

Health Ministry Spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari Said on Saturday That Some 166 More Iranians Have Died From Coronavirus Disease Over the Past 24 Hours as The Death Toll Mounted to 24,118

IRAN NEWS

Head of Arbaeen Central Headquarters Says Both Iranian and Iraqi Governments Are Eager to Hold Arbaeen Rituals But Health Protocols Due to COVID19 Have Persuaded Them to Postpone Them

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E3 Say UN Sanctions Relief For Iran to Continue

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - The three European signatories to the Iran Nuclear Deal say despite U.S. efforts to activate the snapback mechanism, the UN sanctions relief for Iran would continue beyond Sept 20.

Britain, France, and Germany told the UN Security Council on Friday that UN sanctions relief for Iran - agreed under a 2015 nuclear deal - would continue beyond Sept. 20, when the United States asserts that all the measures should be reimposed.

In a letter to the 15-member body, seen by Reuters, the three European parties to the nuclear deal and long-time US allies said any decision or action is taken to reimpose UN sanctions "would be incapable of legal effect." The United States quit the nuclear deal in 2018.

"We have worked tirelessly to preserve the nuclear agreement and remain committed to doing so," said the UN envoys for Britain, France, and Germany, adding that they remain committed to "fully implementing" a 2015 Security Council resolution that enshrines the pact, which also included Russia and China. **See Page 7**

IAEA Asked for No More Access Into Iran Nuclear Activity

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's nuclear chief, Ali Akbar Salehi, says the International Atomic Energy Agency has asked for no further probes except for the two cases agreed between Tehran and the Agency last month.

In late August, Iran agreed to grant the IAEA access to two sites specified by the UN nuclear agency.

Speaking on Saturday, Salehi referred to the first inspection carried out by IAEA in early September, saying that the next probe will be conducted at a set time, however, the time of the inspection will not be announced publicly.

"The IAEA has a request under its obligations, and we have no problem doing so," he noted.

Salehi added that the UN nuclear watchdog has agreed that it will not request any other access or raise any other questions based on its current information.

Highlighting Iran's constant adherence to its commitments, the AEOI chief said, "This means the agency's requests must be within the framework of the Safeguards Agreement or the Additional Protocol and must be considered sound, reasonable and justified," he added. **See Page 7**

"Revenge" Awaits for All Involved In Assassinating Martyr Soleimani



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says Iran will definitely avenge the U.S. assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, but it will only target those who are either directly or indirectly involved in the murder.

General Hossein Salami's remarks on Saturday came after a US publication claimed that Iran planned to assassinate the American ambassador to South Africa in retaliation, prompting both Tehran and Johannesburg to dismiss the allegation.

"Our promise of avenging the martyrdom of General Soleimani is definite, serious and real. Mr. Trump, do not doubt our revenge, because it is quite definite and serious," Gen. Soleimani said at the joint morning ceremony of the General Staff of the IRGC.

But "we will be targeting those who were directly or indirectly involved in the martyrdom of the great general Haj Qassem Soleimani," he said.

"Do you think we will kill a female ambassador to South Africa in exchange for the blood of our martyr brother?" Gen. Salami added.

When the U.S. assassinated Gen. Soleimani and Iraq's top anti-terror commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis outside Baghdad airport on Jan. 3, Iran responded five days later with a volley of precision-guided ballistic missiles which pummeled the Ain al-Asad base in Iraq, where US troops were deployed.

Gen. Salami said Saturday, "We are an honorable people and fair, and we take revenge fairly and justly, which is why we did not target your soldiers at Ain al-Asad."

A flimsy U.S. report on the Politico this week, quoting unnamed officials, claimed that Iran had sought to assassinate US Ambassador to South Africa Lana Marks in retaliation for the January assassination of the top Iranian anti-terror commander.

South Africa's State Security Agency said Friday it had found no evidence to support US media claims that Iran was planning to assassinate Marks.

Iran has categorically rejected the "malicious and baseless" report as part of "hackneyed and outworn methods to create Iranophobic atmosphere" by the U.S.

Gen. Salami on Saturday dealt with the threat, pledging that Iranian missiles are ready to rain down on U.S. troops.

"While you are severely plagued by your own internal problems, you are threatening us with a thousand-fold attack, but when we struck Ayn al-Asad, our assumption and prediction was not that you would not answer, but we were absolutely assuming that you would respond, and that we had hundreds of missiles ready to fire, and if you answered, we would destroy the intended targets."

"It is the same today, and if a hair sheds from an Iranian, we will blow away all your fleece and wool," the top general said, using a Persian catchphrase.

"These threats are serious and we do not wage a verbal war and put everything to action," the top general added.

"The Americans should know that we will strike anyone who was involved in the cowardly assassination of General Soleimani, and this is a serious message," Gen. Salami said on Saturday.

\$400b Deal Between Iran-China Does Not Impact India's Ties With Tehran

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - Murmurs of a potential \$400 billion trade and military deal between Beijing and Tehran have reached New Delhi. As China and India continue to have estranged relations, Beijing's growing influence in the strategically-important Iran is being seen as a matter of concern by the Indian opposition.

India has cleared the air around speculation regarding the possible negative impact of a strategic partnership between Iran and China and has stated that its relations with Tehran "stand on their own footing and are independent of its relations with third countries".

Answering a question from opposition leaders Vinayak Raut and Balashowry Vallabhaneni over Chinese influence in the Persian Gulf Region, Indian Minister of State for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan said:

"India and Iran have historical ties and close civilizational links. Our relations with Iran stand on their own footing and are independent of its relations with third countries. India accords highest priority to our relations with countries in the West Asia and has extensive ties in the fields of culture, education, trade and investments."

As per the media reports, the 18-page document on multi-billion dollar Chinese investments in Iran and agreement on cooperation in security, intelligence sharing, and joint military drills are raising concerns for India, considering its investment in the country. India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited Iran earlier this month, but the purpose of the visit has not been revealed by New Delhi. Foreign ministry sources told Sputnik that the ministers discussed the details of Chinese investment and future prospects of India's infrastructure plan in Iran, including Chabahar port.

In July, there were reports that ties between the two countries have hit a low, as Iran began the Chabahar-Zahedan Railway Line project without India's assistance due to a delay in funds. However, the reports were rubbished by both sides. The 628km railway project holds strategic importance for India, as it will become a trade route between India and Pakistan while bypassing Pakistan. Part of New Delhi's commitment to the trilateral agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan, the project aims at boosting regional maritime transit traffic to Central Asia.

Tehran to Host Int'l Expo On Eurasian Trade Opportunities

TEHRAN - Tehran Permanent International Fairgrounds will host an international exhibition for introducing the Eurasia Economic Union (EAEU)'s trade potentials in early 2021, Managing Director of Iran International Exhibitions Company (IIEC) said.

Bahman Hosseinzadeh said yesterday that the first international exhibition of EAEU trade opportunities is planned to be held during the Iranian calendar month of Bahman (January 20-February 18, 2021), IRNA reported.

All the EUAE member countries are going to have active participation in this exhibition, the official said.

This exhibition is also a good opportunity to introduce the capabilities of Iranian producers and upgrade their industrial and commercial competitiveness capacities, while branding and introducing Iranian products to the Eurasian member countries, Hosseinzadeh stressed. He said that the Eurasia International Exhibition will act as a link for the expansion of relations between Iran and EAEU members by bringing economic convergence and strengthening mutual relations.

"This exhibition will strengthen Iran's economic diplomacy with the members of this union and provide new capacities for the country's traders in order to develop non-oil exports," he added. **See Page 7**

Riyadh Following Israeli Regime's Steps In Nuclear Program

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's Ambassador to the Vienna-based international organizations Kazem Gharibabadi called on the IAEA to ensure that Saudi Arabia is committed to its obligations under the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement.

In the meeting of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Gharibabadi expressed his deep worry about Saudi Arabia's failure in implementing the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement as well as the silence of those who always were worried in these fields.

Referring to the covertly nuclear activities by Saudi Arabia, he called on the IAEA and the Board of Governors to ensure that Saudi Arabia adheres to its obligations under the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement.

"Despite repeated requests of the IAEA, if Riyadh does not cancel its current protocols, IAEA's safeguard tools won't be provided," he said.

Gharibabadi warned that non-implementation of IAEA safeguards at a time when Saudi Arabia is actively pursuing a nuclear program would lead to the concealment of some nuclear activities without being subject to IAEA inspections. **See Page 7**

France Denies U.S. Accusation Against Hezbollah

TEHRAN (IP)- France's foreign ministry on Friday said that there was no evidence to suggest the armed wing of Lebanon's Hezbollah was storing chemicals to make explosives in France after a senior U.S. official said the group had set up caches in Europe since 2012.

Speaking on Thursday, Nathan Sales, the U.S. State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism accused the Hezbollah of smuggling and storing chemicals, including ammonium nitrate, from Belgium to France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland.

Ammonium nitrate is an industrial chemical commonly used in fertilizers and explosives used for quarrying and mining.

"It stores these weapons in places so it can conduct major terrorist attacks whenever its masters in Tehran deem necessary," Sales said in a briefing without elaborating or providing evidence of the activities.

"To our knowledge, there is nothing tangible to confirm such an allegation in France today," foreign ministry spokeswoman Agnes von der Muhll told reporters in response to Sales' allegations. **See Page 7**

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Police Dismantle Drug-Trafficking Band

TEHRAN (MNA) – The police forces of the Sistan and Baluchestan Province, southeastern Iran, have dismantled a drug-trafficking band and seized over 1 ton of illegal drugs in Saravan County.

