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THE GLOBAL NEW LIGHT OF MYANMAR

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Myanmar continues to practise independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy: Senior General



State Administration Council Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing presides over the Foreign Affairs Policy Committee meeting at the Office of the State Administration Council in Nay Pyi Taw on 18 February 2021.

Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Policy Committee, Chairman of the State Administration Council and Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing made a speech at the 1/2021 meeting of Foreign Affairs Policy Committee yesterday.

The meeting was attended by the Council members, General Mya Tun Oo, U Thein Nyunt, U Khin Maung Swe, Secretary and Union Minister for Foreign Affairs U Wunna Maung Lwin, Union Minister for International Cooperation U Ko Ko Hlaing,

Union Minister for Labour, Immigration and Population U Myint Kyaing, Deputy Minister for Planning, Finance and Industry Daw Than Than Lin, and Deputy Minister for Investment and Foreign Economic Relations U Than Aung Kyaw.

In delivering a speech, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing talked about Section 41 of the State Constitution to practise independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy aimed at world peace and friendly relations with nations and upholds the principles of peaceful coexistence among nations.

He also quoted Section 42 (a) of the Constitution, stipulating that 'The Union shall not commence aggression against any nation', and Section 42 (b) 'No foreign troops shall be permitted to be deployed in the territory of the Union'.

The Senior General added that as Myanmar is bordering with two powerful countries, and that careful measures must be taken in all steps of bilateral relations with these countries, while other countries are watching the relations of Myanmar with these countries.

He also said that Myanmar

needs to maintain friendly, peaceful and neighbouring relationship with Bangladesh, India, China, Laos and Thailand as Myanmar should not stand separately among these countries.

The Senior General continued to say about expanding international relations during the term of Tatmadaw government and participation in the international arena, the importance of the relationship with neighbouring countries which have diverse policies and cultures and strengthening friendly relations with these countries.

Regarding foreign investment sector, Myanmar should welcome principled and ethical investments of neighbouring countries; investment from neighbouring countries could reduce the number of migrant workers to these countries and could promote bilateral relations, tourism sector and trade.

He also remarked that the development of the investment sector could substitute import items, reducing trade deficiency of the country and advised to support such type of investment.

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Republic of the Union of Myanmar
State Administration Council
Order No (73/2021)

7th Waxing of Tabodwe 1382 ME
18 February 2021

Appointment of Central Bank Members

The State Administration Council has appointed the following persons as Central Bank members, as per Section 419 of the State Constitution.

1. U Kyaw Win
2. Dr Lin Aung

By order
Sd/ Aung Lin Dway
Lieutenant-General
Secretary
State Administration Council

Public Notification

7th Waxing of Tabodwe 1382
18 February 2021

1. The Central Committee on Prevention, Control and Treatment of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) deems it necessary to continue implementing preventive measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 and made an announcement on 29 January 2021 that all directives, notifications, requests to the public, and orders issued by Union-level institutions and ministries regarding the prevention, control and treatment of COVID-19 until 31 January 2021 (excluding those that have been ordered to be eased) will be extended to 28 February 2021.
2. It was also announced on 27 January 2021 that the Ministry of Electricity and Energy has exempted electricity bill for 150 units from 1 January to 31 January.
3. As the date for COVID-19 control measures has been set until 28 February 2021, the exemption for 150 units of electricity will be extended from 1 to 28 February.
4. Thus, a total of 150 units from domestic consumption between 1 and 28 February 2021 for residential homes, religious buildings, and domestic humanitarian groups (excluding embassies, UN agencies and international organizations) will be deducted from the electricity bill in this period.
5. All relevant households that have consumed from 1 to 150 units of electricity will have their meter bill and service fees exempted (free of charge), while consumption of 151 units and above will have K11,550 for 150 units deducted from the total meter bill.
6. Domestic consumption of 151 units and above will have to make payments according to the different levels of consumption rate. Local civil society organizations in the NGO category are the only type of non-domestic consumers that will have the exemption applied to them. The other non-domestic types will have to continue payments at regular rates.

Ministry of Electricity and Energy



People receive medical treatments at military hospitals

MILITARY hospitals in respective commands have provided medical services to 16,143 outpatients and 2,767 inpatients from 5 February until now.

Among them, 702 patients received major operations, and 334 patients did minor operations. Professors and medics also gave intensive medical treatments to serious cases.

Moreover, 407 babies were born by caesarean section and 620 with regular delivery, totalling 1,027 babies until now.

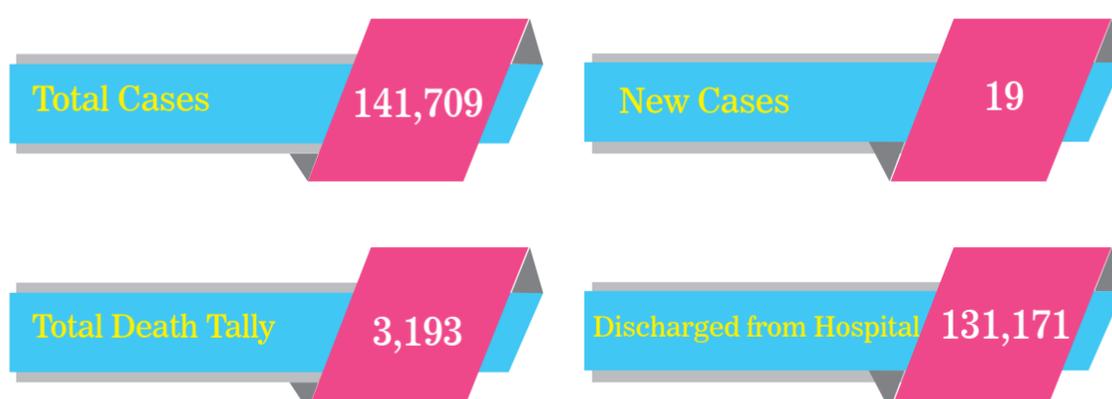
The Young Men's Buddhist Association also donated 100 rice bags to the 1,000-bedded military hospital in Mingaladon Township, Yangon, and the 500-bedded military hospital yesterday.—MNA

One of the local inpatients is seen receiving medical treatment at the military hospital.

19 new cases of COVID-19 reported on 18 February, total figure rises to 141,709

MYANMAR'S COVID-19 positive cases rose to 141,709 after 19 new cases were reported on 18 February 2021 according to the Ministry of Health and Sports. Among these confirmed cases, 3,193 died, 131,171 have been discharged from hospitals.—MNA

Updated at 8 pm, 18 February 2021



Daily death toll until 8 pm 18-2-2021



Ministry of Health and Sports

Myanmar continues to practise independent, active and non-aligned foreign policy: Senior General

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The Senior General discussed responsibilities of Myanmar to abide by all the possible issues included in the pacts and agreements signed as a member of the United Nations, making demarcation of sea boundaries urgently, protection of Myanmar migrant workers abroad, providing assistance in their voluntary repatriation, and containment measures against COVID-19

pandemic.

He also talked about international assistance, loans and aid for special programmes which are useful for the development of the country, and gave advice on the collaboration of the relevant ministries with the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population to prevent trafficking in persons, implementation of repatriation programmes for the displaced persons in accordance

with policies of the country, bilateral agreements and laws.

General Mya Tun Oo, the members of the Council and Union Ministers, reported on the formation and the works of Foreign Affairs Policy Committee in line with the 2008 State Constitution, 12 tasks of the Committee, accelerating international relations, repatriation programmes for the former Myanmar citizens abroad, issuing

verification cards to Myanmar migrant workers, delay of repatriation programmes to bring back the displaced persons from Bangladesh and preparations for presenting foreign policy of the Council at the international meetings.

In his concluding remark, the Senior General said information about the existing situations of the country to the international community, pro-

motion of diplomatic relations, improvement of positive attitude on the prevailing situations of the country, implementation of agreements and pledges with other countries, holding celebrations to mark bilateral ties with other countries including China, the crucial role of Committee to promote international economic relations and recovery of the national economy and international relationship.—MNA

Vice-Senior General Soe Win meets Brunei's Commander-in-Chief online

VICE-CHAIRMAN of the State Administration Council Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Commander-in-Chief (Army) Vice-Senior General Soe Win met Major-General Dato Seri Pahlawan Haji Hamzah bin Haji Sahat, the Commander of Royal Brunei Armed Forces through video-conferencing yesterday afternoon.

