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Nay Pyi Taw town folk participate in Thingyan traditional festival P-2

THE GLOBAL NEW LIGHT OF MYANMAR

Vol. V, No. 1, 3rd Waxing of Kason 1380 ME www.globalnewlightofmyanmar.com Tuesday, 17 April 2018

State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, (Left), is sprinkled with scented water by First Lady Daw Cho Cho as they take part in the last day of Myanmar traditional Thingyan festival in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday. **PHOTO: KO THAR BYAW**

President, First Lady, State Counsellor participate in Thingyan festival

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Later, President U Win Myint, First Lady Daw Cho Cho, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other officials enjoyed the Thingyan songs and dances.

Myanmar New Year Festival usually falls around mid-April. The people celebrates the festival over a period of four to five days and it culminates in the New Year.—Myanmar News Agency ■

Weather bureau warns of thunderstorms, strong winds

THE Meteorology and Hydrology Department issued a severe weather warning yesterday, asking the public to be alert to the possibility of thunderstorms, lightning, gale storms and hail in April and May.

Such weather patterns can follow the movement of cumulus clouds in the pre-monsoon period from mid-April to mid-May, the weather bureau said.

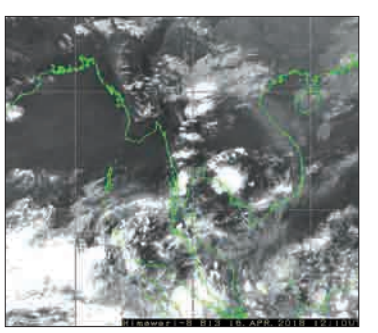
Cumulus clouds form in the afternoon and evening across the country in the current pre-monsoon season as daytime temperatures increase, it said.

The surface wind speeds may reach 35 to 40 miles per hour, the department said.

A man was killed by lightning when a thunderstorm hit a village in Labutta Township, Ayeyarwady region, according to local authorities on 11 April.

A woman was killed and another injured by lightning in Phyu, Bago region, on 3 April.

Gale storms also hit other regions, especially in upper Myanmar, destroying several houses. Thunderstorms are most common in April and May in Myanmar.—GNLM ■



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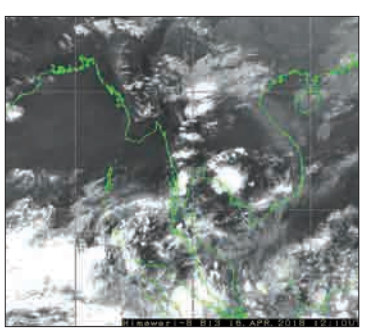

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Nay Pyi Taw Mayor Pandal is crowded with revellers on the last day of Thingyan Festival on Monday. **PHOTO: MNA**

Nay Pyi Taw town folk participate in Thingyan traditional festival

MYANMAR nationals across the country celebrated the final day of ME 1379 and the final day of the Myanmar traditional Thingyan by pouring water on each other yesterday.

While water pandals in Nay Pyi Taw council area were crowded with revellers, merit makers also crowded into monasteries and pagodas.

From 9 a.m., Myanma Radio modern music troupe and singers, dance groups from ministries and the Department of Fine Art entertained the Nay Pyi Taw Mayor's Thingyan pandal, while revellers came to the pandal on cars and motorcycles to participate in the festival.

At the Shwe Than Lwin Company family Myanmar Thingyan pandal, well-known artistes entertained the visitors, while people enjoyed the free food.

Revellers enjoys splash of water as they pass a pandal in Nay Pyi Taw on the last day the Thingyan Festival yesterday. **PHOTO: MNA**

People from Nay Pyi Taw, Pyinmana and the nearby towns also participated in the Pyinmana Splash Walk that was held for the first time this year.

Revellers and people also flocked to the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief's Office (Army, Navy and Air) family pandal near the Zabuthiri department store, and the water pandals in front of the National Defence College, Tatmadaw Hospital and in the compound of Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Office (Army), while dance troupes and singers provided entertainment.

Hlay Khwin Taung, Nay Pyi Taw National Landmarks Garden, Nay Pyi Taw Water Fountain Garden, Nay Pyi Taw Safari Park and Nay Pyi Taw Zoological Garden were teeming with visitors and people enjoying the holiday.

Similarly, Thingyan lovers and the public were seen participating in the Thingyan festival at the pandals in Tatkon, Lewe, Zabuthiri, Ottarathiri, Dekkhinathiri, Zeyathiri and Pobbathiri townships or in merit making activities.

Merit makers, donors and meditators were also seen going to pagodas and monasteries in the Nay Pyi Taw Council area. —Myanmar News Agency ■

Final day of Thingyan in Yangon sees record numbers

BY Min Thit (MNA), Thant Zin Win

RECORD number of people participated in the final day of Thingyan festival. U Hla Thein, who visited the pandals, said, "It was very crowded today. We can't go through Min Dhama Road, the Baho Road and Insein Road. Only the Kaba Aye Pagoda Road and Bayint Naung Road are accessible. As all other roads are blocked, we had to move out of the town centre via Upper Kyimyindine Road."

The Yangon City Maha Thingyan central pandal was crowded with people enjoying the entertainment provided by well-known artistes and dance troupes, as well as people participating in the Splash Walk.

"As it is the final day of Thingyan, we have come to enjoy Thingyan with the whole family. There isn't a place to stand during the Splash Walk. It was so crowded. However, it was great fun to watch the entertainment at the City hall," said Ko KyinNyunt from Thanlyin Township, who came for the Splash Walk in Maha Bandoola Park.

The Splash Walk in Kandawgyi Garden also had small water pandals and entertainment stages along the footpath, depicting Thingyan scenes from the Konbaung dynasty, colonial era and the present day. Rakhine Thingyan festival held in Thuwnna Stadium in Thingyun Township was also crowded with people.

The other water pandals in the Yangon Region attracted revellers. Pandals around the Inya Lake and Anawrahta Road has attracted the highest number of revellers. ■

Cartoon show in Mandalay draws revellers during Thingyan

A cartoon show hosted by the Myanmar Cartoonists Association was teeming with revellers who participated in the city's walking Thingyan around the moat in Aungmyethazan Township, Mandalay Region.

Cartoonist U Aung Maw from the association said, "The cartoon show is opened daily for public observation on the 26th street between 73rd and 76th streets, showcasing more than 300 cartoon pictures. The vast majority of the cartoons feature the country's traditional water festival. We are organising the cartoon show for the first time during Thingyan, which attracts a lot of revellers."

One of the revellers said, "There are many interesting things about Mandalay's walking Thingyan between the 78th and 66th streets. I liked the cartoon show because it informed revellers about the dos and don'ts during the water throwing festival. I expect to see this kind of show next year."—Than Zaw

Cartoon show has attracted revellers in Mandalay.
PHOTO: THAN ZAW MIN

> Our country is still in poverty with necessities in every sector;which is why we need to carry on our struggle and work hard in all sectors. In the international arena, we are facing pressure, criticisms and misunderstandings. The challenges and difficulties our country and our people are facing today are many. Although every issue cannot be solved easily, we will have to make utmost efforts to solve these issues according to each priority sector.
>
> (Excerpt from the speech by President U Win Myint at the ceremony to take oath of office at Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on 30th March 2018)

> Not only in Rakhine State which has received the attention of the world, but in the entire country collectively for security of mind and body.
>
> (Excerpt from the speech by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on the 2nd Anniversary of NLD Government on 1st April 2018)

Vice President U Henry Van Thio visits Pyinmana Splash Walk

VICE President U Henry Van Thio and his wife Dr. Shwe Hlwan visited the Pyinmana Splash Walk in Pyinmana Town, Yan Aung Ward (2), Mingalar Shan Kan, on the last day of Thingyan to watch people enjoying the ME 1379 Thingyan.

Vice President U Henry Van Thio and wife Dr. Shwe Hlwan, accompanied by Union Ministers, the Nay Pyi Taw Council Chairman and wife, council members and officials arrived at the Pyinmana Splash Walk yesterday morning. The Vice President and his entourage watched revellers pouring water on each other and enjoyed the entertainment programme of Thingyan music.

Next, the Vice President participated in the fish feeding and fish releasing merit making ceremony in Pyinmana Town, Mingalar Shan Kan.

In the Nay Pyi Taw Council area, people participated in the Thingyan celebration at small and family pandals along the roads in motorcycles and cars, while "zaduditha" (free food) was provided by merit makers.—Myanmar News Agency ■

Vice President U Henry Van Thio participates the Pyinmana Splash Walk on the last day of Myanmar traditional Thingyan festival yesterday. **PHOTO: MNA**

Nay Pyi Taw Central Pandal closing ceremony

The Nay Pyi Taw Mayor Maha Thingyan Central Pandal held its closing ceremony yesterday evening as the new year of ME 1380 Myanmar New Year approaches. The Central Pandal was located in front of the Nay Pyi Taw City Development Committee building.

Present at the ceremony were Union Minsters Dr. Than Myint and Dr. Win Myat Aye, Nay Pyi Taw Council Chairperson and Mayor Dr. Myo Aung, their wives, Nay Pyi Taw Council members, City Development Committee members, artists, invited guests and Thingyan participants.

The Mayor first delivered a speech and then the Union Ministers and invited guests sprayed scented water on each other as dance troupes performed to the song of "Mahn Taung Yeik Koe".—Myanmar News Agency ■

Dance troupes perform at the closing ceremony of the Nay Pyi Taw Mayor Maha Thingyan Central Pandal yesterday evening. **PHOTO: MNA**

New Year messages of President, Vice Presidents, Hluttaw Speakers and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief to be broadcast

ME 1380 New Year messages of President U Win Myint, Vice President U Myint Swe, Vice President U Henry Van Thio, Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker U T Khun Myat, Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than, and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing will be broadcast by Myanma Radio & Television and Myanma Radio it is learnt.

