

Health Ministry Spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari Said on Saturday That Some 134 More Iranians Have Died From the Coronavirus Disease Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing the Total Deaths to 54,574

IRAN NEWS

An Avalanche in Northern Heights of Tehran Has So Far Killed Six People, And Efforts Are Underway to Find at Least 18 Others Who Have Been Reported Missing, According to the Iranian Red Crescent Society

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Harsh Revenge for Assassination of Gen. Soleimani on Agenda

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Deputy Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Quds Force said a “harsh revenge” for the assassination of Lt. General Qassem Soleimani will be definitely taken, regardless of the two more slaps that the US would receive in the face for the murder.

Speaking to reporters, Brigadier General Mohammad Hejazi pointed to the recent remarks by Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei about the slaps that the U.S. has received from Iran so far for the assassination of Lt. General Soleimani and the two more slaps it will get in future.

The major funerals of Martyrs Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and the retaliatory missile attack on the US military base of Ain al-Assad were the two slaps that the U.S. has receive in the face from Iran, the general noted, saying the next two slaps are the U.S.’ software defeat in the region and the expulsion of American forces from the region.

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Iran Exports \$290m Worth of Cathode to China

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN (MNA) – Islamic Republic of Iran exported more than \$290 million worth of copper cathode to China in the first eight months of the current Iran (from March 21 to Nov. 21).

Statistics of Iran’s foreign trade in the eight months of the current year showed that about \$292.5 million worth of cathode and cathode parts from copper was exported to the People’s Republic of China, equivalent to 6.6 percent at large.

According to the statistics of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 45.6 thousand tons of cathode and cathode parts from refined copper was exported to China in this period.

In addition, Islamic Republic of Iran exported 504.8 thousand tons of iron and steel ingot, valued at over \$183.3 million, to China in the first eight months of the current year.

The Chinese have been also one of the purchasers of Iran’s raw aluminum and they have bought some 19,000 tons of aluminum worth over \$30m.

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Iran Can't Trust American "Robbers"

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani says Iran cannot trust Americans when it comes to the transfer of money to purchase coronavirus vaccines as they are notorious for “stealing” Iran’s funds.

In comments on Saturday, President Rouhani said Tehran has been making efforts to buy the vaccines through COVAX, a global initiative aimed at working with vaccine manufacturers to provide countries worldwide equitable access to safe and effective vaccines.

“We provided the money needed to buy vaccines, but they said first we needed the approval of OFAC (The Office of Foreign Assets Control – a financial intelligence and enforcement agency of the US Treasury Department) to make the payment. Then we tried to transfer the money through another country. Again, they said the money must first be transferred to an American bank,” said the president.

“How can we trust you (the US) when you are infamous for theft,” he said, referring to previous cases of US seizure of Iranian assets.

“The Americans hampered our efforts not only with regards to the purchase of vaccines. We can see traces of the United States’ wickedness with regards to anything we want to buy,” he said.

He then criticized media campaigns regarding Iran’s efforts to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine.

“Anti-Iran media outlets, which happen to be so cheeky, capitalize on an issue every day and use it as a pretext [to launch a campaign against Iran],” he noted.

“This time, they are using the issue of the coronavirus vaccine as an excuse and are taking advantage of the issue of purchasing foreign vaccines, the transfer of money and the production of a vaccine inside Iran,” the president.

“Since the early days of the coronavirus outbreak, one of the key issues in question was to provide a vaccine for the disease. All efforts in the country focused on a two-pronged approach: making attempts to develop a vaccine domestically while trying to buy safe foreign vaccines,” he noted.

He said all media campaigns regarding the issue of the coronavirus vaccine in Iran were false.

President Rouhani made it clear that the anti-coronavirus meeting is being held at least every week since the outbreak of the pandemic a year ago.

Further, he stressed the need to keep the current lockdown steady as it is an important factor in fighting the virus.

The President cautioned against the UK new variant corona virus that rapidly spreading compared with the former COVID-19 cases.

At his remarks, the President advised fellow citizens to use face mask as a national duty.

Criticizing the propaganda against the government’s anti-coronavirus plans, the President said Iran is involved in manufacturing COVID-19 vaccines; meanwhile, the country has made efforts to buy the vaccines from abroad.



IRGC Fully Prepared to Defend Iran’s Security

TEHRAN (MNA) – IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral said that the surveys show that forces, systems and equipment are at the desired level of readiness to defend the water borders and, as well as Iran’s interests and security.

Ali Reza Tangsiri made the remarks during his visit to Greater and Lesser Tunbs in the Persian Gulf on Friday.

Surveying the latest situation of combat readiness of the fighters stationed on the islands, Admiral Tangsiri emphasized maintaining combat readiness and vigilance and full intelligence over their sensitive mission area.

“The purpose of this visit, which is planned in continuation of previous visits and objective observation of the situation in the region, is to review the latest status of combat readiness capabilities,” he said.

“Our field surveys show that forces, systems and equipment in all conditions are at the desired level of readiness to defend the water borders, the interests and security of our country,” he added.

Pakistan to Remove Hurdles to Fruit Exports to Iran

KARACHI (Dispatches) – Pakistan’s Commerce Adviser Abdul Razak Dawood has said issues relating to the bottlenecks in export of fruit and vegetables will be taken up with the governments of Afghanistan, Indonesia and Iran.

During a meeting held in Islamabad a delegation of Pakistan Fruits and Vegetable Exporters Association, led by Patron-in-Chief Waheed Ahmed, informed the adviser that Kabul had imposed duty on Pakistani kinno.

The quota of Pakistani kinno by Indonesian government will expire on Dec 30 and if it isn’t taken up we will lose the market, Waheed said.

He also informed the adviser that Iranian market can accommodate 60,000-70,000 tonnes of Pakistani kinno, but it’s unfortunate that this lucrative market has been closed for many years due to a ban imposed by Tehran.

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Iraq Closes Border Crossing With Iran

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The Iraqi government closed the Shalamcheh border crossing with Iran to prevent the spread of a new strain of coronavirus.

The Iraqi authorities decided to close the Shalamcheh border crossing with Iran on Thursday as part of travel ban restrictions to prevent the spread and transmission of the new strain of coronavirus to the Arab country.

Hakim Al-Mayahi, a local health official in Iraq’s Basra, said, “The local government in the province closed the Shalamcheh port with Iran to the movement of travelers, and canceled all travel exceptions, including patients and students.”

He confirmed that the travels at the border crossing had completely stopped, but noted that “the Shalamjah port is still open to the movement of commercial goods throughout the week without stopping, with strict preventive and health measures taken,” Trends Wide reported.

On Tuesday, the Iraqi government announced a 14-day travel ban to and from 8 countries, including Iran, with the exception of receiving Iraqi arrivals, and the closure of all border crossings to and from the countries covered by the ban.

Tehran, Damscus to Launch Joint Bank

TEHRAN (FNA) - Iran and Syria are due to establish a joint bank to facilitate trade ties between the two countries, a senior Iranian economic official said.

“Iran and Syria are due to establish a joint bank which will change the trade equations between the two countries,” Golmohammadi, a senior member of the economic development headquarters of Iran, Iraq and Syria, said on Saturday.

“We are also trying to create an internal swift between the Central Banks of Iran and Syria in order to counter the sanctions,” he added. This plan is in the final stage which will resolve problems of money transfer between Iran and Syria, Golmohammadi said.

Governors of Iranian and Syrian central banks in a meeting in September 2019 had called for the establishment of joint bank and implementation of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) which have already been signed by both banks. Governor of Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Abdul Nasser Hemmati in a meeting with his Syrian counterpart hailed the agreements reached by the two countries’ central banks, hoping that such measures would help promotion of economic collaboration.

He also called on the Syrian side to remove obstacles for setting up joint bank.

Head of Syrian Central Bank, for his part, said that fortunately, there is no obstacle on the way of promoting banking relations.

Continued talks will encourage the Iranian and Syrian banks and companies for further collaboration, he said.

