

**Health Ministry Spokeswoman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on Tuesday
That Some 187 More Iranians
Have Died From the COVID-19
Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing
The Total Deaths to 54,003**

IRAN NEWS

**The Government Spokesman
Ali Rabiei Yesterday Said That
With the Support of the People
And the Observance of Health
Protocols, the Death Toll in
COVID-19 Has Decreased by 50%**

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Iran Interested in Investments by Russian Oil Firms

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh said the country is interested in investments by Russian oil companies. Zanganeh made the remarks after his meeting with Russian Deputy Prime Alexander Novak and Energy Minister Nikolai Shulginov in Moscow on Monday.

He also said Iran and Russia have agreed to increase their cooperation in the energy sphere to offset the impact of sanctions, TASS reported.

"We discussed the issues related to stabilizing the global oil market in the meeting. Russia has played a decisive role in stabilizing the global oil market over the years, and we talked with each other in the framework of OPEC Plus, given the serious cooperation in OPEC".

After the meeting, Novak in a statement said, "A broad range of trade and economic cooperation matters is also successfully explored between our countries. Although this year has become a tough challenge for the whole global community, economic relations between Russia and Iran do not lose prior dynamics but become more active and meaningful instead".

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Inflation Rate Soars 1.5%

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) announced that the inflation rate in the twelve-month period ended on December 20, which marks the end of the ninth Iranian calendar month of Azar, stood at 30.5 percent, rising 1.5 percent from the figure for the twelve-month period ended on the last day of the eighth month.

Central Bank of Iran (CBI) in a statement in April announced that the annual inflation rate for the current Iranian calendar year (ends on March 20, 2021) is set to be 22 percent.

The statement published on the website of the CBI read, "Given the adopted policies and taken measures and also taking the country's macro-economic factors into account, the CBI believes that based on the realistic scenarios, the inflation rate in the current year will continue its downward trend."

Last year, CBI Governor Abdolnaser Hemmati had said, "Our goal is curbing inflation rate and no estimation shows an inflation rate of over 20 percent for the next year".

Tehran Resolved to Stop U.S. Destabilizing Acts in Region



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Secretary of Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani has said Iran is resolved to stop the United States and its stooges from committing acts of terrorism and destabilizing the region and to eventually force a complete US troop withdrawal.

Speaking at a meeting with Afghan president's national security advisor Hamdullah Mohib, in Tehran on Tuesday, Shamkhani said that the U.S. acts of insecurity in West Asia reached their peak with the "cowardly" assassination of top Iranian and Iraqi anti-terror commanders, Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is resolved to prevent the continuation of the terrorist, tension-fueling and destabilizing acts of the United States and its stooges and make them leave the region by exacting a severe revenge against those who ordered and perpetrated a crime that will go down in history," he added.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Shamkhani referred to the threats facing both Iran and Afghanistan and their common interests, especially the need to stop the spread of terrorism and to restore stability and security in the region.

Warning of increased Daesh activity in Afghanistan and the dangers it posed to regional states, he called for collective vigilance and cooperation to fully eliminate "the cancerous tumor."

Iran's security chief also highlighted the Islamic Republic's principal policy of strengthening good neighborliness. "Afghanistan has a special place in Iran's foreign policy due to numerous commonalities that bond the two nations," he said.

Shamkhani further stressed Iran's firm support for the legitimate government of Afghanistan, underlining the need for enhanced Tehran-Kabul cooperation and interaction in political, economic and security areas.

Additionally, he expressed his satisfaction with the opening of the Khaf-Herat railroad and hoped that the project could play an effective role in promoting bilateral relations and improving the welfare of the Afghan people.

Mohib, for his part, voiced the readiness of the Afghan government and nation to boost cooperation with Iran, which he described as his second home. He further appreciated the unwavering support and hospitality Iran has offered to the Afghan people over the past 40 years.

Later yesterday, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif held talks with Mohib.

In the meeting, Foreign Minister Zarif said supporting the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the principled policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

He highlighted the necessity for the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, said, "We believe a comprehensive political solution with the presence of all Afghan groups will be the best guarantee for lasting peace in this country."

He urged both Tehran and Kabul to enhance consultations at bilateral, regional and international levels.

Zarif expressed satisfaction with the inauguration of the Khaf-Herat railway which came on stream recently, and added the project will pave the way for closer cooperation between the two countries and facilitating connections with regions in the East. "The Dogharoon crossing should be refurbished in order to boost mutual border cooperation," Zarif underlined.

The Afghan official, in turn, presented a report on the latest developments pertaining to peace talks in his country, and appreciated Iran's backing for the Afghan government and people.

He stressed the necessity of boosting political, economic and security cooperation.

The Afghan official also expressed hope linking routes such as the Khaf-Herat railway will further boost regional cooperation. Among other topics on the agenda during the meeting were mutual cooperation on political, economic and security fronts, holding a meeting of the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Committee and following up on other ongoing projects as well as closer cooperation in the water sector.

Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul Train to Launch in 2021

TEHRAN (MNA) - The Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) freight train is expected to resume operations in early 2021 to boost Pakistan's trade with Turkey and Iran.

The railways of Pakistan, Turkey and Iran have mutually agreed to resume regular operations soon, said Turkey's Transport Minister, Adil Karaismailoglu, after the 10th edition of the Economic Cooperation Organization's (ECO) Transport and Communications Ministers Meeting in Istanbul.

The key requirements for the revival of the ITI train, also called the ECO Container train have been fulfilled. The train is expected to resume operations in 2021. The trial run of the ITI train was launched in 2009 as a project under the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) - 10-member Asian trade bloc. The rail route, which is recognized by the UN as an international corridor between the three countries, has so far only been used for test journeys.

The railway line intends to greatly reduce the transit route of the goods from Istanbul to Islamabad. During the trial, the freight train from Islamabad to Istanbul took nearly 13 days to make the 6500km journey. The journey was later further reduced to 11.5 days. In comparison, transporting goods from European countries to Pakistan via seaway took almost 45 days. The train has a maximum capacity for twenty 40-foot containers.

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ViewPoint

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian



Iranians Have Surmounted Sanctions

According to President Hassan Rouhani government's promise to the nation, it was supposed after signing the JCPOA, all cruel sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran would have been completely lifted but with arrival of U.S. President Donald Trump at the U.S. political scene suddenly everything changed and not only were sanctions increased more and more but also all the promises that the maladroit diplomacy team of the government had given to the government did not materialize and Iranian nation endured the tribulation of the indecisive JCPOA for four years.

Today all in the world have seen that the U.S. not only in the JCPOA but also in many international treaties has been presented as unethical and commitmentless. However, the president-elect who has won in the election is himself witnessing misconduct of his predecessor Trump who does not intend to hand over the power to the one who has won the people's votes. But regarding Iran, the winner of 2020 U.S. presidential election, Joe Biden, claims the U.S. leadership of the world.

This very claimant of the world leadership at first should show the world his leadership of morality in the U.S. in order to have shown at least a little bit difference with his predecessor. For him the smallest step to show him a different one is that he should lift without wasting time all sanctions which have targeted only Iranian people and have made them suffer from endless cruelty, and should suspend playing with words and avoid being the captive of the Zionist policies.

Today most of culture-oriented people in the U.S. politics and economy believe that the U.S. cannot push ahead its policy and goals in other countries by creating poverty and hopelessness; such policy is opposite of the U.S. verbiage of being the leader of morality in the world. Biden only by putting an end to these sanctions can both advance the U.S. interests and revive the lost reputation of the country. The U.S. interests can be better achieved through dialogue. For some time after Trump announced the pullout of the U.S. from the JCPOA, Iran according to the IAEA verification did not pursue enrichment process above the level which had been agreed in the JCPOA. But now the condition is totally different from that time. Iranians according to the paragraphs of 35, 36 and 37 of the JCPOA are allowed to pull out of the NPT Treaty and allowed not to let IAEA inspectors to have access to its nuclear facilities and verification.

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Iraq Ready to Export 700,000 Tons of Barley to Iran

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq is ready to export 700,000 tons of barley to Iran at a price of \$125 per tonne, the Iraqi agriculture ministry's spokesman told Reuters.

Exporting a surplus barley crop would be a first for the country, and it had said previously that Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey had expressed interest in buying its grain in a tender.

"Iraq's cabinet has granted this amount to Iran as there are payments owed by the Iraqi government to Iran," Hamid al-Nayef said.

Negotiations to finalize the ministerial decree by which the barley will be exported are ongoing and Iraq hoped Iran would take on the quantities quickly, Nayef added.



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Clues Found From Fakhrizadeh Assassination

TEHRAN (MNA) – Chairman of Iranian Parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission announced the finding of some clues of the assassination of Martyr Mohsen Fakhrizadeh by the country’s security forces.

Referring to the meeting of the Parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission with the Minister of Intelligence, Mojtaba Zonnour said, “In this meeting, the various dimensions of the assassination and martyrdom of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh were examined.”

“The security forces did good and effective works in identifying the clues and achieved good results,” he added.

Europeans Advised to Return to Their Commitment to JCPOA

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – The Government spokesman said that Iran cannot be the only party that fulfills its commitments over JCPOA and the European would better return to their commitment rather than expressing worrisome about it.

Attending his weekly press conference on Tuesday Ali Rabiei in response to Iran Press question over France Foreign Ministry’s comments saying that Iran should stay committed to JCPOA, stated that the Islamic Republic of Iran is a plaintiff party to a breach of obligation and the United States and Europe fundamental non-compliance with obligations. “JCPOA will be kept if only all parties remain committed,” he highlighted.