Commander of the Border Guard of the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran (NAJA) Brigadier General Ahmad Ali Goudarzi made the announcement on Saturday, saying that following the intelligence activities, the police forces of the province have identified and dismantled a drug gang who intended to smuggle a big consignment of narcotics to the province from southeast borders of Iran.

He added that the forces engaged in an armed clash with the smugglers, during which 1.273 tons of narcotics were seized.

President Voices Concern Over Relative Rise In COVID-19 Infections

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – President Hassan Rouhani has expressed concern over a drop in the percentage of people who abide by health protocols amid a surge in the coronavirus outbreak.

President Rouhani said the extent to which people comply with health directives has decreased from 82% to 62% over the past week.

“This issue is very alarming,” he said.

He made the comments after a report was released by the National Coronavirus Headquarters suggesting there has been a relative rise in the number of those infected and hospitalized due to coronavirus.

He touched upon the opening of schools and universities, saying either educational centers may hold their classes online or students may physically attend classes depending on the circumstances.

“The top priority is to protect students and university students’ health,” he noted.

He said educational centers opened just recently, and hence, there are no precise statistics about the number of those infected in educational settings.

The president urged the health ministry to monitor the proper implementation of



health protocols, saying all school authorities are obliged to enforce health directives.

Rouhani undermined the effectiveness of the coronavirus vaccine, saying: “A person who is infected with the virus would not have antibodies in his body for more than 2-3 months and will be infected again, so the vaccine is ineffective in this regard.”

“We do not know what the effects of the vaccine are and how many months it will create immunity,” the president said. “Even if the vaccine is produced, we must still follow the hygienic protocols, including using the mask, social distancing and washing the hands, disinfecting, and avoiding unnecessary travels.”

“Even if we are given the vaccine, we cannot consider the situation normal,” Rouhani noted.

The president also stressed the need for more investment in health, knowledge-based economy, digital economy, and e-government.

Sacred Defense Experiences to Facilitate Zionist Regime’s Collapse

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The Iranian Armed Forces General Staff said the experience of fighting an imposed war in the 1980s have strengthened the country’s defense power and would facilitate dissolution of the Zionist regime.

In a statement released on Saturday to commemorate the Sacred Defense Week, which marks the anniversary of the onset of an Iraqi imposed war on Iran 40 years ago, the Armed Forces General Staff said the spirit of resistance has secured the Islamic Revolution against foreign sanctions and threats.

Iran has achieved a high level of defensive deterrent power, the statement said.

It also hailed the precious experiences of the Sacred Defense as a “strategic need”, saying they would strengthen the nation’s vigilance and resistance in the face of arrogant powers and would facilitate “dissolution of the fake Zionist regime and the hegemony system.”

Every year, in late September, the Iranian Armed Forces attend parades to honor the Sacred Defense Week in remembrance of the martyrs in the eight-year war imposed by Iraq in the 1980s.

Iran Air Force Self-Sufficient, Ready to Help Friends

TEHRAN (IP) - Commander of Iran’s Army Aviation Service (Havanirooz) Brigadier-General Yousef Ghorbani said today the Iranian air forces are not only self-sufficient in producing parts, but are ready to help friends as well.

Ghorbani lauded air forces’ big operations and great performance during eight years of Iraqi imposed war in west and southwestern part of the country.

He added that there were only 10 pilots with highest academic and professional degrees in 7 bases at the begging of the war with Iraq, while now the air forces have plenty of them.

Elaborating on air forces’ self-sufficiency in time of hostile sanctions against the country, Ghorbani noted that this achievement was made despite the fact the country has been experiencing different kinds of sanctions over the last 40 years.

He referred to complicated system of helicopters, saying that, fortunately, Iran needs no other country in producing spare parts.

Such achievements have been made by Iranian universities and knowledge-based companies, he reiterated.

He pointed to flying at night as a major concern for the Iranian air forces, saying today we are able to do so.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the Iranian commander pointed to recent Zolfaghar 99 military drills which covered the Persian Gulf, the Hormuz Strait, Makran Coasts, the Sea of Oman, and northern Indian Ocean and said the event brought about deterrence and made the enemies understand the fact that Iran and especially the Persian Gulf is no place for their presence.

He noted that Iranian army together with the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) has created security in Iran.

U.S. Can Do Nothing More

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The U.S. government has done whatever effective capacities at its hand to sanction Iran and can gain nothing else from any further action with the United Nations Security Council, Iranian Government spokesman Ali Rabiee said.

What is going on in the arena of U.S. foreign policy about the snapback invocation in the context of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is actually an attempt to pull Iran into new playground to provide Washington with more options.

Some 30 days ago, in a move against the International Law, Washington demanded to invoke the snapback clause of the JCPOA.

Evidently, Iran is to gain another win in the framework of multilateral diplomacy and the U.S. is to suffer another defeat in using unilateral policies. Iran is not the only country which the U.S. has tensions with, but the White House has been defamed in no self-made crisis as much the one with Iran.

A decade ago, it was absolutely beyond belief to see the U.S. so isolated that even its European allies eschew it and voice a loud “NO” to Washington’s unlawful demands.

It is even more unbelievable to see that the collective resistance is done in the most important security organization in the world, i.e. the UN Security Council, to save an agreement whose pivot point is Iran.

We need to bear in mind that those days the US easily made big and small powers of the world pass six resolutions against Iran, but today not only can the countries standing by the US be counted the fingers of one hand, but also some of them are – due to their violating the international law – among the most detested and the most isolated governments in the world.

The remarks made by the U.S. secretary of state claiming that all the previous UNSC sanctions on Iran will be revived and threatening other countries to make them follow the U.S. is another defamatory move for Washington. What’s more they will leave no legal traces.

Iran Does Not Hesitate in Dealing With Disrupters of Its Tie With Turkey

TEHRAN (IP) - Deputy Interior Minister Hossein Zolfaghari stated Iran does not hesitate in dealing with terrorist elements in the region who seek to disrupt friendly relations between Tehran and Ankara.

In a phone conversation, Zolfaghari spoke with his Turkish counterpart Muhterem Ince, about the latest developments in the region.

The Iranian official stated: “We need to strengthen cooperation to combat all factors disrupting order and security on the border between Iran and Turkey.”

Zolfaghari stated that the close cooperation between Iran and Turkey will prevent terrorists from disrupting peace between the two countries.

The official explained that the two countries need to strengthen bilateral cooperation and define a participatory mechanism to combat all factors that disrupt order and security along the common border.

Emphasizing that the Islamic Republic of Iran does not appease in monitoring the common border points and confronting terrorist elements in the region who seek to disrupt friendly relations between the two countries, he added: “We assure our friendly and brotherly neighbor Turkey that we are serious in the fight against terrorism, organized crime, arms and ammunition smuggling, and human trafficking.”

Deputy Minister of Interior of the Republic of Turkey also thanked the recent military operations of the Islamic Republic of Iran against the positions of terrorist groups and expressed: “I hope that the continuation of such operations will thwart the goal of the hostile governments in destabilizing the region and destroying the relationship between the two countries by using the tools of dissident and terrorist groups.”

Referring to the problems caused by the suspension of direct flights between the two countries, Zolfaghari called on Turkish friends to provide maximum consular assistance to resume flights.

Ince also promised to raise the issue of flights between the two countries at a meeting of the Turkish National Health Council.

Snapback Mechanism Piece of U.S. Propaganda

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Washington’s push to trigger the snapback mechanism of the JCPOA for re-imposing sanctions on Iran is nothing but an attempt to attract the American public attention as part of a propaganda game, Iranian official Ali Akbar Velayati said.

In an interview with Tasnim, Velayati slammed the hype over the so-called snapback mechanism of the 2015 nuclear deal as a propaganda game.

Pointing to the U.S. administration’s attempts to attract the public opinion after Donald Trump’s plummeting poll numbers, the member of the Iranian team of JCPOA observers lashed out at the US for renegeing on the nuclear deal and refusing to lift the sanctions.

“A one-sided JCPOA has no validity,” Velayati added.

Asked about Iran’s reaction to a possible activation of the snapback mechanism, he said the U.S., which has already withdrawn from the deal, has no right to make any comment or trigger the mechanism.

On the expectations that Joe Biden would win the U.S. presidential election, Velayati said the weakest diplomacy taken by a country is to pin hopes on the fate of other states, stressing that the Iranian authorities do not care who the next US president will be.

Last month, 13 countries of the 15-member council rejected the U.S. push to trigger the snapback provision in the 2015 nuclear deal, leaving Washington isolated on the issue.

Iran Exports 2,000 Tons of Aquatic Fish From Chabahar Port

CHABAHAR (IRNA) - Iran has exported about 2,000 tons on edible and non-edible fishes from the southeastern strategic port of Chabahar during the first half of the Iranian calendar year (started March 20, 2020) an official at Sistan-Baluchestan Province announced on Saturday.

Behzad Amiri, a senior official at Sistan-Baluchestan fisheries office made the remarks while speaking to IRNA. Four world countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan have been the targets of the Iranian fishes, Amiri said. In a related development, an Iranian provincial official announced in late July that the first ship carrying Iran’s aquatic products left southeastern Iranian port of Chabahar for Thailand for the first time.

Facilities are now provided for exporting Iranian products from Chabahar to world countries, to the Southeast Asian states in particular, Amiri noted. The official expressed hope that export market will develop after tackling the pandemic which has created serious problems for many world activities.

Handwoven Carpet Export Unchanged

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The head of Iran National Carpet Center said despite all the sanctions and the coronavirus outbreak, the export of handwoven Iranian carpet has not decreased.

