

Gandhi stamps sold at 500k pounds at auction in UK

LONDON, APRIL 20 /-/- A set of four rare stamps featuring the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi has been sold for record 500,000 pounds at an auction in the UK which its seller said is the highest price ever paid for Indian stamps. Only 13 of the 1948 Gandhi 10-rupee Purple Brown and Lake Service stamps are in circulation. The block of four was sold to a private Australian collector for the highest ever price for Indian stamps, said UK-based dealer Stanley Gibbons. The Indian stamps were particularly rare owing to the fact they were in a set of four. From the issued sheet, supplied to the Government Secretary, only thirteen single examples are authoritatively recorded, including this stamp and a block of four in the Royal Philatelic Collection, owned by Queen Elizabeth II, which is believed to be the world's largest and most valuable private stamp collection, Gibbons said in a statement.

"The recent sale follows that of another Indian philatelic rarity, the famous 'Four Annas', which sold in March of last year for almost 110,000 pounds," the statement said. However, the record price for a stamp sold an auction is USD 9 million (7.4 million pounds). "The market for high-quality Indian rarities has been strong for several years and is supported by the ongoing desire of the wealthy Indian diaspora and savvy international clients to own and invest in historic assets," Keith Heddle, managing director of investments at Stanley Gibbons, was quoted as saying by BBC. (PTT)

Venezuela opposition vows fresh protests despite deaths

CARACAS, APRIL 20 /-/- Opponents of the Venezuelan government vowed fresh huge protests today, upping the ante in their bid to oust President Nicolas Maduro after a day of deadly clashes in the oil-rich but beleaguered nation. A 17-year-old boy and a 23-year-old woman died after being shot yesterday during massive protests, bringing to seven the number killed this month in a mounting political crisis. Riot police fired tear gas to force back stone-throwing demonstrators as hundreds of thousands of people fed up with food shortages and demanding elections joined protest marches in Caracas and several other cities. Thousands of Maduro's supporters held a counter-rally in central Caracas.

The opposition has accused Maduro of letting state forces and gangs of armed thugs violently repress demonstrators as he resists

opposition pressure for him to quit. Despite yesterday's deadly violence, his opponents displayed their determination to ratchet up the pressure by calling for fresh protests today. "Today there were millions of us," senior opposition leader Henrique Capriles told a news conference late yesterday. "Tomorrow (Thursday) even more of us have to come out." The 17-year-old was shot by gunmen on motorbikes who also threw tear gas canisters into a crowd of protesters, Amadeo Leiva, head of the Clinicas Caracas Hospital which treated him, told AFP. The 23-year-old woman, Paola Ramirez, died after being shot in the head in the western city of San Cristobal, the state prosecution service said later in a statement. Authorities had previously reported five other people killed, including a boy of 13, in protests around the country earlier this month. Pressure on the leftist president has been

mounting since 2014, as falling prices for Venezuela's crucial oil exports have aggravated an economic crisis. "I don't have any food in the fridge," said protester Jean Tovar, 32, who held rocks in his hands ready to throw at military police in Caracas.

"I have a two-year-old son to support and I am unemployed, and it is all Maduro's fault." Recent moves by Maduro to tighten his grip on power and ban Capriles from politics have escalated the country's political and economic crisis and sparked international cries of concern. They have galvanized the often divided opposition in the recent protests in their efforts to force Maduro from power. "We have to end this dictatorship. We're fed up. We want elections to get Maduro out, because he's destroyed this country," said protester Ingrid Chacon, a 54-year-old secretary. (AFP)

Trump to make Earth-to-space call on April 24



WASHINGTON, APRIL 20 /-/- US President Donald Trump will make a special Earth-to-space call from the Oval Office to personally congratulate NASA astronaut Peggy Whitson for her record-breaking stay aboard the International Space Station on April 24, NASA has said. Trump will be joined by daughter Ivanka Trump and NASA astronaut Kate Rubins for the 20-minute call which will air live on NASA Television and stream on the agency's website and Facebook page at 10 am EDT.

