President visits hospitals in Tonzang, Tiddim, Falam

President U Htin Kyaw arrived in Chin State yesterday morning and visited the general hospitals in Tonzang, Tiddim and Falam and spoke with its residents.

President U Htin Kyaw and First Lady Daw Su Su Lwin, Union Minister U Salai Lian Luai, flew by helicopter to Tonzang and visited the general hospital and consoled the patients and gave donations.

Afterwards the President met with the citizens of Tonzang in the city’s sports stadium and discussed how the current government since taking office has been working on fulfilling the needs of the country to the best of its ability. It was also noted that there is to be no discrimination between highlands and lowlands but coordinated development for all, with emphasis on underdeveloped regions. This is being accomplished with the help of foreign investment and new business models, the President said.

The President further stated that, to ensure smooth development in underdeveloped areas, the government is considering granting tax freedom for foreign companies who come to invest. Improvements on transport, communication systems and and supply of full electricity is being carried out with consideration from the national budget, he added.

During a meeting with the President, Union Minister U Win Khaing and Dr. Myo Thein Gyi explained the planning strategies in response to submissions by the Tonzang Development Committee Chairman U Nam Khin Paung on upgrading roads and bridges in Tiddim and elevating Tiddim to the status of county, and construction of an industrial high school in Tonzang.

The President then visited the city of Tiddim and its general hospital in which he met with patients and gave cash gift donations.

Afterwards the President met with residents of Tiddim in the KamHawk sports stadium.

Investigation Commission writing full report on Maungtaw

As a result of its third fact-finding mission, the Investigation Commission on Maungtaw, Rakhine State, said it has settled several issues including resettlement and free movement of the Muslim community in conflict areas in northern Rakhine.

At the meeting of the commission yesterday in Yangon following its third mission to northern Rakhine State, Chairman and Vice-President U Myint Swe urged the members of the commission to discuss the issues openly in order to ensure a full report and to suggest long-term plans for Rakhine State to create job opportunities and boost the economy in the state.

The commission divided into groups and visited the villages mentioned in the report the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and separately addressed the findings and accusations in the report.

At the request of the commission, the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Home Affairs also formed commissions investigating the accusations.
Measures taken to protect crops against parasites

TAUNGOO Townshipe Agricultural Department introduced the integrated crop protection system to prevent the summer paddy from the danger of parasites. On 17th February, staff officer U Naing Minn Hlaing and employees from agricultural department laid 120 cards of Naji-Oo in the paddy field of farmer U Aye Lwin, U San Lwin, head of district Agricultural Department also talked about the protection methods.—Shwe Win (Pyay)

AirAsia to start Yangon-Honolulu route in late June

MALAYSIA-based AirAsia will begin flying from Yangon, to Honolulu, the capital of Hawaii and gateway to the U.S. at the end of June, this year. AirAsia is scheduled to start a weekly flights from Yangon to Honolulu, Hawaii via Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and Osaka, Japan on 28 June, according to a press release issued by the Malaysian low-cost airline.


Guests travelling through Osaka do not require a Japanese visa during the two-hour stopover.

Hawaii, nicknamed the Paradise of the Pacific, is formed by eight islands situated in the heart of the Pacific Ocean. Honolulu, the capital city, located on the most populous island of O‘ahu, is a modern city that boasts island charms, including the world-renowned Waikiki Beach, once the site of vacation homes for the kings and queens of Hawaii.—200

New oxygen-making machine to bring benefit to patients

TO FULFIL the needs of patients who require oxygen for therapy, a new oxygen-producing machine will soon be installed at the 500-bed Insein General Hospital in the north of Yangon, according to the hospital.

Beginning in early April, the hospital will support adequate amounts of oxygen to patients who need to receive the treatment, said Dr Aye Aung, medical superintendent of the hospital.

Oxygen requirements of the hospital have increased as the gas is useful in multiple diseases. At present, the hospital has only three small oxygen generating machines that cannot produce a sufficient amount of gas. It meets only half of the current demand. Some monasteries and social organisations continue to donate oxygen cylinders to the hospital to fill the need.

The hospital offers free oxygen services to needy patients. Patients with lung diseases and chronic heart disease need oxygen therapy. There are 30 patients currently receiving oxygen treatment at the hospital’s lung unit alone.

The hospital uses over 150 oxygen cylinders on a monthly basis.

Oxygen therapy can be given to people with breathing disorders, who are not able to get enough oxygen naturally. Medical physicians say that people who receive oxygen therapy often see improved energy levels and sleep, and better quality of life.—Myit Maung Soe

Crime News

Stimulant pills seized in northern Shan State

ACTING on a tip-off, local police searched a motorcycle and found 16,200 amphetamine pills hidden in sound boxes on the motor cycle on Saturday in Lashio.

Action has been taken against Hla Moe, the driver of the motorcycle and Maung Thein, who was on board, when the search was carried out in Namhsalat village Hsenwi Township. Similarly, on the same day, the police searched the motorcycle driven by Lekwen Lyau and found 12,000 stimulant pills and heroin 110g.

The police searched a house in Lwezaung village in Mongkok, Mongsa Township, and found 2425 stimulant tablet from Ardo. Police are taking action against those drug traffickers under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Law.—Myanmar News Agency

2 men mugged near Innya Lake, suspects arrested

A bag store owner was heading home from the City Mart department store on Pyay Road, 10th Ward in Hlaing Township with a friend on Friday at about 11pm when three men approached them near a shadowed area under a construction site near Innya Kannbaung.

His friend turned around with fists raised and yelled at the trio. The men proceeded to rush at the store owner and stole a Xiaomi Redmi phone and SIM card from his trouser pockets. The case was presented on 18 February in the Hlaing Police Department under Penal Code 382 and investigation was begun.

The Hlaing Police Department was able to identify the culprits as Thet Oo, 18, from Hlaing Township, Khaing Gyi, also known as Khaing Khant Kyaw, 17, from Kamayut Township, and Tadoe, also known as Thura Soe, 27, from Hlaing Township.

Police were able to apprehend the trio yesterday at 5pm along with the stolen smartphone.

Interrogation is in process for other possible crimes the trio may have committed.—Myanmar Police Force

My Yangon, My Home festival to come 25 February

THE 2nd edition of “My Yangon, My Home”, art and heritage festival will take place at public places across Yangon starting the last week of this month, according to organisers.

To promote public interest in community arts as well as to explore the everyday life of the city and its daily routine, the extensive fair is planned to be held from 25 February through 12 March and will be moving around the city.

Based on public art to explore the city’s heritage and culture of Yangonites, organisers are now preparing a wide range of exhibitions and unique art events around the theme “Memories, Objects and Spaces”.

A live art installation and poster contest is scheduled to take place on the first day of the festival at Mahabandoola Park, which is surrounded by some of the important structures in the city such as Yangon City Hall, the High Court and the Sule Pagoda. Students from National University of Arts and Culture (Yangon) will display their poster works on that day.

The first edition of MYMH-YAHF was held at different venues in Yangon during the March, 2015, with the aim of bringing together diverse communities to share experiences through public art.—200

Photo: MNA
On this auspicious 69th Anniversary of Chin National Day which falls on the 20th February 2017, I send this Message of Greetings to all Chin national brothers and sisters. May this day bring together all Chin people from all corners of the world.

On this auspicious day, President Htin Kyaw sent greetings to Chin people. In his greetings, he emphasized the development and progress in Chin State.

He expressed his appreciation to the people’s conference held in Falam on 8 November 2015. The conference was held to designate the 20th of February on which date the people’s conference was held in Falam as the Chin National Day. The Chin National Day which was designated since 1948 has now reached the 69th year this year. This Chin National Day is also an auspicious day in the sense that this day brings together all the Chin tribes which have the same language, culture, history and traditions.

Chin State is a place where we may find the Western Yomas stretching from north to south, the Kaladan river which flows into the Bay of Bengal, the Khaw-nu-soum mountain where rare plants are found and where rare animals make their habitat, Kennedy Peak, a well-known battlefield of the Second World War, the beautiful Reed Lake, the Manipur river which flows down profusely, the Bwenu river, the Bontalar waterfalls, natural resources and mineral resources above and below the earth’s surface.