In 2019, the entire value of the exported handwoven carpets to the world stood at 800 million dollars, 73 million dollars of which was the share of Iran, Farahnaz Rafe’ said.

Hoping that the current policies will guarantee Iran’s sustainable leadership role in this are-industry, Rafe’ referred to some difficulties in selling handwoven carpets under the pressure of sanctions and the spread of the coronavirus.

Referring the plans to complete the production chain of handwoven carpets in Iran, she said Golestan Province, northern Iran, is to pilot the plan. It will be started soon. She also said that the wool produced in certain Iranian counties, like Zabol, eastern Iran, has the same quality as the one taken from Australia’s merino breed.

She also said that in the coronavirus time, an online exhibit is being organized. She went on to say that more than 1,200,000 people are directly and indirectly engaged in the production of handwoven carpets, which is programmed to double, adding from among the above-mentioned numbers, more than 191,500 people are professionally-engaged in the production.

Iran Ranks First in Oil, Gas Exploration Volume in World

TEHRAN (IP) - According to Wood Mackenzie Institute, Iran tops the world in oil exploration volume in 2019 by exploring 4,973 Billion barrels, Director of Exploration Department of the National Iranian Oil Company announced.

Attending a press conference on Saturday, Saleh Hendi stressed that with an exploration of 2,7 billion barrels (13% of the world explored gas) in Eram Oil Field and 2,2 billion barrels (10,5% of the world explored oil) in Namavaran Oil Filed, Iran was ranked first and third in world exploration in 2019.

“By exploring 4.97 billion barrels equivalent to liquid hydrocarbons, Iran National Oil Company tops the world, leaving behind Russia Gazprom, British Petroleum Company, and US ExxonMobil company,” he added.

“Iran was ranked first among the big 15 oil companies in the world by exploring 4,973 billion barrels oil and gas in 2019,” he highlighted.

Hendi went on to say that, nine giant discoveries in 2019 happened in Iran, Russia, Mauritania, Cyprus, Suriname, South Africa, and Malaysia which includes 75% exploration of the world.

12 explorations out of 20 giant explorations in the world, explored less than 500 million barrels deposit in 2019, the official noted. Referring to the imposed sanctions on Iran, the official stressed that we will not stop and continue investing in risky sections like exploration.

The oil industry is dynamic and active, although exploration is a time-consuming activity and results after 6 or 7 years, he concluded.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:57
■ Evening (Maghreb)	19:22
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:28
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	06:52

20. But if ye decide to take one wife in place of another, even if ye had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, Take not the least bit of it back: Would ye take it by slander and manifest wrong?
21. And how could ye take it when ye have gone in unto each other, and they have Taken from you a solemn covenant?
Surah 4. Women (20 - 21)

Barter of Goods Suggested for Enhancing Tehran-Moscow Trade Tie

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Tehran Chamber of Commerce Industries Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) and Russia's Export Center signed a memorandum of understanding on concentration more on bilateral cooperation and boosting trade exchanges.

According to reports, in a ceremony held at Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mine and Agriculture (TCCIMA) and Russia's Export Center inked the MoU to expand economic exchanges between Iran and Russia.

During the meeting, Iran proposed barter of goods between both states as a way for enhancing the current level of economic cooperation.

In the beginning of the ceremony, deputy head of TCCIMA on international affairs Mr. Hessemoddin Hallaj pointed to the historic relations of both countries as well as to some hurdles in way of enhancing trade exchanges. He said lack of enough acquaintance of both parties from each other's capacities and of course lack of full acquaintance with the ruling regulations of both countries are of the major hurdles.

He added that the chamber is after restoring effective and direct relations with provincial chambers of commerce of Russia through signing the MoU.

Then Moscow's commercial representative in Tehran, Rustam Zhiganshin, for his part, briefed the participants in the meeting of the activities of Russian Export Center, saying that the center is comprised of state-run companies which are in charge of analysis of the market, ratings and consultation.

He added that the center has 30 representatives in Russia and 10 offices abroad and one of them is in Tehran. He then called for full implementation of all paragraphs of the signed MoU with TCCMI.

Meanwhile Russian Export Center Pavel Bukhanov in Tehran said that signing the MoU is the first step in line with bringing together the private sectors of both states,



adding that in the next phases, setting up a platform and common pattern for direct link between businessmen of both countries should be put on the agenda. He reiterated creating such a pattern is aimed at connecting companies directly and without any involvement of other party.

Then secretary general of TCCIMA Mr. Bahman Eshqi, for his part, pointed to the trade relation between both countries which does not accord with their capacities.

He noted that a study shows that between 1825 and 1917 for almost 90 years, Russia has been Iran's first trade partner but during the Pahlavi Regime, their economic interactions had been restricted to only heavy industries.

Eshqi then pointed to the good grounds for cooperation and revival of the relation between Iran and Russia, saying that one of the issues which can help this relation to be revived is the expansion of transportation network, noting expansion of transportation is like an oil well which both sides can benefit.

He also called for expansion of trade interactions and termed exchange of trade via the Caspian Sea is another solution.

He added that barter of goods can be put on the agenda of both sides as a solution for expanding bilateral trade ties.

Eshqi also urged Russian banks to open accounts for Iranian companies in Russia or at least by those Russian banks which are not concerned about the U.S. sanctions.

Meanwhile Zhiganshin, for his part, said that in 2019, almost 50 percent of trade between Iran and Russia was done in Russian currency, rouble.

Over 637k Tons of Commodities Traded on IME Last Week

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - While over 637,597 MT of commodities worth over \$1,595m were traded last week on the Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME).

According to the report from IME International Affairs and PR, on the domestic and export metal and mineral trading floor of IME, 293,318 MT of various products worth close to \$966m were traded last week.

On this trading floor, 256,256 MT of steel, 6,400 MT of aluminum, 4,140 MT of copper, 120 MT of molybdenum concentrates, 12 MT of precious metal concentrates, 25,390 MT of zinc ingot 1,500 MT of coke as well as 5 kg of gold bullion were traded by customers.

The report declares that on domestic and export oil and petrochemical trading floors of IME, 337,269 MT of different commodities with the total value of \$629m were traded.

On this trading floor, 72,200 MT of VB feed stock, 110,601 MT of bitumen, 68,694 MT of polymer products, 42,229 MT of chemical products, 43,990 MT of lube cut oil, 1,705 MT of insulation, 2,301 MT of base oil, 150 MT of argon as well as 5,050 MT of sulfur were traded.

Furthermore, 6,510 MT of commodities and a commercial real estate were traded on the same trading floor.



Iran to Buy COVID-19 Vaccine From India

TEHRAN (IFP) - Iran's health minister says an Indian company is to sell the coronavirus vaccine to the Islamic Republic.

Saeed Namaki said Iran is to purchase 20 million doses of the vaccine from the Indian firm under a forward sale contract.

"This Indian company, which has already sold 100 million doses of the vaccine to the US under a forward sale agreement, has got the US permission to sell 20 percent of its products to other countries as well," said the minister. Namaki said the Indian company is owned by a Zoroastrian of Iranian descent.

"Based on what this Indian company has promised us, we are going to receive the vaccine at a lower and more reasonable price," he said. Meanwhile, the minister underlined that Iranian research centers keep working to develop a homegrown vaccine for COVID-19.

IOTC Builds Expansion Joints for SMBs

TEHRAN (Shana) - Experts at the Iranian Oil Terminals Company (IOTC) have successfully built expansion joints used in Single Buoy Moorings (SBMs).

According to IOTC, the item was localized by IOTC experts and domestic knowledge-based companies.

The equipment was installed and operated on two SBMs at Assaluyeh gas condensate terminal.

The CEO of the company Abbas Asadrooz said: "Using domestic capabilities is one of the main concerns for the company so that we will not need to buy foreign equipment and the technical and engineering units of this company take effective steps in self-sufficiency."

He added: "In the current special situation and due to the imposition of sanctions by foreign countries, the specialists of IOTC in cooperation with domestic knowledge-based companies succeeded in designing and localizing one of the practical equipment."

The IOTC CEO stated that all SBMs that are used for loading fluids, due to the nature of rotation during loading and connection to the ship, have motion stresses on flow lines, which are vibrations and stresses caused by fluid pressure fluctuations and equipment movement which is absorbed and restrained by the expansion joints.

He said the joints have now been localized by IOTC which were previously only imported from an American supplier.

Tajikistan Discusses Supply of Oil Refinery Raw Materials With Iran

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The work of a large oil refinery in Tajikistan is postponed due to lack of raw materials, so negotiations are underway on the supply of raw materials with companies from Iran, Kazakhstan and Russia.

According to Asia-Plus website, the launch of a large oil refinery built in the «Dangara» Free Economic Zone (FEZ) has been postponed due to lack of raw materials under acceptable conditions.

Noting that the enterprise is completely ready for work and all the necessary infrastructure already exists, - the deputy head of this FEZ Safarali Taifurov said that the main problem is to provide this enterprise with crude oil.

Taifurov stressed that at the moment negotiations are underway on the supply of raw materials with companies from Iran, Kazakhstan and Russia.

He added that the launch of the refinery depended on finding oil under acceptable conditions, which can ensure the efficient operation of the enterprise.

Construction of the refinery with a design capacity of 1.2 million tons of oil per year, began in 2014.

The enterprise was erected by the established Tajik-Chinese joint venture TK-oil, established by the Chinese company Dong Ying heli Investment and Development and the Tajik company "Hasan and Co".

Pakistan Plans to Set Up Six Markets Along Iran Border

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - The decision was announced during a high-level meeting chaired by Prime Minister Imran Khan in Islamabad, according to Pakistani media reports.

