

**Iran's Health Ministry Has Announced
Details of Protocols on the
Reopening of Mosques Across Iran
Ahead of the Qadr Nights (Laylat
Al-Qadr) When People Stay Awake
And Pray From Midnight Till Dawn**

IRAN NEWS

**In a Telephone Conversation With
Iraq's New PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi
On Monday, Iranian President
Hassan Rouhani Voiced His
Country's Full Support for the
Iraqi Government**

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Iran, Afghanistan To Launch Joint Probe Into Harirud Incident

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan have agreed to launch joint investigation into the death of a number of Afghan nationals near the border with Iran.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his Afghan counterpart Mohammad Hanif Atmar have discussed the drowning of a number of Afghan migrants in the Harirud River near Iran's northeastern borders.

In a telephone conversation on Sunday night, Zarif gave an assurance that an Iranian team will investigate the incident, adding they will soon begin their job at the scene.

For his part, Atmar said the Afghan government has deployed a delegation to Herat province to probe into the incident underlining that the team has already begun its investigations there. Both sides also agreed that, if necessary, a joint delegation hold a joint meeting at the border, or in the cities of Mashhad and Herat, according to a statement by the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Afghanistan claims Iranian border guards have tortured and thrown a number of Afghans into Harirud River to prevent their entry into the Islamic Republic.

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No Need for Talks On Prisoners Swap Between Iran, U.S.

TEHRAN (MNA) – Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Monday that there is no need for any negotiations between Iran and the U.S. about the swap of prisoners, there are no problems in this regard and Iran will hold no talks with Americans.

Making the remarks attending Parliament's National Security Committee, Zarif said there have been no changes in Iran's political attitude towards the U.S. and prisoners exchanges will be done by the cooperation of the Foreign Interests Section of the Swiss Embassy in Iran.

According to Iranian officials, Iran accepted the prisoner exchange not to begin a new phase of negotiations. Rather, it agreed to it merely because of humanitarian issues.

Zarif, elsewhere, referred to the efforts done by the US for extension of Iran's arms embargo and named the move an illegal action.

He noted that the U.S. is not a member of the JCPOA and cannot refer to it for having the embargo extended.

19 Killed, 15 Injured in Naval Accident Off Southern Iranian Coast



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - At least 19 have been killed and 15 others injured in a naval accident involving a light Iranian vessel in the south of the country.

The accident happened to Konarak vessel off the port city of Jaask, according to a statement by the Iranian Army's Navy.

It occurred when a number of vessels belonging to the Iranian Navy were conducting exercises.

An investigation has been launched into the cause of the accident.

Health officials say right after the incident on Sunday evening, 10 ambulances were sent to Haft-e Tir wharf to take the injured to the hospital.

They say a total of 16 people have been taken to Imam Ali Hospital, with two people in ICU and one in surgery.

The Konarak Vessel, with body number 1403, is one of several Iranian "Hendijan" class navy vessels that are responsible for logistics and support.

These vessels were made by the Dutch Damen factory in 1988, and are known by MIG-S-4700-SC ID.

The Hendijan class vessels (including the Konarak) are 47 metres long, and 8.5 metres wide, while their draft is 2.9 metres.

With a carrying capacity of 460 tonnes, these vessels can play the role of a light logistics boat capable of carrying more than 100 people at high speed.

Mine laying and carrying up to 40 tonnes of water and the capacity to carry cargos up to 40 tonnes only on the deck are among other capabilities of this boat. People Killed in Konarak Accident

Although these vessels, as mentioned, have the main task of supporting, but according to Tasnim News Agency, some of them (including Konarak) have been equipped with various weapons such as cruise missiles in recent years, and in addition to their main task, they can also appear as a patrol vessel.

Another weapon mounted on these vessels include a Oerlikon 20 mm cannon.

However, on some of these Hendijan-class vessels, instead of cruise missiles, UAV launchers have been installed, which will help them in reconnaissance missions.

It should be noted that the Konarak vessel joined the fleet of Iran's Army Navy in Konarak city on October 7, 2018.

UN Urged to Pressure Saudi-Led Coalition Over Offloading Stranded Oil Tanker

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Yemeni minister of oil and minerals has called upon the United Nations to pressure the Saudi-led coalition involved in a campaign against his country into allowing the offloading of crude oil from a tanker afloat off the coast of Yemen's port city of Hudaydah.

Speaking in an exclusive interview with Yemen's official Saba news agency on Sunday, Ahmed Daress said Safer tanker, loaded with nearly 1.1 million barrels of oil, has turned into a time bomb that threatens the marine environment. He noted that the Saudi-led alliance is adamantly preventing the unloading of the consignment or maintenance work.

"Despite attempts by the Ministry of Oil to carry out maintenance, the coalition of aggression does not permit the entry of the technical team assigned to perform the maintenance under the supervision of the United Nations," Daress said.

The Yemeni minister held the UN and the Saudi-led military coalition fully responsible for any environmental catastrophe in the Red Sea, and destruction of marine life due to a potential oil spill from the ship.

Separately, Yemeni Foreign Minister Hisham Sharaf held Saudi Arabia and its allies to account for a serious pollution off the Red Sea coast. He said Yemeni authorities in Sana'a have on occasions asked the United Nations and its organs to send an evaluation and maintenance team to assess the situation of Safer oil tanker.

Sharaf noted that the ongoing sea, land and air blockade on Yemen has prevented access to the vessel and its much needed maintenance.

The Safer tanker reportedly allows vessels to anchor offshore and transfer oil extracted and processed from installations in the Ma'arib oil field in central Yemen.

The tanker is said to contain 34 crude oil tanks of different sizes and volumes, amounting to a total capacity of about three million barrels.

Saudi Arabia and a number of its regional allies launched the devastating war on Yemen in March 2015 in order to bring former President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi back to power and crush the Houthis Ansarullah movement.

The UN Population Fund has called for \$59 million to protect the health and safety of Yemeni women and girls.

The U.S.-based Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), a nonprofit conflict-research organization, estimates that the war has claimed more than 100,000 lives over the past five years.

U.S. Holds World Record in Lying

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Ministry of Health has roundly rejected U.S. claims that it has enabled the establishment of a sanctions-free channel for the transfer of medicine to the Islamic Republic.

"The U.S. holds the world record in lying," Iran's Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi told a news conference via video-link on Monday. "Their claim about the existence of a channel for the transfer of medicinal items is false," he added.

The official noted that under circumstances wherein thousands of people are losing their lives around the world due to the new coronavirus pandemic every day, keeping a country under sanctions "lacks any justification."

Iran has won a case against the US at the International Court of Justice that obliges Washington to exempt food and medicine from the sanctions it illegally and unilaterally reimposed in 2018. The US government alleges that it has spared those items, a claim that Tehran dismisses as untrue.

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Envoy Refutes Report On Shipping Gold Bars From Venezuela

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's Ambassador to Caracas announced on Monday that the news on shipping nine tons of gold bars from Venezuela to Iran is a big lie and a baseless rumor adding that Venezuela has not any gasoline to revive its refineries.

"Iran has never received such a consignment," Hojjatollah Soltani said, "Venezuela has not imported Iran's gasoline, neither." He rejected all the news claiming that Venezuela is raiding its gold vaults and handing tons of bars to Iran through recent Mahan Air flights.

The envoy also rejected the presence of Iranian experts in Venezuelan refineries.

"To the present date, Iranian gasoline has not entered Venezuela. To date, the governments of the two countries have held talks on bilateral trade cooperation, but so far Iranian fuel has not entered Venezuela," the ambassador noted.

"In recent days, an average of 10 to 17 commercial flights have been made from Iran to Venezuela, for the immediate transfer of equipment needed to reactivate the Paraguaná Refinery Complex, which is now a priority in achieving comprehensive relations between our countries," he added.

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COVID-19 Death Toll Mounts to 6,685 in Iran

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Some 45 more Iranians died of coronavirus over the past 24 hours and 87,422 people out of a total of 109,286 infected with the coronavirus have survived and recovered, according to Health Ministry.

Health Ministry Spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour made the announcement on Monday, saying that 1,683 new infected cases have been detected since yesterday, increasing the total number of infections in Iran to 109,286.

Over the last 24 hours, 45 people died due to the deadly virus, bringing the total death toll to 6,685, he added.

Jahanpour noted that 2,703 cases are in critical condition while 87,422 patients suffering from the novel coronavirus have recovered and been discharged from hospitals so far.

So far, 601,324 tests have been taken across the country to detect infected cases, said the Health Ministry spokesman.

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Chabahar Sees 15-Fold Rise In Basic Commodity Arrivals

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - Iran's import of basic commodities in the current Iranian year –a period of around 7 weeks- via the southeastern port city of Chabahar has risen by more than 15 times compared to the corresponding period a year earlier, an official said.

Director General of the Road Maintenance and Transportation Organization of Iran in the southeastern province of Sistan and Balouchestan said seven cargo ships carrying basic commodities have docked at the Chabahar port since the beginning of the current Iranian year (March 20).

The arrivals during the 7-week period in the port were 421,298 tons of basic commodities, compared with only 27,500 tons a year earlier, which had been freighted with a single cargo ship, Ayyoub Kord said.