In the political change that occurred in Myanmar, many political groups participated in the Multi-party general elections which were held successfully on 8 November 2015, and our government took over power systematically in accordance with the Constitution. Our government has been working for the ethnic nationals living in the Chin State, for their future social-economic development. In working like this we are making sure that there is equitable development between towns and villages and also between townships. In order to do this, we have been opening new Basic Education schools, upgrading schools, repairing new education buildings and building new ones, and appointing new teachers; in the health care area we have been opening new hospitals and health clinics, and appointing new doctors as needed.

In addition, we have made electricity available to all places in the Chin State from the Main Electrical grid, improved road transport networks, built long-distance roads linking with the central plains and new roads within the State, initiated work on Kaladan River Basin development and built the Paletwa Port to provide access to the sea from the Chin State, built the first airport of the Chin State at Falam, and worked on urban development projects in Haka, Falam and Paletwa. As a result we may see that there have been visible and significant developments in each sector. In undertaking regional development works, it is important for the ethnic national races to join hands with the Union government and the State government.

In the Chin State, the existence of high mountains and mountain ridges makes it difficult to travel. Thus although we have to face difficulties as we undertake development works, nevertheless the Union government is making concerted efforts to fulfill the development needs of the Chin State. Therefore the ethnic nationals living in the State should also participate and cooperate as much as possible in these efforts.

It has made me happy to hear recently that National-level political dialogues based on the Constitution discussed the facts they found during the visit to a hospital in Chin State yesterday. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a report on human rights in northern Rakhine State on 14 January 2017, and the OHCHR Commissioner for Human Rights Myint Pe and other officials.

The meeting was attended by commission members U Aung Kyi, U Tun Myat, Dr Daw Thet Thet Zin, U Nyunt Swe, U Saw Thalay Saw, Daw Kyi-in Ngai Man, Dr Hla Maung, U Thar Nyan, Police Maj-Gen Zaw Win, U Aung Naing and secretary of the commission U Zaw Myint Pe and other officials.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a report on human rights in northern Rakhine State on 3rd February 2017, in which it alleged that human rights abusers were occurring.—Myanmar News Agency

President U Htin Kyaw and wife Daw Su Su Lwin present cash assistance to a patient and comfort her during their visit to a hospital in Chin State yesterday. Photo: MNA

Investigation Commission writing full report on Maungtaw

At the meeting, members of the Commission discussed the facts they found during the visit and the writing of the full-text report.

The meeting was attended by commission members U Aung Kyi, U Tun Myat, Dr Daw Thet Thet Zin, U Nyunt Swe, U Saw Thalay Saw, Daw Kyi-in Ngai Man, Dr Hla Maung, U Thar Nyan, Police Maj-Gen Zaw Win, U Aung Naing and secretary of the commission U Zaw Myint Pe and other officials.

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a report on the situations of human rights in northern Rakhine State on 3rd February 2017, in which it alleged that human rights abusers were occurring.—Myanmar News Agency
Domestic gold price on the rise in keeping with high global price

THE gold market was cool during the Chinese New Year festival, resulting in a price slip. The domestic gold price has bounced back with the rise in global gold price and high demand, according to the gold market.

Additionally, the news of three per cent of tax to be levied on gold buyers in April prompted buyers to purchase more gold. The high demand increased the price, said the gold and jewellery shop owners.

The domestic gold fetched Ks882,000 per tical on 6th Feb and the price rose to a high of Ks900,000 on 9th Feb, whereas the gold price was US$1,224 per ounce on 6th Feb and soared to US$1,241 per ounce on 9th Feb.

With a small decline in the global gold price, the domestic gold price slipped to a low of around Ks886,000 per tical on the afternoon of 10th Feb.

The price slightly increased to Ks890,000 on 11th Feb and Ks890,800 on 12th Feb. And the domestic gold price dropped a bit for three straight days from 13th to 15th Feb. The rise in global gold price on 16th Feb affected the domestic gold price with over Ks895,000 per tical on 17th Feb.

— Mon Mon

Trade value of US$8billion required to meet expectations

ABOUT US$8billion is still required to meet the expected amount of trade value with foreign countries in this fiscal year 2016-2017, said U Win Myint, the director of Trade Promotion Department.

The Commerce Ministry expected a trade value of US$31.3 billion in this FY, and the trade value as of 10th Feb in this FY amounted to US$23,522.747 million, with an export value of US$9,663.596 million and import value of US$13,859.149 million. The figure is up by about US$61 million compared to that in the similar period of last year. The value of exports from April to 10th Feb in this FY were $2,362,402 million from the agriculture sector, $8,213 million from animal products, $470,969 million from fisheries products, $381,667 million from minerals, $204,160 million from forest products, $4,497,653 million from manufacturing goods and $1,306,025 million from other products, according to the statistics of the Commerce Ministry.

In the similar period, capital goods worth $5,540,526 million, raw industrial materials worth $4,972,463 million and consumer goods worth $3,346,161 million were imported into the country.

About US$8 billion of trade value is still needed to reach an expected amount in this FY, it is learnt. — Ko Htet

High-quality Zwekapin swimming pool opened in Pha-an

If swimming pools were rated the same way as hotels, the Zwekapin swimming pool in Kanthayar park, Pha-an township would merit five stars. However, the Zwekapin swimming pool was formally opened on 12 February with the budget coming from the State sports and physical education department.

The Zwekapin swimming pool was opened on 12 February with the budget coming from the State sports and physical education department. The aim of the state-of-the-art swimming centre is to promote and nurture gifted swimmers and also to provide relaxation for local people and teaching lifesaving skills in the event someone is drowning.

In keeping with tradition, Kayin Region Minister Daw Nan Khin Htway Myint and responsible state officials unveiled the new facility and sprayed fragrant scent in the dedication plaque and ribbon. Afterwards, the Myanmar swimming Association demonstrated the 50-meter butterfly swimming method and the backstroke method to the assembled guests and State cabinet members. This new swimming complex features a 50-25 meter swimming pool with an audience area, a meeting room, car parking, rest rooms, bat rooms and changing rooms. Local residents can now use the high-standard swimming pool for relaxation and sport, it is learnt. —GNLM

Average inflation rate in Jan 2017 slips

THE average inflation rate in Jan 2017 showed a small decrease when compared to the rate in December 2016, according to the Central Statistical Organisation’s monthly Consumer Price Index (CPI) and inflation rate under the Ministry of Planning and Finance.

According to 2012 statistics, the inflation rate per annum based on CPI in Jan 2017 was 6.97 per cent, whereas the rate in Dec 2016 was 7.02 per cent. The Year on Year Inflation rate in Jan 2017 is up by 1.21 per cent against Jan 2016.

Rakhine State reached the highest inflation rate of 14.04 per cent in Jan 2017, followed by Chin State with 10.94 per cent and Kayah with 10.55 per cent. Meanwhile, Yangon region possessed a high inflation rate of 9.62 per cent, followed by Nay Pyi Taw with 4.89 per cent and Mandalay by 3.59 per cent, it is learnt.

Previously, the inflation rate was evaluated based on a 2006 survey. The base year has now been changed to 2012. The Central Statistical Organisation conducted a Household Income and Expenditure Survey in 82 townships in Nov 2012. Myanmar’s inflation rate is expected to reach 11.68 per cent this fiscal year, it is learnt from the statistics of the Budget Department. The inflation rate in the first five-year plan from 2011-2012 FY to 2015-2016 FY rose. Therefore, in a bid to reduce the inflation rate, special efforts are being exerted on the basis of financial, monetary, trade and foreign currency control policies, mentioned in the Second five-year National Development Plan. — Ko Khant

10,000 tonnes of parboiled rice exported in 10 months

OVER 10,000 tonnes of parboiled rice were shipped to foreign countries over the past 10 months in this fiscal year, fetching nearly US$4million, according to the Commerce Ministry.

“Parboiled rice mills need to be established as it has good market access, plus a good price. There is no plan for the Commerce Ministry to set up the parboiled rice mills, as this business has been already privatized,” said U Khin Maung Lwin, the permanent secretary of the Commerce Ministry.