“Iran’s remedies have been based on its legitimate law (Paragraph 26 and 36), and if parties return to their commitment, Iran will halt its scale-backs too,” the government spokesman added.

Rabiei went on to say that, in order to save JCPOA, France and other European parties must fulfill their commitments and do their best to lift sanctions.

“Europeans should point their finger at the guilty party rather than the oppressed one {Iran},” he concluded.

In response to reports that U.S. President-elect Joe Biden had sent a message to Iran, he noted that the new U.S. administration has not yet taken office and such discussions are mere speculation in the media.

Rabiei stated the public remarks of the new U.S. administration officials have also had the aspect of election slogans, which cannot be given much credibility. The Islamic Republic of Iran will not pay attention to the remarks, but to the actions of the next U.S. administration regarding the return of its obligations under the JCPOA and UN Resolution 2231.

He added: “The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been clearly announced by the Leader and the President regarding JCPOA and the possibility of the return of the parties to deal.”

Commenting on the Canadian Foreign Minister’s remarks that human error could not be the cause of the Ukrainian plane crash, Rabiei said: “The government believes that the causes of the accident must be investigated in accordance with its domestic laws and regulations and in accordance with international obligations and avoiding any politicization and in a completely professional atmosphere.

The official went on to say that the committee appointed in the government has carefully studied all aspects and all experts and informed authorities have been interviewed and a report has been prepared. The officials of the Ministry of Roads



and Urban Development will inform the relevant parties about these results.

Rabiei stated: “So far, in the form of two rounds of talks, we have provided all our findings to the Ukrainian side. But unfortunately, the Canadian government’s approach to the issue of the Ukrainian plane crash is completely political and illegal. They constantly make political statements. From the beginning of this accident, we have carried out the necessary cooperation and research to clarify the dimensions of the incident and also to provide clear information to the concerned parties, and we will continue our efforts and cooperation in good faith.

Rabiei said: “At the same time, we consider the submission of illegal requests by Canada as unprofessional, unconstructive, and extravagant in the process of this cooperation. It is unfortunate that the Canadian government has made such claims without a technical and legal investigation.

The government spokesman stressed that: “We believe that such statements and positions have a negative effect on the investigation process, and are not in line with healing the plight of the survivors. We advise the government of Canada not to disrupt the process of bilateral cooperation between Iran and Ukraine, as two relevant governments, without interfering in the internal affairs of our country.

Rabiei said: “We are also committed to transparency and accurate information of all the details of the Ukrainian plane crash and to prevent the violation of the rights of the families of the victims. We assure the families of the victims of this accident that all agencies will use all their capacities and efforts to pursue the rights of the victims in coordination and cooperation.

He touched: “As mentioned before, criminal proceedings against criminal liability are carried out in the military court and tribunal and should be based on legal principles and precise details set forth in the procedure. We hope that the judicial authority of the ‘military court’ will be able to announce the results of the proceedings soon.

Regarding civil liability, he said: “It has already been announced and the Vice President for Legal Affairs stated that the victims should be compensated according to international customs and standards and without discrimination on the basis of citizenship and equal treatment of Iranian and foreign nationals. We make sure that the necessary resources are provided. In any case, civil liability and compensation are not a substitute for judicial proceedings and criminal liability.”

FM Strongly Dismisses Pompeo’s “Irresponsible Claims”

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh categorically dismissed US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s irresponsible anti-Iran allegations.

“We strongly refute @SecPompeo’s irresponsible anti-#Iran accusations, which blatantly aim to create tension,” Khatibzadeh tweeted on Monday.

“Iran rejects any attack on diplomatic missions. The U.S. military presence is the source of instability in our region,” he noted.

“No amount of spin can divert blame for its evils,” he further said.

Iran Releases Final Report on Ukrainian Plane Crash

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The Civil Aviation Organization of Iran released the final technical report on the January crash of a Ukrainian passenger plane near Tehran.

The aviation accident investigation team of Iran’s Civil Aviation Organization released the final technical report on the Ukrainian jetliner crash on Monday.

The report was given via videoconference to the officials of the other countries whose citizens were

involved in the fatal incident.

The participants in the webinar also held a series of talks about the technical report.

A Kiev-bound UIA Boeing 737 crashed shortly after taking off from Tehran on January 8, killing all 176 people on board, mostly Iranian and Canadian citizens.

Iran said the plane was hit by an anti-aircraft missile due to human error.

European States Violated Obligations in JCPOA

TEHRAN (IP) - Referring to the trade data between Iran and Europe between 2014 and 2019, the Iranian Foreign Minister said that these data indicate the three European member states of JCPOA have severely violated their legal obligations.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif posted a message on his official Twitter page emphasizing several issues at the meeting of foreign ministers of the remaining members of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In a Twitter message, the Iranian Foreign Minister stated the issues raised in his meeting with the Foreign Ministers of China, Russia, Germany, France and Britain as the following: 1. Deadline for three European member states to save JCPOA, 2. Trade data between 2014-2019 proves that the European Union and the three European countries have violated their obligations, 3. Three European countries share irreparable damage to the Iranians with the United States.

“Germany, Britain and France made commitments to meet their obligations within a certain period of time,” Zarif wrote.

The JCPOA timetable (an issue) is inseparable from the agreement and renegotiation is not possible. The crises and armaments in our region have originated mainly from the United States and three European countries’ policies.

“Democratic countries cannot ask Tehran to violate the Iranian Parliament (Islamic Consultative Assembly) resolution,” he continued.

Zarif stressing that every partner in JCPOA should return to the deal, added: “When the United States and the three European countries fulfill their commitments, Iran will immediately reverse the actions taken in response to the illegal withdrawal of the United States and the clear violation of the treaty by the three European countries.”

Tehran Accepts No Condition for U.S. Return to Nuclear deal

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) says the Islamic Republic will accept no condition for the return of the United States to the nuclear deal that Tehran clinched with world powers in 2015 and from which Washington unilaterally withdrew in 2018.

Ali Akbar Salehi made the remarks in an interview with Entekhab news website on Monday when he was asked about the possible return of the United States to the multilateral nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), following election of Joe Biden as the new US president.

Salehi said the latest remarks from Biden’s advisor, including his National Security Advisor-designate Jake Sullivan, and others show that the Americans are willing to return to the JCPOA, but stressed that such a return must be unconditional.

“What has been said so far by Biden and his advisors indicates that they want to return [to the JCPOA]. If they want to return, we will welcome that, of course, if it is without any precondition,” Tasnim News Agency cited Salehi as saying.

He said that Iranian officials have time and again asserted that if the Americans want to return to the same conditions that existed before current U.S. President Donald Trump left the JCPOA, they will welcome it.

“The latest remarks I have heard from Biden’s advisor, [including] Sullivan and others indicate that, for the time being, they are willing to return [to the JCPOA]... The Islamic Republic has announced unequivocally that we accept no conditions for the return of the United States to the JCPOA. This is out of the question. Now we must wait and see whether they live up to what they say or not.”

Iran, Azerbaijan Discuss Energy Cooperation

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran’s energy minister and Azerbaijani deputy prime minister consulted on the issues of mutual interest and stressed cementing ties in the energy sector.

Heading an economic delegation, Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister Shahin Mustafayev traveled to Tehran on Tuesday and met Iran’s Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian.

During the meeting, which was also attended by the Minister of Energy of the Republic of Azerbaijan Parviz Shahbazov and several Azerbaijani officials, the two sides discussed the latest state of cooperation between the two countries, especially in the field of water, electricity, and energy.

Meanwhile delegations from Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan reached a consensus on the text of a long-awaited preferential trade agreement between the two neighbors

Economic and diplomatic officials representing Iran and Azerbaijan held the third round of negotiations on the preferential trade agreement via videoconference.

Officials from the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, Azerbaijan’s Ministry of Economy, and the foreign ministries of the two countries attended the online meeting to discuss the text of the agreement and other proposals.

The negotiations ended with progress, as the two sides agreed on the proposed text of the deal.

The two countries are expected to hold the next round of negotiations at a higher level in order to finalize the draft agreement.

Iran and the Azerbaijan Republic have accelerated efforts in recent years to forge closer partnership in various areas.

Martyr Soleimani’s Revenge Requiring Patience, Harder Planning

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian Parliament Speaker’s Special Aide for International Affairs said that it is certain that the hard revenge for the assassination of Lt. Gen. Qasem Soleimani requires patience and harder planning.

“Ayatollah Raeisi has appointed a special judge to investigate the assassination of Lt. Gen. Soleimani, and our judicial authorities have been able to gather evidence in this regard during their visit to Iraq,” said Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on the eve of the first anniversary of the martyrdom of Lt. General Qasem Soleimani.

Referring to the role of the Iranian Parliament in the fight against terrorism, he noted, “Parliaments play a very important role in the fight against terrorism, but basically, we face a lack of anti-terrorism law in the parliaments of the world.”

“The problem is that for fighting against terrorism, which is a complex phenomenon in the world today, international institutions with specific political views and by putting pressure on activists in the region and the world have developed a series of international regulations and they try to access all the details inside the countries and even the most confidential information under various names such as anti-money laundering, anti-trafficking or anti-terrorism.”

The U.S. terrorist forces assassinated Lt. General Qasem Soleimani, who was among the key figures in the fight against terrorism in Syria and Iraq in the past several years, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq’s pro-government Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in an airstrike ordered by U.S. President Donald Trump at Baghdad’s international airport on January 3, 2020.