The meeting discussed the invitation condition to the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services to participate in the 18th ASEAN Chiefs



Vice-Chairman of the State Administration Council Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Vice-Senior General Soe Win meets Brunei's Commander-in-Chief online on 18 February 2021.

of Defence Forces' Meeting Brunei on 18 March 2021, working paper to be presented at the meeting and the training cooperation between the two armies in the post COVID-19 period.—MNA

Tatmadaw medical corps provides healthcare services at Loilem hospital

THE Tatmadaw medical team consisted of Tatmadaw doctors, specialists, and nurses have been providing necessary healthcare services to the patients at Loilem Public Hospital, and they were warmly welcomed by the residents.

Officials from the Central East Military Command formed the Tamadaw medical team upon the request of the residents due to the absence of 41 doctors and 80 nurses, including Hospital Superintendent Dr Myo Zaw, who are participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement since 13 February. —MNA

137 courses for diploma, postgraduate in medical education to be conducted

A total of 2,082 trainees will be allowed for 137 courses of diploma and postgraduate at medical universities and related universities under the Ministry of Health and Sports in 2021 academic year.

The applications for these courses shall be submitted commencing 2nd week of February.

Sr	University	Diploma	M.Sc	Doctorate	Total
1	Universities of Medicine	7	31	47	85
2	Universities of Dental Medicine	2	10	9	21
3	Universities of Nursing	1	9	1	11
4	Universities of Medical Technology	1	3	3	7
5	Universities of Pharmacy	-	4	4	8
6	University of Public Health	1	2	1	4
7	University of Community Health	-	1	-	1
Total		12	60	65	137

OFFICIALS who are responsible for the stability of the State, the rule of law, lives and property of the public are handling the ongoing problems with care; the State Administration Council have never deviated from the multiparty democracy path since it took the administrative power and measures are being taken in line with the 2008 State Constitution; the Council does not change politic, administrative, economic, social, peace and international relation policies of the country; the emerging situations have resulted from voter list fraud in the previous elections; the Council is working together with prominent persons from civil societies as it focused on the civilian administrative sector.

*(Excerpt from the speech to the coordination meeting of the State Administration Council
made by the Republic of the Union of Myanmar State Administration Council Chairman
Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on 16 February 2021)*

CBM holds coordination meeting

THE Central Bank of Myanmar organized a coordination meeting at its headquarters in Nay Pyi Taw yesterday morning.

Those present at the meeting were CBM Governor U Than Nyein, Vice-Governors U Win Thaw and Daw Than Than Swe, Director-General of Foreign Exchange Management Department Daw May Toe Win, Deputy Director-General of Accounts Department Daw Khine Shwe Wah, officials and staff members.

At the meeting, the Governor expressed his appreciation for the implementation of foreign exchange policy to strengthen financial sector for the economic development of the country, supervising foreign exchange management, a better system for payment and clearing account and development of financial market,



CBM Governor U Than Nyein chairs the coordination meeting in Nay Pyi Taw on 18 February 2021.

which were carried out by the relevant departments.

He added the CBM plays a crucial role in effective implementation of financial system, and requirement of human resource development, and getting technical assistance from international organizations.

The Director-General of Foreign Exchange Management Department discussed implementing the reference foreign exchange rate, foreign investment, foreign exchange licence, financial market services assistance among the banks, foreign remittance

services and management in export/import sector.

The Deputy Director-General of Accounts Department explained payments and accounts clearance, the implementation of Myanmar National Payments System Strategy, drafting the bills for payment

system, the second phase of CBM-NET system for secure and efficient payment and settlement infrastructure, the Automated Clearing House (ACH), the International Financial Reporting Standards, payment system with ASEAN member countries, selling of Government Treasury Bonds in the interbank market under repurchase agreement system to promote financial market development, easy transfer of payment between the state-owned banks and the private banks with 24/7 day services, collecting income tax through CBM-NET system and payment system with the Asian Clearing Union member countries.

Departmental officials presented the details and the deputy governors discussed further work plans.—MNA

Security forces detain protestors in Nay Pyi Taw Council Area

THE protests that seem to harm the stability of the State, the security of people, the rule of law, community peace and tranquillity currently occur in some large cities of the nation. Therefore, Section 144 of Criminal Procedure and a ban on gatherings of 5 or more people

have been imposed.

Despite the imposition, about 200 protestors built protest camps yesterday on Pynmana-Taungnyo road near Thabyay Kone roundabout in Zabuthiri Township of Nay Pyi Taw Council Area starting 9:30 am and shouted out slangs that

cause unrest, via hand speakers.

The township administration council members, administrative officials and Myanmar Police Force repeatedly requested the protestors to disperse as their doings were disturbing others and causing

traffic jams.

The protestors did not disperse and so police members dispersed them in accordance with the prescribed crowd dispersal methods. Meanwhile, the protestors committed violent acts using catapults and throwing stones, bricks and nuts that

can cause serious wounds. The large protest crowd was dispersed at about 3 pm.

No one was injured in the protest. The police detained 44 protestors who committed violent acts together with their materials, and will conduct in accordance with the law.—MNA

Protestors block railway in Chanayethazan of Mandalay

THE protests currently occurred in some large cities of the country, and the protestors also blocked the ways and threatened the staff to disrupt the government mechanism.

They also disrupted the works of Myanmar Railways on 17 February in inspecting the Mandalay-Thasi railway section and locomotives to run to other regions and states from Mandalay Region.

The officials of Myanmar Railways, led by the general manager of railways for upper Myanmar and police members, scrutinized the Mandalay-Thasi railway section and locomotives at about 4 pm on 17 February. About 100 protestors blocked the railway near 34th street and



The protestors block railway whereas the police members clear the blocked materials in Mandalay yesterday.

78th x79th streets in Chanayethazan with iron bars, logs and stones, and it caused unrest.

The general manager, township administrators and officials requested the protestors not to do such moves. When the

police members removed the blocked materials, the protestors threw stones, sticks and knives at the police. Therefore, the police shot rubber bullets to disperse. The protest crowd dispersed at about 9 pm. The

officials will take appropriate actions against those who participated in the unrest.

Due to such doings, a locomotive ran on Mandalay-Thasi railway section to inspect the risks yesterday morning. Tat-

madaw and police members conduct security measures not to occur riots in the country, and for good transportation in accordance with the law the whole day.—MNA



Combined forces taking security measures for public

COMBINED forces of Tatmadaw personnel, police members and fire brigade forces are taking security measures in public areas round the clock.

To lessen anxiety of people amid some rumours and escalating protests in some major cities, the combined forces will work for the rule of law in respective areas of regions and states.—MNA

A convoy of the combined forces' vehicles is seen taking security measures in public areas round the clock.

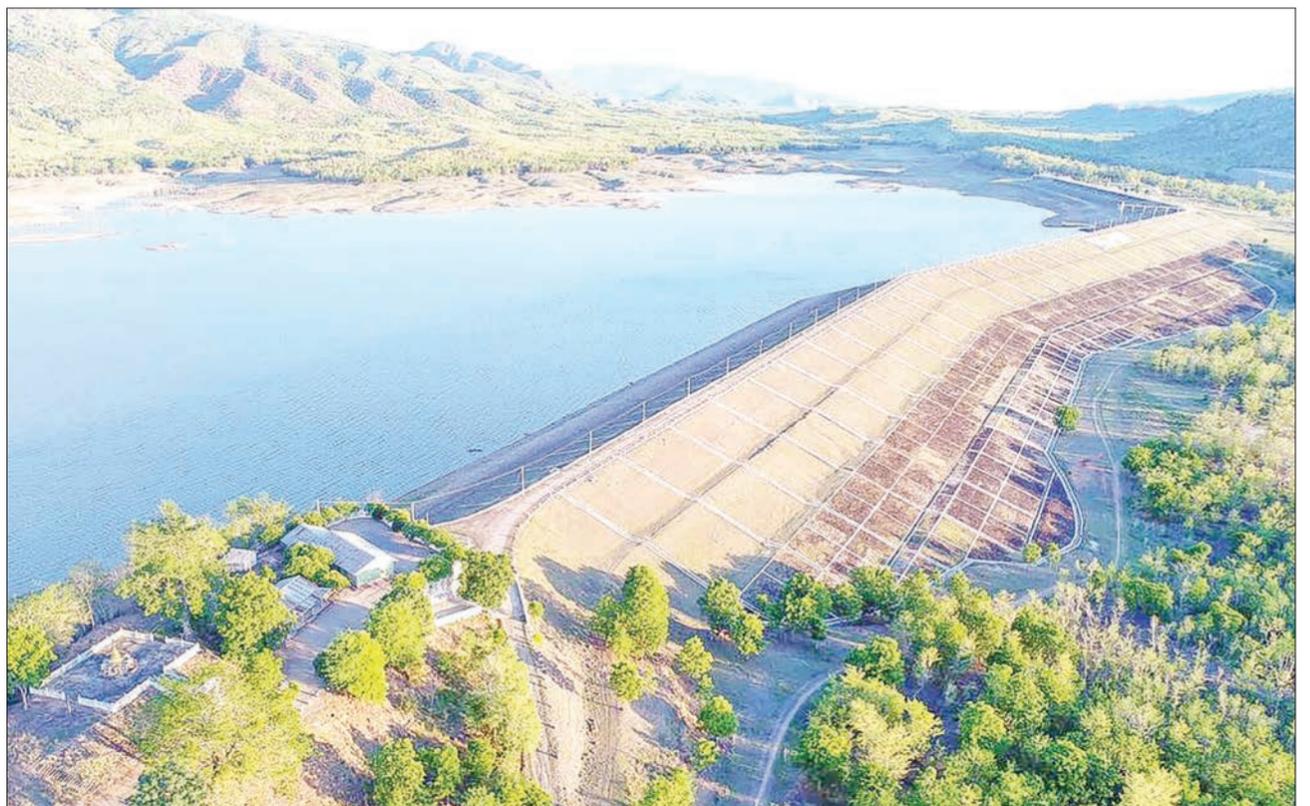
Irrigation water distributed to grow 1,150-acre summer sesame in Ngaphe