At the end of the meeting, both officials agreed that a committee comprising representatives from Iranian and Syrian bankers to pursue implementation of the agreements reached earlier.

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Leader Congratulates World Christians, Muslims on Christmas

TEHRAN (PressTV)- Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has congratulated all Christians and Muslims across the world on the occasion of Jesus Christ's birth anniversary.

"I congratulate all Christians and Muslims of the world, particularly our Christian compatriots, on the birth anniversary of Prophet #Jesus Christ, the Messiah (pbuh)," the Leader said in a tweet on Friday.

President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also on Thursday felicitated the birth anniversary of Jesus Christ and the New Year.

Majlis Seeks Removing Undesirable Procedure of Registering In Presidential Election

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Spokesman to the Presiding Board of Iran's Majlis says recent moves in Majlis for amending the election law is to stop undesirable and inappropriate process of registration in the presidential election and criticized media and unofficial spaces for creating doubts in the society.

Speaking in a press conference yesterday, Mohammad Hossein Farhangi said that what Majlis is currently seeking is that it wants to stop unpleasant and strange process of registration in the presidential election and the Guardian Council agrees this move on the whole, adding that there may be different opinions in its details.

He said amending the presidential election is for the upcoming presidential election in 2021 and the elections after it.

He said that the motive behind this move of Majlis is that every time on the eve of presidential election, the country witnesses some inappropriate and excessive registrations of candidates which harm the reputation of the country and Majlis wants to put an end to it.

He added that Majlis has its own decision and the Guardian Council has its own but all of them are for betterment of the election process.

He blasted some people who accuse Majlis of eliminating the rivals in the election and called it a politicized act which casts doubt on the performance of Majlis.

He also stated that the next Iran year's budget is highly dependent on oil,



and revenues are optimistic.

In response to the question on whether the national budget bill for next Iranian year budget (starting on March 2021) is in line with revenues and are based on optimism, minimum dependence on oil, and structural reforms, Mohammad Hossein Farhangi said: "No", explaining that it is highly dependent on oil and the costs that have been set are inevitable.

"If the revenues are not realized, the country will face many problems," he added.

Farhangi noted that there were different points of views among MPs on whether the bills would be approved in the parliament or not; for example, when the bill is rejected, it is referred to the government, and the government has two weeks to review it; but this time if any bill is rejected, it will be sent to the parliament directly to be discussed and evaluated instead of sending them to the commissions or settlement commission.

"If the parliament has approved the bill, it will be sent to the Budget Settlement Commission," he concluded.

All Religions in Iran Equally Respected

TEHRAN (IFP) – The government spokesman says followers of all divine faiths in the country are equally respected while they live side by side in peace and harmony.

Ali Rabiei said respecting one another is one of the positive points of the Iranian society.

"Tolerance, coexistence and respecting each other is one of the features and strengths of the Iranian society," he said while visiting a Tehran nursing home for Christians.

"I behalf of the government, I congratulate my fellow Christian countrymen as well as all Christians across the world on Jesus Christ's birthday," he said.

In Iran, he said, one may find, a mosque, a synagogue and even a Zoroastrians' place of worship on the same street, "which indicates a sort of coexistence."

The spokesman said issues that followers of other religions face in Iran should be addressed as well.

"The government believes all issues which apply to Iranians also apply to Iranian minorities," he noted.

11 Iranian Prisoners Extradited From Armenia

TEHRAN (IP) - The deputy minister of justice for human rights and international affairs said on Friday that 11 Iranian prisoners in Armenia were extradited by the neighboring country and handed over to the justice system.

Mahmoud Abbasi added: "The prisoners, most of whom charged with drug trafficking, had been serving

their sentences in Armenian prisons for a long time and they should serve the rest of their prison terms in the country's prisons."

Abbasi said that extradition of prisoners took place in coordination with the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials.

No Doubt About Effectiveness of Iranian Vaccine for COVID-19

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – An adviser to the health minister of Iran denounced the promotion of the coronavirus vaccines produced by foreign companies Pfizer and Moderna as a method to fool people, saying he has no doubts about the effectiveness of a homegrown vaccine.

In comments on Friday, Mohammad Esmaeil Akbari advised people not to be deceived by the remarks that uneducated individuals are making about the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

"Those are business advertisements," he said, adding that the health sector has two enemies, namely ignorance and business.

"By which calculation has the notion come to the mind of people that purchasing Pfizer vaccine will save us?" Akbari wondered, bemoaning the fact that the Iranian administration has been forced to make plans for the purchase of 20 million doses of vaccine from abroad.

The adviser highlighted Iran's advances in developing various vaccines, saying people should have no doubt about the safety of the Iranian vaccine for the coronavirus.

"The (homegrown) vaccine has now entered the human trial phase, and I have no doubt at all about the Iranian vaccine for coronavirus," Akbari added.

No Red City in Iran

TEHRAN (IP) - The spokesman of the National Task Force

for Fighting Coronavirus said that currently there were no red cities in Iran and there are 330 yellow cities and 108 orange ones.

On the sidelines of the National Task Force for Fighting Coronavirus meeting, Alireza Raisi said:

"We hope orange cities will turn to yellow soon and the

number of hospitalization of people decreases."

Referring to the mutations which have been made in the virus especially in Europe, called the British virus, he added that the number of Coronavirus infections in the world has exceeded 80 million.

Raisi noted that the death toll in Iran has decreased by people's participation, but the first grade and second grade of elementary school were not reopened and it will be postponed until better conditions are achieved or probably after the vaccination process.

Pointing out that the statistics of the virus contract have completely decreased in 30 provinces, he said: "Currently, only in Mazandaran province, the corona infection statistics are not decreasing, and we hope that it will decrease in this province as well."

Tehran, Ankara Stress Need to Expand Joint Police Cooperation



TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's head of International Affairs of Police and Director General of Interpol Brigadier General Hadi Shirzad held talks with Head of Turkish National Police's Interpol Lutfi Cicek on the expansion of police cooperation.

Referring to the neighborhood of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey, Shirzad said, "Relations between the police of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey are at a good level, and in recent years we have witnessed favorable police interactions between the two countries."

"NAJA Interpol, with authority, intelligence and professionalism, seeks to carry out its assigned missions and develop diplomatic police relations to deal decisively with international defendants," he added.

Emphasizing the need to strengthen interactions between the two countries, Shirzad said, "Dealing with organized crimes, combating smuggling of goods and narcotics, countering terrorist groups and human trafficking can be the focus of joint activities between Iran and Turkey."

Referring to the common border of the two countries, Lutfi Cicek, for his part, said, "The Turkish police also want to deal with international defendants and in this regard, we are ready to cooperate with the police of the Islamic Republic of Iran."

He pointed to the need to recognize common ground with the aim of dealing decisively with international defendants, saying, "Strengthening cooperation in the fight against organized crime can be a good platform for the extradition of internationally wanted suspects from both countries."

Another Group of Iranian Fishermen Released in Pakistan

TEHRAN (ILNA)- Fourteen Iranian fishermen detained by Pakistani forces for illegal entry into the country's territorial waters have been released and returned back to their homeland.

The Iranian Consulate General in Karachi has said that following the diplomatic efforts of the mission, 14 Iranian sailors and fishermen, who were arrested by Pakistani Maritime Security Forces for entering the country's territorial waters released and left for Tehran from Karachi airport on an Iranian flight. In the last two years, 75 fishermen and a total of 90 Iranian citizens have been released from Pakistani jails and returned back to Iran with the continuous efforts of the Consulate General in Karachi.

Ahmad Mohammadi the Iranian Consul General in Karachi, said in his meetings with Pakistani officials, he requested the local authorities to be more lenient with the negligence of Iranian fishermen and instead of arresting them guide them to return back to Iranian territorial waters. He called on the owners of the boats and the dear Iranian fishermen to be more careful and avoid approaching the international waters because the administrative process in Pakistan is complicated and the work of releasing imprisoned Iranian prisoners takes months.

