

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif Will Leave Tehran for The Syrian Capital of Damascus Today in Order to Hold Talks With High-Ranking Syrian Officials

# IRAN NEWS

Iranian Customs Administration Said That Iranian Border Seal-Off With the Republic of Azerbaijan Has Been Extended by May 4, 2020, as Precautionary Measures To Contain Coronavirus

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## Gov't Expands Screening of Population For Coronavirus

TEHRAN (PressTV) - President Hassan Rouhani says Iran has begun taking new measures to screen people for COVID-19 symptoms in a bid to rein in the novel coronavirus pandemic.

In a Sunday address to the National Headquarters for Managing and Fighting the Coronavirus, Rouhani said the procedure involves testing those close to patients with the respiratory disease.

"With the beginning of new screening methods in the provinces, people close to those infected with the coronavirus will also be tested," he said. "This important step brings us closer to containing the disease."

"With the new measures, both the screening and the identification of the infected in critical condition will continue," he added, hoping that in the coming weeks a framework would be reached to shorten the disease period.

He also thanked Iran's medical personnel for their round-the-clock screening of patients at different hospitals, expressing satisfaction with a drop in the number of hospitalized and infected cases as well as the fatalities.

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## Number of Death Toll of Covid-19 Infected Patients Falls

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The latest figures released by the Iranian Health Ministry indicate that 57,023 patients have recovered from the novel coronavirus, and been discharged from hospital.

In his daily briefing on Sunday, Health Ministry Spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said 1,343 new cases of COVID-19 infection have been confirmed in the past 24 hours, bringing the overall number of cases to 82,211.

He said 87 people have died of the virus in the past 24 hours, increasing the death toll to 5,118.

Jahanpour said 3,456 patients are currently in severe conditions. He also noted that 341,662 coronavirus tests have been taken so far across the country.

Meanwhile head of the organization Payman Eshqi said yesterday that Iran had launched a project to collect the plasma of coronavirus patients who had recovered in order to use it for the treatment of individuals infected with the virus.

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## IRGC Calls U.S. Accusation a "Hollywood Scenario"



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a statement on Sunday, the IRGC Navy refuted the American account of what happened in an encounter between the Iranian forces and the US terrorists in the northern parts of the Persian Gulf on April 15, saying the U.S. Fifth Fleet has provided an "untrue, purposeful and Hollywood-style" description of the event.

The statement came after the U.S. claimed that Iran's naval vessels had come within 10 yards of American warships in the Persian Gulf in what the US navy described as a series of "dangerous and harassing approaches". The U.S. Naval Forces Central Command has said that 11 small Iranian boats circled six U.S. warships.

In its statement, the IRGC Navy denounced a repetition of "unprofessional" maneuvers by the "terrorist U.S. naval forces" in the Persian Gulf in recent weeks, saying they have intercepted Iranian ship "Shahid Siavashi" twice, on April 6 and 7.

In order to prevent such "illegal, unprofessional, dangerous and adventurist" moves from the US, ensure the security of Iranian vessels, and fight against the smuggling of fuel, the IRGC Navy increased its patrol units in the Persian Gulf, announced a shooting practice situation and defined the exercise zone on the map, the statement noted.

When a fleet of 11 IRGC Navy boats were deployed to the exercise zone, they encountered the American warships and military vessels, it said, adding that the Americans made "unprofessional and provocative moves" and ignored the warnings from the IRGC forces, but the Iranians forced them to sail out of the path of the IRGC boats.

The IRGC advised the U.S. to respect the international maritime protocols in the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman, avoid adventurism and fake stories, and be aware that Iran's military forces consider dangerous moves from outsiders as a red line and a threat to the country's national security.

Warning the U.S. of Iran's "decisive response" to any miscalculation, the IRGC Navy said, "The illegitimate presence of the terrorist U.S. regime is the root cause of evil and insecurity in the region, and the only way to strengthen sustainable security in this strategic region is for the Americans to withdraw from West Asia."

## UNHCR Hails Iran's Hosting of Afghan Refugees

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Iran, Ivo Freijsen, has hailed as an "important achievement" the country's hosting of Afghan refugees for more than four decades, vowing to help the Islamic Republic protect Afghans amid the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic.

"As UNHCR, we want to first and foremost underscore and highlight that it has been commendable that Iran has been hosting refugees primarily from Afghanistan for more than 40 years now, which is an important feature and an important achievement, a commendable achievement," Freijsen said.

He added that the UN refugee agency in cooperation with its international partners would provide Iranian authorities with further support to protect the Afghan refugees until they can voluntarily and safely go back to their "fully stable" homeland. "Iran has done very well over the years in making basic social services accessible for refugees," the UN official pointed out.

The UN representative also lauded a 2015 decree by Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei allowing schooling for all Afghan children in Iran. The Leader ordered that all Afghan children in Iran be permitted schooling regardless of their residency status. Iran spends \$8 billion on Afghan migrants every year in various sectors, and has repeatedly complained that the countries which caused the displacement of Afghans must accept responsibility and help cover the costs.

In February, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi praised Iran and Pakistan for hosting millions of Afghan refugees despite receiving minimal support from the international community. The UN secretary-general and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees have praised Iran and Pakistan for hosting Afghan refugees for four decades.

"Afghans now constitute the largest group of arrivals in Europe, exceeding for the first time the arrivals from Syria," Guterres said, expressing regret that returns to Afghanistan have hit a historical low.

Elsewhere in his interview, Freijsen said the role and mandate of the UNHCR in the Islamic Republic is to essentially assist the government and other actors in their efforts to provide basic social services and to protect Afghan refugees in areas such as health, education, livelihood and skill development. He added that the UNHCR would support and closely work with its partners in Afghanistan on "voluntary repatriation so that Afghan refugees who wish to go back to their home areas can do so in an organized and planned manner."

"This is what we would like to see in international norms that systems are accessible for refugees" and Afghan children take advantage of education and healthcare like all the other children in Iran, he said.

Freijsen noted that the UNHCR tries to maximize its support for Iran in the protection of refugees and related services, particularly amid the current coronavirus outbreak. He said the UNHCR would definitely like to do more in this regard but its ability depends fully on the amount of money given by donors.

In a statement late last month, Iran's Foreign Ministry threw its weight behind a proposal by the United Nations secretary general for a global ceasefire in conflict-hit zones and a nationwide truce in war-ravaged Afghanistan.

## ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian



## Yemenis Will Punish the British

Canada's desire to sell arms to Saudi Family is like a taste that it is degusted by a grandmother and is recounted to her grandchild. British leading company BAE Systems sold £15b worth of arms and services to the Saudi military during the last five years, the period covered by Riyadh's involvement in the deadly bombing campaign in the war in Yemen.

British daily the Guardian on Tuesday, April 14 and in an article wrote that according to the company's most recent annual report, the arms maker company generated £2.5b in revenues from the Saudi military during the whole of 2019.

An official at the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) has told the Guardian that the last five years have seen a brutal humanitarian crisis for the people of Yemen, but for BAE it's been business as usual. The war has only been possible because of arms companies and complicit governments willing to support it. So it is natural and understandable that Saudi Arabia is the third major customer of BAE Systems and the company maintains and supplies Tornado jet aircraft to the kingdom's airforce and provides "operational capability" to the country's air and naval forces to operate against Yemenis.

Touching upon the report, BAE Systems spokesperson said that the company provided defense equipment, training and support under government to government agreements between the UK and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

According statistics about world largest arms makers and vendors, BAE is the leading in Europe and second in the world after Lockheed Martin.

Deputy head of the Sit-In Committee of Mahrah Province in Yemen, Sheikh Abboud Qamsiyat, has recently asked British Ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron for pullout of the British forces from Al-Mahrah and has emphasized that British troops should not be involved in the occupation of Al-Mahrah. Saudi Arabia has recently deployed considerable amount of its troops, military vehicles and ammunition in the province.

On Tuesday and reacting to Saudi-coalition forces' claim of truce, Qamsiyat said that such a request for a truce is useless when Saudi and Emirate forces control the crossings and airports especially in southern ports of Yemen and above all Al-Mahrah. Saudis have taken the full control in the province which gives them this opportunity to take the control of Nishtun Port, Al-Ghaziah Airport as well as Shahn and Sarfit border crossings. See Page 7

## Tehran Raps U.S. for Pushing UN to Extend Arms Embargo on Iran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's UN envoy says a recent U.S. call on the world body to extend an arms embargo on Tehran is yet another attempt by Washington to divert attention from its economic terrorism.

Majid Takht-Ravanchi made the comments in a post on his Twitter account on Sunday, one day after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged the UN Security Council to prolong the arms embargo on Iran, set to expire in October.

"Yet another attempt by U.S. to distract from its continued #EconomicTerrorism on the Iranian people: this time, U.S. is calling on #UNSC to violate its very resolution 2231, and continue arms restrictions on Iran," he tweeted. "But US will not succeed in wooing others to violate int'l law."

UN Security Council Resolution 2231 endorsed the 2015 international nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), from which Washington unilaterally withdrew in May 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Iran.

Under the resolution, the UN arms embargo on Iran - in place since 2006/2007 - will be lifted in October 2020, five years after the JCPOA took effect.

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# Iran, Kuwait Voice Solidarity on Fighting Coronavirus

TEHRAN (ISNA) – Kuwaiti Parliament Speaker, Marzouq al-Ghanim in a phone call with his Iranian counterpart, Ali Larijani stressed on Kuwait's solidarity with Iranian people on fighting coronavirus.

During the phone call, Marzouq al-Ghanim conveyed Kuwaiti emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's greeting to Larijani as well as his concern over his infection with the disease.