Country Needs 1.5m Tests to Complete Corona Screening

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Government spokesman Ali Rabiei said in his weekly presser that e take 30,000 tests a day, and we need 1.5 million tests to complete the Corona screening program.

“On Sunday, in the meeting of the National Task for combating Corona, which was held with the presence of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, we examined the latest conditions and development on the issue,” he said.

Rabiei added, “People should be sure that the government is working hard on the two issues of income and people’s lives.”

He noted, “According to the National Task for Combating Corona reports, the infected cases have increased, but the number of people who lost their lives has been decreased.”

Rabiei pointed out, “Observing the instructions such as social distancing, increasing the production of disinfectants and masks and completing hospital equipment, as well as screening and diagnosing all these factors are the key to our success in overcoming the effects of the corona.”

“Opening the businesses should be done by observing the protocols,” the spokesman added.

“We have 5 scenarios, including the complete freedom scenario, the strict quarantine scenario, the non-intervention scenario (which we did not follow), a scenario with minimal intervention, with moderate intervention, and we chose one of them based on the economic and health conditions that we had,” he added.

He further called on the people to follow the health protocols to breeze through the current critical situation.

Appreciating the medical forces’ efforts, Rabiei said their readiness helped fight the virus successfully.

Turning to the issue of extradition of prisoners between Iran and the U.S., the spokesman said that making decision about the issue does not need any talks or any mediation efforts.

If there is determination to extradite prisoners, it will be done through Swiss Embassy which represents the U.S. interests in Iran, Rabiei noted.



Touching upon the tragic event occurred for Afghan migrants in Harirud River on Iran-Afghanistan border, eastern Iran, Rabiei said that commute on borders between the two neighboring countries should be well organized to prevent from happening such events.

He further expressed sympathy with the Afghan families of the victims.

Iran has declared that it is ready to form a committee to inquire into the case to clarify different aspects of the human tragedy, he added.

More than three million Afghan people are being hosted in Iran, and Iran sees them as its own citizens even when dealing with the issue of coronavirus pandemic, the spokesman said, adding that Iran attaches great importance to its brotherly relations with Afghanistan. Rabiei stressed that not only Iranian border guards but also the Afghan counterparts are obliged to tackle the shortages on borders.

Some are after damaging friendly ties between Iran and Afghanistan, but Tehran does not let them do so, he underlined.

About Tehran’s ties with neighbors, Rabiei said Iran welcomes appointment of Mustafa al-Kazemi as new Iraqi Prime Minister and is keen on deepening of relations with Iraq.

Turning to the situation of coronavirus pandemic, the official said conditions are not normal yet, and restrictions on presence in public places are still in force.

Meanwhile, the government has decided to reopen the schools as of May 16, but it is not obligatory for the students.

The government will decide about reopening of the universities next week; meanwhile, the religious sites will open to public gradually and based on health protocols, he added.

Only Syrian People Decide Country’s Future

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Ministry says the three guarantor states of the Astana peace process are working to help the Syrian people decide the Arab country’s future and the type of its government and do not interfere in any way in the country’s affairs.

Spokesman Abbas Mousavi made the remarks on Sunday, refuting “baseless and unfounded” reports, which claim that Iran, Russia and Syria are making decisions about Syria’s future.

The Iranian spokesman said it is only the Syrian people who can decide their future, the type of government and their rulers, adding, “The Islamic Republic of Iran has always been on the side of the Syrian government and people in their fight against terrorism, and will continue this line in the future.”

Mousavi emphasized that Iran, Russia and Turkey are trying to strengthen intra-Syrian talks and help the Arab country’s people decide about their future by establishing de-escalation zones, forming a Constitutional Committee and pursuing the process of talks and national reconciliation.

Foreign Ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey last month emphasized the need to continue consultations and coordination among the three guarantors of the Astana process as the most effective format for the settlement of the crisis in Syria.

Iran, Russia and Turkey underline the importance of continued dialog to maintain the Astana deal as the best way to resolve the conflict in Syria.

Iran’s Mohammad Javad Zarif, Russia’s Sergei Lavrov and Turkey’s Mevlut Cavusoglu conferred on a range of issues, including the situation in the militant-held province of Idlib in northwestern Syria, the Syria Constitutional Committee, the need for the lifting of unilateral sanctions amid the coronavirus pandemic, the humanitarian situation in Syria and repatriation of refugees to the Arab country.

President Rouhani’s Letter Submitted to Kuwaiti Emir

TEHRAN (IRNA) - President Hassan Rouhani’s letter to Emir of Kuwait Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah was handed over to Kuwaiti deputy foreign minister by Iran’s ambassador.

Mohammad Irani handed in the letter to Khaled al-Jarallah on Sunday.

According to Kuwaiti media, in the letter, President Rouhani has called for the cooperation of the countries

in fighting the coronavirus epidemic.

In the meeting between the Iranian ambassador and the Kuwaiti deputy foreign minister, issues concerning the regional and international developments, especially efforts made to fight the coronavirus epidemic, were discussed.

In Kuwait, 8,668 people have been infected with the virus, from whom 58 have lost their lives.

JCPOA Withdrawal to Be Remembered as Everlasting U.S. Disgrace

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Ministry spokesperson has slammed U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s remarks praising Washington’s withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, saying that the event will be remembered as “an everlasting disgrace” for the US.

“Mark my word: 8 May 2018 will remain an everlasting disgrace for American polity,” Abbas Mousavi said in a tweet on Sunday. “Only a rogue regime with zero sense of moral responsibility can take pride in dishonoring its international commitments and violating international law,” he added.

The Trump administration withdrew from the multilateral Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on May 8, 2018, reimposing widespread sanctions previously lifted under the deal.

The deal had been signed between Iran and five other countries – the US, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China – in 2015, putting an end to more than a decade of heated negotiations over Iran’s peaceful nuclear activities.

Mousavi’s remarks on Sunday came in response to a tweet by Pompeo praising the measure.

Two years ago, @realDonaldTrump announced the bold decision to protect the world from #Iran’s violence and nuclear threats by withdrawing from the Iran Deal. Today, Americans are safer and the Middle East is more peaceful than if we had remained in the #JCPOA.

Ever since withdrawing from the deal, Washington has sought to couple crippling economic sanctions with regional deployments and provocations as part of a campaign of “maximum pressure” against Tehran.

Iran, UNDP to Cooperate on Waste



TEHRAN (IP) - A joint meeting of the Director-General of the Tehran Waste Management Organization and a representative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) was held aimed at increasing cooperation in urban projects, especially waste.

In a meeting with Claudio Providas, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Resident Representative in Iran on Sunday, Sadreddin Alipour, Waste Management Director of Tehran said that using the office’s capacity has a way to come up with the challenges in the field of waste.

He added that based on the assessments, the equipment needed for the new project in the field of waste has been identified and its budget has been provided, but the imposed sanctions against Iran have made it difficult to purchase the equipment.

Referring to the waste field as one of the three priorities of the Tehran Municipality for the current year, Alipour stated: “Tehran Municipality and UNDP cooperation can be a role model for other cities in Iran and this model will be implemented and activated in other cities.

By stressing the UN office’s readiness to cooperate with Tehran, Claudio Providas UNDP Resident Representative in Iran added the Islamic Republic of Iran as one of the UN’s members has due right to use UNDP’s capacities.

Pointing to the organization’s cooperation with Iran, particularly after the sanctions, Providas said, “The United Nations Development Program, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran, operates in three areas: support for executive programs, facilitation of the purchase of equipment and facilities, and the south-south collaboration.

Exporters Advised to Keep Up With Standards of Products

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Diplomacy Gholamreza Ansari advised the exporters to keep up with standards of products to achieve targets in global markets.

“If we do not take necessary precaution and calculation vis-a-vis the rivals by keeping up with standards of the products, we will have problems and lose the markets,” he said

“Lack of attention to standards is harmful for exports. It damages our reputation in the global markets,” Ansari said.

Keeping up with standards of the products will ensure reputation of Iranian goods securing the target markets vis-a-vis the competitors, he added.

Iranian Trade Relations With Eurasian Economic Union Develop

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The head of Iran’s Trade Development Organization announced 69 percent growth in Iran’s exports in the category of preferential goods by the The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) from November to the end of March.

Hamid Zadbloom noted on Monday at a meeting of representatives of private sectors active and expert in the field of trade with the Eurasian Economic Union that the growth shows the ability of this agreement to help develop Iran’s exports to the Eurasian Economic Union.

Referring to the implementation of the interim agreement between Iran and Eurasia and its impact on the development of trade between the two countries, he said: “It is necessary to review the performance of this agreement during its implementation and to consider the challenges, problems, and obstacles to its implementation and make use the most of this opportunity in cooperation with the private sector.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is an economic union of states located in central and northern Asia and Eastern Europe.

The Treaty of the Eurasian Economic Union was signed on 29 May 2014 by the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, and came into force on 1 January 2015.

Treaties aiming for Armenia’s and Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union were signed on 9 October and 23 December 2014, respectively. Armenia’s accession treaty came into force on 2

Fate of Almost All Iran Joint Fields Determined

TEHRAN (Shana) - The Director of Integrated Planning at the National Iranian Oil Company said the fate of all Iranian oil and gas joint fields had been determined except for one small field.