Twelve markets will be established along the Afghanistan border and six at border areas with Iran, according to a proposal plan, said a statement from the prime minister's office.

Khan, however, initially approved a pilot project to establish three markets.

"These three markets, two along with Iran and one at Afghan border areas, will be completed and activated by February 2021," Khan told officials at the meeting that included Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, Advisor to Prime Minister on finance Abdul Hafeez Sheikh and other senior officials.

The markets will provide better business and trade opportunities to the residents living along the border, Khan said.

Supplying Main Raw Materials the Only Way for Supporting Steel-Makers

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

ISFAHAN - Caretaker of Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade says the only way for support of steel-makers of the country is to supply them with their needed raw materials.

Speaking on the sidelines of the 20th International Exhibition of Building and Construction Industry in Tehran, Mr. Jafar Sarghini pointed to the provision of all materials needed by the construction industry, saying that due to the huge domestic mineral reserves, the country has succeeded in providing all materials needed by the construction industry and the ministry seriously pursue the exports of construction items beside supporting this industry.

He went on to say that production of steel and construction materials are two times more than the domestic needs and it has helped the ministry to distribute them easily among the consumers.

He emphasized industrialization of construction building, adding that construction-builders should go after making their buildings lighter and resistant especially in terms of safety to earthquake as well insulation.

Sarghini expressed his satisfaction over offering of steel products in the market, adding if steel-makers offer their products in the market in time, it will lead to the stability of price for these products in the market.

He noted that the major support from the steel-makers in the country is to provide them with their main needed raw materials and to this end, it takes time and necessary planning.



He then pointed to the amount of exports of steel products and construction materials, noting that out of \$10b of exports in the mine and mineral industry last year, some \$7b belonged to the steel and construction materials, reiterating fortunately Iran is one of the major steel exporters in the region.

Colombian Police Charged With Killing

BOGOTA (Dispatches) - Colombian prosecutors on Friday charged two police officers with torture and aggravated homicide after the death of a man in custody sparked deadly rioting in the capital and other cities.

The two police involved in the arrest of Javier Ordonez, who was repeatedly tasered before dying later in custody, were charged with "torture and aggravated homicide," prosecutor's office official Francisco Barbosa said.

Five other police officers are under investigation in the case.

Thirteen people were killed in the protests, most from gunshot wounds, according to Bogota's leftist mayor, Claudia Lopez, who accused police of firing on the protesters.



French Finance Minister Tests Positive for Coronavirus

PARIS (Reuters) - French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said on Friday he had tested positive for coronavirus, but had no symptoms and would continue to carry out his duties while quarantined at home.

"I tested positive for COVID-19 this evening," Le Maire said in a statement on Twitter, adding that he would remain at home for seven days. "I immediately followed the health measures brought in by the government by self-isolating at home."

He gave no further details.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex last week tested negative for COVID-19, after he came into contact with someone who tested positive at the Tour de France cycle race.



China Slams U.S. Bullying, Warns Of Action Over TikTok, WeChat



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China has accused the United States of "bullying" and threatened to take "necessary" countermeasures after Washington banned downloads of the Chinese video-sharing app TikTok and effectively blocked the use of the messaging super-app WeChat.

"China urges the U.S. to abandon bullying, cease its wrongful actions and earnestly maintain fair and transparent international rules and order," the Chinese Ministry of Commerce said in a statement on Saturday.

"If the U.S. insists on going its own way, China will take necessary measures to resolutely safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies." The United States Commerce Department announced the bans on Friday, citing national security grounds although China and the companies have denied U.S. user data is collected for spying.

Under Friday's order, the Tencent-owned WeChat app would lose functionality in the U.S. from Sunday onwards. TikTok users will be banned from installing updates but could keep accessing the service through November 12.

The timeframe gives TikTok's parent group ByteDance some breathing space to clinch an agreement over the fate of its U.S. operations.

"We disagree with the decision from the Commerce Department, and are disappointed that it stands to block new app downloads from Sunday and ban use of the TikTok app in the U.S. from November 12," ByteDance said in a statement.

"We will continue to challenge the unjust executive order."

TikTok says it has 100 million US users and 700 million globally.

Friday's order follows weeks of deal-making over TikTok, with U.S. President Donald Trump pressuring ByteDance to sell TikTok's U.S. operations to a domestic company to satisfy Washington's concerns over TikTok's data collection and related issues. California tech giant Oracle recently struck a deal with TikTok along those lines, although details remain foggy.

Trump said on Friday said he was open to a deal, noting that "we have some great options and maybe we can keep a lot of people happy," suggesting that even Microsoft, which said its TikTok bid had been rejected, might continue to be involved, as well as Oracle and Walmart.

Trump noted that TikTok was "very, very popular," said "we have to have the total security from China," and added that "we can do a combination of both".

The bans are in response to a pair of executive orders issued by Trump on August 6 that gave the Commerce Department 45 days to determine what transactions to block from the apps he deemed pose a national security threat. That deadline expires on Sunday.

The Trump administration has ramped up efforts to purge "untrusted" Chinese apps from U.S. digital networks amid escalating tensions with Beijing on a range of issues from trade and human rights to the battle for tech supremacy.

Modi Defends New Law as Critics Warn of Risks to Farmers

NEW DELHI (Reuters) - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi defended new laws aimed at lifting restrictions on farmers on Friday after protests by opposition parties, some farming bodies and even an ally of his Bharatiya Janata Party.

India's lower house of parliament on Thursday passed three emergency executive orders issued in June by Modi's cabinet which were targeted at reforming the antiquated Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) Act.

This includes a rule that forces growers to sell their produce only at India's more than 7,000 regulated wholesale markets and Modi said the new legislation would "unshackle" millions of farmers and help them get better prices.

"It will also remove middlemen and let farmers sell their produce directly to buyers," Modi said.

Many farmer organisations oppose the legislation because they say that if big buyers start buying directly from producers, small growers will hardly have any bargaining power.

"The APMC Act forces every buyer to come to wholesale markets, which is designed to help farmers get competitive, assured and timely payments," Dharmendra Malik, a farm leader from Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, said.

If big institutions start purchasing directly from farmers, state governments will lose out on the tax that these buyers have to pay at wholesale markets, Malik said.

"The current system ensures that farmers are paid immediately after selling their crop in the market yard itself. If farmers sell outside, who will ensure that they are paid the promised price?" a Maharashtra state official said.

Modi has said that the wholesale markets will operate as usual as the APMC Act has not been abolished and that farmers are simply being given an option to sell directly to buyers.

But Sudhir Panwar, chief of farmers' group Kisan Jagriti Manch, said if large buyers are allowed to buy directly from farmers, wholesale markets would gradually disappear.

India's food processing minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal resigned on Thursday, calling the legislation "anti-farmer". Badal's Shiromani Akali Dal party is a BJP ally with a strong base in Punjab, one of India's two bread basket states, where farmers form an influential voting bloc.



Haftar Agrees to Lift Oil Blockade With Conditions

TRIPOLI (Dispatches) - Eastern Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar said on Friday his forces would let oil production resume after an eight-month blockade and a senior politician in Tripoli said a committee would be formed to ensure fair distribution of revenues.

However, National Oil Corporation (NOC), which operates Libya's energy sector, said overnight it would not lift force majeure on exports until oil facilities were demilitarised.

The blockade by eastern forces has cost Libya \$9 billion in lost revenue so far this year, the Tripoli-based Central Bank of Libya said this week.

The stoppage has become a big obstacle to new efforts to seek a path forwards in peace talks after Haftar's assault on Tripoli collapsed in June.

Libya and many of its state institutions have been split for years between the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) in the east.

"It was decided to resume production and export of oil with all the necessary conditions and procedural measures that ensure a fair distribution of its financial revenues," Haftar said in a televised broadcast.

In Tripoli, the GNA's deputy prime minister, Ahmed Maiteeg, issued a statement immediately after Haftar's speech also saying it "had been decided" to resume oil production and adding this would involve a new committee to oversee revenue distribution.

The committee would coordinate between the two sides to prepare a budget and transfer funds to cover payments and deal with the public debt, he said.

GNA Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj said on Wednesday he planned to step down by the end of October and analysts have said this would lead to political jockeying among other senior figures in Tripoli to succeed him.

Peru President Survives Impeachment Vote

LIMA (AFP) - Peru's President Martin Vizcarra survived an impeachment vote in Congress on Friday as his opponents failed to win the votes necessary to remove him from power.

Congress had voted last week to open impeachment proceedings against the 57-year-old president for "moral incapacity" over accusations he incited aides to lie to anti-graft investigators.

After a 10-hour debate, during which Vizcarra gave a brief statement at the beginning, only 32 legislators voted for his dismissal, while 78 voted against and 15 abstained.

"The request for vacancy has not been approved," congressional speaker Manuel Marino said after the vote. The opposition needed 87 votes, out of 130, to dismiss the popular leader.

Vizcarra had remained defiant earlier Friday when he delivered a statement at the start of the Congressional debate.

"I'm not running. I didn't do it before and I'm not going to do it now," he said before leaving his defense to his lawyer Roberto Pereira.

"I propose that the request for impeachment on the ground of moral incapacity be dismissed. It is evident that this motion suffers from a minimum elementary classification of the facts."

The heated session was opened by Marino, who would have replaced Vizcarra as Peru's leader had the impeachment carried.

He began by calling on members present in the chamber to avoid any intolerant gestures towards the head of state, although most of the 130 lawmakers joined the debate by video link due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has taken a heavy toll in the South American country.