IRRIGATION water from Manchaung dam and Yinchay dam was distributed in February to grow 1,150 acres of summer sesame in time in Ngape township in Minbu district, Magway region.

There is no sufficient irrigation water in Manchaung dam and Yinchay dam. So, these two dams could not supply the water enough for summer paddy in 2021. But, these dams distributed the irrigation water to grow only summer sesame.

The Yinchay dam supplied the irrigation water from 1 February to 15 February to grow 150 acres of summer sesame in two farmlands, while Manchaung dam will distribute the water from 15 February to 28 February to the 15 farmlands from five village-tracts along the dam area to grow 1,000 acres of summer sesame, said U Aung Ko Oo, the head of Ngaphe township Irrigation and Water Utilization Management Department under the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation.

Last year, about 1,550 acres of summer sesame were cultivated in Ngaphe township using dam water, pond water and underground water. This year, the department targeted to grow about 1,150 acres of summer sesame using irrigation water from Manchaung and Yinchay dams. — Ma Yu (Ngaphe)/GNLM



The Yinchay dam supplied the irrigation water from 1 February to 15 February to grow 150 acres of summer sesame in two farmlands, while Manchaung dam will distribute the water from 15 February to 28 February to the 15 farmlands from five village-tracts along the dam area to grow 1,000 acres of summer sesame



Devotees make worships at religious places

RELIGIOUS devotees visited respective pagodas and temples for worship across the country when reopened on 8 February after the closure of these places for several months due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.

The pilgrims arrived at Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Maha Muni Buddha Image in Mandalay and Uppatasanti Pagoda in Nay Pyi Taw to pay homage to the pagodas in line with COVID-19 rules.

Moreover, other religious devotees made their worships at the respective sites of their faith.—MNA

Devotees are seen worshipping the Uppatasanti Pagoda in Nay Pyi Taw.

Medical treatment for COVID-19 patients available at Phaunggyi centre

THE 14th medical corps of Tatmadaw left for Phaunggyi centre yesterday to provide medical services to the COVID-19 patients.

At the Defence Services Medical Academy in Mingalardon Township, Yangon Region, Commander of Yangon Command Maj-Gen Nyunt Win Swe met the medical corps of 41 personnel before they were leaving for the centre.

The COVID-19 Treatment Centre (Phaunggyi) was set up on 7 May 2020, and it was closed on 12 February as the number of positive cases has significantly declined.

The recent medical corps included 40 Tatmadaw personnel and 20 local volunteers, and they will work together with the Ministry of Health and Sports, the Yangon Region Administration Council and Yangon City Development Committee in providing medical treatments to the COVID-19 cases.—MNA

Request to health workers

1. It is appreciated for the strenuous efforts of the medical doctors, nurses, medical experts and other health works at the respective departments under the Ministry of Health and Sports at the front-line in the fight against prevention, containment and treatment of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).
2. As the vaccination programme of COVID-19 is being conducted for the public and the real-time healthcare services are required for the people, all the staff members at the respective departments under the Ministry of Health and Sports are strongly urged to return to their duties with taking the well-being of patients into consideration.

*Ministry of Health and Sports
8 February 2021*

Request to Public

1. Democracy practices have granted the public freedom of speech, practices and living. Such freedoms should not harm others. Diverse views of others should be understood, but should not be disturbed or harassed. However, with the reason for human rights, some persons are now under pressure, harassed and threatened in breaching the laws. Undisciplined acts could lead to tarnishing the image of democracy.
2. For preventing destructive actions against the stability of the State, the safety of the public and the rule of law, it is also required to take proper actions in line with the law.
3. All the people who favour justice, freedom, equality and safety are requested to oppose breaching the laws and prevent such actions for the benefit of country and people.

State Administration Council's Announcement

Some unscrupulous persons are putting various forms of pressures and posing threats to civil service personnel in performing their duties at present. The civil service personnel who have encountered such pressures and threats shall contact the following phone numbers. Strong legal actions will also be taken against those who make such pressures and threats.

Contact phone numbers	-067 412 168	-067 412 246	-067 412 388	-067 412 598	-067 412 539
	-067 412 222	-067 412 387	-067 412 444	-067 412 066	-067 412 540

Mandalay Region Administration Council's Announcement to Public

Some unscrupulous persons are putting various forms of pressures and posing threats to civil service personnel in performing their duties at present. The civil service personnel who have encountered such pressures and threats shall contact the following phone numbers. Strong legal actions will also be taken against those who make such pressures and threats.

Contact phone numbers	-02 403 9635	-02 403 6869	-09 797 144 144
	-02 403 7199	-02 403 6978	-09 694 740 311

External trade falls by \$2.15 bln as of 29 January

MYANMAR'S external trade between 1 October and 29 January in the current financial year 2020-2021 shrank to US\$10.7 billion, a sharp drop of \$2.156 billion compared with the corresponding period of the FY2019-2020, according to the Ministry of Commerce.

According to data released by the ministry during the same period in the previous FY, trade stood at \$12.88 billion.

Over the past four months, Myanmar's export was worth over \$5.25 billion, which plunged from \$5.9 billion registered a year-ago period. Meanwhile, the country's import was valued at \$5.47 billion, showing a decrease of \$1.4 billion compared with the last FY.

Both sea trade and border trade dropped amid the coronavirus impacts. The neighbouring countries tightened border security and limited the trading time to contain the spread of the virus.

Myanmar exports agricultural products, animal products, minerals, forest products, and finished industrial goods. At the same time, it imports capital goods, raw industrial materials, and consumer goods.

The country's export sector relies more on the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. The government is trying to reduce the trade deficit by screening luxury import items and boosting exports.

Under the National Planning Law for the Financial Year 2020-2021, Myanmar intends to reach an export target of US\$16 billion and import of US\$18 billion.

The Ministry of Commerce is focusing on reducing the trade deficit, export promotion and market diversification. Since 2011, the Ministry of Commerce has adhered to its reform policy. A series of moves to liberalize and open the economy have been introduced through policy development to improve the trade environment.—KK/GNLM

Black bean, pigeon pea cultivation reduced this year on uncertain market



Although Myanmar produced about 700,000 tonnes of black bean in the previous years, the country manufactured only 300,000 or 400,000 tonnes of bean this year because the black bean cultivation acres have been gradually reduced. **PHOTO: PHOE KHWAR**

ACCORDING to Myanmar Pulses, Beans and Sesame Seeds Merchants Association (MPBSSMA), cultivation of the black beans and pigeons, which are the pulses mainly exported to India, has been reduced this year because of uncertain market condition.

Although Myanmar produced about 700,000 tonnes of black bean in the previous years, the country manufactured only 300,000 or 400,000 tonnes of bean this year because the black bean cultivation acres have been gradually reduced.

The pigeon pea yield was annually around 300,000 tonnes in the previous years, a drop to 40,000 or

50,000 tonnes this year.

"Earlier, around 300,000 tonnes of pigeon pea were produced. Now, the local growers from regions and Shan State have replaced maize and other crops with pigeon peas," said an official from MPBSSMA.

Since 2017, India has been setting import quota on beans, including black beans and pigeon peas.