Karim Zobeidi said that the development of joint oil and gas fields was under way in Iran, adding: “The only joint field that has not yet been determined is a small field from which the other country is not producing any hydrocarbons.”

He added: “Operations are under way in the rest of the joint fields, and in the West Karoon region, with the implementation of development projects, Iran is still producing more than Iraq.”

The Director of Integrated Planning at NIOC added that final studies for developed Farzad A and B offshore fields was under way at NIOC, adding development of the last phase of South Pars gas field, which is shared with Qatar in the Persian Gulf, had started by loading the jacket of the phase’s platform.

“Iran is recovering more gas from South Pars than Qatar,” he stressed.

Iran Air to Resume Flight to Amsterdam

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran’s National Flag Carrier, Iran Air, will resume its first foreign flight in the post-coronavirus period on Thursday.

‘Iran Air’ on Monday revealed its flights from Tehran to Amsterdam are scheduled to be launched every Thursday.

With the necessary follow-ups made with the Dutch Airline and issuance of flight license, Iran Air will resume its scheduled flights to Amsterdam Airport by observing health protocols.

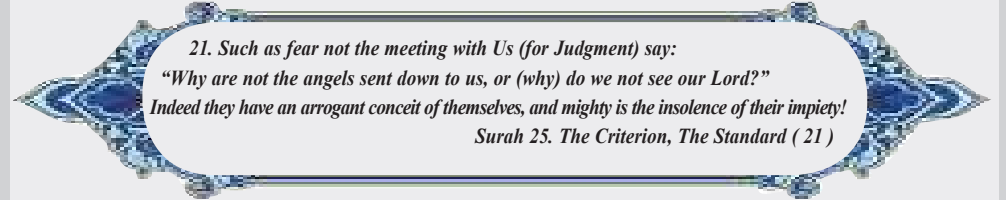
These flights will be operated every Thursday from Imam Khomeini International Airport [IKIA] to Amsterdam Airport through winning licenses from the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, Iranian Civil Aviation Organization [ICAO] in full compliance with the health protocols.

For further information, applicants may get in touch with the airline via phone (+982146621888) or refer to its offices in Tehran and Amsterdam for booking tickets.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	13:00
■ Evening (Maghreb)	20:20
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	04:22
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:00



Iran-Syria Trade To Hit \$1b by 2020

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Chairman of Iran-Syria Joint Chamber of Commerce Keyvan Kashefi believes by some plans on the agenda, the trade volume between Iran and Syria could rise to \$1b by 2022.

On the outlook of trade between Iran and Syria, Kashefi said he predicts a good outlook for bilateral trade between Iran and Syria especially after the launch of the joint chamber of commerce. He added with the plans on the agenda, he hopes the current trade volume to touch \$1b by 2020.

He added in the past 18 months, all economic activities of the private sector of Iran with Syria were done in the form of economic committee but today and because of the rise in the number of economic transactions with Syria, the joint chamber of commerce has been launched.

He noted that Syria will be one of Iran's main export destinations in near future because both countries have many commonalities which can boost the trade ties.

Kashefi reiterated that Syria is eager to expand economic interactions with Iran and Iran should take advantage of this opportunity.

He pointed to the plans for increasing economic relations with Syria, adding that although Iranian companies in the past one and half a years have participated in some exhibitions in Syria and have put on this play their achievements, the chamber has plans for more presence of Iranian exhibitions in Syria.



Kashefi added that the chamber is to hold an exhibition on Iran's capabilities in Syria to introduce Iranian companies to Syria's market.

He also said the chamber has plans for exchange of economic delegations, comprised of economic activists from private sectors of both states.

Kashefi noted that soon the trade center of Iranians will be launched in Syria and a building has been bought in Damascus where Iranian companies can be placed.

He said the chamber is to allocate two floors of the building to specialized exhibitions and auxiliary services.

He also said launching a credit line with Syria for easing the trade is necessary and talks are underway, adding that it needs Iran's Central Bank's cooperation.

Kashefi noted that Syria once was one of the biggest producers but due to the war, it is now in reconstruction era and it is good opportunity for Iranians to cooperate in reconstruction of the country.

He admitted that the most important issue for trade with Syria is the route of transit, adding that currently marine route is the best option for transshipment of goods.

On the land transport, he said there are several problems and to resolve them, it needs serious cooperation of Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Banking Transfer Problem Affected Iran-Italy Trade



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Chairman of Iran-Italy Joint Chamber of Commerce Ahmad Pourfallah says the problem and restrictions in banking transfer has affected the bilateral trade between Iran and Italy, adding that by resolving the problem, the trade can return to the past good days.

He said Iran and Italy as trade partners have had good relations for years and the statistics show that in bilateral trade, all records have always been in favor of Iran. He further said that Italy's government and economic activists have always supported Iran in the worst international condition and they have had regular and good ties with Iran in recent years.

Pourfallah said that banking transfer is one of the important issues for trade between both states as it has led to a fall in trade since last year. He added that if this problem is resolved, both countries can revive the good trade records of the past years.

He added that plan for bartering goods is one of the major programs on the agenda of the chamber, expressing hope it would bear fruit very soon.

He then highlighted some programs of the chamber regarding the outbreak of Coronavirus.

Pourfallah said the outbreak of Coronavirus was a warning for immunizing the economic climate for the future regarding such mishaps.

He emphasized that he believes the international relations should be stronger and Iran should strengthen its international relations because no government can success by itself.

KSC Inaugurates 3 Projects Worth 300b Rials

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Khorasan Steel Company inaugurated three projects worth 300b rials in presence of deputy governor general of Khorasan Razavi Province and governor of Neishaboor.

During the ceremony, two health-centered and one specialized and technical unit were inaugurated.

According to reports, the laboratory of the pelletizing unit with investment of 1.5m euros was one of the projects which were launched in present of the esteemed guests.

Addressing the ceremony, the CEO of Khorasan Steel Company Mr. Kasra Ghafoori said that pelletizing plant is the first ring of the steel chain in the company and the quality of inputs and outputs of this unit has direct impact on the final quality of product and production output of the company.

He noted that equipping and launching this laboratory cost over 1.5m euro, adding that enforcing the quality supervision and laboratory control on the input raw material can guarantee the quality of products in the whole production line.

Ghafoori added that the company also launched two health-centered projects for the welfare and refreshment of the staff. Launching a cloakroom and showers with good standards for 340 people was one of these two projects.

He further said quality-park was the other project which was inaugurated, adding that the company attaches importance to green space as the company enjoys the best standards for green space per capita.



BASCO Sets a New Record in Sponge Iron Production

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The CEO of Baft Steel Complex Company (BASCO) says the amount of produced sponge iron in the company in last Iranian calendar year hit 553,000 tons which was above the defined standards and it was a record.

Mr. Sorena Zamanian said that sponge iron production in the company has started in the direct reduction plant of the company since April, 2019.

He said according to the Midrex standards, the amount of sponge iron production in the first year of the plant should be 60 percent of its nominal production capacity but the direct reduction unit of BASCO



produced 553,000 tons of sponge iron instead of 480,000 tons.

He reiterated that the company produced this amount of sponge iron while the company had no significant production for three months because of shortage of pellet (the raw material for sponge iron).

Zamanian said that BASCO has created 250 direct jobs and it has created indirect jobs 8 times more than its direct jobs.

Baft Steel project is one of the seven major steel projects in Kerman Province. The direct reduction unit of the company came on stream in last Iranian calendar year.

Iran Receiving Orders for COVID-19 Test Kits From 8 Countries

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian test kits used to determine the rate of immunity against the new coronavirus are becoming increasingly popular as several more countries are placing bulk orders for the diagnostic tools, says a senior Iranian official.

Mehdi Qalenoee, a deputy head of the Iranian presidency's office for scientific affairs, said on Sunday that Iranian companies are set to export serological test kits to eight more countries after a first successful shipment was made to Germany earlier this week.

Qalenoee said export of two types of coronavirus test kits to the Philippines and Pakistan was waiting for approval from the local authorities after Iranian companies supplying the diagnostic tools sent sample kits to laboratories in those countries.

He said exports to India, Nigeria and Armenia will begin once travel restrictions over the new coronavirus are eased.

The official said Qatar, Georgia and Syria will soon be included in the list of export destination for the Iranian test kits.

The announcement comes several days after Iran sent a first batch of serological test kits to Germany, a country where authorities are trying to deploy the tests on a massive scale to detect the rate of immunity against COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

Iranian authorities say exports of diagnostic applications from Iran to other countries is a sign of success for home-grown efforts to fight the pandemic.

Iran has been hailed for its robust response to the disease as many governments and organizations keep criticizing the United States for refusing to lift its sanctions to allow the country access medical supplies and vital equipment needed to confront the virus.



Presenting of an innovative product "My Holoo"

Another golden leaf from the largest software Family in the country in the field of guilds



With nearly three decades of successful experience in mechanizing the country's guilds, in order to provide up-to-date services and create more added value for the 700,000-strong family of its customers, Torfeh Negar Group of Companies recently presented new online services on the Internet.