President U Win Myint's New Year message will be broadcast from Myanma Radio & Television on 17 April at 8 a.m., 12 noon, 4 p.m., and 8 p.m after the news and on 18 April 8 a.m., after the news. It will be broadcast from Myanma Radio on 17 April at 8 a.m., 11 a.m., 4:30 p.m. and 8 p.m. after the news and on 18 April at 8 a.m. after the news.

Similarly, the New Year messages of Vice President U Myint Swe and Vice President U Henry Van Thio will be broadcast by Myanma Radio & Television on 17 April at 8 a.m., 4 p.m., and 8 p.m. after the news while New Year speeches of Pyithu Hluttaw Speaker U T Khun Myat, Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing will be broadcast by Myanma Radio on 17 April at 12 noon, 4 p.m., and 8 p.m. after the news. Myanma Radio will broadcast the New Year messages of the two Vice Presidents on 17 April at 8 a.m., 4:30 p.m. and 8 p.m. after the news and the New Year messages of the two Hluttaw Speakers and Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief on 17 April at 11 a.m., 4:30 p.m., and 8 p.m. after the news it is learnt.—Myanmar News Agency ■

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Travellers flock to Taungthaman Lake, U Bein bridge during water festival

LOCAL and foreign travellers are visiting Taungthaman Lake and U Bein bridge, located in Amarapura township, Mandalay District, during the water festival.

Most foreign travellers are from Germany, the Netherlands, France, Britain, Spain, Italy, the United States, New Zealand, Thailand, Japan and South Korea.

Local and foreign travellers have been capturing videos and photographs of the ancient wooden bridge and watching the sunset view of Taungthaman Lake by hiring a boat for Ks10,000. U Bein bridge was crowded with groups and families. Some of the travellers visited U Bein bridge through arrangements with travel and tour agencies based in Yangon. The travellers also bought souvenirs from U Bein bridge. Moreover, they are visiting restaurants along Taungthaman Lake.

People stroll on U Bein Bridge over Taungthaman Lake in Mandalay. **PHOTO: THIHA KO KO**

U Bein bridge was constructed by Mayor U Bein and its construction started in 1211 ME and finished in 1213 ME. The bridge was built of wood, and features 1,086 pillars and includes four resting points.

It is 1.2 kilometres long. Some of the pillars and floors were damaged by water. Maintenance works are being carried out under the management of the Mandalay Region government, in cooperation with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture and the Department of Archaeology.—Thiha Ko Ko (Mandalay) ■

Nyaung Chaungtha beach attracts Thingyan holidaymakers

THE Nyaung Chaungtha beach in Nyaungdon Town is packed with visitors during the Thingyan festival.

This resort is about an hour's drive from Yangon.

"This is a nice economical place to chill out. We want to come here often," said a visitor from Bago.

U Aung Naing, in charge of Nyaung Chaungtha Beach Development Committee, said, "We ensure security along the river and the beach. A team patrols the area daily."

It takes an additional hour to reach Nyaung Chaungtha, as the roads are congested, said a visitor from Yangon.

"Thousands of visitors flocked to the beach on the third day of the Thingyan festival (water festival). The restaurants are overflowing with patrons," said Aung Naing Thu, a restaurant owner.

More travellers visit Nyaung Chaungtha in Thingyan Water Festival. **PHOTO: TUN KYAW (NYAUNGDON)**

Nyaung Chaungtha beach, situated in Yankinsanyar Village, Nyaungdon Town, is just 34 miles from Yangon. Usually, some 300 to 500 visit the beach daily, but it is packed with holidaymakers and Thingyan revellers now. —Tun Kyaw (Nyaungdon) ■

Strong winds destroy 18 houses in Myaing Township

SOME 18 houses were destroyed following strong winds in Kyauk Phoo Village, Myaing Township, in the Magway Region, on 14 April. The storng winds also blew off the roofs of the houses.

U Thein Soe, a few officials, along with a combined team of police force and Fire Service Department, visited the affected areas to provide purified water and other assistance on 15 April.

They also provided aid to the household members who were affected by the strong winds.

The strong winds blew off some 356 roofs. No one was injured in the incident. The affected families have decided against moving to other areas. They are repairing their homes themselves and will continue to live there. —Tun Hlaing (Myaing) ■

Man arrested for stealing money from donation box

A 24-year-old man was arrested for allegedly stealing money from a donation box in Shwe Sayan Pagoda, Thaton Township, Mon State, on 16 April.

"This morning around 5 a.m., we opened the pagoda gate for the pilgrims. I don't know when he arrived at the pagoda compound. We found the donation box was broken and some money missing. We arrested him around 6 a.m. He did not take all the money. He left around Ks100,000," said U Maung Oo, chairman of the pagoda Board of Trustees.

According to the investigation, the security guards from the pagoda trustees found the broken donation box while patrolling the pagoda. On searching the pagoda, they found the man holding bags and standing behind the statues. The pagoda trustees informed the police. The police identified the man as Kyaw Htet Wai, alias Kyaw Thet Paing, 24. During interrogation, he admitted that he had taken money from the donation box. The police also found some Ks265,300 including Ks100, Ks200 and Ks 500 notes in his bag.

The police have filed charges against him under section 379/295 of the Penal Code.—Thet Oo (Thaton) ■

Workers gathering and scooping unhusked rice into sacks at their farm in Ayeyawaddy Region. **PHOTO: PHOE KHWAR**

Exports from agro industry worth $3 billion last FY

EXPORTS from the agricultural sector brought in US$3 billion in the last fiscal year (FY), increasing by $152 million compared with the 2016-2017 FY.

Agriculture, which constitutes 30 per cent of the GDP, grew 3.5 per cent in the 2017-2018 FY, compared with the 2016-2017 FY.

Rice is Myanmar's chief agricultural export, bringing in more than $1 billion last FY. Myanmar's rice was exported to 40 countries. Its rice export market has penetrated some 62 countries, including China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Belgium and Poland.

However, the rice industry still faces some challenges, such as those of pedigree seeds, high input costs, high production costs, the lack of technology, high transaction costs and logistics problems.

In addition to rice, various types of pulses such as mung beans, pigeon peas, green grams, peanuts, sesame seeds, and fruits and vegetables, including corn, watermelons, muskmelons, mangoes, as well as onion, ginger, dried tea leaves and coffee beans, among other things, are shipped to foreign countries. — Mon Mon

Myanmar earns almost $6.8 billion from export of manufactured goods

MYANMAR exported nearly US$6.8 billion worth of manufactured goods to its trade partners in the 2017-2018 financial year (FY), an increase of $1.3 billion compared with the previous year, the commerce ministry reported.

In the 2016-17 FY, foreign traders imported manufactured products valued at $5.477 billion from Myanmar.

The total export figures of manufactured goods in the 2017-18 FY included $3.532 billion through the public sector and $3.262 billion via the private sector. Both sectors saw an increase in the export value. Compared with last FY, the private sector's export of manufactured products saw an increase of $855 million, while exports from the public sector increased by more than $461 million.

The ministry's latest figures show the country earned $12.624 billion through the export of six groups of products, including more than $3 billion from agro products, $60 million from animals products, $697 million from marine products, some $1.78 billion from minerals, and $211 million from forest-based products.

The earnings from the export of miscellaneous products exceeded $2 billion.

Although the value of exports increases each year, the country's import value is always greater than its exports, causing a trade deficit.

To reduce the trade gap, the government is seeking to implement the best available solutions, in collaboration with private businesspersons.—Khine Khant

Bilateral border trade with India increases slightly

BILATERAL trade with India through the cross-borders in the 2017-2018 fiscal year (FY) reached US$90.565 million, including $68.778 million in imports and $21.792 million in exports, according to official figures issued by the Ministry of Commerce.

The Myanmar-India border trade between last April and the end of this March showed a slight increase in value by $2.357 million, compared with the previous FY. However, the bilateral border imports declined to $21.792 million from $24.747 million during the period.

In the 2016-2017 FY, border trade between the two countries was $88.208 million, including $63.461 million in exports.

According to the ministry's statistics, trade through the Tamu border point at the end of the 2017-18 FY amounted to $46.215 million, which saw a decrease of $6.6 million against last FY. During the same period, bilateral trade via the Reed border gate was $44.350 million, which saw an increase of nearly $3.7 million, compared with last year's total.

Myanmar conducts border trade with India mainly through the Tamu and Reed border trade camps. However, the country mostly uses marine trade routes for bilateral imports and exports.

Myanmar usually exports ginger, saffron, turmeric, bay leaves and other kinds of fruits and vegetables, besides human hair, fishery and forest products to the neighbouring country. Its imports from the neighbouring country include medicines, oil cakes, electronic products, cotton yarn, non-alloy steel and other construction materials.—Shwe Khine

Myanmar eyes $3 billion from fishery exports in two years

THE Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation is the third-highest foreign currency earner thanks to the cooperation between the Fisheries Department, Myanmar Fisheries Federation (MFF) and other partner organisations.

An official from the Myanmar Fisheries Federation said on 11 April, "The MFF is making efforts to earn US$3 billion in two years through the export of fish and prawns. It will obtain a Ks100-billion soft loan from the Ministry of Planning and Finance for advanced fish breeding, in collaboration with experts from China and Indonesia, and the construction of fish breeding lakes, fish feed and cold storage factories."

Myanmar earned $711 million from the export of marine products, weighing 560,000 tonnes, to international buyers during the 2017-2018 financial year, and the current figures exceeded its export target, the official added.—Aung Win (Pyapon)

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Our visit to DP camp is to explain about our readiness for repatriation: Dr. Win Myat Aye

UNION Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement Dr. Win Myat Aye led a delegation to Bangladesh to visit the Ukhia camps of displaced persons in Cox's Bazar, Chittagong, and met Bangladesh's Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Home Affairs during his three-day visit.