Myanmar has to export black beans and pigeon peas under a quota system and a limit period.

Consequently, there is no guarantee that we could get the prevailing market price next year; the market observers shared their opinion.

The Ministry of Commerce

and Industry of India issued 150,000 tonnes of import quota for black beans on 1 October. And those who have export licences in Myanmar have the chance to do so until March 2021.

Currently, Myanmar has already exported nearly 100,000 tonnes of black beans. The remaining 50,000 tonnes of beans will continuously be exported, according to MPBSSMA.

Following the no assurance of black beans and pigeon peas in the market, the association suggested on the end-October that the local farmers grow black-eyed beans more.—NN/GNLM

Singapore tops FDI list in Myanmar as of Jan-end

SINGAPORE is the top source of foreign direct investments into Myanmar in the first four months of the current financial year 2020-2021, according to the data released by the Directorate of Investment and Company Administration (DICA).

Twelve Singapore-listed enterprises brought in US\$378.327 million into Myanmar between October 2020 and January 2021. Singapore companies mainly put investments into urban development, real estate, power and manufacturing sectors.

China stood as the second-largest investors this FY with an estimated capital of \$139.354 million from 10 enterprises, followed by Hong Kong SAR investing \$87 million in Myanmar.

Those enterprises listed from Thailand, India, Japan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, UK, Viet Nam, Marshall Island and China (Taipei) also made investments this year.



Twelve Singapore-listed enterprises brought in US\$378.327 million into Myanmar between October 2020 and January 2021. **PHOTO: PHOE KHWAR**

Myanmar has attracted foreign direct investments of more than US\$672.59 million in Oct-Jan of current FY, including the expansion of capital by existing enterprises and investments in

the Special Economic Zones, DICA's statistics indicated.

Of 38 foreign enterprises permitted and endorsed by Myanmar Investment Commission and the respective investment

committees between 1 October and 31 January of current FY, 20 enterprises pumped FDI into the manufacturing sector. Power sector received six projects, and livestock and Fisheries sector

attracted five projects. Other service sector drew four projects while the agriculture sector pulled two assignments, and one foreign enterprise entered the hotels and tourism sector.

MIC intends to reach the FDI target of \$5.8 billion for the current FY2020-2021.

Singapore has stood as the largest foreign investor in Myanmar since 2012, pulling in the FDI of \$1.85 billion in the FY2019-2020, \$2.4 billion in the FY2018-2019, \$724.4 million in the mini-budget period (April-September, 2018), \$2.16 billion in the 2017-2018FY, \$3.8 billion in the 2016-2017FY, \$4.25 billion in the 2015-2016FY, \$4.29 billion in the 2014-2015FY, \$2.3 billion in the 2013-2014FY and \$418 million in the 2012-2013FY respectively.

Additionally, Singapore emerged as the second-largest foreign investor in the Thilawa Special Economic Zone, after top investor Japan.—KH/GNLM

Learning lifeline for London kids struggling to do online lessons



Damian Griffiths founded a community group to fix old computers that are then donated to kids who need them to do online lessons during lockdown. **PHOTO: AFP**

IN a community centre in a deprived London suburb – surrounded by old computers and tangled leads – volunteers take their screwdrivers to the piles of donated equipment.

Their aim? To throw a learning lifeline to the many kids unable to access online lessons during the UK's latest coronavirus lockdown.

Many children in London have struggled to continue their schooling during the pandemic due to a lack of computers or tablets.

Since the lockdown intro-

duced in January, the CatBytes group in Lewisham in southeast London has seen demand from local schools constantly outstrip supply.

“The demand from Lewisham is way in excess of what we can deliver”, says CatBytes founder Damian Griffiths, who works with volunteers most weekdays, fixing up the donated computers.

Schools in England closed in early January as the new variant of coronavirus caused cases to surge.

A date for reopening has not

yet been set, but the government said it will announce a roadmap for easing restrictions next week.

School closures have revealed the large number of families who cannot afford the laptops or tablets needed for remote learning.

Throughout the pandemic, “food insecurity has been the main issue discussed but I think digital (scarcity) is really rising up the ranks”, says Griffiths.

While children often access the internet on phones, “I was surprised at how many don't have any laptops at home”, he says.

Lewisham is nothing exceptional: the number of children in poverty there is slightly below the average for the capital.

CatBytes usually runs workshops for adults, but during the pandemic, it has switched to helping children and has “a lot more volunteers”, Griffiths says.

Marz, who is repairing a donated computer, works as a videographer.

Volunteers sort through the laptops, prioritising ones that can be easily fixed while others are put to one side.

These “we can fix during our little downtimes,” Marz says. — **AFP** ■

Walmart reports strong 4Q sales, announces some wage hikes

WALMART reported another round of strong sales Thursday amid the coronavirus pandemic as it announced significant investments on higher employee wages and technology for growing e-commerce demand.

The retail giant, which has become a one-stop shop for many consumers during the pandemic, said the new investments will bolster delivery and curbside pickup programs connected to e-commerce and lift wages for some 425,000 US workers.

Shares fell sharply on the announcements, which included a forecast for slower US sales growth and slightly lower profits in the coming year.

“Our business is strong, and we're making it even stronger with targeted investments to accelerate growth,” said Chief Executive Doug McMillon.

“This is a time to be even more aggressive because of the opportunity we see in front of us.”

Walmart reported a fourth-quarter loss of \$2.1 billion



Walmart plans additional investments in e-commerce and employee wages after a large jump in revenues during the coronavirus pandemic. **PHOTO: AFP**

from the accounting for asset sales, compared with profits of \$4.1 billion in the year-ago period.

Revenues rose 7.3 per cent to \$152.1 billion as the company pointed to a bounce from a strong holiday shopping season and a lift from a fresh US government stimulus package enacted at the end of 2020.

For all of 2020, Walmart re-

ported profit of \$13.5 billion, down 9.8 per cent. Annual revenues jumped 6.7 per cent to \$524 billion.

At a presentation to Wall Street analysts, Walmart executives said they planned new investments on automation and supply chain improvements in line with a “hybrid” model of traditional and digital commerce.

— **AFP** ■

NEWS IN BRIEF

One in two S.Africans infected by Covid: study and estimates

AROUND half of South Africa's population may have already been infected by coronavirus, a figure far higher than the documented tally, a study and analysis of death figures suggest.

Samples taken from almost 5,000 blood donors across four South African provinces in January showed that between 32 and 63 per cent had antibodies to the coronavirus.

The figure compares with clinically confirmed case rates of just two to three per cent, according to South African research that was released online last week, but has not yet completed peer review.

The numbers could be understated, said lead investigator Marion Vermeulen of the South African National Blood Service.

People with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 are unable to donate blood for 14 days, and therefore less likely to be sampled, she explained.

Antibodies are a telltale of an individual's exposure to the virus, but not a confirmation that the person has fallen sick from it.

Most antibodies were detected in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces.

Both were epicentres of South Africa's second infection wave when it started in December.

Officially, South Africa has recorded close to 1.5 million coronavirus cases, of which just under 48,500 have been fatal -- the highest toll in Africa. — **AFP** ■

Hong Kong approves Sinovac vaccine for emergency use

THE Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has approved the emergency use of the coronavirus vaccine by China's Sinovac. Sinovac's vaccine is the second approved vaccine in Hong Kong, after the Fosun Pharma-BioNTech jab.

The first batch of Sinovac doses will be shipped to Hong Kong soon, and the SAR government will roll out the vaccine as soon as possible, after necessary quality inspection.

The decision comes two days after Hong Kong's advisory panel on COVID-19 vaccines recommended the jab.

Experts agreed that the use of the vaccine can bring more benefits than risks. — **AFP** ■

Coronavirus around the world

THE novel coronavirus has killed at least 2,430,693 people since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP at 1100 GMT on Thursday.

At least 109,857,920 cases of coronavirus have been registered. Of these, at least 67,422,400 are now considered recovered.

These figures are based on daily tolls provided by health authorities in each country and exclude later re-evaluations by statistical organizations, as has happened in Russia, Spain and Britain.

On Wednesday, 11,018 new deaths and 390,322 new cases were recorded worldwide.

Based on latest reports, the countries with the most new deaths were United States with 2,446 new deaths, followed by Brazil with 1,150 and Mexico with 1,075.

The United States is the worst-affected country with 490,550 deaths from 27,826,891 cases.

After the US, the hardest-hit countries are Brazil with 242,090 deaths from 9,978,747 cases, Mexico with 177,061 deaths from 2,013,563 cases, India with 156,014 deaths from 10,950,201 cases, and Britain with 118,933 deaths from 4,071,185 cases.