Russia is the main buyer of Myanmar’s parboiled rice and 500 tonnes of parboiled rice were exported to America and Canada through normal trade, Myanmar’s parboiled rice also flowed into European countries. The prevailing price of boiled rice is about US$460-470 per tonne, businessmen said.

The income earned from a one-tonne-parboil rice export exceeded by 30 per cent that from a tonne of low quality rice, said U Thaung Ngwe, a rice miller.

Previously, there were three parboiled rice mills in Eimee, Kyauklat and Bogale towns in Ayeyawady Region. Now there are nine parboiled rice mills to meet increasing demand.

Myanmar has produced parboiled rice since 1920. Previously, a lack of proper manufacturing process resulted in odorous parboiled rice of low quality, achieved by soaking rice in cold water for several days. But with the adoption of advanced technology, odourless parboiled rice was produced more recently.

Quality rice mills with a capacity of producing about 150,000 tonnes of rice and padda-dy a year are now required, and the mills are being planned to be built in the farming regions, it is learnt. —Zar Lin Thu

Gold jewellery are on display at a shop in Yangon. PHOTO: XINHUA
Launch of SpaceX Falcon rocket aborted seconds before liftoff

CAPE CANAVERAL (Fla) — SpaceX called off the planned launch of a Falcon 9 rocket from a historic launchpad in Florida seconds before liftoff on Saturday to investigate a potential problem with the steering system in the upper stage of the booster.

The flight, the first for the company from a launchpad at the Kennedy Space Center once used for NASA’s space shuttle program, was rescheduled for 9:38 am local time (1438 GMT) on Sunday. The rocket will carry a cargo ship bound for the International Space Station.

The problem concerned an issue with the steering system of the rocket’s upper stage, SpaceX said.

“Standing down to investigate,” Elon Musk, founder and chief executive of Space Exploration Technologies Corp, wrote on Twitter.

SpaceX has not flown from Florida in six months. Flights were suspended after a rocket exploded while being fueled ahead of a routine, pre-launch test at a Dragon capsule loaded with about 5,500 pounds (2,500 kg) of supplies and science experiments for the space station, a $100 billion research laboratory that flies about 250 miles (400 km) above Earth.

Nasa hired SpaceX and Orbital ATK to resupply the station after it retired the shuttles. The US space agency last year added a third company, privately-owned Sierra Nevada Corp, for making cargo runs to the station beginning in 2019.

By then, SpaceX aims to be transporting NASA astronauts from breaking Russia’s monopoly on flying crew to the space station.

—Reuters

Fossils show quick rebound of life after ancient mass extinction

WASHINGTON — Fossils including sharks, sea reptiles and squid-like creatures dug up in Idaho reveal a marine ecosystem thriving relatively soon after Earth’s worst mass extinction, contradicting the long-held notion life was slow to recover from the calamity.

Scientists on Wednesday described the surprising fossil discovery showing creatures flourishing in the aftermath of the worldwide die-off at the end of the Permian Period about 252 million years ago that erased roughly 90 per cent of species.

“Even the asteroid-induced mass extinction 66 million years ago that doomed the dinosaurs did not push life to the brink of annihilation like the Permian one,” SpaceX President Gwynne Shotwell told reporters at the launchpad on Friday.

Perched on top of the rocket is a Dragon capsule loaded with about 5,500 pounds (2,500 kg) of

Wang Yiyi

Paris showed a quick and dynamic rebound in a marine ecosystem, illustrating the remarkable resiliency of life.

“Our discovery was totally unexpected,” said paleontologist Arnaud Brayard of the University of Burgundy-Franche-Comté in France, with a highly diversified and complex assemblage of animals.

The ecosystem from this pivotal time included predators such as sharks up to about 7 feet long (2 meters), marine reptiles and bony fish, squid-like creatures including some with long conical shells and others with coiled shells, a scavenging crustacean with large eyes and strangely thin claws, starfish relatives, sponges and other animals. The Permian die-off occurred 251.9 million years ago. The Idaho ecosystem flourished 1.3 million years later, “quite rapid on a geological scale,” according to Brayard.

The mass extinction’s cause is a matter of debate. But many scientists attribute it to colossal volcanic eruptions in northern Siberia that unleashed large amounts of greenhouse and toxic gases, triggering severe global warming and major fluctuations in ocean chemistry including acidification and oxygen deficiency. The Idaho ecosystem, in the earliest stages of the Triassic Period that later produced the first dinosaurs, included some unexpected creatures.

There was a type of sponge previously believed to have gone extinct 200 million years earlier, and a squid-like group previously thought not to have originated until 50 million years later.—Reuters

Prescription-drug monitoring cuts doctor-shopping for painkillers

ROCKVILLE (Maryland) — State programmes that require physicians to check drug registries before writing prescriptions appeared to slash the odds of doctor-shopping for opioid pain relievers, a new study found.

“Our study shows that prescription-drug monitoring programmes are a promising component of a multifaceted strategy to address the opioid epidemic,” Ryan Matter, one of the study authors, said in a phone interview. He is a health economist at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration in Rockville, Maryland.

Matter and other researchers analyzed annual nationwide surveys of drug use and health from 2004 until 2014, when 36 states implemented prescription-drug monitoring programmes, or PDMPs.

PDMPs are state-run electronic databases designed to track prescribing of controlled substances and to identify people at high risk of using opioids for nonmedical purposes. Every state except Missouri now has a drug-monitoring programme. Some states have mandatory programmes requiring physicians to participate, and other states have voluntary programmes.

The study, reported in the journal Addictive Behaviours, found that in states where physicians were required to check an electronic database before writing an opioid prescription, the odds that two or more doctors would be giving pain relievers for nonmedical purposes to a single patient were reduced by 80 per cent. States that implemented voluntary monitoring programmes showed a 56 per cent reduction in the odds of doctor-shopping.

States with mandatory prescription-drug monitoring programmes reduced the use of painkillers for nonmedical purposes by an average of 20 days a year, the study found. States with voluntary prescription-drug monitoring programmes reduced the use of painkillers for nonmedical purposes by an average of 10 days a year.

“Overall, this, as well as other studies, suggests there’s promise for prescription-drug monitoring programmes,” Dr Stephen W Patrick said in a phone interview. “But they aren’t a panacea.”

“We really need a comprehensive approach. It isn’t one thing that will help get us out of the opioid epidemic,” said Patrick, a pediatrician at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville, Tennessee. He treats newborns struggling with the symptoms of withdrawal from opioids prescribed to their mothers and was not involved in the new study.

Every day, 91 Americans die from an opioid overdose, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Since 1999, deaths from prescription opioids have quadrupled, as have sales of opioids, including the painkillers oxycodone (OxyContin) and hydrocodone (Vicodin).

The number of PDMPs has expanded rapidly across states since 2000, but prior studies have shown mixed results about their effectiveness, the study authors write.—Reuters
China says understands South Korean need for security, still opposes missiles

MUNICH — China understands South Korea’s need to protect its security but Seoul still needs to respect Beijing’s concerns about the deployment of an advanced US anti-missile system, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told his South Korean counterpart.

China has repeatedly expressed opposition to South Korea’s planned deployment later this year of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system, which Seoul and Washington say is needed to defend against North Korea.

China worries the system’s powerful radar can penetrate its territory and it has objected to the deployment.

Meeting on Saturday on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, Wang repeated to South Korea’s Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se China’s opposition to THAAD, China’s Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Sunday.

Wang “stressed that one country’s security should not be founded on the basis of harming another country’s security”, the ministry paraphrased him as saying.

“China understands South Korea’s need to protect its own security, and at the same time South Korea should respect China’s reasonable position,” Wang added.

Yun Fu Ying, chairwoman of the foreign affairs committee in the Chinese National People’s Congress, told a panel discussion at the Munich conference that China could not understand Washington’s decision to deploy the system to South Korea.

“It is like being stabbed by your friends,” she said, adding the system would not increase South Korea’s security anyway.

But Yun Byung-se told the panel the system was needed to augment Seoul’s existing Patriot missile defense system and guard against the kind of high-arc shot used by North Korea in its last test.

“What we need is multiple layers of defense... THAAD is really relevant,” he said. “We don’t pose any threat to China.”