Tehran, Vienna Discuss JCPOA, Bilateral Ties

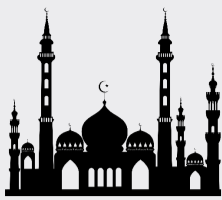
TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Ranking diplomats from Iran and Austria discussed various issues in a telephone conversation, including the 2015 nuclear deal and the bilateral relations between Tehran and Vienna.

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Seyed Abbas Araqchi and Secretary-General for Foreign Affairs in Austria’s Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal discussed a range of issues in a telephone conversation, Iran’s envoy to Vienna said Monday.

The two diplomats stressed the need to maintain the integrity of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in the phone call, the Iranian ambassador said.

Araqchi and Launsky-Tieffenthal also discussed the latest international developments and the issues of mutual interest in the bilateral relations between Iran and Austria, and agreed to continue the consultations.

In a telephone conversation with his Austrian counterpart in May, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called for international cooperation to tackle the coronavirus pandemic and expressed readiness to share experiences with Austria in this regard.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:03
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:16
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:41
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:11

156. That they rejected Faith; that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge;
157. That they said (in boast), "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah:- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not:-"

Surah 4. Women (156 - 157)

Armenia Can Turn Into the Showcase For Iranian Goods

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Chairman of Iran-Armenia Chamber of Commerce Hervik Yarianian believes Iran should take advantage of the current condition in the Armenia-Turkey relation for boosting its trade with Armenia.

Speaking in the webinar on Developing Iran-Armenia Trade Relations which was held by Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mine and Agriculture (TCCIMA), Yarianian said that Iran has not been able to make the most out of the collapse of the Soviet Union and independence of some countries in the north to boost its foreign trade, adding that in the current condition that Turkish products have been banned by the Armenian government after recent Karabakh war, Iran should take advantage of this opportunity to boost its trade with Armenia.

He said although Armenia is a limited and small market, it can be a gateway to other countries in the Eurasian Union, adding that Armenia can be a showcase for Iranian goods in the Eurasian region.

Yarianian recommended Iranian traders that if they want to enter the Armenian market, they should fully evaluate the market and its competitive condition, and then enter it fully prepared.

Meanwhile addressing the webinar, Iran's envoy in Yerevan announced the visit of the Armenian Minister of Economy to Tehran at the beginning of next year (2021) stating that in this visit, a high-level economic delegation of Armenian companies and economic activists are scheduled to travel to Tehran.

Abbas Zohuri also pointed to reopening and resumption of works at Meghri Free Economic Zone in the near future and noted that development of free trade zones between both states can activate economic capacities of both sides.

He said the trade volume of both countries is around \$400m and due to the Armenian



government's policy of banning Turkish products, this trade level can enhance.

Zohuri also said that the passenger and cargo flights between both countries are to resume since December 27.

At the beginning of the webinar, head of international affairs department of TCCIMA Mr. Hesamuddin Hallaj said that multilateral regional agreements are good opportunity for developing economic relations for countries and creating economic stability and security among the member states, adding that Eurasian Union agreement and Iran's joining it is a good opportunity for bolstering the level of trade relations of Iran with Eurasian Union countries.

He said issues related to transportation and finding practical solutions are possible through talks between officials of both states.

Meanwhile the CEO of Aras Free Zone Organization Mr. Mohsen Nariman pointed to the talks with Armenian counterparts for launching a joint border market between both states and noted that launching this joint border market is a big step in exchanging economic cooperation between Iran and Eurasian Union states. He also pointed to the strengthening of compound logistic between both states and stipulated that facilities of the zone for arrival of Iranian producers and economic activists are ready.

In this virtual meeting, over 100 Iranian business activists and owners of businesses were present and reviewed ways of cooperation of Iranians with Armenia and entering the Eurasian Union markets.

Road Minister Inaugurates 89 Railway Projects



TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian road minister inaugurated 89 railway projects at the value of 2.27 trillion rials (above \$9 billion) on Monday.

The inauguration ceremony was attended by the Head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (known as RAI) Saeed Rasouli, as well.

These projects were put into operation today through video conferencing in four provinces of the country by the order of Minister Eslami and RAI's Rasouli.

The projects included 12 projects in the field of technology and infrastructure worth 2.21 trillion rials (\$8.84 million) and 77 projects in the field of building and station services at the value of 565 billion (\$2.24 million).

As reported, from the beginning of the current Iranian year (20 March 2020), 521 units of various types of railway fleets have been produced in the country and joined the railway network, and the capacity of transporting cargo and passengers has been improved quantitatively and qualitatively.

Lufthansa Mulling Flights To Imam Khomeini Airport

TEHRAN (FNA) - Managing-Director of Imam Khomeini Airport City (IKAC) Mohammad Mahdi Karbalayee said that Lufthansa, the largest German airline, is mulling start of flights to Imam Khomeini International Airport in Tehran.

"Lufthansa is mulling establishment of flights to Imam Khomeini airport. Iran's Civil Aviation Organization has also provided them with the necessary assurances," Karbalayee said.

He added that during his talks with the regional manager of Lufthansa, the German side has clearly said that they do not have any problem with Iran's airspace regarding flight security.

Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport is the primary international airport of Tehran, the capital city of Iran, located 30km Southwest of Tehran and spread over an area of 13,500 hectares (33,000 acres) of land.

Along with Mehrabad International Airport, Imam Khomeini Airport is one of the two international airports serving Tehran. All international flights in Tehran, with the exception of Hajj charters, are currently served by this airport, and all domestic flights are served by Mehrabad Airport.

Energy Projects Worth Over \$131m Inaugurated in 2 Provinces

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Some 28 energy projects worth over 5.53 trillion rials (about \$131.6 million) were inaugurated in two provinces in the 33rd week of the Energy Ministry's A-B-Iran program.

In a ceremony attended by the Energy Minister Reza Ardakanian, the mentioned projects including three scattered power plants, five small-scale power plants, 16 power supply projects, and several network modification and optimization projects were put into operation in Tehran and Gilan provinces.

Of the mentioned projects, 25 were inaugurated in Tehran province and three others were in Gilan province.

As reported, the mentioned projects have been put into operation with the aim of increasing the reliability of the electricity network, reducing unwanted blackouts,

supplying electricity to the Mehr housing projects, and increasing the country's electricity generation capacity.

A-B-Iran program (the acronyms A and B stand for water and electricity in Persian) was initiated in the previous Iranian calendar year (ended on March 19), during which the minister made 31 trips to various provinces for inaugurating over 220 major projects with a total investment of 335.6 trillion rials (about \$7.99 billion).

Since the beginning of the second phase of the scheme in the current Iranian calendar year (started on March 20), every week several energy projects have gone operational across the country.

Earlier this month during the 31st week of the A-B-Program, Ardakanian said: "In the second phase of the program 250 projects are going to be inaugurated by the end of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20, 2021) of which so far 154 have gone operational."

Educational Innovation, Technology Centre Opens in Tehran

TEHRAN (IFP) - An educational innovation and technology center has opened in the west of the Iranian capital, Tehran.

The four-story facility is built on an area measuring around 2,600 sqm. The move is aimed at overhauling the innovative ecosystem of Tehran and urging university students to form innovative and technological teams and present educational innovative plans.

Present at the ceremony was Sorena Sattari, the head of the Science and Technology Department of the Presidential Office, who said innovation and creativity should come under the spotlight again.

"This change is fortunately taking place in many universities," he noted.

Sattari said his department is supporting the development of spaces dedicated to the enhancement of innovation and creativity. "Thanks to this support, around one million square meters of space dedicated to innovative plans have been added to the premises of universities," he said.

The official added the innovative ecosystem has made its presence felt in society and innovation, creativity and development centers have stepped into this new path.

MSC Designs, Manufactures Composite Nut and Bolt

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

ISFAHAN – Mobarakeh Steel Company by relying on capability and potentials of its experts and collaboration with domestic manufacturing companies succeeded in designing and manufacturing composite nut and bolt and used them in the secondary part of electric arc furnaces instead of anti-magnet steel nut and bolt.

Head of technical group on maintenance and repair of steel-making and continuous casting unit of the company Mr. Yousef Esmaealzadeh in an interview announced design and manufacture of composite nut and bolt which holds high current water jacket cables in the secondary part of the electric arc furnaces.

He then delved into details of quality and function of the achievement.

On this regard, an expert in this unit Mr. Ali Alikhani pointed to the function of the composite nut and bolt manufactured by the company for supporting and holding the cables, noting that the new achievement will help the company to save waste of production.

He said that the achievement will minimize the delays and pauses significantly during the production and in the electric arc furnaces section of the company.



Int'l Exhibition of Home Appliances Without Foreign Companies

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Secretary of Iran's Association of the Industries of Household Appliances says the 20th International Exhibition of Home Appliances will be held in Tehran without presence of foreign companies and the public.

Speaking in a press conference, Abbas Hashemi said that this year's exhibition will be held on December 25-28 with

observing all sanitary protocols at the Permanent Fairground of Tehran and in an area around 16,000 square meters with participation of 175 domestic manufacturers.

He said the four-day 20th International Exhibition of Home Appliances will kick off on Friday December 25.

Hashemi blamed the coronavirus for no show-up of foreign companies and producers in this year exhibition which was at first to be held in November.

He said the association had invited China and Turkey to dispatch some of their companies to the exhibition but due to the pandemic and disruptions in flights they have failed to attend this year's exhibition and no foreign company will attend this year's exhibition.

Hashemi reiterated that all sanitary protocols like installing disinfectant tunnels at the entrances of the halls of the fairground will be observed.

