

Iran Health Ministry Spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari Said on Friday That Some 178 More Iranians Have Died From Coronavirus Disease Over the Past 24 Hours as Death Toll Mounted to 53,273

IRAN NEWS

In Reaction to the Recent remarks Of U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif Said That the U.S. Own Restrictions Sanctioned U.S. Companies Out of Iran's Market


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Tehran Rejects Renegotiation of JCPOA Under New U.S. Administration

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's permanent representative to Vienna-based international organizations says there is no necessity for a separate document to revive the 2015 nuclear deal under the new U.S. administration after the United Nations atomic watchdog chief called for a new agreement with Tehran.

In a series of tweets on Friday, Kazem Gharibabadi reiterated Iran's position on the 2015 landmark accord, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), that the agreement was not subject to renegotiation even as a new administration came to power in Washington.

"There would be no renegotiation on the deal and in case of its revival, there is no necessity for a new document on the Agency's role. It's not needed to complicate the situation," Gharibabadi wrote in one of his tweets.

The Iranian envoy also said under the accord, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was tasked with only monitoring and verifying Iran's voluntary measures, and not making assessments on how Tehran was implementing its commitments. **See Page 7**

President Inaugurates 99 Civil, Urban Development Projects

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani, on Thursday, inaugurated 99 civil and urban development projects worth over 79.5 billion rials (about \$1.89 million) across the country through video conference in the 37th series of inauguration ceremonies in the current Iranian calendar year (started on March 19).

The mentioned projects including some subway stations, renovation of urban transport fleets, and a waste-to-energy plant, were put into operation in various provinces across the country including Tehran, Khorasan Razavi, East Azarbaijan, Isfahan, Shiraz, and Mazandaran.

Since the beginning of the current calendar year, which has been named the year of "surge in production" by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Seyed Ali Khamenei, the government has urged various bodies and ministries to take the necessary measures for the realization of the year's motto.

In this regard, since the beginning of the year, every week several major projects have gone operational in various sectors. **See Page 7**

UNGA Resolution on Iran Human Rights Lacks Legal Effect



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has condemned a resolution passed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on the human rights situation in the Islamic Republic, saying the document lacks legal status.

Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Thursday that the countries behind the resolution, drafted by Canada, have a record of gross and systematic rights violations, especially through military interventions and weapons sales to dictatorial and authoritarian regimes.

The remarks came one day after the General Assembly adopted draft resolution II, dubbed "Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran," by 82 votes in favor, 30 against and 64 abstentions.

The resolution expressed "serious concern" about what it called "the alarmingly high frequency of death penalty use" in Iran and urged the country "to address the poor conditions of prisons; release women human rights defenders imprisoned for exercising their rights; end rights violations against persons belonging to ethnic, linguistic or other minorities; and ensure free presidential elections in 2021."

Khatibzadeh said that the countries behind the resolution have, under the influence of American bullying, turned a blind eye to the US economic terrorism against the Iranian nation and turned into Washington's accomplices instead of condemning its illegal and inhumane sanctions.

Iran has condemned a UN resolution, drafted and proposed by Canada, as a rehash of "groundless" claims about the Islamic Republic's human rights situation, slamming the "hypocrisy" of the "notorious" group of countries that voted for it.

He also advised Canada and other key proponents of the anti-Iran resolution to stop their "meddlesome and immoral approach" towards independent nations.

"Such non-constructive measures do not help promote the human rights situation globally but rather perpetuate negative stereotypes and political labeling against independent countries," Khatibzadeh said.

"We condemn the move by the Canadian government and other founders of this resolution, which is a clear example of abusing the transcendent concepts and values of human rights meant to advance short-sighted political motives; [We believe such resolutions] have no legal effect."

The spokesman also stressed that the repetition of fake reports by these countries against the Iranian people would only further discredit their claims of advocating human rights.

Last month, Canada proposed a similar anti-Iran resolution, which was approved at the UNGA Third Committee with 79 'yes' votes.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson had already mentioned a list of the governments initiating and sponsoring resolutions against Iran, and had denounced Canada's shameful move to rally "a group of notorious governments in the human rights sphere", including the U.S. regime, the Zionist regime, and Bahrain for training Iranian people in human rights.

Khatibzadeh had also called on the Canadian officials to focus their attention on correcting their anti-human performance inside and outside Canada, stop the Canadian regime's systematic policy of genocide of native Canadian people, and be held accountable for aiding and abetting the anti-human crimes committed by the Saudi and Israeli regimes against people of Yemen and Palestine.

ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

The West's Modus Operandi Is Excuse-Seeking

Human sciences have been acquired based on the time axis and during thousands of years, and also based on transformation of the gained experiences that with curiosity of the mankind have won cognition or in human's behavior, and his needs for repetition and emergence of experience have turned into some kind of science.

In continuity of engendering any experience which has been repeatedly attained by man, lot of time and huge costs have been spent and these costs, of course, have created the ground for interests-seeking habit of humankind. Today men have tied any one of his achieved knowledge to an experience, and has made out of that knowledge and experience a base for their superiority over others. One series of these sciences can be called social sciences or sociology that mankind through his existence has given form and experimental symbols to commonalities, bonds and relations and has defined them on course to his interests in the sociology because the infrastructure of this ontology is defined by the approach to the world and worldview, and he has defined bio-behavioral schools proportionate to his geographical surrounding in acceptance of his people, and insists on making rule of law for general obedience.

The distinguishing point of behaviors in any people or nation begins from this point and enjoys this approach that if on course to acceptances, the people seek the logic behind it and demand another approach, they are challenged. Western and Eastern theories are based on this procedure that they accuse each other of deceitful speech. The Western logic today, in a general symbol, has pretended human-orientation and evaluates others under a method called liberalism while today in East and West of the world, not all of countries and nations all have accepted liberalism. **See Page 7**

Vietnam Regrets U.S. Decision to Sanction Firm Over Iran-Related Trade

HANOI (Reuters) - Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on Thursday it regretted a U.S. decision to sanction a Vietnamese company relating to the transport of petroleum products from Iran.

"Trade relations between Vietnam and Iran are strictly civilian and involve goods that would serve the essential needs of people and are not in contrary to the resolutions of the UN," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang told a daily press briefing.

The U.S. Treasury Department on Wednesday imposed sanctions on a number of global companies, accusing them of supporting the sale of Iranian petrochemicals as Washington increases pressure on Tehran in the closing days of President Donald Trump's term.

Vietnam Gas and Chemicals Transportation Corporation was targeted over its connection with significant transactions for the transport of petroleum products from Iran, the Treasury said.

Hang said Vietnam fully observed United Nations resolutions and handled any violations accordingly, adding that Vietnam hoped the United States would remove the sanctions on the company.

Vietnam Gas and Chemicals Transportation Corp did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The United States on Wednesday also imposed sanctions on companies based in China and the United Arab Emirates.

U.S. Forces Urged to Leave Syria

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

NEW YORK - Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Iran to the UN Majid Takht-Ravanchi described U.S. troops' presence in Syria illegal and for the pursuit of covert targets, saying that these forces should leave the country.

Addressing a meeting of the United Nations Security Council on "Middle East: Syria - Political and Humanitarian" on Wednesday, he added that everyone should fully respect the sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria.

Full text of his remarks reads as follows:

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is fully committed to contributing to a political solution of the Syrian crisis. This is a message that our President and other high-ranking officials of our country conveyed to the Foreign Minister of Syria in his recent visit to Tehran, where a broad range of issues, including the ways and means of preserving the Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity and reducing the sufferings of the Syrian people were discussed extensively.

Likewise, the latest developments in the political process were discussed in recent consultations between Iran's special envoy on Syria and SRSG Pedersen, who briefed the Iranian side on the outcome of the fourth meeting of the Constitutional Committee. They also exchanged views on facilitating the successful convening of the Committee's next meeting. **See Page 7**

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Jahangiri Felicitates Qatar National Day

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's First Vice President Es'hagh Jahangiri congratulated the occasion of Qatar National Day in a message to the Arab state's prime minister.

In a message issued to Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdul Aziz al-Thani Iran's Jahangiri extended congratulations on the arrival of Qatar National Day to the named official and the Qatari nation.

In a part of this message, referring to the ties and commonalities between Iran and Qatar, he expressed hope that in the light of cooperation and efforts between the two sides, more and more development of mutual relations in all fields will be witnessed.

Enemies Trying to Make Rift Between Iran and Afghanistan

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Secretary of High Council for Human Rights Ali Bagheri-Kani said that having a lot of commonalities Iran and Afghanistan should solve their differences because the enemies try to make rift via the differences and create riots to reach their illegitimate aims.

"The foreign forces have occupied regional countries such as Afghanistan for nearly 20 years. They have not maintained peace and security, and they have hindered efforts made to develop tranquility and serenity. Afghanistan is regarded as the bedrock for narcotics production in the world. Instead of fighting narcotics and smuggling, the enemies make Afghanistan a safe haven for smugglers, and narcotics production has increased to 2000 tons," Bagheri-Kani added.

"The two nations' cultural, historical and civilization commonalities are even more than the history of foundations of some countries. Afghan nationals' presence in the Islamic Republic of Iran dates back to the beginning of Iran's Islamic Revolution, and it is a valuable investment to develop the two countries for next generation," said the official.

"The enemies do not care about Yemenis, Iraqis, Afghans, or Iranians; they just pursue their own interests. So with unification, cooperation and unity, Iran and Afghanistan can build a bright future for their posterity," Bagheri-Kani highlighted.

"Despite their deep challenges, the European countries are making their utmost



efforts to put them, aside and are aiming to make a rift between our regional countries to reach their illegitimate goals, but with unity, we must not let them be opportunists," he stated.

"If the westerners had believed in human rights, they would have sent Afghans agricultural equipment to help build their country instead of sending tanks and war weapons to destroy it," Bagheri-Kani underscored.

"They have not destroyed terrorist outfits; instead, they created ISIS and assassinated Lt. Gen. Qassem Soleimani who had been fighting terrorism," he reiterated.