Intelligence Ministry Rejects News Release Against Afghan Citizens

TEHRAN (IP) - Rejecting some propaganda against Afghan citizens, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence announced in a statement that the only source of information about the ministry's news is the Ministry of Intelligence's public relations.

News: Due to the release of some news and rumors against Afghan citizens on social networks and cyberspace, warning and creating fear and panic towards them in the country, the Ministry of Intelligence's Public Relations and Information Center rejected the attribution of the news release to the Ministry of Intelligence.

The statement emphasizes that the only source of news information for the ministry is the Center for Public Relations and Information, and any news, announcements, warnings, etc. will be published through the Vaja website (WWW.Vaja.ir).

Medicine Embargo on Iran Example of Terrorism

TEHRAN (MNA) – An Iranian Parliament member said that the drug embargo against Iran, which results from the sanctions imposed by Western countries, is one of the examples of terrorism and a clear violation of international laws.

The head of the Iranian Parliament's Human Rights Faction, Mohammad Sargazi spoke about the impact of the sanctions against Iran in terms of access to essential medicines and medical equipment.

Unfortunately, today, human rights have become a tool through which the dictators seek to achieve their goals and plots, he said, adding that they use sanctions as a tool to punish their opponents.

According to JCPOA, anti-Iran sanctions, especially in the field of medicine, were supposed to be lifted, the Iranian lawmaker said and added, "Today, not only the sanctions did not lift, but the enemies used other mechanisms so as to increase such sanctions."

Of course, the Western countries do not confess that they have imposed a drug embargo on Iran, but in practice, they have created conditions in which it is not possible for Iranian pharmaceutical companies to buy needed medicine, he underlined.

Such a drug embargo against Iran, which results from the sanctions imposed by Western member states, is one of the examples of terrorism and a clear violation of international laws, he highlighted.

Belgrade Believes in Deepening Ties With Tehran

BELGRADE (IRNA) - President of Serbian National Assembly Ivica Dacic said on Friday that Serbian leaders are determined to expand and deepen relations with Iran, and this policy will not change.

In a meeting with Iran's Ambassador in Belgrade Rashid Hassanpour, he added, "When I was at the helm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I always supported maintaining and development of bilateral and international cooperation. I will continue this role in my new position and responsibility by strengthening parliamentary cooperation."

Hailing current level of relations, he said that the two countries have plenty of opportunities to improve relations, especially in the economic and agricultural fields.

Serbian official also appreciated the principled stances of the Islamic Republic of Iran on supporting the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries, including Serbia, saying that JCPOA is the greatest diplomatic victory and achievement in establishing peace, stability and security. Unfortunately, by withdrawing from the nuclear deal, the Trump administration eliminated all its positive effects and replaced them with a great crisis.

Iranian ambassador, for his part, conveyed warm greetings of Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf to him and invited him to visit Tehran.

Describing bilateral relations as growing in various fields, Hassanpour said that Iran welcomes strengthening parliamentary cooperation which will pave the way for promoting collaborations in other fields.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:05
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:18
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:43
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:13

162. But those among them who are well-grounded in knowledge, and the believers, believe in what hath been revealed to thee and what was revealed before thee: And (especially) those who establish regular prayer and practise regular charity and believe in Allah and in the Last Day: To them shall We soon give a great reward.
163. We have sent thee inspiration, as We sent it to Noah and the Messengers after him: we sent inspiration to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms.
Surah 4. Women (162 - 163)

Talks Underway for Iran's Frozen Assets in Iraq

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Chairman of the Iran-Iraq Chamber of Commerce Yahya Ale-Ishaq says some \$5b of Iran's money has been blocked in Iraq and talks are underway that the money is used in the best way.

Al-e Eshaq said that Iran's rivals in Iraq are on the rise and Turkey and China are more active in Iraq market, and some Arab countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt will be Iran's rivals in Iraq's market in the future. He noted that the more the condition in Iraq becomes normal and safe, the more condition will be competitive in its market.

On the devaluation of Iraq national currency dinar and its effect on trade between Iran and Iraq, he said devaluation of dinar is a domestic affair as the Iraqi officials believe it will be to the benefit of the budget and other issues in the country, and it has no significant effect on Iran-Iraq trade. He noted but there will be better maneuver regarding imports of Iraqi goods, and suppose Iranians trade with Iraq with dinar, it will be to their benefit and it will also provide more opportunity for Iranian travelers and pilgrims.

He said but it will have no major effect on Iran's exports and Iranian will get more dinars with lesser value and since the country has no significant imports from Iraq and it is mainly exporter, the devaluation of dinar will not have major effect on bilateral trade.



On the presence of other countries especially Arab ones in Iraq market, Al-e Eshaq said Saudi Arabia and Egypt have started process for their presence in Iraq market and there is not competition between them and Iran, however the number of Iran's rivals in Iraq market is on the rise and in the future they will turn into Iran's major rivals. He reiterated that as the condition in Iraq is getting normal and safe, the condition is getting more competitive and Europeans may also enter Iraq market and Iranians will have to improve the quality of their services and the after sale services in order to consolidate their position in the Iraq market.

Reacting to Iran's frozen assets in Iraq, he said currently the amount of Iran's frozen assets in Iraq is around \$5b and the country is planning to use it in its best way possible, and by some part of it, the country is to import goods which are not under sanctions and the talks are underway.

Tehran, Hanoi to Hold Webinar on Boosting Trade



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mine and Agriculture (ICCIMA) in cooperation with Iran-Vietnam Joint Chamber of Commerce is to hold a webinar on Wednesday, January 6 where participants are to explore ways to boost trade.

According to the reports, the webinar is to review and explore opportunities, challenges and hurdles in way of cooperation between private sectors of Iran and Vietnam.

The webinar will also seek ways for easing the arrival of Iranian companies into Vietnam's market.

Representatives of provincial chambers of commerce and business activists are to participate in the webinar.

102,000 Jobs to Be Created in Free, Special Economic Zones



TEHRAN (MNA) - Some 1,000 trillion rials (around \$24 billion at the official rate of 42,000 rials) plus \$1.5 billion of foreign investment is forecast to be invested in free and special economic zones of the country, creating 102,500 jobs by August next year, according to Morteza Bank, the secretary of Iranian Free Zones High Council.

The job opportunities will be created through implementing 320 development projects in free zones and 200 projects in special economic zones by August next year, which marks the end of the administration of President Hassan Rouhani, Bank stated.

More than 40 percent of Iran's exports is done through the country's free trade zones and special economic zones, Bank said in September.

The value of exports from Iran's free trade zones and special economic zones stood at \$17 billion during the past Iranian calendar year (ended on March 19).

There are currently seven free trade zones and 25 special economic zones in Iran.

The establishment of free trade zones in Iran dates back to Iranian calendar year 1368 (March 1989- March 1990) following the fall in the country's oil income in the preceding year which prompted the government to promote non-oil exports.

The first two free trade zones of Iran were established in the Persian Gulf islands of Kish and Qeshm.

Some five other free trade zones have been also established in the country since then, including Chabahar in southeastern Sistan-Baluchestan Province, Arvand in southwestern Khuzestan Province, Anzali in northern Gilan Province, Aras in East-Azarbaijan Province and Maku in West-Azarbaijan Province, both in the northwest of the country.

Considering the important role that the free trade zones play in promoting the country's export and employment, Iran is seriously pursuing the development of its existing zones and establishment of new zones as well.

Iran, Afghanistan Stress Expansion of Tourism

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran's Deputy Tourism Minister and his Afghan counterpart conferred on the expansion of tourism between the two countries.

Iran's Deputy Tourism Minister Vali Teymouri and his Afghan counterpart Mojgan Mostafavi discussed the expansion of tourism between the two countries in a videoconference on Friday.

Teymouri stressed the significance of promoting cooperation in the field of tourism education by holding training workshops.

Both sides further emphasized reopening the borders and resuming tourism activities with health protocols in place.

Iran's Deputy Tourism Minister also invited his counterpart to participate in Tehran Tourism Industries Exhibition which will be held in the upcoming months.

