

\$840M in Gold Bars Prepared for Loading onto Russian Jet at Venezuelan Airport: Report

CARACAS - About 20 tons of gold from Venezuela's central bank was ready to be hauled away Tuesday on a Russian airline's Boeing 777 that landed in Caracas a day earlier, a Venezuelan lawmaker wrote on Twitter. The destination of the \$840 million in gold bars was unknown, but a source told Bloomberg News that it represented about 20 percent of the country's holding of the metal. The gold was set aside for loading, the report said. The news outlet, which first reported on the tweet, identified the lawmaker as Jose Guerra. The lawmaker did not provide evidence for his claim but is identified in the report as a former economist at the country's central bank with close ties to workers still there.

Noticias Venezuela, a news out-



let in the country, posted a photo of what it identified as a Nordwind Airlines plane from Moscow that made the trip with only a crew aboard.

Simon Zerpa, Venezuela's finance minister, did not comment about the gold when reached by Bloomberg and denied there was a Russian plane at the Simon Bolivar International Air-

port in Caracas.

"I'm going to start bringing Russian and Turkish airplanes every week so everybody gets scared," he joked.

Bloomberg reached out to Nordwind, which did not comment on the purpose of the flight. The airline did not immediately respond to an email from Fox News.

A plane belonging to a Moscow-based company was reportedly seen Monday heading to an international airport near Caracas, according to flight tracking records.

Reuters reported that there had been speculation about the jet that was "parked by a private corner of the airport." And Reuters reported that it was the first time the plane made the trip. (Fox News)

Neighbor News

National Space Agency Reorganized in Turkmenistan

ASHGABAT - The National Space Agency under the President of Turkmenistan has been reorganized into the Space Administration of the Turkmenaragatnasyk Agency (Turkmen Communication), Trend reports with reference to the Turkmen presidential decree. The Turkmenaragatnasyk Agency is under the jurisdiction of the newly formed Ministry of Industry and Communication of Turkmenistan. The document prescribed to ensure the preparation and approval of the draft regulation on the space administration of the Turkmenaragatnasyk Agency. The decision to estab-

lish the National Space Agency under the President of Turkmenistan was made in May 2011. At the same time, the Turkmen Hemrasy CJSC (Turkmen Satellite) was established. Turkmenistan launched its first telecommunications satellite TurkmenAlem 520E from Cape Canaveral (Florida, US) in 2015 with the help of SpaceX, the US company, in order to start space research. The first Turkmen satellite is equipped with three antennas, the coverage area of which includes dozens of countries in Europe and Asia, as well as countries of the Middle East and North Africa. (Trend)

Pakistan Seeks to Improve Economic Partnership with Oman, Says FM Qureshi

MUSCAT - Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, during an official visit to Oman on Wednesday said that discussions with Omani leadership will focus on how to improve economic partnership between the two countries.

The comments were made by Qureshi during an interview with The Times of Oman, adding that the visit would "promote and build a multi-dimensional relationship".

Qureshi is expected to hold talks with leadership of the gulf state and attend the meeting of Pak-Oman Joint Ministerial Commission. Representatives of a number of govern-

ment departments will participate in the joint ministerial commission meeting as well. In the meeting with Omani leadership, the foreign minister will discuss bilateral relations between the two countries and other international issues.

Officials from the gulf country's foreign ministry, including Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi received Qureshi upon his arrival in the Omani capital of Muscat on Tuesday.

Qureshi said that he held meeting with Minister of Diwan of Royal Court Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidi in order to explore how defence partnership could be improved. (Agencies)

Uzbekistan Establishes New Ministry

TASHKENT - Uzbekistan has established the new Ministry of Investment and Foreign Trade, Trend reports via Podrobno.uz. The new ministry is a merger of the Ministry of Foreign Trade and the State Committee for Investments.

The new ministry is responsible for implementing a single investment policy, coordinating the attraction of foreign investments, cooperation with international financial institutions and foreign governments' financial

organizations, as well as formation and coordination of a common policy in foreign trade and international economic cooperation.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was tasked to develop an interactive investment map of Uzbekistan, reflecting the investment potential and investment demand of each region, indicating specific projects with preliminary calculations and other information of interest to potential investors by June 1, 2019. (Trend)

Russia, Europe, Asia Interested in Iran Cryptomining

TEHRAN - A blockchain and cryptocurrency research lab has been set up in Iran, says the head of the company contracted by the Central Bank of Iran to design and develop a national digital currency.