"Iran-Afghanistan commonalities, including their literature, dates back to 1000 years, and Afghan nationals are active in Iran in various fields; this is a precious investment," he said.

"Afghans have not allowed anyone to rule or dominate them like the US or the West with their sophisticated weapons. They also stand still against their bullying firm and defended their country, people, and identity," he continued.

"The truth is that Iran and Afghanistan, with their transnational capacities, can be a role model for other nations," Bagheri Kani pointed out.

A ceremony on the occasion of the "World Refugee Day" was held in Tehran on Dec 17, 2020, with successful Afghan immigrants as well as the Secretary of High Council for Human Rights in Iran, Bagheri-Kani in attendance.

The Afghan nationals who live in Iran are active in scientific, art, sport and an array of other fields. They expressed their views and discussed their challenges during the ceremony.

Zarif Criticizes MEMRI Accusations

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in a message slammed Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) over antisemitism accusations against him.

"MEMRI has sunk to a new low in taking my pre-judgmented usage of a word to accuse me of Antisemitism. I was *mocking* the allegation that Iran seeks to 'throw the Jews into the sea' and reiterating our solution is a referendum with participation of ALL: Jews, Muslims, Christians," Zarif wrote in his Twitter account.

Zarif made the remarks in reaction to Middle East Media Research Institute's recent tweet in which it accused him, saying: "Iranian FM Zarif: Biden's U.S. Will Be Obligated to Rejoin JCPOA; the West Failed to Include Iran's Missiles, Regional Role in the JCPOA and Cannot Add Them Now; We Want to Resolve the Problem of Israel by Referendum, Not by Throwing the 'Kikes' into the Sea."

FM Discuss Anti-Terrorism Campaign With Portuguese Counterpart

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his Portuguese counterpart Augusto Santos Silva in a phone talk late on Wednesday reviewed bilateral relations as well as fighting terrorism.



They also dealt with ties between Iran and EU during Portugal's presidency over the bloc.

Issues of mutual interest for both sides and exchange of views on human rights were among other topics discussed during the conversation.

Meanwhile, Zarif and his Swedish counterpart Ann Linde in a telephone conversation on Wednesday reviewed the latest regional, international developments, JCPOA and bilateral relations.

They also stressed cooperation, consultation on peace and security, besides the need to provide humanitarian assistance in Yemen and Afghanistan.

Enemy's Maximum Pressure Policy Failed



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Stating that Iran will never lose to the enemy, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) said that the maximum pressure policy of the enemy has failed.

"The enemy no longer has the ability to threaten and we will never lose to the enemy," said Major General Hossein Salami.

"Neither the maximum pressure prevented the Iranian nation from continuing its path and independence, nor did the pressures of the enemy stop this country from expanding its defense power and missiles. Neither the assassination of some Iranians like Fakhri-zadeh stopped the nation from continuing the path of scientific progress, nor did the martyrdom of our great commander [Martyr Soleimani] stopped us from continuing our path," he added.

He also said the assassination of Lt Gen Soleimani did not lead to the severance of the Islamic World's ways and Iran but provided Iran with all the means to expel and destroy the enemy in the region.

Speaking on Thursday in Sari, the capital of Mazandaran province in a ceremony commemorating Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani and the martyrs from Iran's northern provinces, Salami stated: "The enemy has always sought to keep the country dependent and also the follower of his desires and inclinations, and the theory of maximum pressure also sought to impose pressure on the people, and force them to abandon their progress and achievements in order to control not only Iran but also the entire Islamic region."

"Just as maximum pressure did not divert the proud nation of Iran from the path of science, knowledge, and dignity, and did not prevent the country from expanding its defense power, the assassination of scientists does not prevent us from continuing the path of scientific progress," Salami highlighted referring to the assassination of top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh.

"Today, all the tools for defeating the enemies are in the hands of the nation and the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and our power is unique and unattainable," he noted.

Referring to the martyrdom of Lt Gen Soleimani, he stated: "The enemies thought that with the assassination of the Lt Gen Soleimani, all the ways of the Islamic world would be closed to us, but the martyrdom of Lt Gen Soleimani did not lead to the severance of the ways of the Islamic world and Islamic Iran, and all the ways were provided to expel the enemy from the region, and destroy them in the region."

Tehran Cannot Pay All Costs of Implementing JCPOA

TEHRAN (IP) - The Islamic Republic of Iran cannot pay all the costs of implementing the nuclear deal and the illegal behavior of others, Deputy Foreign Minister says.

Speaking at the 17th meeting of the JCPOA Joint Commission on Wednesday, which was held in a video conference, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi criticized the recent positions of European governments after the assassination of Iranian nuclear and defense scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh.

"Instead of condemning the brutal assassination of an Iranian nuclear scientist, three European governments condemned the legal punishment of a criminal," Araqchi noted while referring to the three country's position on Ruhollah Zam's execution.

The head of the Iranian delegation stated at the JCPOA Joint Commission meeting: "The European parties always want only Iran to be restrained against all illegal and hostile behavior, whether U.S. sanctions or sabotage in Natanz and the assassination of nuclear scientists. While Iran cannot bear all the costs of implementing the JCPOA and the illegal behavior of



others, others must pay to maintain the JCPOA."

"Iran has always been clear about its position and is ready to fulfill its obligations under the nuclear deal after the U.S. returns to the nuclear deal," Araqchi said.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister also stressed that the three Europeans, which consider themselves committed to democracy and its rules, should not expect Iran to ignore the principles of democracy and not implement the law passed by the parliament.

He added: "The Iranian government is committed and obliged to implement what approved in the parliament after going through their legal steps."

The Joint Commission of JCPOA was held on Wednesday, with the participation of representatives of China, France, Germany, Russia, Britain, and Iran at Deputy Foreign Ministers' level.

Coordinator of the Joint Commission of JCPOA stated after Wednesday's meeting: The participants in today's meeting agreed to hold an informal meeting of the Foreign Ministers of JCPOA member states on December 21 via videoconferencing.

Iran Signs Contracts to Export Arms

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami unveiled plans for the export of homegrown weapons under new contracts with a number of foreign countries.

In comments, the Iranian defense minister said contracts have been signed with a number of countries to export arms.

He noted that negotiations are underway for the purchase of arms from various countries as well. "The Islamic Republic of Iran's arms cooperation with some countries has been pursued very well in the period that the Americans made attempts and imposed arms sanctions on us, and after the termination of embargo," Brigadier General Hatami said.

He was referring to the termination of the UN arms restrictions on Iran in October, five years after adoption day of the JCPOA in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2231.

In comments after the termination of the UN arms embargo, Hatami said the sales of Iranian weapons would outstrip the imports.

Iran Opposes Any Act of Sabotage Against Maritime Safety, Int'l Trade

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran opposes any act of sabotage against maritime safety and international trade security after an explosion hit a fuel tanker off the Saudi port of Jeddah.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran rejects any move and act of sabotage against maritime safety and security and freedom of international trade," Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

He stressed the Islamic Republic of Iran's unwavering position on the need to safeguard regional stability and security. Khatibzadeh expressed hope that countries in the region would step up their efforts to strengthen cooperation in providing maritime security, combating piracy, and fighting illicit drug trafficking in order to achieve lasting regional security.

The remarks came two days after an oil tanker off the Saudi Arabian port city of Jeddah suffered an explosion. "The attack resulted in a small fire, which emergency units successfully extinguished. The incident did not result in any casualties, and there was no damage caused to the unloading facilities, nor any effect on supplies," a spokesman of the kingdom's Ministry of Energy said, condemning the attack as "terrorist."

The Singapore-flagged oil tanker's owner also confirmed it was struck by a blast in the fuel terminal in Jeddah, a key Red Sea port and distribution center for oil giant Saudi Aramco.

The company, Hafnia, said all 22 sailors on board the BW Rhine escaped without injury, but warned it was possible some oil leaked out from the site of the blast.

Tehran Reports Seizure of Hundreds of Tons of Narcotics to UN

VIENNA (IP) - Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the Vienna-based international organizations announced the discovery of more than 778 tons of various drugs by the Iranian police in the first 10 months of 2020.

Sending a letter to the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Kazem Gharibabadi stated: the highest volume of drug detection is related to opium 621,388 kg.

"In the first 10 months of 2020, the Iranian police had 1,914 armed clashes with drug traffickers, which led to the destruction of 1,886 gangs and the transit and narcotics network. Unfortunately, 9 Iranian soldiers were martyred during the clashes," Gharibabadi added.

The Iranian diplomat also criticized some countries for not accepting joint responsibility, saying that the Islamic Republic is a leading role in the fight against smuggling narcotics.

Joint Defense Industry Can Unite Muslim World

TEHRAN (MNA) – The Chairman of the General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces believes that creating a common defense industry can improve Muslims' unity in the world. Major General Mohammad Baqeri said on Thursday that the Islamic World with its geopolitical and geostrategic position as well as natural and human capacities and resources has numerous capabilities to become a world-class power in the global geopolitical system.

Addressing the Sixth Congress of Muslim Geographers held online on Thursday, he added that the valuable goal of this congress is of special and extraordinary importance to the geographers of the Islamic world as the scope and definition of geography goes far beyond the mere description and analysis of natural and human phenomena.

The responsibility of geographers of the Islamic world goes far beyond the stage of describing and analyzing the geographical realities of the world and the Islamic countries; rather they should provide a solution for the development and synergy of all members and countries of the Islamic world.

Islamic world holds some two-thirds of the world's fossil energy resources, the most important straits essential for the world maritime trade and attractive markets, Bagheri said, noting that they should make optimal use of the assets.

He asserted that establishing a common defense industry would improve Muslims' unity.