A number of other issues such as the challenges of obtaining visas as well as the importance of transportation infrastructure, including the opening of the Khaf-Herat railway were also discussed during the virtual event.

Joining FAFT to Harm Iran

TEHRAN (Tasnim) - An Iranian analyst warned that joining the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) would be totally detrimental to the Islamic Republic and have no impact on the removal of sanctions.

The strategic affairs analyst, Mohammad Javad Larijani, has argued that joining FATF would have no effect on the lifting of sanctions against Iran and is "a hundred percent detrimental" to the country.

It would be sheer folly to abide by the FATF regulations, he added.

The former secretary general of Iran's High Council for Human Rights then noted that the FATF members are among the major sponsors of terrorism,

such as Saudi Arabia with a record budget in support of ISIS terrorist group.

He then denounced the calls for the purchase of US-made vaccine for the coronavirus as a plot aimed at bringing Iran to its knees.

Larijani, the current president of Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences, underlined that the coronavirus vaccine developed by the Iranian scientists meets the scientific standards, saying he would immediately participate in the nationwide vaccination program with homegrown vaccine as soon as it begins.

"We definitely do not rely on their (U.S.) vaccine and would make it by ourselves," he stressed.

Guangdong of China, Iran's Leading Partner With \$4.5b Trade

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian Consulate General in Guangzhou said on Saturday that Chinese Guangdong province is Iran's leading trade partner with \$4.5 billion trade, calling for joint venture investments in Iran in light of the large capacity of the two sides.

According to The Consulate General of Iran in Guangzhou, Hossein Darvishi Motavali made the remarks in a meeting with Chairman of the International Trade Promotion Council (CCPIT) Feng Lisho in Guangzhou.

Motavali called for enhanced cooperation of Guangdong with state and private sectors in Iran, such as the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, the Organization for Trade Development, the Free Zones and other entities.

At the meeting, Iranian Consulate General in Guangzhou pointed out that the availability of commercial cooperation, encouraging the Chinese companies to invest in different sectors, as well as suitable industrial, technological and efficient infrastructure, and considered Iran a suitable site for manufacturing and exporting Chinese companies in order to produce and export to the region's countries, including the Middle East, West Asia, Central Asia, and even Europe.

Chairman of the International Trade Promotion Council (CCPIT) Feng Lisho for his part, called for enhanced trade and economic cooperation in the region, expressed his readiness to encourage companies to participate in joint venture investments with Iran in various sectors including manufacturing medicines, household appliances and electronics.

The companies in China's Guangdong are famous in China and the world, and we can create industrial parks in Iran with participation of Chinese companies and investors.

Iran Focuses on Petchems as Replacement for Oil, Gas Exports

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Caretaker of planning and development department of National Petrochemical Company of Iran Hassan Abbaszadeh said on Saturday that the company is focusing on leading petrochemical projects to replace the crude oil and gas exports.

He made the remarks speaking to IRNA economic correspondent on Saturday.

Noting that the price of a ton of gas is \$90 and the price of each ton of methanol is estimated between 150 and 200 dollars, the official said that implementing the projects and turning methanol into propylene, their price will rise to 1,500 dollars per ton.

Abbaszadeh said that such processing brings 700% value-added.

He said that standing against selling raw materials is divided into two parts: the first is to reduce export of crude oil and gas resources, one of the main examples of which is petrochemical industry, and the second is to stop selling raw the basic petrochemical products such as methanol as they will be turned into more valuable products in foreign countries and imported to the Iranian market more expensive than they could be produced inside the country.

Some 642,000 Tons of Commodities Traded on IME Last Week

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Within the week ending on December 24th the IME played host to trading of a mixed bag of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$317m.



According to a report by the IME's international affairs and PR, the exchange sold 342,474 tons of commodities on its mineral and industrial trading floor worth \$185.5m, including 330,869 tons of steel, 2,350 tons of aluminum, 5,530 tons of copper, 120 tons of molybdenum sulfur, 15 tons of precious metals concentrate, 100 tons of cast iron, 5,000 tons of iron ore concentrate and 21 kg of gold bars.

Furthermore, the IME traded a total of 297,708 tons of commodities on its export pit with a trading value of nearly \$132m. Traded commodities on this floor were 99,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 64,441 tons of bitumen, 61,196 tons of polymeric products, 31,335 tons of chemicals, 27,000 tons of lube cut, 170 tons of insulation, 2,036 tons of base oil, 2,000 tons of slop wax, 100 tons of argon and 1,300 tons of sulfur.

Based on this report, the IME was also a platform for trades of 2,453 tons of various commodities on its side market.

Iran 9th Largest Supplier Of Potassium Sulfate

TEHRAN (Shana) -The CEO of the Iranian Investment Petrochemical Group Company (IIPGC) announced the improvement of Iran's global ranking from the twelfth to the ninth in the field of potassium sulfate production by launching a new plant in Urmia, northeastern Iran.

Addressing a virtual ceremony to launch the potassium sulfate unit of Urmia Petrochemical Plant on Thursday, Rasoul Ashrafzadeh said development of complementary industries and construction of downstream parks to complete the value chain, as well as preventing the import of certain items, production boom, especially in less developed areas, are some of the goals pursued by the Persian Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company (PGPIC).

IIPGC is a subsidiary of PGPIC.

He pointed out that IIPGC has four downstream parks under way with a production capacity of 3,500,000 tons per year, adding: "The three projects of Lordegan Petrochemical Plant, the second phase of Ilam Petrochemical Plant and the potassium sulfate unit of Urmia belonged to this company which have come on stream in the current calendar year (which began on March 21)."

He also said that the projects were developed with over 2.5 million tons of production capacity per year.

The official further added that the potassium sulfate unit of Urmia Petrochemical Plant was built with 585 billion Iranian rials of investment and is expected to generate 4,650 billion Iranian rials in revenue annually.

3 UN Peacekeepers Killed In C. Africa Republic

NEW YORK (AFP) - Three UN peacekeepers have been killed by unidentified combatants in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, as the country prepares for a general election and fighting continues between rebels and government forces.

The news came after a rebel coalition called off a ceasefire and said it would resume its march on the capital and following the arrival of troops from Russia and Rwanda to shore up the government of the resource-rich country. "Three peacekeepers from Burundi were killed and two others were wounded" following attacks on UN troops and Central African national defense and security forces, the UN said in a statement Friday.



Russia Opens Criminal Case Against ally of Navalny

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia launched a criminal case on Friday against Lyubov Sobol, an ally of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, over accusations she had violently entered a flat that her supporters said was linked to a secret agent involved in plot to kill Navalny.

The move against Sobol is the latest in a clampdown on the Kremlin's opponents before next year's parliamentary election. Sobol aims to run for office, although outspoken critics of the Kremlin are often prevented from standing. Sobol was detained for 48 hours after questioning, Navalny, one of the Kremlin's fiercest opponents, wrote on Twitter.



Camper Van Explodes in Nashville, Possible Human Remains Found



NASHVILLE (Reuters) - A motor home parked on a street exploded in downtown Nashville at dawn on Friday, moments after a recorded message emanating from the vehicle warned of a bomb, in what police called an "intentional act" in the heart of America's country music capital.

Three people were injured in the Christmas morning blast, though none critically. Authorities said it was uncertain whether anyone was inside the recreational vehicle when it exploded, but police reported hours later that investigators had found possible human remains nearby.

Nashville Mayor John Cooper ordered a curfew imposed around the blast site through the holiday weekend as FBI investigators comb the scene, though police said they were aware of no further threats to Tennessee's most populous city.

Authorities offered no explanation as to a possible motive, and there was no claim of responsibility.

The blast came just moments after officers responded to reports of gunfire in the area and discovered the recreational vehicle parked outside an AT&T building in downtown Nashville at about 6 a.m. CST (1200 GMT).

Police heard a recorded voice warning that a "bomb would detonate in 15 minutes," Nashville Police Chief John Drake told reporters.

The message, as captured in a recording broadcast later by local television news stations, said: "This area must be evacuated now. This area must be evacuated now. If you can hear this message, evacuate now. If you can hear this message, evacuate now."