He admitted that the exhibition will be open for the experts and not for the public, adding that the organizers are to hold some webinars on the sidelines of the exhibition.



ESCO Wins Int'l Certificates on IMS



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

ISFAHAN – The consumer cooperative personnel company of Esfahan Steel Company (ESCO) for the first time got the international certificates on Integrated Management System (IMS), including ISO 14001 (Environmental management system), ISO 45001 (Occupational health and safety management system) and ISO 9001 (quality management).

The manager of the cooperative Mr. Amin Ghanbari announced this achievement and said the advantages of getting these ISO certificates by the cooperative have been these points that the cooperative conforms itself with international standards and ultimately create quality and trust in the offered services and goods to the shareholders.

On getting environmental management system certificate, he said the company fully observes all requirements regarding safety and occupational health of its staff as well as all requirements regarding environment.

Ghanbari added that essential commonality between these three standards has decreased the parallel costs and redundancy and increased productivity.

He then pointed to other advantages of these certificates like minimizing the incidents in the occupational environment and boosting better services and creation of more incentives in the staff.

He said in fact the goal behind getting and implementing the certificates is that the consumer cooperative with a targeted method based on necessary standards would create enough assurance and trust among the staff and shareholders.

Mexican President Expects No Conflicts With Biden Administration

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Monday his weekend call with U.S. President-elect Joe Biden was “very friendly” and that he expect relations to be positive with the new Democratic administration taking office in January.

“There won’t be any conflict with the new government that Mr. Biden heads,” Lopez Obrador told a government news conference after their phone call on Saturday, which he said had lasted about 20-30 minutes.



U.S. Congress Reaches Deal On COVID-19 Aid Package

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. congressional leaders reached agreement on Sunday on a \$900 billion package to provide the first new aid in months to an economy and individuals battered by the surging coronavirus pandemic, with votes likely on Monday.

The package would be the second-largest economic stimulus in U.S. history, following a \$2.3 trillion aid bill passed in March. It comes as the pandemic accelerates, infecting more than 214,000 people in the country each day. More than 317,000 Americans have already died.



Pakistan Can't Recognize Israel Until Palestine Resolved



MULTAN (Dispatches) - Pakistan says it has made it clear to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that Islamabad cannot recognise Israel until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not resolved.

“I categorically presented Pakistan’s stance on Israel to the UAE’s foreign minister that we will not and cannot establish a relationship with Israel until a concrete and permanent solution to the Palestine issue is found,” Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi told reporters in the central city of Multan on Monday.

Qureshi’s statement came days after his visit to the UAE, which was seen by many as crucial amid rumors that Islamabad had secretly sent a messenger to Israel.

Islamabad denied the reports, which appeared mainly in the Israeli media.

Responding to questions regarding reports about alleged pressure from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Persian Gulf states for recognition of Israel, Qureshi said he explained to his UAE counterpart the “depth of emotions and feelings Pakistanis have about Palestine and Kashmir”.

The UAE foreign minister, he contended, “fully understood our feelings” on the two issues.

Rebuffing reports about pressure on Islamabad to recognize Israel, he said, “Number one, there will be no pressure on us nor there is. Number two, we have to make decisions keeping Pakistan’s interests in view and not because of any pressure. We have a policy and we are still steadfast on it.”

He said Prime Minister Imran Khan had “time and again clarified there is no pressure on us in this regard”.

Khan made headlines last month when he revealed that Islamabad had been under pressure from some “friendly” nations to recognize Israel.

Although he stopped short of naming the countries despite being repeatedly asked whether they were Muslim or non-Muslim countries, many believe the Pakistani leader was referring to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The UAE, Bahrain and Morocco recently established diplomatic and economic relations with Israel, while reports suggest some other Persian Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, are also weighing the options to normalise ties.

In recent years, Pakistan’s relations with its traditional Persian Gulf allies have come under strain due to Islamabad’s “neutrality” on several issues, including the war in Yemen and the blockade on Qatar imposed by a Saudi Arabia-led Arab alliance.

Riyadh also appears to be irked by criticism from Islamabad over its lukewarm stance on Pakistan’s longstanding dispute with India over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir, claimed in full by both the South Asian neighbours.

Dozens of U.S. Treasury Email Accounts Hacked

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Dozens of email accounts at the U.S. Treasury Department were compromised by the powerful hackers responsible for a wide-ranging espionage campaign against U.S. government agencies, the office of U.S. Senator Ron Wyden said on Monday.

In a written statement, Wyden’s office said that Senate Finance Committee staff were briefed that the hack of the Treasury Department appears to have been a significant one, “the full depth of which isn’t known.” Wyden, the most senior Democrat on the committee, said that Microsoft notified the agency that dozens of email accounts had been compromised and that the hackers also penetrated the systems at Treasury’s Departmental Offices division, which is home to its top officials.

“Treasury still does not know all of the actions taken by hackers, or precisely what information was stolen,” the statement said, although it added that the Internal Revenue Service said there was no evidence the tax agency was compromised or that taxpayer data was affected. Wyden’s statement carried a considerably more pessimistic tone than the one taken by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who told CNBC earlier in the day that “the good news is there has been no damage, nor have we



seen any large amounts of information displaced.”

“I can assure you, we are completely on top of this,” he said.

The Treasury declined to add to Mnuchin’s comments, and did not immediately return a message seeking comment on Wyden’s statement. A Wyden aide said the hackers were able to access the Treasury officials’ Microsoft-hosted inboxes after taking control of the cryptographic key used by Treasury’s “single sign on” infrastructure - a service used in many organizations so that employees can access a variety of services with a single username and password.

The aide quoted Treasury officials as saying Mnuchin’s inbox was not among those affected. Microsoft did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

U.S. governments and cybersecurity experts in several countries are still struggling to get their arms around the breach, which began earlier this year when hackers subverted the Texas-based software company SolarWinds and used the company as a springboard to jump deep into government and corporate networks.

Iraqis Protest After Currency Value Slashed

BAGHDAD (AFP) - Hundreds of angry Iraqis protested Monday in several cities against a currency devaluation that has slashed their purchasing power amid a pandemic-fuelled economic crisis.

The Central Bank of Iraq (CBI) at the weekend devalued the currency by over a fifth against the US dollar, officially re-pegging the dinar at a bank rate of 1,460 to the greenback.

On Monday, hundreds gathered in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square, demanding the government change tack, furious at the first devaluation in a half-decade.

“The government should collapse before the dinar,” one sign held by a young protester read. Many of the protesters were elderly, who said the value of their pensions had been cut.

Riot police with shields and helmets stood guard at Tahrir, but the protest was peaceful. Tahrir Square had been occupied round-the-clock for a year by a protest movement demanding an end to government corruption, but the demonstrators were cleared out in an army-led operation in October.

Iraq, which relies on oil sales to finance more than 90 percent of its budget, is set to see its economy shrink by 11 percent this year, while poverty doubles to 40 percent of the country’s 40 million residents, according to International Monetary Fund estimates. “If we hadn’t changed the currency rate or adjusted our expenditures, our (foreign currency) reserves could have run out in six or seven months,” Finance Minister Ali Allawi told local reporters on Sunday.

The devaluation sparked panic, as people rushed out after its announcement to buy dollars or stock up in supermarkets before price rises hit.

Elsewhere on Monday, hundreds marched in the eastern city of Kut, near the border with Iran, where traders said imports would be hit as they used dollars to buy goods from outside.

Prices at food markets and wholesalers in the southern city of Nasiriyah rose by around 20 percent, an AFP correspondent said.

Armenian Protesters Force PM to Curtail Mourning Trip

YEREVAN (Dispatches) - Demonstrators in Armenia blocked roads on Monday and forced Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to cut short an official visit, as anger in the country grows over a contentious peace deal with Azerbaijan.

Pashinyan has come under pressure from the opposition to resign after agreeing to the peace accord with Azerbaijan that saw Armenia cede swathes of disputed territory after a brief conflict.

Six weeks of fighting between the ex-Soviet countries for control of the Nagorno-Karabakh region erupted in late September and left more than 5,000 people dead.

Government critics say that new border demarcations in the south of the country are being drawn at the expense of Armenia’s national security -- a claim Pashinyan has denied.

The prime minister on Monday was travelling to the south of Armenia on the final day of a three-day national mourning period.

He said he did not want to resort to force to continue his journey after protesters blocked roads to prevent him from travelling.

“I am returning to Yerevan,” he wrote on Facebook, referring to the Armenian capital.

Pashinyan, 45, met with residents of the southern town of Sisian but protesters barred him from travelling to Goris and other towns.

Goris mayor Arushan Arushanyan had called on protesters to bar Pashinyan from entering the southern Syunik region. Arushanyan was later detained by police, a representative told AFP, in an incident the mayor’s lawyer described as “an abduction”.

A spokeswoman for the national Investigative Committee told AFP that investigators had opened several criminal probes.

Clashes over Karabakh ended in November with the Moscow-brokered peace agreement that saw Azerbaijan with Turkey’s military and political backing make decisive gains in the disputed territory.

The opposition has branded Pashinyan a traitor for agreeing to end the war on Azerbaijan’s terms and has insisted that he stand down.

Nagorno-Karabakh declared independence from Azerbaijan during a war over the mountainous province in the 1990s that left tens of thousands dead.



Russia, Rwanda Send Troops to C. Africa



BANGUI (Dispatches) - The Central African Republic said Monday that Russia and Rwanda had sent in hundreds of troops after an alleged attempted coup ahead of weekend elections.