Calling on the Islamic countries to iron out differences and move toward a political coalition to demand a permanent status for the Islamic world in the UN Security Council, he said that they should set up joint Islamic banks and joint trade market exchanging goods with preferential tariffs and create Islamic world's media and radio and TV unions.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:01
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:14
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:40
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:10

148. Allah loveth not that evil should be noised abroad in public speech, except where injustice hath been done; for Allah is He who heareth and knoweth all things.
149. Whether ye publish a good deed or conceal it or cover evil with pardon, verily Allah doth blot out (sins) and hath power (in the judgment of values).
Surah 4. Women (148 - 149)

Tehran, Islamabad to Launch Four New Joint Border Markets

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN- Pakistan Ambassador to Tehran Rahim Hayat Qureshi on Wednesday met Head of Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA) Masoud Khansari and during the meeting the Pakistani diplomat announced that four markets will be launched at the joint border points in the upcoming weeks.

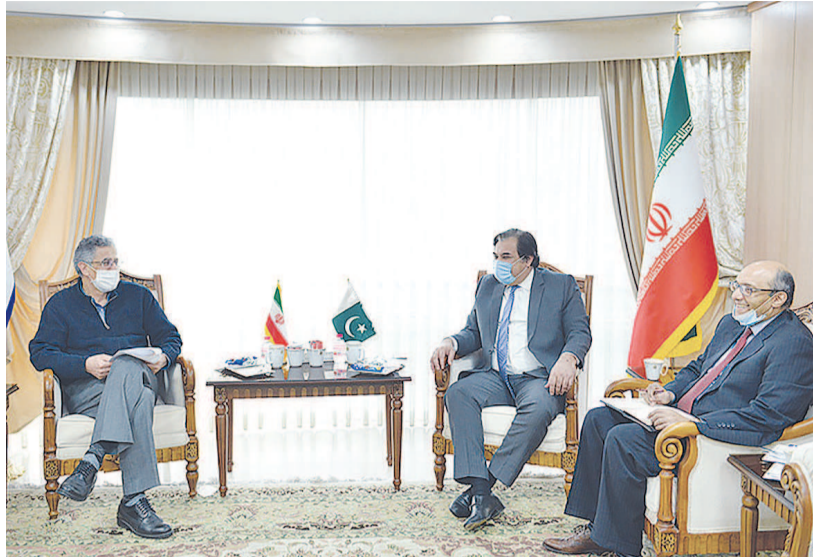
According to reports, in the meeting Pakistan Ambassador Hayat Qureshi said that direct talks between private sectors of Iran and Pakistan are currently underway with the initiative of TCCIMA and this will lead to serious developments in bilateral economic relations of both countries, adding that in the upcoming weeks four new joint border markets will open.

Hayat Qureshi who has recently started his work as Pakistan Envoy to Tehran emphasized the significance of boosting bilateral economic relations and added that during Iran Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif's recent visit to Islamabad and his meeting with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and other Pakistani officials, expansion of bilateral ties was one of the main topics of talks.

He also pointed to the strategic and geographical position of Iran in the region and the opportunities which will happen in the near future, adding that chambers of commerce of both countries as the executive arms of private sectors will have important role on course to developing bilateral relations.

He also expressed his gratitude over holding specialized trade webinars by TCCIMA and announced opening of four new joint border markets in upcoming weeks, adding that the new joint border terminal of Iran and Pakistan is to open this week with presence of officials of both countries which can help the trade volume of both countries to increase significantly.

Meanwhile, Head of TCCIMA Mr. Khansari, for his part, pointed to the amicable and good relations of both countries in the past and in different periods, adding that despite having good relations, the economic relation of both states has not been satisfactory despite their good



economic capacities and it has not been as good as their cultural ties. He then notified that private sector can play its role in expansion of bilateral economic relations more than ever.

Khansari also pointed to the visit of TCCIMA delegation to the cities of Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan and expressed hope that after containment of coronavirus and return of normal life to the world, the exchange of delegations between Iran and Pakistan would resume.

He also pointed to the actions of the international affairs department of TCCIMA at least in the past year for improving trade relations with neighboring states and said both sides through cooperation of chamber of commerce and Pakistan Embassy and Iranian Counsellors can identify the problems and weaknesses and find the proper solutions for the woes.

In recent weeks, TCCIMA in collaboration with chamber of commerce of city of Lahore has held a webinar for boosting economic relations and this week TCCIMA is to hold another joint trade webinar and this time in collaboration with chamber of commerce of the city of Karachi.

Also in the meeting, head of international affairs department of TCCIMA Mr. Hesamuddin Hallaj, for his part, called for a joint workgroup between TCCIMA and Pakistan Embassy and holding regular monthly meetings for removing hurdles in way of developing cooperation between Iran and Pakistan. He said re-export of goods that both sides have slapped ban on their imports despite their preferential trade agreement can be a practical solution for resolving the problem of not implementing the agreement.

Iran Trade With ECO Exceeds \$5.7b

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The spokesman of Iran's Customs Office said on Thursday that Iranian trade with members of Economic Cooperation Organization has surpassed 5.7 billion dollars in the past eight months of the current Iranian year (starting on March 20).

Ruhollah Latifi said that Iran has exported 7,430,423 tons of goods to ECO member states, which was worth 2,945,623,049 dollars. The Iranian export to the members of ECO involved liquefied gas, petroleum products, fish, shrimps, tomato paste, vegetables, fresh and dried fruits, saffron, dried nuts, etc.

In the same period, Iran has imported 3,481,304 tons of goods with the value of 2,817,313,451 dollars. The imported items to Iran from ECO member states have mostly been raw materials, thread strings, cotton, barley, lentil, beans, different kinds of acid, industrial equipment and agricultural machinery.

Members of ECO are Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. Latifi said from the ECO members, Iran has had the biggest trade with Afghanistan, Turkey, and Azerbaijan.

He said Afghanistan is the biggest trade partner of Iran among ECO member states as the country's exports to Afghanistan stand at around \$1.2b.

180 Urban Projects to Be Inaugurated by End of 12th Gov't

TEHRAN (IP) - Interior minister said on Thursday that by the end of the 12th government, 180 urban projects worth 25 trillion Tomans will be put into operation.

At the inauguration of the national projects of the Ministry of Interior, which was held in the presence of the president today (Thursday), Abdolreza Rahmani-Fazli stated that one of the most important things that were done was the formation of the Metropolitan Commission.

The Metropolitan Commission directly provides the government with decision-making and submission of bills and arrangement of legislation, he noted.

Today, 99 significant projects worth 7,950 billion Tomans will be put into operation, and also, another 180 projects with 25,000 billion Tomans will be put into operation by the end of this government, Rahmani-Fazli highlighted.

Waste management was one of the unresolved issues of the municipalities and the problem of the general public, especially for the people of the northern provinces. In this regard, a law was passed and sent to the parliament, and the task was determined, he concluded.

Iranian Universities Conclude 8,400 Contracts With Industrial Sector

TEHRAN (IP) - Iran's science minister says Iranian universities and research centers have concluded 8400 active contracts with the industrial sector, which has resulted in a turnover of 2100 billion tomans.

Mansour Gholami, Minister of Science, Research and Technology of Iran, made the remarks at the joint opening ceremony of the 8th Iranian Laboratory Equipment and Materials Exhibition and the 21st Exhibition of Research, Technology, and Techno Market Talents, which was dubbed as "Iran-Made Exhibition" and was held virtually Thursday.

He added: "Iranian universities have gained a special place in the field of science production in recent years, and this ability of Iranian researchers to conduct research, both quantitatively and qualitatively, has placed Iran among the famous countries."

The minister of science, research and technology of Iran said: "We have seriously pursued paying attention to applied research in various fields of science in universities and research centers."

Mansour Gholami added: "Iranian graduates present good ideas, but in order to achieve those ideas, the support of the private sector is needed."

He concluded: "The target community of Iranian knowledge-based companies for their products, in addition to the domestic market in Iran, must also include foreign markets, because if we want to break the deadlock of the oil-dependent economy, products must be offered to the world markets."

Iranian Knowledge-Based Companies' Progress "Outstanding"

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's vice president for science and technology said that the progress of knowledge-based companies in recent years has been outstanding and the Iranian people see the impact of these companies in their lives.



At the joint opening ceremony of the 8th Iranian Laboratory Equipment and Materials Exhibition and the 21st Exhibition of Research, Technology, and Techno Market Talents, which was dubbed as "Iran-Made Exhibition" and was held virtually this morning, Sorana Sattari said the purpose of holding the Iran-Made Exhibition has always been for Iranian compatriots of different ages to use equipment made in Iran for research work and to create this self-confidence in them.

He stated that along with Iranian universities, 44 science and technology parks, 6 to 10 thousand startups and more than 150 private sector accelerators have been created, and 5500 Iranian knowledge-based companies have sold about 120 trillion tomans last year. He noted that Iranian knowledge-based companies created 300,000 direct jobs last year, and the recruits are educated Iranians. There is a process in Iran that can attract elites, that is, Iranian students abroad return to Iran in this system, Sattari explained. "In the last 4 years, we have helped to return 2,000 people from 100 prestigious universities in the world to Iran, and a significant number of these people work in knowledge-based companies."

Meanwhile Iran has unveiled four modern homegrown products in the domains of health and electronic transport.

The four products are supported by the Science and Technology Department of the Presidential Office and will be commercialized to enter markets. The products include three in the health sector and one in advanced electronic transport

One of the products unveiled was coronavirus sampling swabs which are flexible, durable and comfortable for patients who feel no pain when the product is used on them for getting COVID-19 samples. Another product was a cochlear implant system which meets one of the urgent needs of the hearing impaired.

The third product unveiled in the health sector was an infrared non-contact thermometer, which shows body temperature with high precision. The achievement obviates the need to import such products. And the fourth product was a state-of-the-art electric motor which could be used in such products as industrial fans, electric vans, modern electric motorcycles, etc. This comes as plans have been set in motion to incorporate the technology and know-how used by knowledge-based firms into industry.

Payman Salehi, the deputy head of the Science and Technology Department of the Presidential Office for innovation and commercialization, says one of the strategic priorities of the department's Center for Major National Projects is to help commercialize innovative projects until products hit the market and part of domestic needs are met.

"Given the technological needs by different industries, knowledge-based companies can meet those needs and steer the country through the path to progress," he said.