Yun Byung-se said North Korea launched two nuclear tests and 24 missiles last year alone and was nearing the final stage of nuclear weaponization.

“In our analysis, the tipping point may be only a few years away,” he told conference participants.

“It’s a ticking time bomb.”

Wang told Yun Byung-se that efforts to seek peace with North Korea should not be abandoned, the ministry said.

“All parties, at the same time as strictly enforcing (UN) Security Council resolutions, should proactively look for breaking points to resume negotiations, to break the negative cycle of the nuclear issue on the peninsula,” Wang said.

“North and South Korea are technically still at war because their 1950-1953 conflict ended in a truce, not a peace treaty. The North regularly threatens to destroy the South and the South’s main ally, the United States.

Earlier this month, North Korea tested an intermediate-range ballistic missile, its first direct challenge to the international community since US President Donald Trump took office on 20 January.

China says it is committed to enforcing UN sanctions against its unpredictable neighbour, whose nuclear and missile tests have angered Beijing.

China will suspend all imports of coal from North Korea starting 19 February, the country’s commerce ministry said on Saturday, as part of its efforts to implement United Nations sanctions against the country. — Reuters

Four North Korean suspects fled Malaysia after airport murder: police

KUALA LUMPUR — Four North Korean suspects in the murder of the estranged half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un fled Malaysia on the day he was attacked at Kuala Lumpur airport and apparently killed by a fast-acting poison, police said on Sunday.

A North Korean man, a Vietnamese woman and an Indonesian woman have been arrested already in connection with the assassination of Kim Jong Nam last Monday, which has triggered a diplomatic spat between Malaysia and Pyongyang.

South Korean and US officials believe Kim Jong Nam was killed by agents from the reclusive North, whose diplomats in Kuala Lumpur sought to prevent an autopsy on the 46-year-old’s body and demanded it be handed over.

“We believe the North Korean regime is behind this incident considering five suspects are North Koreans” Jeong Joon-hee, spokesman at the South Korea’s Unification Ministry that handles inter-Korea affairs, told a briefing on Sunday.

Kim Jong Nam, the eldest son of the late North Korea leader Kim Jong Il, had spoken out publicly against his family’s dynastic control of isolated, nuclear-armed North Korea.

The four suspects are holding normal passports, not diplomatic passports,” he said. “Next plan is to get them. We of course have international cooperation especially with Interpol, bilateral involvement with the country involved, we will go through those avenues to get the people involved.”

He named the four who escaped as Ri Ji Hyon, Hong Song Hak, O Jong Gil, and Ri Jae Nam. The police are looking for three other people who are not suspects but who they believe could help with their enquiries, one of whom is North Korean.

Police said the cause of death was still not known and that they were waiting for pathology and toxicology tests after conducting a post-mortem. — Reuters
Philippine army to create task force to chase big drug syndicates

MANILA — The Philippine army will create a “battalion size” task force to help the government’s anti-narcotics agency run after high-value targets in President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs, the country’s military chief said.

Duterte — who recently suspended the national police from the anti-narcotics campaign that has killed over 7,700 people in seven months — has ordered the military to play a role in its crackdown. He has said that he also wants to grant troops powers to arrest “scalawag” police.

The announcement came after it emerged last month that drug squad officers had killed a South Korean businessman at national police headquarters.

The troops, however, will only provide back-up in the campaign and not patrol the streets or play any kind of leading role, Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) Chief Isidro Lapena told Reuters earlier this month.

“We are ready to operate with the PDEA. (The task force) is yet to be created, but we are talking about a battalion size,” Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief General Eduardo Ana told reporters late on Saturday in Baguio City, where Duterte attended a military alumni homecoming. Up to 5,000 soldiers could be mobilized under the task force, or only 500 depending on the threat, he said. Ana, however, ruled out a bloody operation by the task force, unlike some of the raids conducted by the national police.

“The AFP will not do that, we will not be involved in the street, we’ll not be involved in running after street pushers,” he said. “The armed forces will help the PDEA in running after high-level drug syndicates.”

In his speech during the military alumni homecoming, Duterte said: “I need the help of each one, especially the military, not for some show of force but protection for the citizens from the lawless, the reckless, and the selfish.”

He declared his war on drugs to be “by and large successful”, but added the problem was more complex than he had thought and that is why he needed the military to play a role. Reuters

Thai police order thousands of worshippers out of scandal-hit temple

BANGKOK — Thai police ordered thousands of worshippers to leave the country’s biggest Buddhist temple on Sunday so it can intensify its search for its former abbot, who is wanted on money-laundering charges.

Thailand’s ruling junta used a special emergency law on Thursday to let police explore the scandal-hit Dhammakaya Temple after months of failing to get it to hand over Phra Dhammachayo.

On Sunday, police said that all non-residents must vacate the premises to expedite the search of all non-residents must vacate the premises to expedite the search of the 1,000 acre (400 hectare) facility because temple activities were hindering police. Monks who live within the temple grounds were ordered to congregate at an exit point and not interfere with the investigation.

“We are conducting these steps so that we can conduct the search process as quickly as possible so that we can return the temple grounds to the worshippers,” Woranun Srilam of the Department for Special Investigation told Reuters.

“The temple has been a rare bastion of Buddhist values as anyone else,” the speaker of house, who final tabled a motion of no confidence in the government following unruly disruptions. Though the trust vote was scheduled for morning, according to Dantamano.

“Some 24,000 people were the temple as of Sunday morning, according to Dantamano, who said that the temple would have to comply with the request to evacuate. Although the temple has no overt political affiliation, the abbot is widely believed to have links with populist former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was overthrown in 2006. A government-led by Thaksin’s sister was toppled by the army in 2014.

The Dhammakaya Temple’s brash approach to winning adherents jars on conservatives, who say it exploits its followers and uses religion to make money. The temple says it is as committed to Buddhist values as anyone else.

Thai worshippers hold placards and pray at the gate of Dhammakaya temple, after police ordered thousands of worshippers to leave the temple so it can search for its former abbot, in Pathum Thani province, Thailand, on February 19, 2017. Photo: Reuters

New chief minister of India’s southern Tamil Nadu wins trust vote

NEW DELHI — New Chief Minister of the southern Tamil Nadu. That Tamil Nadu’s governor K. Palaniswamy has won the trust vote, officials said on Sunday.

Palaniswamy won a test of strength on Saturday in Tamil Nadu Assembly after a bitter fight with Sasikala and her allies.

The 68-year-old Jayalalithaa died in December last year, following which her trusted leg- islator O Panneerselvam was chosen as chief minister. Soon after Sasikala tried to exert her power in party and approached Governor to stake claim as chief minister, Panneerselvam opposed her move and pushed state in political crisis, which continued for more than a week.

Panneerselvam was expelled from the basic membership of AIADMK. However, Sasikala’s dream to become the chief minister were dashed on Tuesday after India’s top court convicted her in a 21-year-old Drug Enforcement Act case along with other two. She was jailed on the outskirts of Beng- galuru city on Wednesday to serve a four-year sentence.

The case dating back to the 1990s was based on fact that among those arrested was a woman with a Vietnamese travel document. She was arrested in Malaysia in 1998 in Nam Dinh province, southeast of the capital Hanoi. Those details are the same as those released by Malaysian pol- ice.

“We only hear on the internet and everyone else hears on the internet but judging from the picture it looks like her. I can’t be a 100 per cent certain because we haven’t met her yet,” he said in Nam Dinh.

The rice farmer said his sister appeared to be the woman whose image was captured in a grainy airport CCTV im- age wearing a white shirt with the acronym ‘LOL’ on it. He said Vietnamese authorities had been in touch and had been supportive. Doan said his sister had left home when she was 18 and only came home occasionally and without letting anyone know when she would be back. “Whenever she comes home I can only tell her to study and work hard,” he said.