The following are some excerpts from interviews with Union Minister Dr. Win Myat Aye and Dr. Aung Tun Thet, Chief Coordinator of the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance and Resettlement and Development in Rakhine State — UEHRD

Union Minister Dr. Win Myat Aye meets with displaced persons at the Ukhia displaced persons' camp in Cox's Bazar, Chittagong. **PHOTO: MNA**

Union Minister Dr. Win Myat Aye

Some people at the displaced persons' camp can speak Myanmar, and so we were able to talk freely. The government is duty-bound to accept the displaced persons, and we will perform our duties and proceed according to the bilateral agreements. It is important for the DPs to know the process thoroughly. So, we explained to them the procedures when we met them.

They also mentioned their troubles and desires. What we learnt is that the majority of them are willing to return to their homes in Myanmar. For this, they should ask authorities in Bangladesh to fill up the requisite forms. However, they have not seen the forms or received them so far. According to the bilateral agreements, Bangladesh must distribute the forms to those who want to return to Myanmar.

The entire process is being carried out according to the rules and regulations.

First, we will scrutinize the lists of the returnees to ensure no terror suspects are among them. After a careful scrutiny, we will send the lists of returnees to the Bangladesh side. Unfortunately, the displaced persons staying at the camps have no knowledge of the details. We explained to them about the procedures in detail. Some people got a chance to express their desires. As such, we are performing our duties according to the rules, so that they can enjoy the rights they deserve.

We explained about the repatriation process for DPs and the relocation and resettlement programmes, including better provisions for them in the administrative laws. We explained it is the duty of the governments to ensure they can live in better conditions, according to the law.

We have made available a few facilities for individuals to better their living conditions.

We haven't had a chance to see them all in one place because these camps are situated in vast areas. We had requested the Bangladesh authorities to meet some 508 Hindus and some 750 Muslims separately, but to no avail. We have scrutinised some 600 people among the 8,000 people in the lists provided by Bangladesh.

It is a great opportunity to meet the displaced persons at the DP camps, because they can share information among themselves. Moreover, we can determine why the process of repatriation had not been initiated by Bangladesh yet.

Success

Another good point is that we had spoken openly about the repatriation process with the Bangladeshi Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Home Affairs. During the meeting, the Bangladesh Foreign Minister said they would send information about the DPs using the forms agreed upon by both countries as soon as possible, and would collaborate with Myanmar to handle the sensitive border area issues. The meeting was very good indeed and we practically got some results, which can bring about success through cooperation.

In short, the purpose of our tour in Bangladesh was to meet displaced persons directly in order to know their requirements and explain our readiness for the repatriation process from Myanmar's side. We did well.

Due to the camp's vast area, we were not in a position to meet them all and the main thing is that they haven't filled in the forms included in the bilateral agreements. Moreover they didn't know about the form either. We believe we can resume the repatriation process very soon and are trying our best to cooperate with the authorities.

Bilateral cooperation has been aimed at working together for the repatriation of displaced persons settled in the border areas. As the handling of the border areas can cause misunderstandings, it is important for the relevant departments in both countries to discuss these issues transparently. Moreover, Myanmar is working with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for development and resettlement projects in Rakhine State.

The rule of law and development are strongly interrelated and mutually reinforcing. The advancement of the rule of law at the national level is essential for inclusive economic growth and stability. Likewise, the Rakhine Region will enjoy prosperity and sustainable development as long as the rule of law and stability prevails.

Prof. Dr. Aung Tun Thet, Chief Coordinator of UEHRD

According to the bilateral agreements in 2017, we try our best to explain to displaced persons about the repatriation process and the purpose of our touring here. Preparations have been made to provide assistance to DPs who wish to return to Myanmar before the rainy season sets in, and to help with any problems they may be facing in the host country. As for the Myanmar side, we are ready for the repatriation process to begin.

Arzemullah, a displaced person at Cox's Bazar camp. **PHOTO: MNA**

Arzemullah, a displaced person at Cox's Bazar camp

Up to now, we haven't received any forms for the repatriation process, but there are some data collections, which can provide rice and other necessary assistance for us. — Thura Zaw

Translated by Win Ko Ko Aung

Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker attends closing ceremony of Myawady Myanmar traditional Thingyan central pandal

AMYOTHA Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than attended the closing ceremony of ME (Myanmar Era) 1379 Myanmar traditional Thingyan central pandal near Thaungyin Hall, Ward (4), Myawady Town, at 6 p.m. yesterday.

The event was attended by the Hluttaw representatives, Myawady District Deputy Commissioner, Thingyan dance troupe members, the local populace and officials.

First, Myawady Township Maha Thingyan Organising Committee Chairman and District Deputy Commissioner U Htoo Lwin delivered the New Year greetings.

Next, the award ceremony for dance troupes was held, where officials presented prizes to dance troupes who won the consolation prizes.

Following this, officials awarded prizes to third-prize winner Shwe Thingyan May dance troupe and second-prize winner Nwe Oo Marlar dance troupe.

Finally, Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than presented the first prize to the Nwe Oo Kabya dance troupe. The Nwe Oo Kabya dance troupe then entertained the crowd with Thingyan dances after which the Deputy Commissioner announced the successful closure of the Myanmar traditional Thingyan central pandal.

In conclusion, the Thingyan dance troupes welcomed the New Year's dancing on the song "Mann Taung Yeik Kho" (Beneath the shadow of Mann Mountain). — Myanmar News Agency ■

Amyotha Hluttaw Speaker Mahn Win Khaing Than presents first prize to the Nwe Oo Kabya dance troupe at the final day of the Thingyan Festival in Myawady. **PHOTO: MNA**

Yangon Mayor Maha Thingyan (Central) pandal holds closing ceremony

Yangon Region Chief Minister U Phyo Min Thein delivers the closing speech at the closing ceremony of Yangon Mayor Maha Thingyan Pandal in Yangon. **PHOTO: ZAW MIN LATT**

Min Thit (MNA), Thant Zin Win

THE closing ceremony of Yangon Mayor Maha Thingyan (central) pandal was held yesterday (Thingyan final day) at 5 p.m. in front of Yangon City Hall.

At the event, first Yangon Region Chief Minister U Phyo Min Thein delivered a greeting and then announced the closure of the Maha Thingyan water festival. Also, artistes, dance troupes, and ethnic national dancers performed dances accompanied by songs.

Following this, Chief Minister and officials presented prizes to the dance troupes, along with ethnic national dancers, who provided entertainment throughout the water festival.

The closing ceremony was attended by Yangon Region Hluttaw Speaker U Tin Maung Tun and his wife, Region Hluttaw Deputy Speaker U Lin Naing Myint, regional ministers and their wives, Yangon City Development Committee Chairman U Maung Maung Soe and invited guests.

Later in the evening, officials presented traditional dance artistes with prizes and entertained the crowds with movies, music, traditional dances and songs. ■

Machines provided again to conduct municipal services in Bago Region

THE Bago Region government has provided machines a second time to conduct municipal services in the Bago Region.

There are some 28 townships and four districts in the region. The Bago Region government gives priority to town cleaning annually. The region government bought 28 five-tonne backhoe vehicles, 96 dump trucks (SKAT), 14 hydraulic garbage trucks, 40 rubbish containers and 180 rubbish bins (660 litres) with additional funds from the 2017-2018 fiscal year.

The region government has provided five-tonne backhoe vehicles to each township; four SKAT each for Kyauktaga, Nyaunglebin, Toungoo, DaikU, Bago, Phyu, Yedashe, Pyay, Paungde, Shwedaung, Thegon and Thayawady; three SKAT each for Kawa, Kyaunkkyi, Htantabin, Shwegyin, Waw, Thanatpin, Ottwin, Gyobingauk, Zigon, Nattalin, Panduang, Paukkaung, Minhla, Monyo, Letpadan and Okpho; and three hydraulic garbage trucks each for Taungoo, Bago, Yedashe, Pyu, Nyaunglebin, Pyay and Thayawady.

The region government provided the machines for the second time at the end of March 2018. The region government provided a five-tonne backhoe vehicle, four three-tonne backhoe vehicles, 23 dump trucks, 13 hydraulic garbage trucks and 52 tanks for the townships in the Bago region on 8 November 2017 for the first time. —Tin Soe (Bago) ■

Bago Region Government has provided backhoes to the townships in the region to conduct municipal services. **PHOTO: TIN SOE (BAGO)**

17 APRIL 2018
THE GLOBAL NEW LIGHT OF MYANMAR

More efforts needed to prevent human rights violations

PRESIDENT U Win Myint vowed to implement democracy, human rights and other social changes in his inaugural speech.

Myanmar has experienced challenges and crises in the past, and we must take lessons from them by trying our best with full impartiality to bring about democracy and respect for human rights to our citizens.

President U Win Myint has urged the Myanmar Human Rights Commission to speed up its efforts, in accordance with the law in the right direction, so that the people and the country's new generation can enjoy their human rights.

The rule of law, democracy and human rights are interrelated, so, if one is violated, the others are also violated.

Arrangements must be made, in accordance with the rules and regulations, to prevent human rights violations during the custody period in police stations and courts and in prisons and camps for hard labour, as well as to provide them with rights.

Arrangements must be made, Human rights are basic rights and freedom that belong to all of us from birth until death. All human beings are born free and are equal in dignity and rights. Every individual can enjoy equal rights and freedom without segregation. No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family life or correspondence or to attacks on his honour and reputation.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security. These are all prescribed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The rule of law, democracy and human rights are interrelated, so, if one is violated, the others are also violated.

Human rights education is an essential tool to implement the government's obligations to respect, protect and fulfill human rights. Also, it is essential for the long-term prevention of human rights abuses. The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human rights states that "every individual and every organ of society, keeping this declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and educating to promote respect for these rights and freedom."