Vizcarra has accused Marino of "conspiracy" by trying to secure military assurances for a bid to succeed him.

Analysts had predicted his opponents in Congress would fall short of the 87 votes needed to oust him.

Vizcarra's cabinet petitioned the Constitutional Court this week on the grounds the legislature had exceeded its powers and was not competent in seeking to rule on the president's moral capacity.

But the Court ruled by five votes to two to allow the vote.

Vizcarra, in power since 2018, came under fire after audio recordings were leaked, in which he is heard telling aides to hide details from congressional investigators of his office's controversial hiring of a popular singer as a paid cultural advisor.

Public support for the president and his anti-corruption campaign has been evident in opinion polls, with eight out of 10 Peruvians wanting him to continue until the end of his mandate in July 2021.



U.S. Military Strengthens Deployment in Syria



WASHINGTON (AFP) - The U.S. Army announced Friday it was stepping up its military deployment -- both troops and equipment -- in northeastern Syria despite a push to limit its presence there, a move that follows tensions with Russia in the region.

U.S. Central Command (Centcom) "has deployed Sentinel radar, increased the frequency of U.S. fighter patrols over U.S. forces, and deployed Bradley Fighting Vehicles to augment U.S. forces" in the area, which is controlled by the U.S. and its Kurdish allies, spokesman Captain Bill Urban said in a statement.

The number of armored vehicles sent as reinforcement did not exceed half a dozen, and "less than 100 people" were sent to maneuver them, a U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity said.

Without mentioning Russia, Urban said the moves were meant "to help ensure the safety and security of Coalition forces," and that the U.S. "does not seek conflict with any other nation in Syria, but will defend Coalition forces if necessary."

The U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said however that the actions "are a clear signal to Russia to adhere to mutual de-confliction processes and for Russia and other parties to avoid unprofessional, unsafe and provocative actions in northeast Syria."

U.S. Bradley Fighting Vehicles were pulled out of the region last October by President Donald Trump, who tried in early 2019 to recall all U.S. troops from Syria, before agreeing to leave a few hundred to protect oil wells.

Several incidents in recent weeks have pitted the U.S. military against Russian forces now deployed along the Turkish border under an agreement with Ankara.

At the end of August, seven American soldiers were injured in a collision with a Russian vehicle.

Videos posted on Twitter, apparently filmed by witnesses and the Russians themselves, showed Russian armor and helicopters attempting to block American vehicles and then force them out of the area.

The tanks were flown in from a base in Kuwait, anti-jihadist coalition spokesman Colonel Wayne Marotto said in another statement.

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France Moves to Freeze Plans for Environmental Tax on Airlines

PARIS (Reuters) - France is preparing to put plans for new environmental taxes on the airline sector on hold, officials said on Friday, despite a government push to speed up moves towards a greener economy.

Before the coronavirus crisis brought air traffic to a standstill and many airlines to their knees, the sector had been fighting a losing battle against emissions taxes in Europe.

New taxes on air travel were among proposals from a Citizens' Climate Council in response to the "yellow vest" movement, which began as a protest at the cost of living and became a rebellion against President Emmanuel Macron himself.

Macron has said that he would take on most of the council's 150 proposals, and the taxes were not among those he has said would be excluded.



U.S. Current Account Deficit Jumps 52.9%

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. current account deficit soared to its highest level in nearly 12 years in the second quarter as the COVID-19 pandemic weighed on the export of goods and services, offsetting a shrinking import bill.

The Commerce Department said on Friday the current account deficit, which measures the flow of goods, services and investments into and out of the country, jumped 52.9% to \$170.5 billion last quarter. That was the biggest gap since the third quarter of 2008 when the economy was working its way through the Great Recession.

Data for the first quarter was revised to show a \$111.5 billion shortfall, instead of \$104.2 billion as previously reported. Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the current account gap increasing to \$157.9 billion in the second quarter.

The current account gap represented 3.5% of gross domestic product in the April-June quarter, the biggest share since the fourth quarter of 2008.

The Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis, which compiles the data, said the decline in transactions resulted "in part from the impact of COVID-19, as many businesses were operating at limited capacity or ceased operations completely, and the movement of travelers across borders was restricted."

In the second quarter, exports of goods and services dropped to \$444.7 billion, the lowest since the first quarter of 2010, from \$605.6 billion in the January-March period. There were sharp declines in the export of petroleum, civilian aircraft and motor vehicles and engines.

Travel restrictions undercut air travel. Income from abroad also fell last quarter, reflecting decreases in portfolio investment income and direct investment income. There were also decreases in interest on loans and deposits. Income from private sector fines and penalties also fell.

Imports of goods and services dropped to \$609.6 billion, the lowest level since the third quarter of 2010, from \$732.0 billion in the first quarter. The decline mostly reflected decreases in imports of motor vehicles, parts and engines, as well as petroleum.

The amount of money leaving the country also fell last quarter, with declines in interest on loans and deposits. Private sector fines and penalties, as well as government transfers like international aid also declined last quarter.

Bangladesh Economy Shows Early Signs of Pandemic Recovery



DHAKA (Dispatches) - A rebound in garment orders after demand crashed during spring shutdowns is helping to revive the Bangladesh economy.

Apparel makers, the country's main export industry, say they are looking ahead to Christmas orders from the U.S. and other major markets.

Remittances from Bangladeshi workers employed overseas have also recovered, helping to relieve pressures from a pandemic quasi-shutdown during the spring.

The Asian Development Bank reported this week that the economic comeback was encouraging. It is forecasting the economy will grow at a robust 6.8% annual pace in the fiscal year that ends in June if current conditions persist. That's a much brighter outlook than in April-May, when global clothing brands suspended or cancelled orders worth more than \$3 billion, affecting about 4 million workers and thousands of factories.

"At the moment we can say that the ready-made garment industry has been able to regain its growth trajectory upward compared to March-May," Rubana Huq, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, or BGMEA, told The Associated Press. "As economies in the West were turning around we were successfully able to get the buyers back to the negotiating table, which is why 80% to 90% of the \$3.18 billion in cancelled orders have been reinstated," she said.

Bangladesh earns about \$35 billion annually from garment exports, mainly to the United States and Europe. The industry is the world's second largest after China's.

Bangladesh's exports rose 0.6% to \$3.9 billion in July, after plummeting 83% to \$520 million in April. Imports, which are reported on a quarterly basis, began recovering earlier, rising 36% in May-June.

In August, exports rose 4.3% from a year earlier, to \$2.96 billion, mostly driven by apparel shipments, according to the government's Export Promotion Bureau. Garment shipments totaled \$5.7 billion in July and August.

"The garment sector is making a good comeback. Our agriculture is doing well. Remittances are coming. These all are good signs for the economy," said Ahsan H. Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, a think tank in Dhaka.



India's Economy Heads For Double-Digit Decline

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India's economic recovery prospects have gone from bad to worse after the nation emerged as a new global hotspot for the coronavirus pandemic with more than 5 million infections.

Economists and global institutions like the Asian Development Bank have recently cut India's growth projections from already historic lows as the virus continues to spread. Goldman Sachs Group Inc. now estimates a 14.8% contraction in gross domestic product for the year through March 2021, while the ADB is forecasting -9%. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development sees the economy shrinking by 10.2%.

The failure to get infections under control will set back business activity and consumption — the bedrock of the economy — which had been slowly picking up after India began easing one of the world's strictest and biggest lockdowns that started late March. Local virus cases topped the 5 million mark this week, with the death toll surpassed only by the U.S. and Brazil.

"While a second wave of infections is being witnessed globally, India still has not been able to flatten the first wave of infection curve," said Sunil Kumar Sinha, principal economist at India Ratings and Research Ltd., a unit of Fitch Ratings Ltd. He now sees India's economy contracting 11.8% in the fiscal year, far worse than his earlier projection of -5.8%.

Goldman Sachs's latest growth forecast came last week after data showed gross domestic product plunged 23.9% in the April-June quarter from a year ago, the biggest decline since records began in 1996 and the worst performance of major economies tracked by Bloomberg.

While there are some signs that activity picked up following the strict lockdown, a strong recovery looks uncertain.

"By all indications, the recovery is likely to be gradual as efforts toward reopening of the economy are confronted with rising infections," Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das told a group of industrialists Wednesday.

The central bank will likely release its own growth forecast on Oct. 1 when the monetary policy committee announces its interest rate decision. In August, the RBI said private spending on discretionary items had taken a knock, especially on transport services, hospitality, recreation and cultural activities.

The plunge in GDP, as well as ongoing stress in the banking sector and among households, will curb India's medium-term growth potential. Tanvee Gupta Jain, an economist at UBS Group AG in Mumbai, estimates potential growth will slow to 6% from 7.1% year-on-year estimated in 2017.

Japan's August Consumer Prices Fall at Fastest Pace

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's core consumer prices fell at their fastest pace in almost four years in August, dragged mostly by government-sponsored discounts for domestic travel aimed at supporting the battered tourism sector.

The weak consumer price data comes after Bank of Japan Governor Haruhiko Kuroda said on Thursday it would monitor not just price trends but jobs growth in guiding policy, signalling a readiness to ramp up stimulus if job losses heightened the risk of deflation. Japan's new premier Yoshihide Suga on Wednesday pledged to contain COVID-19 and retain his former boss's "Abenomics" growth policies while pushing reforms such as deregulation and digitalisation.

The core consumer price index (CPI), which includes oil products but excludes volatile fresh food prices, fell 0.4% in August from a year earlier, government data showed on Friday. That compared with the median market forecast for a 0.4% decline and a flat reading in July and matched the level seen in November in 2016.