Addressing Ali Larijani, Marzouq al-Ghanim said, "You are a valuable and influential figure in the region and I wish you full recovery on behalf of the Kuwaiti emir and people".

## Majlis Backs Strategic, Friendly Iran-China Ties

**TEHRAN (MNA) – Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani emphasized that the Parliament supports and backs any move for strengthening strategic and friendly ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China.**

He made the remarks in his response to the message of Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) on Sat. who had expressed his sympathy with the Iranian nation during the outbreak of coronavirus as well as his wishes for Larijani after the Iranian official contracted the COVID-19.

Larijani congratulated China on containing the disease and creation of an effective model in this field.

"I would like to emphasize that the two countries of Islamic Republic of Iran and People's Republic of China, benefited from their rich culture and civilization, play a very important and key role in regional and international developments," he said.

Development and expansion of amicable cooperation between the two countries in



various fields is one of the strategic principles of the foreign policy of the two countries, he said, adding, "in this regard, Iranian Parliament supports any move for strengthening these strategic friendly ties between the two countries."

Larijani seized this opportunity to express his special thanks to the humanitarian and medical aids of china to Iran in the fight against coronavirus.

Undoubtedly, these humanitarian aids will play a very important role in helping the trend of containing and controlling the disease in Iran, Larijani stressed.

## Leader Issues Fatwa on Fasting In Ramadan Amid Pandemic



TEHRAN (MNA) – Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has answered a question regarding the fasting during the coronavirus outbreak.

"What is the rule for fasting in current circumstances that the coronavirus is spreading?" a person asked the Leader via his office.

"Among the effects of fasting is the emergence of spiritual state and inner purity, individual and social piety, strengthening the resistance against hardships, and its role in the health of the human body, and God has set a great reward for fasting people," answered the Leader.

"Fasting is one of the necessities of religion and the pillars of Islamic law, and it is not permissible to abstain from fasting during the holy month of Ramadan unless one finds a rational suspicion that fasting would cause disease, aggravate a disease, or prolongs the disease's period and postpones recovery," he said, adding that in these circumstances, fasting is void, but it is necessary to make up for it.

If this assurance, he continued, is obtained from the words of a specialist and pious doctor, it will be enough.

"Therefore, if a person has fears and worries about the above-mentioned matters and this fear has a rational origin, there is no obligation for them to fast but they have to keep a fast after Ramadan."

## Two Modern Strategic Radar Systems Unveiled



TEHRAN (IFP) - Iran has unveiled two new strategic radar systems, named "Persian Gulf" and "Moraqeb", to further enhance its air defense capability.

The "Persian Gulf" strategic radar system has a range of more than 800 kilometers. It is a phased-array radar system which employs cutting-edge technology. The system is capable of detecting all conventional and radar-evading targets as well as ballistic missiles.

The other radar system unveiled is named "Moraqeb," which literally means "one that monitors." It is an accurate, 3D, phased-array modern strategic radar system with a range of 400 kilometers. It can spot airborne targets with very high precision and can detect small targets at low and medium altitudes. It can also spot stealth and unmanned aircraft.

The unveiling came in a ceremony attended by Army Commander Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi, who is also the commander of the Khatam-al Anbiya Air Defense Headquarters, and Brigadier General Allireza Sabahifard, the commander of the Army's Air Defense Force.

## Judiciary May Free More Prisoners Amid Outbreak

TEHRAN (MNA) – A spokesman with Iran's Judiciary said that special committees will be established across the country to study the prisoners' cases that may lead to freedom of more inmates.

"Based on the order of the Judiciary Chief, 500 special committees will be established in all judicial districts to address the status of prisoners, both those in furloughs and those still in prison," Gholamhossein Esmacili said on Saturday night in a live TV program.

In late March, the Judiciary once again extended prison leave for some 100,000 inmates as the country is pressing ahead with its measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus. According to the order, furloughs had been extended until April 19 for those prisoners who had been granted a leave until April 3. Esmacili has then said that such an extension does not include those prisoners who have carried out an illegal or criminal act during their furloughs.

The committees will study how many of the inmates bear the required conditions to continue furlough, added the spokesman, noting that these groups will determine the exact number of prisoners who can be freed.

"Some of the furloughed inmates and even some of the inmates who are now in prison may be freed, although a group of prisoners will gradually be sent back to imprisonment according to a timetable," he added.

## Tehran, Tokyo to Keep Cooperating to Revive Lake Urmia

TEHRAN (IRNA) -The director of a national project for protecting Iranian wetlands said on Saturday that Iran and Japan are to cooperate for the seventh consecutive year to revive Lake Urmia.

Thanking the constant cooperation of Japan with Iran in this regard, Ali Arvahi said that the agreement for the seventh phase of the cooperation was signed. The seventh phase is about people's cooperation in reviving Lake Urmia.

Arvahi said that the lake is currently in the best condition it has had in the past six years, which has taken place due to the nonstop attempts of the officials, and state and non-state beneficiaries of the drainage basin of the lake.

The project of saving and reviving the wetlands of Iran is done by joint attempts of the Department of Environment and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) with the financial support of Japan.

He said 12,000 locals and farmers have visited and participated in the projects.

Reduction in water usage (25.4%), improvement in irrigation (41.9%), creation of employment (250 experts), creation of 30 companies and 12 NGOs, creation of green employment for 750 woman villagers are among the results of the project, Arvahi said.

On Saturday, a provincial official of the water organization of West Azarbaijan said the water of the lake has come up 32cm compared to last year.

Atabak Jafari said that the lake now has 4.71 billion cubic meters of water, which is one billion cubic meters more than last year's, adding that the lake has been expanded by 210 square kilometers.

He said that seven years ago, the water in the lake was only 690 million cubic meters, but it is 4.71 billion cubic meters now.

## Hashemi Appointed as Tehran Deputy Mayor for Transportation

**IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK**

TEHRAN – Former Golestan Province Governor Seyed Manaf Hashemi was appointed as new deputy mayor of Tehran on transportation affairs.

Tehran Mayor Pirouz Hanachi yesterday appointed his advisor Mr. Hashemi as his new deputy on transportation affairs.

Hashemi replaced Mohsen Pourseyed Aghaei who resigned a couple of months ago. Hanachi in his decree expressed hope that Hashemi can focus on working on the infrastructures to ease traffic in Tehran.



## Tehran, Minsk Discuss Repatriation of Iranian Prisoners

TEHRAN (IP) - Iran's ambassador to Belarus Saeed Yari discussed the repatriation of Iranian prisoners with the Belarusian Attorney General in a telephone conversation.

Yari in a telephone conversation with Alexander Kanyuk, the Belarusian Attorney General, asked him to take the necessary measures to transfer Iranian prisoners to their country, given the outbreak of coronavirus and the possible risks for their health.

Expressing confidence in the health condition of the Iranian prisoners, the Belarusian Attorney General said that he would issue the necessary orders to carry out the relevant judicial process and repatriate the Iranian prisoners.

It is worth noting that currently, two Iranians are serving their sentences in Belarusian prisons.

## Iran Opposes Any Violent Action On Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's Ambassador to Azerbaijan Javad Jahangirzadeh said that Iran condemns any move that would undermine the negotiation process on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

According to the UN resolutions and documents, the occupied territories must be returned to Azerbaijan, said Iran's Ambassador to Azerbaijan Javad Jahangirzadeh, according to Trend.

Iran has always supported the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, the ambassador said.

Jahangirzadeh added that the Islamic Republic of Iran was one of the first countries to offer assistance and mediation in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and positive steps have been taken in this direction.

The ambassador said that there is a need for stability and cooperation in the region, adding that Iran is pleased that Azerbaijan has always demonstrated its readiness for a peaceful solution to this conflict.

Commenting on the video footage of Iranian trucks allegedly transporting goods to Nagorno Karabakh, he said it is fake and unreliable.

Talking about the recently held so-called "elections" in Nagorno-Karabakh, he noted that Iran condemns any move that would undermine the negotiation process on the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

"Such actions will not help resolve the conflict and will only complicate it. The Armenian side must prove its claim to be sincere in the discussions, but their actions prove the opposite," he said.

Recently, a video was posted on social media allegedly showing transportation of goods and fuel to the occupied Nagorno-Karabakh of Azerbaijan by Iranian trucks.

The Iranian side said that the footage was fake.

## No Shortage of Gowns, Protective Items

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran has no longer shortage of gowns and protective items at hospitals highly needed by health workers for medical treatment of coronavirus patients, according to Head of Iran's Food and Drug Administration Mohammadreza Shanehsaz.

Speaking during a video press conference, Shanehsaz said that Iran will be not only able to meet its needs for protective items in the near future, but will have the capacity to export such items to foreign countries as well.

He said that Iran's capacity of alcohol and disinfectants production used to be nearly 180,000 liters a day, while it has now grown to over 400,000 liters a day. The official also said that there is no shortage in production of sanitizing gels.

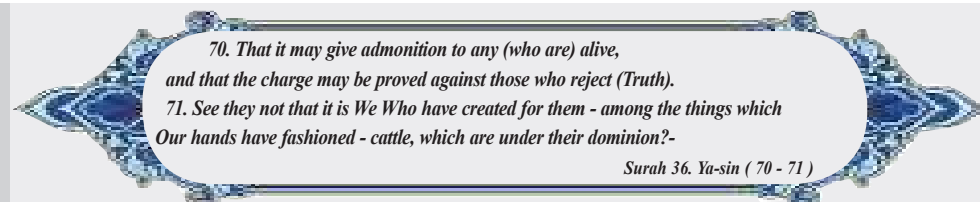
Noting that the country is currently producing nearly 40,000 gowns a day, Shanehsaz said that the quality of Iran-made texture used for producing gowns is much higher than the foreign ones.





