

Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei in a Message Yesterday Congratulated Iran's National Army Day, Which Falls on April 17

# IRAN NEWS

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## DOMESTIC

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## DOMESTIC

7% Growth in Industrial Production Registered for Autumn

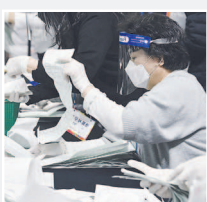


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Seasons Will Resume Without Fans, But No Dates Yet



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## Iran on Brink of Containing Virus In Most Provinces

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Health Minister Saeed Namaki has said that Iran is on the brink of containing the COVID-19 outbreak in most of the country's provinces.

In a written statement published on Friday, Namaki said that Iran has been able to curb the outbreak using its own "successful model" despite lacking the financial and material support enjoyed by other countries.

"Despite circumstances arising of sanctions and economic warfare, no patient was left abandoned behind hospital doors and no patient lacked needed drugs and medical care during the peak of the virus across cities," he added.

The health minister added that Iran's virus response was developed on scientific models and years of past experience "eradicating infectious diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, polio, measles, mumps and tetanus".

Namaki added that the country was seeking to gradually reopen businesses as part of "smart distancing" program to reduce the economic impacts of US sanctions, and restrictive measures adopted to slow the virus spread.

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## Zarif Mentions U.S. Illegal Presence In Persian Gulf

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in a message mentioned the last year U.S. illegal presence in the Persian Gulf and noted that the Persia Gulf existed 2,000 years before the U.S. came into being.

"U.S. Navy can't seem to find its way around our waters. Perhaps because it hasn't figured out its name: Persian Gulf, as it's been called for 2,000 yrs longer than US has existed. Or maybe it doesn't know what it's doing in our backyard, 7,000 miles from home," Zarif wrote in his Twitter account as a yearly reminder.

The 'Persian Gulf' which has been used for thousands of years to name the strategic waterway in south of Iran takes its roots from the old civilization of the country and the collective minds of the peoples who have occupied the region in at least past three thousand years. It has always been there in the oldest world maps and will remain so forever.

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## U.S. Presence in Persian Gulf Destabilizes Security in Region



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami lambasted the US' illegal presence in the Persian Gulf region, saying the Americans are the main reason behind any insecurity in the region.

"The Americans have come from across the world to the Persian Gulf, and yet, make unfounded claims about security," the defense made the comment on Friday on the sidelines of the National Army Day celebrations in Tehran. "We are here at our home, while they have come from thousands of miles away, putting other countries in trouble by sanctions and threats," he added.

On Wednesday, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that 11 high-speed boats, belonging to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), have been moving alongside six US warships in the Persian Gulf.

Yesterday, President Hassan Rouhani congratulated the National Army Day, saying the Islamic Republic's Army is the "guardian of the Iranian's lives".

In a message on Friday, Rouhani described "the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran as not the symbol of warmongering, but rather the manifestations of popular support and national interests," stressing that "whether in war or peace, the Army is the guardian of Iran and Iranians' lives."

"Throughout the existence of the human beings, defending and confronting the enemy has always been one of the beauties of human life, and today we see this beauty both in the face of the visible enemy and in the face of the hidden enemy," Rouhani said.

The president referred to the selfless efforts of the Iranian Armed Forces in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, saying, "The army is the guardian of Iran's life, whether in war -hard war or soft war- or peace, whether on the front or on the street, whether in the barracks or in the hospital and the life of Iran is the life of all Iranians."

"Today, the soldiers and generals of the Army, the commanders and the soldiers of the Army of the Guardians, along with the health defenders and the supporters of protecting the lives of the people, are creating an epic point in the history with empathy," Rouhani said.

"In these difficult times, the armies around the world are less involved in the war, but a hidden enemy has come to fight all human beings."

"The world will not forget this war. The most humane war in history in which all human beings and all armies fight for human beings," he added.

He noted that "the greatness of the Army's work at various stages in the social stage of helping the nation and the state during floods, earthquakes, diseases and other social disasters further proves the need to maintain the strength in war and defense in times of peace."

## Iran Mulls Over Producing Nuclear-Powered Submarines

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's Navy commander says the force plans to build nuclear-powered submarines capable of operating in international waters for long periods of time amid the growing threats facing the country from the sea.

Rear Admiral Hossein Khanzadi on Thursday highlighted the capabilities of submarines powered by nuclear reactors compared to the conventional models, saying nuclear propulsion enables the watercraft to stay at high seas for months and rids it of the need for frequent refueling.

He said the plan is in line with the country's defensive agenda, adding that many countries, including the U.S., are using nuclear-powered submarines.

"It would be negligence on the part of Iran if it fails to consider using submarines with nuclear propulsion," he said. "Therefore, we are thinking about its."

"This domestic capability exists at the Defense Ministry regarding the production of submarines larger than Fateh and certainly, the developing of submarine propulsion is on the Navy's agenda," he added.

Fateh (Conqueror) is an Iranian designed class of semi-heavy submarines that can operate for five weeks at a submerged depth of 200 meters.

The near 600-tonne vessel is equipped with torpedoes and naval mines in addition to cruise missiles.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Khanzadi stressed that Iran's stance on the nuclear energy is clear and that Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has on many occasions highlighted the peaceful nature of the country's nuclear activities.

In addition, he added, Iran requires the peaceful nuclear program given multiple threats around the country.

The commander said Iran is entitled to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes as per international conventions.

The Armed Forces need equipment to maintain peace and security, the Iranian navy chief said, noting, however, that "peace would not be consolidated if there is no deterrence and preparedness for defense."

## ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian



## Wahhabism Condescends to Shiism

In these Coronavirus-hit days and in lives of all humanity regardless of what he is doing has caused emergence of great plague and it has almost overshadowed and changed all political, social and economic equations, some coming reports from Saudi Arabia show that Sunni youths of this country in a climate filled with belief and love to religion are converting from Wahhabism to Shiism one after the other.

Although this issue is tried to be kept secret from the media through some adopted measures or it is suppressed by resorting to coercion but it is revealed between bits and pieces of the news and reports and right finally finds its way.

Some video clips from some famous Sunni clerics, who actually feel hearty that Wahhabism like Bahaism is man-made and has been created by the British, have gone viral where they are moving to introduce Shiism and its legitimacy among Islamic sects, and question after question strikes the minds of the Sunni youths about the behavior of Daesh forces and their followers who used to obey Ibn Taymiyyah, and all these questions are unanswered. Everywhere it is talked about enchanting elegance and accuracy of Imam Zaman (A)'s thoughts.

Due to blessing of pro-Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) household Muslims' maturity in countries like Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Yemen, it is talked about resistance and bravery and all this approach is deep-rooted in transparency of Hadis Nabavi (Prophetic Hadith) that does not separate the Holy Quran from Atrat (Prophet's Household).

Apart from stimulant topics in the thought and faith climate, the number of anti-stimulant climate against Wahhabism's thought is not few. For example one can point to recent behavior of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman with his relatives. The way Saudis butchered and assassinated Jamal Khashoggi is another example that one can find out the nature of father and son's ruling over Saudis and one can easily find what factors cause hatred among Saudi youths towards the hypocrisy of the hand-raised of Wahhabism to rise.

Recently Asharq Al-Awsat daily, owned by Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, in an article and in confrontation with the content of the book "Howler of Riyadh" pointed to some conflicts between King Salman and his son and has tried to introduce out of all Saudi Family these father and son to the Muslim community. The article in highlighting important points of the lives of these two princesses has not left any smallest dot in order that one can believe Saudi King is a human being. See Page 7

## Technical Features of Iranian Coronavirus Detection System to Be Announced

TEHRAN (IFP) - A senior Iranian official says technical capabilities and features of a smart system recently developed by domestic experts to detect the coronavirus will soon be announced.

Brigadier General Ramezan Sharif said the process of the production of the system will also be explained in the presence of media and experts.

"We thank God Almighty that despite unfair sanctions and the spread of the viruses of enmity and grudge of the US and its allies, the children of the Iranian nation, by God's grace, and on the back their willpower and firm resolve as well as the development of their talents and creativity, are securing achievements day by day, especially in the field of science and technology, bringing further honour and dignity upon Iranians while triggering the awe and anger of domestic and foreign enemies and ill-wishers," said general Sahrif, the spokesperson for Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC).

He said the system had been tested for more than 10 days in at least 10 hospitals and medical centres before being officially unveiled. According to the general, the system can detect the coronavirus with 70-80 percent accuracy.

He blasted the propaganda campaign launched by certain foreign media outlets against this accomplishment, saying such a move indicates their feeling of weakness and desperation.



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# Presence of Iran's Army Disappointing Enemies

TEHRAN - The secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran tweeted on Thursday that Iranian Army is "a source of fear and disappointment for the enemies".

Ali Shamkhani wrote that the presence of the Iranian Army is a messenger of peace, security, and power for the people and fear and disappointment for the enemies.

He made the remarks in his message on the occasion of the National Day of the Army that falls on April 17.

Late Imam Khomeini named the day "the National Day of the Army" in 1979.

## President Vows Continuation Of Development by Opening 4 Energy Projects

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

**TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani has opened four major energy projects in the province surrounding the capital Tehran as his government launches an ambitious plan to finish over \$3 billion worth of similar projects until the end of the current calendar year in March 2021.**

Speaking via video conference on Thursday, Rouhani ordered the opening of one power plant and three sewage treatment facilities in four cities near the capital.