South Korean and US offi- cials have said Kim Jong Nam was assassinated by North Kore- an agents. —Reuters

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte reviews troops next to armed forces chief General Eduardo Ano during the Armed Forces anniversary celebration at Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon city, Metro Manila, Philippines on December 21, 2016. Photo: Reuters

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte reviews troops next to armed forces chief General Eduardo Ano during the Armed Forces anniversary celebration at Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon city, Metro Manila, Philippines on December 21, 2016. Photo: Reuters

Philippine army to create task force to chase big drug syndicates

MANILA — The Philippine army will create a “battalion size” task force to help the government’s anti-narcotics agency run after high-value targets in President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs, the country’s military chief said.

Duterte — who recently suspended the national police from the anti-narcotics campaign that has killed over 7,700 people in seven months — has ordered the military to play a role in its crackdown. He has said that he also wants to grant troops powers to arrest “scalawag” police.

The announcement came after it emerged last month that drug squad officers had killed a South Korean businessman at national police headquarters.

The troops, however, will only provide back-up in the campaign and not patrol the streets or play any kind of leading role, Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) Chief Isidro Lapena told Reuters earlier this month.

“We are ready to operate with the PDEA. (The task force) is yet to be created, but we are talking about a battalion size,” Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) Chief General Eduardo Ano told reporters late on Saturday in Baguio City, where Duterte attended a military alumni homecoming. Up to 5,000 soldiers could be mobilized under the task force, or only 500 depending on the threat, he said. Ana, however, ruled out a bloody operation by the task force, unlike some of the raids conducted by the national police.

“The AFP will not do that, we will not be involved in the street, we’ll not be involved in running after street pushers,” he said. “The armed forces will help the PDEA in running after high-level drug syndicates.”

In his speech during the military alumni homecoming, Duterte said: “I need the help of each one, especially the military, not for some show of force but protection for the citizens from the lawless, the reckless, and the selfish.”

He declared his war on drugs to be “by and large successful”, but added the problem was more complex than he had thought and that is why he needed the military to play a role. Reuters

Thai police order thousands of worshippers out of scandal-hit temple

BANGKOK — Thai police ordered thousands of worshippers to leave the country’s biggest Buddhist temple on Sunday so it can intensify its search for its former abbot, who is wanted on money-laundering charges.

Thailand’s ruling junta used a special emergency law on Thursday to let police explore the scandal-hit Dhammakaya Temple after months of failing to get it to hand over Phra Dhammachayo.

On Sunday, police said that all non-residents must vacate the premises to expedite the search of all non-residents must vacate the premises to expedite the search of the 1,000 acre (400 hectare) facility because temple activities were hindering police. Monks who live within the temple grounds were ordered to congregate at an exit point and not interfere with the investigation.

“We are conducting these steps so that we can conduct the search process as quickly as possible so that we can return the temple grounds to the worshippers,” Woranun Srilam of the Department for Special Investigation told Reuters.

“The temple has been a rare bastion of Buddhist values as anyone else.” —The speaker of house, who final tabled a motion of no confidence in the government following unruly disruptions. Though the trust vote was scheduled for morning, according to Dantamano.

“Some 24,000 people were the temple as of Sunday morning, according to Dantamano, who said that the temple would have to comply with the request to evacuate. Although the temple has no overt political affiliation, the abbot is widely believed to have links with populist former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was overthrown in 2006. A government-led by Thaksin’s sister was toppled by the army in 2014.

The Dhammakaya Temple’s brash approach to winning adherents jars on conservatives, who say it exploits its followers and uses religion to make money. The temple says it is as committed to Buddhist values as anyone else.

Vietnamese man believes sister held over North Korean murder

HANOI — A Vietnamese man said on Sunday he believes his sister is one of the suspects arrested in Malaysia in connection with the murder of the half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Kim Jong Nam was assassinated at Kuala Lumpur International Airport with what was thought to be a fast-acting poison. Malaysian police have said that two of those arrested was a woman with a Vietnamese travel document.

Vietnamese authorities have said only that they are investigating and are in touch with Malaysia.

Joseph Doan confirmed that his sister’s name was Doan Thi Huong and that she was born in 1988 in Nam Dinh province, southeast of the capital Hanoi. Those details are the same as those released by Malaysian pol- ice.

“We only hear on the internet and everyone else hears on the internet but judging from the picture it looks like her. I can’t be a 100 per cent certain because we haven’t met her yet,” he said in Nam Dinh.

The rice farmer said his sister appeared to be the woman whose image was captured in a grainy airport CCTV image wearing a white shirt with the acronym ‘LOL’ on it. He said Vietnamese authorities had been in touch and had been supportive. Doan said his sister had left home when she was 18 and only came home occasionally and without letting anyone know when she would be back. “Whenever she comes home I can only tell her to study and work hard,” he said.

South Korean and US officials have said Kim Jong Nam was assassinated by North Kore- an agents. —Reuters
Suppressing free press is ‘how dictators get started’ US Senator McCain

MUNICH — US Senator John McCain, defending the media against the latest attack by President Donald Trump, warned that suppressing the free press was “how dictators get started.”

“I hate the press. I hate you especially,” he told interviewer Chuck Todd from an interview with NBC’s “Meet the Press” that was released in advance of the full Sunday morning broadcast.

“I hate you especially,” he told interviewer Chuck Todd from an interview with NBC’s “Meet the Press” that was released in advance of the full Sunday morning broadcast.

“If you want to preserve democracy, you need a free press. We must have a free press. We must have it. It’s vital to our survival.”

“If you want to preserve democracy, you need a free press. We must have a free press. We must have it. It’s vital to our survival.”

McCain added: “If I was in your shoes, I would make sure the media was operating and working. And I would make sure the country was informed and not党委.” He called for a dialogue with Sunni Arab states to defeat “radical Islamist groups” in the region.

“The comments from US lawmakers followed Trump’s tweet and came days after the president held a raucous news conference at which he repeatedly criticized news reports about disorder in the White House and leaks of his telephone conversations with the leaders of Mexico and Australia.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasised the importance of a free press at the conference on Saturday, saying, “I have high respect for journalists. We’ve always had good results, at least in Germany, by relying on mutual respect.” — Reuters

Powers push for ceasefire, weapons withdrawal in eastern Ukraine from Monday

MUNICH — Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine agreed on Saturday to use their influence to implement a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from Monday in eastern Ukraine.

The Minsk peace agreement, brokered by France and Germany and signed by Russia and Ukraine in February 2015, calls for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front line and constitutional reform to give eastern Ukraine more autonomy.

But since the deal the sides appear stuck in a stalemate broken periodically by sharp exchanges of fire, resulting in the death of civilians and fighters.

The Trump administration has said that sanctions imposed on Moscow following its annexation of Crimea and events in eastern Ukraine would not be lifted until there was progress on implementing the Minsk agreement.

“A military vehicle travels near the government-held industrial town of Avdiyivka, Ukraine, on 6 February 2017.” Photo: Reuters

US foreign minister says Iran main sponsor of global terror

MUNICH — Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister on Sunday rejected Iranian calls for dialogue saying Tehran was the main sponsor of terrorism in the world, a destabilising force in the Middle East and wanted to “destroy us.”

“Iran remains the single main sponsor of terrorism in the world,” Adel al-Jubeir told delegates at the Munich Security Conference.

“If you want to preserve — and called for a dialogue with Sunni Arab states to defeat “radical Islamist groups” in the region. 

“If you want to preserve democracy, you need a free press. We must have a free press. We must have it. It’s vital to our survival.”

McCain added: “If I was in your shoes, I would make sure the media was operating and working. And I would make sure the country was informed and not党委.” He called for a dialogue with Sunni Arab states to defeat “radical Islamist groups” in the region.

The comments from US lawmakers followed Trump’s tweet and came days after the president held a raucous news conference at which he repeatedly criticized news reports about disorder in the White House and leaks of his telephone conversations with the leaders of Mexico and Australia.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasised the importance of a free press at the conference on Saturday, saying, “I have high respect for journalists. We’ve always had good results, at least in Germany, by relying on mutual respect.” — Reuters

Powers push for ceasefire, weapons withdrawal in eastern Ukraine from Monday

MUNICH — Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine agreed on Saturday to use their influence to implement a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from Monday in eastern Ukraine.

The Minsk peace agreement, brokered by France and Germany and signed by Russia and Ukraine in February 2015, calls for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of heavy weapons from the front line and constitutional reform to give eastern Ukraine more autonomy.