These services are in the form of a smart user interface with the brand name "My Holoo" which allows users to provide online support services and countless other services such as building a professional site for any business and sales in the shortest time. Their products also have access to online ordering and payment procedures. The unveiling of this product, like the product itself, had an innovative aspect, because all the mechanisms provided a professional unveiling and it was held live on the Holooland page via Instagram in the context of social and virtual media. The unveiling of the MyHoloo product was a combination of the creativity of Holoo Software Engineering Company in holding ceremonies and matching business activities with the current conditions of the society in order to observe the social distance plan and fight against COVID19.

In this program, Holoo Software Engineering Company officially invited organizations, companies and individuals with professional and industrial knowledge, entrepreneurship and economic celebrities, as well as business experts, who participated in this program with a large number of visitors.

The program was held in three main sections in two hours. In the first part of the ceremony, Dr. Shahram Shakoori, Founder and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Torfeh Negar Group, spoke and announced the secrets of his success, the key to which is the commitment of the collection to customers and subscribers of the collection in these three decades. Finally, he said that the result of this commitment and thousands of hours of managerial and expert work is another new and creative service to the large family of guilds in the country, and its goal is to build the capacity of the E-commerce and other facilities for more than two hundred and fifty classes in the field of guilds.

Then, the Vice President of Production of Torfeh Negar spoke about online Holoo services and products and the discussion of Holoo's unwavering support for businesses, especially with the production of MyHoloo smart product.

After that, some of the managers of the start-ups under Torfeh Negar subsidiary retold their roadmap and how these companies designed and planned to create added value for Holoo customers. In the third part of this Instagram live, MyHoloo smart user interface was unveiled as one of the most important services of this collection, and the draw of the Instagram competitions was held after that.

New Record Set At Steel Unit of MSC

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Shahid Kharrazi Steel Unit in Mobarakeh Steel Company (MSC) set a new record for sponge iron production as the unit produced 8815 tons in the year of surge in production.

Manager of Shahid Kharrazi Steel Unit of Mobarakeh Steel Company Mr. Dariush Rashid announced the new achievement of the plant, saying that the company improved its previous record of daily production of 8640 tons of sponge iron which had been set in the first month of the current year and it set a new record by producing 8815 tons.

He added that the achievement is the result of strong determination and endeavors of the unit's personnel for more participation in increasing the production.

He expressed hope that with the planning of the management and endeavors of the staff, the steel unit of Mobarakeh Steel Company would have a brilliant record in the current year.

UN Peacekeepers Killed in Mali

PARIS (AFP) - Three UN troops were killed and four more wounded when their convoy hit a roadside bomb early Sunday, officials said, in the latest violence to hit the war-torn West African state.

Chadian peacekeepers were on a routine patrol in Aguelhok commune in the north of the country, the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, known as MINUSMA, said in a statement.

Three soldiers were killed and four were seriously wounded in the blast, it added.

"We will have to make every effort to identify and apprehend those responsible for these terrorist acts so that they can be brought to justice," said MINUSMA mission head Mahamat Saleh Annadif.



Lebanon Extends Curfew Amid Spike in Coronavirus Cases

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Lebanon extended a night curfew on Sunday amid a rise in the number of coronavirus infections in the country.

In a statement, Interior Minister Mohamed Fahmi said the curfew will start from 7:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. local time (1600-0200 GMT).

The move came as Lebanese health authorities confirmed 36 new virus infections in the country on Sunday, taking the total cases to 845.

So far, 26 people have died from the disease.



Hundreds Stage Anti-Gov't Protests in Baghdad



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Hundreds of Iraqis have gathered in central Baghdad for fresh anti-government protests demanding better living conditions and an overhaul of the country's political system, just days after the formation of a new government.

The gathering in Tahrir Square on Sunday came after Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the country's new prime minister, promised to release demonstrators arrested during the mass protests that erupted in October last year.

Following his first cabinet meeting, al-Kadhimi on Saturday also pledged justice and compensation to relatives of more than 550 people killed since the start of the popular demonstrations. The prime minister was Iraq's spy chief when the protests - the bloodiest in Iraq's recent history - broke out, and his pledges came as calls spread on social media for renewed demonstrations on Sunday.

Sunday's protests stretched to other areas, including Iraq's southern city of al-Nasriya.

Al Jazeera's Simona Foltyn, reporting from central Baghdad, said the gathering was the "most significant" since March 17, when a curfew was imposed in an attempt to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

"Since then, Tahrir Square has been virtually empty, with a few dozen people remaining in the tents that have been set up here," she said. Foltyn reported that "a few hundred people" had gathered in Tahrir Square as of 10:00 GMT, with some manning the barricades on top of Republican Bridge.

"It's pretty small compared to what we saw in the early days of the protests ... but people are still flocking to Tahrir Square so the numbers may rise throughout the day," she added.

The formation of the new government came some six months after former Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, who has been leading a caretaker administration, resigned in the face of the mass protests calling for the departure of Iraq's ruling elite accused of driving the country into dysfunction and economic ruin. The battle over government portfolios since Abdul Mahdi's resignation in November last year prevented two previous nominees for prime minister from forming a cabinet and deepening the country's political crisis.

To earn a vote of confidence in Parliament, al-Kadhimi had to appease the main political parties by letting them pick ministers in his cabinet - an informal yet deeply entrenched power-sharing system known as apportionment.

"Protesters still have demands that go well beyond the appointment of a new prime minister," Foltyn said.

"They still demand a complete overhaul of the political system and they say that the political parties that are responsible for the failures of the past government are still controlling Parliament."

Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi novelist, believes that the protests will continue, mainly because al-Khadhimi is the "product of the very same system" that the protestors have been rallying against.

"While releasing the detainees is good, these gestures and any other cosmetic changes are not going to fool the protesters nor quell the protests," Antoon told Al Jazeera.

"The protests are against decades of corruption and criminality and against a political class beholden to foreign influence and al-Kadhimi is an insider," he said.

In his speech, al-Kadhimi also promised that all pensions would be paid out in the coming days, rescinding a decision taken by the previous government just before it stepped down that blocked all state spending, including civil servants' salaries and pension payments - relied on by one in five Iraqis.

"The announcements were quite bold for his first cabinet meeting," Foltyn said. "It was clear that al-Khadhimi was wasting no time to try to mend the rifts between the demonstrators and the government."

Eleven Captured for Failed Maritime Invasion of Venezuela

CARACAS (AFP) - Eleven alleged "terrorists" were arrested on Sunday in connection with the failed maritime "invasion" of Venezuela, authorities said, bringing the total captured to more than 40.

"Captured today #10May 2020, another three terrorist mercenaries in Colonia Tovar," about an hour from Caracas, tweeted armed forces chief Admiral Remigio Ceballos.

Hours later, state television reported that military personnel had captured an additional eight "terrorists" in the northern coastal state of Vargas.

The arrests came after another three alleged "mercenaries" were arrested Saturday, according to Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

"We have been meticulously looking for all those involved and we are going to capture them all," Maduro announced during a television address.



Hong Kong Leader Vows Education Overhaul After Protests

HONG KONG (AFP) - Hong Kong's pro-Beijing leader on Monday vowed to overhaul the city's education system, arguing its liberal studies curriculum helped fuel last year's violent pro-democracy protests.

Chief Executive Carrie Lam described the current secondary school program as a "chicken coop without a roof" and said her government would soon unveil their plans.

"In terms of handling the subject of liberal studies in the future, we will definitely make things clear to the public within this year," she told the pro-government Ta Kung Pao newspaper in an interview published Monday.

Her comments are likely to inflame those Hong Kongers who fear Beijing is chipping away at the freedoms that make the city a major international draw as political tensions rise once more.

With the backing of Beijing, Hong Kong's government is pushing ahead with a bill that outlaws insulting China's national anthem and leading pro-establishment figures are lobbying for an anti-secession law.

The government says new legislation is needed to curb snowballing support -- especially among younger Hong Kongers -- for democracy and greater autonomy from China.

Opponents say the laws will cut back on free speech and do little to heal the city's festering divides. Hong Kong has some of Asia's best schools and universities with academic freedoms unseen in mainland China.

Liberal studies was introduced in 2009 as a way to foster critical thinking with schools allowed to choose how they teach it.

But it has become a bete noire for Chinese state media and pro-Beijing politicians who have called for more patriotic education.

In Monday's interview, Lam said she felt the classes allowed teachers to push their political biases and that greater oversight by the government was now needed.

Hong Kong was convulsed by seven straight months of often-violent youth-led pro-democracy protests last year, with millions hitting the streets.

More Than 20 Killed in Attacks in West of Niger

TILLABERI (Dispatches) - Bandits riding motorbikes killed 20 villagers in a string of attacks in Niger's western region of Tillaberi, the governor there told AFP on Sunday.

An unknown number of "armed bandits" attacked three villages on Sunday at around 5:30 pm local time (1630 GMT), said governor Tidjani Ibrahim Katiella.

He said that the assailants "pillaged shops" and looted cereal as well as cattle before heading off towards the north.

One local source named villages targeted as Gadabo, Zibane Koira-Zeno and Zibane-Tegui, all administered by Anzourou, a commune some 50 kilometres (30 miles) from Tillaberi city, the main town in western Niger and some 100 kilometres from the border with Mali.

Last January, Niger authorities restricted motorcycle traffic by day as well as night in a bid to crack down on jihadists operating in the region.

They also closed down a number of food markets they said were "supplying terrorists with fuel and cereals," according to the governor.