The government in CAR, one of the world’s poorest and most unstable countries, on Saturday accused former president Francois Bozize of fomenting a would-be putsch by three rebel groups.

The three groups on Friday started to advance on the capital Bangui along key highways after declaring an alliance, the government said.

The UN peacekeeping force MINUSCA announced on Sunday that the rebels had been stopped or pushed back and the situation was “under control”.

“Russia has sent several hundred soldiers and heavy weapons” under a bilateral cooperation agreement, government spokesman Ange Maxime Kazagui said.

“The Rwandans have also sent several hundred men who are on the ground and have started fighting.”

Rwanda’s defence ministry confirmed the deployment.

It said the move was in response to the targeting of its troops in the 11,500-strong MINUSCA by rebels supported by Bozize, who ruled the CAR from 2003 to 2013. No details were given about the deployment, but the ministry said it would “also contribute to ensure a peaceful and secure general elections scheduled on Sunday”.

MINUSCA’s Rwandan contingent is notably in charge of the security of CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera and the presidential palace.

There was no immediate confirmation from Moscow about the Russian deployment although the Kremlin said the situation in the country was of “serious concern”.

Moscow has been leading a vast diplomatic and financial offensive in the former French colony since 2018 in return for concessions to Russian firms to exploit minerals, particularly gold and diamonds.

Private security guards employed by Russian companies also provide protection for Touadera and are involved in training of local armed forces.



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S, J, balcony
yard, & pkg
Fully Furn

Parsian

Zaferanieh (\$2700) 240sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, S, J, & F.F
Farmanieh (\$3000) 300sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, S, J, & F.F

Niavaran bldg (\$20000) 7storey, 30bdrs, S/p, S, J, balcony, pkgs
Velenjak bldg (\$10000) 5storey, 20bdrs, S/p, S, J, balcony, pkgs

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China Against U.S. Bill to Remove Chinese Firms From U.S. Exchanges

BEIJING (Reuters) - China said on Monday it firmly opposed U.S. President Trump signing a bill that would kick Chinese companies off U.S. stock exchanges unless they adhere to U.S. auditing standards, saying it contains discriminatory provisions against Chinese companies. "This is nothing but an unjustified political crackdown on Chinese enterprises listed in the United States," foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a daily new briefing in Beijing. "It will seriously hinder the normal listing of Chinese companies and distort the basic market economy rules that the U.S. has always touted," Wang said.



Air Transport in Turmoil as Flights From UK Banned

PARIS (Reuters) - Europe faces significant disruption to air transport as a growing number of countries bans flights from Britain due to fears over a new coronavirus strain, prompting airlines to repeat calls for more testing to keep borders open.

Eurocontrol Director General Eamonn Brennan said there had been 900 daily flights between Britain and the 27 countries of the European Union between Monday and Saturday last week.

"We'll see a significant impact on the network as a result of the new (coronavirus) variant in the UK," the head of the pan-European air traffic control agency wrote on Twitter. Already reeling from the loss of some six million flights since March due to the pandemic, airlines faced a flood of overnight restrictions echoing the sudden impact of ash from an Icelandic volcano eruption in 2010, albeit on reduced traffic levels.

"The measures came in at extremely short notice," an airline industry official told Reuters.

Shares in European airlines fell sharply, led by UK-based carrier easyJet, down almost 10%, and British Airways owner IAG, down 9%.

As EU officials met to try to forge a coordinated response, airlines issued a fresh appeal to step up testing regimes in order to keep borders open.

"Governments must cooperate to put mutually recognized testing capacity in place so that borders can remain open to the vast majority of healthy passengers," the International Air Transport Association (IATA) said.

IATA, which represents most major airlines, said the World Health Organization had adopted a mantra of "test, test and test again" and added: "We implore governments to act on this advice".

Under initial restrictions, which came into force on Monday, carriers faced a mixed bag of conditions.

Italy and Germany exempted cargo and medical flights from their bans on flights from the United Kingdom, which has said a new, more easily transmissible variant of the coronavirus is spreading rapidly.

Romania also exempted mail flights, but it was not immediately clear to what extent postal services would be hit elsewhere. Germany's Deutsche Post said earlier it was halting all deliveries of parcels to Britain. France, Latvia and Bulgaria banned all flights from Britain with no apparent exemptions, according to notices to pilots. Britain expressed surprise at the inclusion of freight.

Airlines operating in London Heathrow, meanwhile, were warned to ensure passengers do not become stranded in Britain and "can be appropriately routed to the final destination". The Netherlands said in an industry bulletin that Dutch carriers and Britain's easyJet would be able to repatriate aircraft and crew "in order to get these planes out of the United Kingdom".

Long-haul travel was also affected, though traffic on those routes is already the worst hit from the slump in air travel demand caused by the pandemic.

Hong Kong said it would ban all flights arriving from the United Kingdom from midnight, in the first such move in Asia. Canada said on Sunday it would halt passenger flights from the United Kingdom for 72 hours.

S. Korea Pins Hope on Exports in Post-COVID-19 Era

SEOUL (Dispatches) - Exports could be a breakthrough for the South Korean economy in the post-coronavirus era, a state-run trade agency said Monday.

Despite numerous uncertainties that are expected to linger in 2021, the state-run Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency raised its exports forecast for next year, saying semiconductors and biotech products, among others, are likely to lead the gains.

Overseas shipments would grow 6-7 percent in 2021 to reach \$540 billion-560 billion next year, from around \$510 billion this year, the KOTRA projection shows.

The forecast was based on estimates and information gathered and analyzed by 127 overseas KOTRA offices in 84 countries.

As key favorable factors, the agency cited improving global trade conditions, increases in the prices of key export items like semiconductors and crude oil, growth in new export products and the expected implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. By product, Korea's flagship export items such as semiconductors as well as items from noncontact businesses would continue to lead the overall export growth, the report said.

Another "semiconductor supercycle" is likely to occur driven by demand recovery, price increases, expansion of 5G networks and accelerating digital transformation, the agency projected.

Health care products would see their shares grow as a new growth export category as countries begin to establish infrastructure for public health amid the protracted pandemic.

Korea is also likely to witness a sales boom in electronics and other information technology products as the noncontact industry would thrive in the wake of the pandemic.



Fitch's Downgrade of Malaysia Sparks Fiery Debate

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Fitch Ratings' downgrade of Malaysia's Long Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) to "BBB+" from "A-", has ignited a firestorm of comments, with everyone from politicians to economists providing their proverbial two cents worth on the matter.

More concerning, however, is whether other rating agencies are likely to follow in Fitch's footsteps, analysts say, warning Malaysia needs to get down to brass tacks and detail how it intends to shrink its massive debts and consolidate its finances post Covid-19, and demonstrate a commitment to institutional reforms to avert another downgrade.

Within a few hours of the downgrade, Finance Minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Aziz released a statement conveying Putrajaya's disappointment with Fitch's rating outcome, "particularly during these exceptional times as the Covid-19 pandemic is still unfolding".

"By honing in on Malaysia's fiscal position and political situation, Fitch's decision does not give due justice and credit to our crisis response efforts and strong economic fundamentals," Zafrul says.

To put things into perspective, Fitch said that its downgrade stemmed from a few points.

At the top of the list is the deterioration of government debt metrics — a result of the pandemic — which Fitch projects will propel general government debt to 76% of GDP in 2020, from 65.2% 2019.

"Lingering political uncertainty following the change in government last March" was another reason cited, which Fitch said weighs on the policy outlook as well as prospects for further improvement in governance standards.

Not everyone is on the same page with Fitch.

U.S. to Earmark \$1.9b to Replace Huawei, ZTE Telecoms Gear

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) — U.S. policymakers will back a \$1.9bn programme to remove telecommunications network equipment that the US government says could threaten national security as part of a \$900bn COVID-19 relief bill, two sources briefed on the matter told the Reuters news agency.

The COVID-19 relief bill, the second-largest economic stimulus in U.S. history following a \$2.3 trillion aid bill passed in March, invests \$7bn to increase access to broadband, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Democratic

Leader Chuck Schumer said in a statement. The low-income programme, they said, will "help millions of students, families and unemployed workers afford the broadband they need during the pandemic".

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) said in June it had formally designated China's Huawei Technologies Co and ZTE Corp as threats, a declaration that bars U.S. firms from tapping an \$8.3bn government fund to buy equipment from the companies. Earlier this month, the FCC finalised rules that require carriers with ZTE or Huawei equipment to "rip and replace" that equipment but is awaiting funding from Congress.

Huawei said earlier this month it was disappointed in the FCC's decision "to force removal of our products from telecommunications networks. This overreach puts U.S. citizens at risk in the largely underserved rural areas — during a pandemic — when reliable communication is essential".

The bill "establishes a temporary, emergency broadband benefit program at the FCC to help low-income Americans, including those economically challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic, get connected or remain connected to broadband," according to a fact sheet seen by Reuters.

One of the sources also said the program will supply a \$50 monthly subsidy to qualifying households "to help them afford broadband service and an internet-connected device."

The bill also expands eligibility for the rip-and-replace reimbursement program to communications providers with 10 million subscribers or less but prioritizes reimbursement for providers with two million subscribers or less, the source said, citing a draft fact sheet.

The bill will include \$285m for connecting minority communities and will establish an Office of Minority Broadband Initiatives at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). It will also offer funding to "support minority-serving education institutions, including when they partner with minority-owned businesses, to expand broadband capacity and use at the school and in the surrounding community," the fact sheet seen by Reuters said.