## PRAYER TIME

|                          |       |
|--------------------------|-------|
| ■ Noon (Zohr)            | 13:03 |
| ■ Evening (Maghreb)      | 20:00 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr) | 04:53 |
| ■ Tomorrow's Sunrise     | 06:23 |



# Gov't to Fully Support Non-Oil Exports

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN – First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri says the government emphasizes non-oil exports and it will support non-oil exports despite its budget limitation.**

Jahangiri said that Iran needs export of non-oil commodities in the current year [started March 21, 2020] more than any other time and non-oil export is the main and top priority of the government.

He made the remarks in a meeting with the minister of industry, mine and trade, deputies and senior managers of the ministry and added, “non-oil exports should be put atop agenda as a serious and determining issue. Although the government has budget restrictions in this field, it will support non-oil export.”

Export to neighboring countries is the main aim of the government, he said, adding, “With the planning made in this regard, Iran must export \$48 billion worth of non-oil products to neighboring countries by 2021.”

He pointed to the economic recession in post-corona era and said, “if the country faces any reduction in export of petrochemical products and metals in post-corona period, we should prepare ourselves to compensate shortfalls with more focusing on export of non-oil commodities and provide required currency resources.”

The Ministry of Industry managed to provide basic goods and commodities of people during coronavirus outbreak especially at the condition that Iran is grappling with economic war with the United States, Jahangiri stressed.

He went on to say the government will support private sector and those who are active



in import and export as forerunners in countering sanctions and coronavirus condition.

He added that all should work together to boost the society and economy's resistance against Coronavirus and supporting the weak layers of the society should be prioritized despite all restrictions.

Jahangiri reiterated that undoubtedly, private sector and trade activists especially importers and exporters are frontline fighters because they have supported the country during the sanctions and Coronavirus outbreak.

He added that the government's main target is to boost exports to neighboring states as the industry ministry planned and Iran's exports to 15 neighboring states should hit \$48b by 2021 and all should work harder in the post-Coronavirus era to boost any decline in the non-oil exports.

Jahangiri reiterated that those who get official rate forex to import goods and ignore it are traitors and should be punished.

He noted that all should oppose corruption and to fight with it and the government is pioneer in transparency and fight with corruption.

Jahangiri also urged domestic media to avoid preparing stuff for foreign media for questioning Iran's government and establishment.

## Parand Combined Cycle Gas Turbine Plant Now Fully Operational



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN – The third phase of the third and last unit of MAPNA Group's Parand combined cycle gas turbine plant in a video conference was inaugurated by President Hassan Rouhani last Thursday in presence of Energy Minister, the CEO of MAPNA Group and some senior officials of Energy Ministry.**

During the ceremony, Deputy Energy Minister Homayoon Haeri and the CEO of MAPNA Group Mr. Abbas Aliabadi detailed the project in the video conference for President Rouhani.

Haeri said that today units of Parand combined cycle gas turbine plant with capacity of 160 megawatts each came on stream and the total capacity of the plant touched 1503 megawatts while the total national electricity capacity reached 83,000 megawatts.

He reiterated all equipment and necessary parts for the project have been indigenized by MAPNA Group and there was no need to foreign parts and equipment in the project.

Haeri added that by operation of Parand plant, the country will save 855m cubic meters of gas per annum and it has huge advantage for the environment.

He hailed the staff of Parand plant and MAPNA Group for their efforts despite the outbreak of Coronavirus as they worked round-the-clock to finish the project.

Meanwhile addressing the ceremony, the CEO of MAPNA Group Mr. Aliabadi wished happiness and a healthy life for people from every walk of life in Iran and the world, adding that the project of converting gas power plants to the combined cycle gas plants is one of the ideas which was raised by the energy ministry and MAPNA Group with a national motivation in line with developing the infrastructures in the country concurrent with boosting productivity in the field of energy and economy, and they are determined to pursue it.

He added that by implementing the project and expanding it across the county, the country will materialize some important objectives like increasing the output from 33 to more than 50 percent, reducing environmental pollutants and greenhouse gases, increasing capacity of the plant by 50 percent without any need for constructing new plants and protecting jobs in the giant national plant industry.

Aliabadi noted that each one of triple plants has cost over 7,000b tomans and the total cost of the project was 21,000b tomans, adding that Parand Plant was completed successfully and two more plants are under construction and they are in their last stages of construction. He then detailed the characteristics of Parand Plant.

## Iran Independently Producing Medical Equipment



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

**TEHRAN - Vice President for Science and Technology said that knowledge-based companies have taken effective measures to combat the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the country by producing medical needs.**

Sorena Sattari said that significant measures have been taken on the country during COVID-19 outbreak and epidemic. “Iran was dependent on foreign countries to meet some of its needs during the crisis, but now its needs are met domestically,” he added.

The official also stressed Iran's ability in the medical equipment sector which is producing particular equipment of CCU rooms, operation rooms, and ventilators.

The ventilators are in use for special cases and kits to diagnose the disease have the same ability and criteria, he said.

Sattari elsewhere underscored that mask producing machines are also manufactured domestically along with the other equipment which has made Iran independent with no need for any county to meet its needs.

On Sunday morning, Interior Ministry held its regular meeting on COVID-19 attended by Vice President for Science and Technology Sorena Sattari, where several products made by knowledge-based companies like nano masks, antibacterial, particle respirator, different ventilators, oxygen saturation system and test kits were unveiled.

All domestically produced equipment is on the verge of mass production. The ventilator is compatible with European standards.

## “Nahid 1” Telecommunications Satellite To Be Sent Into Orbit This Year

**TEHRAN (MNA) – Head of Iranian Space Agency (ISA) Morteza Barari said that “Nahid 1” telecommunications satellite will be sent into the orbit in the current year [started March 21, 2020].**

He pointed to the prioritized projects in space section of the country in the current year and added, “with the necessary coordination made with the commissioner of launcher, “Nahid 1” telecommunication satellite will be sent into the orbit before the termination of the current year [to end March 20, 2021].”

“We hope that the flight model of the country's three major space projects [including ‘Orbital Transmission System’, ‘Pars 1 Sensing Satellite’ and ‘Nahid 2 Telecommunications Satellite’] will be completed according to the scheduled programs in the current year,” he added.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Barari pointed to the Students' International Small-Scale Satellite Project, which is being implemented by Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO) in Iranian Space Research Centers in cooperation with three universities of the country, and added, “since this project is done in international level jointly, we should try to take advantage of high capacities and potentials of this international organization effectively.”

The deputy minister of Communications and Information Technology (ICT) emphasized the need for developing infrastructures in the space field and added, “existing capacity of Iranian Space Research Center should be used optimally. In this regard, updating space programs of the country in the fields of developing space systems and navigation technologies is one of the main tasks of the Agency that this Research Center can play a constructive and important role in relevant issues.”

He called for the promotion of bilateral cooperation between the Iranian Space Agency and Space Research Center for developing international relations.

Turning to the motto of the current year named after ‘Surge in Production’ by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Barari said, “Iranian Space Agency will take giant stride in the current year in relevant issues.”

## Iran Rice Output Surge by 45%

**TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian agriculture authorities say output and cultivation area for rice both increased significantly over the last calendar year to satisfy a growing domestic demand for the staple.**

A senior official at the Iranian agriculture ministry (MAJ) said that the total harvest of rice plant across Iran in the year ending late March increased by over 46 percent compared to the previous year to reach 4.518 million metric tons.

Faramak Aziz Karimi, who heads the MAJ's department for grains and staples, said that total output for white rice, the grain left from processing rice plant, topped 2.9 million tons at the end of last calendar year, an increase of 45 percent compared to the previous yearly period.

Karimi said the figure is exactly equivalent to the amount of white rice consumed inside Iran which is 35 kilograms a year per person based on official government estimates.

He said growing rice production in Iran last year was mainly due to an increase in cultivation area for the crop and better precipitation.

The official said lands used for rice farming expanded by 230,000 hectares or 38 percent across Iran to reach an unprecedented figure of 834,000 hectares.

An Iranian agriculture official says over 70 percent of rice farming in the country is mechanized.

Karimi said rice farming area almost doubled in Golestan and Khuzestan, two provinces in in northeast in southwest of Iran respectively which saw much of the flooding and heavy rainfall in March-April 2019.

Iranian authorities announced in October that the country no longer needed to import rice in heavy volumes from countries like India.

They said self-sufficiency in rice production could help the country cut around two million tons of imports each year.

# Iran Makes Preparation for Producing Corona Antibody

**TEHRAN (MNA) – Preparations were made for producing coronavirus, COVID-19, antibody in the country.**

Head of Coronavirus Plasma Therapy Project Hassan Abolghasemi made the remarks in an interview and added, “with the efforts of Iranian researchers, preparations were made for producing specific corona immunoglobulin [antibody] in the country.”

Specific immunoglobulin on coronavirus can be produced from human plasma, he said, adding, “in other words, coronavirus antibody can be produced using purification of plasma and/or store them in small-scale vials.”

Like intravenous immunoglobulins, which are provided from human plasma and is a valuable and expensive drug, specific anti-coronavirus immunoglobulin can be produced from human plasma as well, he stressed.

Research activities for producing coronavirus antibody have started in the country, he said, adding, “it seems that there is ability to produce specific immunoglobulin against COVID-19 in the country.”

Elsewhere in his remarks, Abolghasemi said that effective steps have been taken in this field in the country, adding, “we are waiting to get approval by the Ministry of Health and Medical Education.”