The main factor for the fall in the core CPI was a price decline in accommodation and hotels after the government launched subsidies for national travel discounts from late July to revive tourism.

Prices of accommodation fell 32.0% in August from a year earlier, the index showed.

"Downward pressure on consumer prices will likely continue and the core CPI index could fall to around 1.0% year-on-year later this year," said Yoshiki Shinke, chief economist at Dai-ichi Life Research Institute. He said the travel campaign will continue to weigh on accommodation while the boost to prices from a sales tax hike implemented last October will disappear later this year.

Meanwhile, downward pressure on prices is broadening from the hit to demand caused by the coronavirus.



The so-called core-core price index, which excludes food and energy prices and is closely tracked by the central bank as a narrower gauge of inflation, fell 0.1% in August, the first fall since March 2017. In July, the index gained 0.4%.

"There is also a possibility that weak demand triggered by the coronavirus outbreak could push down consumer prices going ahead, though we haven't seen significant impact on consumer prices so far," Shinke said.

The economy shrank an annualised 28.1% in April-June, its biggest postwar contraction. Analysts see the reopening of businesses after a nationwide shutdown supporting the economy, but firms and consumers remain cautious about the coronavirus outbreak and the pace of recovery may be limited.

Russia Holds Back on Interest Rate Cuts

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia's Central Bank took a breather Friday from successive rounds of interest rate cuts after a surprise jump in inflation over the summer and a recent fall in the ruble.

But Governor Elvira Nabiullina said further rate cuts were likely before the end of the year as the pace of economic recovery appeared to be slowing.

Russia's interest rate is currently at its lowest-ever level of 4.25% after the Central Bank has slashed two percentage points from it so far this year in a bid to get the Russian economy firing as it emerges from the coronavirus pandemic. An unexpected jump in inflation to 3.6% in August and the renewed possibility of fresh sanctions against Russia following the poisoning of leading Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny prompted the Bank's rate-setters to hold back from further monetary easing at this stage.

The Russian ruble has lost 8% against the U.S. dollar in the last three months and is down more than 20% since the start of the year. The latest lurch lower downward came immediately after German doctors confirmed Navalny had been poisoned by nerve agent Novichok, news which sent the ruble to a four-year low against the euro.

Friday marked the first time since the start of the pandemic that the Central Bank opted not to cut rates.

In a press conference Friday afternoon, Nabiullina cited a "volatile" international climate as behind the Bank's decision. She pointed to "rising concerns about the pace and sustainability of the recovery in the global economy, especially considering that in recent weeks the pandemic situation has worsened to a certain extent in a number of countries." She also added that "geopolitical risks have intensified" — a coded reference to sanctions fears and a possible hardening of anti-Russia rhetoric abroad or new measures in the run-up to or aftermath of the U.S. election.

EU Urged to Diversify Trade Ties, Develop Own Value Chains

BERLIN (Reuters) - The European Union must diversify its trade relations, become less dependent on Asian suppliers in certain areas such as medical precursors, and develop its own value chains within the 27-member bloc, German Economy Minister Peter Altmaier told Reuters.

"The coronavirus pandemic has taught us that Europe must stick together and diversify its trade relations," Altmaier said in remarks cleared for publication on Friday.

"That means that there must be no spanner in the works of the EU's internal market and that we have to ensure more resilient supply chains, the development of value chains within the EU, and more legal certainty in international trade."

As Germany currently holds the presidency of the European Union, Altmaier will host a meeting of fellow EU ministers responsible for trade on Monday, with a special focus on global supply chains and the future of the European steel industry.

Altmaier, a close ally of centre-right Chancellor Angela Merkel, said Europe should not turn its back on globalisation as trade and open markets were still powerful engines that could help propel Europe out of the current economic crisis.

Still, greater autonomy coupled with the development of innovative and resilient EU value chains is needed so that Europe "can still play in the premier league of the world's economically successful regions" in the future, Altmaier added.

Asked if Europe and Germany should re-think trade ties with China, Altmaier said that everyone had to acknowledge that in the long term, trade could only work on a level playing field.

"Anyone who wants to enjoy the advantages of the free market in the European Union must also open the doors to European companies," Altmaier said.

While Germany over the past decade has benefited massively from Chinese demand for its machines and cars, officials in Berlin and Brussels have become increasingly frustrated in recent years as China has not fully delivered on its promises to engage in fair and free trade.

Energy Ministry Delegation to Embark for Afghanistan

TEHRAN (MNA) – A delegation from the Iranian ministry of energy will leave for Afghanistan today to develop mutual relations and discuss joint ventures in electricity sector.

The delegation will be led by Homayoun Ha'eri, the Iranian deputy energy minister. The establishment of a wind corridor at the Iran-Afghanistan joint border is of the important issues which are to be conferred during this trip.



Covid, Cash Crunch Lave UN Limping

GENEVA (Dispatches) - Meetings postponed and marble-clad hallways echoing empty: The coronavirus pandemic and a liquidity crunch have all but silenced the usual frenzied diplomatic wrangling at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva.

As the world grapples with multiple towering crises linked to Covid-19, fears abound that the world body is sinking into lethargia and that the already suffering multilateral system risks buckling.

"The response to the crisis must be multilateral," French Ambassador Francois Rivasseau told the UN Human Rights Council this week, stressing that it was "essential that the international organisations resume their work."

"The resumption of activities is slow and we are beginning to worry," agreed a European diplomat who asked not to be identified.

Usually bustling with delegates and UN staffers from across the world, the UN cafeteria has for weeks been eerily quiet, with a handful of masked people carrying trays of pre-portioned food past a former salad bar draped in plastic.

The dramatic slowdown at the UN's Palais des Nations headquarters has come even as host country Switzerland has remained relatively unscathed by the pandemic, dodging the strict confinement measures seen in neighbouring countries.

The UN, which usually houses thousands of staff, delegates, activists, journalists and others on any given day, decided back in March to halt all in-person events and shut its doors to all but a few dozen essential workers.

By early September, only around 30 percent of the UN Geneva Secretariat's some 2,900 staff members had returned to their offices.

The UN has since asked remote workers to come back, but on a rotational basis so as not to pass 60 percent of the pre-pandemic occupancy.

The Human Rights Council is one of the only UN bodies that has maintained physical meetings at the Palais, largely due to the tenacity of council president Elisabeth Tichy-Fisslberger of Austria, who quickly pushed through a hybrid system.

But only one representative per country delegation is allowed into the meeting hall, and the UN has barred countries and non-governmental organisations from holding their usual slew of side events on its premises during the council sessions.

Trine Heimerback, Norway's deputy permanent representative in Geneva, hailed the UN for doing its best in difficult circumstances, but voiced concern over the reduced access for civil society actors.

"It is not as inclusive as Norway at least would have liked," she told AFP.

As for other UN bodies, many have postponed or cancelled their planned assemblies and meetings. Too many, some say.

"When it comes to disarmament, the annual meetings have been postponed," another European diplomatic source said, blaming some countries who had insisted people from their capitals needed to travel in to participate.

Other countries have balked at the idea of negotiating and voting through decisions online, pointing to financial and technical challenges. "Obviously, when it comes to inter-state negotiations, it is not ideal to have these online," Heimerback said.

"We are in a business where personal contact is needed to build trust and finding solutions relies on... people spending time together. And we are blocked from doing so now," she said.



Some diplomats meanwhile complain that the anti-virus measures at the UN are too strict, and suggest that certain countries are using them as an excuse to put uncomfortable discussions on ice. "There is a risk of paralysis in the decision-making process," the first European diplomat warned.

"Multilateralism appears blocked," another diplomat said, blaming countries generally opposed to multilateral dealings, as well as a lack of clear UN decisions on how to move forward.

Even before the pandemic hit, the UN was struggling to keep up the expected high pace of international meetings amid a drawn-out liquidity crisis brought on by numerous countries failing to pay their dues on time.

The coronavirus crisis has exacerbated those financial woes.

"Contrary to what one might imagine, virtual conferences are actually more expensive for the UN than in-person meetings," Alessandra Vellucci, head of the UN information service in Geneva, told AFP. Travel restrictions and the UN's strict distancing measures have pushed most meetings online, but every virtual or hybrid meeting requires the UN to dish out "several thousand" additional dollars, she said.

This is in part due to technical costs as well as the additional staff needed to operate the platform and audio-visual infrastructure.

There is also an additional cost for translation into the required six UN languages, since interpreters tire quicker due to poorer audio quality online, so more of them are needed.

"Making these types of meetings accessible through adding sign language and closed captioning requires even more staff support," Vellucci said.

"None of these costs have been included in the approved budget for 2020."

Due to infrastructure challenges, the UN has only been able to equip four conference rooms to accommodate hybrid meetings, and budgetary constraints mean it is unable to host more than two such meetings at a time.

"Even though activities have been planned, budgeted, and approved for 2020," Vellucci said, "the shortage of funding and staffing means they cannot be fully implemented in this more complex and expensive format."

E3 Say...

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U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last month that he triggered a 30-day process at the Security Council leading to a return of UN sanctions on Iran on Saturday (2000 EDT/0000 GMT Sunday) that would also prevent a conventional arms embargo on Tehran from expiring on Oct. 18.

But 13 of the Security Council members say Washington's move is void because it is no longer a party to the nuclear deal. The United States says it can make the move because the 2015 Security Council resolution still names it as a participant.

Diplomats say few countries are likely to reimpose the measures, which were lifted under the JCPOA.

The U.S. President Donald Trump plans to issue an executive order in the coming days allowing him to impose U.S. sanctions on anyone who violates the UN arms embargo on Iran, sources have told Reuters, in a bid to reinforce the U.S. assertion that the measure has been extended indefinitely beyond Oct 18.