The government recently extended a state of

emergency in the region first brought in in 2017.

According to official statistics, 174 soldiers have been killed in three attacks in the zone since last December at Chingodiar, where 89 were killed on January 8, Inates (71 dead on December 10) and Sanam (14 dead on December 24.)

The Islamic State claimed all three attacks.

In March, Malian and Niger soldiers joined forces with French forces in the area for an operation which mobilised around 5,000 troops under the ongoing Operation Barkhane deployment.

French general staff credited the counter-terrorism operation with eliminating "a large number of terrorists".

The French-led Operation Barkhane is leading counter-terror operations across Sahel states Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres warned last week that jihadist groups in the Sahel are exploiting the coronavirus pandemic to step up attacks, according to documents seen by AFP.

Guterres urged better coordination among anti-jihadist forces fighting an array of armed groups.



France, Spain Ease Virus Lockdowns But UK Wary

PARIS (Dispatches) - Millions of people in France and Spain were set to embrace a relaxation of stay-at-home rules on Monday, but Britain extended its lockdown as countries plot their way tentatively through the coronavirus crisis.

Fears of a second wave of the pandemic, which has killed more than 280,000 people worldwide and wrecked the global economy, stalked much of Europe and the world. With millions out of work and economies flatlining -- including in the United States, where 20 million people lost their jobs in April -- governments are desperate to reopen, but most are choosing a gradual approach.

In France, people from Monday morning were able to walk outside without filling in a permit for the first time in nearly eight weeks, teachers will start to return to primary schools, and some shops -- including hair salons -- will reopen.

Bars, restaurants, theatres and cinemas will, however, remain closed. Spaniards outside of urban hotspots such as Madrid and Barcelona -- which remain under lockdown -- made plans to meet friends and family in bars and restaurants that have outdoor spaces.

But Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it was too soon for Britain to do the same. Almost seven weeks after a nationwide stay-at-home order was put in place, more than 31,800 have died during the outbreak in Britain -- the worst toll in Europe and second only to the United States.

Johnson, who himself spent a week in hospital with COVID-19, said on Sunday the measures had come "at a colossal cost to our way of life" but added it would be "madness" to squander the progress by moving too soon.

"This is not the time simply to end the lockdown this week," the 55-year-old said, but he unveiled a "conditional plan" to ease the measures in England in the months ahead.

Some European officials have been emboldened by declining death rates: France's toll of 70 on Sunday was its lowest since early April, and Spain's daily fatalities have dropped below 200.

But the risk of a second wave was underscored by a resurgence in South Korea.

Although widely praised for its handling of its initial outbreak, the country has been forced to shut all bars and clubs in the capital Seoul after a cluster of infections.





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J, L.balcony
yard, & pkg
Fully Furn

Shanon (adviser)

Jordan Villa (\$4000)
1000sq.m
5bdrs, S/p
S, J, balcony
yard, & pkg
Fully Furn

Parsian

(Sa'adat abad)
(\$1700)
180sq.m, 3bdrs
balcony, & F.F

Niavaran Apts
(\$2200) 2bdrs, S/p, F.F
(\$2500) 3bdrs, S/p, F.F
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UK Wants to Slowly, Cautiously Ease Lockdown to Restart Economy

LONDON (Reuters) - The British government wants to slowly and cautiously restart the economy, housing minister Robert Jenrick said on Sunday ahead of a televised address from the prime minister to set out plans to begin easing the coronavirus lockdown measures.

It has been nearly seven weeks since Boris Johnson asked Britons to stay at home to help prevent the spread of the virus, all but shutting down the economy.

"The message ... of staying at home now does need to be updated, we need to have a broader message because we want to slowly and cautiously restart the economy and the country," Jenrick told Sky News.



French, Dutch Join Forces to Urge EU to Show Teeth on Trade

PARIS (Reuters) - France and the Netherlands have joined forces to urge the European Union to enforce environmental and labor standards more forcefully with countries the bloc signs trade deals with, according to a document seen by Reuters.

The initiative comes as the EU tries to negotiate a new trade deal with Britain, which formally left the bloc on Jan. 31, amid concerns that it might seek to undercut EU labor and environmental standards to boost its competitiveness.

The involvement of the traditionally strongly pro-free trade Dutch underscores a shift in European thinking on the need to protect domestic industry and jobs, a French diplomat said, as the coronavirus pandemic batters the global economy. A more assertive China and U.S. President Donald Trump's more protectionist 'America-First' agenda have also helped to reshape European attitudes towards free trade.

In their joint proposal sent to the other 25 EU member states, the French and Dutch trade ministers urge the European Commission to be ready to raise tariffs against trade partners that fail to meet their commitments on sustainable development.

"Trade policy instruments can provide additional leverage to the implementation of international environmental and labor standards," the document said.

The EU should link tariff reductions "where relevant" to the effective implementation of trade and sustainable development provisions and be willing to take action when those provisions are breached, it added.

The European Commission, which handles trade policy on behalf of EU member states, has yet to give a formal response to the joint proposals, which the French and Dutch want applied to deals under negotiation and to updates of existing trade pacts.

The document urges the Commission to inform member states more regularly on the impact that trade deals have on European jobs and domestic industries. It also says a commitment to the Paris Agreement on climate change must be a pre-requisite for any trade pact. Trump has decided to ditch the climate pact.

France has long favored a more protectionist stance on trade. As early as his first EU summit in 2017, President Emmanuel Macron said attracting foreign investment should not mean exposing Europe to "the disorder of globalization", and he cautioned the EU against being too "naïve" in global trade.

French officials say the coronavirus pandemic has further exposed the dangers of relying too much on competitors such as China for critical supplies and contributed to an increased wariness among EU nations such as the Netherlands and the Nordics that have long supported unrestricted free trade.

"Countries for which this agenda was seen as very French a few months ago are now shifting," a French diplomatic source told Reuters. "There's a sort of wake-up call in Europe."

The European Commission did not immediately reply to a request for comment on Sunday. The Franco-Dutch document was first reported by the Financial Times.

Saudi Aramco Seeking to Review Price of SABIC Deal

DUBAI (Reuters) - Saudi Aramco is looking to restructure its deal to acquire a controlling stake in petrochemicals maker SABIC after a more than 40% drop in SABIC's value following a slump in oil prices in coronavirus pandemic, two sources told Reuters.

Aramco last year agreed to buy a 70% stake in Saudi Basic Industries Corp from the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the kingdom's wealth fund, for \$69.1 billion, in one of the biggest deals in the global chemical industry. The transaction was priced at 123.39 riyal (26.49 pounds) per SABIC share, when the deal was announced in March 2019, but its shares are currently trading at around 70 riyals, as an oil price crash and the coronavirus pandemic pushed SABIC into a second straight quarterly loss in the first quarter.

SABIC's total market value now is about \$56.5 billion, which would make the value of Aramco's planned stake around \$40 billion. In theory, Aramco has to pay about \$75 billion in dividends to the Saudi government after its initial public offering last year but analysts say its free cash flow is not expected to cover that amount.

Aramco's chairman and head of the PIF, Yasir al-Rumayyan, is leading the talks for Aramco and purchase price will be reviewed, according to one of the sources with direct knowledge of the matter. Another source familiar with the deal said that Aramco wanted to reduce the burden on its balance sheet. PIF is also looking to extend a \$10 billion bridge loan signed with 10 banks in October and linked to the acquisition by Aramco of its stake in SABIC, one of the two sources and a separate source said. The loan was aimed at providing PIF with short-term funding for new investments and would have been repaid after the sale of SABIC is completed, the PIF said last year. A SABIC spokesperson said purchase of SABIC shares is a matter between the PIF and Saudi Aramco.

Aramco and the PIF did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment. SABIC CEO Yousef al-Benyani told a virtual news briefing last week that Aramco has committed to complete the acquisition of a controlling stake in SABIC by the second quarter and he did not see anything that changes this timeline.



China Central Bank Signals More Policy Measures to Support Economy

BEIJING (Reuters) - China's central bank said on Sunday it will step up counter-cyclical adjustments to support the economy and make monetary policy more flexible to fend off financial risks.

The first-quarter monetary policy implementation report from the People's Bank of China (PBOC) did not repeat the central bank's long-standing vow to refrain from "flood-like" stimulus to support growth, reinforcing signs of more policy measures.

China's long-term stable economic trend remains unchanged, despite the coronavirus outbreak, the central bank said. "But at present, challenges faced by China's economic development are unprecedented, we must fully consider difficulties, risks and uncertainties," it said. The bank said it will keep liquidity ample, using both aggregate and structural policy measures, and continue to deepen interest rate reforms to help lower borrowing costs and allocate financial resources more efficiently in the economy.

The central bank will also support the real economy, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, it said. "We should properly handle the relationship between stabilizing growth, ensuring employment, adjusting structure, preventing risks and controlling inflation," the PBOC said.

China's economy contracted 6.8% in the first quarter from a year earlier, shrinking for the first time since at least 1992, as the coronavirus outbreak paralysed production and spending, raising pressure on authorities to do more to stop mounting job losses. The PBOC has already rolled out a raft of easing steps since early February, including cuts in reserve requirements and lending rates and targeted lending support for virus-hit firms.