He pointed to the ‘more purification of plasma and possibility of easier storage’ as the salient advantage of the project, he said, adding, “plasma should be stored in a temperature below 20 degrees of centigrade in special bags but in this case, samples will be stored in smaller and portable vials at pharmacies as well.”

Islamic Republic of Iran has made breakthrough to treat COVID-19 patients using plasma therapy and all standards have been met at different stages of the research, he added.

## Plans to Boost Production in S. Pars Phases 20 and 21

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

**TEHRAN - Director of the 8th Gas Refinery of South Pars Gas Complex (SPGC) Hadi Chabook says currently gas production in phases 20 and 21 of South Pars is growing uptrend and the process for completing the projects and launching them goes well and they will see significant rise in production this year.**



Chabook said one of the major plans of the 8<sup>th</sup> gas refinery in line with materializing the slogan of surge in production is to increase the production capacity by 11 percent by using gas resources of other sources and necessary measures being taken and it will be materialized in the second half of the year.

He added that the amount of reliability index of the refinery was 65.99 percent last year which has improved comparing to its preceding year which was 49.99. He noted that the refinery has improved its point in the reliability index while it has not been fully exploited.

Chabook added that on the other indexes in production sector, the adopted plans and measures have helped the refinery to meet its set targets last year and they will improve this year by drawing up new plans.

He said that the 8<sup>th</sup> refinery has recently been launched and still some operational units of the phases 20 and 21 have not come on stream and efforts are made that all those units would join the production unit very soon.



## Turkey's Coronavirus Cases Highest in Middle East

ISTANBUL (Reuters) - Turkey's confirmed coronavirus cases have risen to 82,329, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said on Saturday, overtaking neighbouring Iran for the first time to register the highest total in the Middle East.

An increase of 3,783 cases in the last 24 hours also pushed Turkey's confirmed tally within a few hundred of China, where the novel coronavirus first emerged.

Koca said 121 more people have died, taking the death toll to 1,890. A total of 10,453 people have recovered from coronavirus so far, and the number of tests carried out over the past 24 hours came to 40,520, the minister said.



## Pro-Tripoli Gov't Forces Try To Build on Military Momentum

TRIPOLI (Reuters) - Forces aligned with Libya's internationally recognised government said they had advanced on Saturday on Tarhouna, a key support base for their eastern-based rival Khalifa Haftar.

The advance comes days after forces loyal to the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) had pushed back Haftar's allies along the coast west of the capital, marking a possible turning point in their attempt to fend off a year-long offensive by Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). Tarhouna, about 65 km (45 miles) southeast of the capital, Tripoli, has been a crucial asset for the LNA, providing local manpower for a campaign that has leaned heavily on air support supplied by the United Arab Emirates as well as Russian military contractors.



## Director of Wuhan Lab Denies Virus Link



BEIJING (AFP) - The director of a maximum-security laboratory in China's coronavirus ground-zero city of Wuhan has rejected claims that it could be the source of the outbreak, calling it "impossible".

Beijing has come under increasing pressure over transparency in its handling of the pandemic, with the U.S. probing whether the virus actually originated in a virology institute with a high-security biosafety laboratory.

Chinese scientists have said the virus likely jumped from an animal to humans in a market that sold wildlife.

But the existence of the facility has fuelled conspiracy theories that the germ spread from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, specifically its P4 laboratory which is equipped to handle dangerous viruses.

In an interview with state media published Saturday Yuan Zhiming, director of the laboratory, said that "there's no way this virus came from us". None of his staff had been infected, he told the English-language state broadcaster CGTN, adding the "whole institute is carrying out research in different areas related to the coronavirus".

The institute had already dismissed the theory in February, saying it had shared information about the pathogen with the World Health Organization in early January.

But this week the United States has brought the rumours into the mainstream, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo saying U.S. officials are doing a "full investigation" into how the virus "got out into the world".

When asked if the research suggested the virus could have come from the institute, Yuan said: "I know it's impossible."

"As people who carry out viral studies we clearly know what kind of research is going on at the institute and how the institute manages viruses and samples," he said.

He said that because the P4 laboratory is in Wuhan "people can't help but make associations", but that some media outlets are "deliberately trying to mislead people".

Reports in the Washington Post and Fox News have both quoted anonymous sources who voiced concern that the virus may have come -- accidentally -- from the facility.

Yuan said the reports were "entirely based on speculation" without "evidence or knowledge".

Authorities in Wuhan initially tried to cover up the outbreak and there have been questions about the official tally of infections with the government repeatedly changing its counting criteria at the peak of the outbreak.

## Trump Warns China Could Face Consequences for Virus Outbreak

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. President Donald Trump warned China on Saturday that it should face consequences if it was "knowingly responsible" for the coronavirus pandemic, as he ratcheted up criticism of Beijing over its handling of the outbreak.

"It could have been stopped in China before it started and it wasn't, and the whole world is suffering because of it," Trump told a daily White House briefing.

It was the latest U.S. volley in a war of words between the world's two biggest economies, showing increased strains in relations at a time when experts say an unprecedented level of cooperation is needed to deal with the coronavirus crisis. "If it was a mistake, a mistake is a mistake. But if they were knowingly responsible, yeah, I mean, then sure there should be consequences," Trump said. He did not elaborate on what actions the United States might take.

Trump and senior aides have accused China of a lack of transparency after the coronavirus broke out late last year in its city of Wuhan. This week he suspended aid to the World Health Organization accusing it of being "China-centric."

Washington and Beijing have repeatedly sparred in public over the virus. Trump initially lavished praise on China and his counterpart Xi Jinping for their response. But he and other senior officials have also referred to it as the "Chinese virus" and in recent days have ramped up their rhetoric.

They have also angrily rejected earlier attempts by some Chinese officials to blame the origin of the virus on the U.S. military.

Trump's domestic critics say that while China performed badly at the outset and must still come clean on what happened, he is now seeking to use Beijing to help deflect from the shortcomings of his own response and take advantage of growing anti-China sentiment among some voters for his 2020 re-election bid.

At the same time, however, White House officials are mindful of the potential backlash if tensions get too heated. The United States is heavily reliant on China for personal protection equipment desperately needed by American medical workers, and Trump also wants to keep a hard-won trade deal on track.

Prison officials had "locked the prisoners in a small cell and refusing them food and water for three days because they were accused of belonging to Boko Haram", Ibedou told AFP. "It's horrible what has happened."

The government denied the allegations.

A security source, speaking on condition of anonymity told AFP that "the 58 prisoners were placed in a single cell and were given nothing to eat or drink for two days".

Mahamat Nour Ahmed Ibedou, secretary general of the Chadian Convention for the Protection of Human Rights (CTDDH), made similar accusations.

Paris (AFP) - A group of 44 suspected members of Boko Haram, arrested during a recent operation against the jihadist group, have been found dead in their prison cell, apparently poisoned, Chad's chief prosecutor announced Saturday.

Speaking on national television, Youssouf Tom said the 44 prisoners had been found dead in their cell on Thursday.

An autopsy carried out on four of the dead prisoners revealed traces of a lethal substance that had caused heart attacks in some of the victims and severe asphyxiation in the others, he said.

The dead men were among a group of 58 suspects captured during a major army operation around Lake Chad launched by President Idriss Deby Itno at the end of March.

"Following the fighting around Lake Chad, 58 members of Boko Haram had been taken prisoner and sent to Ndjamena for the purposes of the investigation," said Tom.

"On Thursday morning, their jailers told us that 44 prisoners had been found dead in their cell," Tom said, adding that he had attended the scene.

"We have buried 40 bodies and sent four bodies to the medical examiner for autopsy." An investigation was ongoing to determine exactly how the prisoners had died, he said.

A security source, speaking on condition of anonymity told AFP that "the 58 prisoners were placed in a single cell and were given nothing to eat or drink for two days".

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## Bangladesh Workers Pack Streets to Demand Wages

DHAKA (Reuters) - Hundreds of workers poured onto the streets of Bangladesh's port city of Chittagong on Saturday, flouting social distancing rules to demand work and wages during the coronavirus shutdown.

Bangladesh, the world's second-largest apparel producer after China, is set to lose about \$6 billion of export revenues this fiscal year as retailers and brands across the world cancel orders, two industry bodies have said.

The country reported 306 new cases of coronavirus and nine more deaths on Saturday, taking the total to 2,144 cases and 84 deaths.

Those figures are still relatively low compared with the worst-hit regions including China, parts of Europe and the United States.

But health officials have warned that the infection could still spread fast through the surrounding South Asia region, home to a fifth of the world's population where millions live in packed slums with fragile public health systems.

Neighbouring India reported 991 new cases and 42 new deaths from the virus on Saturday, taking the total number of reported cases to 14,378 and deaths to 480.

Indian health ministry official Lav Agarwal told reporters some districts had not reported any new cases. But he urged people to stick to social distancing rules. "This is a battle for which we have to stay vigilant continuously," he said.

India is in the fourth week of a nationwide shutdown, though the government has said it will allow industries in the countryside to reopen and some farms to resume work next week.

Sri Lanka's government said on Saturday it would partially ease restrictions from April 20.

Bangladesh has sent troops out into the streets to help enforce a shutdown on travel and restrictions on gatherings.

In Chittagong, the crowds of workers on the streets said they were still waiting for last month's wages.

Police had talked to one factory owner who had promised to make the payments by April 28, local officer Mohammad Zamiruddin told Reuters.

Bangladesh's government last month launched a \$588 million package to help companies in the crucial garments sector pay staff during the pandemic, but manufacturers have said it is not enough.