To be able to fulfill the hopes and needs of the people of our country, we must perform our duties with more conscientiousness and without corruption.

Today, we should not tolerate any possible interference by those in authority in anti-corruption cases or any abuse of power to defend the accused.

We must press on with our duties until our citizens get their human dignity. ■

130th Anniversary of Pakokku Town

By Maung Tha
(Archaeology)

METAPHORICALLY known as the capital city on the west bank of the Ayeyarwady, the Pakokku township has become popular since ancient time as the city of Pitakas for teaching Buddhist Scriptures. The Sanghas from across Myanmar have come and gather in the great monasteries in the Pakokku where Buddhist Scriptures are taught to monks and nuns, thereby letting the Pakokku Sanana flourish throughout the country.

Until March, 2017 there are many great monasteries and religious edifices—1639 pagodas, 461 monasteries, 39 nunneries and 145 religious halls in the Pakokku township; there are 3023 monks and 484 nuns who stay and mediate in these religious buildings. In addition, there are nine famous pagodas including Thihoshin, Shwegugyi and Phaundaw-U pagodas and seven monasteries were recorded by the Department of General Administration. The other nine religious buildings are also situated inside the township.

The Pakokku township lies in the east with the Ayeyarwady and Taungtha township, in the west with Pauk and Seikphyu townships, in the south with the Ayeyarwady and Nyaung-U township and in the north with Myaing township, stretching 34 miles from the east to the west and 11 miles from the south to the north. The area of two combined townships(Pakokku and Kamma) is 485.839 square miles, consisting of 27 wards and 54 village tracts.

According to map descriptions , the Pakokku is located in the northern latitudes of 20' 54" and 20' 29", in the eastern longitudes of 95' 14" and 95' 21". The town is situated on the plains of Ayeyarwady bank, 211.69 feet above the sea level and surrounded by 1040'-high Tantkyi Mountain and 1127'-high Tatma Mountain range in the west.

The history of Pakokku

According to a legend, Pagan King Aloungsithu set off on a journey to the present-day Pakokku on a golden barge in Myanmar Era 454. Among the female attendants who accompanied by the king , one pregnant female attendant by the name of Melnyo Saint laughed heartily and lustily after seeing a young fisherman on the way. The king became furious at her behavior and gave her a caning to death. The king performed an anatomical dissection on her body to find a baby boy and removed it from her womb to entomb in a place where the Shwegu Pagoda was later built, thereby calling the place by the name of Pakokku. King Alounsithu buried the boy in a tomb in the Pakhan area which became gradually known as Pakokku, some source said.

A town with a lifespan of over 130 years

After the annexation of Myanmar by the British, the Pakokku Municipality was established on 21 December, 1887 and so the town is now over 130 years old. In encyclopedic descriptions, during the periods of Myanmar rulers, the Pakokku District used to be the Pakhangyi District which were ruled by heads of Pakhangyi, Yawlay and Bankyitait towns. Before the British annexation, the Pakokku was a mere fishing village was under the rule of Bagan major. There was wide stretch of sand bank between the Pakokku and the Ayeyarwady in those days and the course of the Ayeyarwady changed dramatically to move towards the bank of the river becoming a seaport town in 1885. The Pakokku is the second biggest after Mandalay in Upper Myanmar; it is 494 miles away from Yangon if measured along the Ayeyarwady and 103 miles away from Mandalay.

Historic Pagodas in Pakokku

Tourists , both domestic and foreign, usually pay homage to historic pagodas including Thihoshin and Shwegu pagodas. Thihoshin Pagoda is situated in a compound of five acres in Myitkhaing Ward; it has emerged as the Thihoshin Pagoda with three different names. The height of the Pagoda is 5' 9" with a left hand in a supine position and the right hand in an upright position.

In 1117 AD, King Asoka Rama of Ceylon donated an image of the Buddha carved out of Bodhi tree to King Aloungsithu and the image was named Thihoshin in honour of King Daywanunpiya Taitha. In 1185, Myintha village headman built two statues of Thihoshin on the left and the right; the one on the left weighs 35 viss of solid gold and the one on the right weighs 43.25 viss of gold. Thihoshin image festivals are held three times annually: one during Thingyan Water Festival, the second on 7th waxing day to 3rd waning day of Nadaw and the third on the Fullmoon day of Thadingyut.

Original Phaundaw-U Buddha Statue keeps staying at the Maha Wizar Rama Asokayon monastery which lies at southeast of Maha Wiza Rama monastery, one of the most famous in Pakokku township. According to the Buddhist history, King Alaungsithu on his visit to Ceylon Island in 454 AD was presented by Ceylonese King with a boat made up of Thitkanet wood. King Narapadisithu carved Thitkanat wood for nine Buddha statues, including that of Phaundaw-U. On the plinth of the Statue ," Bagan King Narapadisithu enshrined Buddha relics," carved on the gold foil. Naymyothura, the chief of Popa carried Phaundaw-U Statue reverently to Pakokku where the Statue was entrusted to two monks of U Meda and U Zagara. They carried the Statue wherever they visited and stayed. In Myanmar Era 1277, the Pakokku town was gutted by fire and the Statue was carried to present-day Maha Wiza Rama monastery on the 12th waxing day of Tasaungmoon, 1282 M.E. The other statues and pagodas including four-tooth relics pagoda built by King Anawrahta , are also famous in the township. The Shwetantit Pagoda, about three miles east of the Pakokku town is kept on the altar with the support of 14 elephant figurines.

Shwegu Buddha Statue and its great ornamental backdrop

According to the history of the Statue, statuette pagoda near the Statue was believed to have built by King Alaungsithu. A boatman built a similar pagoda and became popularly known as the Shwegu Buddha image.

Three monks of U Bya, U Thandaing and U Paduma who stayed at Shwegu monastery carried three Buddha statues reverently from the Shan State; one sacred Buddha statue has remained near the Shwegugyi. Floral designs in relief about life of Buddha were carved out of wood on the ornamental backdrop and is now displayed in the Gandakuhti repository of the Statue. The Buddha Statue was kept in an ornamental backdrop with a length of 5'x10", the height of 12'x10" and thickness of 6".

Pictures and floral designs in relief were carved on combination of five planks , depicting 136 humans and 18 animals. Carving on the great ornamental backdrop of the Shwegu Statue started in 1904 and completed in 1908. At that time , a tical of gold cost only K. 20 and the sculptors charged for the carving at a cost of K. 4000 which was equivalent to two viss of gold. On the plaque were inscribed about the carving and its cost of K. 4000 built within a period of four years and two pictures of the sculptors—father and his son are displayed on the wall.

The donors of the great backdrop were U Hinghar and his wife Daw Zeezan and their daughters Maythet and Maymyet; the sculptors were U Kangyi and his son Maung Tay of Myaing Township. U Kangyi and his son did not use the traditional tools in carving of the Shwegu backdrop; instead they used different collapsible tools in accord with their wish, numbering as many as 50 tools in total. The two sculptors carved on the great backdrop of Buddha's life stories including several jatakas of Dewarawhana, Nemi, Thamani and Vimvisara which were inscribed in orderly fashion.

Shwetanttit Tharakhan Buddha Image.

On uppermost layer of the backdrop were the carvings of Dewarawhana jataka in which the Buddha delivered Abidama to the Nats and Bramins during three-month period of Buddhist Lent. The Buddha descended the stairs of gold , silver and ruby to earthly world; all sculptural decorations of 20 statues were vividly seen in relief. While going through the stair of ruby, the Buddha was accompanied by Martali and Withakyon nats, Bramins,conch-shell blowers, parasol courtiers and musicians; the carvings and sculptures absolutely full of life.

On upper right side of the great backdrop, the statues of Naymi jataka were carved out of wood and those of Thadima on the upper left side.

Martali Nat took Naymi and Thadima princes on a carriage drawn by three horses through a thick forest. Birds are found playing happily and feeding their chicks. The Buddha surrounded by Nats, Bramins,kings, high and low-ranking officers, dancers and local populace were vividly carved on the backdrop.

The statues of Dewadat advising Azadathet prince how to kill his father to become a king; Azzdathat prince dethroned his father to put him in prison; starving king Vivisara being presented an emerald towel by Queen Wedihi; tattooed executioners cut the king's soles. All these sculptures are lively and full of life.

Carpenter U Kangyi threw all tools including screwdrivers, hammers and saws into the Ayeyarwady after carving the backdrop of Shwegu Statue by making a special effort with all his skills, goodwill and a generous mind. A little damage caused to 100-year-old ornamental backdrop of the Shwegu Statue because of being neglected on the ground without roofs.

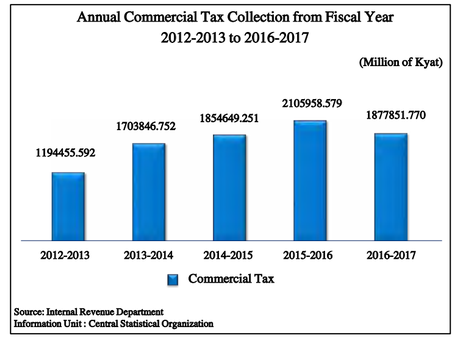
But in 1946 , the daughter of original donor Daw Zeezan carried out extensive renovations to a damaged backdrop and kept it in a roofed stairway. Preserving an old ornamental backdrop of the Shwegu Statue for more than 100 years has clearly demonstrated the skills and capabilities of two Myanmar sculptors—U Kan Gyi and his son.

