady Gaga played coy about everything from her wardrobe choices to set list and theatrics.

“The singer, who won rave reviews for her rendition of the US national anthem at Super Bowl 50 last year, adds her name to the list of Super Bowl halftime performers that includes some of rock music’s most iconic acts in Bruce Springsteen, Paul McCartney, Prince, U2, Rolling Stones and The Who.

“As much as I always wanted to be an artist I never really decided to be a musician until later in my life and I think I saw the halftime show even before I made my decision that I wanted to try to be a song writer,” said Gaga. “Watching Michael Jackson do the halftime show is one of the fondest memories I have.”—Reuters

Singer LeAnn Rimes focuses on love for new album ‘Remnants’

LOS ANGELES — Just ahead of Valentine’s Day, singer LeAnn Rimes’ latest album “Remnants” is all about love.

“We take a look at (love) in so many different angles,” the 34-year-old Grammy-winning country pop singer told Reuters.

“From giving it, receiving it, standing up for it. I think there’s a softness about it but there is also this balance of real power, inner power,” she added.

The album, out on Friday, features songs inspired by Rimes’ own marriage, to actor Eddie Cibrian, and her family, “Learning Your Language” is about her relationship with her husband while “Love Lines” is about her two step-sons, Cibrian’s children from his first marriage.

“That song is very honest in the verses about kind of the struggles of that — step-parenting,” Rimes said. “I just wanted them to know that’s how I felt. And I’m good at communicating that through music.”

Rimes released her first album when she was 15, and has found herself growing up in the spotlight, including her relationship with Cibrian, which began when they both were married to other people and became tabloid news.

“None of my life has ever been really private,” she said.

“I think I had to go through everything that I’ve gone through to make me understand and to have empathy and compassion and to be able to write a record like this,” she added.—Reuters
German mini-world park builds a wall around US

HAMBURG — A German tourist attraction that features miniature models of various parts of the world has put up a wall around the United States, in a dig at President Donald Trump’s plan to build a full-sized one on the border with Mexico.

The display at Miniature Wonderland, which Trip Advisor rates as the top destination in the city of Hamburg, is a hit with tourists, including some from the United States, who are usually drawn by its vast model railway.

Visitors on Friday could be seen peering over a miniature concrete wall topped with razor wire to look at outfits such as a tiny Mount Rushmore and a Las Vegas skyline.

The slogan “Let the world be great again” was scribbled on the wall, a reference to Trump’s election slogan “Make America Great Again”.

“I don’t want to tell anyone what to think. Everybody should look at that wall, and then decide regardless of whether they are on the left, right or centre,” said Gerrit Braun, co-founder of Miniature Wonderland.

“The main thing is that the people think about it.”

Ryan O’H, a tourist from the United States, said: “I think it’s a good use of humour, which is what the world needs, I think, right now to help cope with what’s happening in our country.” — Reuters

New Brussels museum displays costumes of Manneken Pis statue

BRUSSELS — Visitors to Brussels will soon be able to admire scores of colorful costumes used over the years to dress the city’s most famous landmark, the 400-year-old Manneken Pis. The 61 cm (24 inch) bronze statue of a naked boy urinating into a fountain is one of the biggest attractions for visitors to the Belgian capital and on Saturday a museum that celebrates his extensive and diverse wardrobe will open near to the site.

The museum, called Garderobe Manneken Pis, opens to the public on Saturday and will display 133 costumes from a 965-item collection. They include a fireman, a coal miner, a bee-keeper, Mickey Mouse, Santa Claus, Dracula and a Chinese dragon.

A giant mural depicting the Manneken Pis in a jacket and jeans emblazons the side of the museum building.

Manneken Pis receives about 15 to 20 new costumes annually and is dressed for 130 days of the year. But there are strict rules about what he can wear — no political or religious garb, and none for commercial purposes.

The new museum is split into seven sections: geography, folklore, charity and citizens’ associations, trades, celebrities, sports and designers. Visitors will also be able to dress up a Manneken Pis model.

All the outfits on display are original except one — the replica of a costume donated by French King Louis XV in 1747 as an apology after his soldiers tried to steal the statue.

The origins of Manneken Pis are unclear. One story says a little boy saved Brussels from burning down in the 13th century by urinating on the blaze. Another says a rich man lost his son and found him relieving himself on a street corner.

The original statue dates from 1619 and now sits in the City Museum. Other statues have been stolen or vandalised. The current Manneken Pis statue was put together from fragments found after an 1817 theft by a reprieved French convict.

On Saturday, the Manneken Pis will receive a new costume based on a mediaeval city pageant. — Reuters

Masked teenagers chase children in centuries-old Spanish festival

MADRID — Spain’s village of Casasvieja observed its annual celebration of Saint Blaise on Friday, when masked 18-year-olds dressed as “zarramachos”, a reference to their outlandish costumes topped by a multicoloured conical hat.

Teenagers gather at the central Spanish village’s town hall, dressed in white robes, straw mats and cowbells, before parading through the streets brandishing wooden sticks and oranges and chasing younger children.