The country with the highest number of deaths compared to its population is Belgium with 188 fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants, followed by Slovenia with 180, Britain 175, Czech Republic 175 and Italy 156. — **AFP** ■

Quake injures more than 30 in southwest Iran



A 5.4 magnitude earthquake rocked southwestern Iran late Wednesday, injuring more than 30 people and causing widespread damage in mountain villages, Iranian media reported. **PHOTO: AFP**

A 5.4 magnitude earthquake rocked southwestern Iran late Wednesday, injuring more than 30 people and causing widespread damage in mountain villages, Iranian media reported.

The quake struck at 10:05 pm (1835 GMT) near the town of Sisakht, in a mountainous district of Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad province, the US Geological Survey said.

It left 32 people injured, two of them seriously, and caused “extensive damage to buildings, infrastructure and homes”,

Iran’s state news agency IRNA reported.

According to a preliminary survey, “78 villages suffered serious damage with some houses completely destroyed”, it said.

The magnitude of the quake was sufficiently large that most villagers spent the night out in the open for fear of aftershocks, it added.

Iran sits astride the boundaries of several major tectonic plates and experiences frequent seismic activity.

In June, a quake near Mount

Damavand, Iran’s highest peak, killed one person and injured more than 20 just east of the capital Tehran.

Last February, a 5.7 magnitude earthquake that rattled the western village of Habash-e Olya killed at least nine people over the border in neighbouring Turkey.

Iran’s deadliest quake was a 7.4-magnitude tremor in 1990 that killed 40,000 people in the north of the country, injured 300,000 and left half a million homeless. —AFP ■

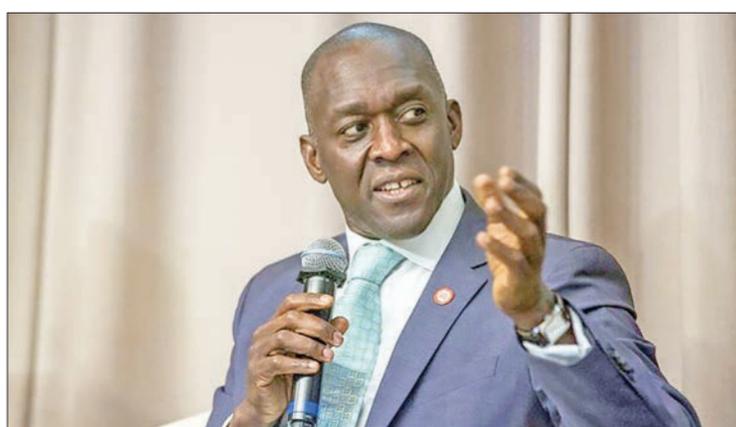
World Bank names former Senegal finance minister to head IFC

THE World Bank on Thursday announced that it has selected former Senegal finance minister Makhtar Diop to lead the agency responsible for private sector finance at a critical time for the global recovery.

He would be the first African to lead the International Finance Corporation (IFC), which leverages financing to support private firms in developing nations.

The announcement comes just days after the World Trade Organization (WTO) selected Nigeria’s former finance minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as its new director-general, the first African and first woman to serve in that role.

Noting his “deep development and finance experience,” World Bank President David Malpass said, Diop’s “skills at IFC will help the World Bank



Senegal’s Makhtar Diop will take over as chief of the International Finance Corporation, the private sector financing arm of the World Bank, the first African to lead the institutions. **AFP/FILE**

Group continue our rapid response to the global crisis and help build a green, resilient, inclusive recovery.”

Diop, currently World Bank vice president for infrastructure and previously vice president for Africa, will start his new role at the IFC on March 1.

As countries struggle to recover from the economic crisis sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic, and acquire enough vaccines, Diop cautioned that “the coming months will be very hard”.

“The private sector has critical role to play in development,” Diop told reporters. —AFP ■

In virus-hit Lebanon, seamstresses stitch body bags

IN a Lebanese textile workshop, Umm Omar recalled making school uniforms and holiday garments – before surging coronavirus cases forced her into the grim business of body bags.

“We used to sew festive clothes, outfits for pilgrims, and school uniforms. We brought people joy,” said the 53-year-old workshop supervisor in the southern city of Sidon.

“But now, even if we don’t want to, we’ve been obliged... to shift from joy to sadness.” Around her, seamstresses in face masks were busy at work sewing black body bags as demand rises due to a spike in Covid-19-related deaths.

Leaning over their machines, they placed spools of thread on holders. A young man measured fabric and used a stub of chalk to mark out patterns, under a wan neon light.

Others folded the finished bags, resembling those used to store tuxedos or gowns, before packaging them in plastic covers.

“Doing this kind of work is upsetting, but we’re forced to do it” because of the high demand, said Umm Omar, her face framed by a floral veil. Lebanon, a country of more than six million, has recorded 343,584 coronavirus cases including 4,092 deaths since the pandemic reached it last year. —AFP ■



In a Lebanese textile workshop, Umm Omar recalled making school uniforms and holiday garments -- before surging coronavirus cases forced her into the grim business of body bags. **PHOTO: AFP**

NEWS IN BRIEF

French ex-minister jailed for rape

A former French government minister on Thursday began serving three years in prison after a court found him guilty of raping an employee during “foot massages” in his office and at the home of his co-defendant.

The conviction of Georges Tron, 63, comes as France is confronting a wave of sexual assault allegations that has pushed the government to promise tougher laws to protect victims and punish assailants. —AFP ■

Fire hits yacht that belonged to French tycoon off Malaysia

A multi-million-dollar sailing yacht that once belonged to French tycoon Bernard Tapie went up in flames off Malaysia Thursday, with firefighters battling for hours to put out the blaze.

Coastguards said they were alerted to the fire on the 75 metre (246 foot) Phoecea just after 8:00 am (0000 GMT) when it was off the resort island of Langkawi. Seven crew members were rescued from the vessel without suffering injuries, said coastguard official Mohamad Zawawi Abdullah, but firefighters were still battling to extinguish the blaze in the evening.

The four-masted yacht was built for renowned French sailor Alain Colas in 1976 and was owned by Tapie in the 1980s and 90s. It was later sold to a wealthy Lebanese woman for 36.5 million francs (75 million euros at current values), according to media reports. —AFP ■

Far from the Mediterranean: African migrants cross the Americas

AHMED Kabeer fled his homeland of Sudan where he was tortured and travelled thousands of miles to find himself in a new hell: the ominous jungle that straddles Colombia and Panama.

Unlike hundreds of thousands of other African migrants that crowd into precarious boats and launch into the Mediterranean Sea hoping to reach Europe, Kabeer's aim is the US.

"There is a route" through Latin America, said Kabeer, who has a huge scar on his left leg and walks with a limp.

Kabeer is one of 23 people from the other side

of the world who - along with hundreds of Haitians and Cubans - are waiting in a camp to cross the daunting Darien Gap having fled war and poverty.

They are united by anxiety.

Following a forced pause due to the pandemic, the moment has come to cross the jungle corridor between Colombia and Panama that spans more than 250 kilometres.

Almost 700 migrants have been held up in Necocli, Colombia for weeks.

They set up a makeshift camp in the village while waiting for the border with Panama to reopen.



Members of Panama's National Border Service help migrants cross the Chucunaque River after they walked for five days in the Darien Gap, in Bajo Chiquito village, Darien Province, Panama, on February 10, on their way to the US. PHOTO: AFP

Arriving in South America was the easy part for Kabeer, 34.

"I find it's not very difficult that Brazil gives visas for people," he said. From Brazil he went

to Peru and Ecuador before arriving in Colombia.

The route to the US passes through Panama and on northward through Central America. —AFP ■

Letter bomb injures three at Lidl's German headquarters



Three people were hurt Wednesday when a letter bomb exploded at the German headquarters of discount supermarket Lidl, police said. PHOTO: AFP

THREE people were hurt Wednesday when a letter bomb exploded at the German headquarters of dis-

count supermarket Lidl, police said.

The blast occurred in an administrative building

at the company's head offices in Neckarsulm, western Germany, shortly before 1400 GMT.

The three injured people were taken to hospital and around 100 employees were evacuated from the premises.

"Based on the current status of the investigation, a letter exploded inside the building," police said in a statement.

The blast triggered a large emergency response with police, firefighters, several ambulances and a rescue helicopter racing

to the scene.

Police officers combed through the building with sniffer dogs but no further suspicious items were found, the statement added.

"We are deeply upset about the incident and wish our colleagues a good and swift recovery," Lidl said in a statement to German news agency DPA.