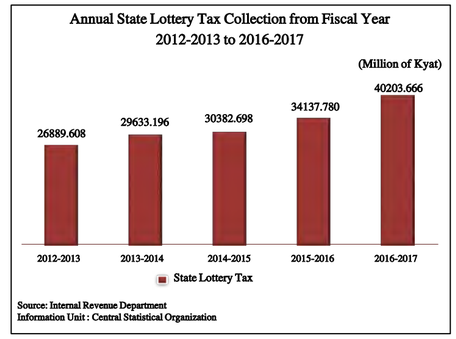
There are many religious edifices of ancient pagodas and statues in Pakokku township; they have been preserved for more than 130 years and they will keep on standing still to be visited by pilgrims and tourists alike.■

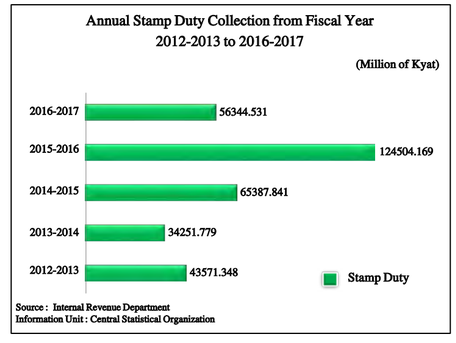
Ref:

Myanmar Encyclopedia vol. 6
Pakokku's history of Buddhism
Local facts on the Pakokku township(Department of General Administration)

Translated by Arakan Sein







Invitation to young writers for Sunday section

The Global New Light of Myanmar is accepting submissions of poetry, opinion, articles, essays and short stories from young people for its weekly Sunday Next Generation Platform. Interested candidates can send their works to the **Global New Light of Myanmar** at No. 150, Nga Htat Kyee Pagoda Road, Bahan Township, Yangon or by email to **dce@globalnewlightofmyanmar.com** with the following information: **(1)** Sector you wish to be included in (poetry, opinion, etc.), **(2)** Real name and (if different) your penname, **(3)** Your level of education, **(4)** Name of your School/College/University, **(5)** A written note of declaration that the submitted piece is your original work and has not been submitted to any other news or magazine publishing houses, **(6)** A color photo of the submitter, **(7)** Copy of your NRC card, **(8)** Contact information (email address, mobile number, etc.).– Editorial Department, The Global New Light of Myanmar news office

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing pours water on Defence Services Academy officers on the last day of the Thingyan Festival in Pyin Oo Lwin yesterday. **PHOTO: MNA**

Dance troupes performing at Tatmadaw Administration School pandal in Pyin Oo Lwin. **PHOTO: MNA**

SG Min Aung Hlaing and wife visit Pyin Oo Lwin Tatmadaw Thingyan

COMMANDER-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla visited the military base in Pyin Oo Lwin and participated in the celebrations for ME 1379 Myanmar Thingyan Festival of the families of military personnel yesterday.

The celebrations included events such as "yein" group dances and musical performances, some performed by cadets. The Senior General and his wife then sprayed scented water on the cadets and officers of the Defence Services Academy.

Later, the Senior General and his wife visited the pandals of Tatmadaw Administration School (Pyin Oo Lwin), Tatmadaw Technological University, and Pyin Oo Lwin Tatmadaw Hospital and sprinkled scented water and gifted cash prizes to the performers.

Meanwhile, families of military personnel from the Office of the Defence Chief (Army, Navy and Air) celebrated the final day of the ME 1379 Myanmar New Year Thingyan festival at Zeyathiri Golf Course yesterday as the pandals closed down.

Vice-Senior General Soe Win and wife Daw Than Than Nwe arrived in place of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, along with Union Minister for Defense Lt-Gen Sein Win and his wife, and other officials were present at the celebrations. There were many 'yein' dance performances by female military officials, female military personnel, family groups, male military officials and personnel, as well as musicians and artists. The Vice Senior General and wife then distributed cash prizes to the performers.

As the final performance of the closing ceremony, the performers and artistes sang the song "Mahn Taung Yeik Koe", which was followed by the Vice Senior General and wife spraying scented water on all the attendees and performers, thereby officially completing the closing ceremony.

The Vice-Senior General and his wife also visited the pandal at Nay Pyi Taw Military Headquarters and the SKYNET pandal in Nay Pyi Taw celebrating Thingyan yesterday. —Myanmar News Agency ■

31 crimes, 58 injured nationwide on third day of Thingyan Festival

DESPITE security efforts, there were still numerous cases of accidents and crimes reported during the water festival. On the third day of the water festival, 31 crimes occurred, including 58 injuries, across the country.

A total of some 62 crimes occurred, including one death and some 127 injuries on the third day of the Thingyan Festival in Nay Pyi Taw. The death was mainly due to a car accident. Moreover, there was one rape case, five murders and five injuries during the Thingyan Festival.—Than Oo (Laymyet hna) ■

Young motorcyclist killed in road accident in Mogaung Township

A MOTORCYCLIST was killed in a road accident on Mogaung-Hpakant road on the third day of the Thingyan New Year Water Festival, according to a police report.

The accident happened at around 2 p.m. on 15 April at 8-mile junction in Mogaung Township, Kachin State.

The motorcycle, driven by Tun Linn Maung, 20, carrying a 15-year-old boy as pillion rider, crashed into the left wheel of a car, driven by U Sein Lin, 32, while he was trying to overtake the car. The driver of the motorcycle died on the spot.

Investigators said the motorcyclist was a resident of Maubinsu Ward, Kamaing Town, in Hpakant Township. An investigation is ongoing to determine the cause of the accident. A police officer said the rate of traffic fatalities significantly increased in Kachin State during 2016 because of the lack of knowledge about traffic rules and the growing number of unlicensed motorcycles and cars.—Win Naing (Kachinmye) ■

Kawthoung residents happily celebrate Thingyan water festival

RESIDENTS in Kawthoung, Taninthayi Region celebrated the fourth and last day of Myanmar traditional Thingyan festival (Atet Day) yesterday.

Popular vocalists, modern music bands and local traditional dance troupes are performing entertainments to Thingyan revelers at central water throwing pandal in Kawthoung starting from 8 am where Thingyan goers are also offered a chance to enjoy Satuditha (public charity feast). Thingyan revelers throw water at each other at water throwing pavilions. Modern music bands and local traditional dance troupes entertained dances and songs to Thingyan merrymakers.

Many Thingyan revelers participated in a walking style Thingyan celebration while some people are going a day trip to islands in Andaman Sea with the boats for relaxation.—Myanmar Digital News ■

Russia has 'not tampered' with Douma site: Lavrov

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. **AFP**

MOSCOW—Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Monday denied that Moscow was interfering with evidence of a suspected chemical weapons attack in Syria after Britain said international inspectors were not being allowed into the site in Douma.

"I can guarantee that Russia has not tampered with the site," Lavrov told BBC's Hardtalk programme.

He also said that the evidence of a chemical attack carried out by Syrian forces cited by Britain, France and the United States had been based "on media reports and social media".

Lavrov denied that any chemical attack had taken place, telling the BBC: "What did take place was the staged thing".

Russia has accused Britain of being involved in staging the attack.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was holding a closed-door meeting at its headquarters in The Hague on Monday to discuss the alleged chemical attack, following air strikes on Syria by London, Paris and Washington on Saturday.

Britain's embassy to the Netherlands earlier on Monday said Russia and Syria have not yet allowed a fact-finding mission from the world's chemical weapons watchdog to enter Douma.

British ambassador Peter Wilson also urged the meeting "to act to hold perpetrators to account", saying failure to do so "will only risk further barbaric use of chemical weapons, in Syria and beyond".—AFP

Turkey says France's Macron won't break its Russia alliance

ANKARA—Turkey on Monday said French President Emmanuel Macron will not be able to break its partnership with Russia, after he argued the weekend's air strikes against the Syrian regime had driven a wedge between Ankara and Moscow.

"We can think differently but they (our relations with Russia) are not so weak that the French president can break them," Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said at a press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. "We have strong relations with Russia," Cavusoglu added. "But our relations with Russia are not an alternative to NATO relations or our allies."

There have been growing signs of Western discomfort over the alliance of Turkey—a key NATO member since 1952—with Iran and Russia over Syria.

In an interview with French television, Macron suggested that the air strikes against Syria regime targets over the weekend had succeeded in engineering a split in the Russia-Turkey alliance.

"With these strikes and this intervention, we separated the Russians and the Turks on this issue... the Turks condemned the chemical strike and supported the operation that we conducted," the French president told BFM TV in an interview.

Russia and Iran are the key allies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and their military intervention in Syria is widely seen as helping his regime stay in power.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday had welcomed the strikes, which he described as "appropriate" and strongly condemned the alleged chemical attack. But Cavusoglu said Macron was mistaken in his assessment and said that Ankara "expected statements befitting of a president" and should express himself "more seriously".

Earlier, Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag also hit back at Macron, saying our "Syria policy is not a policy of being on the same side or being opposed to another country." Bozdag's comments follow tension between Ankara and Paris after Macron offered to mediate between Turkey and outlawed Kurdish militants, an offer furiously rejected by Erdogan. —AFP

OPCW starts emergency talks on Douma attacks: diplomatic sources

THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS—The global chemical arms watchdog on Monday opened emergency talks on the suspected poison gas attack in the Syrian town of Douma, diplomatic sources told AFP.

The meeting has "just started," said one source as the closed-door talks went into session.

Earlier the British, Russian and French ambassadors were all seen arriving at the headquarters of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague.

The global chemical arms watchdog on Monday opened emergency talks on the suspected poison gas attack in the Syrian town of Douma, diplomatic sources said. **AFP**

The OPCW has 192 members, and Monday's governing executive council meeting of 41 states was called by its chairman, Bangladeshi ambassador Sheikh Mohammed Belal, "to discuss the alleged use of chemical weapons" in Syria.

An OPCW fact-finding team is also in Syria to probe the alleged attack on Douma in which 40 people died.—AFP

Syria urges transparency, impartiality, accuracy in chemical weapons probe

DAMASCUS—Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad said on Monday his government is keen to cooperate with the chemical weapons investigators who have arrived in Damascus three days ago, according to the state news agency SANA.