The official IRNA news agency said the projects had costed around 28 trillion rials (\$175 million), adding that construction for them had been financed by both the government and the private sector.

While opening a new steam unit in Parand Power Plant, located to the southwest of Tehran, Rouhani said Iran could benefit from turning its gas-fired power plants to the so-called combined-cycle systems where the steam is raised through using the exhaust heat from the combustion turbines.

He said the government would compensate any private sector investor launching a combined cycle power plant through supplying free natural gas in the early years of operation.

"To save fuel and protect the environment, it is always recommended that power plant units are turned into combined-cycle (systems) wherever it is possible," Rouhani said.

Rouhani said that Iranians won't sit idle for a moment for country's development despite two concurrent fights against sanctions and coronavirus, and continue observing health protocols.



Speaking at the unveiling ceremony of a number of important, major projects in the fields of water and power in Tehran province, President Rouhani said, "the opening of these projects and other projects only in the energy sector until the end of year bears the message that everybody is working hard for the development of our Islamic Iran."

I would like to thank Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian and all those who are working hard in the water treatment plants and the energy sector, he added.

The government plans to launch more than 5,000 projects in the current Iranian calendar year.

Construction for the third steam unit in Parand began in 2015. The project will add some 160 megawatts per hour to the current electricity production capacity in the province of Tehran. Nearly \$150 million has been spent on the project which will create 220 permanent jobs and 1,500 more on the wider supply chain.

Also on Thursday, Rouhani ordered the opening of three major sewage treatment facilities in Eslamshahr, Malard and Safadasht, cities located to the west and south of Tehran.

He said his government will finish 500 trillion rials (\$3.125 billion) worth of similar energy projects until March 2021 when the current Persian calendar year comes to its end.

## Tehran, Ankara Discuss Ties, Coronavirus in Tehran

TEHRAN (MNA) — Majlis Speaker's Special Aide for International Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian held a meeting with Turkish Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Iran Derya Örs on Wednesday to discuss bilateral relations.

"Outbreak of coronavirus pandemic has overshadowed the global ties and regional exchanges and constructive interaction between regional and neighboring states is effective in improving the current situation," said the Iranian official.

Amir-Abdollahian pointed to the deep cultural, religious and historical ties between the two countries of Iran and Turkey and emphasized the significance of friendly relations between the two countries in all fields."

He pointed out that the Iranian Parliament welcomes evermore strengthening cooperation with neighboring Turkey.

He also termed the current relations between Tehran and Ankara in the regional and international interactions 'excellent'.



Iran's medical staff and physicians are ready to share their experiences with neighboring Turkey in the field of combating coronavirus, he said, adding, "joint cooperation between Iran and Turkey in battling the disease is of paramount importance."

Turkish Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Iran Derya Örs, for his

part, expressed his satisfaction with the expansion of ties between Iran and Turkey and added, "people, parliaments and governments of the two countries of Iran and Turkey have established amicable cultural, religious and historical relations based on good neighborhood policy which dates back to many years ago."

The Turkish envoy termed strengthening mutual interactions in crisis conditions in the fight against coronavirus 'very significant' and said, "exchanging experiences between medical staff of the two countries is of paramount importance."

He also wished a speedy recovery for Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani who was infected by COVID-19.

## Tehran Rejects Reports on Sending Aids to Karabakh

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran opposes any move that can help heighten the conflict between the two neighboring states of Armenia and Azerbaijan, said Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Abbas Araqchi said in a telephone conversation with his Azeri counterpart Khalaf Khalafov.

During the telephone call initiated by the Azeri side, Araqchi also discussed bilateral ties.

Referring to release of some news in cyberspace, Araqchi said that the enemies are attempting to harm the two neighboring states' relations via media hype.

News on the Iranian truck traffic to Karabakh and occupied areas of Azerbaijan are totally false, as Iran respects the country's territorial integrity.

Appreciating Azerbaijan's humanitarian aid to Iran to fight COVID-19, Araqchi said that continuation of goods transit and transportation while observing health protocols is a major issue in bilateral ties.

Araqchi also referred to closure of universities in Azerbaijan, calling for Baku's help to return Iranian students home. His proposal was welcomed by the Azeri official.

During the phone talk, the two officials also stressed the need for maintaining friendly ties and keeping up all-out cooperation between the two countries.

## IRGC, Army Not Hesitate to Strengthen Deterrence, Authority

TEHRAN (MNA) — Chief Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Major General Hossein Salami said that IRGC and Army forces of the country do not hesitate in strengthening deterrence and authority of the country.

Despite enemy's animosity waged against the Islamic Republic of Iran, IRGC and Army forces of the country have joined their hands together and will not hesitate in strengthening all-out 'deterrence and authority' components of the country, he said in a statement on the occasion of Army Day on April 17.

He congratulated the auspicious occasion to the Commander of Iran's Army Major General Seyyed Abdollah Mousavi.

Salami termed IRGC and Army of the country as a united front of the Islamic Iran in the fight against the global arrogance.

April 17, which marks Iran's Army Day, is a reminiscence of wisdom and miraculous foresightedness of the founding father of the Islamic Revolution the late Imam Khomeini in protecting the Army and supporting it against the malicious plots and conspiracies of enemies waged on the Islamic Republic of Iran, Major General Salami added.

## Swiss Ambassador Hails IRCS' Effective Role in Fighting COVID-19



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Switzerland's Ambassador in Tehran Markus Leitner said that the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) played a crucial role in fighting the rapidly spreading coronavirus.

In a meeting with head of IRCS Karim Hemmati late on Wednesday, he added that his country enjoys a good place in the world and it can use it for promoting humanitarian services.

He further noted that both Swiss Embassy and government have close cooperation with IRCS, as it is considered a main partner which playing an effective role in fighting the deadly virus.

Swiss companies operating in Iran are eager to cooperate with IRCS, he said, noting that Iran can place its orders with them in the field of medical supplies.

Referring to operationalization of Swiss financial channel, the Swiss ambassador said that the channel is active in two fields. First is presence of Swiss medical firms in Iran in the fields of pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and foodstuff and can import needed items to Iran.

Second is transferring money to Swiss banks for purchasing Iran's needed goods, he said, noting that this channel was not created for humanitarian aid, but as a channel to buy Iran's needs for humanitarian purposes.

Switzerland is trying to boost interaction with IRCS to enhance humanitarian services, Leitner said.

Hemmati, for his part, highlighted importance of humanitarian diplomacy, saying that Iran lost many people as a result of coronavirus spread due to the US unilateral sanctions.

Despite all problems, Iran has managed to overcome the epidemic, Hemmati said, noting, "We are ready to share the experiences in the field with Swiss universities and scientific and research centers."

## Envoy Stresses Expansion of Economic Ties With Turkmenistan

MASHHAD (IRNA) - The ambassador of Iran to Turkmenistan stressed strengthening and expanding economic relations with Turkmenistan focusing on transit.

In a meeting with the border points committee on Thursday, Abbas-Ali Arbab-Khales said that expanding relations and enhancing transit cooperation between Iran and Turkmenistan in railroads and roads sections and removing limitation are necessary.

He said that he is completely ready to help expand the different economic relations, especially the capacities that have not been used.

Arbab-Khales said that the officials in Iran and Turkmenistan are willing to deepen mutual relations in different fields.

He added that the capabilities of Iranian provinces near the border can be a good ground for expansion of relations - capabilities like industries, construction, agriculture, academics, and novel sciences.

## Zarif Lauds China Anti-COVID19 Aid to Iran

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister in a message on Thursday thanked China for providing medical aid to Iran in time of coronavirus outbreak and slammed U.S. sanctions that hindered Iran's fight against pandemic.

"I am very happy to talk to my old friend, Wang Yi, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister again," Zarif said in a Twitter message in Chinese language.

"We exchanged views on issues of common interest, such as fighting the New Crown Pneumonia epidemic, deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries, and the peace process in Afghanistan," he added.

"I thank China for providing Iran with anti-epidemic materials and sending medical experts, condemning the continued illegal sanctions by the United States that seriously hindered Iran's efforts to fight the epidemic," Iranian top diplomat noted.

Earlier, Iranian Ambassador to China Mohammad Keshavarzadeh appreciated Chinese government and people's aid to all countries, including Iran, saying the contributions serve to develop international relations with China.

Iran and China as two ancient civilizations enjoy historical relations, he said.

## Majlis Body Rejects Fake Coronavirus Tolls

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN — Majlis Research Center has rejected the tolls from the coronavirus outbreak in Iran that certain foreign media outlets have reported, referencing a report by the body.

"The figures offered by foreign media about coronavirus cases and casualties [in Iran] are wrong and invalid, and are in no way confirmed by the Parliament's Research Center," said Mohammad Qassemi, the caretaker director of the center, on Thursday.

He said foreign media outlets had distorted the figures presented in a recent report by the center.

The center's data, he said, in no way challenged the figures released by Iran's National Headquarters to Fight the Coronavirus, and merely examined the sensitivity of the Reverse Transcription-Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) diagnostic test for the coronavirus, which is the case in all the countries dealing with the virus.

The center's report explicitly states that the National Headquarters to Fight the Coronavirus is the sole reference for the publication of coronavirus-related statistics and that the main criterion is the people whose test results have come out a definitive positive, Qassemi said.

Several foreign media outlets had misreported the figures presented by the center. In one report, the Associated Press had claimed that the center had said the number of coronavirus deaths in Iran may be as high as 8,500 and the country may have as many as 760,000 cases.