Commander of the station's Expedition 51 crew, Whitson will officially set the US record Monday for most cumulative days in space. Trump will be joined by daughter Ivanka Trump and NASA astronaut Kate Rubins for the 20-minute call which will air live on NASA Television and stream on the agency's website and Facebook page at 10 am EDT.

Additionally, she is the first woman to command the station, rose to the rank of lieutenant general during a 33-year career in Russia's foreign intelligence service, according to the institute's website. After Reshetnikov retired from the institute in January, Putin named as his replacement Mikhail Pradkov. The institute says he served as the director of Russia's foreign intelligence service from 2007 to 2016. Reuters was unable to determine if either man was directly involved in the drafting of the documents. Reshetnikov's office referred questions to the Russian institute. On its website, the Russian institute describes itself as providing "expert appraisals," "recommendations," and "analytical materials" to the Russian president's office, cabinet, National Security Council, ministries, and Parliament. On Jan. 31, the websites of Putin's office and the institute posted a picture and transcript of Reshetnikov and his successor Pradkov meeting with Putin in the Kremlin.



Spanish writer Eduardo Mendoza (R) receives the 'Premio Cervantes' Literature Award from Spain's King Felipe during a traditional ceremony at the University of Alcalá de Henares, near Madrid, Spain -REUTERS

More mudslides in Colombia kills at least 17 people

BOGOTA, APRIL 20 /-/- A deluge of rain set off landslides that smashed homes and filled streets with mud Wednesday in a mountain clinic in a coffee-growing part of Colombia, and authorities said at least 17 people were killed and two dozen injured. The disaster struck in the early morning when many people in Manizales were still asleep, just as a flooding disaster two weeks ago that caused more than 300 deaths in this Andean nation's southern city of Mocoa. Dozens of hillsides gave way in Manizales after the city of nearly 400,000 people received the equivalent of a full month's rain in a span of five hours. The inundation caused at least 40 to 50 avalanches of mud and rock that destroyed homes and left several roadways impassable.

Rescuers dug in thick layers of mud searching for nine people listed as missing. Among those believed buried in the debris was a man trying to help several relatives after water began entering their home. A mudslide wrecked the house while he was still inside, though all of his family members managed to escape. "Unfortunately, everything indicates he is buried in there," said Juan Carlos Rendon, a transit coordinator aiding operations in Manizales. Rendon also led a police officer and two children. President Juan Manuel Santos attempted to reach the region but was forced to land 200 kilometers (124 miles) away in Medellin after encountering bad weather. In remarks in a live broadcast, he said residents in areas still at high risk were being evacuated and national agencies mobilized to assist in the recovery.

"It rained in Manizales like it has never rained before," Santos said. The landslides occurred as Colombia is still recovering from the March 31 disaster in Mocoa, and the two incidents drew several immediate parallels. Both caught unsuspecting residents off guard in the early morning hours after the cities received unprecedented amounts of rain. Both also struck hardest at poor people living in precarious housing developments. In one Manizales neighborhood hit yesterday, several houses had been constructed on a mountain slope despite it being known to be at risk for landslides, Rendon said. One resident, Ana Henao, said she was at home with her 12-year-old daughter Tuesday evening when their roof began to collapse from the intense rains. They stayed awake in fear that worse might still be to come. When a stream of mud began burying the home, she and her daughter got to safety. (Agencies)

Oz unveils major changes to citizenship process

CANBERRA, APRIL 20 /-/- Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has announced major changes to citizenship laws, making it tougher for foreign nationals to become Australian citizens. Aspiring citizens will have to undergo tougher tests on their English language skills and ability to demonstrate "Australian values". Turnbull said this test was not enough to assess whether an applicant has understanding of and commitment to "Australian values" and responsibilities. In explaining what constituted "Australian values", Turnbull said migrants must demonstrate support for religious freedom and gender equality. The test the prospective citizens are required to pass will focus on respect for women and children. It will also reportedly include possible questions about child marriage, female genital mutilation and domestic violence, according to the report. "If we believe that respect for women and children and saying no to violence... is an Australian value, and it is, then why should that not be made a key part... of our process to be an Australian citizen?" Turnbull asked.