Despite rising interest in cryptocurrencies, Iran has been slow to embrace them, but CEO of Informatics Services Corporation Seyyed Abotaleb Najafi believes they can help expand banking services in the face of marauding US sanctions.

Iran's central bank has contracted his company to gather information on blockchain and cryptocurrency technologies and establish a research lab, he told a conference on electronic banking and payment systems in Tehran Wednesday.

Blockchain is a digital ledger or database where transactions in Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies are recorded. On Tuesday, financial services giant JPMorgan said the most meaningful impact of blockchain will probably be three to five years away and mostly on trade finance.

"Blockchain isn't going to reinvent the global payment system, but it will provide marginal improvements," JPMorgan's chair of global research, Joyce Chang, told Bloomberg. According to Iranian media reports, a state-backed national cryptocurrency backed by the local fiat unit, the rial, has already been developed but it has yet to be approved for use by the central bank. (Press TV)

Germany Slashes Growth Outlook on Brexit, Trade Fears

FRANKFURT, Germany - The clouds darkened over Europe's slowing economy on Wednesday as the German government slashed its growth forecast and said concerns about a chaotic Brexit and trade tensions were holding back the continent's powerhouse. Germany's Economy Ministry said Wednesday it was cutting its 2018 forecast to 1.0 percent from 1.8 percent in its previous outlook issued last fall. Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said that while the German economy

would grow for a 10th year in a row, "the headwinds, primarily from the external environment, are increasing." He cited Brexit and trade conflicts as key issues. German businesses are unsettled about the possibility that Britain will leave the EU without agreeing on trade rules for a transition period. New import taxes imposed by the U.S. and China are also weighing on prospects for global trade. That hurts the outlook for Germany because the country is a major exporter. (AP)

Bangladesh to Sue Manila Bank over \$81 Million Cyber Heist: Cenbank Governor

DHAKA - Bangladesh will file a lawsuit in a U.S. court on Wednesday against Philippine bank Rizal Commercial Banking Corp (RCBC) over its role in one of the world's biggest cyber-heists, the Bangladesh central bank governor said. In February 2016, unknown criminals used fraudulent orders on the SWIFT payments system to steal \$81 million from the Bangladesh central bank account at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. The money was sent to accounts at

Manila-based RCBC and then vanished into the casino industry in the Philippines. Fazle Kabir, governor of the Bangladesh Bank, said the lawsuit would be filed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. "All necessary processes have been completed and Bangladesh signed an agreement Tuesday night with the New York Fed Bank to assist Bangladesh in handling this case," Kabir told reporters. For its part, RCBC has



previously said the cyber heist was an inside job and Bangladesh Bank was engaging in a cover-up by maligning it.

On Wednesday, RCBC said in a statement it had engaged a top New York law firm to handle its defense. (Reuters)

U.S. Security Aid to Palestinians to End Thursday, Envoys Seek Workaround



RAMALLAH, West Bank - U.S. security aid for the Palestinian Authority was set to dry up on Thursday after it declined the money over

concerns it could increase its exposure to U.S. anti-terrorism lawsuits. The loss of the some \$60 million in annual funding would mark another

tear in ties between the Trump administration and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and potentially undermines his security cooperation with Israel in the occupied West Bank. Diplomatic sources said Palestinian, U.S. and Israeli officials were seeking a way to keep the money flowing despite Abbas's decision to turn it down as of a Jan. 31 deadline set by Congress' Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (ATCA) of 2018. The ATCA empowers Americans to sue for-

foreign aid recipients in U.S. courts over alleged complicity in "acts of war". Abbas's administration, long accused by Israel of stoking Palestinian militant attacks, worries about such legal exposure. It denies encouraging any such acts. "We do not want to receive financial aid, including aid provided to the security forces, so as not to be subject to the anti-terrorism law approved by Congress," one Palestinian official told Reuters on condition of anonymity. (Reuters)

China-Ireland Trade Sets Record High in 2018

DUBLIN - Bilateral trade between China and Ireland set a record high of 14.5 billion U.S. dollars in 2018, up 31.23 percent from a year ago, said a Chinese official on Tuesday. Last year China exported 3.64 billion U.S. dollars worth of goods to Ireland, up 24.87 percent year on year while its imports from Ireland were valued at 10.8 billion U.S. dollars, up 33.51 percent year on year, said Yue Xiaoyong, Chinese ambassador

to Ireland.