According to police, one person was "moderately wounded" in the blast while the two others suffered only light injuries. —AFP ■

Smartphones, game consoles could get pricier as chip crisis bites

PRICES of popular gadgets such as PlayStations and iPhones could rise because of microchip shortages caused by a "perfect storm" of coronavirus-driven demand, supply chain disruptions and trade war stockpiling, experts warn.

In the months after the pandemic hit, people stuck at home went on a spending spree to buy items, including extra monitors, new computers and tablets - each of which runs on all-important chips.

Compounding the crisis are US-China tensions - Huawei stockpiled semiconductors last year before American sanctions aimed at cutting the tech giant off from global chip-makers kicked in, adding further pressure to supplies.

The squeeze in the market was highlighted when automakers, enjoying a pick-up in car-buying, tried to source specialised semiconductors, only to find manufacturers had



Prices of popular gadgets such as PlayStations and iPhones could rise because of microchip shortages. PHOTO: AFP

prioritised consumer electronics and could not fill orders.

The auto sector is the highest-profile victim so far, with giants, including Ford and Volkswagen, forced to cut production, but shortages appear to be spreading to a wide range

of electronic items.

"A perfect storm of coronavirus chaos, trade-war stockpiling, and a paradigm shift in work-from-home devices is causing the chip squeeze," Mr Neil Mawston, executive director at consultancy Strategy Analytics, told AFP. —AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Facebook 'unfriends' Australia: Global uproar as news pages go dark

FACEBOOK faced a worldwide backlash from publishers and politicians on Thursday (Feb 18) after blocking news feeds in Australia in a surprise escalation of a dispute with the government over a law to require it to share revenue from news.

Facebook wiped out pages from Australian state governments and charities as well as from domestic and international news organizations, three days before the launch of a nationwide Covid-19 vaccination programme. Though the measure was limited to Australia, denunciations came from far afield, with politicians elsewhere describing it as an attempt to put pressure on governments that are considering similar measures around the world.

"Facebook's actions to unfriend Australia today, cutting off essential information services on health and emergency services, were as arrogant as they were disappointing," Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison wrote on his own Facebook page.

"These actions will only confirm the concerns that an increasing number of countries are expressing about the behaviour of Big Tech companies who think they are bigger than governments and that the rules should not apply to them." —AFP ■

Two arrested in police raid on Berlin gangs

SEVERAL hundred police officers carried out a large-scale raid in Berlin on Thursday and detained two suspects following violent clashes between rival gangs in the German capital last autumn, according to police and state prosecutors.

"Investigators are currently enforcing arrest warrants and over 20 search warrants for organized trade of drugs and weapons. Two suspects have been arrested," tweeted Berlin state prosecutors on Thursday morning.

They added that the investigation also related to violent "clan clashes" in November 2020 between "members of a family of Arab origin and Russian nationals of Chechen background".

The Berlin police tweeted that "several hundred" officers had been involved in the raid, which also related to "investigations by the tax office".

While the authorities did not disclose any further details, Berlin media reported that they were targeting the so-called "Remmo clan", a family of Arab origin notorious for ties to organized crime whose members have been linked to major museum heists in Berlin and Dresden in recent years.

In December, police arrested a fourth member of the family over the snatching of priceless jewels from the "Green Vault" museum in Dresden.

The family was also previously implicated in another stunning museum robbery in the heart of Berlin in which a 100-kilogramme (220-pound) gold coin was stolen. —AFP ■

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Singapore virus-secure hotel looks to lure business travellers

SINGAPORE on Thursday launched what it billed as a coronavirus-secure hotel and meeting complex where visitors communicate via intercom through glass panels, as the Asian financial hub slowly opens up to the world for business.

Short-stay business travellers to Singapore will be able to avoid the official 14-day quarantine rule if they stay at Connect@Changi, a purpose-built facility near Changi Airport.

They will, however, be required to remain within the facility for the duration of their stay to prevent possible transmission to the wider community.



Ongoing construction work at Connect@Changi's courtyard. The facility at Singapore Expo and Max Atria is almost complete and is expected to receive its first guests under the Connect@Singapore segregated travel lane from Feb 21. **PHOTO: CONNECT@CHANGI/FACEBOOK**

After keeping its borders mostly closed for months, Singapore, which is home to the Asian headquarters of many interna-

tional firms, will soon allow in business travellers from anywhere in the world as part of efforts to recover from a pandemic-induced

downturn.

The city-state suffered its worst-ever recession last year as global travel ground to a halt, with international visitor arrivals plunging to a mere 2.7 million from 19.1 million in 2019.

"The resumption of business travel and international meetings is important for catalyzing economic recovery, in Singapore and the region," Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said.

It will "preserve our role as a global business hub", he added at the launch of the complex, which will receive its first guests in March. —AFP ■

Thai fruit exports to China surge despite pandemic impacts

THAILAND'S export value of fruit products to China surged 39.43 per cent year on year in 2020 despite the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This was compared

with a 4-per cent increase posted in Thailand's total exports of goods to China last year.

Total value of the Southeast Asian country's fruit exports to Chi-

na reached 2.9 billion U.S. dollars last year, according to data from the Thai Government Public Relations Department (PRD).

In breakdown, its fresh durian exports to China to-

talled 1.51 billion U.S. dollars in 2020, surging 77.57 per cent from one year ago.

The move helped boost Thailand's fruit exports, especially fresh products, the PRD said. —Xinhua ■

Israel's housing crisis, a decade after its 'tent revolution'



A young couple share a picnic in front of the skyline of Tel Aviv -- a city where rents are among the highest in the world. **PHOTO: AFP**

TEN years since protests against the cost of living rocked Israel, affordable housing remains just as scarce, even prompting some city-dwellers to seek cheaper living on a rural kibbutz.

The 2011 "tent revolution" saw young Israelis furious at sharp rises in rents erect shelters on the upmarket Rothschild Boulevard in the heart

of Tel Aviv. Thousands of protesters soon took to the streets across Israel, shouting slogans demanding social justice.

Such widespread social upheaval had not been seen in Israel since the early 1970s, when thousands of people, led by a group called the Black Panthers, campaigned against racial discrimination suffered by Mizrahi Jews of Middle

Eastern descent. But many of the demands of the tent revolution remain a dream.

"Since then, prices have continued to increase," said Stav Shaffir, a figurehead of the 2011 protests. "Social housing -- important in the 1960s and 1970s -- has been cut back so that almost everyone is tied to the private market," Shaffir told AFP.

The private housing market is largely unregulated in Israel. Shaffir, who was later elected to parliament, introduced the "fair rental law", passed in 2017 to strengthen tenants' rights. Property must now be in "good condition and the repairs are done at the expense of the owners... who can no longer evict the tenants as quickly as before," said the 35-year-old activist, who heads Israel's Green Party. —AFP ■

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

M.V ISEACO FORTUNE VOY. NO. (037W)

Consignees of cargo carried on **M.V ISEACO FORTUNE VOY. NO. (037W)** are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on **19-2-2021** and cargo will be discharged into the premises of **MIP/MITT** where it will lie at the consignee's risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

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

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

Phone No: **2301185**

**Shipping Agency Department
Myanma Port Authority**

Agent For:

M/S NEW GOLDEN SEA LINES

CLAIMS DAY NOTICE

M.V GSS YANGON VOY. NO. (1133S/N)

Consignees of cargo carried on **M.V GSS YANGON VOY. NO. (1133S/N)** are hereby notified that the vessel will be arriving on **19-2-2021** and cargo will be discharged into the premises of **AWPT** where it will lie at the consignee's risk and expenses and subject to the byelaws and conditions of the Port of Yangon.

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

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

Phone No: **2301185**

**Shipping Agency Department
Myanma Port Authority**

Agent For:

M/S NEW GOLDEN SEA SHIPPING PTE LTD

Ministry of Transport and Communications Myanma Port Authority Open Tender Invitation

1. Myanma Port Authority is planning to construct the following vessel, funded by foreign currency USD (United States Dollar) only, within the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 fiscal years. Therefore, interested Tenderers are cordially invited to submit the complete project proposal for the following:

No	Particular	Currency	Tender closing date and time
1	Buoy Vessel (Multi-Purpose Buoy Handling Vessel) (1 unit)	USD Only	25-03-2021 13:00 PM

2. Tender forms can be purchased at the Main Store Department, New Strand Road (Concrete Road), near Tollgate, Botahtaung Township, Yangon, Myanmar, during the office hours, starting from 23rd February, 2021.
3. The Tender Submission will be accepted in terms of one tender two sealed envelopes system, i.e., Prequalification Bid and Price Bid to be submitted with each sealed envelope. The Explanation Session for the Prequalification Bid will be held at 13:00 PM on 12th March 2021, at the Meeting Room (First Floor) of the Head Office of Myanma Port Authority, No.10, Pansodan Street, Kyauktada Township, Yangon, Myanmar.
4. Should you need more detailed information, please contact us at +951-8610218, +951-8610225, and email: arkar.mpa@gmail.com; info@mpa.gov.mm.