The origins behind the folk tradition that dates back centuries are unclear with some suggesting that the jangle of cowbells serve to purify the village. — Reuters

6 “dangdang” buses start operation in N China’s Hohhot

BEIJING — These buses are modelled after the old-fashioned trams, known as ‘dangdang’ buses, after the sound of the bells drivers used instead of horns. A “dangdang” bus runs in Hohhot, capital of north China’s Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. A total of 6 “dangdang” buses started operation in Hohhot on Saturday. These buses are modelled after the old-fashioned trams, known as “dangdang” buses, after the sound of the bells drivers used instead of horns. PHOTO: XINHUA
Mourinho wants Man Utd players to lift burden off Ibrahimovic

LONDON — Jose Mourinho wants to see more of his Manchester United players scoring goals to take some of the burden off striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic as the club pushes for a top-four finish.

“I have to agree with you that we don’t score enough goals,” the Portuguese manager told reporters ahead of Sunday’s trip to struggling Premier League champions Leicester City.

“Some of our players from these attacking creative positions they could, they should, score more goals,” Mourinho said.

Ibrahimovic has scored 19 goals for United in all competitions this season, and 14 in the league, with Juan Mata and Paul Pogba a long way behind the 35-year-old Swede with seven each.

United are unbeaten in 14 games in the top flight but have drawn their last three, with Wednesday’s home match against relegation-threatened Hull City ending in a 0-0 draw.

That disappointing result left Mourinho’s side sixth overall, 14 points behind leaders Chelsea, with more home draws to their credit than wins.

In Leicester, United come up against a side who have already shipped 38 goals — two more than all of last season — while struggling to score.

Mourinho, who led Chelsea to the title last season, did then let when their form slumped the following year, said Leicester’s woes came as no surprise.

“What Leicester did is one of the big things in the world of football. Total respect for what they did. Next season will be much better for them,” he said.

United will be without injured centre back Phil Jones, who was substituted in the second half against Hull and has a bruised foot, for the match.

Benitez says he is committed to Newcastle

LONDON — Newcastle United manager Rafa Benitez assured fans he was not about to walk away after media reports suggested he was frustrated by the club’s lack of signings in the transfer window.

Newcastle are second in the Championship, a point behind leaders Brighton, and on course for a swift return to the Premier League.

Mourinho, who led Chelsea to the title in 2014-15 and then left when their form slumped the following year, said Leicester’s woes came as no surprise.

“It will be a tough game for us but it will also be difficult for them,” he said.

United will be without injured centre back Phil Jones, who was substituted in the second half against Hull and has a bruised foot, for the match.

It’s better to be cautious but we are positive and happy,” said the manager.

Goalkeeper Hugo Lloris trained on Thursday and Friday and is set to return at White Hart Lane after missing the Sunderland game through illness.

Ranieri doesn’t fear sack, focused on Leicester survival

LONDON — The possibility of getting sacked is far from Claudio Ranieri’s thoughts as the Leicester City manager is intent on ensuring the struggling Premier League champions maintain their top-flight status.

Following their stunning title triumph last season, Leicester have continued producing the unexpected, only this time they are battling relegation as they sit 16th in the table, two points above the bottom three.

“It’s not my philosophy to think about this. If my thoughts go there... I remember what was said by my chairman the first time I met him. He said ‘if we go down will you stay with us?’ And I said ‘yes’,” Ranieri told British media.

“Now why do I have to think about this? I am thinking to fight and to survive. That’s it. I don’t speak about my position with the owner. Never do I speak with the chairman about my position,” the Italian added.

“We know that is football. When everything is right, everyone is fantastic. When you start to lose, the manager is bad.”

Ranieri said he has no problem playing striker Leonardo Ulloa, who tried to force a move away from Leicester in January and accused the manager of betraying him. “Yes, he will play, don’t worry. He is a professional 100 per cent. I don’t know if Leo could give more because he always gives 120 per cent,” Ranieri added. "Sooner or later, when he is ready, he will have the chance to play. There is no issue. He tried to say everything to push hard but it is okay. He will fight, not for me, for Leicester. Everybody is fighting,” he said.

Tottenham defender Rose to see specialist after knee scan

LONDON — Tottenham Hotspur’s England defender Danny Rose will see a specialist on Monday after suffering a knee injury that could sideline him for several weeks.

“Danny Rose had his scan yesterday,” manager Mauricio Pochettino said on Friday. “Now we need to wait until Monday when he is going to see the specialist and we’ll see afterwards.”

Rose injured his knee in the first half of Tuesday’s 0-0 Premier League draw at bottom side Sunderland. Pochettino, whose side host Middlesbrough on Saturday, did not put any time frame on the left back’s recovery but media reports have speculated at a possible month’s absence due to ligament damage. Rose, and right back Kyle Walker, have been pillars of the Spurs defence this season with the second-placed North Londoners sharing with leaders Chelsea the honour of fewest goals (16) conceded in the league.

Tottenham are already without Belgian centre back Jan Vertonghen, who is recovering from an ankle injury suffered two weeks ago.

It’s better to be cautious but we are positive and happy,” said the manager.

Goalkeeper Hugo Lloris trained on Thursday and Friday and is set to return at White Hart Lane after missing the Sunderland game through illness.

--- Reuters