The central bank will continue to deepen the reform of the loan prime rate (LPR) regime and improve the monetary policy transmission mechanism to help lower borrowing costs, it said.

Swiss National Bank Battling Enormous Pressure On Safe-Haven Franc

ZURICH (Reuters) - The Swiss National Bank has no alternative to its ultra-expansive monetary policy, with the coronavirus crisis heaping "enormous" appreciation pressure on the safe-haven Swiss franc, SNB Chairman Thomas Jordan said in newspaper interviews.

The SNB was not happy about the negative interest rate of minus 0.75% it charges banks who park money with it overnight, Jordan told the SonntagsZeitung paper.

It would lift the rates — the lowest in the world — as soon as circumstances allowed, he said, although this was currently impossible.

"We unfortunately have no choice but to maintain the negative interest rate," said Jordan. "Without it, we would be in a much more difficult situation now."

"The Swiss franc would be massively more attractive and the financing conditions for the Swiss economy would be much worse," he added. "The negative interest is necessary at the moment to avert major damage to Switzerland."

The SNB was also stepping up foreign currency purchases to dampen the rise of the franc, Jordan said. Sight deposits at the central bank, a proxy for SNB interventions, have risen by nearly 77 billion Swiss francs (£63.94 billion) this year, while the franc has risen to its highest level against the euro EURCHF= since July 2015. "We have emphasized several times ... we are active in the foreign exchange markets to reduce the pressure on the Swiss franc," Jordan told the paper.

"We deliberately never report our transactions in detail, but I would like to emphasise that we are making a substantial commitment," he said.

All this was necessary to prevent the franc from strengthening, hurting Switzerland's export-orientated economy and triggering deflation.

"The appreciation on the franc as a safe haven has become enormous," Jordan said. "Without the SNB's monetary policy we would see a completely different franc exchange rate in the current situation."

In a separate interview with the Tribune de Geneve paper, Jordan was asked whether the SNB was trying to keep the euro from falling below 1.05 to the franc.

"We do not defend a specific course against the euro. To carry out its mandate and in its assessment, the SNB takes into account the situation for all currencies," he said.

Jordan told the papers restrictions on public life imposed by the Swiss government to try to curb the spread of COVID-19 were limiting Swiss economic activity to 70-80% of normal levels at an economic cost of 11-17 billion francs per month.

Asked by Tribune de Geneve if Swiss rates could go even more negative, he said: "We still have room to manoeuvre if necessary, but today we are focusing on interventions on the foreign exchange market to limit the pressure on the franc."

He said the SNB had no plans at this stage to increase its gold holdings of 1,040 tons.



Global Response to COVID-19 Must Address Rights and Needs of Women and Girls



By: Dr Natalia Kanem, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Mark Lowcock, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)



In a week in which people in some parts of the world have been given cause for optimism that they have passed the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how the extraordinary actions of individuals can change the trajectory for a whole nation.

Retired doctors putting themselves back on the front line, nurses making their own face masks so they can treat the sick, parents separated from their children so they can care for people suffering from the virus.

More often than not, these are women. Globally, women make up 70 per cent of the health workforce. They also have the majority of caregiving roles in homes and in communities. Women do this essential work in spite of obstacles and inequalities.

That's why our updated Global Humanitarian Response Plan to fight coronavirus, published on 7 May, has women at its heart. We know from experience that investing in women and girls produces dividends for all. We see that again with COVID-19.

In hospitals and in homes, women are on the frontline in this fight against COVID-19. We know local actions translate into global gains. If there is one thing we have learned about this pandemic, it's that the world is in this together and we can only defeat it if we act as one.

According to the International Labour Organization, women perform 76 per cent of the total hours of unpaid care work globally. They will carry more of the weight of caring for the sick and helping to stem the spread of the virus.

We must equip women with what they need. Let's enable them to stay safe and supported. It's the right thing to do but also the smart thing to do so they can continue to save and improve lives.

As health systems become stretched, many people with COVID-19 will need to be cared for at home. This will add to women's workload, and put them at greater risk of becoming infected.

And as the world fights the COVID-19 pandemic, we know we have another epidemic to overcome – the violence perpetrated against women, and the inequalities that leave them more likely to be living in poverty and without access to essential services.

We know lockdowns and quarantines are essential to suppressing COVID-19. Yet they can trap women with abusive partners. Over the last few weeks, there has been a dramatic jump in reported incidences of domestic violence in many countries. In some countries, the number of women calling support services has doubled.

Humanitarian settings already stressed by years of war and poverty will not be any different, except that often there are few places to report the abuse or to seek shelter so that women and their children can stay safe.

If we are serious about defeating this virus, we must promote and protect the health and rights of women, for their own well-being and so that they can continue to promote and protect the health of others.

That is why the UN's global humanitarian response plan to fight COVID-19 sets out specific actions to achieve this in the most vulnerable settings.

This global plan is already helping install hand-washing facilities that are safe for women and girls to access; deliver vital medical equipment and supplies, including to address women's health; and getting aid workers and supplies to where they are needed most.

The plan recognizes the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls. It also recognizes their power to defeat the virus. UNFPA will use resources from the appeal to prioritize the needs of women and girls – including working with women's groups on the ground to create safe spaces.

All this is possible because of the generosity of donors. Much more is needed. We count on donors to continue funding the COVID-19 humanitarian response plan while sustaining support for existing humanitarian and refugee response plans.

And we urge all governments to make the prevention and redress of violence against women a key part of their national response plans for COVID-19.

Every day, women are overcoming obstacles and inequalities to treat and care for those infected with the virus, working hard to contain the virus, and helping their families and communities protect themselves.

We owe it to these women to give them the tools and services they need, and the justice and equality that is their right – in hospitals, in homes, and in their communities.

We are determined to do everything we can to fight this deadly virus, and that means addressing the inequalities that will otherwise hold all of us back.

Iran Unearths 64.2m Tons Of Iron Ore a Year

TEHRAN (IRNA)- The statistics published by Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization's (IMIDRO) shows that Iran's 10 big mines and mining industries unearthed 64.2 million tons of iron ore in the previous Iranian yeas (ended on March 20).

The statistics show that the 10 iron producers' excavation

reached 64,274,983 tons. Also production of iron ore concentrate reached 33,008,275 tons last year.

According to the same statistics, Gohar Zamin excavated 17,247,459 tons of iron ore (26.8% of the total) and Golhohar produced 16,011,720 tons of concentrate iron ore (48.5% of total) to be the top producers.



Damascus Further Rations Subsidized Petrol

DAMASCUS (AFP) - Syria's government Sunday banned cars with large engines from receiving subsidized petrol in the latest move to curb a hydrocarbon crisis in the war-torn country the government blames on sanctions.

Heating fuel, petrol and cooking gas have been in short supply over the past two years in government-held areas, with Damascus ordering a series of caps on consumption to try to cope.

Oil and Mineral Resources Minister Ali Ghanem said there would be no more subsidized fuel for cars with engines larger than 2,000 cc as of Sunday.

Individuals or companies with more than one vehicle were also no longer allowed to benefit from the subsidies. Before these measures, any car owner was entitled to 100 liters of subsidized petrol per month.

With state help, a 20-litre tank refill used to cost 5,000 Syrian pounds (around \$7).

Now those hit by the new rations will have to pay 9,000 Syrian pounds (around \$12) for the same volume. Ghanem said the measure "lifted subsidies for only nine percent" of cars, according to state news agency SANA.

"Oil derivatives and crude oil supplied to Syria do not just entail international oil prices, but also the cost of transport and financial transactions as a result of the harsh economic measures" imposed on the government, he said.

Damascus has repeatedly blamed the fuel crisis on Western sanctions.

The latest petrol rationing has sparked criticism in the streets and online.

Actress Shukran Murtaja wrote on Facebook: "Can I possibly spend more on my car than on my home? I've decided to sell it."

Among dozens who commented on the post, Rami Obeido wrote: "What's happening is efforts to bring money into state coffers from the pocket of the ordinary citizen."



Ghanem has said Syria needs 146,000 barrels of crude oil per day, whereas it produces just 24,000 locally.

Syria used to produce almost 400,000 barrels per day before civil war broke out in 2011.

But nine years of conflict have ravaged production, and seen US-backed Kurdish-led forces seize control of the largest oil fields in the country.

Syria is in the grips of a severe economic crisis that has seen the value of the local currency plummet to record lows on the black market, and food prices double in a year, according to the World Food Program.

S. Korea's Per Capita National Debt Exceeds 14m Won



SEJONG (Dispatches) - South Korea's per capita national debt has surpassed 14 million won (US\$11,500) and is expected to go up due to a spending hike meant to mitigate the economic fallout from the coronavirus outbreak, data showed Sunday.

The data posted on the website of the National Assembly Budget Office showed that the per capita national debt stood at 14.83 million won as of Saturday. In comparison, it was 2.37 million won in 2000.

The office said that South Korea's national debt stood at 769.18 trillion won as of Saturday, a sharp increase from 111 trillion won in 2000.

South Korea's per capita national debt could rise this year as the government is pushing for a third extra budget worth 30 trillion won in the latest attempt to minimize the economic fallout from the spread of COVID-19.