But since the deal the sides appear stuck in a stalemate broken periodically by sharp exchanges of fire, resulting in the death of civilians and fighters.

The Trump administration has said that sanctions imposed on Moscow following its annexation of Crimea and events in eastern Ukraine would not be lifted until there was progress on implementing the Minsk agreement.

“If you want to preserve democracy, you need a free press. We must have a free press. We must have it. It’s vital to our survival.”

McCain added: “If I was in your shoes, I would make sure the media was operating and working. And I would make sure the country was informed and not党委.” He called for a dialogue with Sunni Arab states to defeat “radical Islamist groups” in the region.

The comments from US lawmakers followed Trump’s tweet and came days after the president held a raucous news conference at which he repeatedly criticized news reports about disorder in the White House and leaks of his telephone conversations with the leaders of Mexico and Australia.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasised the importance of a free press at the conference on Saturday, saying, “I have high respect for journalists. We’ve always had good results, at least in Germany, by relying on mutual respect.” — Reuters
Iraqi forces advance towards Mosul airport in push to capture city

Baghdad, South of Mosul — US-backed Iraqi forces began moving on Sunday towards Mosul’s airport, the first target of a ground offensive to capture the western side of the city that remains under control of Islamic State, the Iraqi military said.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi earlier on Sunday announced the formal start of a ground offensive on western Mosul, asking the Iraqi forces to “respect human rights” during the battle.

Islamic State militants are essentially under siege in western Mosul, along with an estimated 650,000 civilians, after US-backed forces surrounding the city forced them from the east in the first phase of an offensive that concluded last month.

Iraqi federal police units are leading a northward charge on the Mosul districts that lie west of the Tigris river, aiming to capture the Mosul airport, located just south of the city, according to statements from the armed forces joint command.

They captured several villages and a local power distribution station in the first hours of their pro-"grest and killed several militants including snipers, the statements said.

“Mosul would be a tough fight for any army in the world,” the commander of the US-led coalition forces, Lt Gen Stephen Townsend, said in a statement.

Iraqi security forces advance towards the western side of Mosul, Iraq on 19 February, 2017. **Photo: Reuters**

Iraqi security forces advance towards the western side of Mosul suffer food and fuel shortages and markets are closed, United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq Lise Grande told Reuters on Saturday.

Commanders expect the battle in the west to be more difficult than in the east because tanks and armoured vehicles cannot pass through its narrow streets and alleys.

The militants have also developed a network of passageways and tunnels that will enable them to hide and fight among the civilians, disappear after hit-and-run operations and track government troop movements, according to residents.

Western Mosul contains the old city centre, with its ancient souks, Grand Mosque and most government administrative buildings.

It was from the pulpit of the Grand Mosque that Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a “caliphate” over parts of Syria and Iraq in 2014.

The city — Iraq’s second-biggest — is the largest urban centre captured by Islamic State in both countries and its facto capital in Iraq. Raqqa is its capital in Syria.

Baghdadi’s group imposed a radical version of Islam in Mosul, banning cigarettes, televisions and music, however, carrying out suicide bombings and burning women to cover from head to toe. Citizens who failed to comply risked death. Capturing Mosul would effectively end the militants’ ambitions for territorial rule in Iraq. They are expected to continue to wage an insurgen-cy, however, carrying out suicide bombings and inspiring lone-wolf actions abroad.—**Reuters**
Putin orders Russia to recognise documents issued in rebel-held east Ukraine

MOSCOW — President Vladimir Putin ordered Russian authorities on Saturday to temporarily recognise civil registration documents issued in separatist-held areas of eastern Ukraine, a decision strongly criticised by Ukraine’s president.

The decision will enable people from the conflict-hit region to travel, work or study in Russia.

According to Putin’s order, published on the Kremlin website, Russia will temporarily recognise identity documents, diplomas, birth and marriage certificates and vehicle registration plates issued in the eastern Ukraine regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

The legislation will be in place until a “political settlement of the situation” in these regions based on the Minsk peace accords, the Kremlin said.

Ukrainian authorities sharply criticised Putin’s decision, saying Russia had violated the Minsk peace process.

“For me, this is another proof of Russian occupation as well as Russian violation of international law,” Ukraine’s President Petro Poroshenko told reporters in Munich, Germany.

“This step completely negates the Minsk process,” said Oleksander Turchynov, secretary of Ukraine’s National Security and Defence Council, which is headed by Poroshenko.

Fighting has recently escalated in the conflict between the Ukrainian government and Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, focusing global attention on a simmering conflict that has strained relations between Russia and the West.

The February 2015 Minsk peace agreement only locked the two sides into a stalemate that has been broken periodically by sharp resurgences of fighting that Kiev and the Kremlin blame each other of instigating.

The foreign ministers of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine met on Saturday in Munich and agreed to use their influence to implement a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from Monday in eastern Ukraine.

—Reuters

New US travel ban to spare green card holders — Trump official

MUNICH — A new version of a Trump administration travel ban will not stop green card residency holders or travellers already on planes from entering the United States, US Secretary for Homeland Security John Kelly said on Saturday.

US President Donald Trump’s initial attempt to clamp down for security reasons on immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries and on refugees snarled to a halt amid a judicial backlash and chaos at airports.

The president is contemplating releasing a tighter, more streamlined version of the first (order).

And I will have opportuinity to work on (a) rollout plan, in particular to make sure that there’s no one in a sense caught in the system of moving from overseas to our airports,” Kelly said at the Munich Security Conference.

Asked whether green card residency permit holders would be allowed in, Kelly said: “It’s a good assumption and, as far as the visas go, ... if they’re in motion from some distant land to the United States, when they arrive they will be allowed in.”

He promised “a short phase-in period to make sure that people on the other end don’t get on airplanes.

But if they’re on an airplane and inbounds, they’ll be allowed to enter the country.”

Trump’s original order, which he said was meant to head off attacks by Islamic militants, barred people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen from entering for 90 days and excluded all refugees for 120 days, except those from Syria, who were banned indefinitely.

The abrupt implementation of the order last month plunged the immigration system into chaos, sparking a wave of criticism from the countries affected, and from European allies and some of America’s leading corporations, especially technology firms.—Reuters

Sri Lanka arrests soldiers over journalist’s abduction during war

COLOMBO — Sri Lankan police arrested an army officer and two soldiers on Saturday over the abduction, assault and illegal detention of a leading journalist in 2008 during the war against separatist rebels, the police said.

The island nation saw its first wave of press freedom after the conclusion of the Sri Lanka’s civil war in May 2009.

The previous government headed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa failed to probe the crimes despite international pressure.

A special police team arrested an army officer and two soldiers over the abduction and illegal detention of journalist Keith Noyahr, police spokesman Priyantha Jayakody said in a statement. A local court ordered the three held until 23 February.

Noyahr was an associate editor of the English language weekly The Nation when he was abducted in May 2008. He was severely beaten before being released, barely able to walk.

After the attack, he fled the country with his family fearing for his life.

Rights groups have blamed the Rajapaksa government for several abductions, assaults and killings of high-profile journalists or editors who were critical of his government and the war against the Tamil Tigers.

President Maithripala Sirisena, who unseated Rajapaksa in an upset win in 2015, has promised to probe human rights abuses including war crimes.

However, Sirisena’s administration has been sluggish in probing key allegations due to resistance by members of his own party and some government officials.—Reuters
BANGKOK — A United States aircraft carrier strike group has begun patrols in the South China Sea amid growing tension with China over control of the disputed waterway and concerns it could become a flashpoint under the new US administration.

China’s Foreign Ministry on Wednesday warned Washington against challenging its sovereignty in the South China Sea.

The US navy said the force, including Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, began routine operations in the South China Sea on Saturday. The announcement was posted on the Vinson’s Facebook page.

The strike group’s commander, Rear Admiral James Kirk, said that weeks of training in the Pacific had improved the group’s effectiveness and readiness.

“We are looking forward to demonstrating those capabilities while building upon existing strong relationships with our allies, partners and friends in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region,” he said as quoted by the Navy News Service.

Fruition between the United States and China over trade and territory under US President Donald Trump have increased concerns that the South China Sea could be a flashpoint.