Iran Wants to Use its Assets with Turkish Banks to Buy Goods

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has called on Turkey to find a way for Iran to tap into its assets with Turkish banks to purchase the commodities it needs directly from other countries through Turkish banks.

The demand was made by Iranian Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade Alireza Razmhosseini in a videoconference with Turkish Trade Minister Ruhsar Pekcan. "Iran and Turkey are two neighboring, friendly and brotherly countries which have always had broad trade exchanges in addition to historical and cultural commonalities," said the Iranian minister.

He said Iran-Turkey trade exchanges have hovered around \$10 billion over the past five years.

"Due to the coronavirus outbreak and its impacts on business and trade, the volume of mutual trade exchanges stood at \$4.3 over the second and third quarters of 2020, and we seek to increase this trade and the necessary potential exists to do that," said Razmhosseini. He underlined the current international situation is prepared for the enhancement of trade exchanges between the two countries. "It is possible to promote exchanges in the trade domain and the two countries stand ready to expand their relation in that regard," he noted.

He further added Tehran will follow up on talks held and agreements reached in a meeting of the Joint Iran-Turkey Commission back in August, so that the two countries can increase their trade within a "win-win" framework.

He said Iran needs commodities like grain, soyabean meal, oil seeds, and oil and in case Turkey produces those commodities, Iran is interested in buying them from Turkey otherwise it can provide them through Turkish intermediary



companies by using its assets in Turkish banks.

Meanwhile Pekcan, for his part, said that Turkey will stand by Iran in hard times and it will prioritize foodstuff and medicines and it will lay the grounds that Iran could use its banking assets for imports of foodstuff and medicines.

He also announced his country's readiness for enhancing bilateral trade volume based on a win-win policy and for boosting cooperation especially in the coronavirus condition. He referred to his phone talks with Chief of Staff of the President of Iran Mr. Mahmoud Vaezi, saying that Turkey is ready to open the way for traders and entrepreneurs of both countries for enhancing the bilateral trade volume and economic exchanges.

Pekcan also pointed to the videoconference between economic officials of both countries in August 2020 and said during the videoconference both sides underlined full implementation of the approvals of the 27th joint economic commission of both countries.

He also underscored the full implementation of preferential trade agreement of both countries which was signed in January 2015. A study compiled recently by the Tehran Chamber of Commerce (TCCIM) shows Iran's exports to Turkey suffered a considerable decline in the 10 months to the end of October mainly because a drop in crude and oil product shipments.

Excerpts of the TCCIM analysis published last week showed that shipments from Iran to Turkey had dropped nearly 74 percent year on year in October to \$795 million.

The report said that the declined exports of crude and other oil products, including petrochemicals, were mainly a result of American sanctions on Iran's energy sector.

Iran Gifts Islamic Books to Turkey's Presidential Library

TEHRAN (IQNA) - The Iranian Cultural Center in Ankara gifted 430 books on Islamic issues to the the Presidential Library in Turkey.

According to the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, Mahmoud Sedqizadeh, they were gifted in a meeting between the Iranian cultural attaché in Ankara and Han Tughlu, head of the library.

They also discussed developing mutual cooperation at the meeting. The books include a collection of Dehkhoda Dictionary, Encyclopedia Islamica, Encyclopedia of Shia Islam, Encyclopedia of the Muslim World and some other literary, historical and religious reference books.

Introducing the activities of the library, the Turkish official said that it is the largest library in Turkey located inside the Presidential Complex in Ankara.

The Library is 125,000 square meters in area and can accommodate up to 5,000 readers at a time.

He added that the board of directors of Turkey's public libraries decided in 2017 to establish a library to collect electronic copies of rare books and manuscripts. The Nation's Library of the Presidency, also referred to as the Presidential Library by common people has a collection of over four million books in 134 different languages, and 120 million articles and reports.

The Presidential Library, which has the largest incipient collection in the world, was officially inaugurated by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on February 20, 2020. In addition to receiving a copy of materials printed in the country, as a depository library, the Presidential Library also receives books, in collaboration with the Foreign Ministry, from every country where Turkey has a diplomatic mission. Referring to the importance of Iranian reference books, the director of the Turkish library expressed readiness to cooperate with Iranian libraries to exchange experts and books and manuscripts. The Iranian official said in his turn that the cultural center is also ready to provide the library with more Iranian reference books.

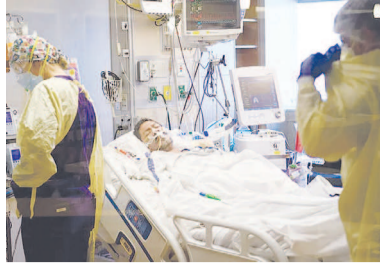


U.S. Sets 24-Hour Records With over 3,700 COVID

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States set a grim double record Wednesday notching more than 3,700 deaths and more than 250,000 new Covid-19 cases in 24 hours, according to figures from Johns Hopkins University.

The country has seen a spectacular spike in COVID infections for more than a month now, with some 113,000 people currently hospitalized due to the virus, also a new record, according to data from the Department of Health and Human Services.

The tally marks the third time in the past week that the United States has crossed the 3,000 deaths threshold. The previous 24-hour record was set in late April at the height of the country's first wave -- which never totally ended.



EU Extends Economic Sanctions on Russia

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - The European Union prolonged on Thursday its economic sanctions on Russia for its intervention in Ukraine by another six months, the bloc's council of governments said in a statement.

The EU hit Russia's energy, financial and arms sectors over Moscow's role in the conflict in Ukraine, and prolonged them repeatedly as the Kremlin vows not to return the Crimea peninsula to Kyiv and a frozen conflict has taken hold in Ukraine's east.

The sanctions will be formally prolonged until July 31, 2021, with leaders considering the next rollover in June.



Putin Says Navalny Not Worth Poisoning



MOSCOW (Reuters) - President Vladimir Putin said media reports that Russian state security agents had poisoned opposition politician Alexei Navalny were part of a U.S.-backed plot to try to discredit him, saying Navalny was not important enough to be a target.

Navalny, one of Putin's leading critics, was airlifted to Germany in August after collapsing on a domestic flight. Laboratory tests in three European countries, confirmed by the global chemical weapons watchdog, established he was poisoned with a Soviet-style Novichok nerve agent but Russia denies this and says it has yet to be shown any evidence.

Citing flight records and mobile phone geolocation data, investigative website Bellingcat and Russian media outlet The Insider published results of a joint investigation on Monday carried out in cooperation with Der Spiegel and CNN.

The investigation, which Navalny endorsed, said it had identified a team of assassins from Russia's FSB security service, who had stalked him for years. It named the intelligence officers and poison laboratories it said were behind the operation. Putin on Thursday dismissed the investigation, saying it was made up of information provided by U.S. intelligence services.

"It's a trick to attack the leaders (of Russia)," Putin told his annual news conference.

He suggested Navalny enjoyed the support of U.S. intelligence, an allegation Navalny denies. It was therefore right, said Putin, that Russian security agents kept an eye on him.

"But that absolutely does not mean he needs to be poisoned," said Putin. "Who needs him?"

"If someone had wanted to poison him they would have finished him off," he added.

Putin avoids mentioning Navalny's name in public and only referred to him as "the patient from the Berlin clinic".

Kira Yammysh, Navalny's spokeswoman, said on Twitter that Putin's comments meant he had confirmed that Navalny was being followed by FSB agents.

Fielding a question about a series of recent media investigations into people close to him, including one of his daughters, Putin said they looked like Washington's revenge for alleged Russian hacking of U.S. elections, something he has repeatedly denied.

"It's revenge and an attempt to influence public opinion in our country to try to interfere in our domestic politics," Putin said.

Putin on Thursday also blamed the United States for starting a new arms race, saying Moscow had been forced to develop hypersonic weapons in response.

Responding to a question about the risk of a new arms race, Putin told his annual news conference: "It happened already, and this is obvious."

Putin earlier urged Washington to agree a one-year extension of the New START treaty, the last remaining agreement maintaining the nuclear balance between the two countries, which expires in February.

Macron Positive Covid-19 Test Pushes European Leaders Into Isolation

PARIS (Dispatches) - A host of European leaders and top French officials rushed into isolation on Thursday after President Emmanuel Macron tested positive for Covid-19, upending political agendas across the continent.

A flurry of contact-tracing followed France's confirmation that Macron had become the latest world leader to contract Covid-19, following the likes of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US President Donald Trump.

Macron, 42, was tested after the "onset of the first symptoms" and will now self-isolate for seven days in accordance with national regulations, his office said in a statement.

"He will continue to work and carry out his activities remotely," the statement said.

The timing is awkward for Macron, who is trying to handle the pandemic crisis in his own country while keeping a close eye on Brexit talks and a host of other international issues. Officials emphasized he was still working and was taking part in a conference on economic development on Thursday afternoon.



Spain's Lower House Approves Bill Legalizing Euthanasia

MADRID (Reuters) - Spain took a big step towards legalising euthanasia on Thursday, with the lower house of parliament approving a bill allowing the seriously ill to choose to end their life, despite staunch opposition from the political right and religious groups.

The bill, which allows for euthanasia and assisted suicide for people with "serious and incurable" or debilitating diseases that cause "unbearable suffering," was passed by 198-138 vote.

A few dozen protesters rallied outside to a funeral beat of several drums.

The document will now go to the senate, which can sign it into law or send it back to congress with amendments. Without amendments, it could be approved by spring 2021. If passed, Spain would become the fourth country in the European Union to legalise the practices after Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

With the only political opposition coming from the conservative People's Party and the far-right Vox, the proposal authored by the leftist coalition government has caused fierce debate inside and outside parliament.

"The euthanasia law is a defeat for civilisation and a victory for the culture of death, for those who believe that some lives are more worthy than others," Vox leader Santiago Abascal said in a video uploaded to social media.

Outside parliament, protesters brandished skull-and-crossbones flags and a banner reading "Government of death."