Officers quickly went door-to-door in nearby buildings to hustle people to safety, and called for dispatch of the police bomb squad, which was on its way to the scene when the vehicle blew up, police spokesman Don Aaron said.

The Metro Nashville Police Department posted a photo of the recreational vehicle on its Twitter feed and said that the vehicle had arrived in the area at 1:22 a.m.

An area resident, Betsy Williams, told CNN that she was awakened by the sound of gunfire and looked out her window to see an RV parked across the street as it began playing a message delivered by a "computerized" female voice. She said the voice warned the vehicle contained a bomb and started a minute-by-minute countdown to the actual explosion.

"Everything shook, it was quite a blast," she told CNN.

The fiery blast destroyed a number of other vehicles parked nearby, shattered windows and heavily damaged several adjacent buildings, sending a pall of black smoke into the sky that could be seen for miles. The mayor said a total of 41 businesses were damaged.

Armenia's Leader Backs Early Vote After Mass Protests

YEREVAN (Dispatches) - Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has backed the prospect of early parliamentary elections next year, after huge protests over his handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan.

Pashinyan wrote on Facebook on Friday that he was inviting parliamentary and interested, non-parliamentary powers to talks on the subject, though he did not name an exact date for them.

"I am not hanging on to the prime minister's seat," he said, though he added that he was ready to continue leading "if the people reaffirm their trust in these difficult times".

Pashinyan has been under heavy pressure since the end of fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The opposition is calling for his resignation, holding him responsible for the defeat against Azerbaijan.

Since the peace deal between the two neighbors was signed on November 10, Armenia's opposition politicians and their supporters have been demanding that Pashinyan step down.

The accord saw Azerbaijan reclaim control over large parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas that it had lost in the early 1990s.

The Russia-brokered agreement ended 44 days of fierce fighting in which the Azerbaijani army routed Armenian forces.

Pashinyan has defended the peace deal as a painful but necessary move to prevent Azerbaijan from overrunning the entire Nagorno-Karabakh region.

He argued on Friday that his critics lack broad public support for their demand.

"There is only one way to get answers to these questions: by holding early parliamentary elections," Pashinyan wrote on Facebook.

Police on Thursday arrested at least 77 people following clashes when thousands of protesters converged in capital Yerevan and surrounded the heavily guarded government building.

Opposition supporters on Friday continued blocking streets in the Armenian capital and engaged in occasional scuffles with police.



Turkey Seeks Closer Ties With Israel

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey would like better ties with Israel but Israeli policy towards the Palestinians remains "unacceptable", President Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday.

Turkey and Israel, once allies, have had a bitter falling out in recent years. Ankara has repeatedly condemned Israel's occupation in the West Bank and its treatment of Palestinians. It has also criticized recent U.S.-brokered rapprochements between Israel and four Muslim countries. "The Palestine policy is our red line. It is impossible for us to accept Israel's Palestine policies. Their merciless acts there are unacceptable," Erdogan told reporters after Friday prayers in Istanbul.

"If there were no issues at the top level (in Israel), our ties could have been very different," he said, adding that the two countries continued to share intelligence. "We would have liked to bring our ties to a better point."

Israel's Foreign Ministry declined to comment on Erdogan's statement.

Turkey and Israel expelled each other's ambassadors in 2018 after Israeli forces killed dozens of Palestinians in clashes on the Gaza border.

In August this year, Israel accused Turkey of giving passports to a dozen Hamas members in Istanbul, describing the move as "a very unfriendly step".

Hamas seized Gaza from forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in 2007, and the group has fought three wars with Israel since then. Turkey says Hamas is a legitimate political movement that won power through democratic elections.

Israel has formalized ties with four Muslim countries this year - the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. It said on Wednesday it was working towards normalizing ties with a fifth Muslim nation, possibly in Asia. Ankara has slammed the U.S.-brokered deals, with Erdogan previously threatening to suspend diplomatic ties with the UAE and withdraw its envoy.

Turkey also slammed Bahrain's decision to formalize ties as a blow to efforts to defend the Palestinian cause.

Hundreds Protest Against Dissolution of Parliament

KATHMANDU (Reuters) - Nepal's Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli faced a fresh political challenge on Friday as hundreds of opponents protested against his sudden move to dissolve parliament and call elections more than a year ahead of the schedule.

Three former prime ministers joined hundreds of activists who sat on a road near Oli's office demanding he reverse the decisions announced on Sunday, which have triggered deep political unrest in the Himalayan nation just as it grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ex-premiers said Oli had no power to dissolve parliament and that he had violated the constitution.

"We'll organise stronger protests against this dissolution by an unrestrained prime minister," said Prachanda, one former prime minister.

Oli has rejected their demands and vowed to press ahead with parliamentary elections next year, on Apr. 30 and May 10. It is not uncommon for Nepali polls to take place over two days.

The prime minister has lost support within his ruling party this year, with some senior members accusing him of sidelining them in making decision and key appointments, and calling for him to step down.

Oli says internal squabbling and a lack of cooperation from his party has paralysed decision-making, forcing him to seek a fresh popular mandate.

The Supreme Court is hearing more than a dozen petitions challenging Oli's dissolution of parliament and calling of early elections. It has given the government until Jan. 3 to provide reasons for the dissolution, said court Bhadrakali Pokharel.



Japan Urges Biden To Be Strong

TOKYO (Reuters) - A top Japanese defense official on Friday urged U.S. President-elect Joe Biden to "be strong" in supporting Taiwan in the face of an aggressive China, calling the island's safety a "red line."

"We are concerned China will expand its aggressive stance into areas other than Hong Kong. I think one of the next targets, or what everyone is worried about, is Taiwan," State Minister of Defense Yasuhide Nakayama told Reuters.

In an interview, Nakayama, Japan's deputy defence minister, urged Biden to take a similar line on Taiwan as outgoing President Donald Trump, who has significantly boosted military sales to the Chinese-claimed island and increased engagement.

Japan's engagement with Taiwan has also flourished in recent years on a largely non-governmental basis. Tokyo maintains a "one China" policy, delicately balancing its relationships with neighbouring giant China and its longtime military ally in Washington.

Japan shares strategic interests with Taiwan, which sits in sea lanes through which much of Japan's energy supplies and trade flow.

"So far, I haven't yet seen a clear policy or an announcement on Taiwan from Joe Biden. I would like to hear it quickly, then we can also prepare our response on Taiwan in accordance," Nakayama said.

During the presidential campaign, Biden called for strengthening ties with Taiwan and other "like-minded democracies."

Decades ago as senator, Biden questioned whether the United States had an "obligation" to defend Taiwan. But many in his foreign policy circles acknowledge that U.S. imperatives have changed as a rising, authoritarian China has become more assertive and sought to shape global institutions.

An official in Biden's transition team said the president-elect believes U.S. support for Taiwan "must remain strong, principled, and bipartisan."

"Once in office, he will continue to support a peaceful resolution of cross-strait issues consistent with the wishes and best interests of the people of Taiwan," the official said.



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UK Parliament to Vote on Brexit Deal on Dec. 30

LONDON (Reuters) - Britain's parliament will vote to approve a trade deal with the European Union on Dec. 30, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Thursday following the announcement of an agreement with Brussels.

He said the deal would be available for scrutiny, "followed by a parliamentary vote, I hope, on December the 30th".



Turkey's Central Bank Boosts Credibility With Interest Rate Hike

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's central bank increased interest rates by 2 percentage points to 17 percent on Thursday – a bigger than expected move, as it seeks to cool double-digit inflation and bolster its policy credibility under new Governor Naci Agbal.

The lira rallied to its strongest in more than a month and analysts said Agbal passed a test of his ability to set monetary policy free of political pressure after only two months on the job.

The bank, faced with record dollarization and a weak lira, lifted its one-week repo rate from 15 percent. It again pledged to "decisively" keep policy tight to permanently lower inflation, which stood at 14 percent last month and has been above target for years.