## Hundreds Protest Against U.S. Virus Rules

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Hundreds protested Saturday in cities across America against coronavirus-related lockdowns -- with encouragement from President Donald Trump -- as resentment grows against the crippling economic cost of confinement.

An estimated 400 people gathered under a cold rain in Concord, New Hampshire -- many on foot while others remained in their cars -- to send a message that extended quarantines were not necessary in a state with relatively few confirmed cases of COVID-19.

The crowd included several armed men wearing military-style uniforms, with their faces covered.

In Texas, more than 250 people rallied outside the State Capitol in Austin, including far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, founder of the Infowars site, who rolled up in a tank-like truck.

"It's time to reopen Texas, it's time to let people work, it's time for them to let voluntary interaction and good sense rule the day, not government force," said Justin Greiss, an activist with Young Americans for Liberty.

Stay-at-home mother Amira Abuzeid added: "I'm not a doctor but I'm an intelligent person who can do math and it looks like at the end of the day, these numbers are not that worrisome."

Few if any observed social distancing recommendations.

Demonstrators outside Maryland's colonial-era statehouse in Annapolis stayed in their cars but waved signs with messages like "Poverty kills too."

Dolores, a hairdresser, told AFP she is not eligible for unemployment because she is a business owner, not an employee.

"I need to save my business. I need to work to live. Otherwise I will die," she said.

Other demonstrations took place across the country in cities such as Columbus, Ohio and San Diego, California, as well as the states of Indiana, Nevada and Wisconsin.

Few practiced social distancing but many of the protesters waved American flags.







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## Kurdistan Region to Defer Oil Payments

OSLO (Dispatches) - Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region will postpone payments for oil sales made between November 2019 and February 2020 while committing to paying regularly for the following months, London-based Genel Energy said.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

pays international oil firms, including Genel and Norway's DNO, to pump oil on its territory. "Payment of invoices relating to oil sales from November 2019 to February 2020 will be deferred, interest free, for at least nine months," Genel said in a statement, citing a message from the KRG.



## Asia's Economic Growth to Halt For First Time Since 1960s

HONG KONG (Dispatches) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) believes Asia's fast-growing economies will "come to a standstill" due to the Covid-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, faring worse than during the 2008-9 global financial crisis or the 1997-98 Asian crash.

The region will experience zero growth for the first time since the 1960s, said Chang Yong Rhee, director of the IMF's Asia and Pacific Department, who forecast that the economic impact of the pandemic will be "severe, across the board, and unprecedented."

Rhee said during a live-conference via online that Asia faces "a crisis like no other" due to the pandemic, which has killed over 136,000 people worldwide and prompted governments to impose lockdowns that have hampered commerce.

"Containment measures are severely affecting economies," Rhee said. Though Asia will "fare better than other regions," it will nonetheless be hard-hit, in part due to a "deterioration of external demand" in Europe and North America, where severe recessions are expected.

This week, the IMF predicted that "the Great Lockdown" will cause the worst global downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Unlike during the 2008-9 crisis, economic growth in China, Asia's biggest economy and where the pandemic originated in late 2019, will plummet - from 6.1% in 2019 to 1.2% this year.

Economies that depend on trade with China, such as Australia and those of South-East Asia, will likely see sharp recessions.

The IMF forecasts contractions of 6.7% for Australia and Thailand, with Malaysia likely to see its economy shrink by 1.7%, slightly-less than the 2% decline forecast by the country's central bank. A new report by the secretariat of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), a regional inter-governmental organization, warned that member states will be slammed by a combination of slowdown in China and travel bans imposed due to the pandemic.

The secretariat said that tourism in South-East Asia "benefits from the large influx" from China, while across the region, "supply chains are heavily integrated with China's manufacturing sector." Indonesia and the Philippines will see growth flatten to around one per cent, with recessions only kept at bay due to the weight of consumer spending by their large populations.

The collapse in oil prices since the onset of the pandemic will also hit energy-dependent economies hard, the IMF outlined, with East Timor, which depends on energy revenues for almost all government spending, facing a 3% contraction. Elsewhere, factors such as "reduced tourism, disrupted trade and manufacturing" will weigh heavily, according to the IMF.

Japan, Asia's second-biggest economy, could shrink by 5.2%.

While Cambodia, where tourism makes up almost a fifth of gross domestic product, is facing negative growth of 1.6 per cent - a steep decline compared to the 7% growth the country has enjoyed most years over the past decade.

Countries across Asia have announced huge government spending proposals aimed at cushioning the economic impact of the pandemic.

According to economists at Dutch bank ING, "countries with deep pockets," such as Australia and Singapore, will be better able to live up to their spending plans. Some countries have included measures such as loans and tax breaks in fiscal plans, suggesting that the cash available to help hard-pressed businesses is less than it appears on paper.

According to ING, "those with weaker financial positions, Malaysia, Indonesia, have had to bulk the packages out more and their genuine fiscal support is typically lower."

## European Car Sales Fall the Most in Decades, Signaling Slump

FRANKFURT (Dispatches) - European car sales went over a cliff in March, falling to their lowest level in at least 30 years, according to data published Friday that provided one of the first concrete indications of the economic damage caused by coronavirus lockdowns.

Most of the previous available economic data dated from before the lockdowns began and is all but useless. Also, the car industry is a bellwether for overall economic growth in the European Union because it is a pillar of manufacturing and employs so many people — 2.6 million, or 9 percent of all factory workers in the bloc. Based on the March sales numbers, the outlook is not good.

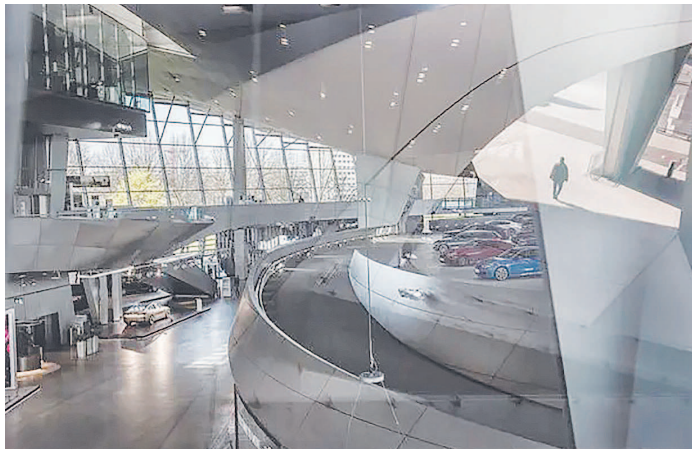
New car registrations fell by more than half from a year earlier, to 570,000 from 1.3 million, the European Automobile

Manufacturers Association said. It was by far the worst March for auto sales since at least 1990. Comparisons before then are of limited value because Europe was still divided by the Iron Curtain.

The new registration figures may be even worse than they sound. It was only around the middle of the month that most car dealers in Europe closed their doors, factories went idle and buyers were told to stay at home.

Italy, which went into lockdown first, suffered the biggest drop in car sales: 85 percent in March. That suggests that the damage to the European car industry could be even more severe in April, depending on how quickly lockdowns ease.

Automakers are eager to get their assembly lines rolling again, and some — including Volkswagen, Volvo and Daimler — will cautiously begin doing so on Monday.



## Russia May Suspend Grain Exports for 6 Weeks

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia, the world's biggest wheat exporter, will suspend grain exports until July 1 once its export quota is exhausted, which is currently expected to happen in mid-May, its deputy agriculture minister Oksana Lut said.

Russia last fully banned wheat exports in 2010 when drought hit its harvest, rocking global markets. Turkey, Egypt and Bangladesh are the largest buyers of Russian wheat. "The quota was introduced for the period from April 1 to June 30, 2020. After it is depleted, the supplies outside the (Russia-led) Eurasian Economic Union will be stopped for this period," Lut said.

"Based on the pace of the quota filling, it is expected that exports will be suspended in mid-May."

There are no plans to increase the second-quarter quota, and the agriculture ministry could keep the grain export quota mechanism in the new 2020/21 marketing season, which starts on July 1, Lut said.

To conserve supplies for the domestic market during the coronavirus outbreak, Russia, along with several neighbouring countries which are large wheat exporters via the Black Sea, limited grain exports earlier in April.

These moves led to a lower than usual number of suppliers at a tender by Egypt's state grain buyer on Thursday, as some traders did not submit offers due to fears over potential export bans in the Black Sea region.

"Mid-May is now increasingly seen as the time the quota will be used up because of the rapid pace of Russian exports. There is perceptible caution about selling Russian wheat in international markets beyond this date," a European trader said. If the Russian quota is depleted in mid-May and exports are suspended, it could hit Egypt's latest purchases of Russian wheat, Cairo-based traders said.

"This may very well hurt the latest vessels that Egypt booked," one of them said. Egypt, the world's largest wheat buyer, booked 180,000 tonnes of Russian wheat in its tenders this week in an effort to beef up its strategic reserves amid the coronavirus.

The shipment of the three supplies is due on May 15-25, May 21-June 5 and May 26-June 5. If Russia's grain exports are suspended, there will be no exceptions for certain companies, Lut said. "The mechanism was developed without dividing the permitted amount of exports among market participants."

Russia set the quota for grain exports at 7 million tonnes for the April to June period.

## IMF Approves \$1.4b in Coronavirus Aid to Pakistan

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved the disbursement of \$1.386 billion under the Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) to help Pakistan address the economic impact of COVID-19 shock.

According to an IMF press statement issued on Friday, "A purchase under the Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) equivalent to SDR 1,015.5 million (\$ 1.386 billion, 50pc of quota) has been approved for Pakistan to meet the urgent balance of payment needs stemming from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic."