China wrapped up its own naval exercises in the South China Sea on Friday. War games involving its own aircraft carrier have unnerved neighbours with which it has long-running territorial disputes.

China lays claim to almost all of the resource-rich South China Sea, through which about $5 trillion worth of trade passes each year.

Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also claim parts of the waters that command strategic sea lanes and have rich fishing grounds, along with oil and gas deposits.

The United States has criticised Beijing’s construction of man-made islands and build-up of military facilities in the sea, and expressed concern they could be used to restrict free movement.

—Reuters

Japanese troops hold 1st overseas drill to extract nationals

RAYONG (Thailand) — The Self-Defence Forces have been conducting their first drill overseas to extract Japanese nationals, based on security legislation that the Japanese parliament’s upper house passed last week.

Japanese troops, allowed to transport nationals and citizens to an airport, where the evacuees boarded a C-130 transport airplane.

As part of the drill, local residents blocked the road to the airport and the SDF members responded by threatening the use of force. “We were able to collaborate with the United States and other countries and it was meaningful training,” said Col Hiroyuki Kawai of Japan’s ground Self-Defence Force, who was in command of the drill.

Around 130 personnel from Japan’s ground, air, maritime self-defence forces are participating in the Cobra Gold exercises at the Utapao Royal Thai Navy Airfield.

—Reuters

UK parliament’s upper house likely to attach conditions to Brexit bill — ex minister

LONDON — The British parliament’s upper chamber is likely to attach conditions to legislation giving Prime Minister Theresa May the power to trigger the country’s exit from the European Union, a former minister from the opposition Labour Party said on Sunday.

Earlier this month, May won approval for the legislation from parliament’s lower chamber, the House of Commons. The unelected upper chamber, the House of Lords, is due to begin debating the bill on Monday.

The legislation passed through the Commons without being amended, but it could face a tougher ride through the Lords, where May’s Conservative Party does not have a majority.

Amendments aimed at giving EU citizens in Britain guaranteed rights post-Brexit, and calling for parliament to have a vote on the final Brexit deal are expected to attract the most support.

Asked during an interview on BBC TV whether it was his view the government could be defeated on these two issues, Peter Mandelson, a Labour member of the House of Lords said: “I think it is. I think there is a strong body of opinion across party and among independent peers as well that both these issues are very serious.”

Mandelson said he plans to trigger Article 50 of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty by the end of March and that she expects to get the legislation through parliament in time to do so.

If the Lords succeeds in attaching any conditions to the legislation, the amended bill will have to go back to the Commons for its approval.

The House of Commons has already rejected amendments on both issues.

The legislation will be passed back and forth between the upper and lower houses until they both agree.

“At the end of the day the House of Commons must prevail because it is the elected chamber but I hope the House of Lords will not throw in the towel early,” Mandelson said.

Justice Secretary Elizabeth Truss told the BBC she expected the Lords to get on and pass the legislation.

“It is a simple bill on do we trigger Article 50, the British people have voted for that, they were clear in the referendum and the House of Lords now needs to get on with it which is what I understand they will be doing,” she said.

“I fully expect the House of Lords will recognise the will of the people and the will of the House of Commons, which was overwhelming, and pass that legislation.” —Reuters
Dubai police summon Russian model who dangled from skyscraper-newspaper

DUBAI — Dubai police have summoned a Russian model who posed for a video while dangling from a skyscraper to sign a pledge not to put her life in danger again, a local newspaper reported on Saturday.

A video of the model, identified by local media as 23-year-old Viktoria Odintcova, went viral after she posted it on her Instagram account earlier in the week.

It shows her stepping off a girder at the top of Dubai's 73-story Cayan Tower and dangling in the void, held only by a man gripping her hand. Major-General Khalid Ibrahim al-Mansouri, an assistant to the chief of police in Dubai, was quoted by the Arabic-language al-Ittihad newspaper as saying that Odintcova "had been summoned to sign an undertaking not to repeat any dangerous moves that could endanger her life in Dubai."

"What the young Russian woman had done represents a danger to her life," the newspaper quoted Mansouri as saying. He said it was important for residents in the Gulf Arab city to avoid practising dangerous hobbies without taking necessary precautions or obtaining prior permission from authorities, the newspaper said. The video registered more than half a million views after it was posted on Odintcova's Instagram account. —Reuters

Film about colonial era explains modern Brazil, director says

BERLIN — A film about Brazil's colonial era explains modern Brazil, director says.

"This film is approachable only with a generous heart," director Idioko Eneyedi told the audience at the awards ceremony ending the 67th Berlin International Film Festival. Eneyedi showed 18 films in competition and 403 in sidebar screens.

Eneyedi was one of the seven-member panel that showcased 18 films in competition at the 10-day Berlinale, which ran February 18-28 in Berlin, Germany.

"Ildiko Enyedi, receiver of the Golden Bear for Best Film 'On Body and Soul' pose during the awards ceremony at the 67th Berlinale International Film Festival in Berlin, Germany, on 18 February, 2017. PHOTO: REUTERS"

Members of the international jury and director Ildiko Eneyedi, receiver of the Golden Bear for Best Film 'On Body and Soul' pose during the awards ceremony at the 67th Berlinale International Film Festival in Berlin, Germany, on 18 February, 2017. PHOTO: REUTERS

HUNGARIAN LOVE STORY WINS TOP PRIZE AT BERLIN FILM FESTIVAL

LOS ANGELES — Paramount CEO Grey to depart as soon as next week — sources

LOS ANGELES — Brad Grey, the chairman and chief executive officer of Viacom Inc's (VIAB.O) Paramount Pictures film studio is expected to leave with an announcement coming as early as next week, according to two sources familiar with the situation.

Grey's departure from the studio, which he has headed for 12 years, comes after years of underperformance, producing box office bombs such as "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows" and "Ben-Hur."

Viacom Chief Executive Bob Bakish will work with an interim management team at Paramount, according to one of the sources.

A spokeswoman for Viacom declined to comment. A spokesman for Grey declined to comment.

Paramount was at the centre of a bruising power struggle between Viacom's controlling shareholder, Sumner Redstone, and his daughter, Shari, and Viacom's former chief executive, Philippe Dauman.

The battle began when Dauman, who resigned in August, proposed selling a stake in Paramount against Redstone's wishes. Last month, Grey helped to arrange a deal for two Chinese film companies, Shanghai Film Group (SFG) and Huahua Media, to invest $1 billion in Paramount, giving the studio much-needed cash and support as it attempts to grow.

As part of the agreement, SFG and Huahua Media will finance a combined 25 per cent of all of Paramount's films for the next three years, with the option to extend to a fourth year. The Chinese studios will share in the economic returns of the films, but details were not provided.

During his tenure at Paramount, Grey was responsible for a seven-year marketing distribution deal with Marvel and the 2008 acquisition of DreamWorks SKG for $1.6 billion, from which Paramount got the Transformers franchise. However in recent years, the studio has struggled.

Viacom's Bakish is making Paramount a focal point in his strategy to turn around the New York-based media company's declining ad revenue and ratings.

In Viacom's earnings call last week, Bakish outlined a strategy to focus on six of its brands: Paramount, BET, Comedy Central, MTV, Nickelodeon and Nick Jr channels. As part of the strategy, the networks will start making films with Paramount. —Reuters
LONDON — British designer Jasper Conran reworked classic masculine classics at London womenswear show

Conran used a colour palette of chocolate, berry, navy, greens, cream, black and white with dabs of scarlet, orange, pink and royal blue bursting through the collection.

“It’s... exciting juxtapositions of colour — so classic colours, berry colours, greens and browns and then vibrant colour,” he said. For accessories, footwear was flat, with knee-length boots and loafers in mainly dark colours.

London Fashion Week, during which designers are showcasing their autumn/winter 2017 womenswear creations, runs until Tuesday.
— Reuters

Elephants on parade in Laos as numbers dwindle

SAYBOURY, LAOS — Dozens of elephants, adorned in bright colours and with garlands of flowers, paraded through a Lao-tian town on Saturday in a celebration of a species that has become increasingly scarce in the Southeast Asian country.