The current citizenship test - a multiple-choice questionnaire - tests an applicant's knowledge about Australian laws, flags and national symbols. Turnbull said this test was not enough to assess whether an applicant has understanding of and commitment to "Australian values" and responsibilities. In explaining what constituted "Australian values", Turnbull said migrants must demonstrate support for religious freedom and gender equality. The test the prospective citizens are required to pass will focus on respect for women and children. It will also reportedly include possible questions about child marriage, female genital mutilation and domestic violence, according to the report. "If we believe that respect for women and children and saying no to violence... is an Australian value, and it is, then why should that not be made a key part... of our process to be an Australian citizen?" Turnbull asked.



Pak Hindu youth selected for prestigious US award

WASHINGTON, APRIL 20 /-/- A Hindu youth from Pakistan has been selected for the prestigious Emerging Young Leaders Award given by the US State Department for the positive role played by youngsters in building lasting peace. Rej Kumar, from Pakistan, was among 10 youths from across the world who have been selected for the second edition of the Emerging Young Leaders Award given by the State Department. Those selected for the award include youngsters from Malta, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Algeria, Tajikistan, Belgium, Vietnam, Peru and Israel. The young people selected for the award will visit the US for an intensive programme from April 30 to May 13, specially designed to explore their leadership capacities, strengthen their knowledge of management strategies in the non-profit, government and private sectors, learn and share best practices, and broaden their networks of resources and support, the State Department said in a statement yesterday. Kumar became an active member of the Pakistan-US Alumni Network (PUAN) following his participation in the State Department sponsored Global Undergraduate Exchange Programme in 2013, the statement said. He served in various leadership positions within PUAN and secured grants totaling USD 10,000 for projects focusing on countering violent extremist voices and promoting pluralism in society. (PTT)

Putin-linked think tank drew up plan to sway 2016 US election: Documents

WASHINGTON, APRIL 20 /-/- A Russian government think-tank controlled by Vladimir Putin developed a plan to influence the 2016 US Presidential Election to Donald Trump and undermine voters' faith in the American electoral system, three current and four former US officials have said. They described two confidential documents from the think-tank as providing the framework and rationale for what US intelligence agencies have concluded was an intensive effort by Russia to interfere with the November 08 election. US intelligence officials acquired the documents, which were prepared by the Moscow-based Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, after the election. The institute is run by retired senior Russian foreign intelligence officials appointed by Putin's office. The first Russian institute document was a strategy paper written last June that circulated at the highest levels of the Russian government but was not addressed to any specific individuals.

It recommended the Kremlin launch a propaganda campaign on social media and Russian state-backed global news outlets to encourage US voters to elect a president who would take a softer line towards Russia than the administration of then-President Barack Obama, the seven officials said. A second institute document, drafted in October and distributed in the same way, warned that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was likely to win the election. For that reason, it argued, it was better for Russia to end its pro-Trump propaganda and instead intensify its messaging about voter fraud to undermine the US electoral system's legitimacy and damage Clinton's reputation in an effort to undermine her presidency, the seven officials said. The current and former US officials spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the Russian documents' classified status. They declined to discuss how the United States obtained them. US intelligence agencies also declined to comment on them.

Putin has denied interfering in the US election. Putin's spokesman and the Russian institute did not respond to requests for comment. Officials that participated in the Obama administration's conclusion that Russia mounted a "fake news" campaign and launched cyber attacks against Democratic Party groups and Clinton's campaign, the current and former officials said. "Putin had the objective in mind all along, and he asked the institute to draw

him a road map," said one of the sources, a former senior US intelligence official. Trump has said Russia's activities had no impact on the outcome of the race. Ongoing congressional and FBI investigations into Russian interference have so far produced no public evidence that Trump associates colluded with the Russian effort to change the outcome of the election. Four of the officials said the approach outlined in the June strategy paper was a broadening of an effort the Putin administration launched in March 2016. That month the Kremlin instructed state-backed media outlets, including international platforms Russia Today and Sputnik news agency, to start producing positive reports on Trump's quest for the US presidency, the officials said. Russia Today did not respond to a request for comment. A spokesperson for Sputnik dismissed the assertions by the US officials that it participated in the Kremlin campaign as an "absolute pack of lies." "And by the way, it's not the first pack of lies we're hearing from sources in US official circles," the spokesperson said in an email.