"It is a law that goes against all principles, all my principles," said Candela, a protesting biologist who did not give her surname. Euthanasia, when a physician actively helps a patient die, and assisted suicide, where a doctor provides a lethal substance for the patient to administer, are considered homicide by the Roman Catholic Church, which for many years set the tone as Spain's moral authority.

With countries including Portugal and New Zealand debating similar legislation, the Vatican doubled down on its position in September, issuing a document that described politicians who support such laws as accomplices to murder.

Italy PM Flies in as Libya Frees Sicilian Fishermen

ROME (AFP) - Eighteen fishermen including eight Sicilians who were held in Libya for more than three months have been freed, Italy's prime minister and foreign minister said Thursday after visiting Benghazi to secure their release.

"Our fishermen are free," Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio posted on Facebook, alongside a picture of the men held for 108 days for allegedly fishing in Libyan territorial waters.

"In a few hours they will be able to hug their families and loved ones."

The plight of the eight Italians, six Tunisians, two Indonesians and two Senegalese has gripped Italy since they were seized on September 1 by the forces of strongman Khalifa Haftar, who controls Benghazi.

Di Maio said he and Conte had met with Haftar, who is waging war against the UN-recognised government of Prime Minister Faye al-Sarraj in the west.

"The government continues to firmly support the stabilisation process in Libya. This is what Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and I reiterated to Haftar today during our talks in Benghazi," he said.

Conte tweeted a picture of the men with the comment "Have a good trip home". In the Italians' hometown of Mazara del Vallo in Sicily, there were cheers, hugs and tears of joy among relatives and friends who gathered in the local council chamber to hear the news.

"The fishermen have already spoken with their families and are on board their two fishing boats, Antartide and Medina," which had also been seized, local mayor Salvatore Quinci said.

He reported one of the fishermen telling his wife: "I have to leave you now and end the phone call, because I have to start the boat's engine."

"I'm so happy. I have no words to express the joy I feel and the happiness of thinking that he will soon be able to hug him again," the daughter of one of the men, who was not named, told the ANSA news agency.

The fishermen of Mazara del Vallo have for generations relied on Mediterranean waters north of Libya for their livelihoods but see their futures increasingly threatened.

As fish stocks have dwindled and trawler capabilities improved, their boats have sailed further from port and into waters over which Libya has claimed sovereignty.

The area is a fishing ground for the gambero rosso, or red prawn, a crustacean prized by gourmet chefs.

It has seen numerous clashes, intensifying in 2005 when Libya's then leader Moamer Kadhafi proclaimed that its protected fishing zone extended 74 nautical miles from the coast, in defiance of international standards.



Top U.S. General Meets Taliban in Qatar



DOHA (Dispatches) - The top United States general met Taliban representatives this week in Qatar, urging them to reduce the level of violence and move more swiftly towards a political solution in Afghanistan, the U.S. military said on Thursday.

The previously unannounced meeting in Doha with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, comes as negotiators representing the Afghan government and the Taliban take a break until January 5 when they will continue to work on an agenda.

Milley also met Taliban officials in June but that meeting was not publicly announced, news agencies reported. The two meetings are believed to be the first time a chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has met the Taliban, although Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the top U.S. military official in Afghanistan have met them before.

During his trip, Milley also met Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in Kabul. "The most important part of the discussions that I had with both the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan was the need for an immediate reduction in violence," Milley told reporters who accompanied him. "Everything else hinges on that."

There has been a rise in violence in recent weeks, undermining the best hope for ending the war that has ravaged Afghanistan since 2001.

Army General Scott Miller, the top commander of US and coalition forces in Afghanistan, said in an interview at his Kabul office on Wednesday that the Taliban has stepped up attacks on Afghan forces, particularly in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, and on infrastructure.

"My assessment is, it puts the peace process at risk — the higher the violence, the higher the risk," Miller said. He meets at least once a month with Taliban negotiators as part of Washington's efforts to advance a peace process.

Pompeo said this month that violence in Afghanistan was "unacceptably high" and said Washington had asked the warring parties to "stand back and indeed stand down". In the so-called Doha agreement signed last February by the U.S. and the Taliban, the administration of President Donald Trump agreed to a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops, going down to zero troops by May 2021 if the agreement's conditions are upheld.

Shanon
(adviser)

Elahieh Apt (\$3000)
260sq.m, 4bdrs
S/p, Sauna
J, balcony
yard, & pkg
Fully Furn

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

Parsian

(\$2800)
Kamranieh Apt
300sq.m, 3bdrs
S/p, S, J, & F.F

Zaferanieh Apts
(\$1500) 2bdrs, S/p, F.F
(\$2200) 3bdrs, S/p, F.F
(\$3000) 4bdrs, S/p, F.F

(\$10000)
Farmanieh bldg
6storey, 30bdrs
S/p, yard, & pkgs

Sa`adat abad (\$1400)
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Euro Zone Economy Exceeded Expectations in December

LONDON (Reuters) - Euro zone economic performance far exceeded expectations this month - although it still contracted slightly - as a second wave of coronavirus infections and renewed lockdowns had less of an impact than earlier in the year, a survey showed.

Manufacturers reported strong growth, fuelled by rising exports and a booming performance from Germany, but the

services industry remained in decline as social distancing restrictions were kept in place.

IHS Markit's flash composite PMI, seen as a good guide to economic health, soared to 49.8 in December from November's 45.3, just shy of the 50 mark separating growth from contraction. A Reuters poll had predicted a much shallower rise to 45.8.



U.S., EU Deal on Aircraft Subsidies Urged to Include China Clause

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States and Europe should agree to cooperate in opposing any future "hurtful" subsidies used by China to build up its commercial aircraft industry, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer told Reuters in an interview.

Lighthizer said he was working to settle a 16-year-old dispute between Washington and Brussels over past government aid to aircraft manufacturers, but expressed frustration that current World Trade Organization rules would not prevent future subsidies by the European Union or China.

"If this plays out, they can start a new subsidy tomorrow, and drag out that litigation for five or six years, and there's nothing under the WTO that you can do about it at all," Lighthizer said in a rare interview late on Tuesday.

He said he had made several proposals to settle the matter before the Trump administration leaves office on Jan. 20.

"In every proposal I've made, I've said we have to have a clause that says, that whatever we agree to, if China starts to do massive subsidies in this area and it's hurtful, we have to be able to work together to solve that problem," he said.

The comments address what many trade experts have long regarded as the end game of the 16-year trade dispute - a transatlantic deal that the two sides could use to curb future subsidies by China in its fast-growing aerospace industry.

The WTO has ruled against every past use of government loans to develop new airplanes, but has not outlawed future subsidies.

U.S. and European negotiators have been engaged in intensive talks about ending the dispute over government aid to Europe's Airbus, which is politically backed by Britain, France, Germany and Spain, and U.S. aid to planemaker Boeing.

Emily Haber, Germany's ambassador to the United States, on Wednesday urged quick action to resolve the dispute, calling it a distraction from bigger issues that require joint action such as climate change and the pandemic.

She said a solution was urgently needed given the harmful impact of the coronavirus pandemic on aircraft manufacturers in both regions and moves by China to develop rival models.

European diplomats said the sides remained at odds, but expected to eventually reach an agreement with Lighthizer or possibly his successor.

The U.S. side has insisted on repayment of damages, a proposal rejected by EU negotiators, according to sources familiar with the matter. Reflecting U.S. concerns about the WTO, Washington is also seeking a bilateral dispute settlement mechanism that could be modeled on the system adopted in its U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade agreement, said one of the sources. Both sides have imposed tariffs against each other's aircraft and a range of food and liquor products after receiving a green light from the WTO, which found both engaged in illegal subsidies in the past. The EU in November said it would impose tariffs on \$4 billion of U.S. goods, while U.S. tariffs on \$7.5 billion of EU products have been in place since 2019.

BOJ Loads Up \$6b in Ammunition to Combat Market Turmoil

TOKYO (Reuters) - The Bank of Japan will tap \$6 billion in cash from a government account in a rare arrangement to ensure it has enough ammunition to combat any market disruptions caused by a recent resurgence in coronavirus infections.

Under the arrangement announced on Wednesday, the central bank will buy dollar cash from the Ministry of Finance any time through to the end of March next year at the prevailing market exchange rate at the time.

It will be the first time the BOJ will buy dollars outright from the MOF, underscoring the bank's caution over the risk of renewed dollar-funding strains heading into the end of the year. The move is "in preparation for smoother execution of the Bank of Japan's operations, such as international financial cooperation and foreign currency supply to financial institutions," the BOJ said in the statement.

The decision will likely give the BOJ flexibility to address any dollar shortages domestic financial institutions face ahead of the year-end and the March closure of Japan's fiscal year.

"Dollar funding is not a problem now, but perhaps it could become a problem in the future. This is a reasonable move for the BOJ," said Tohru Sasaki, head of Japan markets research at JP Morgan Securities.

"In the past, the BOJ has relied on the Federal Reserve. But if they do this transaction with the finance ministry they don't have to rely on the Fed," he said. The MOF, for its part, can use the yen proceeds to pay for the rising cost of servicing Japan's huge public debt diversify its foreign reserves by adding more gold, analysts said.

"The MOF wanted to raise yen and the BOJ dollars, so it was a win-win situation for both. By trading with each other internally, they could avoid affecting the currency market," said Izuru Kato, chief economist at Totan Research. The MOF currently holds \$1.3 trillion in foreign currencies, deposits and securities, as well as \$43 billion worth of gold.

Japanese financial institutions have repeatedly faced dollar funding strains in times of market stress, though the BOJ's dollar-funding operations have drawn little demand in recent months as markets remain stable.

The BOJ, along with other major central banks, have dollar swap arrangements with the Fed, which was put in place to deal with the global financial crisis a decade ago.

"Our response this time was extremely extraordinary under the coronavirus circumstances," a finance ministry official told Reuters. The BOJ eased policy in March and April mostly by ramping up asset purchases and creating a new facility to funnel funds via financial institutions to cash-strapped firms hit by COVID-19.