Missing K2 climbers are dead: Pakistan official

THREE climbers lost on Pakistan's K2 are believed to have died on the mountain, a Pakistan official said Thursday, more than a week after the group went missing while trying to summit the world's second highest peak.

Climbers John Snorri from Iceland, Juan Pablo Mohr from Chile and Muhammad Ali Sadpara of Pakistan lost contact with base camp on February 5, sparking a massive rescue effort that included military helicopters and planes.

"All the weather experts, climbers, and experts from the Pakistan army have reached the conclusion that a human being cannot live for that long in such harsh weather. That's why we are announcing that they are no

more," said Raja Nasir Ali Khan, a provincial minister for tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan, where K2 is located.

Khan said the search for the bodies would continue.

"My family have lost a kind father and the Pakistan nation has lost a great, brave, and experienced mountaineer," Sajid Ali Sadpara -- son of Muhammad Ali Sadpara -- told reporters after the announcement was made.

The latest deaths further mar what has been a bittersweet winter season on K2.

Two climbers had already died on its treacherous slopes since January, and a third mountaineer was lost during an acclimatizing mission on a nearby peak. —AFP ■



Conditions on K2 are harsh -- winds can blow at more than 200 kilometres per hour (125 miles per hour) and temperatures can drop to minus 60 degrees Celsius (minus 76 Fahrenheit). **PHOTO: AMELIE HERENSTEIN/ AFP**

US Citizenship Act of 2021 to be introduced in Congress

PROPOSED by President Joe Biden, the US Citizenship Act 2021 - which among other things intends to eliminate the per-country cap for employment-based green cards would be introduced in Congress on Thursday, a move that would benefit hundreds and thousands of Indian IT professionals in America.

In a major move, those waiting for a Green Card for more than 10 years, would get the legal permanent residency immediately as they would be exempted from the visa cap. Indian IT professionals, waiting for more than a decade now, and whose number runs into thousands, are likely to be the biggest beneficiary of this provision of the bill.

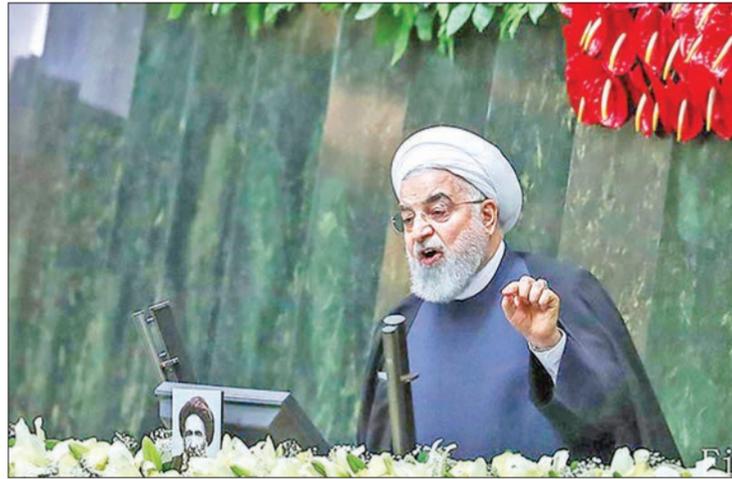
To be introduced by Senator

Bob Menendez in the Senate and Congresswoman Linda Sanchez in the House of Representatives, US Citizenship Act 2021, which creates an eight-year path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented immigrants, needs to be passed by Congress before it can be sent to the White House for Biden to sign into law.

The Biden administration now calls them non-Citizens to better reflect the president's values on immigration, a senior administration official said.

The bill, which was sent by Biden to Congress hours after he was sworn in as the president on January 20, clears employment-based visa backlogs, recapture unused visas, reduces lengthy wait times, and eliminates per-country visa caps. —ANI ■

Iran's president reiterates nuclear weapons have no place in defence programme



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani addresses the opening session of Iran's new parliament in Tehran, Iran, May 27, 2020. **PHOTO: AHMAD HALABISAZ/XINHUA**

IRAN'S President Hassan Rouhani reiterated on Wednesday the Islamic Republic's "definite" determination not to produce or store weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), including nuclear weapons, official news agency IRNA reported.

"As we have said many times, in our country's defence programme, there is no place

for weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, and this is a definite decision of the system," he said in a cabinet meeting in Tehran.

Rouhani said this is not a new or recent decision, because Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and late Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani underlined nearly

30 years ago that Iran will not pursue nuclear weapons.

However, Iran has ever since intended to develop "peaceful nuclear technologies" as it is right as a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and signatory to a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), he added.

Iran's president also reiterated that Tehran will not accept any changes in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed in 2015 after intensive works between Iran and six world powers, neither will negotiate its national defense program.

Meanwhile, Rouhani said that Iran vowed to return to compliance with the JCPOA "in a few hours" after sanctions against Iran are lifted, whether this is done step by step by both the U.S. and Iran, or in full and at once. —AFP ■

Italian PM Draghi wins confidence vote, vows 'reconstruction' from Covid-19 crisis

PREMIER Mario Draghi easily won a confidence vote in Parliament's upper chamber Wednesday night after vowing to do whatever it takes to lead Italy out of the coronavirus pandemic and rebuild its economy into a more sustainable and equitable one for future generations.

The Senate voted 262-40 with two abstentions to back Draghi's technical-political government, which he formed at the request of Italy's president to steer Italy through the health and economic crises. A confidence vote Thursday in the lower Chamber of Deputies is also expected to give Draghi broad backing, since he has secured support from across Italy's political spectrum.

Draghi told senators that Italy has a once-in-a-lifetime chance to rethink and rebuild the country, urging them to unite behind his government, which he vowed will be environmentally conscious, staunchly pro-European and oriented toward technological and digital reforms.

"Today, unity isn't an option, it's an obligation," Draghi said



Italy's new Prime Minister Mario Draghi (top centre) addresses the Senate in Rome, Italy, on Wednesday before submitting his government to a vote of confidence. In his maiden speech to parliament, Draghi said his main duty was to "fight the pandemic by all means and to safeguard the lives of our fellow citizens." **PHOTO: AFP**

to applause as he outlined his government program. "An obligation guided by what unites us all: love of Italy."

Draghi, the former European Central Bank chief who is widely credited with having saved the euro by declaring to do "whatever it takes" during the

European debt crisis, pledged a similar all-out effort to bring Italy out of the pandemic. Since the virus first erupted in Italy at this time last year, the country has reported over 94,000 deaths related to COVID-19, more than any other European country except Britain. —AFP ■

Cyber attacks hit two French hospitals in one week

RANSOMWARE attacks struck two French hospital groups in less than a week, prompting the transfer of some patients to other facilities but not affecting care for Covid-19 patients or virus vaccinations.

The two French hospitals were stricken with ransomware attacks, and a third pre-emptively cut connections with an IT provider, in less than a week, prompting the transfer of some patients to other facilities.

The Villefranche-sur-Saône hospital complex in France's eastern Rhone département (administrative area) announced Monday that a cyber attack had been detected at 4:30 am local time.

The attack by the crypto-virus RYUK, a kind of ransomware, "strongly impacts" the Villefranche, Tarare and Trévoux sites of the North-West Hospital, the hospital said in a statement.

Ransomware is software that blocks data on a computer system that is then made acces-



A nurse stands in front of out-of-service computers following a cyber attack on Villefranche-sur-Saône's hospital complex in eastern France on February 16, 2021. PHOTO: PHILIPPE DESMAZES /AFP

sible after a ransom payment.

Each hospital site's team immediately set up limited procedures to ensure the exchange of information necessary for patient care, as well as a crisis unit to organize the operation of all three sites.

There are no scheduled transfers for patients in inten-

sive care at Villefranche, nor for infants in the neonatal department, and Covid-19 vaccinations are continuing.