Mekdad said that the investigators of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) arrived in Damascus three days ago and held meetings with the Syrian government side, during which both sides discussed the cooperation for the team to carry out its work with transparency, impartiality, and accuracy.

The official also stressed the Syrian government's willingness to cooperate and facilitate the work of the OPCW team, which arrived to look into the allegations of chemical weapons use by the Syrian army on 7 April in the formerly rebel-held Douma district east of Damascus. The Syrian government side denied the accusations, accusing the rebels of staging and fabricating the attack to frame the Syrian army and attract foreign military campaign.

On Saturday, the US, France and Britain launched missile strikes on Syrian military positions in retaliation for the alleged chemical attack in Douma, without waiting for the results of the investigation.—Xinhua

NASA's new planet-hunter to seek closer, Earth-like worlds

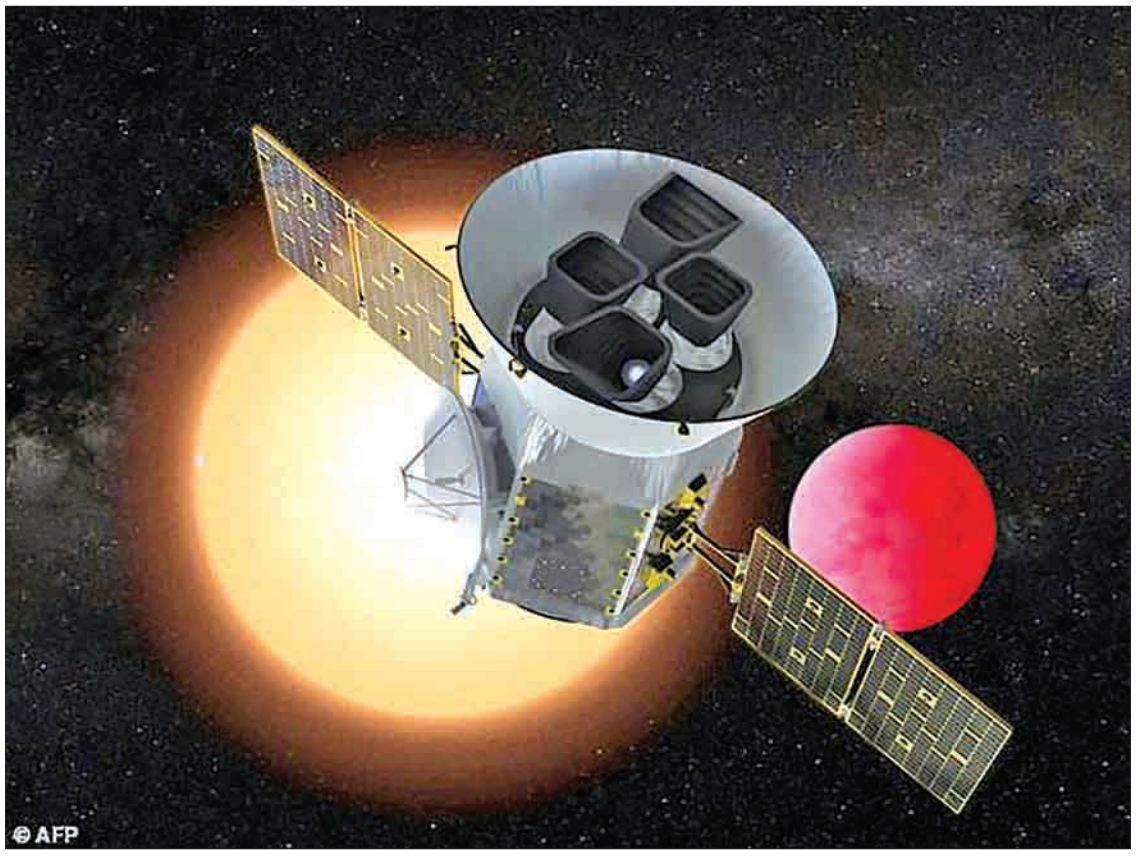
TAMPA—NASA is poised to launch a $337 million washing machine-sized spacecraft that aims to vastly expand mankind's search for planets beyond our solar system, particularly closer, Earth-sized ones that might harbor life.

The Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite, or TESS, is scheduled to launch on Monday at 6:32 pm (2232 GMT) atop a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Its main goal over the next two years is to scan more than 200,000 of the brightest stars for signs of planets circling them and causing a dip in brightness known as a transit. NASA predicts that TESS will discover 20,000 exoplanets — or planets outside the solar system — including more than 50 Earth-sized planets and up to 500 planets less than twice the size of Earth.

"They are going to be orbiting the nearest, brightest stars," Elisa Quintana, TESS scientist at NASA's Goddard Spaceflight Center, told reporters on Sunday.

"We might even find planets that orbit stars that we can even see with the naked eye," she added. "So in the next few years we might even be able to walk outside and point at a star and know that it has a planet. This is the future."



This NASA handout artist's rendition shows the Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite (TESS), a NASA Explorer mission launching in 2018 to study exoplanets, or planets orbiting stars outside our solar system. **PHOTO: AFP**

Follow-on to Kepler

Just a couple of decades ago, the notion of finding habitable planets — or any planets at all — was a mere fantasy, said Paul Hertz, astrophysics division director at NASA.

"Humans have wondered forever whether we were alone in the universe, and until 25 years ago the only planets we knew about were the eight in our own solar system," he told reporters on the eve of the TESS launch.

"But since then, we have found thousands of planets orbiting others stars and we think all the stars in our galaxy must have their own family of planets."

TESS is designed as a follow-on to the US space agency's Kepler spacecraft, which was the first of its kind and launched in 2009. The aging spacecraft is currently low on fuel and near the end of its life.

Kepler found a massive trove of exoplanets by focusing on one patch of sky, which contained about 150,000 stars like the Sun.

The Kepler mission found 2,300 confirmed exoplanets, and thousands more candidate planets. But many were too distant and dim to study further. TESS, with its four advanced cameras, will scan an area that is 350 times larger, comprising 85 percent of the sky in the first two years alone. "By looking at such a large section of the sky — this kind of stellar real estate — we open up the ability to cherry-pick the best stars to do follow-up science," said Jenn Burt, a postdoctoral fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

"On average the stars that TESS observes are 30-100 times brighter and 10 times closer than the stars that Kepler focused on."—AFP

Germany charges 94-year-old former Auschwitz guard

BERLIN—German prosecutors brought charges on Monday against a 94-year-old former Auschwitz guard, accusing him of abetting murder in the latest 11th-hour attempt to use the criminal justice system to address the Holocaust.

The public prosecutor's office in Stuttgart said it had filed charges of accessory to murder with the regional court in nearby Mannheim against the unnamed suspect, a German citizen born in Ruma in today's Serbia.

The then 19-year-old began his training as a guard at the Auschwitz death camp in German-occupied Poland in October 1942 and worked from December 1942 until January 1943 "supporting camp operations and thus acts of extermination", prosecutors said. "In this time, at least 15 rail transports arrived at the Auschwitz concentration camp after which people were immediately 'selected' based on their ability to work," they said.

"The prosecutor's office assumes that at least 13,335 of these people were classified as unfit to work and murdered in the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau."

The suspect said through his defence attorney that he was "not aware of the background, intent or procedures behind the killing" at Auschwitz.

The court in Mannheim must now decide if the case should go to trial. If so, the suspect will be tried before a juvenile court because he was a teenager at the time of his alleged crimes. More than one million people, mostly European Jews, perished at Auschwitz-Birkenau, operated by the Nazis from 1940 until it was liberated by Russian forces on 27 January, 1945.

The renewed German drive to bring to justice the last surviving perpetrators of the Holocaust follows a 2011 landmark court ruling.

For more than 60 years German courts had only prosecuted Nazi war criminals if evidence showed they had personally committed atrocities. But in 2011 a Munich court sentenced John Demjanjuk to five years in prison for complicity in the extermination of Jews at the Sobibor camp, where he had served as a guard, establishing that all former camp guards can be tried.

Three cases against former Auschwitz guards since then have gone to trial in Germany.

Two of the aged defendants, Reinhold Hanning and Oskar Groening, were convicted and have since died while the case against a third, Hubert Zafke, was thrown out in 2016 following complaints that the judges were biased.—AFP

New Zealand aims to open talks soon on 'progressive' EU trade deal

PARIS—New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said on Monday that she hoped to begin talks "in the coming months" on forging a free-trade agreement with the European Union, the country's biggest trading partner after Australia.

"I believe an EU-New Zealand FTA presents an opportunity to conclude an agreement that is a model for progressive and inclusive trade," Ardern said after talks with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris.

New Zealand mainly exports agriculture products to the bloc, which said in October that it would fast-track the trade talks by bypassing a risky national ratification process.

Both Ardern and Macron said the talks would take into account environmental and social concerns while being "mutually beneficial".

"Some of the concerns being raised domestically in New Zealand will be similar to the ones raised in France," Ardern said in reference to potential resistance from French and European farmers.

"Our goal is a model that will demonstrate to the public that we want to deliver free-trade agreements that can benefit and be prosperous for both our citizens."—AFP

Seven killed, 17 injured in South Carolina prison riot: official

LEE COUNTY—Seven inmates were killed and 17 others injured in a riot at a maximum security prison in South Carolina, the southern US state's Department of Corrections said on Monday.

The department said the riot erupted Sunday evening at the Lee Correctional Institution in Bishopville, South Carolina and was brought under control at 2:55 am on Monday. "The incident at Lee CI resulted in 17 inmates requiring outside medical attention and 7 inmates were killed," the department said on its Twitter account. All prison guards and law enforcement authorities who responded were "safe and accounted for."