## Hungary Begins Expelling Iranian Students

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

BUDAPEST - Hungary says it began expelling 14 Iranian students on April 16 for alleged violations of coronavirus quarantine rules.

The Iranians "displayed blatantly antisocial, violent behavior" while under quarantine in a Budapest hospital last month, police Lieutenant Colonel Robert Kiss said on April 15.

Eleven of the students were to be expelled on April 16; the other three are to be sent home on April 23, Kiss said at a news briefing.

The expulsions follow complaints by the Hungarian Health Ministry accusing them of leaving their hospital rooms without permission and without protective clothing. They refused to return to their rooms, loudly demonstrated their dissatisfaction, and behaved aggressively toward medical staff, the ministry said.

The Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC), a rights group that represents one of the students, has called Budapest's accusations about its client "absurd."

The 33-year-old pharmacy student was put in hospital quarantine on March 7 and given an expulsion order within a week despite obeying the rules, according to HHC. Her appeal against deportation to Iran was then rejected by a Budapest court on April 8.

The HHC said in an earlier statement that all the students later proved to have no symptoms of COVID-19.

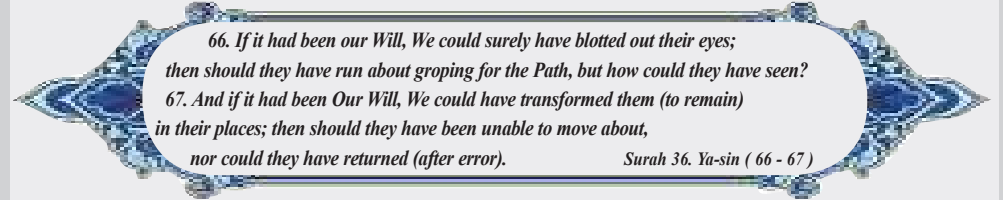
A spokesperson for Iran's Foreign Ministry, Abbas Mousavi, told Iranian media last week that the expulsion decisions were "deeply regrettable."





## PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	13:03
■ Evening (Maghreb)	19:56
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:58
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:25



## 7% Growth in Industrial Production Registered for Autumn

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN – Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade says the Central Bank's report on the country's seven percent growth in industrial production in the autumn and setting record for non-oil exports and boosting trade volume of the country to \$85b indicates the country's unique capacities for materializing the surge in production.**

Reza Rahmani on Thursday said that the volume of exports and imports of the country last year surpassed 169m tons and the amount of exports last year experienced 14 percent growth comparing to the preceding year.

He reiterated that the figure reveals importance of developing infrastructures for exports and easing process for foreign trade more than ever.

Rahmani added that with studying all details and process of exports in the past Iranian calendar year, the ministry for surge in production will prioritize attention on exporting the knowledge-based exports and goods with value-added.

He noted that since the beginning of the New Year and upon the order of the President, activities in the production units especially in producing hygienic goods have not halted and it is expected that after containment of the Coronavirus, the country can turn the condition into an opportunity to materialize the slogan of the surge in production and to create new export markets. Rahmani reiterated that the country enjoys having capacities and potentials to boost production and economic



boom and all should work together to take advantage of capacities.

He also pointed to the Central Bank's report on the seven percent growth in the industrial production in the autumn and setting new record in non-oil exports and increasing the national trade volume to \$85b show that the country has unique potentials in production sector.

Rahmani added that most of the imported goods last year were essential goods, industrial machines, intermediary goods and industrial equipment and most of people's needs were provided with domestic products.

He said if domestic products meet people's needs and demands, then smuggling of goods will fall and to this end, all capacities for domestic production should be activated and Iranian brands should be revived.

Rahmani emphasized that cooperation of private sector and all activists in the industry will accelerate boost in production and can turn the threats into opportunities.

He said the ministry has started reviewing and studying the weaknesses on way of boosting production, and it wants to draw up plans for surge in production by using all experts' views.

He emphasized that the ministry will draw up practical plans far from any slogan for implementing them in the country.

## Coronavirus Not Stopping Activities in South Pars Gas Field



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The CEO of Pars Oil and Gas Company said on Thursday that was necessary to prevent further spread of coronavirus and to continue with the projects at the same time.

During a visit to a project in Asaluyeh and Kangan, Mohammad Meshkinfam said after two months of the coronavirus outbreak, the activities of the country restarted on April 11.

Stressing that the outbreak should not harm the progress of the projects in South Pars Field, Meshkinfam said the activities of these projects will continue with complete implementation of the protocols issued by the Health, Security, and Environment Unit.

He added that in certain parts of the projects that are less sensitive, in order to safeguard the health of the employees, they should do their jobs through remote working.

Meshkinfam added that it is necessary that in the less sensitive parts that few staff are needed, their presence in the office is managed through telework.

During his visit to the project, Meshkinfam conferred with managers of the projects and was informed with the latest developments and progresses in the projects and plans for carrying out projects in the current year.

He also visited the combined cycle gas turbine plant in Asaluyeh and different sections of South Pars Phase 2 and 3 and refineries of Phases 20 and 21, and was informed with the latest developments in the projects.

Earlier on Thursday, the deputy for energy of the Passive Defense Organization said that South Pars Gas Field in Asaluyeh, Bushehr Province, is a white zone and a role model for other industrial zone in the aspect of coronavirus outbreak.

Brigadier-General Mohammad-Ali Motiei said in video conference that the managers of South Pars closely followed the instructions issued by the minister of petroleum and put it among the most successful industrial zones of the world in controlling the coronavirus.

Motiei said that the zone has an important role in the Iranian economy and national production. He added the six refineries of the areas have been carefully disinfected.

## Turkmenistan Criticized for Strictness On Its Borders



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Head of Iran-Tajikistan Chamber of Commerce says Iran has faced problem for its exports to the Central Asian countries because of Turkmenistan's strictness on its border crossings.

Speaking to ILNA, Mohammad Hossein Roshanak pointed to Turkmenistan's imposed restrictions on its border crossings, saying that the restrictions have affected not only on Iran's trade with Turkmenistan but also hit Iran's exports by railway to other the Central Asian states and north of Afghanistan.

He reiterated that strictness of Turkmenistan on its borders is totally exaggeration and it has no justification, adding that such restrictions are just type nit-picking because the cargo is loaded in Mashhad and it takes a week to reach Turkmenistan's border and if the cargo is infected with any virus will be virus-free after a week.

Roshanak noted that if the strictness is because of the driver, Iran's cargoes are transported by railway and there is no justification for any strictness, either.

He urged Iranian officials especially Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Roads and Urban Development to begin talks with Turkmenistan officials to resolve the problem.

Roshanak noted that so far Iranian officials have had several talks with Turkmen officials but talks have been in low level and weak and high-ranking Iranian officials are needed to involve in talks with Turkmenistan.

On exports and the volume of exports in the past Iranian calendar year, he said that the volume of exports last year in terms of weight grew by 33 percent comparing to its preceding year, noting that in terms of value, last year's exports equaled to its preceding year.

On the condition of exports in the current year, Roshanak said that the issue of Coronavirus will not be resolved soon and all policy-makings for international trade should be based the realities and the Coronavirus.

He reiterated that if the issue of the Coronavirus and restrictions of Turkmenistan are not solved in two months, several exported goods of Iran like cookies, dry milk and edible foods will decay in the borders.

## Iran's Export of Sponge Iron Ups by 86%

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's export of sponge iron, also called direct reduced iron (DRI), increased by 86% in the first 11 months of the previous Iranian year (starting on March 2019) compared to the same period of the previous year.

The export of DRI in the aforementioned period reached 942 thousand tons. This is while export of DRI has a 10% duty.

According to the Iran Steel Producers statistics, in the first 11 months of Iranian year 1397, the export of DRI was 507 thousand tons, and reached 533 thousand tons at the end of the same year, which showed a 25% reduction capered to 1396.

The statistics show that Iran has produced 25,449,000 tons of DRI in the first 11 months of 1398, which shows a



5% growth compare to the production in the same period of its previous year that was 24,303,000 tons.

In toll, the production of the year 1397 was 26,359,000 tons.

The consumption of sponge iron in Iran was about 24,5 million tons that

shows 3% growth compared to the first 11 months of the previous year.

The consumption of DRI in Iran in 1397 was 25,826,000 million tons, which showed an 18% growth compared to the year before that.

Iran stand second, after India, in producing sponge iron, and stands 10th in producing steel.

Iran is to inaugurate a factory in Kerman, central Iran, this year that can produce two million tons of DRI.

## Iran Largest Investment Holding Pockets Over \$0.4b Through IPO

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's largest investment holding Shasta has offered a portion of its shares in the stock market pocketing more than \$0.4 billion through the initial public offering (IPO).

The official IRNA news agency said that Shasta's IPO was the biggest of its kind in the history of the Tehran Stock Exchange (TSE), adding that a total of 6.7 billion shares were sold off to 2.07 million buyers in a matter of hours.

Shasta, a subsidiary of state-run Social Security Organization (SSO), is the largest investment holding in Iran with an estimated value of \$6.25 billion. It has nine major finance companies active in areas like energy and communications with around 44,000 staff members.

Another 1.3 million shares will also be on offer on Saturday for a sell-off to smaller investments funds, said the report by IRNA, adding that the total IPO is expected to generate nearly 70 trillion rials, or around \$440 million, in new funds for Shasta.

Iran's central bank has approved rules for repurchase and reverse repurchase agreements.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani reacted to the IPO in a Cabinet meeting on Wednesday, describing the move as bold and a first of its kind by an Iranian government in history.