The IMF projected the near-term economic impact of COVID-19 to be significant, as it would give rise to large fiscal and external financing needs.

The IMF support would help provide a backstop against the decline in international reserves and provide financing to the budget for targeted and temporary spending increases aimed at containing the pandemic and mitigating its economic impact.

"The IMF remains closely engaged with the Pakistani authorities and as the impact of the COVID-19 shock subsides, it will resume discussions as part of the current Extended Fund Facility (EFF)," it added.

Following the Executive Board discussion, Geoffrey Okamoto, First Deputy Managing Director and Acting Chair, said that the outbreak of COVID-19 was having a significant impact on the Pakistani economy.

The domestic containment measures, coupled with the global downturn, are severely affecting growth and straining external financing, Okamoto said, adding that this had created an urgent balance of payments need.

"In this context of heightened uncertainty, IMF emergency financing under the Rapid Financing Instrument provides strong support to the authorities' emergency policy response, preserving fiscal space for essential health spending, shoring up confidence, and catalyzing additional donor support," the IMF Acting Chair added.

Okamoto said that in response to the crisis, the government of Pakistan had taken swift action to halt the community spread of the virus and introduced an economic stimulus package aimed at accommodating the spending needed to tackle the health emergency and supporting economic activity. Crucially, the authorities are increasing public health spending and strengthening social safety net programs to provide immediate relief to the most vulnerable.

## French Lower House Approves €110b Emergency Budget

PARIS (Dispatches) - Reacting to an "economic emergency" due to the coronavirus pandemic and concomitant lockdown measures, the French National Assembly in an overnight vote late Friday into early Saturday approved a €110 billion emergency budget. The Senate is expected to vote on the budget bill Tuesday.

In a second financial amendment bill since the coronavirus crisis began, the French lower house approved a €110 billion budget plan, which includes bonuses for medical staff, funds to help struggling workers and families, and aid to businesses including strategic industries such as aviation and car manufacturing. Members of the centre-right Republican Party and the Socialist Party, both in opposition, approved the text — unlike France's far-left Communist and France Unbowed parties.

French political parties are divided on generating revenues to finance the new package, with the left and far-right parties calling for the restoration of a solidarity wealth tax to make the richest contribute, while the government opposes any tax hikes at this stage.

Another bone of contention is the €20 billion "recapitalisation" plan to help companies hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the aviation and automobile sectors. Opposition groups have asked for further clarifications and environmental groups are denouncing "a cheque to big polluters", with no conditions attached.

"It will not be a blank cheque,"

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire promised parliament, adding that any capital increases or likely temporary nationalisation measures would be "competitive" and based on "an ambitious environmental policy".



## RBI Vows to Do All It Takes To Boost Indian Economy



MUMBAI (Dispatches) - Governor Shaktikanta Das vowed on Friday to do "whatever it takes" to cushion the economic blow of the coronavirus pandemic, before drawing from the central bank's arsenal to cut the reverse repo rate to nudge banks to lend, provide liquidity support to struggling non-banks and ease asset classification norms.

The measures, announced outside the monetary policy cycle, set the stage for the second round of fiscal stimulus that finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman is expected to announce any day now.

Governor Das's pledge to do all that it takes to save the economy indicates that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will take aggressive steps, including further rate cuts, to support economic activity in a nation that has been locked down since 25 March. Business leaders and economists have also sought a ₹9-10 trillion fiscal stimulus package.

RBI cut reverse repo rate by 25 basis points to 3.75% to discourage banks from parking excess liquidity under the liquidity adjustment facility (LAF) window. As on 13 April, banks had parked as much as ₹6.9 trillion under the reverse repo window.

Banks now don't have any incentive to park their surplus liquidity with the central bank and will be forced to either buy government securities or revive the credit cycle. Combined with some of the other liquidity boosting measures, regulatory forbearance on bad loans and re-channelling of funds to non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), including home financiers and micro-finance institutions, the immediate shock from loan defaults may have been kicked down the road. However, unlike banks, NBFCs may resume lending only selectively. At the same time, they may be able to refinance loans they had taken from the market, reducing the likelihood of defaults and financial shocks.

"Based on our continuing assessment of the macroeconomic situation and financial market conditions, we propose to take further measures to maintain adequate liquidity in the system and its constituents in the face of covid-19 related dislocations; facilitate and incentivize bank credit flows; ease financial stress; and enable the normal functioning of markets," Das said in his speech.

For non-banks and micro-financiers, RBI has proposed to make available liquidity worth ₹50,000 crore directly under the targeted long-term repo operation (TLTRO) 2.0 window and also indirectly through financial institutions such as Nabard, Small Industries Development Bank of India (Sidbi) and National Housing Bank (NHB).

Under the TLTRO 2.0 window, banks can access three-year funding from RBI to invest in investment grade papers of non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), with at least 50% invested in small and mid-sized NBFCs and micro-financiers. The central bank has also assured companies that it will make available further liquidity under this facility depending on the pattern of utilization and requirement. Banks will have a month to invest funds raised under TLTRO. Exposures under the facility will not be included while calculating large corporate exposure.

The move to announce a special liquidity facility under the TLTRO 2.0 window for NBFCs and micro-financiers comes as these companies failed to get funding under the earlier TLTRO scheme. While RBI had released as much as ₹75,000 crore out of ₹1 trillion promised amount, banks had utilized these funds for investing in only corporate papers with top ratings.



## NISOC Creating Jobs in Oil-Rich Southern Regions

TEHRAN (Shana) –The CEO of the National Iranian South Oil Company said: “With the implementation of new projects in southern oilfields, job opportunities will be created in the country.”

According to the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), Ahmad Mohammadi said NISOC had various projects in enhance and maintain oil production in the fields it operated

southern Iran which would generate jobs for the locals.

NISOC has defined packages for enhancing productivity of 28 oil fields of which 6 packages have become operational creating 1,100 jobs, he said.

Mohammadi also added that once all the packaged became operational, 80 oil rigs would become active in the fields.



## Turkey Rejects Foreign Financial Aid as Economy Struggles Against Coronavirus Impact

ANKARA (Xinhua) — Turkish leaders have rejected any foreign financial assistance as the country is struggling to cushion the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

On Thursday, Turkey's lira weakened to 6.91 per U.S. dollar, the lowest point in 18 months. Earlier this week, Turkey restricted foreign investors' ability to trade the lira in the offshore swaps markets, sending its national currency to the low level witnessed during the 2018 crisis, with a further drop predicted by the analysts.

Since the start of this year, the lira has declined by more than 15 percent in value against the greenback despite Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's economic incentives implemented to protect the economy since before the pandemic.

Last week, Erdogan rejected the possibility of cooperating with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) just days after the IMF's chief said the institution has a “constructive engagement” with Ankara. Turkey “will not enter into any program, especially one from IMF that would have been enforced upon us ... No one has the power to get Turkey in trouble,” the Turkish leader said.

Since Erdogan came to power in 2002, he has repeatedly declined to seek financial assistance from the IMF, noting Turkey “closed that chapter.”

Economists argue that Ankara should consider some forms of foreign aid in these troubled times when all economies, strong or vulnerable, are affected by the pandemic.

“We may ask for a funding of 8 to 10 billion dollars from the IMF. Turkey has every right to do it. And the annual cost of this financing will be 1.5 percent, which is acceptable,” said Emre Alkin, a professor of economy from the Istanbul Altinbas University.

Erdogan fears that asking the IMF for funding will cause him to lose voters' confidence or reputation, Alkin explained on his blog. It is worth noting that the Turkish professor also suggests Ankara strike a SWAP deal worth 20 billion dollars with the Fed.

In addition to a pledge of a financial stimulus package of 15 billion dollars for businesses hit by the coronavirus, Erdogan on Monday announced additional support measures for the unemployed and large-scale postponement of debt and mortgage payments.

Turkey is also suffering a liquidity crunch as gross foreign currency reserves have fallen by more than 20 billion dollars in recent months after the central bank's sale of dollars to prop up the dwindling lira.

In its World Economic Outlook, the IMF anticipates Turkey's economy to shrink by five percent in 2020 amid a worldwide recession of three percent, despite another positive outlook of a five-percent growth for the G20 nation in 2021.

Early Thursday, the Turkish parliament adopted a series of economic measures to help the country through the pandemic crisis, which include a critical role for the Turkish Wealth Fund (TVF) to enable it to inject cash or acquire stakes in strategic firms.



TVF owns assets in several major public companies and banks such as the national flag carrier Turkish Airlines, Turksat (satellite) and the Turkish petroleum company Botas.

Meanwhile, Turkish Treasury and Finance Minister Berat Albayrak announced that the government has started to distribute 1.75 billion dollars' worth of aid to 2.1 million households who lost income amid rising unemployment.

“We received cash help this week ... It is not a big amount but it will keep us afloat for a time,” Bekir Dilek, a house painter who has been unable to find work for nearly a month, told Xinhua by phone.

Turkey has taken several measures against the COVID-19 outbreak, including closing schools and non-essential shops, banning inter-city and air travels. Citizens under 20 and over 65 are under mandatory home confinement.

Wearing face masks are now compulsory in public places and the government is distributing them free of charge. COVID-19 treatment is also free in the country, according to a government decree.

Despite a lockdown over weekends in major cities to prevent people from going out amid the coronavirus outbreak, the Turkish government has so far refrained from imposing a nationwide lockdown in order to keep the economy on track.

Turkey has so far recorded 74,193 coronavirus cases and 1,643 deaths, according to the latest data released by the health ministry.