Known historically as the “Land of a Million Elephants”, Laos now has only a few hundred left in the wild and not many more than that in captivity, most of which are used in logging.

Nearly 70 elephants joined the main procession at the 11th annual elephant festival in Sayaboury province, some 200 km (120 miles) northwest of the capital Vientiane.

“The festival is organized to draw the public’s attention to the condition of the endangered elephant as well as promoting traditional culture and livelihoods,” said Yanyong Sipsaeseth, the deputy governor of the province.

Wild elephant numbers have dwindled because of the destruction of their forest habitat, although poaching for ivory has also played a part, conservationists say. A ban on capturing elephants from the wild so they can be domesticated has put greater strain on the existing captive population, meaning elephants are often worked so hard that they fall sick and no longer reproduce. — Reuters

Contemporary art brings life to Cairo’s City of the Dead

CAIRO — On a winding road leading into Cairo’s City of the Dead, a cartoon mouse with round ears and green eyes adorns the shop fronts and walls of the mausoleums where thousands of Egyptians live among the graveostones.

The path leads to a 15th-century complex built by Mameluk Sultan al-Ashraf Qaitbey, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that has been recently revived as a local artistic hub.

In an adjacent courtyard where local boys play football, a mural shows Frankie the mouse putting a leash on a Pharaonic cat.

Contemporary art is bringing life and colour into the once-drear necropolis, part of an ongoing project by Polish architect Agnieszka Dobrowolska called “Outside In: the Art of Inclusion”.

“What we want to do is to bring together the old heritage, the traditions of this particular place, with creative contemporary art and with various cultural events to promote diversity. Old meets new, death and life come together in the city of the dead, where we can exchange ideas and culture between east and west,” Dobrowolska told Reuters.

What began as a conservation project for the complex — which includes a mosque, a school and the remains of a drinking trough — grew into the initiative to invite artists from around the world to engage the community and create art inspired by the local culture. It is largely funded by the European Union.

Artists have so far come up with murals, mosaics, sculptures, graffiti and even live performances. Frankie the mouse is the work of a Polish graffiti artist who uses the pseudonym Franek Myszka. — Reuters
Lewandowski rescues lethargic Bayern with stoppage-time leveller

BERLIN — Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich needed a last-gasp goal from striker Robert Lewandowski to rescue a 1-1 draw at Hertha Berlin on Saturday and increase their advantage at the top to eight points.

Hertha scored through Vedad Ibisevic with the Bosnian volleying in for his ninth goal and his first since November, with Bayern, who crushed Arsenal 5-1 in the Champions League in midweek, lacking any game plan despite controlling possession.

The Bavarians, who looked a shadow of the team that obliterated Arsenal with three goals in 10 minutes, had few clear-cut chances in the second half.

But Lewandowski was in the right place at the right time to fire in from close range for his 16th league goal in the sixth minute of stoppage time after Arjen Robben had seen his shot blocked.

“The team is always there when needed,” said captain Philipp Lahm. “But to be honest we had come to Berlin to win.”

Bayern, who have now won just one of their last three league games, moved up to 50 points with RB Leipzig, in second place on 42, travelling to Borussia Monchengladbach on Sunday.

“We worked at it until the very end,” said Bayern’s Thomas Mueller. “We have the mental strength and we have had to like win here.”

Borussia Dortmund bounced back from their midweek Champions League loss to Benfica to ease past Villarreal 5-0 and climb into third place on 37 points. An own goal from Jeffrey Bruma put them in the driving seat before Lukasz Piszczek and Ousmane Dembele increased their lead with second-half goals.

Hoffenheim joined them on 37 points after their 2-0 victory over bottom side Darmstadt 98, courtesy of Andrej Kramaric’s brace. Eintracht Frankfurt squandered their chance to go third in the standings, slumping to a 2-0 defeat by visitors Ingolstadt to drop to sixth on 35 points.

—Reuters

Bale scores as Real tighten grip on top spot; Gameiro treble fires Atletico to victory

BARCELONA — Gareth Bale marked his return to action after a long injury layoff by sealing a 2-0 victory for Real Madrid over Espanyol on Saturday to provisionally stretch Zinedine Zidane’s side’s lead at the top of La Liga to four points.

Alvaro Morata headed home a floated cross from Isco to put Real ahead after 33 minutes against a stubborn Espanyol side and Bale steered another pass from the Spain midfielder in off the post in the 83rd minute shortly after coming off the bench.

Bale, making his first appearance since damaging ankle ligaments against Sporting Lisbon in November, netted his first goal in 42 consecutive games in all competitions.

“I’m delighted that Gareth is back and especially for him, he was so keen to return and feel like a player again after all three months away from the pitch,” Zidane told reporters.

“I told him to enjoy the game, he is a special player, different to everyone else.”

Real top the standings on 52 points, four clear of Barcelona who host Leganes on Sunday while Sevilla, in third on 46, entertain Eibar later on Saturday.

Real have a game in hand on both their title rivals.

Earlier on Saturday, Kevin Gameiro came off the bench to score a hat-trick in the space of five minutes to fire Atletico Madrid to a 4-1 win over struggling Sporting Gijon that kept them fourth in the standings on 45 points.

Yannick Carrasco had given Atletico the lead 12 seconds into the second half but Sergio Alvarez gave the impressive home side a deserved equaliser in the 49th minute.

 Sporting continued to cause Diego Simeone’s side problems after drawing level and Alvarez missed a gilt-edged chance to put them ahead when he sent a half-volley over the bar from close range.

For the second week in a row, however, Atletico dug deep to rescue the points from an unconvincing display.

Antoine Griezmann had a goal harshly ruled out for offside but laid on the pass for Gameiro’s first strike, the former Sevilla player calmly rounding Ivan Cuellar to put Atletico ahead in the 80th minute. Gameiro ruthlessly killed off Sporting with two quick-fire strikes, latching on to a pass from Thomas Partey to score in the 81st minute and taking advantage of another through ball from Griezmann to complete his treble. The Frenchman is the first Atletico player to score a hat-trick in the league as a substitute while his treble was the second fastest in the history of La Liga, behind only Bebeto’s at Deportivo La Coruna against Albacete in 1995. “We didn’t imagine anything else than the difficult game we had. Atletico have always struggled to win here,” said Atletico coach Diego Simeone.

“Gameiro was on a very positive game, we scored then they pulled us back immediately. “The substitutes gave us an extra boost and made us stronger in midfield and then Gameiro’s speed settled the game. The reaction was very good as we managed to score by playing well. I’m very happy for Gameiro, it’s not easy to score three times in a game, it’ll do wonders for him.” —Reuters

Luis Enrique says future unaffected by PSG thrashing

BARCELONA — Barcelona coach Luis Enrique has not made up his mind about whether he will remain in charge next season but his team’s thrashing by Paris St Germain will not affect his decision, he said on Saturday.

Luis Enrique has eight trophies in his two-and-a-half years in charge and has led Barça to a third consecutive King’s Cup final but he came in for heavy criticism following Tuesday’s harrowing 4-0 loss to PSG in the Champions League, the club’s heaviest defeat in a major competition since 2013.

Doubts hung over his future before the Parc des Princes meltdown as he stalled over talks to extend his contract, which expires at the end of the season.

“What happens in these months will have nothing to do with my decision, not one game, not two or the 38 games in the league. I still haven’t taken it.”

Luis Enrique told a news conference on Saturday ahead of Sunday’s La Liga game against Leganes.

“Criticism has no effect on me, if it did then I wouldn’t have been able to stay in this job for almost three years. We are our fiercest critics, the ones who most want to improve. Everything else is just a circus.”

Barca are on the brink of their earliest exit from the Champions League since 2007 but can get their bid to catch Real Madrid at the top of La Liga back on track when they host struggling Leganes.

Barca are second in the standings on 48 points and have played two games less than Real but Luis Enrique is still optimistic about their title chances.

“It’s a different game for us after what happened on Tuesday, a good opportunity to see the team’s response from a difficult situation,” he said.

“In football everything is exaggerated but I still don’t think everything is black or white. We are still alive in three competitions, we’re struggling a bit in one of them but we have a small chance. In the other two we’re more than alive.”

—Reuters