Iran's ministry of labor (MCLS), which is in charge of SSO and its subsidiary companies, said it would gradually give up ownership of its economic enterprises to become a sheer shareholder.

Shasta's IPO, which was carried out through Fara Bourse (IFB) a second market of the TSE for small-cap deals on securities and other financial instruments, is expected to boost a stock market index that has already gone through all-time highs.

The TEDPIX, the main index in the TSE, topped 645,761 points on Wednesday, bringing the total value of the market to 23,580 trillion rials or \$147.37 billion.

## Gov't to Grant Loans to Employers to Prevent Layoffs

TEHRAN (IFP) - Iran will offer low-interest loans to employers to keep their employees on the job amid the coronavirus outbreak, a top official says.

Minister of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare Mohammad Shariatmadari said among the priorities of the government is to prevent a rise in unemployment and keep workers from being laid off. "Workers in 10 job groups whose employment has been affected by the coronavirus outbreak will be supported," he said.

The minister added some 600,000 people have registered their names on a website for unemployment benefits.

"The trend of unemployment is alarming in all countries. In Iran, too, the necessary predictions have been made to support some workers who have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 outbreak," he said.

He noted some Rls. 50 trillion (\$334 million) has been earmarked to provide unemployment benefits for these workers.

## Iranian Students to Return From Italy, Netherlands

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's minister of science and higher education said on Thursday that the Iranian students studying in Italy and the Netherlands are to return home.

Mansour Gholami said that the number of Iranian non-medical students in other counties is very small. However, Iran is pursuing to return them home from countries that are engaged with the coronavirus.

Gholami said that Iranian students that study in Italy will return home with three flights of Mahan Airlines, and one flight is arranged for returning students from the Netherlands.

Many non-medical students who studied in China returned home in the very early days of the outbreak.

## Iran, Other UNWTO Members Discuss Ways to Revitalize Tourism Industry

TEHRAN (IFP) - Deputy Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Vali Teimuri has attended a webinar organized by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) to discuss the ways to revitalize the global tourism industry.

The Iranian deputy minister was one of the participants in the UNWTO video conference on "Policies for an Inclusive Recovery in Global Tourism".

Chaired by Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization Zurab Pololikashvili, the webinar was attended by more than 240 participants, including officials of the UNWTO, ministers and ranking officials from the member states of the UN specialized agency, and the policy-makers and other figures in the tourism sector.

Considering the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic and its direct impacts on the world economy, particularly the tourism industry, the World Tourism Organization has devised plans to advance immediate response and find common executive policies in the countries affected by the contagious disease.

The participants in the recent webinar discussed various plans and decided that the World Tourism Organization should publish a compilation of the necessary policies and recommendations and provide it for the Member States.

The Iranian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts has already submitted a detailed report on the impacts of the novel coronavirus on the country's tourism industry, the measures that Iran has adopted and the plans that it is implementing to handle the crisis, as well as the strategies that the ministry has developed for the post-coronavirus era.

During the webinar, the Iranian deputy minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts highlighted the main features of the report which has been officially given to the World Tourism Organization.



## Swiss Aim to Ease COVID-19 Curbs

ZURICH (Reuters) - Switzerland said on Thursday it would let hairdressers, beauty salons and some other businesses reopen from April 27 to start a gradual relaxation of restrictions following a slowdown in new coronavirus infections.

The announcement came the same day that the World Health Organization's regional director said European countries should move with extreme caution when considering easing lockdowns.

But neighbouring Austria and Germany have begun their own tentative steps out of their shutdowns. Business groups have also been pressing the Swiss government to ease restrictions to lessen the blow on the economy.



## House Speaker of Trying to Remove Bolsonaro From Office

BRASILIA (Reuters) - Brazil's right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro on Thursday accused the speaker of the lower house of Congress Rodrigo Maia of turning state governors against him in the coronavirus crisis and seeking to remove him from the presidency.

Bolsonaro fired Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta on Thursday, saying he was not adequately taking the economic fallout from coronavirus lockdowns into consideration.

In an interview with CNN Brasil, Bolsonaro appealed to the governors to rethink their quarantine restrictions to allow the economy to breathe, warning that Brazil risked going broke and ending up "the same as Venezuela."



## South Korea Ruling Party Wins Big Parliamentary Majority



SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea's left-leaning ruling party won a landslide election victory, results showed Thursday, after the coronavirus pandemic turned the political tide in President Moon Jae-in's favour.

His Democratic party secured the largest absolute majority in the National Assembly since the advent of democracy in 1987, on a turnout of 66.2 percent -- the highest at a parliamentary election for 28 years.

Just a few months ago Moon was threatened by scandals over power abuse and sluggish economic growth, while critics called his dovish approach towards North Korea unrealistic.

But the South's relatively quick and effective handling of the epidemic -- it has also exported test kits to at least 20 countries -- was a boon for Moon and his party ahead of the polls, largely seen as a referendum on his performance.

Koreans' confidence in Moon's administration was boosted by his so-called "coronavirus diplomacy", including recent phone calls with at least 20 national leaders, said Minseon Ku, a politics scholar at Ohio State University in the US.

She added that the president had successfully framed the pandemic as an "opportunity for South Korea to restructure its economy -- capitalising on industries like AI and biopharma".

That sat well with voters, "coupled with South Korea's global recognition" for its handling of the outbreak, Ku said.

In a statement, Moon said he felt a greater sense of responsibility than joy at the outcome.

"We will never be conceited but listen more humbly to the voice of the people," he added.

South Korea was among the first countries to hold a national election during the pandemic, with citizens still asked to maintain social distancing after enduring one of the worst early outbreaks of COVID-19.

All voters were required to wear protective masks, clean their hands and don plastic gloves, and undergo temperature checks on arrival at the polling station.

Those found to have fevers cast their ballots in separate booths disinfected between each user.

South Korea uses a mix of first-past-the-post seats and proportional representation, and Moon's Democratic party and a sister organisation took a total of 180 seats in the 300-member National Assembly.

The main conservative opposition United Future Party (UFP) and its satellite secured 103.

Moon's position was not at issue as he is directly elected, but the absolute majority means he is likely to be less of a lame duck than previous presidents towards the end of their single five-year term.

## U.S. Outlines Phased Reopening, as China Faces Virus Ire

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump on Thursday laid out guidelines for a gradual reopening of the United States after the battering of the coronavirus pandemic, saying normal life should resume quickly in some states.

Trump's new push came as he saw progress in his campaign to pressure China, with fellow Western leaders agreeing that Beijing has not been transparent on the origins of the virus that has infected more than 2.1 million people.

Facing re-election in November, Trump has been impatient to lift a lockdown that has thrown 22 million people out of work in the world's largest economy, although plenty of leaders at home and abroad fear that hastily easing restrictions will cause more people to die. "Based on the latest data, our team of experts now agrees that we can begin the next front in our war," Trump told a news conference. "We're opening up our country."

The United States accounts for the most COVID-19 deaths of any country, with almost 33,000 of the nearly 144,000 fatalities worldwide. But pointing to sparsely populated parts of the country, Trump said some states were already free from the impact and can open "literally tomorrow."

"We have large sections of the country, right now, that can think about opening," he said.

The White House outlined three "phases" under which each governor would determine the permitted size of gatherings depending on their location and levels of infection.

Trump's recommendations were a far cry from his previous calls for a sudden end to social distancing measures -- as well as his earlier call for the nation to be fully open in time for Easter on April 12.

He also pulled back from a battle over authority, with governors ultimately deciding what to do -- as was the case before his announcement.

Hours earlier, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York, the U.S. epicenter of the virus, said he was extending the shutdown there until May 15 despite signs of progress.

"I would like to see that infection rate get down even more," Cuomo said, reporting that 606 people had died in the last day, the lowest number in 10 days.

Britain, which shut down later than most of continental Europe, said it would extend its lockdown for at least another three weeks. Its daily death toll spiked to 861.



## Putin, Xi Slam Attempts to Blame China for Late Virus Response

MOSCOW (AFP) - Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping on Thursday rejected as counterproductive attempts to blame Beijing for delaying informing the world about the coronavirus, the Kremlin said.

Putin and Xi spoke after U.S. President Donald Trump's administration berated China for not sharing data more quickly.

Washington is also investigating the origins of the coronavirus -- which has killed more than 140,000 people worldwide -- saying it doesn't rule out that the disease came from a laboratory researching bats in Wuhan, China.

The Kremlin said that during phone calls with Xi on Thursday, Putin praised "consistent and effective actions" of the Chinese "which allowed the epidemiological situation in the country to stabilise."

The leaders did not refer to the White House directly but stressed the "counterproductiveness" of attempts to blame China for not informing the world quickly enough about the appearance of a dangerous new infection.

Xi called attempts to politicise the pandemic "detrimental to international cooperation," according to a Chinese readout of the call reported by state-run Xinhua.

Xinhua also reported that Putin had called "attempts by some people to smear China" over the virus "unacceptable."

Since emerging in China at the end of last year, the pandemic has turned the world upside down, forcing half of humanity indoors and sending the global economy into freefall.

Putin and Xi also stressed the two countries' "strategic partnership" and said Russia and China were ready to help each other during the pandemic

by exchanging specialists and supplying medical equipment, protective gear and medicines, the Kremlin said.

"The two leaders expressed confidence that our countries will be able to successfully overcome the pandemic-related challenges by continuing to closely cooperate," Putin's office said.