## IMF Forecasts Drastic Economic Slumps Across EAC



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - All five East African Community countries should brace for drastic drops in their economic growth rates this year as a direct result of the global coronavirus crisis.

The International Monetary Fund's latest World Economic Outlook projections for 2020 pegs Kenya and Tanzania's respective GDP growth rates at one per cent and two per cent respectively in 2020, down from 5.6 and 6.3 per cent respectively in 2019. Uganda will maintain a 3.5 growth rate this year, compared with 4.9 per cent in 2019.

Rwanda's predicted decline from 10 per cent in 2019 to 3.5 per cent this year is the steepest drop in the region, comparable only with Ethiopia's new 3.2 per cent projection from nine per cent in 2019.

But the outlook for 2021 is slightly better for Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, with Nairobi's growth rate expected to shoot back up to 6.1 per cent (higher than 2019) while Tanzania and Uganda also recover to 4.6 and 4.3 per cent respectively.

The IMF said the Covid-19 pandemic will cause a three per cent contraction in the global economy in 2020, much worse than during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis.

“In a baseline scenario, which assumes that the pandemic fades in the second half of 2020 and containment efforts can be gradually unwound, the global economy is projected to grow by 5.8 per cent in 2021 as economic activity normalises. The risks for even more severe outcomes, however, are substantial,” it added.

For Tanzania, the new IMF projection represents a sharp change from early last month—after completing its latest mission to the country—when it reported that the economy had rebounded to an estimated annual growth rate of six per cent in 2020, up from four per cent projected in early 2019.

That projection was still below the seven per cent growth rate quoted by the government, a contradiction that caused some friction between Tanzania and the IMF last year.

The IMF said in March that increased activity in the country's construction and mining sectors had helped to boost real GDP growth.

It also predicted that Tanzania's inflation would remain under five per cent, exchange rate stable, and the public debt manageable at below 40 per cent of GDP.

## Japan Tourism Faces 80% Drop as Coronavirus Threatens Abenomics

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japan saw arrivals from overseas plunge 93% in March, a record year-on-year decline, as the novel coronavirus has kept travelers at home. Economists predict the number of foreign visitors to Japan will drop 30% to 80% for the full year, a serious setback for the government's hopes for tourism.

Its initial target was to draw 40 million visitors this year. Eased visa requirements and a big marketing push overseas have helped fuel a huge increase in overseas arrivals in the past decade. The tourism boom has been one of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's biggest successes on the economic front.

But the coronavirus pandemic has turned the boom to bust. With the Tokyo Olympics postponed until next year, and travel bans in place around the world, 2020 is shaping up to be a gloomy year for tourism, dealing a blow to Japan's economy.

In March, 193,700 foreign visitors arrived in Japan. Those from China virtually stopped coming altogether: arrivals were down 98.5% from the same month a year ago. South Korean visitors fell nearly as steeply, by 97.1%, according to the Japan National Tourism Organization. The two countries made up around half of Japan's 31.88 million visitors in 2019.

According to the Japan Tourism Agency, foreign tourists' spending slid 41.6% from January to March, compared with the same period last year.

The sudden fall in overseas travelers is hitting tourist destinations hard, including Takayama, in Japan's central Gifu Prefecture. “It is unusually very quiet at this season,” said Yoshiaki Komaya, secretary-general of the Hida-Takayama Tourism & Convention Bureau. The city, which had previously planned to hold its famous Takayama Festival on Tuesday and Wednesday, cancelled the event, which features food stalls and portable Shinto shrines carried through the streets. “We have seen only a few Japanese tourists, and hardly any foreign visitors since mid-February,” Komaya said.

Takayama is the gateway to the Japan Alps, a popular area with hikers, and to UNESCO-listed Shirakawa-go, a village



with well-preserved thatched-roof farmhouses. Takayama normally welcomes millions of tourists, attracting hotel operators to the area. Five or six new properties are scheduled to open by March 2021, Komaya said. Tokyo-based Tokyu Stay opened a hotel with more than 200 rooms on April 1, although

it has been “greatly impacted by the coronavirus outbreak,” according to a company representative.

“I don't think the city's accommodation will be oversupplied once the outbreak ends, but we don't know when that will happen,” Komaya said.

The tourism industry is suffering the most from the downturn. According to Teikoku Databank, a credit research firm, there were 53 coronavirus-related bankruptcies in Japan through Monday, 21 of which were related to travel and tourism.

The sector has grown robustly in recent years, in contrast to many industries in Japan that have struggled to remain globally competitive. Last year, foreign visitors spent 4.8 trillion yen (\$44 billion), a figure that has more than doubled over the last five years. The World Travel & Tourism Council estimates that Japan's travel and tourism sector accounts for 7% of its gross domestic product, up 1.6 percentage points from 2018.

Abe has made reviving rural economies a pillar of his economic program. The Japanese countryside is losing people, and tourism is seen as a rare opportunity for growth. The trends had been positive: “Until 2019, we were seeing tourists heading to rural areas of Japan rather than metropolitan cities,” said Tatsunori Kuniyoshi, an analyst at Euromonitor International.

Estimates vary on how badly the coronavirus will hurt the tourism. Keiji Kanda, a senior economist at Daiwa Institute of Research, believes the number of foreign visitors in 2020 may fall to 7 million, down 80% from last year, if the disruption from the pandemic continues through the end of the year. Kanda estimates this will lead to a loss of 4 trillion yen in the economy. If the pandemic ends in June in major economies, the number of tourists visiting Japan will fall 30% from last year, he predicts.

## Tehran Raps U.S...

FROM PAGE 1

The U.S. has repeatedly expressed its anger at the possible termination of restrictions on Iran's import and export of arms.

Washington has already been infuriated by the failure of its attempts to coerce the remaining signatories to the JCPOA to follow suit in scrapping the JCPOA.

Pompeo took to Twitter on Saturday to claim that lifting the arms embargo imposed on Iran may give rise to violence in the Middle East. “The arms embargo on Iran – the world's leading state sponsor of terror – expires six months from today. The UN Security Council (UNSC) must extend the embargo before Iran's violence escalates and they start a new arms race in the Middle East. The clock is ticking,” he said. In response, Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov stressed that the risk of an arms race could only be reduced through collective efforts, not unilateralism.

“Usually an arms race is not unilateral. It is a collective endeavor either at level of great powers or in regional&subregional context. A risk of arms race can hardly be removed through arms embargo against one country. This task requires collective efforts through negotiations,” he tweeted.

## Yemenis Will...

FROM PAGE 1

That today Yemeni people burn under fire of Saudi-led coalition and they are dismembered, soon Saudi-led coalition forces and their providers of arms will get proper reply. On the claim of Saudis for a truce with Yemeni forces, it is enough to refer to reports of Al-Mayadeen TV channel showed fierce clashes between Yemeni forces with pro-former Yemeni President Mansour Hadi forces and coalition forces which began in northwest of Marib Province, and during the clashes, Saudi fighter jets for ten times conducted aerial strikes in Sarvah town of Marib Province.

Reuters quoted some sources close to negotiating team between Saudi Arabia and National Salvation Government of Yemen as saying and claimed that both sides have had several contacts since the beginning of the week but the progress for restoring the ceasefire all depends on Ansarullah forces and trust building between both parties.

Some local officials have told Reuters that Saudi coalition started again efforts for negotiations for a truce after their forces launched aerial attacks on towns and villages under control of the army and popular committees in order to stop their advancement in al-Jawf Province (North of Yemen) towards town of Marib, a town which is said is the last stronghold of the resigned-government of Yemen which is supported by Saudis.

Reuters has claimed it has contacted with Spokesman of the Saudi-led coalition Turki Al-Maliki about this claim but he has not replied. The claimed truce of the Saudi-led coalition has begun since last Thursday under the pretext of the breakout of the Coronavirus in Yemen but the National Salvation Government, that Ansarullah is some part of it, called it a deceit and did not accept the call for truce and emphasized that it would only agree with ceasefire in Yemen when the truce is a comprehensive one along with lifting the five-year siege of the country because without lifting the siege, fight with Coronavirus will be impossible while the country's health and hospital infrastructures have been ruined and its economy has collapsed and it faces shortage of food and medicines.

This point that arms dealers and vendors who have veto and lobbying power are not ready to restore ceasefire in Yemen will not ever be wiped out of Yemenis' memories because if they want a ceasefire and an end to war in Yemen, it means they have ignored their whooping revenues and petrodollar earnings from arms sales.

Yemeni people undoubtedly will overcome this devastating war but the time will come when they punish the pro-Saudis like the British.

## Gov't Expands...

FROM PAGE 1

Rouhani further stressed that all countries are dealing with the coronavirus which has affected the world's politics and economy.

However, he noted, the virus “has been and is more difficult for our people.”

“One of the reasons is sanctions. Many countries are not under the sanctions condition while we have for two years been subjected to harsh sanctions,” he added.

Another reason that makes the situation more difficult for the Islamic Republic is the coincidence of the coronavirus outbreak in Iran with the Iranian New Year also known as Nowruz, during which families visit each other, the president said.

The third reason, which affects all Muslims, is the upcoming holy fasting month of Ramadan, he added.

## Number of Death...

FROM PAGE 1

The Blood Transfusion Organization announced that the project will get off the ground as of April 20, 2020.

Eshqi said in this project the plasma of patients who have recovered will be collected and stored in 14 provinces.

“The project involves people who achieved full recovery at least a month ago,” he added.

He expressed hope patients who have recovered from the coronavirus infection will cooperate with the organization to help it run the project well.

He said the Blood Transfusion Organization is the only legal authority in the country responsible for providing blood products needed by patients.