However, Tuesday's slate of surgeries were postponed, and two sites are coordinating with the regional health agency to refer emergency patients to other facilities. —AFP ■

Major winter storm grips shivering southeast US



Millions of people were still without power on Wednesday (Feb 17) in Texas, the oil and gas capital of the United States, and facing water shortages as an unusual winter storm pummelled the southeastern part of country. PHOTO: AFP

MILLIONS of people were still without power on Wednesday (Feb 17) in Texas, the oil and gas capital of the United States, and facing water shortages as an unusual winter storm pummelled the southeastern part of country.

The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a winter storm warning for a swathe of the country ranging from east Texas to the East Coast state of Maryland.

The NWS said the storm

would bring ice, sleet and heavy snow to parts of Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi as it tracks to the northeast, causing power outages, tree damage and making driving hazardous.

It said an Arctic air mass was beginning to lose its grip on an area of the country not used to such extreme cold but the frigid temperatures were expected to continue.

"Temperatures will still remain 20 to 35 degrees (Fahren-

heit) below normal throughout the Plains, Mississippi Valley, and lower Great Lakes," the NWS said.

More than 20 storm-related deaths have been reported in the United States since the cold weather arrived last week, most them in traffic accidents.

Hundreds of thousands of residents of the Texas metropolis of Houston are suffering from both power outages and a loss of water pressure.

"Water pressure is very low," Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner tweeted. "Please do not run water to keep pipes from bursting."

Several Texas cities advised residents to boil their water before drinking it or using it for cooking.

David Hernandez, 38, spent the night at a Houston church with other people who have fled their homes.

"My car got stranded and I was trying to sleep in the car but it was just too cold," Hernandez said. "Liquids in my car were actually turning to ice so it was like sleeping in an ice box. —AFP ■

Police arrest dozens in second night of Spain rapper protests

SPANISH police arrested some 50 people overnight following a second night of clashes over the jailing of a rapper for a string of tweets insulting police and the monarchy.

Angry demonstrations first erupted on Tuesday night in Catalonia after police detained Pablo Hasel, 32, who was holed up in a university in that region to avoid going to jail in a controversial free speech case.

And the protests swelled on Wednesday with hundreds gathering under a heavy police presence in Madrid's Puerta del Sol square and calling for his release, later hurling bottles at police, who charged at them in clashes

lasting several hours, AFP journalists said.

Police said at least 15 people were arrested, but were due to issue an update on Thursday morning, while the city's emergency services said 55 people were injured, among them 35 police officers. In Barcelona, demonstrators lobbed objects at police and set barricades ablaze, with police firing foam rounds and charging at the protesters.

Across Catalonia, the Mossos d'Esquadra regional police said 31 people were arrested, including 10 in Barcelona, 14 in Lerida, where Hasel was arrested, five in the northern city of Girona and 2 in Tarragona. —AFP ■



Violent protests have broken out over Pablo Hasel's arrest for the second night running in Barcelona. PHOTO: JOSEP LAGO / AFP

NASA rover faces "7 minutes of terror" before landing on Mars

SEVEN months after blast-off, NASA's Mars 2020 mission will have to negotiate its shortest and most intense phase on Thursday: the "seven minutes of terror" it takes to slam the brakes and land the Perseverance rover on a narrow target on the planet's surface.

Entry, Descent, and Landing (EDL) begins when the spacecraft carrying Perseverance strikes the Martian atmosphere at nearly 12,500 miles per hour (20,000 kilometres per hour).

It ends around seven minutes later with the rover at rest on the surface.

Touchdown on the Jezero Crater is scheduled for 3:55 pm US eastern time (2055 GMT). Weather conditions so far appear favourable in the Martian northern hemisphere spring, but nothing is taken for granted.

"This is one of the most difficult maneuvers that we do in this business, and almost 50 per cent of the spacecraft that had been sent to the surface of Mars have failed," Matt Wallace, the mission's deputy project manager said.

Atmospheric entry

Ten minutes before entering the Martian atmosphere, the spacecraft sheds its cruise stage that supplied the fuel tanks, radios and solar panels on the voyage.

It's left with just a protective aeroshell, carrying the rover and descent stage, and it fires thrusters to make sure its heat shield is forward facing. —AFP ■

Shan United gets new CEO for 2021 football season

SHAN United Deputy Chief Executive Officer U Ye Myo Tun has been appointed Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the success of Shan United and to take on more responsibilities from the start of the 2021 football season, according to a recent statement of the team.

He served in the football club's administration for the two year's consecutive success of the Shan United.

U Ye Myo Tun took Operations Director position starting in 2016 when the football club name was changed to Shan United from Kanbawza FC.

He served his best for the team till 2019, and in the 2020 football season, he took Deputy Chief Executive Officer role for the team.

Shan United has won Myanmar National League football tournament three times: in 2017, 2019 and 2020, respective-

ly. The team had also garnered General Aung San Shield in 2017.

"Because the chairman and team officials believe in me, I'll take the role with the best of mine. With the best of my effort, I will try to shape the team's progress," said CEO U

Ye Myo Tun.

Shan United is being preparing with great speed for the upcoming 2021 Myanmar National League football season, domestic knockout tournaments and AFC Champions League. —GNLM ■

Europa League returns amid complaints about COVID-19 relocations



Manchester United and Arsenal face tough ties when the Europa League returns for the knockout stages on Thursday amid complaints over the relocation of various matches due to coronavirus restrictions. **PHOTO: AFP**

LONDON — Manchester United and Arsenal face tough ties when the Europa League returns for the knockout stages on Thursday amid complaints over the relocation of various

matches due to coronavirus restrictions.

Both legs between Arsenal and Benfica have been moved to neutral venues with Thursday's first clash taking place

in Rome and the second leg in Athens.

United's trip to Real Sociedad this week has also been switched to Turin with no elite sport exemption allowed for the English giants to travel to the Basque Country due to concerns over new strains of Covid-19. Real Sociedad's director of football, Roberto Olabe, criticized UEFA for what he sees as an unfair advantage should the Spanish side have to play the second leg in Manchester. "It does not seem coherent to me that as the home team, we play on a neutral field and as a visitor, we do it there," he told Diario Vasco. "I would like the return to be also on a neutral ground or for UEFA to appoint a single venue for a one-game tie as it did last year." —AFP ■

Peerless Djokovic ends Karatsev dream to reach Australian Open final

MELBOURNE — World number one Novak Djokovic ended the dream run of Russian qualifier Aslan Karatsev in the Australian Open semi-finals Thursday to maintain his bid for a record-extending ninth title.

The 33-year-old Serb, showing no ill-effects from an abdomen injury sustained in the third round, overwhelmed the 114th-ranked Karatsev 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 to reach his 28th Grand Slam final.

"This is the best I've felt in the entire tournament," said Djokovic, who hit 30 winners and 17 aces. "I could swing through the ball. No pain. The best match so far."

Djokovic, 34, remains on course for his 18th Grand Slam trophy, nipping at the heels of rivals Roger Federer and Rafael

Nadal, who are on 20. In his way will be either fourth seed Daniil Medvedev or Nadal's conqueror Stefanos Tsitsipas, the fifth seed, a clash Djokovic said he was ea-

gerly anticipating.

"I'm going to take the popcorn and enjoy it," he said. "I absolutely have zero preference." —AFP ■



World number one Novak Djokovic ended the dream run of Russian qualifier Aslan Karatsev in the Australian Open semi-finals Thursday to maintain his bid for a record-extending ninth title. **PHOTO: AFP**

New Tokyo 2020 chief vows to 'regain trust' after sexism row



Seiko Hashimoto replaces 83-year-old Yoshiro Mori, who resigned after claiming that women speak too much in meetings. **PHOTO: POOL/AFP**

TOKYO — Tokyo 2020's new president Seiko Hashimoto on Thursday vowed to "regain trust" in the Olympic organizing committee after an embarrassing sexism row, with just over five months until the virus-postponed Games.

Hashimoto, a seven-time Olympian, had been one of just two women in Japan's cabinet, serving as Olympic minister before stepping down to take the key post.

She replaces 83-year-old Yoshiro Mori, who resigned after saying women talk too much in meetings, sparking outcry in Japan and abroad.

"I'm sure the Games are going to attract more attention related to gender equality, and in this regard I am de-

termined to regain trust, by my fullest endeavours," she said after her appointment.

She pledged to increase the number of women on the Tokyo 2020 executive board from around 20 per cent to 40 per cent, and urged Olympic torchbearers and volunteers who had quit in protest at Mori's comments to return.

Until Thursday, Hashimoto, 56, was also minister for gender equality and women's empowerment.

"I recognize that there is still a lot of conscious division of roles according to gender (in Japan).

What can be done to change that through the organising committee's reforms is important," she said. —AFP ■