The trade surplus that Ireland enjoyed over China last year further widened to 7.2 billion U.S. dollars, an increase of 38.35 percent compared with the previous year, he said. The above figures were announced by Yue while addressing a reception hosted by the Chinese embassy here on Tuesday night to celebrate the upcoming Spring Festival or the Chinese New Year which falls on Feb. 5 this year. (Xinhua)

Despite Doping Scandals, Russia Bids to Host European Games

MOSCOW - Russia is bidding to host the 2023 European Games in Kazan despite a backdrop of years of doping scandals. Russian Olympic Committee president Stanislav Pozdnyakov is working with regional officials on the Kazan bid and said late Tuesday the city has "unique sports infrastructure at both the Russian and international level." Kazan hosted the University Games in 2013, the world swimming championships two years later, and World Cup soccer games last year. World Anti-Doping Agency investigator Richard McLaren later said the University Games were used as a "trial run" for the vast doping cover-up when Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. McLaren accused the host nation of leading the medals table for the University Games in part because of "a defense for the Russian athletes" - cover-up orders from the sports ministry which led to eight Russian gold medalists with failed doping tests being reported as clean. (AP)

Nigerian Appeal Court Rules Tribunal Can Try Suspended Chief Judge

ABUJA - A Nigerian appeals court ruled on Wednesday that a code of conduct tribunal can try the country's top judge, who has been suspended for allegedly breaking wealth declaration rules, according to a Reuters witness. The legal case has raised fears of interference in the Feb. 16 presidential election, after President Muhammadu Buhari last week suspended Walter Onnoghen from the position where he would have a key say in resolving any disputes after the vote. Onnoghen has not responded to the allegations. (Reuters)

London's India Club, Saved from Developers, Celebrates Its History

LONDON - An exhibition celebrating the storied history of an Indian members' club in London opens on Wednesday, less than a year after the restaurant dodged being turned into a boutique hotel. "A Home Away from Home", organised by British conservation charity the National Trust, tapped into a "treasure trove" of history on the India Club which emerged in part thanks to recent efforts to save it from eviction. The month-long exhibition tells the story of the restaurant and bar venue on the Strand in London's West End, through the voices of those connected



to it over its six decades. "The history has always been there but the campaign unearthed it and brought it to the surface," Phiroza Marker, the club's manager, told AFP during a preview tour. "People want to tell their stories," she added, noting that old customers

and even relatives of those who helped establish the club came forward when it was threatened with closure. In late July, the club was saved from developers who wanted to overhaul the building, which already has a budget hotel on its higher floors. (AFP)

US Calls for Russian, Chinese Nuclear Transparency

BEIJING - The United States accused Russia and China of not fully reporting their nuclear programmes Wednesday and called for more transparency, amid US threats to withdraw from a key arms control treaty. A senior US official made the remarks as the five permanent members of the UN Security Council - all of them nuclear-armed powers - met in Beijing for talks on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Andrea Thompson, US under secretary for arms control and international security, said there were "uneven results" in efforts to advance transparency under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. "We previously agreed to set (a) format for reporting, but the gap between the reports of the United States on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other, is great," Thompson said in her opening remarks. (AFP)

New NASA Study Shows Warming Seas May Increase Frequency of Extreme Storms

LOS ANGELES - A new NASA study shows that the warming of the tropical oceans due to climate change could lead to a substantial increase in the frequency of extreme rain storms by the end of the century.

The research team, led by Hartmut Aumann of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California, combed through 15 years of data acquired by NASA's Atmospheric Infrared Sounder instrument over the tropical oceans to determine the relationship between the average sea surface temperature and the onset of severe storms. They found that extreme storms, which produced at least three millimeters of rain per hour over a 25 km area, formed when the sea surface temperature was higher than about 28 degrees Celsius, according to a release of JPL on Tuesday. The team also found that 21 percent more storms form for every one degree Celsius that ocean surface temperatures rise. Aumann said severe storms will increase in a warmer environment. Thunderstorms typically occur in the warmest season of the year.

"Our data provide the first quantitative estimate of how much they are likely to increase, at least for the tropical oceans," Aumann said. Currently accepted climate models project that with a steady increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which is 1 percent per year, tropical ocean surface temperatures may rise by as much as 2.7 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, said the team. (Xinhua)