Aramco May Have to Sell Assets

DUBAI (Reuters) - Oil giant Aramco, whose dividend remains vital to helping Saudi Arabia contain a huge deficit, may have to sell assets and borrow more to fulfil its fiscal role amid uncertainty in oil prices, market specialists said.

While Saudi Arabia has increased non-oil revenues this year, Aramco still accounted for more than half its total income, and will be key to containing a budget shortfall this year forecast at 298 billion riyals (\$79.4 billion), or 12% of GDP. Aramco, the world's largest oil producer, listed in 2019 in a record \$29.4 billion share sale, but the government still owns 98.2% of the group.

Though its profits plummeted this year as oil prices tumbled during the COVID-19 pandemic, the company is sticking to a promised \$75 billion annual dividend that will go almost entirely to the government.

While it is not obliged to maintain such a high payout, economists expect the firm to continue to offer the same support to state coffers next year.

"They can adjust the dividend to government lower, but they are more likely to maintain or increase the \$75 billion and borrow if needs be," said James Reeve, chief economist at banking firm Samba Financial Group.

Aramco declined to comment.

With oil prices at \$50 per barrel or above, Aramco should be able to fund the \$75 billion dividend and capex from operating cash flows, said Dmitry Marinchenko, senior director at Fitch.

"However if oil prices are lower the committed dividend level becomes unsustainable, and Aramco would need to attract additional external debt or sell assets to fund it."

For Yousef Hussein, equity analyst at EFG Hermes, it would make sense for Aramco to do some sale and leaseback-type agreements to improve liquidity.

Aramco is working with Moelis & Co on such a strategy, two sources said. Moelis also declined to comment.

The company is already weighing up a more than \$10 billion sale of a stake in its pipeline assets to global investors, and could sell more assets to raise cash, according to sources familiar with the matter.

Aviation in Doldrums, While Vaccine Impact on Oil Demand Is Several Months Away

LONDON (Dispatches) - The roll-out of vaccines this month to combat the coronavirus pandemic will not quickly reverse the destruction wrought on global oil demand, International Energy Agency (IEA) warned.

"The understandable euphoria around the start of vaccination program partly explains higher prices but it will be several months before we reach a critical mass of vaccinated, economically active people and thus see an impact on oil demand," the IEA said in its monthly report.

The IEA trimmed its global oil demand forecasts also as the massive coronavirus pandemic hit to the aviation industry will likely be worse than expected next year.

The Paris-based watchdog revised down its estimates for oil demand this year by 50,000 barrels per day (bpd) and for next year by 170,000 bpd, citing scarce jet fuel use as fewer people travel by air.

Europe accounts for much of the backslide, with demand set to be lower in the fourth quarter compared with the third due to renewed lockdown measures.

Global oil stocks, which have mounted as consumption faltered during the pandemic, will finally reach a deficit compared to pre-crisis levels at the end of 2019 by July, the IEA added.

Aviation fuel demand is "not expected to recover quickly, as governments intend to keep in place border closures and travel restrictions until a vaccine is widely available."

"In 2021, demand for both gasoline and diesel is projected to return to 97-99 percent of their 2019 levels," it added.

The IEA noted that on the supply side, OPEC and allied oil producers, principally Russia, had agreed to slowly increase output earlier this month but all recognized that the market remained fragile and required careful management.

U.S. Warns Pacific Islands About Chinese Bid for Undersea Cable Project

SYDNEY (Reuters) - The United States has warned Pacific island nations about security threats posed by a Chinese company's cut-price bid to build an undersea internet cable, two sources told Reuters, part of an international development project in the region.

Huawei Marine, which was recently divested from Huawei Technologies Co Ltd and is now majority-owned by another Chinese firm, submitted bids along with French-headquartered Alcatel Submarine Networks (ASN), part of Finland's Nokia, and Japan's NEC, for the \$72.6 million project backed by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), the sources with direct knowledge of the project details said.

The project is designed to improve communications to the island nations of Nauru, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Kiribati.

Washington sent a diplomatic note to FSM in July expressing strategic concerns about the project as Huawei Marine and other Chinese firms are required to co-operate with Beijing's intelligence and security services, the sources said.

That note followed an earlier warning to Micronesia and development agencies from the Nauru government, a Pacific ally to Taiwan, which is viewed by China as a renegade province, about Huawei Marine's participation in the project, the sources said.

The FSM government told Reuters in a statement it is talking to bilateral partners in the project, "some of whom have addressed a need to ensure that the cable does not compromise regional security by opening, or failing to close, cyber-security related gaps."

Under the Compact of Free Association, a decades-old agreement between the United States and its former Pacific trust territories, Washington is responsible for FSM's defence.

A spokeswoman for the Nauru government said bids were being examined and that stakeholders were addressing "technical and administrative issues" to ensure the project progresses, without elaborating.

The U.S. State Department's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs did not respond to requests for comment.

The third island nation involved in the project, Kiribati, views Huawei Marine's bid most favourably after last year severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favour of China, the sources said.

The Kiribati government did not respond to questions.

A World Bank spokesman said the tender was continuing and could not "provide specific comments on the process at this time." The ADB referred questions to the World Bank.

Germany's Ifo Institute Cuts 2021 GDP Growth Forecast to 4.2%



BERLIN (Reuters) - Germany's Ifo institute expects Europe's largest economy to recover less strongly than expected next year as a stricter lockdown to contain a second wave of infections in the COVID-19 pandemic holds back consumers and companies.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and state leaders imposed a "lockdown lite" from Nov. 2, under which restaurants and bars were closed but shops and schools were open. From Wednesday, stricter measures are in effect that shutter most stores as well as hair salons and other services.

Ifo on Wednesday cut its gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecast for next year to 4.2% from 5.1% previously. For 2022, Ifo raised its GDP forecast to 2.5% from 1.7%.

"The recovery is being pushed back because of the recent shutdown here and in other countries," Ifo chief economist Timo Wollmershaeuser said. So the production of goods and services would not reach its pre-crisis level until the end of 2021.

As a result of lockdown measures, Ifo expects the economy to shrink in the final quarter of this year. For 2020 as a whole, it predicts a plunge by 5.1%, unadjusted for calendar effects.

These forecasts include measures under Germany's "lockdown lite" from Nov. 2, which Ifo assumes will remain in place until end-March, but not the impact of stricter measures in effect from Dec. 16 until at least Jan. 10.

Ifo said it assumes that curbs will gradually be relaxed from April onwards and completely lifted by summer.

The institute expects exports to fall by 9.7% this year and to grow by 8.8% next while it forecasts imports to decline by 8.7% in 2020 and to rise by 6.8% in 2021. Germany's relatively large current account surplus is expected to increase further.

Iran Reopens Border Crossing With Turkmenistan

MASHHAD (IRNA) - The exchange of goods on the land border crossing of Lotfabad was resumed in accordance with the interests of Iran as part of facilitating trade with Turkmenistan, a local official in Khorasan Razavi Province Ali Rasoulia said on Thursday. Goods are shipped to Turkmenistan via three land border

crossings of Lotfabad, Sarakhs, and Bajgiran in Khorasan Razavi province, which had been closed by the neighboring country in March 2020 following the coronavirus outbreak. Turkmenistan has reopened the Sarakhs rail route and then the Lotfabad land border by setting out conditions for Iranian trucks to cross.



WHO Vaccine Scheme Risks Failure, Leaving Poor Countries With No COVID Shots Until 2024

BRUSSELS (Reuters) - The global scheme to deliver COVID-19 vaccines to poorer countries faces a "very high" risk of failure, potentially leaving nations home to billions of people with no access to vaccines until as late as 2024, internal documents say.

The World Health Organization's COVAX program is the main global scheme to vaccinate people in poor and middle income countries around the world against the coronavirus. It aims to deliver at least 2 billion vaccine doses by the end of 2021 to cover 20% of the most vulnerable people in 91 poor and middle-income countries, mostly in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

But in internal documents reviewed by Reuters, the scheme's promoters say the program is struggling from a lack of funds, supply risks and complex contractual arrangements which could make it impossible to achieve its goals.

"The risk of a failure to establish a successful COVAX Facility is very high," says an internal report to the board of Gavi, an alliance of governments, drug companies, charities and international organisations that arranges global vaccination campaigns. Gavi co-leads COVAX alongside the WHO.

The report and other documents prepared by Gavi are being discussed at Gavi's board meetings on Dec. 15-17.

The failure of the facility could leave people in poor nations without any access to COVID-19 vaccines until 2024, one of the documents says.

The risk of failure is higher because the scheme was set up so quickly, operating in "uncharted territory", the report says.

"Current risk exposure is deemed outside of risk appetite until there is full clarity on the size of risks and possibilities to mitigate them," it says. "It therefore requires intensive mitigation efforts to bring the risk within risk appetite."

Gavi hired Citigroup last month to provide advice on how to mitigate financial risks.

In one Nov. 25 memo included in the documents submitted to the Gavi board, Citi advisors said the biggest risk to the program was from clauses in supply contracts that allow countries not to buy vaccines booked through COVAX.

A potential mismatch between vaccine supply and demand "is not a commercial risk efficiently mitigated by the market or the MDBs," the Citi advisors wrote, referring to multilateral development banks such as the World Bank.

"Therefore it must either be mitigated through contract negotiation or through a Gavi risk absorption layer that is carefully managed by a management and governance structure."

Asked about the documents, a Gavi spokesman said the body remains confident it can achieve its goals.

"It would be irresponsible not to assess the risks inherent to such a massive and complex undertaking, and to build policies and instruments to mitigate those risks," he added.



The WHO did not respond to a request for comment. In the past it has let Gavi take the lead in public comments about the COVAX program. Citibank said in a statement: "As a financial advisor, we are responsible for helping Gavi plan for a range of scenarios related to the COVAX facility and supporting their efforts to mitigate potential risks."

COVAX's plans rely on cheaper vaccines that have so far yet to receive approval, rather than vaccines from frontrunners Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna that use more expensive new mRNA technology. The Pfizer vaccine has already been approved for emergency use in several countries and deployed in Britain and the United States, and the Moderna vaccine is expected to be similarly approved soon.