## U.N. Yemen Envoy Expects Warring Parties to Agree Truce

NEW YORK (Reuters) - United Nations Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths said on Thursday he expects the warring parties to formally adopt "in the immediate future" agreements on a nationwide ceasefire, key economic and humanitarian measures and a resumption of political talks.

Yemen has been mired in conflict since the Iran-aligned Houthi group ousted the government of President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi from the capital Sanaa in late 2014. A Saudi-led military coalition in 2015 intervened in a bid to restore the government.

Griffiths told the U.N. Security Council he has been negotiating with the parties on the texts of his proposals for the past two weeks. "We expect them to agree on and formally adopt these agreements in the immediate future," he said.

He said the economic and humanitarian measures could include: release of prisoners and detainees, opening Sanaa airport, paying civil servant salaries, opening access roads, and ensuring entry at Hudeidah ports for ships carrying commodities that will help in the fight against COVID-19, the potentially lethal respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus.

"The conversations we had with the two parties, and our consultations with the Saudi-led Coalition among other international actors ... are continuous, detailed and constructive," Griffiths said.

He said "good progress" was being made and the United Nations was redoubling its efforts to bridge outstanding differences "before we convene them at a meeting where ... these agreements will be tabled, confirmed - I hope - and published."

Griffith's latest push for peace for Yemen was sparked by U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's call last month for a global ceasefire so the world can focus on fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

So far only one case of COVID-19 has been confirmed in Yemen, where around 80% of the population, or 24 million people, require humanitarian aid.

But aid groups fear that could be a harbinger of a catastrophic outbreak given Yemen's shattered health system and widespread hunger and disease after five years of war in which more than 100,000 have been killed.

"Epidemiologists warn that COVID-19 in Yemen could spread faster, more widely and with deadlier consequences than in many other countries," U.N. aid chief Mark Lowcock told the Security Council on Thursday.

He also warned that the world's largest aid operation needed money and that three-quarters of the United Nations 41 major programs "will start closing down in the next few weeks if we can't secure additional funds."



## Merkel's Conservatives Make Big Poll Gains

BERLIN (Reuters) - German Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative bloc has won support during the coronavirus crisis, hitting its highest level in nearly three years, a poll showed on Thursday.

Merkel's cautious approach during the emergency appears to have reaped rewards, as a relatively early shutdown of schools, many factories and shops has had some effect and Europe's biggest economy has announced small steps towards a relaxation.

The DeutschlandTrend poll for ARD television put Merkel's CDU and its Bavarian CSU sister party on 38%, up 3 points from two weeks ago and its highest level since August 2017, just before the last federal election.

The environmentalist Greens were second on 19% but lost 3 points and fell below 20% for the first time in just over a year. Having profited from climate fears in the last 18 months, the party has sunk into the background in the pandemic.

The Social Democrats (SPD), who share power in Merkel's right-left coalition, were up 1 point at 17% while the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), the official parliamentary opposition, was down 1 point at 9%.

Merkel's CDU has postponed a leadership contest due to the coronavirus and is now unlikely to pick a new chair before December, outgoing chair Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer said this week.

The new CDU leader will be a favourite to stand as chancellor in the next federal election, due by Oct. 2021, as Merkel has said she will not seek a fifth term. However, the CSU also has a say and it may prefer to put forward their leader, Markus Soeder, as the chancellor candidate.

A poll last month showed that Soeder, who has introduced tough measures to limit social contact in his state during the pandemic, was Germany's most popular politician, an unusual situation for a Bavarian.







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(adviser)

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## IMF Steering Committee to Review Adequacy of IMF Resources

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The steering committee of the International Monetary Fund on Thursday said it would continue to review the adequacy of the global lender's resources as it works to help its 189 member countries respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

In a joint statement, the 24-member International Monetary and Financial Committee reaffirmed its

commitment to a strong, quota-based and adequately resourced Fund, and said the IMF should draw on relevant experience from previous crises.

"We remain committed to revisiting the adequacy of quotas and continuing the process of IMF governance reform under the 16th General Review of Quotas, including a new quota formula as a guide, by December 15, 2023," the committee said.



## IEA Predicts Worst Year In the History of Oil Sector

LONDON (Dispatches) - The coronavirus outbreak will slash global oil demand in 2020 to erase a decade of growth and set up "the worst year in the history" of the sector, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said Wednesday.

Demand is projected to plummet by a record 9.3 million barrels per day (mbd) for the year as a whole, with 29 mbd in the month of April, and 26 mbd in May -- "staggering numbers", according to the agency's executive director Fatih Birol.

"I believe in a few years' time, when you look at 2020 we may well see that it was the worst year in the history of global oil markets," he told reporters on a teleconference. "During this terrible year, the second quarter may very well be the worst of the lot and... April may very well be the worst month." The projected figures for this month were last seen in 1995, said Birol, describing this as "Black April in the history of the oil industry."

The global economy has been hard hit by the coronavirus outbreak, with many industries brought to their knees and air, rail and road traffic slashed as non-essential businesses were closed and hundreds of millions of people around the world placed in lockdown. The epidemic has killed more than 123,000 people since it first emerged in China in December.

The IEA said measures taken by the OPEC+ group and other oil producing nations to cut output should allow demand to start exceeding supply again by the second half of 2020, assuming population lockdowns to curb virus spread are lifted.

"Once the declines in oil demand start to reduce and once the impact of the production cuts from the OPEC+ agreement and non-OPEC producers start to bite, we start to see a recovery in the second half of the year," Neil Atkinson, head of the agency's oil division, told the briefing. "But obviously there's still a long way to go before we reach that point."

In total, producers have undertaken to cut supply by about 12 million barrels a day in May, Atkinson said, including 9.7 million mbd pledged by the OPEC+ group.

G20 countries have agreed to support the OPEC+ cuts.

The combined effort "takes us right back to below 90 mbd a day which is a level of production for the world which we haven't seen since back in 2011," said Atkinson.

On Tuesday, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said the coronavirus pandemic was pushing the world into its deepest recession in a century, with economic output expected to shrink three percent. This means that "COVID-19 results in one year of growth lost of the global economy and almost a decade of growth lost in global oil markets," said Birol.

"The volatility we are seeing in oil markets is detrimental to the global economy at a time that we can least afford it" Oil prices extended their slump Wednesday, with WTI hitting the lowest level since 2002 as the output cuts were deemed not enough. The benchmark WTI contract tumbled to \$19.20 per barrel, its lowest level in 18 years. The IEA report said the OPEC+ and G20 actions "won't rebalance the market immediately."

"But by lowering the peak of the supply overhang and flattening the curve of the build-up in stocks, they help a complex system absorb the worst of this crisis, whose consequences for the oil market remain very uncertain in the short term," Birol said the oil price crash would likely to cause a "huge decline" in global emissions of planet-warming carbon emissions this year.

"But in my view this is not a reason to celebrate because this decline is happening because there is an economic meltdown, the energy industry is in many parts almost collapsing and many people are losing their lives."

"We shouldn't forget that if there is a rebound of the economy... we may well see a big rebound of emissions as well." In 2009, after the global economic crisis, emissions declined by 0.4 gigatonnes only to rise again by 1.7 gigatonnes the following year -- the highest increase in the last 50 years, said Birol.

## U.S. Unemployment Claims Jump 5.2m Last Week

ANKARA (Dispatches) - More than 5.2 million Americans filed unemployment claims last week as businesses remained mostly closed due to the coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. Labor Department said Thursday.

State-mandated lockdowns bring the number of unemployed Americans to a record 22 million in the past four weeks.

The weekly report is the fourth straight showing more than 1 million claims.

The figures were revealed after U.S. President Donald Trump pushed recently for the country to prepare plans to reopen portions of the economy, declaring his "total" authority over the matter. However, he said Monday he would prefer to work with states to reopening.

The states of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Delaware and Massachusetts formed a regional advisory council to plan a "safe and coordinated" reopening.

California, Oregon and Washington also agreed to work on a shared approach for reopening their economies.

The U.S. has surged to lead the world in the number of coronavirus infections and deaths with data from Johns Hopkins University indicating more than 639,700 cases, including nearly 31,000 deaths and roughly 52,700 recoveries.

Overall, the virus has spread to 185 countries, infecting more than 2.1 million patients, and killing more than 138,100 worldwide since it first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year. More than 525,800 have recovered.



## Japan Business Mood Slumps to Decade Low on Coronavirus Hit

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japanese business confidence plunged to fresh decade lows in April as firms reported widespread damage from the coronavirus pandemic which is threatening to throw the world economy into recession, the Reuters Tankan survey showed on Thursday.

The global spread of the highly contagious virus has caused entire regions to be placed on lockdown, upended supply chains and halted services and production around the world.

The poll showed both manufacturers and service-sector firms in Japan expected to see a further sharp deterioration in business sentiment in the three months ahead.

The weak business confidence could deal a hard blow to capital spending, one of the few bright spots in the world's third-largest economy, likely raising calls on the government to roll out more supportive measures.

Last week, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared a state of emergency to fight coronavirus infections in major population centres and unveiled a nearly \$1 trillion stimulus package to soften the economic blow.

Sources told Reuters the Bank of Japan will discuss further steps to ease corporate funding strains at this month's rate review after it eased monetary policy last month to help firms grappling with the coronavirus crisis.

All manufacturing industry categories were pessimistic about business conditions, according to the Reuters poll of 499 large- and mid-sized non-financial companies, of which 239 firms responded on condition of anonymity.

Among the service sector, no industry categories were optimistic about the business mood except the real estate/construction and information/communications sectors. A manager at a real estate firm said business conditions didn't see any impact from the coronavirus yet, while adding that some cancellations had started to come in.