The department had initially described the riot as an "ongoing incident," revealing the scope of the problem hours after its start at 7:15 pm on Sunday.

"The incident involved multiple inmate on inmate altercations in three housing units," the department said.—AFP

Japan, China affirm importance of free trade amid friction with US

TOKYO—Japan and China agreed on Monday on the importance of the global free trade system amid escalating trade friction between China and the United States.

"We share the recognition that bringing on a trade war would have a huge impact on the prosperity of the global economy," Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono told reporters after a high-level bilateral economic dialogue in Tokyo.

China's Foreign Ministry quoted State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi as saying in the dialogue that Japan and China "should jointly oppose trade protectionism and preserve the multilateral trade system.

A recent thaw in bilateral relations prompted Japan and China to return to the dialogue framework after a roughly eight-year hiatus.

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono (second from R) and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi (second from L) hold high-level economic talks at the Iikura Guest House in Tokyo on 16 April, 2018. **PHOTO: KYODO NEWS**

Kono, who led the Japanese side in the talks, said Japan had said something needs to be done about China's overproduction of steel, and asked it to join international frameworks for the free and fair transfer of technology while ensuring the protection of intellectual property.

The administration of US President Donald Trump has cited both of the issues as driving its new tariffs on imports of various Chinese products and commodities.

The tariffs and China's retaliatory action have prompted worldwide concern over a trade war.

Although primarily aimed at China, the US tariffs on steel and aluminum imports rolled out last month also apply to Japan.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is expected to repeat Japan's call for an exemption like those granted to other US allies when he holds talks with Trump in Florida later this week.

Kono said the Japanese and Chinese officials discussed their countries' visions for development across the Indo-Pacific region—Japan's "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy and China's "One Belt, One Road" infrastructure megaproject.

Wang said at the outset of the talks that China hopes to "deepen dialogue" with Japan about working together on the Chinese project. Kono said Japan told China it is willing to "cooperate on a case-by-case basis" with projects that meet international standards regarding transparency, openness, feasibility, the fiscal soundness of the countries that accept financing, and environmental and social considerations.

According to Japanese officials, the Chinese side replied that Beijing is of the same mind as Japan on the importance of international standards.—Kyodo News ■

Large bushfire burns near homes on Sydney outskirts

SYDNEY—Hundreds of firefighters were on Monday battling a large bushfire that was raging near Sydney suburbs, with authorities saying it was "miraculous" no houses had been damaged and no-one had been injured.

New South Wales state police are investigating the cause of the bushfire in south-western Sydney, which started on Saturday afternoon amid unseasonably warm autumn weather and strong winds, with suspicions it was deliberately lit. The blaze has burnt through more than 2,430 hectares (6,005 acres) so far, with some locals evacuated from their homes.

Despite the fire's size and its proximity to several suburbs, with some locals evacuated from their homes, no properties were known to be lost, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service said.

"It is absolutely miraculous that we have not lost any lives and virtually no property and this is because of the hard work and dedication and heroism of our fire services," the state's acting Emergency Services Minister Mark Speakman told reporters on Monday.

Authorities said it was "miraculous" no-one had been hurt in the blaze. **PHOTO: AFP**

NSW Rural Fire Service Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said the only damage reports were of fences and a children's playhouse caught in the fire's advance.

Conditions had improved Monday as winds eased, with firefighters working to slow the spread of the flames. They also conducted controlled burns overnight to clear land that could be combustible.

Fitzsimmons said it would be "sickening and reprehensible" if the fire was discovered to have been arson.

He added that a variety of conditions, including a dry summer, contributed to the magnitude of the blaze.

"When you add on to that the unseasonably hot couple of weeks we came into autumn and into the month of April, we were talking about temperatures well and truly in the 30s (degrees Celsius), which were unprecedented," Fitzsimmons said.—AFP■

Malaysia's Mahathir to contest on holiday island in election

KUALA LUMPUR—Malaysia's veteran ex-leader Mahathir Mohamad will run at an upcoming general election on the holiday island of Langkawi, the opposition announced on Sunday, as he seeks to oust the scandal-plagued government.

Mahathir has come out of retirement and joined the opposition alliance to take on his former protege, Prime Minister Najib Razak, who has become embroiled in a massive corruption controversy.

The 9 May poll will be a tough test for Najib's coalition, which has governed Malaysia for six decades.

But 92-year-old Mahathir, the opposition's prime ministerial candidate, is still not expected to beat the party he led for years.

About 5,000 supporters gathered at a rally late Sunday on Langkawi, which attracts hordes of foreign tourists each year to its palm-fringed beaches, for the announcement of his candidacy.

"Najib came and gave a lot of money to Langkawi people, but these people gave the money to us to fight Najib," he told the cheering crowd.

Mahathir Mohamad is still not expected to beat the party he led for years. **PHOTO:AFP**

"He thought cash is king—but the people of Langkawi know that it is stolen money."

Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, a senior figure in opposition coalition Pact of Hope, then formally announced Mahathir would run in Langkawi.

It should be a safe seat for Mahathir—he helped develop the island into a major tourist destination during his time in office, and is well-liked there.

Billions of dollars were allegedly looted from sovereign wealth fund 1MDB, which Najib set up and oversaw, in an audacious scheme of fraud and money laundering. Najib and the fund deny any wrongdoing.—AFP■

Beyonce throws Coachella homecoming with Destiny's Child reunion

INDIO, CALIFORNIA—Beyonce returned spectacularly to the stage on Saturday with a joyous, homecoming-themed party at the Coachella festival where she delighted fans with a rare reunion of her former trio Destiny's Child.

Before a sea of some 100,000 people in the southern California desert, the pop superstar headlined the second night of the premier global music festival, ending a year-long hiatus from live music as she gave birth to twins.

Beyonce showed no sign of slowing down after her maternity leave, singing and strutting her stuff with little break for two hours as she led around 100 back-up dancers and musicians.

Her husband, rap mogul Jay-Z, popped up on stage toward the end of her set to join in their song "Deja Vu." But he turned out to be only a preview of a less routine guest appearance.

With an audio recording of novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's essay "We Should All Be Feminists" allowing Beyonce a moment to prepare, she re-

Beyonce reunites with her girl band Destiny's Child at Coachella. **PHOTO: AFP**

emerged being elevated to the stage in an unmistakable silhouette of three figures.

Fellow Destiny's Child members Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams joined Beyonce for three of the trio's songs, including "Say My Name."

It was their first reunion since Beyonce's Super Bowl halftime show in 2013. The group propelled Beyonce to stardom but was also beset by internal friction.

On Saturday, Beyonce referred to her bandmates as her "sisters" —and was also joined on stage by her real sister, Solange Knowles.

Beyonce made clear from the start that Coachella was about reuniting, with an announcer starting the show by welcoming guests to her "homecoming."

A school's worth of brass and string players played from stadium-style stands as Beyonce entered to a New Orleans-style march. She sported an all-American outfit of tight jean shorts and a collegiate sweatshirt —the Greek letters, of course, starting with "B."

After revving up the crowd with fireworks and the boisterous "Crazy in Love," Beyonce offered a take on "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the unofficial African American national anthem.

Beyonce voiced pride that she was the first black woman to headline Coachella. She is one of the few women to top the bill of any major festival, a sign of lingering male dominance of the music industry.

Coachella takes place over two consecutive weekends with identical lineups.

Next weekend, Beyonce may want to check her shoes —after changing into a racier bodysuit, she appeared to hold herself back at moments for fear of dancing her feet out of her boots.—AFP ■

Miss Sunshine' star Dano to make directorial debut at Cannes

PARIS—Hollywood star Paul Dano's much-anticipated directorial debut, "Wildlife", will open Critics' Week at the Cannes film festival next month, the organisers said on Monday.

The film by the "There Will Be Blood" and "Little Miss Sunshine" actor features his friend Jake Gyllenhaal, who played opposite Dano in the Oscar-nominated "Prisoners" in 2013.

The film is based on a Richard Ford novel about a teenager watching his parents' marriage fall apart. Critics' Week director Charles Tesson said it includes an "extremely impressive" performance from British actress Carey Mulligan, who was nominated for an Oscar for her performance in "An Education", the coming-of-age drama based on journalist Lynn Barber's best-selling memoir.

"Paul Dano shows himself to be a true cineaste in his first feature film," Tesson told AFP, "a profoundly human portrait at the disintegration of an American family... done with elegant classicism."

Zoe Colette, Ed Oxenbould, Jake Gyllenhaal, Paul Dano, Carey Mulligan and Zoe Kazan attend the 'Wildlife' Premiere during the 2018 Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. **PHOTO: AFP**

The parallel event for first- and second-time directors, which starts on 9 May, the day after the main Cannes festival, also features a parody of the life of a superstar footballer not unlike Cristiano Ronaldo called "Diamantino".

Although its Portuguese-American co-director Gabriel Abrantes has said that the film is "not really about" the Real Madrid star, Tesson said the "delightful off-the-wall" comedy would ring bells with football fans.

Women dominate

Unlike the main festival, which has been criticised for its dearth of female talent, Critics' Week is dominated by films by and about women.

While only three of the 18 films competing for the top Palme d'Or prize are by women, they make up the majority in the Critics' Week competition.—AFP ■

'Rampage' sneaks past 'Quiet Place' to a box-office lead

LOS ANGELES—Sci-fi action flick "Rampage" topped North American box offices over the weekend, taking in an estimated $34.5 million to barely beat out horror film "A Quiet Place," industry tracker Exhibitor Relations said on Sunday.

"Rampage" stars hard-working Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson in a plot perhaps better seen than described: He plays a primatologist who befriends an albino gorilla who grows to enormous size after a rogue experiment and who then teams with Johnson to stop invading monsters.

While the three-day take for the new Warner Bros. film was said to be one of the best ever for a video game spinoff, its $120 million budget means the movie "will need to have strong legs to make its money back," Hollywood Reporter said. Naomie Harris co-stars.