“The organization has a duty to work at its best to help patients in need and supply the blood products they need,”





## Buffon Agrees New Juventus Contract

TURIN (Dispatches) - Gigi Buffon is set to go around next season with Juventus.

The veteran goalkeeper is now 42 and has agreed a new 12 month deal with the Bianconeri.

Tuttosport says he will extend his contract with the Bianconeri until 2021 after speaking with club president Andrea Agnelli last week. The deal will be the same as the one he currently has with the club, however the coronavirus pandemic has prevented the contract from being formalised.

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## Zenga Hints Inter Milan Want Vidal

ROME (Dispatches) - Cagliari coach Walter Zenga has hinted Inter Milan are moving for Barcelona midfielder Arturo Vidal.

Zenga has Radja Nainggolan on-loan from Inter. And he revealed, "He's a player available in any situation."

"When I heard Inter wanted Arturo Vidal, I asked why, when they have Radja. That is my thought, but I'm happy to have him here because he makes the difference. If Inter leave him for another year at Cagliari, I will be the happiest man in the world."

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SPORTS

MONDAY APRIL 20, 2020

# Tennis Big Three Plan to Help Lowest-Ranked Players



PARIS (AFP) - Novak Djokovic said on Saturday that he, Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal are organising aid for players struggling with the paralysis of the game due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"I spoke to Roger and Rafa a few days ago," Djokovic, the world number one, said in an Instagram chat with friend and rival Stan Wawrinka on Saturday.

"We had a long conversation about the near future of tennis, what is going to happen, how we can contribute and how we can help especially lower-ranked players, who are obviously struggling the most."

"The majority of the players who are ranked between 200, 250 in the world, and the 700th or 1,000th do not have federation support, do not have sponsors. They are completely independent and left alone," he said.

"Guys who are ranked between 200-250, especially to 700...are thinking of leaving tennis right now."

He said players, the ATP and the four Grand Slams "would all get together and will contribute to a player relief fund that ATP will distribute."

"It looks, hopefully, that there will something between \$3 million (2.75 million euros) and \$4.5 million that is going to be distributed," he estimated.

## Mercedes F1 Boss Takes a Stake in Aston Martin

LONDON (Reuters) - Mercedes Formula One boss Toto Wolff has taken a stake in British sportscar maker Aston Martin, whose executive chairman Lawrence Stroll runs the Racing Point F1 team, according to company filings.

A Mercedes F1 spokesman said Wolff's move was purely an investment on the Austrian's part and would be diluted by a rights issue on Monday from 4.77% to less than 1%.

"Fully diluted following the pending rights issue, this investment will represent a 0.95% stake in the company," he added.

"It is a financial investment and Toto's partnership and executive role with Mercedes are unaffected by the transaction."

Swiss billionaire Ernesto Bertarelli has also bought a 3.38% stake which will be similarly diluted. Wolff previously had a 16% shareholding in former champions Williams but sold that after he joined the Mercedes team, where he serves as principal and owns 30%.

Canadian billionaire Stroll, whose son Lance drives for Racing Point alongside Mexican Sergio Perez, is close to Wolff. The Silverstone-based team — to be renamed Aston Martin next year — use Mercedes engines and gearboxes. Mercedes-Benz's parent Daimler also has a small stake in Aston Martin.

"It's clear that Aston are now Mercedes' B team," the Daily Mail quoted one Formula One insider as saying.

Wolff's future at Mercedes has been the subject of some media speculation, with the 48-year-old linked variously to senior management roles with Liberty Media-owned Formula One and at Aston Martin.

His Aston Martin shares were bought from Yew Tree Overseas Limited, a vehicle controlled by Stroll who acquired a roughly 25% percent holding in Aston Martin with a consortium of investors.

Mercedes have won the past six Formula One drivers' and constructors' titles but have six times world champion Lewis Hamilton out of contract at the end of the 2020 season, which has yet to start due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hamilton, who has also been linked to Ferrari, had told reporters before the global crisis changed the sporting and financial landscape that his decision would depend on Wolff's plans.

in January," he said.

"These guys are the grass roots of tennis. The future of tennis. We need to show them they still can rely on support of the top guys."

According to reports in tennis media, Djokovic, as president of the ATP Players' Council, which also includes Federer and Nadal, proposed to members that players in the top 100 for singles and the top 20 in doubles contribute according to their rankings.

The proposed scale runs from \$30,000 for a top-five player to \$5,000 for those between 51 and 100.

That would raise approximately \$1 million and the ATP would make a similar contribution.

On Friday, ATP chief Andrea Gaudenzi echoed the call for unity on the tour website.

"Our guys are at home, obviously unable to play, unable to earn money and financially struggling, so we will try to help," he said, adding that the ATP faced the problem of not knowing how long the crisis would last and how much revenue it would lose.

"I've been quite touched by the top players who reached out, the big names expressing their desire of helping the lower-ranked players and putting those players first."

"We are also talking with the Grand Slams about it. They may want to join in the effort. I think it would be a great message for the sport."

World tennis has been at a standstill since the beginning of March and will not resume until mid-July at the earliest following the postponement of Roland Garros and the cancellation of Wimbledon.

## Mourinho Agent Admits He Had Agreement With Liverpool



LONDON (Dispatches) - Jose Mourinho had a deal with Liverpool before the intervention of Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich, it has been revealed.

Mourinho, now in charge of Tottenham, was close to taking over from Gerard Houllier during a mediocre season at Anfield in 2004. In a new book, 'Mourinho: Beyond the Special One, from the origin to the glory', his former advisor, Jorge Baidek has confirmed there was an agreement in place with the Reds.

But they were asked to wait just over two weeks with Houllier still in charge, by which time Chelsea pounced.

Baidek recalled: "Mourinho should have gone to Liverpool. 'Rick Parry [then chief executive] was in charge of transfers and we had an agreement."

"They asked us to wait for 15 days as Houllier was still the Reds' manager."

Bruno Satin, Houllier's agent, had been involved in negotiations but super-agent Jorge Mendes alerted Chelsea they still had a chance to act.

He helped engineer their attractive offer, and a meeting before Porto's Champions League semi-final saw Mourinho meet Abramovich for the first time. Soon, a deal was rubber-stamped on his yacht the day after Mourinho's Champions League triumph.

## Sterling, Alexander-Arnold Confirmed for ePremier League



LONDON (Reuters) - Several top-flight players have signed up to represent their clubs in the ePremier League Invitational tournament next week to generate funds for Britain's National Health Service (NHS) during the novel coronavirus pandemic.

The inaugural edition of the knockout tournament will see players test their FIFA 20 video game skills against each other between April 20-25 from the comfort of their homes.

Among the players who have confirmed their participation are Manchester City's Raheem Sterling, Liverpool's Trent Alexander-Arnold, Wolverhampton Wanderers' Diogo Jota and Crystal Palace's Wilfried Zaha.

"The thoughts of everyone at the Premier League are with all those directly affected by COVID-19," Premier League Chief Executive Richard Masters said

in a statement here on Saturday.

"The league, our clubs and players are providing valuable support for communities and the NHS."

"We are also aware of the importance of finding new ways to entertain fans at this time and we're excited to bring together a strong line-up of players for the ePremier League tournament."

The prize fund will be donated to the #PlayersTogether initiative created by league players to help the NHS.

Fans can watch the action on the Premier League website and app as well as its YouTube, Facebook and Twitter channels. The semi-finals and final will be broadcast live on Sky Sports.

"We know how popular FIFA 20 is with players and I'm looking forward to seeing who will be crowned the ePL Invitational champion," Masters added.

## Premier League Return Date Still Not Clear



LONDON (Dispatches) - West Ham chief executive Karen Brady claims the Premier League's return date is still unclear despite hopes the top-flight season can restart in June.

The Premier League said on Friday that wrapping up the remaining 92 fixtures remains their goal, but the on-going coronavirus crisis means no fixed schedule can be drawn up yet.

Brady's West Ham were perilously placed in the English top flight when football was suspended, sitting above the relegation zone on only goal difference with nine games remaining.

"Players will have been able to retain some physical fitness at home," Brady wrote in her column in The Sun on Saturday. "But if social-distancing rules are still in place, physical match-play training will not be allowed -- you can't tackle from two metres away."

"So, how match-fit will players be if the season commences, as we all hope it will, by mid-June?"

With most clubs having nine games left, it was reported that Friday's meeting of the 20 clubs discussed finishing the season in a 40-day window.

There have been claims that clubs were told domestic seasons must end by July 31 and the 2020-21 campaign must start by the first week of September at the latest.

But Brady is adamant difficult questions over training, testing of players, hygiene and medical protocols will need to be resolved first.

## F1 Owners Would Bail Out Struggling Teams



LONDON (AFP) - Red Bull team principal Christian Horner believes the prospect of losing a struggling team from the Formula One grid would be such an "enormous blow" that the sport's owners would have to launch a financial bailout.

The world championship has not yet got underway due to the coronavirus pandemic with nine races either cancelled or postponed.

The French Grand Prix scheduled for June 28 is also in doubt as is the Belgian Grand Prix, set for August 30. With TV and advertising revenue drying up, there are fears that the weakest among the 10 teams could go to the wall.

However, Horner believes that F1's owners, Liberty Media, would be forced to act.

"It could be an enormous blow and at that point the promoter has to decide," Horner told The Guardian on Saturday. "It is their business, they have to decide how do they keep these teams alive because they need teams to go racing."

"The Liberty guys would do whatever they can to ensure that 10 teams are on the grid and competing next year."

"In order to protect their own business, I believe they would help to facilitate, which means paying, to ensure that those teams would be around to compete next year."