"Due to the impact from the virus, orders are decreasing across almost all industries, focused on those for the automobile industry," a manager at an electrical parts maker wrote in the survey.

A manager at a transportation equipment maker said: "Because of the COVID-19 impact, sales are dropping to an extent never seen before." Ninety-three percent of companies said they expected the impact of the virus on supply and demand their business has experienced to last at least for a number of months or could not say when the impact would end.

"As there is no precedent, we can't predict what things will be like," said a manager at a retailer. The sentiment index at manufacturers slumped to minus 30 in April from minus 20 in the previous month, hitting the lowest since October 2009, when the world economy was still on shaky ground from the global financial crisis.

The service-sector gauge dropped to minus 23 from minus 10, the Reuters Tankan poll showed, the worst reading since Feb 2010. A negative figure means pessimists outnumber optimists.

## Turkey Economy May Contract 5% This Year

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's economy may contract 5 percent this year, the International Monetary Fund said in its semi-annual World Economic Outlook.

The decline in the country's economic output will be accompanied by an increase in unemployment, the IMF said on Tuesday, predicting a jobless rate of 17.2 percent by the end of 2020.

Turkey is working to soften the economic impact of the spread of the coronavirus -- infections in the country have risen to 65,111,

official data showed, with an additional 4,062 cases reported on Tuesday. The government has announced a 100-billion lira (\$15 billion) package of measures to help businesses and workers deal with the outbreak, which began in mid-March.

The IMF's prediction of an economic contraction this year compares with Turkey's goal of 5 percent growth, a figure the government has yet to officially revise. Unemployment in the country of 82 million stood at 13.8 percent in the three months to February.

Consumer price inflation may end the year at 12 percent, the fund said. Inflation in the country stood at an annual 11.9 percent in March. The government's goal is 8.5 percent.

Inflation in the country is being pressured by a decline in the value of the Turkish lira. On Wednesday morning, the lira fell by 0.5 percent to 6.85 per dollar, extending its lowest levels since a currency crisis in August 2018. The record low set that month stands at 7.2 percent.

The Turkish government's ability to stimulate the economy is limited after it spent tens of billions of dollars since the currency crisis to help boost growth. The central bank has also slashed interest rates to single digits and spent foreign currency reserves in the lira's defence.

The IMF said the Turkish economy may grow by 5 percent in 2021, but inflation would probably remain sticky at about 12 percent. Unemployment could amount to 15.6 percent, it said.

The country's current account could post a surplus of 0.4 percent of GDP this year, before reverting to a deficit of 0.2 percent in 2021, the IMF said.

## G20 Agrees to Debt Relief for Poorest States Amid Pandemic

PARIS (AFO) - With the global economy plunged into the worst recession in a century, the Group of 20 nations on Wednesday announced a one-year debt

standstill for the world's poorest nations as they struggle to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

The G20, which brings together the world's largest economies, also reiterated the pledge to deploy "all available policy tools" to deal with the health and economic crisis caused by COVID-19.

With over two million cases and fatalities approaching 130,000 worldwide, many of the less developed countries are facing the heaviest burden since they do not have the spending power to deal with treatment and the economic fallout caused by widespread lockdowns of their economies imposed to contain the virus.

The G20 finance ministers and central bankers endorsed "a time-bound suspension of debt service payments for the poorest countries," and in the communique following their virtual meeting, said, "All bilateral official creditors will participate in this initiative."

Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan, who currently chairs the group, said this means "poor countries don't need to worry about repaying over the course of the next 12 months."

The initiative will "provide north of \$20 billion of immediate liquidity" for poor countries to use "for their health system and support their people facing COVID-19," he said in a press briefing.

The G20 officials "put our money where our mouth is, and commit to further support the world as it faces this pandemic," he said.

The International Monetary Fund and World Bank had been calling on the governments to provide debt relief to the countries most in need, and finance ministers from the Group of Seven advanced economies agreed to do so on Tuesday providing the G20, which includes China and Russia, was in favor.

The leaders of the IMF and World Bank hailed the announcement, calling it "a powerful, fast-acting initiative that will do much to safeguard the lives and livelihoods of millions of the most vulnerable people."

The Washington-based lenders have rushed to roll out emergency financing and have received requests for aid from 100 countries.

The IMF has \$1 trillion in lending capacity and has doubled its fast-deploying emergency financing facilities, and on Wednesday approved a new Short-Term Liquidity Line as a "renewable backstop" for countries with very strong fundamentals.

For the poorest nations that need the most concessional aid, "Our target is to triple what we do for these countries," IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva told reporters, saying the fund will "go on the offensive" to raise the money.

## UK Headed for Historic Slump



LONDON (Reuters) - Britain's economy looks set for a widely feared record contraction after figures showed retail spending plunged by more than a quarter and one in four firms stopped trading temporarily due to the coronavirus lockdown.

The British Retail Consortium (BRC) reported on Thursday a 27% year-on-year drop in sales in the two weeks to April 4, which included the period after the March 23 start of a lockdown that has shuttered shops other than supermarkets.

"The closure of non-essential shops led to deserted high streets and high double-digit declines in sales which even a rise in online shopping could not compensate for," BRC chief executive Helen Dickinson said.

A separate survey from the Office for National Statistics showed 25% of businesses had temporarily closed or paused trading since the lockdown.

In those businesses that remained open, a fifth of workers had been placed on temporary leave.

Britain's budget forecasters say the economy could be on track for an unprecedented 35% decline in the April-June period.

Even if the lockdown eases and growth rebounds, annual output could still fall 13% in 2020, the biggest annual decline in over 300 years.

Bank of England data, collected from March 2-20, showed lenders expect the biggest rise in business borrowing since the survey began in 2007 but for demand for new mortgages to fall by the most on record as the housing market freezes up.

The government has promised to underwrite 330 billion pounds (\$412 billion) of lending to businesses to keep them alive while large parts of the economy are closed, but banks are facing a big backlog of loan applications.

The BRC said total retail spending in the five weeks to April 4 - this year's March period for British retail sales - was down by 4.3% compared with the previous year.

This fall came despite a surge in supermarket spending in the early part of the month, when British shoppers stocked up - and in some cases engaged in panic-buying - ahead of the lockdown.



## NISOC Operates 1st Well in Output Enhancement Projects

ILAM (Shana) – The CEO of the National Iranian South Oil Company (NISOC) said his company had started production from the first well in a package of projects aimed at enhancing productivity of old oil fields in Iran. Ahmad Mohammadi said Well No. 6 of Kaboud Field in Bangestan Reservoir, Ilam Province, western Iran, had become operational with an average production rate of 1,000 barrels per day.

The project is among a package of projects aimed at increasing and maintaining productivity of 28 oil fields operated by NISOC in server Iranian provinces in western, southwestern and southern parts of the country.

Back in February 2019, a series of contracts were signed by NISOC and Iranian developers to implement the projects.



## Pandemic to Bring Asia's 2020 Growth To Halt for First Time in 60 Years

TOKYO (Reuters) - Asia's economic growth this year will grind to a halt for the first time in 60 years, as the coronavirus crisis takes an "unprecedented" toll on the region's service sector and major export destinations, the International Monetary Fund said on Thursday.

Policymakers must offer targeted support to households and firms hardest-hit by travel bans, social distancing policies and other measures aimed at containing the pandemic, said Changyong Rhee, director of the IMF's Asia and Pacific Department. "These are highly uncertain and challenging times for the global economy. The Asia-Pacific region is no exception. The impact of the coronavirus on the region will be severe, across the board, and unprecedented," he told a virtual news briefing conducted with live webcast.

"This is not a time for business as usual. Asian countries need to use all policy instruments in their toolkits."

Asia's economy is likely to suffer zero growth this year for the first time in 60 years, the IMF said in a report on the Asia-Pacific region released on Thursday.

While Asia is set to fare better than other regions suffering economic contractions, the projection is worse than the 4.7% average growth rates throughout the global financial crisis, and the 1.3% increase during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, the IMF said.

The IMF expects a 7.6% expansion in Asian economic growth next year on the assumption that containment policies succeed, but added the outlook was highly uncertain.

Unlike the global financial crisis triggered by the 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers, the pandemic was directly hitting the region's service sector by forcing households to stay home and shops to shut down, the IMF said.

The region's export powerhouses were also taking a battering from slumping demand for their goods by key trading partners such as the United States and European countries, it said.

China's economy is expected to grow by 1.2% this year, down from 6% growth in the IMF's January forecast, on weak exports and losses in domestic activity due to social distancing steps.

The world's second-largest economy is expected to see a rebound in activity later this year, with growth to bounce back to 9.2% next year, the IMF said.

But there were risks even to China's growth outlook as the virus could return and delay normalization, the IMF said.



"Chinese policymakers have reacted very strongly to the outbreak of the crisis ... If the situation becomes aggravated, they have more room to use fiscal, monetary policies," Rhee said. "Whether that would be needed will really depend on progress in containing the virus."

Asian policymakers must offer targeted support to households and firms hit hardest by the pandemic, the IMF said, calling also for efforts to provide ample liquidity to markets and ease financial stress faced by small and midsize firms.

Rhee warned that direct cash transfers to citizens, part of the U.S. stimulus package, may not be the best policy for many Asian countries which should focus on preventing small firms from going under to stop a sharp increase in unemployment.

Emerging economies in the region should tap bilateral and multilateral swap lines, seek financial support from multilateral institutions, and use capital controls as needed to battle any disruptive capital outflows caused by the pandemic, the IMF said.