Last month, the National Assembly approved a 12.2 trillion-won extra budget to fund emergency handouts for households to cope with the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak.

It is the second extra budget related to the fallout from the virus, following an 11.7 trillion-won one created in March.

South Korea's debt-to-GDP ratio could rise to 44.4 percent this year if the third extra budget and possible zero economic growth this year are taken into account.

In 2019, South Korea forecast that its debt-to-GDP ratio could come to 39.8 percent in 2020 before rising to 42.1 percent in 2021.

South Korea's economy contracted 1.4 percent on-quarter in the first quarter of this year, marking the sharpest quarterly contraction since the fourth quarter of 2008, when the nation's economy sank 3.3 percent on-quarter.

The International Monetary Fund has predicted that South Korea's economy will shrink 1.2 percent this year as the global economy is expected to have its worst year since the Great Depression of the 1930s over the pandemic.

Sweden Admits Failure to Protect Elderly in Care Homes

STOCKHOLM (AFP) - Bjorn Branngard's mother died in a Stockholm nursing home where five of the eight people in her section and more than a third of residents have so far succumbed to the new coronavirus.

"They didn't have time to take care of my mother," he told AFP.

Her coronavirus test came back negative two days after her death, but Branngard, who claims she died of neglect, says the nursing home staff lacked protective gear and were spreading the virus around the home.

Sweden, whose softer approach to the coronavirus has garnered international attention, admits it has failed to adequately protect the elderly, with around half of COVID-19 deaths occurring among nursing home residents.

Reports have flooded Swedish media in recent weeks of care home staff continuing to work despite a lack of protective gear.

Others have refused to work and workers are encouraged to stay home even with mild symptoms, leaving homes short-staffed.

Other personnel have admitted going to work despite exhibiting symptoms of the virus, potentially infecting residents, while some elderly have reportedly been infected while admitted to hospital for other treatments and then sent back to care homes where they unwittingly spread the disease.

Sweden has reported 3,220 deaths from the virus as of Saturday. The country said early on that shielding those 70 and older was its top priority.

Yet 90 percent of those who had died as of April 28 were over the age of 70. Half were nursing home residents, and another quarter were receiving care at home, statistics from the Swedish Board of Health and Welfare show.



"We failed to protect our elderly. That's really serious, and a failure for society as a whole. We have to learn from this, we're not done with this pandemic yet," Health and Social Affairs Minister Lena Hallengren told Swedish Television recently.

Unlike many European

countries, Sweden has kept its primary schools open as well as bars and restaurants, while urging people to respect social distancing and hygiene recommendations.

It did, however, ban visits to care homes on March 31.

Sweden's Nordic neighbors also introduced bans around the same time, but have recorded far fewer care home deaths.

But unlike in those countries, Swedish nursing homes are often large complexes with hundreds of residents.

They are only available to those in very poor health and unable to care for themselves, and residents are therefore "a very vulnerable group", according to Henrik Lysell of the Board of Health and Welfare.

Bjorn Branngard told AFP the personnel at his mother's home did not have proper protective gear.

"There was no protection. The personnel were going between different sections and spreading the virus."

In greater Stockholm, the epicentre of Sweden's virus spread, 55 percent of nursing homes have so far confirmed COVID-19 cases, according to Region Stockholm health authorities.

Kommunal, Sweden's largest union for municipal employees which includes many care workers, has meanwhile blamed precarious working conditions for the unfolding tragedy.

It said that in March, 40 percent of staff at Stockholm nursing homes were unskilled workers employed on short-term contracts, with hourly wages and no job security, while 23 percent were temps.

Italy Tightens Rules on Mafia Virus Prison Releases

ROME (AFP) - The Italian government has tightened up conditions for the release of mafia mobsters from jail due to coronavirus fears after an outcry over the scheme meant to protect them against infection.

A decree adopted overnight Sunday now requires that any release be reviewed every two weeks to ensure that it was fully justified and remains so.

Some 376 mafiosi and drug dealers have been moved from jails to house arrest since March and judges were examining release requests from 456 others, the Repubblica daily reported on Thursday.

Those freed include notorious Cosa Nostra boss Francesco Bonura, 78, and Franco Cataldo, 85, who was part of a gang which murdered the teenage son of a turncoat in 1996 and dissolved his body in acid.

The releases followed widespread riots in prisons in March by inmates fearful of catching the virus, which has killed some 30,000 people in Italy but there was much public unease given the seriousness of some of their crimes, prompting the government to backtrack.

"No one can think they can take advantage of the health emergency caused by the coronavirus to get out of prison," Justice Minister Alfonso Bonafede was quoted as saying by the AGI news agency on Sunday.

"There is a new rule now which is going to put things straight," Bonafede said.

Uncertainties May Cloud Ringgit's Outlook This Week

KUALA LUMPUR (dispatches) - Malaysia's upcoming economic data releases are less likely to have a major say on the local currency's performance this week, with extraneous factors set to continue holding court over the ringgit-U.S. dollar pair, said FXTM.

For the week ahead, the government is set to release March industrial production data followed by the announcement on the gross domestic product (GDP) for the first quarter (Q1).

FXTM expects the March industrial production data to show a negative 2.5 per cent year-on-year reading, while the Q1 GDP was also expected to have contracted.

It said the better-than-expected March external trade data, along with the widely-forecasted 50 basis point reduction to Malaysia's benchmark interest rate last week, did little to pull the ringgit away from the regional trend.

"Moving forward, the fog of political uncertainty however may further cloud the ringgit's outlook, amid a time of great global economic uncertainty," FXTM market analyst Han Tan said.

Tan noted that the 4.30 level had proven its worth as a support level for the dollar-ringgit over recent weeks.

The currency pair bounced off the psychological level to climb back above its 50-day moving average and reclaim the 4.33 handle last Friday. "Despite oil prices finding a surer footing over recent sessions, the ringgit ended the day and the week as Asia's worst-performer against the US dollar," Tan said. He said on the global stage, several events in the week ahead could trigger moves in the dollar and oil prices, two major drivers for the ringgit.

Iran, Afghanistan...

FROM PAGE 1

The governor of Gulran district Abdul Ghani Noori says out of 55 Afghan migrants who were forced into the river, 18 bodies have been recovered so far. He said six migrants were still missing while others survived.

Iranian officials, however, have dismissed the claims, saying the incident occurred inside Afghanistan's territory.

Nearly three million Afghan refugees are living and working in Iran. Tens of thousands returned to Afghanistan after the coronavirus pandemic, but as restrictions ease in Iran, many are again looking for jobs in the country.

U.S. Holds...

FROM PAGE 1

Raeisi explained that the sanctions were also preventing the country from using its own overseas' assets towards battling the virus and prohibiting foreign-based Iranians from sending aid to the Islamic Republic.

He, however, hailed Iran's performance in the face of the outbreak given that the country had earmarked only around \$1 billion for battling the virus, compared to the roughly \$114 billion that the United States has set aside for fighting the pandemic.

More than 284,100 people have died worldwide, including 6,685 in Iran, from the novel virus that first emerged in central China late last year.

The official said thanks to public observance of relevant health protocols, the closure of schools and universities as well as a reduction in urban and inter-urban travels, there has been a "favorable decline" in the disease curve.

So far, 90 percent of the population or around 78 million people have been screened for infection symptoms, he reported, adding that the deployment of as many as 400 outpatient diagnosis facilities has remarkably eased pressure on hospitals amid the outbreak.

Most provinces have put the spread's peak behind, he announced. In the southern Khuzestan Province, however, where health protocols have not been employed as efficiently as they should be, officials have begun reintroducing stringent measures aimed at fighting back the spread, Raeisi said.

According to the official, health protocols have been defined for as many as 130,000 professions, while authorities have either closed down or issued caveats for 210,000 businesses, which were found in violation of preventive measures.

Raeisi, meanwhile, warned that the outbreak could rebound and reverse the country's achievements if the public assumed that conditions had already normalized, adding there were still no "risk-free" areas across the country.

Envoy Refutes...

FROM PAGE 1

Soltani also referred to Iran-Venezuela cooperation on fight against the coronavirus saying, "The Iranian government's cooperation with the Venezuelan people has intensified in times of crisis, and our relations, especially in the area of trade cooperation, are stronger than ever. We are here to help the people of Venezuela."

Some reports claimed that Venezuelan government officials piled some 9 tons of gold -- an amount equal to about \$500 million -- on Tehran-bound jets in April as payment for Iran's assistance in reviving Venezuela's gasoline refineries. They said the shipments, which resulted in a sudden drop in Venezuela's published foreign reserve figures, leave the country with just \$6.3 billion in hard-currency assets, the lowest amount in three decades.

Envoy Refutes...

FROM PAGE 1

According to the latest reports on Monday, the number of people around the world confirmed to have the coronavirus has risen to 4,181,221, and 283,877 have lost their lives, while 1,493,500 people have recovered.

Meanwhile yesterday, Deputy Health Minister said, "A good screening was carried out in the country with the participation of the people, and within a month, 78 million people were screened, and in the second phase, this number has reached 32 million."

Alireza Raisi said that good cooperation of the nation to observe social distancing and personal hygiene has caused a declining trend in active COVID-19 infections.