"Agbal has totally passed the test" and showed the bank "is getting serious about inflation", said Cristian Maggio, head of emerging markets strategy at TD Securities.

The lira – among the weakest of the emerging market currencies this year – rallied as much as 1 percent against the United States dollar and stood at 7.575.

The tightening follows a hefty increase of 4.75 percentage points last month, which was Agbal's first move after taking the reins in a surprise leadership overhaul in which Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan pledged a new market-friendly economic era.

The "strong" tightening was meant to "eliminate risks to the inflation outlook, contain inflation expectations and restore the disinflation process as soon as possible", the policy committee said in a statement.

Economists predicted a 1.5 percentage-point rise in a Reuters poll and called it a credibility test in the face of Erdogan's past criticism of high rates, especially with coronavirus fallout set the crimp the economy this winter.

But inflation is rising and is well above the 5 percent target range, and Turks continue to buy foreign currencies at record levels, keeping Turkey's lira near record lows and putting pressure on the bank to tighten again.

The bank said foreign exchange buying will reverse along with inflation.

Agbal acknowledged last week that the lira's roughly 23 percent drop this year has kept inflation lofty, but the bank still sees it dipping to 9.4 percent by the end of 2021.

The lack of monetary stimulus could exacerbate an economic slowdown brought on by restaurant closures and new curfews after the pandemic's first wave sharply contracted activity in the second quarter.

But the central bank is focused on inflation and its depleted foreign exchange buffer, which on a net basis is down by more than half this year due largely to costly state interventions in foreign exchange markets to support the lira.

Erdogan has long blamed high rates for inflation – in contrast to economic orthodoxy – and has held foreign investors responsible for the economy's woes. But last month he said even "bitter" policies would be adopted.

TD's Maggio said there will be more tests for Agbal because foreign investors have been deeply scarred by years of Turkish policies that squeezed them out of local assets.

In the 2018 crisis, the bank increased rates to as high as 24 percent.

Egypt, Jordan, Iraq to Implement Commercial, Industrial Integration

CAIRO (Dispatches) - The trade and industry ministers of Egypt, Jordan and Iraq have agreed to start actual steps of implementing commercial and industrial integration among the three Arab countries.

During the virtual meeting on Thursday, the three ministers agreed to send an Egyptian technical team to Iraq within the coming few days, with the participation of the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad, to assess Iraqi factories and find out the needs of the Iraqi market and the potential investment opportunities in the country, reports Xinhua news agency.

Egyptian Trade and Industry Minister Nevine Gamea said that the meeting came as a result of the visit of the Jordanian and Iraqi ministers to Egypt earlier this month, where they discussed implementation of a number of joint projects in the fields of trade and industry.

Gamea noted that the targeted sectors of joint cooperation include pharmaceutical, chemical, petrochemical, leather and ceramics industries, besides studying the establishment of a permanent exhibition for Egyptian and Jordanian products in the Iraqi capital.

For her part, Jordanian Minister of Industry, Trade and Supply Maha Ali emphasized the importance of electronic linkage between the customs authorities of the three countries to facilitate the process of trade exchange among them.

Meanwhile, Iraqi Minister of Industry and Minerals Manhal Aziz al-Khabbaz, expressed his country's keenness to open up to the Egyptian and Jordanian markets and to start urgent steps towards achieving economic integration, "in light of the Iraqi government's aspiration to restore its strong economic relations with all partners, especially at the regional and Arab levels".

The Ministers also agreed on the necessity of lifting restrictions and obstacles that hinder the flow of intra-trade among the three countries, through granting easier access of their products to the three markets.



India's Economy Recovering Faster

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has said in a recent report that there is more evidence of India's economy recovering quickly after the deep Covid-19 shock. The central bank in its 'State of the economy' report said there are some headwinds but added that India is on a "faster growth trajectory".

"Since the assessment presented in the last month's Article, more evidence has been turned in to show that the Indian economy is pulling out of COVID-19's deep abyss and is reflation at a pace that beats most predictions," said the RBI.

The central bank in its report cited key indicators like real GDP, which is expected to break out into positive territory in the third quarter of the year. The RBI report said India's recovery is being aided by the improving Covid-19 situation in the country. "India is bending the Covid infection curve: since mid-September, barring localised surges, infections are slanting downwards week after week, and the recovery rate is nudging 95 per cent," said the report.

It also said that many sectors like auto and capital goods, which had been hit hard during the initial lockdown, are expecting a turnaround in future earnings. Meanwhile, healthcare, IT and FMCG companies are now aiming for a stronger earnings outlook.

"Moreover, intrinsic strength in the manufacturing and services sectors is being built as debt servicing capacity is getting reinforced and leverage is being brought down. India's farm sector is also forging ahead, backed by pathbreaking marketing reforms," the report said.

The central bank further noted that high-frequency indicators are also performing well at the moment and if the momentum continues, India's economy will see a much stronger recovery.

"Abstracting from the inherent flux in high-frequency indicators, the underlying trend would reveal that the pick-up in momentum of economic activity that commenced with the onset of the second half of 2020-21 is sustained," the RBI report said.

It also mentioned that the absence of the "dreaded second wave" of the coronavirus in India so far has boosted the recovery momentum.

"Already, contractions forecast by various agencies for the year as a whole are being trimmed, and if the current momentum is maintained, the bounce back expected in the last quarter of the year may be stronger than postulated under baseline assumptions," RBI added in its report.

Despite the quicker recovery, the central bank continues to be worried about the consistently high rate of retail inflation which came down just marginally in November to 6.93 per cent. It still remains higher than the RBI's target of 2-6 per cent.

RBI said, "Efforts need to be redoubled to exorcise the 'worm in the apple' inflation before it hurts the impulses of growth that are taking root."

Russia Supports OPEC+ 500,000 bpd Oil Output Hike From Feb

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia expects to support an increase in oil production by the group, known as OPEC+, of another 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) from February at next month's summit of the leading global oil producers, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

Oil prices are trading above \$50 per barrel, after coming under pressure this week from concerns new fast-spreading variants of the coronavirus will lead to reduced fuel demand.

In comments, cleared for publication on Friday, Novak also said that Moscow views an oil price between \$45 and \$55 per barrel as the optimum level to allow for recovery of its oil production, which has been significantly reduced as part of the OPEC+ supply deal.

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

Since the agreement on a record global supply cut in April, OPEC+ has progressively reduced the cuts and is expected in January to release an extra 500,000 bpd into the market.

The group holds its next online summit on January 4, when it is expected to discuss whether to release another 500,000 bpd in February.

"If the situation stays normal and stable, we will support this position (increase by 500,000 bpd)," Novak told reporters at a briefing held in the government's headquarters.



China to Lower Import Tariff on More Products in High Demand for 2021

BEIJING (Reuters) - China will lower import tariffs on more products in high domestic demand for next year, including medical equipment, raw materials for baby powders, high-tech equipment and some commodities, the finance ministry said.

For 2021, China will implement temporary import tariffs, which are lower than the most-favored-nation tariffs, on 883 products, from 859 products taxed at temporary rates in 2020.

The tariff changes are made to satisfy domestic demand and boost the technology development of Chinese industries so that a "great circulation" of the domestic economy would be formed, said the ministry.

Facing hostilities from the United States, Beijing has unveiled a "dual circulation" strategy for the next phase of its economic development, in which it would rely mainly on "domestic circulation" - the internal cycle of production, distribution, and consumption, supported by innovation and upgrades in the economy.

To improve people's livelihood, China will exempt import tariffs on some anti-cancer drugs and raw materials of rare disease drugs, while import duties on artificial heart valves, hearing aids, as well as some raw materials for baby powders, are to be lowered.

Beijing will also lower import duties on parts, raw materials, and industrial equipment used in its new infrastructure and high-technology push, in order to meet domestic demand. Emission-filtering devices for diesel engine vehicles would also see their import rates cut as a result of the government's environmental drive.

Tariffs for some non-alloyed nickel and the minor metal niobium will be slightly cut in 2021 to encourage more imports, the ministry said, while sliding tariffs on cotton cargoes brought in under additional quotas will be reduced marginally, a move traders said would lower costs of importing the fiber.