## China Cuts Medium-Term Borrowing Costs to Record Low



SHANGHAI (Dispatches) - China's central bank yesterday stepped up policy support for its embattled economy, cutting a key rate to a record low and reducing the amount banks must hold as reserves by around US\$28 billion (\$40 billion) as the coronavirus crisis slammed the brakes on growth.

When combined, the moves inject US\$43 billion into the financial system ahead of a report tomorrow that is expected to show gross domestic product (GDP) fell 6.5 per cent in the first quarter, the first quarterly contraction in the world's second-biggest economy in more than 30 years.

The People's Bank of China (PBOC) said it was lowering the one-year medium-term lending facility (MLF) loans to financial institutions to 2.95 per cent, the lowest since the liquidity tool was introduced in September 2014, down 20 basis points from 3.15 per cent previously.

The cut should pave the way for a similar reduction to the country's benchmark loan prime rate, which will be announced next Monday, to lower financing costs for companies hit by the pandemic.

In a statement, the central bank said it was injecting 100 billion yuan (\$20 billion) through the liquidity tool.

The cut was largely in line with market expectations, as economists believe the central bank would flatten the yield curve by lowering the MLF rate by the same margin as the cut to the seven-day reverse repo rate late last month.

"In general, the one-year MLF is still close to 3 per cent, the highest among all major economies, which offers the PBOC space for further easing if things get worse," said portfolio manager Yun Xiong of Green Harmony Capital in Hong Kong.

Some market participants believe the PBOC's dual easing move yesterday - lowering the medium-term borrowing cost on the same day that the first phase of a targeted reserve requirement ratio cut comes into effect - is a sign the authorities are stepping up monetary support as markets brace themselves for grim economic data.

China is due to release its first-quarter GDP data and activity indicators tomorrow. Besides the first-quarter contraction, analysts are forecasting this year's growth to slow sharply to 2.5 per cent, the weakest in nearly half a century, from 6.1 per cent last year.

"Unlike previous easing cycles, when most of the new credit went to finance spending on infrastructure, property and consumer durable goods, this time we expect most of the new credit to be used on financial relief to help enterprises, banks and households survive the Covid-19 crisis," Nomura analysts said in a note.

## Robots Ride to Rescue as Delivery Risks Rise

PARIS (AFP) - What looks like a rolling picnic cooler stops at the crosswalk, waits for a car to pass and then navigates its way at a leisurely pace down the sidewalk in suburban Washington.

Three blocks away, Jake Williams and his three-year-old daughter Emilia wait for the delivery robot and take out bags with pizza, fresh fruit and a loaf of French bread from the nearby Broad Branch Market.

"We can't go into the shops now," says Williams, among those locked down due to the virus pandemic. "And it's fun for her."

The Starship delivery robots have seen surging demand in dozens of cities around the world, with consumers staying home and virus risks growing for both shoppers and delivery workers.

Starship began working with the Broad Branch in early April, when the corner store was forced to close to shoppers because it was too small to ensure proper social distancing.

Store owner Tracy Stannard said a fleet of up to 10 robots each day, managed by Starship, helps the market meet demands in the neighborhood. The store handles 60 to 70 deliveries daily, half by robot.

"Some people request the robot, they don't even care about the groceries," Stannard said. "It's cute to see them roaming the neighborhood and it makes people happy."

Robot deliveries from Starship and a handful of other companies meet only a tiny fraction of food deliveries, but highlight a need in a time of social distancing and pandemic fears.

The jump in demand comes as consumers see a trip to the grocery store as a perilous adventure, and retail employees are scrambling to keep safe.

More than 40 grocery store employees in the US have died from the virus, according to a Washington Post tally. And delivery workers around the US have staged protests to press safety demands.

San Francisco-based Starship Technologies, created by two Skype founders, is gearing up to operate in other areas around Washington and recently launched with retailers in Tempe, Arizona, and in cities in Britain and California.

The rolling devices operate autonomously at a speed of around six kilometers (four miles) per hour and can carry about three bags of goods.

"The demand for contactless delivery has expanded exponentially in recent weeks," said Ryan Tuohy, vice president of Starship.



"Our robots are doing autonomous deliveries in five countries and we're grateful that our robots can make life a little bit easier for everyone."

A handful of other companies also has been stepping up.

Silicon Valley startup Nuro recently began delivering groceries in the

Houston area in partnership with grocery giant Kroger with its R2 autonomous robot, which travels on streets at speeds up to 40 kilometers (25 miles) per hour and can transport some 190 kilos (400 pounds).

Nuro is moving to expand its service and has received approval in California to operate on public roads.

"We did not foresee our service helping to keep Americans safe from contagion. But the COVID-19 pandemic has expedited the public need for contactless delivery services," Nuro's David Estrada said in a blog post.

"Times like these reinforce the need for autonomous delivery services like Nuro, and how they can benefit communities."

Delivery robots from Postmates, a delivery startup, have also been seen on the streets in California. And similar autonomous robots are being tested by Amazon.

Drone delivery is another area where interest is growing due to the pandemic.

Wing, the drone startup created by Google parent Alphabet, has seen a jump in demand in its pilot projects in rural southwestern Virginia -- where it delivers non-prescription medicines and other items from the Walgreens chain -- and in Australia and Finland, a company spokesman said.

"While we recognize that this service will be a small relief during this time, we hope it means one less trip to the store for items our customers may need, and provides an efficient way for local businesses to reach their customers in a time when limiting human-to-human contact is important." Wing CEO James Ryan Burgess said.

Amazon and others have continued testing drone deliveries, but these systems are subject to regulatory barriers which have prevented deployment.

Zipline, a California startup which has been delivering medical supplies by drone in Africa, has indicated it wants offer similar services in the US once it gets regulatory approval.

## Wahhabism...

FROM PAGE 1

Apart from the disrupted foundations in the Saudi Family's morality, they have also been politically source of deviation and authoritarianism. The tough social condition and a strict religious climate dominating Saudi Arabia, and consequently the rule of Wahhabism, which used to deny any interaction with other cultures and even anathematize them, had made Saudi society an isolated and backward one.

The first diplomatic relation of Saudi Arabia was restored with Egypt and during the ruling of King Farouk where sons of King Bin Abdulaziz got acquainted with some political, social and cultural concepts. But this relation did not last too long and after Gamal Abdel Nasser took power in Egypt, the tie between Egypt and Saudi Arabia was deteriorated. But at the same time that Saudi rulers considered Egypt as their main rivals, they monitoring all Egyptian poets, writers, intellectuals, and artists and their works.

Gradually Saudi rulers realized that they can employ the culture and media to serve the kingdom. And it was a beginning for Saudi Family's attention to culture, art and media so they turned to read Egyptian books and listen to songs of some famous Egyptian singers or watch some Egyptian movies, and a player was taken to Abdulaziz's free of spirituality Palace in order that they can watch Egyptian movies.

According to Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz, during watching the films where Egyptian actresses had no hijab (Islamic dressing), his aunts always expressed their dissatisfactions.

Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman was one of the Saudi Family who found out immediately the significance of culture and media and learned that culture and media is the best means to promote himself. So he immediately bought Saudi Printing and Publication Institute. He then bought the license of International Arab-language and London-based Asharq al-Awsat daily and it is a beginning for Bin Salman's activities in the media.

Either politically or culturally, the book "Howler of Riyadh" tries to recount dark sides of lives of Bin Abdulaziz the King of Saudi Arabia and his son Crown Prince Bin Salman. From ties with Egypt to his subservience to Zionists in Israel and his subservience towards U.S. President Donald Trump, all and all indicate this point that Saudi Family have been the real factor and motivation for young and well-intentioned Saudi youths to turn towards Imam Zama's thought.

Muslim world under transparent guidelines of Holy Quran and with support of Alawi instructions is moving in direction of re-appearance and what has been mentioned in this article is the smallest part from what is happening in the deep foundations which have tendency towards the world free of sin and cruelty.

## Iran on Brink...

FROM PAGE 1

He noted that if the ministry concludes that the reopening of businesses is resulting in "any negative impact on managing the disease, we will swiftly demand a re-imposition of restrictions".

Speaking about the gradual reopening of businesses amid the coronavirus pandemic earlier this month, Iranian Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi said that the measures were necessary as Iran is "fighting both the coronavirus and sanctions".

The sanctions, imposed on the country after President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in 2018, targeted much-needed humanitarian aid and needed finances from reaching the country.

Meanwhile yesterday, the head of Iran's Health Ministry's Public Relations Office said that 89 others died of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Iran over the past 24 hours so that the country's total death toll grew to 4,958.

Kianoush Jahanpour said that 1,499 new cases of infection have been detected since yesterday, adding that 79,494 people have been confirmed infected to the novel coronavirus disease so far in the country.

The official said that 54,064 Iranian COVID-19 patients have recovered and discharged from hospital so far.

Jahanpour, however, noted that 3,563 COVID-19 patients are in critical conditions being under intensive care.



## Zarif...

FROM PAGE 1

Though, lately, enemies and ill-wishers of the Islamic Iran have made extensive efforts to undermine the noble name of the Persian Gulf, well-supported historical documents and geographic maps emphasize the fact that the original roots of the name are undeniable.

Persian Gulf, as one of the most important waterways and strategic areas in the world, has always been a source of pride and honor for Iranians. For thousands of

years, people of Iran have lived alongside the glacial waters of the Persian Gulf and have enjoyed its endless benefits.