Deputy Health Minister referred to the closure of educational departments, saying, "We witnessed unexpected days in the country, so that none of the people came out on the Iranian Nature's Day, and we saw the result of this action on the reduction of infectious by the coronavirus."

ATP Tour Chief Not Ruling out 2020 Return

MUMBAI (Reuters) - Despite the growing possibility of a total wipeout of professional tennis this year due to the coronavirus pandemic, ATP Tour chief Andrea Gaudenzi is refusing to give up on 2020 just yet.

The tennis season was suspended in early March due to the COVID-19 outbreak, and the hiatus will continue at least until mid-July with many countries in lockdown to contain the virus.

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Afghanistan's Shafaq Handed Six-Year Ban for Corruption

KABUL (Reuters) - Afghanistan wicketkeeper-batsman K Shafiqullah Shafaq has been hit with a six-year ban after he accepted four charges of breaching their Anti-Corruption Code, the country's cricket board (ACB) said on Sunday.

The charges relate to offences during the first edition of the Afghanistan Premier League (APL) T20 in 2018, where Shafaq played for the Nangarhar Leopards, and the 2019 Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), where he represented Sylhet Thunder.

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SPORTS

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Roland Garros Could Be Behind Closed Doors

PARIS (Dispatches) - French tennis chief Bernard Guidicelli admitted Sunday that Roland Garros, already controversially pushed back four months due to the coronavirus, could be staged behind closed doors.

Guidicelli, who said that the French federation (FFT) had "no regrets" over its unilateral decision to move the clay court Grand Slam from May 24-June 7 to September 20-October 4, insisted all options remain on the table.

"We haven't ruled out any option. Roland Garros is first and foremost a story of matches and players," he told the Journal du Dimanche.

"There is the tournament taking place in the stadium, and the tournament on TV screens.

"Millions of viewers around the world are waiting. Organizing it behind closed doors would allow part of the business model -- television rights (which account for more than a third of the tournament's revenues) -- to go ahead. This cannot be overlooked."

The spread of the coronavirus has halted all tennis since mid-March and will not resume until July 13 at the earliest.

Wimbledon has already been cancelled for the first time since the Second World War.

The U.S. Open, due to take place in New York from Aug 31-Sept 13, is also in question with a decision expected in mid-June.

Close to 500,000 fans regularly attend Roland Garros every year.

However, an indication as to the thinking around the 2020 edition came on Thursday when the FFT decided to reimburse all tickets bought for the original date of the tournament rather than transfer them.

Guidicelli admitted that the start of the rescheduled French Open could even be pushed back a further week to begin on September 27.

That would allow a two-week break between the U.S. Open and Roland Garros.



"I have regular discussions with Andrea Gaudenzi (president of the ATP), Steve Simon (president of the WTA) and David Haggerty (head of the ITF) and another call is planned next week to see how we have progressed.

"We are working well together, but it is still a bit early to precisely determine the schedule."

Guidicelli is adamant that the FFT was right to shift the tournament back by four months with the death toll from the coronavirus in France standing at 26,310 by Saturday night.

"Roland Garros is the driving force of tennis in France, it is what feeds the players in our ecosystem (260 million euros in revenue, or 80% of the turnover of the FFT)," added Guidicelli, describing himself as the "good father".

"We think of them first, protecting them. We made a courageous choice and today, no one regrets it."

"A tournament without a date is a boat without a rudder -- we don't know where we're going.

"We positioned ourselves as far in the calendar as possible, anxious not to harm major events, so that no Masters 1000 or any Grand Slam would be affected. The turn of events seems to have proved us right."

Gaethje Dominates In UFC's Return

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The Ultimate Fighting Championship Saturday became the first major American sporting event held since the U.S. coronavirus outbreak, with President Donald Trump congratulating the promoter.

The controversial card put the UFC in the spotlight like never before, but did not go off without a hitch after middleweight Ronaldo 'Jacare' Souza was dropped when he and two of his cornermen tested positive for COVID-19 on Friday.

The main event saw Justin Gaethje dominate Tony Ferguson with a fifth-round technical knockout victory in the lightweight division. Gaethje finished his opponent off three minutes and 39 seconds into the fifth to earn the interim lightweight crown.

"It worked out great," said promoter Dana White. "I am happy with the way it went tonight."

In a pre-recorded video shown during the undercard fights, Trump -- who in November attended a UFC card -- congratulated White for the sport's return.

"Get the sports leagues back, let's play," the president said. "You do the social distancing and whatever else you have to do, but we need sports. We want our sports back."

The fights were staged in an empty 15,000-seat VyStar Veterans Memorial arena in Jacksonville, Florida, after earlier attempts to hold it in New York and California failed due to pandemic restrictions on live sporting events.

The global outbreak has largely shut down the American economy, but Florida authorities have deemed professional sports -- including mixed martial arts -- essential businesses.

White downplayed the negative impact of Souza's positive test and insisted it showed they were on top of things.



Roger Federer called for a merger between the two governing bodies last month, with both ATP Tour Chairman Andrea Gaudenzi and his WTA counterpart Steve Simon welcoming the suggestion.

Rafa Nadal, the other member of the so-called 'Big 3' alongside Federer and Novak Djokovic, also voiced his support as did many other past and present players.

However, outspoken Australian Nick Kyrgios was not enthused.

"Did anyone ask the majority of the ATP what they think about merging with the WTA and how it is good for us?" the world number 40 wrote on social media, before adding "we shouldn't merge."

Pospisil Hits out at Kyrgios for Merger Opposition

MUMBAI (Reuters) - Canada's Vasek Pospisil has hit back at Nick Kyrgios for opposing the proposal to merge the men's ATP and women's WTA tennis tours, saying the Australian did not have enough information to comment on the matter.

Roger Federer called for a merger between the two governing bodies last month, with both ATP Tour Chairman Andrea Gaudenzi and his WTA counterpart Steve Simon welcoming the suggestion.

Rafa Nadal, the other member of the so-called 'Big 3' alongside Federer and Novak Djokovic, also voiced his support as did many other past and present players.

However, outspoken Australian Nick Kyrgios was not enthused.

"Did anyone ask the majority of the ATP what they think about merging with the WTA and how it is good for us?" the world number 40 wrote on social media, before adding "we shouldn't merge."

World number 93 Pospisil, who sits on the ATP Players Council, termed Kyrgios' comments as ill-informed.

"You know what, it's because a lot of players express, or people in general, will express an opinion without having any information, just because they feel like they want to say something," Pospisil told TSN In Depth. "That might be the case with Nick."

"To be honest, he's in no position to express an opinion when he just hears about this for the first time and has done zero due diligence. There are some guys like that and I'll have no problem telling him that to his face."

"But again it raises eyebrows, there are a lot of valid questions that need to be asked and answered, which I have."

As many as seven associations govern different parts of tennis. Besides the ATP and the WTA Tours, the sport is also controlled by the International Tennis Federation and the boards of the four Grand Slam tournaments.

They all joined forces in recent weeks to raise more than \$6 million for a player relief fund that will target about 800 singles and doubles players collectively on the men's and women's tours, who need financial support during the COVID-19 shutdown.

Five La Liga Players Test Positive For Coronavirus

MADRID (AFP) - Five players from Spain's top two leagues have tested positive for coronavirus, La Liga confirmed on Sunday.

Players in Spain's top-flight and Segunda division were allowed to carry out individual work at training grounds last week. The move was the beginning of a staggered training program, with the aim to restart competitive games in the middle of June.

La Liga is identifying infected players through positive tests are part of that plan.

The five players, who have not been officially named, will now be quarantined at home and tested again "in the next few days".

They will be allowed to rejoin their club's training program only after obtaining two consecutive negative test results. A La Liga statement read: "Among La Liga Santander and La Liga SmartBank (Segunda) clubs, five positive cases were detected in players, all of them asymptomatic and in the final phase of the disease."

"One of the objectives of these medical tests, according to the La Liga's protocol for returning to training, according to recommendations of the CSD (Supreme Sports Council) and the Ministry of Health, was precisely to detect the denominated or asymptomatic, that is, those people who are infected and that, without presenting symptoms, they can infect other people," the statement added.



Leclerc Likes Idea Of Reverse Races When F1 Returns

LONDON (Reuters) - Ferrari's Charles Leclerc likes the idea of racing in the "wrong" direction once Formula One emerges from the global COVID-19 lockdown.

The sport is considering various options to get its stalled season started, with grands prix likely to be held without spectators and some European circuits hosting more than one race.

There has even been a somewhat fanciful suggestion that the British Grand Prix circuit at Silverstone might host back-to-back races clockwise and anti-clockwise on the same or successive weekends.

Leclerc, holed up in the Monaco apartment where he has been strumming his guitar, playing the piano, winning esports races and working on improving very basic cooking skills, said he would be up for that. "I've seen something about doing races the other way around, that would be very, very cool," the 22-year-old told reporters in an online news conference. "This could be an interesting idea."

"We would definitely have to re-learn the track completely from scratch. I've done this in karting, to do one track in one way and then do it the other way."

"I think it would be very exciting to do a track like Silverstone the other way around, to arrive so quick in Becketts and then Maggotts would be very exciting."

Silverstone's managing director Stuart Pringle said this month that the idea was maybe not so crazy but, asked about Leclerc's comments, recognised there were too many obstacles to overcome.