"A Quiet Place," in its second week, took in a healthy $32.6 million, buoyed by rave reviews.—AFP ■

'Rampage,' starring Dwayne Johnson and Naomie Harris -- seen here at the film's recent London premiere -- led North American box offices over the weekend. **PHOTO: AFP**

Japan's Alpine sightseeing route featuring 17-meter snow walls opens

People walk through a pathway with snow walls as tall as 17 meters each side of the road in Toyama Prefecture on 16 April, 2018. The Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route opened that day after wintertime closure. **PHOTO: KYODO NEWS**

TOYAMA—A sightseeing route running through the Tateyama mountain range in central Japan's Northern Alps opened on Monday, offering views at one point of snow walls as tall as 17 metres each side of the road.

The Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route, which connects the town of Tateyama in Toyama Prefecture and the city of Omachi in Nagano, is popular with its spectacles of mountains, valleys and waterfalls.

Until June 22, visitors can walk through a pathway next to the high snow walls, called "Yuki no Otani" (Huge valley of snow), created by snow removal work. It is forged through the Tateyama Murodo plateau at an altitude of 2,450 metres.

"I was so surprised at the size. I guess we cannot see such a high snow wall anywhere else," said Yusuke Ogura, 32, who came from the western Japan prefecture of Wakayama.

The opening of the 37.2-kilometre-long sightseeing route for this season was pushed back one day because of heavy snowstorms.

Given a growing number of foreign tourists, the route operator expects 1 million visitors, up some 70,000 from a year ago, during the season through the end of November.—Kyodo News

Names of members of Japan WWII 'germ warfare' unit to be released

Visitors look at a scene of human experiments at the Unit 731 museum in Harbin in northeast China in 2015. **PHOTO: AFP**

KYOTO—A group of Japanese scholars is set to reveal the names of the members of a Japanese World War II germ warfare unit that infected and starved Chinese and allied POWs in a series of gruesome experiments.

Katsuo Nishiyama, professor emeritus of Shiga University of Medical Science in western Japan, has told local media his team is analysing a list of 3,607 members and plans to publish it online to encourage further historical study of the unit.

"This is the first time that we see a list of the names of nearly all its members being released in the form of an official document," the Mainichi Shimbun daily quoted Nishiyama as saying.

Unit 731 of the Imperial Japanese Army was set up in Manchuria after Japan formed a puppet state in northeastern China in 1931.

Its members— some of them physicians from Japan's top medical universities—conducted human experiments, injecting plague and other germs into their victims, testing germ bombs, and artificially causing frostbite to victims while depriving them of sleep and food.

The Japanese government denied the existence of the unit until 1998, when the Supreme Court indirectly acknowledged it by ruling there was an academic consensus that Unit 731 existed.

The list, recently released by the National Archives of Japan to Nishiyama's team, includes the names, ranks and addresses of those who belonged to Unit 731, according to the Mainichi Shimbun.

"This piece of valuable evidence supports all the testimonies given by those who knew the unit. This is a big step forward for efforts to reveal the hidden truth," Nishiyama said.

The list includes 52 surgeons, 49 engineers, 38 nurses and 1,117 combat medics of the unit.

Nishiyama could not be reached for immediate comment.

Japan, unlike Germany, has been widely accused of failing fully to face up to its wartime atrocities.—AFP ■

Former first lady Barbara Bush, 92, 'in failing health'

HOUSTON—Former US first lady Barbara Bush is in "failing health" after a series of hospitalizations and "has decided not to seek additional medical treatment," her husband's office said in a statement on Sunday.

It said that Mrs Bush, after consulting with relatives and doctors, had decided to "focus on comfort care" at the family home in Houston.

"She is surrounded by a family she adores, and appreciates the many kind messages and especially the prayers she is receiving," said the brief statement from the office of former president George HW Bush.

The statement provided no details on her condition, but Mrs Bush had been hospitalized for bronchitis treatment in January 2017. She had heart surgery in 2009, and was operated on for an ulcer the year before. She had been treated in the past for the thyroid ailment known as Graves' disease.

"The President's and First Lady's prayers are with all of the Bush Family during this time," said White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders.

Barbara Bush has long been considered the rock at the centre of one of America's most prominent political families, as the wife of a president, the mother of another, George W Bush, and the mother also of a former Florida governor and one-time presidential aspirant, Jeb Bush.

She first met her husband-to-be at the age of 16; she was a schoolgirl and he was a student at an elite preparatory school in Massachusetts. They married in 1945 while he was on leave from wartime service as a naval officer. The couple had six children.

As first lady, from 1989 to 1993, she embraced the cause of universal literacy, and founded a foundation for family literacy.

She gained a reputation for toughness, wry humor and straight-speaking. Asked in 2010 about former Alaska Governor Sarah Palin— who sought the vice presidency in 2008—Mrs Bush told an interviewer, "I sat next to her once, thought she was beautiful, and I think she's very happy in Alaska, and I hope she'll stay there."—AFP ■

Pacquiao: 'No decision' on trainer after reports Roach ditched

MANILA—Manny Pacquiao said Monday he had not yet chosen a trainer for his July world title fight with Lucas Matthysse, dismissing reports he has cut ties with long-standing mentor Freddie Roach.

The veteran US ring guru Roach said last week that his 15-year association with Pacquiao, who has won world titles in an unprecedented eight weight divisions, had been terminated ahead of the Matthysse bout in Malaysia.

"I would be lying if I didn't say I wasn't hurt that he didn't contact me personally about his decision, but the great times we enjoyed together far outweigh that," Roach said in a brief statement on Friday.

But Pacquiao went on social media Monday to say that he would make a decision later this week on his corner team for the Kuala Lumpur fight with the Argentine World Boxing Association welterweight champion.

"Contrary to statements which I personally did not make that are circulating in the media, I have not made my final decision who will be my head trainer for my 14 July (US time zone) fight with Matthysse," he said.

Pacquiao — who has a record of 59 wins with 38 KOs, seven losses and two draws — told millions of followers on his official Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts that his adviser Mike Koncz "has been in contact with Freddie (Roach)'s people to keep them informed.

"I will make a final decision within the week. When that decision is made, Freddie will be the first one to be informed and then I will advise the media," the 39-year-old added.

Roach was ever-present in Pacquiao's corner during his rise to the pinnacle of his sport, helping mould the fighter into one of the best boxers in history.

Pacquiao has not fought since being defeated on points by Australia's Jeff Horn in Brisbane last July, a loss that cost the Filipino star his World Boxing Organization welterweight crown.

Matthysse, who has 39 wins including 36 KOs against four defeats, won the vacant WBA belt after beating Thailand's Teerachai Sithmorseng in January.—AFP

Manny Pacquiao (right) works out with his long-standing trainer Freddie Roach last year. **PHOTO: AFP**

Life after Bolt: new-look Jamaica fail Commonwealth test

GOLD COAST—As sprint legend Usain Bolt partied into the early hours and hung out with movie stars at the Commonwealth Games, it wasn't so much fun for the Jamaica track team he left behind.

At their first major competition since Bolt retired after a decade of dominance, the Jamaican juggernaut caught a flat on the Gold Coast, failing to win a single sprinting gold medal.

Yohan Blake's flop in the men's 100 metres set the tone as Jamaica's confidence was immediately dented by South African Akani Simbine.

Jamaica's pre-race favourite Yohan Blake (R) finished third in the 100 metres. **PHOTO: AFP**

Blake, who picked up a world title in 2011 after Bolt false-started, could only finish third behind Simbine's countryman Henricho Bruintjies after a calamitous start.

To add insult to injury, double Olympic champion Elaine Thompson failed to win a medal in the women's 200m as Shaunae Miller-Uibo romped to victory for the Bahamas.

And with Trinidad and Tobago's Jereem Richards capturing gold in the men's 200m and countrywoman Michelle-Lee Ahye an upset winner of the women's 100m, Jamaica's Caribbean rivals enjoyed their days in the sun.

Jamaica's Olympic chief insisted that there was no crisis, pointing to a new generation of sprinters coming through.

"It was a perfectly creditable performance," Christopher Samuda told AFP. "Jamaican athletes usually peak in June or July.

"Usain Bolt had a very big influence but we have a wealth of talent and the future for Jamaican sprinting is in very good hands."

But after the Jamaican men's 4x100m relay team were crushed by England to take third behind South Africa in a puny title defence, Bolt took to social media to question whether he had retired too soon.

"Watching the relay just now made me ask myself a few questions," tweeted the eight-time Olympic champion, who watched part of the athletics with Hollywood heartthrob Chris Hemsworth.—AFP

Johnson outlasts Sandgren to repeat as US Clay champion

LOS ANGELES—Steve Johnson captured his second consecutive ATP US Clay Court Championship title on Sunday by outlasting fellow American Tennys Sandgren 7-6 (7/2), 2-6, 6-4.

Sixth seed Johnson won his third career ATP title, taking two in a row on Houston clay after his first victory came in 2016 at Nottingham.

Johnson, who is getting married next weekend, was the first back-to-back US Clay court winner since Andy Roddick in 2001-02.

American eighth seed Sandgren, who made a stunning run to the Australian Open quarter-finals in January, was playing in his first tour final.

Johnson, ranked five spots ahead of Sandgren at 51, had never before faced the shock Aussie Open upstart, who ousted Stan Wawrinka and Dominic Thiem, two top-10 foes, at Melbourne in January.

It was an emotional victory for Johnson, whose father Steve Sr. died 11 months ago and last saw him play in last year's Houston final.

After the final point, Johnson made a cross sign and fist-pumped to the heavens, then buried his head on Sandgren's shoulder, overcame by memories and the moment.—AFP

Steve Johnson, pictured in action in March 2016, won his third career ATP title in Houston. **PHOTO: AFP**