Bangladesh, India Finalizing First Bilateral Rice Deal in 3 Years



DHAKA (Reuters) - Bangladesh is finalizing a purchase of 150,000 tons of rice from India's NAFED, the New Delhi-based state agency told Reuters, in what would be the first such bilateral deal in three years after floods in Bangladesh sent local prices to a record high.

India, the world's biggest rice exporter, is offering a steep discount to supplies from rivals Thailand and Vietnam to cut its surplus after a bumper harvest.

"We are negotiating with Bangladesh," said a spokesman for NAFED (the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd). "NAFED is in a position to supply up to 500,000 tons rice to Bangladesh."

A senior official with Bangladesh's food ministry said they could buy 100,000 tons of parboiled rice and 50,000 tons of white rice under a government-to-government deal.

India could sell parboiled rice at around \$407 and white rice at around \$417 per ton on a cost, insurance and freight (CIF) liner out basis, an Indian government source said. The rates are about a third cheaper than those from Thailand and Vietnam.

The entire shipment is likely to be made in the first quarter of next year from the Haldia port in India's eastern state of West Bengal, which borders Bangladesh, the Indian government official added.

Both the Indian and Bangladeshi government officials declined to be named as details are still being worked out.

Representatives for the trade and food ministries of India and Bangladesh did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Bangladesh, the world's third-biggest rice producer with an output of almost 35 million tons a year, relies on imports from time to time to cope with shortages caused by natural disasters such as floods or drought.

Iran, India to Hold Online Meeting To Share Technology Know-How

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran and India will hold online Forum to share technology know-how between the Iranian and Indian companies. The Forum is sponsored by the Presidential Office in charge of promoting science and technology.

The Forum begins on January 31, 2021 and the registration deadline for the applicants is until January 11, 2021.

Those interested to learn more information are invited to refer to www.tesc.ir.



Brexit Trade Deal Will Lessen, But Not Kill, the Economic Pain

LONDON (Reuters) - Britain has clinched a last-minute trade agreement with the European Union that will preserve its zero-tariff and zero-quota access to the bloc's single market of 450 million consumers.

But it is a thin deal that will not prevent economic pain and disruption for the United Kingdom or for EU member states, and many aspects of Britain's future relationship with the EU remain to be hammered out, possibly over years.

The UK government's Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) forecast that, with a deal, Britain would see a loss of output of around 4% over 15 years compared to remaining in the EU.

That presumes a "hard Brexit" of the kind now agreed - a sharp rupture compared with previous divorce proposals, and not much better in economic terms than a "no deal", which the OBR said would have led to a further reduction in output of 2% initially and 1.5% through 2025.

"A 'No Deal' is painful because it hits like a tsunami immediately," economist John van Reenen wrote in a London School of Economics blog. "A Hard Brexit Deal is stealthier, domestically abusing the economy over decades."

EU economies will also be hit, though to a lesser degree -- even if some, such as Ireland and Belgium, suffer more than others.

Hylke Vandenbussche, a professor at Belgium's University of Leuven, forecast last year that a Brexit with a free trade agreement would imply a loss of 0.38% for the combined economy of the 27 EU countries and a loss of around 280,000 jobs.

Rules on trade, travel and business were frozen during a transition period that followed Britain's formal exit from the EU on Jan. 31. But from Jan. 1, 2021, the UK will sit outside the EU's single market and customs union.

So, although the goods trade that accounts for half the \$900 billion in annual EU-UK commerce will be covered by the zero-tariff agreement, it will no longer be frictionless.

Customs rules, regulatory standards and border checks that the EU requires of third countries will apply to Britain, making trade slower and more expensive.

The British government has estimated there will be a fivefold increase in border checks. In a worst-case scenario report, it said 40-70% of trucks travelling to the EU might not be ready for new controls on Jan. 1, possibly causing queues of up to 7,000 vehicles and delays of two days.

This will have a big impact on British food supplies, around a quarter of which come from the EU. Retailers have warned there may be shortages of fresh produce such as fruit, vegetables and some meats on supermarket shelves.

There will also be disruption of trade flows on the EU side, especially in the countries nearest Britain, with a big impact on sectors and factories that rely on just-in-time deliveries.

Ireland, the EU country most affected by Brexit, estimated in September that import and export declarations could increase to as many as 20 million per year -- a 12-fold increase.



Some goods, including most cars, are still likely to be subject to tariffs because their share of components from outside Britain or the EU exceeds a threshold stipulated by 'rules of origin'.

Wary of the political violence that convulsed Northern Ireland for decades, London and Brussels have created a separate protocol to prevent a hard border from being erected with the Republic of Ireland, which is in the EU.

That in effect keeps the British-run region in the EU's customs union and single market for goods after Dec. 31, and requires checks on goods arriving from inside Britain instead.

This will have a significant impact on the flow of goods and strain traditional supply chains, particularly in farm produce.

Financial services were not part of the trade talks, so blanket access for Britain's vast banking and financial sector to the bloc's single market ends on Jan. 1.

Under a system known as equivalence, access to EU markets will not be granted to banks, insurers and other financial firms based in Britain unless their home rules are deemed by Brussels to be "equivalent", or as robust as regulations in the bloc.

With a trade deal done, Brussels may be more amenable to granting City of London firms more access. However, with restrictions looming, these have already moved 7,500 jobs to new hubs in the EU to avoid disruption to EU-based clients.

Gas Crisis in Pakistan to Worsen In January 2021



ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Gas crisis in Pakistan to worsen in January 2021. Islamabad [Pakistan]: The gas crisis in Pakistan is set to worsen in January 2021, as Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited (SNGPL) will face a shortage of 500 mcmfd and will be left with no option but to close down Regasified Liquefied Natural Gas (RLNG) supply to the power sector.

According to The News International, in wake of delay in receiving the LNG cargo from Nigeria, the gas crisis has aggravated in Balochistan and Sindh as Sui Southern Gas Company (SSGC) is not able to retain the RLNG of 200 mcmfd, instead, the intake of RLNG to SSGC has reduced, which has further worsened the gas crisis in Karachi and Quetta.

SNGPL has already closed down RLNG supply to captive power plants meant for non-zero rated industry, and the supply of RLNG to CNG and fertiliser sectors have also been stopped. After placing a cut of RLNG to the power sector, the authorities will be able to divert 250 mcmfd to the domestic sector, but it will continue to face a gas deficit of 250 mcmfd.

The ETEnergyworld Smart Electricity Conclave aims at providing a platform for digitalisation experts from around the globe to share best practices, chalk out a digital roadmap and act as a bridge between the industry and decision-makers for the success of

In Pakistan, people are forced to purchase LPG to cater to their food needs, and the gas crisis has reached an extent that, except in posh areas, people have started facing gas with low pressure and in some areas, they are using wood as fuel.

The Pakistan government may also go for RLNG supply cuts to the export industry once a week from January 2021.

From January 4 to 20, the gas crisis will heighten to a large extent because of failure in getting hold of three cargoes of LNG as the bids were received in fixed price in dollar terms at USD 12.95 to USD 15.95 per mmbtu, and the government decided not to procure the pricey LNG, The News International reported.

China's Economic Growth to Bolster Global Recovery from COVID-19

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Having gone through a big test with the pandemic, China's economy has emerged stronger as key economic indicators suggest that China's recovery is gathering pace at year's end.

It will surely help revive the global economy mired in the severest recession in nearly a century.

After recording a rare 6.8 percent GDP contraction in the first quarter when the virus took its toll, China's economy made a sharp U-turn and returned to 3.2 percent growth in the second quarter. In the third quarter, the figure surged 4.9 percent.

Recent economic indicators have shown that across-the-board recovery of the world's second largest economy from the COVID-19 recession is picking up steam.

In November, indexes for the manufacturing sector, the service sector, foreign trade as well as the consumption sector are encouraging, demonstrating the economy's strong resilience and potential.

National Bureau of Statistics said major gauges in November pointed to faster economic growth in Q4, as both production and demand have continued to soar steadily.