IAEA...

FROM PAGE 1

"This is an important principle that the Islamic Republic of Iran adheres to. Iran's cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency is defined in this context."

Following the U.S. withdrawal from the deal in 2018, Iranian officials have been asking the European signatories to the JCPOA to take an effective stand against reimposed American sanctions and open a reliable channel for trade and business in order to sustain the deal.

Tehran to Host...

FROM PAGE 1

Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union signed a preferential trade agreement last October, based on which 860 commodity items will be exchanged between Iran and the five EAEU members.

Iran's trade data show that in the past few months following the signing of the agreement, Iranian exports to these countries have increased by nearly 63 percent.

According to the spokesman of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA), the value of trade between Iran and the EAEU members reached \$2.112 billion since the implementation of the preferential trade agreement on October 27, 2019.

Some \$1.528 billion of the mentioned figure has been the share of Iran's imports and \$584 million was gained from the exports, Ruhollah Latifi said in early June.

Riyadh...

FROM PAGE 1

"According to Saudi nuclear activities, the discovery of the construction of nuclear facilities without the knowledge of the IAEA is a matter of grave concern," he added.

"History is repeating itself and Saudi Arabia is using the same way that Israel went through, and they are not committed to any obligations because they are not a member of NPT," said Iran's Ambassador to the Vienna-based international organizations.

He noted, "The IAEA, including the Board of Governors, must make it clear to the Saudis that acceptance and adherence to commitments is essential, and therefore transparency and accountability are a prerequisite for such a program."

"The IAEA must call on Saudi Arabia to immediately implement the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement," he stressed.

Gharibabadi also urged the members of IAEA, which chose to cooperate with Saudi Arabia, to be conscious in this regard and to respect their commitments under the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement.

France...

FROM PAGE 1

During a recent visit to Beirut, French President Emmanuel Macron stressed that Hezbollah had been elected by the Lebanese people and that there is a partnership between Hezbollah and other Lebanese parties.

The United States and its allies have stepped up efforts to increase pressure on the resistance in the region following the successes of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon in countering terrorist groups in the region.

Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, as key members of the Resistance Front, play a key role in countering US-Israeli conspiracies and actions in the region.

EU to Introduce Crypto-Assets Regime by 2024



LONDON (Reuters) - The European Union will introduce new rules within four years to make cross-border payments quicker and cheaper through the use of blockchain and crypto assets like stablecoins, two EU documents showed.

The European Commission is due to set out its strategy for encouraging greater use of digital finance at a time when 78% of payments in the euro zone are in cash. It also wants a rapid shift to "instant" payments generally as pandemic lockdowns showed the growing role of cashless payments.

The EU executive will present a draft law to clarify how existing rules apply to crypto assets and set out new rules where there are gaps, the documents said.

"By 2024, the EU should put in place a comprehensive framework enabling the uptake of distributed ledger technology (DLT) and crypto-assets in the financial sector," the documents said. "It should also address the risks associated with these technologies."

Stablecoins, a type of cryptocurrency often backed by traditional assets, leapt onto policymakers' agendas last year when Facebook revealed plans for its Libra token. Central banks are now studying whether to launch their own.

Brussels also wants to make it easier to share data within the financial sector to encourage competition and a wider range of services, while upholding the principle of "same risk, same rules, same regulation", the documents say.

The bloc should also have rules in place within four years to allow new customers to start using financial services quickly once anti-money laundering and identity checks have been completed, it said.

"By 2024, the principle of passporting and a one-stop shop licensing should apply in all areas which hold strong potential for digital finance," it said. Instant payment systems should become the "new normal" by the end of 2021. Instant payments are suitable for many uses beyond traditional credit transfers, in particular for physical and online purchases, which are currently dominated by payment card schemes, the documents said.

Europe Imposes Fresh Curbs as Global Cases Top 30m

MADRID (Dispatches) - Large parts of Europe on Friday geared up for broad new restrictions to stop the coronavirus and Israel enforced a second nationwide shutdown, as infections worldwide topped the 30-million mark.

Spain was set to unveil a raft of restrictions as officials in Madrid warned the capital had been overwhelmed by the virus and called for "decisive" action from central government.

Santiago Usoz, a medic working at accident and emergency in Madrid's October 12 hospital, told AFP there was a lack of both beds and staff.

"Intensive care units are overwhelmed with Covid patients," he said.

Britain and France are both rolling out new measures in the face of surging caseloads, with UK officials warning that a national lockdown could be reimposed.

Almost 950,000 people have now died from the virus since it first emerged in China late last year, Europe accounting for almost a quarter of those fatalities.

Israel imposed a three-week nationwide shutdown from 2:00 pm (1100 GMT) on Friday hours before Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year.

The measures, under which people will be limited to within 500 metres of their home, will also hit other key religious holidays including Yom Kippur.

"The economy is in freefall, people are losing their jobs, they're depressed," said 60-year-old Yael, one of hundreds who protested in Tel Aviv late on Thursday.

Meanwhile, most of a group of Hasidic Jewish pilgrims who had camped along the Belarusian border with Ukraine left on Friday after Kiev refused them entry in line with its coronavirus rules, and Israel urged them to return.

Tens of thousands of Hasidic Jews head to the central Ukrainian city of Uman every Jewish New Year to visit the tomb of Rabbi Nahman, the founder of the Breslov Hasidic movement.

Anxiety has been growing across Europe about the possible return of stringent measures.

In Britain, new measures on Friday covered about two million people in northeast England, barring them from



meeting people outside their homes and obliging entertainment venues to shut early.

The government had already imposed rules across England on Monday limiting socialising to groups of six or fewer, as daily cases reached levels not seen since early May.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock told BBC television on Friday that the government could reimpose a national lockdown.

"We're prepared to do what it takes both to protect lives and to protect livelihoods," he said.

Meanwhile, London mayor Sadiq Khan said the city's New Year's Eve fireworks display, which annually attracts tens of thousands of people, will not go ahead.

Not everyone is happy with the situation in the UK.

Music legend Van Morrison added his name to the list of artists officially fed up with lockdown measures, saying on Friday he had recorded three "protest songs" against the UK government's lockdown.

The Northern Irish singer-songwriter has called the new tracks "Born To Be Free", "As I Walked Out" and "No More Lockdown".

French authorities are also preparing tighter restrictions in several cities to curtail a resurgence after daily infections topped 10,000 twice over the last week.

Health minister Olivier Veran said Lyon and Nice would be under new rules by Saturday, after curbs on public gatherings were imposed this week in Bordeaux and Marseille.

The country's public health agency said on Friday that coronavirus deaths were trending upwards for the first time since the end of the national lockdown.

Italy, meanwhile, said it would partially reopen stadiums to allow up to 1,000 fans at open air sports events as of today.

Large sporting and entertainment events have caused major headaches for organizers forced to stay within guidelines on social distancing.

"Ratings have been flagging for award shows for years," said IndieWire TV awards editor Libby Hill. "This is, if nothing else, an opportunity to mix things up."

Kragh Andersen Takes Second Tour Stage Win

PARIS (Reuters) - Denmark's Soren Kragh Andersen claimed his second audacious solo stage win of the Tour de France on Friday with a perfectly timed attack late in the 19th stage, an undulating 166.5-km ride from Bourg en Bresse to Champagnole.

The Sunweb rider, who also won the 14th stage in Lyon with an instinctive move in the finale, jumped away from a group of late breakaway riders to give his team their third stage win this year after Marc Hirschi's victory in the 12th stage.

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Monfils Subjected to Racist Abuse Online

PARIS (Reuters) - France's Gael Monfils revealed on Friday that he had been racially abused on Instagram following his early exit at the Italian Open in Rome.

Fifth seed Monfils, who had received a bye into the second round, lost 6-2 6-4 to Dominik Koepfer on Thursday after which he received the abusive comments as personal messages, with one fan calling him a "stupid black monkey" and "slave".

Djokovic, Nadal Into Last Eight in Rome



ROME (Dispatches) - World number one Novak Djokovic and defending champion Rafael Nadal welcomed the decision to allow a limited number of fans to watch the Italian Open as the top men's seeds advanced to the quarter-finals on Friday.

Italy's government have said that 1,000 spectators can be present at the Foro Italico on Sunday's semi-finals, with matches so far being played in empty courts.

"If it's safe enough, fantastic," said Nadal after sweeping past Serb Dusan Lajovic 6-1, 6-3 in his third round match.

Djokovic battled past fellow Serb Filip Krajinovic 7-6 (9/7), 6-3, to remain on a collision course for a final showdown with Nadal for a second consecutive year.

"A thousand people is better than no people, for sure, because we all miss the fans," said Djokovic.

Men's fourth seed Matteo Berrettini, the only Italian remaining in the tournament, regretted he could not benefit from spectators for his quarter-final against Norway's Casper Rudd on Saturday.

"A thousand people isn't insignificant, it's a thousand motivations," said Berrettini.

Nadal proved too strong for 25th-ranked Lajovic, who had valiantly but vainly launched a fightback after trailing 4-0 in the second set to the Spaniard.

But Krajinovic made long-time friend Djokovic work hard to reach the quarter-finals for the 14th time, just one fewer than Nadal.

Djokovic double faulted on the first of his three set points in the first-set tiebreak but a quick break in the second put him through in a tournament he has won four times. "Never easy, I think, emotionally to play against someone that is one of my best friends for many years," said Djokovic.