COVAX has so far reached non-binding supply agreements with AstraZeneca, Novavax and Sanofi for a total of 400 million doses, with options to order several hundred million additional shots, one of the Gavi documents says.

But the three companies have all faced delays in their trials that could push back some possible regulatory approvals to the second half of 2021 or later.

This could also increase COVAX's financial needs. Its financial assumptions are based on an average cost of \$5.20 per dose, one of the documents says.

Pfizer's vaccines costs about \$18.40-\$19.50 per dose, while Moderna's costs \$25-\$37. COVAX has no supply deals with either of those firms. Nor is it prioritising investment in ultra-cold distribution chains in poor countries, necessary for the Pfizer vaccine, as it still expects to use mostly shots which require more conventional cold storage, one of the Gavi documents says.

supply contracts.

The West's Modus Operandi...

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We should accept this point that with this very Western approach that the liberalism can have its own advantages and disadvantages for humanity, schools and religions and relations of others can also have advantages and disadvantages in implementation or behavioral disobedience for nations. Western



approach is not at any cost ready to accept its weaknesses and lack of meeting the human needs in the form and content. One of these rejections is the religion-escape attitude of governments in the East and the West. With escaping from the religion today man has stayed away from the supernatural and spiritual and he is content with materialistic life. The maximum needs of humanity in religion-orientation and beliefs have been restricted to the individual God-seeking. In the Western society, God is some kind of inmate in the hearts of the people and its manifestation not only is not promoted but also is confronted. According to this meaning and concept, the West today has lost its logic of accepting the opinions of others. With the self-made pretexts like human rights, it challenges beliefs of others and condemn them. Implementation of capital punishment in the argumentative logic of most behaviors and beliefs is law-oriented. But today the West opposes any country or nation with related laws for punishing its corruption-seeking individuals and felons in its own geographical territory and fights with it and even makes hullabaloo.

In Canada which is known as the heaven of fugitives (Land of Wanted), culprits are given shelters and are incited to betray their people and country. That someone to be their mercenary and to disturb public opinion of his nation by resorting to any trick is fully supported and implementation of punishment against him is considered something against human rights while even the human rights that they insist on it does not let disturb public opinion and consider it a clear offence. This behavior before creating a doctrine and even a logic for the West has created a tool and pretext for opposing the independence of humanity in any part of the world. Today easily and with the reasoning logic, one can consider the West as excuse-seeker and resemble its behavior to a struggling ploy rather than a human achievement.

Tehran Rejects...

FROM PAGE 1

"As I said before, IAEA's sole role is to monitor and verify the voluntary nuclear-related measures as detailed in the JCPOA and to provide regular factual updates in this regard," Gharibabadi said, adding, "Presenting any assessment on how the commitments are implemented (e.g referring to breach) is absolutely beyond the mandate of the Agency and should be avoided."

Iran's permanent representative to Vienna-based international organizations was responding to comments by IAEA chief Rafael Mariano Grossi, who argued the upcoming US administration needs to strike a new deal with Iran due to the occurrence of what he claimed "too many breaches." U.S. President-elect Joe Biden, who is to take office next month, has said he hopes to return the U.S. to the deal, which was reached while he was vice president, but he has also indicated he would like to expand it. The JCPOA was signed in July 2015 between Iran and six world powers and ratified in the form of Resolution 2231.

President Inaugurates...

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Addressing the inaugural ceremony of the projects, President Rouhani said he is confident that the next U.S. administration will abandon its sanctions policy against the Iranian people and will bow under their "national power" and resistance.

Stressing the importance of maintaining national unity in the ranks of the Iranian nation, President Rouhani said, "It is this national unity that engenders national power for us and forces the enemy to bow down in the face of the people's rights," he said. "I am confident that the heroic steadfastness of the Iranian nation will make the next U.S. administration genuflect in the face of the people. This steadfastness will force them to return to their commitments [under the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran] and will create cracks in sanctions" the president noted. The now-outgoing administration of U.S. President Donald Trump returned the sanctions that his predecessor Barack Obama had lifted under an international and historic nuclear accord between Iran and world powers. Trump reinstated the bans after bucking against the nuclear deal, which is officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Elsewhere in his remarks, Rouhani adduced Wednesday's remarks by Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, in which the Leader advised strongly in favor of neutralizing the sanctions.

The Islamic Republic should not spare any effort to try to neutralize or cushion the blow of the sanctions, the Iranian president echoed, adding, "This is our foremost responsibility, and we should try to break down the sanctions."

"As the Leader said the day before, doing this should not be delayed even by an hour...this was a very important instruction that the Leader insisted upon," Rouhani said. The president finally hoped that the country will witness further development and prosperity every day under the aegis of continued synergy, cooperation, and unity among the nation.

Asian Countries, Switzerland at Risk in U.S. Treasury's Currency Report



WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. Treasury could label several countries currency manipulators before President Donald Trump leaves office, analysts say, as the coronavirus pandemic skews trade flows and widens U.S. deficits with trading partners.

Currency experts say Vietnam, Thailand, Taiwan and Switzerland all risk being found in violation of the three U.S. criteria for currency manipulation in the Treasury Department's long-delayed report on the foreign exchange practices of major trading partners. They expect the report within days.

While President-elect Joe Biden is expected to be less confrontational with U.S. allies on matters of trade, a new White House could find it politically difficult to immediately walk back designations of currency manipulation by the current administration.

To be labeled a manipulator, countries must at least have a \$20 billion-plus bilateral trade surplus with the United States, foreign currency intervention exceeding 2% of GDP and a global current account surplus exceeding 2% of GDP.

Brad Setser, a former U.S. Treasury economist and senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, has replicated data used by Treasury to analyze these criteria, constructing a quarterly tracker that shows Vietnam, Switzerland and Thailand exceeded the department's thresholds during the first and second quarters of 2020.

Taiwan met all three thresholds in the second quarter, but barely missed on the foreign exchange intervention in the first quarter in the data compiled by Setser, who now serves on Biden's transition team for trade issues.

However, Treasury's actual data may differ and it has some discretion in applying the label, and mitigating circumstances such as the coronavirus pandemic may factor into its decisions.

Trade surpluses for Asian economies exporting personal protective equipment and other supplies needed to fight the pandemic have jumped, while capital has surged into safe haven currencies such as the Swiss franc, driving them higher.

Torrent of Foreign Money Threatens India's Tight Grip on Rupee

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - There's growing consensus among traders and fund managers that the mounting pressures - particularly the liquidity glut distorting money markets - may spur the central bank to consider a range of changes, from relaxing its grip on Asia's worst-performing currency to curtailing bond purchases.

A modest gain in the rupee over the past month could mean that policy makers are already dialing intervention down a touch, or that inflows are starting to get the better of them.

"We believe that the RBI is facing a tough task of liquidity management while juggling FX inflows, secondary bond market purchases to keep long-term borrowing costs low and ensuring money-market rates are aligned to the policy rate," said Kanika Pasricha, an economist at Standard Chartered Plc in Mumbai. Steps must be taken to realign money-market rates with policy rates, she said.

While most currencies in Asia have benefited from a weaker dollar, the rupee is down 3% this year. Traders point to how the RBI has bought \$58 billion of dollars in the first nine months of the year as signs of its intervention.

Governor Shaktikanta Das has only commented very broadly

on the matter, writing in the most recent policy statement that the central bank acts to damp forex volatility and keep the rupee in sync with underlying domestic fundamentals.

Inflows into India's equity markets have grown to more than \$20 billion this year, on course for the most on an annual basis since 2012. Foreign investors have also completed about \$30 billion of acquisitions in cash, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Declines in the dollar, which is forecast to keep falling in 2021, are fueling fund flows into emerging markets globally.

In India, capital inflows may reach \$82 billion by the end of the fiscal year though March, then continue at much the same pace for the following 12 months, according to estimates from Deutsche Bank AG.

"Given the multiple challenges from excess liquidity due to capital flows and inflation, the RBI may be forced to reduce the intervention and allow appreciation," said Arvind Chari, head of fixed income and alternatives at Quantum Advisors Pvt. The median of estimates compiled by Bloomberg is for the rupee to appreciate to 72 per dollar by the end of 2021. Analysts at Goldman Sachs Group Inc. forecast the currency as strong as 70 by March 2022. It closed trading down 0.1% at 73.64 per dollar on Tuesday.

U.S. Forces...

FROM PAGE 1

The Committee must continue its work and operate without any external interference or pressure or setting any artificial deadline to conclude its work.

The only objective of the political process must be to enable the Syrian people to determine the future of their country by themselves. Furthermore, sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria must be fully respected by all, separatist agendas and illegitimate self-rule initiatives must be rejected, and all foreign forces whose presence is not permitted by the Syrian Government, particularly the US forces who are following a hidden agenda, must leave Syria.

Places like Idlib must not turn into a safe haven for terrorist groups, and accordingly, while every effort should be made to protect the lives of civilians, combating terrorists must be continued until the full removal of their threats.

We strongly condemn Israel's continued aggressions against Syria. Such provocative military adventurism must stop.

Facilitating Syria's reconstruction and the safe and voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to their original places of residence in Syria need to be part of an overall solution to the current conflict in Syria. The interests of millions of Syrian refugees must not be held hostage for political gains by certain powers. Delaying their return will only prolong their sufferings.

Along the same line, unilateral sanctions particularly those of the United States target the most vulnerable people the most, adding to their sufferings. This inhumane practice must come to an end.

We will continue to support the people and Government of Syria in their struggle to overcome the threats of terrorism and foreign occupation." Meanwhile Takht-Ravanvhi on Thursday reaffirmed Tehran's commitment to peace and stability in Afghanistan and the development of the neighboring country, saying Iran is prepared to help its Afghan neighbor in that regard.

He said Iran and Afghanistan enjoy common religious, cultural, linguistic and historical backgrounds and the stability, socio-cultural development and economic growth of both countries are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.