Russia Today and Sputnik published anti-Clinton stories while pro-Kremlin bloggers prepared a Twitter campaign calling into question the fairness of an anticipated Clinton victory, according to a report by U.S. intelligence agencies on Russian interference in the election made public in January. Russia Today's most popular Clinton video - "How 100% of the 2015 Clintons' 'charity' went to... themselves" - accumulated nine million views on social media, according to the January report. The report said Russia Today and Sputnik "consistently cast president elect-Trump as the target of unfair coverage from traditional media outlets." The report said the agencies did not assess whether Moscow's effort had swung the outcome of the race in Trump's favour, because American intelligence agencies do not "analyse U.S. political processes or U.S. public opinion." Neither of the Russian institute documents mentioned the release of hacked Democratic Party emails to outlets, according to four of the officials. The officials said the hacking was a covert intelligence operation run separately out of the Kremlin. The overt propaganda and covert hacking efforts reinforced each other, according to the officials. Both Russia Today and Sputnik heavily promoted the

release of the hacked Democratic Party emails, which often contained embarrassing details. Five of the US officials described the institute as the Kremlin's in-house foreign policy think tank. The institute's director when the documents were written, Leonid Reshetnikov, rose to the rank of lieutenant general during a 33-year career in Russia's foreign intelligence service, according to the institute's website. After Reshetnikov retired from the institute in January, Putin named as his replacement Mikhail Pradkov. The institute says he served as the director of Russia's foreign intelligence service from 2007 to 2016. Reuters was unable to determine if either man was directly involved in the drafting of the documents. Reshetnikov's office referred questions to the Russian institute. On its website, the Russian institute describes itself as providing "expert appraisals," "recommendations," and "analytical materials" to the Russian president's office, cabinet, National Security Council, ministries, and Parliament. On Jan. 31, the websites of Putin's office and the institute posted a picture and transcript of Reshetnikov and his successor Pradkov meeting with Putin in the Kremlin.

Iran FM slams 'worn-out' US nuclear accusations

TEHRAN, APRIL 20 /-/- Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif today criticised "worn-out" US accusations that it was seeking a nuclear weapon to threaten the region and the world. "Worn-out US accusations can't mask its admission of Iran's compliance" with a 2015 nuclear deal, Zarif wrote on Twitter. Iran says its nuclear programme is purely for peaceful purposes but signed a deal with world powers to restrict its fuel enrichment for 10 years in exchange for sanctions relief. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said yesterday that Tehran has so far met its obligations, but that the deal could only delay Iran's development of a nuclear weapon. The deal "fails to achieve the objective of a non-nuclear Iran," he said, and was a product of "the same failed approach of the past that brought us to the current imminent threat we face from North Korea."

Trump gutting H-1B visa programme: S Asian advocacy group

WASHINGTON, APRIL 20 /-/- A leading South Asian advocacy group has said US President Donald Trump's executive order on H-1B visas is a move to gut the programme, popular among Indian technology professionals. South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT) also said in a statement that the Trump administration's recent court motion to revoke the programme "is a r a d - f o u g h t employment authorization for some H-4 visa holders was very disturbing. Both policies run contrary to core American values of respect for work and the right to participate in the workforce," SAALT said, a day after Trump signed the executive order directing an interagency review of the H-1B visa program. "We reject the premise that US-born and foreign workers should be pitted against each other to 'ensure the integrity' of the immigration system and serve the national interest," SAALT said. The group said Trump's executive order would interfere with the U.S. economy by encouraging immigration enforcement presence by encouraging immigration raids at businesses and other places of employment, "further underscoring this administration's commitment to criminalizing immigrants," SAALT said. It is "disturbed" by efforts of the current administration "to profile, ban, and deport community members by leveraging the full power



of every federal agency, including the Department of Justice." The executive order dishonours the legacy of immigrant workers in this country, past and present. The idea that the economic challenges of working class Americans stems from immigrant work, innovation, and entrepreneurship is nothing but a lie to us all and must be opposed," SAALT said. (PTT)