Novak Hopes Biden Won't Upset Oil Market Stability

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia hopes the incoming administration of U.S. President-elect Joe Biden will not derail producer nations' action to boost oil markets, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Monday.

Russia, other leading oil producers and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, a group known as OPEC+, have joined forces to reduce output and bolster the global oil market as the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened fuel demand.

"We hope that the changes to the policy of the US administration will not have an impact on the joint actions, which, first of all, are designed to play a positive role for the global economy and energy markets," Novak told an online conference.

He also said Moscow had noted statements from the incoming administration that he said appeared to contradict the U.S. policy of the last four years.

In addition to pulling the United States out of the United Nations' agreement to curb climate change, which requires less use of fossil fuel, outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew from a nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed sanctions that have stifled Iran's oil exports.

In April, Trump was involved in talks that led the OPEC+ group to agree a record oil supply cut. Biden's election could lead to a shift in U.S.-Russian relations and he has named Russia as Washington's most serious global threat.

OPEC+ has said it will continue easing cuts from April's record supply reduction and is expected to reduce output curbs in January by 500,000 barrels per day.

Novak said earlier this month the cumulative output increase by the OPEC+ group will reach a planned 2 million bpd by April, barring any unforeseen events.

He said on Monday the recovery in oil demand has not been as fast as anticipated. Oil prices fell sharply on the day in response to a fast-spreading new strain of the coronavirus that has closed much of Britain.

India Plans Tough Annual Targets For State Firms to Boost Valuations



NEW DELHI (Reuters) - India plans to set tough financial targets for state-run firms to try to improve their valuations ahead of a push by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to privatize some companies, according to a draft government document and sources.

The government, which is trying to rein in its fiscal deficit, wants state-run firms to focus on improving market capitalization and dividend payouts from the 2021/22 fiscal year, starting April, as well as ramping up the sale of non-core assets, the sources said.

State-run companies have traditionally largely targeted raising output and increasing revenues, rather than improving efficiency and valuations, contributing to years of share price underperformance versus the broader market. "The companies need to raise their valuation and profitability in a changing business environment. Then only we will be able to get a better price (from stake sales). Shareholders and investors should be rewarded," said a government source with knowledge of the plan.

After regaining power in 2019, Modi's government prepared a plan to raise as much as 3.25 trillion rupees (\$44 billion) over 5 years by selling down its stakes in companies including Oil and Natural Gas Corp, Indian Oil Corp, NMDC Ltd, Coal India, Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd and BEM Ltd.

It announced moves to privatize companies in non-strategic parts of the economy and reduce the number of firms in key sectors. The government has already initiated steps to privatize Bharat Petroleum, Container Corp and Shipping Corp.

However, weak investor sentiment and limited demand have led to delays. So far this fiscal year to end-March 2021, the government has raised only a tenth of its targeted 1.20 trillion rupees stake sales.

The planned changes in annual targets could be announced in next year's federal budget, due in February, a second government source said.

"The state run companies will need to deploy funds raised through asset monetization for issues like debt repayment. They should have return on capital employed and return on equity quite high on the margin," the source said. For the first time, India will include annual targets for state-run companies on metrics such as earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA), according to the sources and a document on the draft guidelines, which is currently before a government committee.

Other targets will include increasing market capitalization or share price, as well as measures such as return on net worth and capital employed, they said.

Iranian Books Win Award At Int'l Contest in Qatar

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Translation of two Iranian books ranked third at Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and International Understanding held in Doha, Qatar.

Two Iranian books translated in Arabic included A History of Persian Literature by Ahmad Tamimdari and From the Past of Literary of Iran by scholar of Iranian literature Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob.

Zarrinkoob's book had been translated by Sadeq Khorsha and Tamimdari's book by a Syrian translator with cooperation of Iran's cultural attache in Damascus.

Founded in 2015, Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation and International Understanding aims to encourage translators and publishers working for friendship and cooperation among the world nations.



Asian Economies to Regain Pre-COVID Scale in 2022

KUALA LUMPUR (Dispatches) - Economists expect Asian economies to turn around in 2021 following sharp drops in 2020, but the improvement could be slow as the future course of efforts to contain COVID-19 remains unclear. It is in 2022, not 2021, when these economies will regain pre-pandemic levels, a survey of economists suggests, with the effectiveness and availability of coronavirus vaccines likely to impact the pace of recovery.

The Japan Center for Economic Research and Nikkei conducted a quarterly consensus survey from Nov. 20 to Dec. 14, collecting 38 answers from economists and analysts in the five biggest members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations -- Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand -- and in India.

As the pace of economic decline slowed in these countries, with the largest drops in the April-June period, the deterioration of economic outlooks also appears to have halted. The growth projections for calendar 2020 and 2021, or for fiscal 2020 and 2021, for the six countries were continuously revised down in previous quarterly surveys in March, June and September, but the latest forecasts are basically unchanged from last time.

Growth projections for the ASEAN5 for 2020 and 2021 are -5.0% and 4.3% respectively, unchanged from the previous survey. The 2021 growth figure shows a V-shaped recovery for each economy, but this largely due to a base effect. Many economists foresee an uncertain, less-than-robust recovery in 2021, given that it will depend on how the pandemic situation develops.

2020 growth projections for Thailand and Singapore were revised slightly upward from the previous survey. Somprawin Manprasert from Bank of Ayudhya in Thailand said the bank had raised its 2020 forecast, reflecting "better-than-expected 3Q20 GDP data, accelerating public spending, and stronger merchandise exports".

"Monthly indicators show signs of bottoming out, but [are] still weak," observed Yuma Tsuchiya of MUFG Bank on the Singaporean economy.

The projections for 2020 were revised slightly downward from the previous survey for Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. "Private consumption slowed due to weakening purchasing power" triggered partly by "massive layoffs," reported Juniman of Maybank Indonesia.

Economists project the growth rates of ASEAN countries will turn positive in Q1 or Q2 in 2021, though recoveries could be weak and uncertain. Alvin Ang of Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines foresaw a weak recovery as "the economy will most likely remain in general quarantine." Wide deployment of vaccines would "take time," he added.

"We expect economic growth to start recovering in H2 2021, albeit the economic level [will remain] below the pre-pandemic level," commented Wisnu Wardana of Bank Danamon on the Indonesian economy. "The Thai economy will likely remain subdued, mainly due to escalating global economic risks. The global coronavirus outbreak is not yet under control," said Nattaporn Tiratanasirikul of Kasikom Research Center.

Some economists have more positive outlooks. "Recovery prospects improve amid vaccine hopes and consumption stimulus measures," stressed Vincent Loo Yeong Hong of KAF Research on the Malaysian economy. "We expect global demand to surprise on the upside next year, fueled by households drawing down on their significant accumulated savings," remarked Manu Bhaskarn of Centennial Asia Advisors in Singapore on the global economy.

Suhaimi Ilias of Maybank Investment Bank in Malaysia commented that Malaysia's 2021 economic outlook "depends on pandemic, politics and policy". Jonathan Ravelas of BDO Unibank saw government infrastructure spending as the "key economic driver in 2021" for the Philippines.

The Indian economy, meanwhile, was hit hard by COVID-19 infections and lockdowns.



The growth rate for the April-June period was -23.9%. The decline eased in July-September, with the rate at -7.5%. The 2020/21 growth projection was revised slightly upward to -8.2% and is expected to rise to 9.1% in 2021/22, helped largely by a base effect.

Tirthankar Patnaik of National Stock Exchange of India observed that the economy had improved faster than expected: "Faster normalization of business activities amid gradual lifting of lockdown restrictions and restocking and pick-up in consumption demand ahead of the festive season has supported economic growth over the last few months," he said. Looking to the future, "growth is expected to turn positive by the fourth quarter of this fiscal year (January-March 2021)."

While envisaging a V-shaped recovery in 2021/22, economists also noted risks. Sonal Varma of Nomura pointed to "downside risks on pandemic resurgence, fiscal expenditure compression, and ebbing of pent-up festive demand", while expecting "continued normalization of the economy."

Inflation is also a matter of concern in India, having topped 6.0%, the upper limit of the central bank's target, for months. Supply chain bottlenecks for food and other goods that arose following the nationwide lockdowns are mostly to blame. "Food inflation is likely to remain high for the next three to six months," commented Punit Srivastava of Daiwa Capital Markets India.

Growth projections for the six countries toward 2022 (2022/23) show that most economies will return to pre-COVID-19 levels in 2022. Nicholas Mapa of ING Bank predicted that the Philippine and Indonesia economies would return to "pre-COVID-19 level by mid-2022" and "early 2022" respectively. Somprawin from Thailand's Bank of Ayudhya predicted that GDP would return to pre-pandemic levels in the second half of 2022.

The survey asked economists about topics on their radar in 2021, with deployment of vaccines and other COVID-19-related topics dominating their interests.

Wan Suhaimie of Kenanga Investment Bank in Malaysia warned that "any negative outcome of the vaccine may cause another round of economic downturn." Dharmakirti Joshi of CRISIL said of the Indian economy: "Until a vaccine becomes widely available, [the] spread of COVID-19 ... remains a downside risk, which will determine the pace of economic recovery."

Many governments around the world have increased public spending and central banks have loosened monetary policies to support their pandemic-hit economies. "The expected increase in government borrowing may exert upward pressure on interest rates," said Emilio Neri of Bank of the Philippine Islands. Amonthep Chawla of CIMB Thai Bank paid attention to "abundant global financial liquidity," which "could lead to higher asset prices in emerging markets."