"As our president stated very recently, we consider Afghanistan's stability as our own stability," he noted while addressing a Thursday meeting of the UN Security Council. He added that the Islamic Republic of Iran is committed to contributing to a more secure and prosperous Afghanistan through further enhancement of relations between two nations.

The Iranian envoy said Afghanistan's decades-long insecurity and instability can end only through a comprehensive and inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process, involving all Afghan factions, including the Taliban, supported by neighboring, regional and international partners.

Lewandowski Nets 250th Bundesliga Goal

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Robert Lewandowski passed the milestone of 250 Bundesliga goals on Wednesday with both goals in Bayern Munich's 2-1 home win over Wolfsburg to keep the European champions in touch with German league leaders Bayer Leverkusen.

Lewandowski, who finds out whether he has been voted FIFA's player of the year having been shortlisted alongside Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, has scored 18 goals in 17 games for Bayern this season in all competitions.

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Pakistan's Amir Retires From Internationals

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) - Pakistan fast bowler Mohammad Amir announced his retirement from international cricket at the age of 28 on Thursday, claiming he could no longer play in an atmosphere where he did not feel welcome in the national team.

Amir, who was jailed in 2011 for his part in a spot-fixing scandal, served three months in prison and a five-year ban from all forms of cricket before returning to the Pakistan squad in January 2016.

Robert Lewandowski Wins The Best 2020 Award

ZURICH (Dispatches) - The Bayern Munich striker confirmed the predictions and beat Cristiano Ronaldo and Leo Messi in the voting. The Polish striker completes the year of his life winning five titles with the Bavarians and being the top scorer in the Bundesliga, Pokal and Champions League.

There wasn't much doubt about it, but it's now official that Robert Lewandowski is the winner of The Best 2020. A title that is doubly as good: because of the award itself and for coming ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo and Leo Messi, the two players that have amassed almost all awards over the last few years. But the Polish strike has beaten them thanks to his 5 titles with Bayern Munich and a treble that had only been seen once before: being top scorer in the league, cup and Champions League.

No one can dispute the choice of Lewandowski. Between the 20th July 2019 and 7th October 2020, the period for The Best to be counted, he scored 60 goals and got 12 assists in 52 official club matches, of which he only lost 6. 1.38 goals generated per match. Simply spectacular for a guy that is having the best averages of his career.

With regards to his national team, there were only six matches during that time, but he managed 4 goals and 2 assists.

He has also won many honours: best player of 19-20 by UEFA; as well as best striker; chosen in the ideal XI for IFFHS; best player of the year for World Football Summit and player of the year in Germany, amongst others.

Lewandowski is the fourth player to win The Best; Cristiano Ronaldo, Luka Modric and Leo Messi had previously won it.

England women's footballer Lucy Bronze was named the women's footballer of the year for 2020 at the FIFA Best awards on Thursday (17th December), and immediately set her sights on Olympic success at the Tokyo Games in 2021.

Federer, Serena Eye Special 40th Birthday Gifts in 2021

PARIS (Dispatches) - Having endured a 2020 wipeout and seen Rafael Nadal equal his record of 20 Grand Slams, Roger Federer will edge towards his 40th birthday in 2021 with his eyes on an elusive Olympic singles gold medal despite fears over his long-term fitness.

Federer played just one tournament this year, a bumpy run to the semi-finals of the Australian Open, before knee surgery put him on the sidelines.

The Covid-19 pandemic, which caused a five-month shutdown as well as the cancellation of his beloved Wimbledon, forced him to call time on his season.

On the tour since 1998, Federer will be 40 on August 8, just a week after the men's final at the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics.

"The big plan is to be there for the Olympics. It's one of my big goals," said Federer.

"Maybe it's a little selfish, but it's not a bad thing it was moved because of all the problems this year."

Unlike Nadal, Federer has yet to win a singles gold at the Olympics although he did capture the doubles title with Swiss compatriot Stan Wawrinka in Beijing in 2008.

Nadal, whose 13th triumph at the delayed French Open in October also took him to 20 Slams, has no doubt that his rival and close friend remains a force.

"He has nothing more to prove, he has already shown that whenever he is well he can play at the highest level," said the 34-year-old Spaniard.

Federer has other goals. His haul of 103 titles is just six short of Jimmy Connors' all-time mark of 109.

Another Grand Slam title in 2021 would also make him the oldest man ever to win a major.

Ken Rosewall, who was 37 years and 67 days old when he won the Australian Open in 1972, currently boasts that distinction.

If Federer is to break that mark then Wimbledon, where he has been victorious eight times, remains the most likely stage.

World number one Novak Djokovic will be most people's choice for a ninth Australian Open, whenever the tournament, still under a coronavirus shadow, takes place.



Cavani Charged By FA Over Social Media Post

LONDON (Dispatches) - Edinson Cavani has been charged with misconduct by the Football Association for a now-deleted social media post containing a Spanish phrase that is offensive in some contexts and for which the Manchester United star apologized.

The 33-year-old Uruguayan striker's Instagram post thanked a friend for his congratulations after scoring twice as United came from 2-0 down to beat Southampton 3-2 last month and included the Spanish word "negrito" (small black person).

He later deleted the post and apologized when it was pointed out the meaning that could be attached to it. Both United and the player said at the time that the word was clearly used in an affectionate manner and has different connotations in South America.

"Edinson Cavani has been charged with misconduct for a breach of FA Rule E3, in relation to a social media post on Thursday 29 November 2020," read the FA statement.

"It is alleged that, contrary to FA Rule E3.1, a comment posted on the Manchester United FC player's Instagram page was insulting and/or abusive and/or improper and/or brought the game into disrepute.

Iniesta Vows to Play on After Surgery



TOKYO (Dispatches) - Former Barcelona star Andres Iniesta has promised his glittering career won't be cut short by the thigh injury that has left him facing four months on the sidelines.

The World Cup-winning Spanish midfielder, 36, said he planned to be back for his Japanese club Vissel Kobe next season after undergoing surgery in Barcelona on a ruptured tendon.

Iniesta suffered the injury in the knockout stages of the Asian Champions League, where he helped Vissel reach the semi-finals before they were knocked out on Sunday.

"The surgery has been a success and I am feeling very well," Iniesta said in a statement posted on Twitter, with a photo of himself giving the thumbs-up from his hospital bed. "My objective is to get back on track as soon as possible and enjoy what I like doing the most."

"All my energy is already put into the recovery and the work that lies ahead."

The Spanish maestro was injured and substituted during Vissel's round-of-16 victory over China's Shanghai SIPG in Doha, a match in which he scored.

He made a telling cameo appearance in the quarter-final against South Korea's Suwon Bluewings, coming on as a 113th-minute substitute and scoring Vissel's first penalty in a 7-6 shoot-out victory.

Iniesta clutched his thigh and grimaced immediately after slotting his kick past Suwon goalkeeper Yang Sang-min, and did not appear in Vissel's 2-1 semi-final defeat by Ulsan Hyundai three days later.

Iniesta joined Vissel in 2018 after making 442 appearances for Barcelona, where he was the midfield dynamo in some of the club's greatest ever teams.

Barcelona wished Iniesta a speedy recovery in a Twitter post on Wednesday, as did Spanish side Albacete, where Iniesta began his youth career.

Spanish basketball star Pau Gasol, a six-time NBA All-Star and winner of two Olympic silver medals with the Spanish national team, also sent a message of encouragement.

Ronaldo Penalty Miss as Juve Held by Atalanta

TURIN (Dispatches) - Cristiano Ronaldo missed a penalty as champions Juventus squandered the chance to move second in Serie A on Wednesday with a 1-1 draw at home against Atalanta.

Juventus picked up their sixth draw in 12 games, to sit third, four points behind leaders AC Milan who were held to a 2-2 draw at Genoa.

Behind AC Milan, Inter Milan and Napoli go head-to-head in the San Siro.

"You have to take these games home," said Juventus coach Andrea Pirlo. "We had many opportunities and we weren't able to close it. When you leave the game in the balance anything can happen."

Federico Chiesa curled in a powerful shot to put Juventus ahead before the half hour mark in Turin. But Atalanta hit back with Remo Freuler grabbing the equaliser 12 minutes after the break shortly after captain Papu Gomez came off the bench.

The build-up to the game had been overshadowed by tensions between coach Gian Piero Gasperini and Gomez, left out of their last two league games amid speculation he could leave the Bergamo club in January. Ronaldo, who had fired over the target in the fifth minute, missed a rare penalty after an hour when Chiesa was fouled.

The Portuguese striker's weak effort was easily saved by Atalanta keeper Pierluigi Gollini.

The five-time Ballon d'Or winner is currently joint top of the Serie A scorers charts alongside Zlatan Ibrahimovic on 10 goals.

Gollini also denied Alvaro Morata after 48 and 62 minutes from close range.



Barcelona's Best Game of Season Reignites Title Bid

MADRID (Dispatches) - Barcelona reignited their La Liga title push on Wednesday when they came back from a goal down to defeat Real Sociedad 2-1, with veteran defender and goal scorer Jordi Alba claiming it was the team's "best game of the season".

The win allowed Barcelona to move six points off the top of the table whereas defeat meant Sociedad lost their spot as leaders to be replaced by Atletico Madrid.

However, Barca did it the hard way.

Sociedad, without a point at Barcelona in 25 years, took the lead through Willian Jose in the 26th minute. Spanish international Alba levelled four minutes later with Frenkie de Jong adding the second just before the break. "It was our best game of the season. We came into it knowing very well what we had to do," said left-back Alba.

"We put pressure on them, especially in the first half."

"Tonight I saw a very good Barca. We are happy with the attitude. We knew how to suffer. This should give us more confidence for the rest of La Liga as there are a lot of games left."

Under-siege Barca coach Ronald Koeman played in the team which last yielded a home point to Sociedad in 1995.

The Dutchman was fearing the worst when Willian Jose scored with his right foot from close range after a Porto corner. Alba's equaliser arrived on the half-hour mark after a fine interchange of passes between Antoine Griezmann and Pedri.

French star Griezmann hit the bar six minutes later after taking the ball past Sociedad keeper Alex Remiro.