The top seed is warming up for the French Open in 10 days time, having made the switch from the American hard court tour where he won the Cincinnati tournament played in Flushing Meadows before the US Open from which he was disqualified.

He next plays German qualifier Dominik Koepfer who ended the run of Italian teenager Lorenzo Musetti 6-4, 6-0.

World number two Nadal takes on Argentine

eighth seed Diego Schwartzman, who dropped a set before recovering to see off Poland's Hubert Hurkacz 3-6, 6-2, 6-4.

Nadal, 34, won his first Rome title back in 2005, and is bidding for a third consecutive crown on clay in the Italian capital and 10th in total. The 12-time French Open champion is returning to competition, having not played since winning in Acapulco in February.

Top women's seed Simona Halep and defending champion Karolina Pliskova also eased into the quarter-finals, along with two-time Rome winner Elina Svitolina.

Halep rallied from 0-3 down in the first set to see off Ukraine's Dayana Yastremska in a 7-5, 6-4 victory in one hour and 28 minutes.

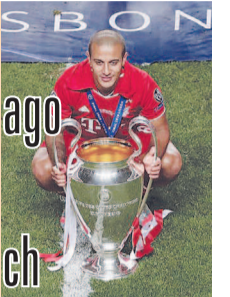
The two-time Rome finalist next meets Yulia Putintseva, who came back from 6-4, 5-2 down to dispatch fellow Kazakh Elena Rybakina, the 10th seed, 4-6, 7-6 (7/3), 6-2.

"I expect a tough battle but I feel fit," said former French Open champion Halep, a runner-up in Rome in 2017 and 2018 to Svitolina, who got past two-time Grand Slam winner Svetlana Kuznetsova 7-6 (8/6), 6-4.

Halep said she was looking forward to the "good energy" generated by the crowd. Ninth seed Garbine Muguruza advanced to her sixth quarter-final this year with a straight-sets win over last year's Rome finalist Johanna Konta.

The former French Open winner will next face US Open finalist Victoria Azarenka.

Liverpool Complete Thiago Signing From Bayern Munich



LONDON (Reuters) - Liverpool have signed Spain midfielder Thiago Alcantara from Bayern Munich on a long-term contract, the Premier League champions said on Friday.

British media reported Thiago signed a four-year deal with Liverpool after the Merseyside club agreed a transfer fee worth 20 million pounds (\$25.91 million) plus five million pounds in add-ons with European champions Bayern.

Thiago, 29, won the Bundesliga title in each of his seven seasons with Bayern and played in last month's Champions League final victory over Paris St Germain.

"I think it's an amazing feeling. I was waiting for this moment for a long time and I am very, very happy to be here," Thiago told the club's website here.

"When the years are passing, you are trying to win as much as you can - and when you win, you want to win more. I think this club describes what I am as well... I want to achieve all of the goals, win as many trophies as possible."

Thiago, capped 39 times by Spain, becomes Liverpool's second new recruit after Greece left back Kostas Tsimikas joined the club last month.

Guardiola Has No Complaints Despite Missing Out on Messi

LONDON (Dispatches) - Pep Guardiola said Friday that only Lionel Messi knows if a move to Manchester City is a possibility next year after the Argentine reluctantly decided to stay at Barcelona this season.

In an explosive interview earlier this month, Messi blasted Barcelona president Josep Maria Bartomeu, accusing him of not keeping his promise to allow him to leave for free at the end of the last campaign.

Instead, Messi was forced to stay or face a court battle with the club he has played for his entire career.

City were believed to be in the driving seat to sign the six-time Ballon d'Or winner if he left Catalonia.

"I don't have to explain anything. I think Leo explained quite well his feelings, I don't have anything to add," Guardiola said ahead of City's first game of the new season, away to Wolves on Monday.

"He is a Barcelona player, the club I love and (I have) nothing more to say."

Messi will be able to leave Barca for free next summer but his former coach Guardiola, who was Barcelona's most successful-ever manager with 14 trophies in four years between 2008 and 2012, is in the dark over whether he is keen to come to Manchester.

"I don't know," he said. "I cannot talk about the intentions from other people."

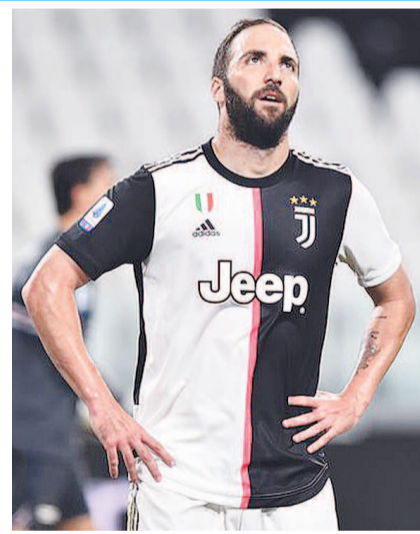
In the aftermath of Messi's U-turn, City's summer transfer business in bringing in Ferran Torres from Valencia and Nathan Ake from relegated Bournemouth seems underwhelming.

Guardiola's men won just the League Cup last season as they finished 18 points behind runaway champions Liverpool.

But after spending hundreds of millions during four years in charge at Abu-Dhabi backed City, Guardiola insisted he had no complaints over the lack of signings so far in the window.

"Since day one when I arrive here, I am more than satisfied with what I had in the team and I know the club do absolutely everything not just for me, for the team, for all of us to do our best," he said.

Higuain Joins Inter Miami After Juventus Exit



TURIN (Reuters) - Inter Miami have signed Argentine striker Gonzalo Higuain on a free transfer after he left Italian champions Juventus, the Major League Soccer (MLS) club announced on Friday.

Higuain, 32, will join the MLS side owned by David Beckham as a designated player, joining compatriot Matias Pellegrini and Mexican midfielder Rodolfo Pizarro as the team's highest-paid squad members.

Nicknamed 'the Beckham Rule', the designated player option allows MLS teams to sign up to three players outside their salary cap.

"First of all, I want to thank Inter Miami for the effort it has made to sign me. I think it will be a beautiful experience in my life," Higuain said in a statement here.

"It's what I was looking for - a new experience, a new league and a beautiful city. "I'm really happy to be here and that it's official. My goal is to try to transmit all the experience I acquired in Europe and to help the team grow."

Earlier on Friday, Serie A champions Juventus announced they had terminated Higuain's contract by mutual consent.

Former Real Madrid striker Higuain, who joined Juventus in 2016 after a three-year stint with Napoli, scored 66 goals in 149 games in all competitions for the league champions.

"There were many battles together, many goals scored, with many often decisive. Now the paths of Higuain and Juventus go their separate ways," Juventus said in a statement here.

Higuain follows former Juventus team mate Blaise Matuidi in Miami, and he will also be playing in the same league as his older brother, Federico Higuain, who plays for D.C. United.

Infantino Speaks of Forces Wanting to Drag FIFA Into the Darkness

BERN (Reuters) - FIFA president Gianni Infantino, the subject of criminal proceedings in Switzerland, spoke of forces which he said wanted to drag the global soccer body into the "darkness of the past" as he defended himself at the annual Congress on Friday.

The Congress, usually a lavish event in which the representatives of FIFA's 211 member associations enjoy first-class travel and luxury hotels, was held by video conference from FIFA headquarters in Zurich due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It lasted around 90 minutes. The proceedings against Infantino were launched by a special prosecutor looking into meetings that he had with former Swiss Attorney General Michael Lauber.

The AB-BA watchdog, which oversees the Attorney General's office, said that special prosecutor Stefan Keller had found indications of criminal conduct related to their meetings. Infantino and Lauber have denied wrongdoing. Infantino, elected in 2016 to clean up FIFA after it became embroiled in a scandal, has argued it is perfectly natural for him to meet law enforcement agencies.

"Why was I meeting the Attorney-General? Because it was my duty, my duty as FIFA president, because I want to liberate FIFA from those old toxic values," he said.

"There are still forces who want to drag us back into the darkness of the past... because they don't like reforms and because they want to hide their malpractices, who knows?"

Infantino said he would continue to fight against corruption in football and to co-operate with authorities over the world to help clean up the sport. "I am more convinced than ever to fight for these values. Those who have made up conspiracy theories will become victims to their own schemes," he said.



Mourinho Brands Spurs' Packed Schedule a Total Joke

LONDON (Reuters) - Tottenham Hotspur manager Jose Mourinho has fired a broadside at the Premier League and English Football League (EFL) as his team prepare to play three times in a week on multiple fronts.

Spurs are having to negotiate the Europa League qualifying rounds by winning three matches to get into the group stage, with Premier League and League Cup matches also in the mix.

After returning from Bulgaria where they beat Lokomotiv Plovdiv on Thursday, Tottenham visit Southampton in the Premier League today (Sunday) and Leyton Orient in the League Cup on Tuesday before a trip to Macedonia to play Shkendija on Thursday.

"The people who make these decisions, they forgot that one English team... could be Spurs, could be Wolves or Sheffield United or another one. They forgot this situation is not possible," Mourinho told reporters.

"This is a joke... a total joke, but here we go. We were very, very lucky that Leyton Orient beat Plymouth because Plymouth would be very, very far for us.

"Saturday we will be in Southampton, Wednesday we will be flying again to Macedonia and so on and so on. It's quite dramatic but I would prefer to be in this competition (Europa League) so let's fight until we can."

Mourinho also grumbled at the fact that Sunday's Premier League match would be kicking off at 12 pm, giving the squad less time to rest after returning to London early on Friday.

"We are going to try to recover the best we can," Mourinho added. "The game could be 5 pm or 6 pm to give us more time. But no, it's 12 pm and that's another great decision - so it has to be, it has to be."