Japan's Record \$1 Trillion Budget Highlights COVID-19 Challenge to Growth, Debt



TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's cabinet approved on Monday a record \$1.03 trillion budget draft for the next fiscal year starting in April 2021, the Ministry of Finance said, as the coronavirus and stimulus spending puts pressure on already dire public finances.

The 106.6 trillion yen (\$1.03 trillion) annual budget also got a boost from record military and welfare outlays. It marked a 4% rise from this year's initial level, rising for nine years in a row, with new debt making up more than a third of revenue.

From Europe to America, policymakers globally have unleashed a torrent of monetary and fiscal stimulus to prevent a deep and prolonged recession as the pandemic shut international borders and sent many out of work.

In Japan, fiscal reform has been shelved as Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga prioritised efforts to contain the pandemic and boost growth, despite public debt at more than twice the size of Japan's \$5 trillion economy.

"How to balance the coronavirus response with fiscal reform has hardly been debated in Japan," said Izuru Kato, chief economist at Totan Research. "Ultra-low interest rates under the Bank of Japan's prolonged monetary easing may have caused fiscal discipline to be paralysed."

The spending plan, which was in line with a Reuters report out last week, must be approved by parliament early next year. It will be rolled out along with a third extra budget for this fiscal year as a combined 15-month budget aimed for seamless spending to ease the virus pain and back Suga's goal of achieving carbon neutrality and digital transformation.

"We had to strike a right balance between the needs to prevent the spread of infections, revive the economy and achieve fiscal reform," Finance Minister Taro Aso told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

World Bank OKs \$300M of Financing for Turkey's Micro, Small Businesses

ANKARA (Dispatches) - The World Bank on Monday announced that under a new project, it will provide financing worth \$300 million (TL 2.3 billion) to help avert the closure of viable micro and small enterprises (MSEs) in Turkey and protect jobs amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The Rapid Support for Micro and Small Enterprises Project for Turkey will be implemented by the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Organization of Turkey (KOSGEB), according to a statement by the bank.

"Consistent with this framework, the World Bank is pleased to contribute to the support of viable firms and protection of vulnerable jobs in Turkey," said Auguste

Kouame, World Bank country director for Turkey.

The new financing will support people and firms by providing reimbursable support financing for manufacturing firms and other innovative young firms focusing on manufacturing, scientific research and development, and computer programming.

The project will provide financing in the form of performance-based reimbursable support to eligible MSEs, including innovative young firms that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 but remain financially viable and are likely to survive the crisis, if they can access funding to meet their temporary liquidity needs.

Iran Interested...

FROM PAGE 1

Zangeneh also called Russia a "strategic partner" during a visit to Moscow and invited Russian companies to invest in the Islamic Republic.

"We welcome the investment of Russian companies in the required sectors of the oil industry" in Iran, Zangeneh said after meeting Shulginov Monday. Novak said a broad range of trade and economic cooperation matters is "successfully explored between our countries".

"Although this year has become a tough challenge for the whole global community, economic relations between Russia and Iran do not lose prior dynamics but become more active and meaningful instead," he said.

While observers watched Zangeneh's latest visit with interest, it was not immediately known what was in store after the meetings, but Shana cited him as indicating that some agreements had been reached.

Russia's Tass news agency only said Novak discussed key issues of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the oil sphere with Zangeneh, stating that relations in the energy sector are also "developing successfully at present".

Russia has signed an agreement with Iran to implement the second and third units of the Bushehr nuclear power plant after bringing the first facility online in 2011. Zangeneh said Tehran and Moscow will increase cooperation in the energy sector to offset the impact of sanctions. "We see Russia as a strategic partner and this partnership will not change with the warm and cold atmosphere in the international arena," the veteran Iranian minister said.

Iran's Oil Ministry, he said, has good cooperation with Russian companies, adding this cooperation in the field of oil, gas and manufacturing of equipment is to continue.

For operation in Iran, however, Russian manufacturers of oil and gas equipment must invest according to the law of maximum use of domestic capabilities. "They must partner with Iranian companies and negotiate with their Iranian counterparts to achieve results," Zangeneh said.

The Iranian ambassador to Russia and his colleagues at the embassy are about to follow up on the agreements, he added without elaboration. Zangeneh was accompanied by his deputy and Iran's governor to OPEC Amir Hossein Zamaninia. The minister said one of the topics discussed in his meetings was the global oil market.

Russia, he said, has played a key role in stabilizing the global oil market in recent years. It has cooperated closely with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries to curb production and support prices on the platform of what has become known as the OPEC+. In his meeting with the Russians, Zangeneh said, they talked about their "serious cooperation" within the OPEC+ framework, adding their views were close.

Iranians Have...

FROM PAGE 1

All the world believe that the U.S. by returning to the negotiation table will benefit, and to materialize it, it is necessary that Biden cancels all Trump's executive orders regarding Iran outright and without any negligence. Only such an action can revive the U.S. lost reputation in a short



time that Biden needs it for an agreement, and it can provide the ground for broader talks over the other issues.

That Iran accepts Biden to resist for an all-out agreement may make the case more complicated and in this issue, the U.S. may probably gain nothing but "nothing". Iranians believe sanctions have benefited them and they have succeeded in putting behind major part of the sanctions, and have relied on domestic power and capabilities, and have overcome the unpleasant effects of sanctions.

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution recently during his clear remarks whose words were misused and distorted by the West-oriented media has said, "We must be strong in all areas, including economics, science, technology, and defense. Because the enemies will not give up their greed, aggression, and invasions until we become strong. So I strongly advise that you do not trust the enemy. Do not trust any of their promises regarding solving the problems of the people and the future of the country. You saw what the U.S. did to you under Trump and what they did under Obama. The hostilities are not particular to Trump's America for this to end when he leaves office. Obama's America was also malicious to you and the Iranian nation."

The Leader went on to say, "The three European countries too have displayed a total lack of commitment and extreme malice, duplicity, and hypocrisy. Officials should not harm this unity and synergy of the people (referring to the national unity regarding to Recep Tayyip Erdogan's remarks) and should not divide the nations, and the three branches of power should strengthen national unity through convergence and cooperation and resolve their differences through dialogues. Don't you say that we should negotiate with the world? Well, is not it possible to resolve differences with the domestic element, either? This is a fact that lifting of sanctions is in the hands of the enemy, but nullifying them is in our hands. Thus, we need to focus more on nullifying them than on having them lifted. Of course, we do not mean that we should not seek to have the sanctions lifted, because if the sanctions can be lifted, we should not hesitate for even an hour. However, this has been delayed for four years now. Since 2016 when all sanctions were supposed to be lifted at once, not only have they not been lifted, they have even increased."

The Supreme Leader, who was addressing a group of the organizers of the first memorial ceremony of Martyr Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani and his comrades who were martyred by the blood-sucker Trump, emphasized, "If the sanctions can be lifted in a correct, wise, Iranian-Islamic, and dignified manner, this should be done. But our main focus should be on neutralizing the sanctions, and the initiative for this is in your hands."

This method of leadership in tackling Western immorality and misconduct especially by the Americans has kept Islamic Iran on its feet, and for this reason this belief exists that even if Biden moves in the same direction of the past misconducts of Barack Obama or Trump, Iranians would be stronger than before both to overcome the effects of sanctions on their economy and to have independence of their nuclear power.

Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul...

FROM PAGE 1

The total length of the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul project is 6500 km, including, Iran: 2600 km, Turkey: 1950 km, and Pakistan: 1990 km.

The railway line from Istanbul, through Tehran, all the way to Islamabad has been described as "tremendously beneficial" to all three nations. It aims to boost economic cooperation among Pakistan, Iran and Turkey first and with the other ECO member countries afterwards.

Besides Pakistan, Turkey and Iran, some countries, including, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan will benefit from the ITI project. Although the project was launched to promote the economic relations among the ECO founding member countries, it offers a short, safe, and affordable route for transportation of goods between Asia and Europe, extending benefits to several regional countries. From Turkey, the corridor can link up with the European rail networks via Istanbul's 76-km long undersea Marmaray railway tunnel.

Other countries earlier also expressed eagerness to join the project and suggested further expansion to the European and Middle East markets. Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul rail corridor will provide service to facilitate cargo and container transport. Its transport capacity is 20 containers of 40 feet. Estimated travel time is 11 days as compared to 45 days via sea route. It has over 30% reduction in rail fares as opposed to traditional routes.

Ko Powers to Victory in LPGA Tour Championship

NAPLES (Dispatches) - World number one Ko Jin-young pulled away from second-ranked Kim Sei-young with five back-nine birdies to win the LPGA's season-ending Tour Championship by five strokes.

Ko, who was playing just her fourth LPGA event of the pandemic-disrupted season, had only squeezed into the elite field with a tie for second on Monday at the US Women's Open. But the 25-year-old South Korean made the most of her opportunity, firing seven birdies in her six-under par 66 at Tiburon Golf Club in Naples, Florida.

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Murray Beats Evans on Day One of Battle of the Brits

LONDON (Dispatches) - The Battle of the Brits Premier League Lof Tennis brought some much-needed cheer to the tennis-watching population, as the popular event bringing together Britain's elite tennis players made a comeback in the run-up to Christmas.

The highlight of the day was the rematch between the current British No. 1 Dan Evans and Andy Murray. From the get-go, it was evident that the three-time Slam champion had been honing his serve. But all eyes would be on his movement, especially against a player like Evans who relies on his ability to move his opponents around.