In addition to having vast resources of energy and economic significance, the Persian Gulf has an ancient and unique history and culture that can be seen in the people who lived by it.



## U.S. PGA Tour Plans To Resume in June

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The U.S. PGA Tour on Thursday announced plans to resume in June, with the first four tournaments being closed to spectators due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The tour suspended its season after the first round of the Players Championship last month, previously targeting a return on May 21.

The extended suspension means that the Canadian Open and the Barbasol Championship have been cancelled.

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## Ronaldinho Enjoys Golden Cell In Locked-Down Asuncion

ASUNCION (Dispatches) - With Paraguay's capital in lockdown, former Brazil soccer star Ronaldinho is spending his second week under house arrest in an exclusive hotel in Asuncion, where a ballroom has been set up to allow him to keep up his soccer skills, as he awaits trial for entering the country under a false passport.

The 40-year-old World Cup winner and his business-manager brother Roberto are occupying two \$350-a-night suites at the otherwise deserted Colonial-style Palmaroga hotel, just a couple of blocks from the government headquarters.

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SPORTS

SATURDAY APRIL 18, 2020

# Seasons Will Resume Without Fans, But No Dates Yet

LONDON (Reuters) - Predicting when soccer will resume in Europe is impossible in the current climate but there is no doubt that matches will have to be played in empty stadiums when it does, the deputy general secretary of European Leagues (EL) has said.

The EL represents professional soccer leagues in Europe and its members include the top flights of England, Spain, Germany, France and Italy, which have all been suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Clubs across Europe have been hit hard by the stoppage and leagues are now looking at different ways to resume their seasons, the EL's Alberto Colombo told the BBC.

"There's no doubt games will be behind closed doors," Colombo said. "But, of course, it's impossible to answer the question: 'When will we be back playing?' Nobody has these answers."

"Ultimately, we all know the governments of the countries are the ones in charge for lifting the various restrictions that apply to sport."

The English Premier League has been suspended until at least April 30 and its clubs are meeting on Friday to review the situation although a resumption in the near future is unlikely with Britain still in lockdown.

German clubs returned to training last week with squads split into small groups and having to adhere to strict social distancing guidelines.



football season will be able to resume amid the coronavirus outbreak.

The sport has been brought to a standstill by the outbreak with the Euro 2020 competition postponed until next year and both national leagues and continental club competitions on hold.

Football associations, leagues, clubs and players around Europe are debating how to complete seasons and ensure the safety of players and officials.

UEFA, European soccer's governing body, has made it clear that it wants its member associations to complete their domestic seasons rather than abandon them. It also hopes to finish the Champions League and Europa League competitions.

UEFA said in a statement that the meeting, to be preceded on Tuesday by a session for the general secretaries of its 55 member associations, will "discuss the latest developments regarding the impact caused by the coronavirus outbreak on European football."

"The meetings will look at developments across both domestic and European competitions," it added. Both will be held by video conference.

## Nadal Expecting Lengthy Wait Before Tennis Returns



MADRID (AFP) - Rafael Nadal thinks the global nature of tennis means there is little chance tournaments will go ahead any time soon as sport continues to be paralysed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Novak Djokovic also anticipates a lengthy delay before tennis can be played even behind closed doors, with the world number one expecting players to have to wait a "few months".

The French Open, which Nadal has won a record 12 times, has been postponed until September, shortly after the US Open, while Wimbledon was cancelled earlier this month for the first time since World War II.

But the prospect of either grand slams at Roland Garros or Flushing Meadows being played with fans appears increasingly remote.

"Tennis is a global sport," Nadal told Spanish radio station Onda Cero on Wednesday night. "We go from country to country and a lot of people have to move around."

"It seems difficult to me for any big tournament to be played in the short or medium term."

## Fernandes Wants Man Utd to Sign Players Hungry for Titles

LONDON (Reuters) - Manchester United playmaker Bruno Fernandes has said that the Premier League club should look to sign players who share his winning mentality.

Fernandes, who joined the 20-times English league champions from Portugal's Sporting Lisbon in January for an initial fee of 55 million euros (\$59.83 million), has thrived with three goals and four assists in nine games across all competitions.

Fernandes beat the likes of Marcos Alonso and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang to be named the Premier League's player of the month for February after an exceptional first month with Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side.

"I'm hungry to win everything. I came to Manchester to win... league, Champions League, everything," Fernandes said in a Q&A with fans on United's official website here

"We already have a big team, but whoever comes needs to come to win. Just to focus to win, I want people hungry for titles."

"We know the potential Manchester have, because we are a young team, but we've a lot of quality... I feel this now in the group, everyone wants to win."

United, who looked galvanised after the arrival of the 25-year-old, went on an 11-game unbeaten run in all competitions before the novel coronavirus stopped sporting activity around the world. Solskjaer's team are currently fifth in the Premier League, which has been suspended since March 13.

## Joshua Wants Blockbuster Fury Fight

LONDON (Reuters) - Anthony Joshua has said a blockbuster fight for the undisputed world heavyweight title with Tyson Fury is needed to determine a single dominant figure in the division.

Joshua, 30, defeated Mexican-American Andy Ruiz Jr in a December rematch in Saudi Arabia to win back his IBF, WBA, WBO and IBO titles while Fury won the WBC title in Las Vegas two months ago with a seventh-round stoppage of Deontay Wilder.

"If you really want to say you're number one, come fight me. Let's get it on. I've got the rest of the belts so it only makes sense," Joshua told Sky Sports, addressing fellow Briton Fury.

The Italian football federation wants to resume training as soon as the country's lockdown ends on May 3 and has recommended that players and staff be tested and isolated in training camps.

"The priority so far has been on focusing on creating conditions to be able to resume competition during the summer should we be able," Colombo added.

"There is no doubt that players' health comes first, and also the health of all those involved in matches - staff of clubs, media, everyone has to be safe."

Belgium has cancelled the rest of the top-flight season citing health concerns and financial woes in the wake of the pandemic but Colombo said most leagues wanted to finish.

"The vast majority has been focusing 100% on the resumption of their competitions," he added.

Meanwhile UEFA will hold a meeting of its decision-making executive committee on April 23 with discussions likely to centre on how, when and if the European

## La Liga Current Top Four Qualify for Champions League

MADRID (Dispatches) - The Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) proposed on Thursday that La Liga's current standings decide which teams qualify for European competitions if the season has to be cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

La Liga and UEFA have not given their approval to the plan, with both governing bodies insisting they are still focused on finding a way to ensure domestic seasons are completed.

Javier Tebas, La Liga's president, said earlier this month the league had identified the end of May, start of June and end of June as possible times for fixtures to restart. But the RFEF, which regularly clashes with La Liga over political issues in Spanish football, has put forward a back-up plan that would see the current top four - Barcelona, Real Madrid, Sevilla and Real Sociedad - qualify for the Champions League. Getafe and Athletic Madrid, in fifth and sixth respectively, would go into the Europa League, along with Athletic Bilbao, as the Copa del Rey's highest-placed finalist outside the top six.

"The decision will be made, when requested by UEFA, according to the positions on the last day of the First Division when an equal number of games are played by the 20 teams," said the statement from the RFEF. "The top four at that time would go into the UEFA Champions League and the fifth and sixth ranked, plus one of the two finalists of the Copa del Rey, to the UEFA Europa League, according to different circumstances that may occur."



## Courtois to Race for Red Bull In Virtual Chinese GP



LONDON (Reuters) - Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois is aiming for a top 10 finish when he joins Red Bull's Alexander Albon and five other regular Formula One racers for Sunday's virtual Chinese Grand Prix.

The 1.99 metre tall Belgian international is a serious gamer and has become an esports regular with both the soccer and motor racing seasons on hold, as athletes compete online from home.

Six times Olympic cycling gold medallist Chris Hoy and World Cup-winning England cricketer Ben Stokes raced for Red Bull in the two previous virtual grands prix but ended up among the tail-enders.

Courtois has his sights on more than just taking part in a 28 lap race that will be televised live by Formula One's broadcast partners in more than 100 countries as well as on social channels.

"I love the game, I've faced Alex a few times already on track and racing against other F1 drivers is pretty awesome," said the 27-year-old.

"Practice over the last few weeks has seen me always around the middle of the grid so I'm hoping to get into the points."

Sunday would have been the day of the real Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai but that race is one of seven to have been postponed so far due to the pandemic.

## Saudi Takeover Promises New Dawn For Newcastle at a Cost

LONDON (Dispatches) - Newcastle United fans have long dreamed of ridding the club from owner Mike Ashley, but a potential £300 million (\$377 million) takeover backed by the Saudi sovereign wealth fund presents fans on Tyneside with a different dilemma.

Retail tycoon Ashley has been deeply unpopular in his 13 years in charge of Newcastle, during which time the club have twice been relegated from the Premier League before bouncing back into English football's lucrative top flight. British financier Amanda Staveley has held a long-running interest in brokering a deal for one of England's most passionately supported clubs with attendances often above 50,000 despite years of limited success.

Ashley labelled Staveley a "waste of time" when a previous bid to take control collapsed in 2017.

However, documents filed last week to Companies House provide a framework for talks between Staveley's PCP Capital Partners and Ashley.

According to reports, 80 percent of the deal would be funded by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund with Staveley providing 10 percent and the other 10 percent coming from British billionaire brothers David and Simon Reuben.

The Toon Army have long voiced their dissent as Ashley has tried to cash in on the riches of Premier League television rights deals, whilst investing little on improving the team on the pitch.

