

Business

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2018

19 China's young shoppers breathe new life into its luxury markets**19** French supermarket boss hauled over Nutella frenzy**22** Virtual beaus are capturing Chinese hearts as female gaming blooms

BEIJING: British Prime Minister Theresa May speaks during a joint press conference with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang at the Great Hall of the People. — AFP

PM May eyes 'golden era' with China

Batted away critics of her leadership on Brexit, domestic issues

BEIJING: Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday forecast a "golden era" in Sino-British relations with deeper trade ties after Britain leaves the European Union, but her visit to China was dogged by Brexit rows at home. As she embarked on the three-day visit, May batted away critics of her leadership on Brexit and domestic issues, including within her Conservative party.

"First and foremost, I'm serving my country and my party. I'm not a quitter and there's a long-term job to be done," she told reporters travelling with her. The House of Lords is scrutinizing a key piece of legislation on quitting the EU, as a leaked government report shows only economic downsides to leaving the bloc. May discussed Brexit with Premier Li Keqiang when they met at the imposing Great Hall of the People, where both leaders boasted about their "golden era" of relations and the potential for better trade ties.

"We are determined to deepen our trading relationship even further and we are ambitious for what our future trade relationship will be," May said. The British leader said more than nine billion pounds (\$12.7 billion) in busi-

ness deals would be signed during her visit. The two countries also launched a joint trade and investment review to "identify priorities" on goods, services and investment, she said. They also agreed new measures to improve access to the Chinese market and remove trade barriers, including lifting a ban on British beef exports to China within six months.

In a nod to her hosts, May said "we welcome the opportunities" provided by China's cherished Belt and Road initiative, a massive infrastructure project aimed at reviving ancient Silk Road trade routes between East and West and creating greater market access for Chinese companies.

But she threw in a caveat, saying the two countries would continue to work together to ensure that the endeavor "meets international standards". Li said Sino-British rela-

tions "don't have winter, only spring" and their ties would not be affected by Brexit. "Brexit is a situation that both our countries face," he said. "Our bilateral relationship will not change with the changes of UK relations. We will have assessment and discussion on our trade relationship to make our economic and trade relationship move forward."

Rights and Hong Kong

May, who will hold talks with President Xi Jinping today and finish her visit Friday in the eastern business hub of Shanghai, was under pressure to address thorny issues with China. Before her trip the former British governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, urged her to address concerns about the political situation in the semi-autonomous city, which London handed back to Beijing in 1997.

In a letter to May's Downing Street office, Patten said Hong Kong was facing "increasing threats to the basic freedoms, human rights and autonomy" which its people were promised after the handover. Human Rights Watch also urged the British leader to "get tough with China" on rights. But business is the focus of her trip. "The UK and China will not always see eye-to-eye," she wrote in a Financial Times column. "But as partners committed to global free trade we can work together to confront and tackle challenges that affect all of our economies."

Britain has said it will leave the EU's single market and customs union so that it can strike its own trade deals with countries outside the bloc, making China's huge market an attractive target. In preparation, a number of British officials have travelled to China in recent months. Trade minister Liam Fox discussed market access for British exports, including its key financial services sector. Finance minister Philip Hammond worked on final preparations for a "stock connect" between the London and Shanghai exchanges, and mulled the possibility of linking their bond markets as well. — AFP

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Israel, Lebanon argue over offshore energy block, Beirut slams threat

BEIRUT/TEL AVIV: Israel described as "very provocative" yesterday a Lebanese offshore oil and gas exploration tender in disputed territory on the countries' maritime border, and urged international firms not to bid. Lebanese President Michel Aoun, whose country considers Israel an enemy state, described the comments as "a threat to Lebanon".

"When they issue a tender on a gas field, including Block 9, which by any standard is ours ... this is very, very challenging and provocative conduct here," Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said. "Respectable firms" bidding on the tender "are, to my mind, making a grave error - because this is contrary to all of the rules and all protocol in cases like this," he told an international security conference hosted by Tel Aviv University's INSS think-tank.

Lebanon in December approved a bid by a consortium of France's Total, Italy's Eni and Russia's Novatek for two of the five blocks put up for tender in the country's much-delayed first oil and gas offshore licensing round. One of the awarded blocks, Block 9, borders Israeli waters. Lebanon has an unresolved maritime border dispute with Israel over a triangular area of sea of around 860 sq km (330 square miles) that extends along the edge of three of the blocks.

"Lieberman's words about Block 9 are a threat to Lebanon and its right to sovereignty over its territorial waters," Aoun said on his official Twitter account. Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri said the country would take up the comments with the "relevant international bodies to affirm its right to its territorial waters". "For the past few days Israeli officials have been deliberately sending threatening messages to Lebanon," Hariri said in a statement from his press office. Hariri said Lieberman's words were "blatant provocation".

The contracts are expected to be officially signed on Feb 9, the Lebanese Petroleum Administration said, allowing exploration to begin. The licensing round was re-launched in January last year after a three-year delay caused by political paralysis. Lebanon is on the Levant Basin in the eastern Mediterranean where a number of big sub-sea gas fields have been discovered since 2009, including the



KUWAIT CITY: Lebanon's President Michel Aoun attends a gathering with the Lebanese community in Kuwait City on January 23, 2018 during an official visit. — AFP

Leviathan and Tamar fields located in Israeli waters near the disputed marine border with Lebanon. Israel last went to war in Lebanon in 2006, against the Iran-backed Hezbollah militia. With tensions rising anew, Lieberman said Lebanon would "pay in full" for any new Hezbollah attacks on Israel. But he said Israel sought no war, adding: "We try to conduct ourselves determinedly and responsibly." — Reuters

Sisi inaugurates Zohr gas field

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi yesterday inaugurated the offshore Zohr gas field, aimed at making the Arab world's most populous country self-sufficient in natural gas by the end of 2018. "We are now entering into the self-sufficiency stage... and, God willing, by the end of the year we will have reached self-sufficiency," Petroleum Minister Tarek Al-Molla said at a ceremony in the northern city of Port Said, broadcast live on state television. In December, the oil ministry said it was starting production from the field discovered in 2015 by Italian energy giant Eni with an initial 350 million cubic feet (10 million cubic meters) a day. Molla, at the ceremony attended by Sisi, said Egypt expects it "will be able to stop importing liquefied natural gas... and therefore save what we import which is \$230 million per month, or \$2.8 billion annually". The Egyptian government is trying to roll back the impact of the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak and led to years of political, security and economic turmoil. — AFP