Chiefs Down Saints For 9th Straight Win

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Patrick Mahomes threw three touchdown passes and the visiting Kansas City Chiefs won their ninth consecutive game by defeating the New Orleans Saints 32-29 on Sunday in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome.

Mahomes completed 26 of 47 for 254 yards as the Chiefs improved their NFL-best record to 13-1.

Drew Brees returned from a four-game absence due to rib and lung injuries to complete 15 of 34 passes for 234 yards with three touchdowns and an interception as the Saints (10-4) lost their second straight after a nine-game winning streak.

The Chiefs led at halftime, but Brees threw a 24-yard touchdown pass to Latavious Murray on the first possession of the third quarter to give the Saints their only lead at 15-14.

Buccaneers 31, Falcons 27

Tom Brady threw a 46-yard touchdown pass to Antonio Brown with 6:19 remaining and visiting Tampa Bay overcame a 17-point halftime deficit to defeat Atlanta.

Brady completed 31 of 45 passes for a season-high 390 yards with two touchdowns, with most of the production coming in the second half. The winning points came on Brown's first touchdown since joining the team last month as the Buccaneers (9-5) improved to 5-2 on the road.

Matt Ryan threw for three touchdowns, but the Falcons failed to put a dent in the Buccaneers' bid for a playoff spot. Instead, it was another lead that Atlanta (4-10) didn't protect. Ryan hit 34 of 49 passes for 356 yards.

Bears 33, Vikings 27

David Montgomery rushed for a career-high 146 yards and two touchdowns and Mitchell Trubisky had a passing touchdown and 236 yards of offense as visiting Chicago kept its NFC playoff hopes alive with a win over Minnesota.

Chicago (7-7) won for the second straight week on the heels of a six-game skid and is one game behind the Arizona Cardinals for the final NFC wild-card spot. The Vikings, who rallied after starting the season 1-5, fell to 6-8 as their playoff aspirations took a sizable hit with two weeks left in the regular season.



Trubisky was 15-for-21 passing for 202 yards with one touchdown and one interception for the Bears. Allen Robinson finished with four catches for 83 yards. Kirk Cousins was 24-for-35 for 271 yards and two touchdowns for Minnesota. Dalvin Cook had 24 rushes for 132 yards and a touchdown.

Ravens 40, Jaguars 14

Baltimore had little trouble moving one step closer to earning its third straight trip to the playoffs with a dominating home victory over Jacksonville.

The Ravens (9-5) never trailed against the Jaguars (1-13), who lost its 13th consecutive game, tied for the longest losing streak in franchise history. Baltimore won its third straight game.

Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson passed for 243 yards and three touchdowns and rushed for 35 yards and another score. J.K. Dobbins finished with 14 carries for 64 yards and a touchdown, which marked his franchise-record fourth straight game in which he found the end zone. Gardner Minshew went 22-of-29 passing for 226 yards and two touchdowns for Jacksonville.

Titans 46, Lions 25

Ryan Tannehill passed for three touchdowns and rushed for two more as Tennessee overwhelmed visiting Detroit in Nashville.

Tannehill completed 21 of 27 passes for 273 yards and rushed for 21 yards on three carries. Derrick Henry rushed for 147 yards and one score on 24 carries as the Titans (10-4) remained tied for first in the AFC South with Indianapolis. Corey Davis caught four passes for 110 yards and a touchdown. D'Andre Swift rushed for 67 yards and two touchdowns on 15 carries, and Matthew Stafford passed for 252 yards and a touchdown for the Lions (5-9). Marvin Jones Jr. caught 10 passes for 112 yards and a touchdown.

Zenhausern Wins World Cup Slalom

ROME (Dispatches) - Switzerland's Ramon Zenhausern claimed the second World Cup men's slalom victory of his career on Monday in Alta Badia.

The 28-year-old, who had been eighth after the first run, edged out Austrians Manuel Feller and Marco Schwarz by 0.08sec and 0.12sec respectively.

It was Zenhausern's fourth World Cup win and second in the slalom. His last victory in that event came in Kranjska Gora, Slovenia in March 2019.

France's Alexis Pinturault, winner of the giant slalom on Sunday, struggled on the second run and finished 11th overall at 0.77sec, but nevertheless extended his lead in the overall World Cup standings.

Italy's Alex Vinatzer had lead the way in the first run in the Italian Dolomites but finished off the podium in fourth at 0.19sec.



Arteta Wants Fighters Not Victims at Arsenal

LONDON (Dispatches) - Under-pressure Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta says the only way the struggling Gunners are going to turn their season around is if his players show they are fighters and not victims.

The Spaniard is favorite to be the next Premier League manager to be fired as the warm glow of FA Cup success last season has evaporated fast.

Arsenal are 15th in the table and without a Premier League win since November 1. They have accrued just two points in the last seven games and are only four points above the relegation zone.

The only respite for Arteta -- who has been in the post for just over a year -- has come in the cup competitions.

They are through to the knockout rounds of the Europa League and they face Manchester City -- where he cut his coaching teeth as assistant to Pep Guardiola -- in the League Cup quarter-finals.

"You have two types of people: fighters and victims," said Arteta. "You need fighters and you don't want any victims."

"Victims bring excuses, victims bring negativity and they start to blame anything that is happening around them or is not going their way."

"You need people who fight, people who contribute and people who are ready to give everything to the club in this moment."

Arteta says he ignores what is written about him and the club, insisting that all that matters is the feeling within the club -- and there, he claims, it is a wholly supportive atmosphere.

"Obviously a club of this stature deserves the best and when it is not happening, everyone is going to question what is happening," he said.

"I am the most responsible one in terms of results, so I have to accept that."



Ronaldo Wins Golden Foot Award

LONDON (Dispatches) -- Cristiano Ronaldo has got his hands on a trophy ahead of old rival Lionel Messi.

For years, the Portuguese superstar has been duking it out with Barcelona's talismanic forward for football's top honors. Ronaldo currently trails Messi when it comes to Ballon d'Or wins, with the Portugal international having won the trophy five times to his Argentine counterpart's six triumphs. But the former Manchester United man has now got his hands on a trophy that has so far eluded the mercurial Messi.

Earlier this month, it was announced that the Juventus hitman would be the latest

recipient of the Golden Foot award.

The Golden Foot - which was first introduced in 2003 - is an award for active players over the age of 28 and can only be won once.

The award has been won by the likes of Roberto Baggio, Alessandro Del Piero and Ronaldinho.

Ronaldo received the award on Sunday and looked chuffed to bits with his latest personal accolade.

In keeping with tradition, a dapper-looking Ronaldo placed his feet in cement and left his signature in the concrete.

Ronaldo's winning of the Golden Foot comes as no surprise as he's been in red-hot form this year.

Tomic Suffers A Fresh Blow

LONDON (Dispatches) - Bernard Tomic teased us but in the end it was, sadly, the same old story as much of his career.

The Aussie tennis star was on the comeback trail in Brisbane and showed glimpses of promise as he qualified for the final of a local tournament on the weekend -- but he didn't even make it on the court for the decider.

Warming up before the final of the UTR Pro Tennis Series event, Tomic was hampered by a back issue and pulled out of the match, failing to take what would have been at least a small step forward as he looks to rejuvenate his stuttering career.

Followed by reporters while walking shirtless back to his car, Tomic answered "soon" after being asked when he would return.

"Unfortunately I couldn't play today but hopefully I'll improve," he said. "I've been trying for a year to come back so I'll try my best."

The 28-year-old was a Wimbledon quarter-finalist in 2011 and once ranked as high as 17th in the world. Confident he had the game to win a grand slam, Tomic has since fallen onto the tennis scrap heap as his ranking and desire plummeted.

He's now ranked 226th in the world and can't even get a gig on the main ATP Tour.

Tomic's appearance at the UTR Pro in his home state of Queensland was supposed to be a stepping stone on his journey back to the big leagues but his long wait will have to continue.

Whether he ever makes it back at all -- or even wants to -- remains a mystery, especially from a man who has said repeatedly he doesn't even like tennis and is perfectly happy sitting back counting his millions of dollars.



No New Striker For City Due to COVID Impact

LONDON (AFP) - Manchester City's strikers will have to rediscover their scoring touch because reinforcements will not be signed in January, manager Pep Guardiola has said.

Guardiola explained that even with the backing of their Abu Dhabi owners, City were subject to the same financial pressures as their rivals due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

City have scored only twice in their last three league games but hope to welcome back Brazilian striker Gabriel Jesus for Tuesday's League Cup quarter-final with Arsenal.

However, the League Cup holders' record goalscorer Argentinian Sergio Aguerro is sidelined by an undisclosed issue having had knee and illness problems already this season. Asked about the prospect of new blood coming to the club, Guardiola replied: "No I don't think so because the economic situation around the world is what it is."

"All the clubs struggle -- we are not an exception."

City are eight points adrift of champions Liverpool after 14 matches as they bid to reclaim the title Jurgen Klopp's side took off them last season.

Guardiola says the lack of goals harms their chances of catching Liverpool but he hopes City will be more clinical against out-of-form Arsenal. "We are creating clear chances that we cannot score and when this happens we are always going to suffer," he said.

"That's why I'm not able to say how we will be this season. "Game by game is the only thing I can do and now we go to London to play Arsenal in the League Cup."

Guardiola, though, can be thankful that despite the misfiring front line his defence have been in miserly form with seven clean sheets in their last eight matches in all competitions.

"It's incredible -- that is how we can still be there, knocking on the door of teams above us," said Guardiola. "We need it to be stable and maybe one day players will be fresh to score the goals."