China is expected to be the only major economy that will see positive growth this year, according to the projections by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and other international organizations.

In its latest Economic Outlook released on Dec.1, OECD predicted that global gross domestic product will reach pre-pandemic level by the end of 2021, with China expected to account for over a third of world economic expansion.

The hard-won economic achievements are attributed to the central leadership. Facing the sudden onslaught of COVID-19, it took resolute actions and put people and life above everything else.

The 1.4 billion Chinese people, united as one, have created the conditions for the country to gradually bring production and life back to normal.

"With the right mix of supportive macroeconomic policies focused on strengthening social safety nets and further key reforms, China will secure the recovery and ensure balanced and high-quality growth, which will benefit China and the world," said IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva.

In face of an ongoing pandemic, mounting protectionism and unilateralism, China has not stalled in its pursuit of opening-up, which has a positive spillover effect on the world economic recovery.



China has taken many policy steps to open its door still wider, such as implementing the Foreign Investment Law, further cutting the negative list for foreign investment, and easing foreign access to the financial market.

China signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement with other participating countries in mid-November.

It is conducive to boosting regional trade, and improve the economic recovery of participating countries, according to Steven Zhang, the chief economist at Morgan Stanley Huaxin Securities.

China's import of goods has basically recovered to the level of last year. The China International Fair for Trade in Services held in Beijing this September brought together 22,000 companies from 148 countries and regions to its online and off line events.

Not long ago, the third China International Import Expo saw 72.62 billion dollars' worth of deals reached, outperforming the past two events.

To achieve high-quality development, China put forward a new development pattern of "dual circulation," in which domestic and foreign markets reinforce each other, with the domestic market as the mainstay. This pattern will further integrate its economy into the world's.

The pattern will enable China to fully unleash its market potential so as to provide more business and trade opportunities around the world.

China's per capita GDP has topped 10,000 dollars, and its middle-income population has exceeded 400 million. This will create more demand for a greater variety of quality products, technologies and services, thus providing a lasting boost to global revival.

The just-concluded Central Economic Work Conference outlined the specific tasks for 2021, saying China will promote high-quality development, work to ensure the economy run in an appropriate range and pursue a high-level opening-up.

The conference sets course for a continuous growth that will help drive a global economic recovery.

It is clear China cannot develop without the rest of the world, nor can the world as a whole prosper without China.

As China embarks on a new journey toward building a modern socialist country in an all-round way from next year onwards, the high-quality development of China's economy will inject more confidence and vitality to the world and bring shared prosperity for all in the post-pandemic era.

Harsh Revenge for...

FROM PAGE 1

"Those are only slaps, while the harsh revenge will be taken," General Hejazi added, warning those who ordered and perpetrated the assassination attack that the Islamic Republic decides how and when to take revenge according to the situation.

In a meeting with the family of Gen. Soleimani on December 16, Ayatollah Khamenei paid tribute to the late commander as "a hero of the Iranian nation and the Islamic Ummah", underlining that the "revenge will be taken on those who ordered the murder and those who carried it out".

Iran Exports...

FROM PAGE 1

According to the Iran Customs Administration, Iran has exported non-oil goods worth \$4.4b to China in the first eight months of the current year.

Based on the studies made at Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (TCCIMA), 487.7 thousand tons of semi-finished products of iron or steel, valued at \$169.8 million, was exported to China from March 21 to Nov. 21.

Pakistan...

FROM PAGE 1

Dawood said Pakistan strongly desires to see people of Afghanistan getting economically strong and to achieve that existing procedures to facilitate Pak-Afghan trade was being made simple and feasible. He further shared that duty structure was also being reviewed and simplified simultaneously facilitating Pak-Afghan trade.

He said an Afghan government delegation is also coming to Pakistan on Dec 28 to review bilateral trade.

He assured the delegation for taking up the matter with the Indonesia government to get the quota reissued for 2021.

Dawood said he would also take up the issue of Iranian ban on kinno with the help of Pakistan's Embassy in Iran.

U.S. Preparing New Sanctions to Impede Nord Stream 2 Pipeline

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The United States is urging European allies and private companies to halt work that could help build the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline and is preparing wider sanctions on the Russian project in coming weeks, senior Trump administration officials said.

The outgoing Trump administration is readying a fresh round of congressionally mandated sanctions "in the very near future" that it believes could deal a fatal blow to the Russia-to-Germany project led by state gas company Gazprom, three officials said.

"We've been getting body blow on body blow to this, and now we're in the process of driving a stake through the project heart," said one of the officials, who spoke to Reuters on the condition of anonymity.

Russia this month resumed building the \$11.6 billion (9.5 billion euro) pipeline, which is 90% complete, after a one-year pause prompted by existing U.S. sanctions.

New work has been centered on a 2.6 kilometer (1.6 mile) stretch in shallow waters of Germany's Exclusive Economic Zone but not yet in the deep-water sections off Denmark that comprise most of the unfinished 100-km stretch.

Washington says the project, which will increase European reliance on Russian gas, will compromise European energy security. Russia says the sanctions amount to "unfair competition" aimed at helping U.S. liquefied natural gas producers, and insists it will finish the pipeline.

The feud may not die down once President-elect Joe Biden takes office on Jan. 20, foreign diplomats say.

The U.S. pressure campaign on Nord Stream 2 is backed by both Democratic and Republican lawmakers who fear it will bypass Ukraine, robbing it of lucrative transit fees. Biden described the pipeline as a "bad deal" for Europe in 2016, and has criticized Moscow for its alleged role in a massive cyber attack on U.S. government agencies that was discovered last week.

Nord Stream 2 did not immediately comment on the possibility of new sanctions. Last month it told Reuters that existing sanctions and new ones in the defense policy bill would, if imposed, directly or indirectly hit more than 120 companies from more than 12 European countries.

Gazprom has had to retool its ships to do the delicate deepwater pipelaying and may need the help of companies from other countries to finish the project quickly.

LICENCE HOLDER: SOKHAN GOSTAR INSTITUTE

Switchboard:
(+98) (21) 44253448
Public Relations Tel:
(+98)(21) 44253450
Editorial Board: 44253449
Public Relations Fax:
(+98)(21) 44253395
Advertising Department:
Tel/Fax: (+98) (21) 44253335-9/44253234
Website:
http://www.irannewsdaily.com

E-Mail Address:
info@irannewsdaily.com
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Rodriguez to Miss Next Two Games for Everton

LONDON (ANI) - Everton boss Carlo Ancelotti on Friday confirmed that midfielder James Rodriguez will miss the next two games for the side. Rodriguez will definitely miss the Boxing Day trip to Sheffield United and visit of Manchester City on December 28 due to the calf problem that has seen him sit out the Blues' last four games, while Richarlison is being assessed after suffering a blow to the head during Wednesday's Carabao Cup meeting with Manchester United.

Domenech Joins Nantes On Short-Term Deal

PARIS (Dispatches) - Former France coach Raymond Domenech has signed a six-month contract with Nantes for his first job since the fiasco at the 2010 World Cup, the club told AFP. Domenech, 68, left his role as les Bleus boss after finishing bottom of the group and a player revolt in South Africa and last coached a club side in 1993. "The final details have been sorted and all will be made official this weekend," the Breton side said three weeks after sacking Christian Gourcuff.

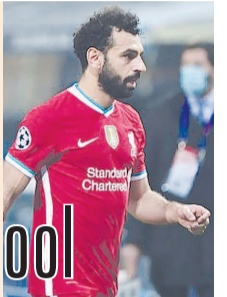
Robinson Lifts Heat Past Pelicans

MIAMI (Dispatches) - Erik Spoelstra remained perfect on Christmas, and a record-tying show from Duncan Robinson helped him stay that way. Robinson made seven 3-pointers - tying the Christmas single-game mark - and scored 23 points, helping the Heat beat the New Orleans Pelicans 111-98 to start the NBA's holiday quintupleheader Friday. "It's super special to play in Christmas," Robinson said. "I certainly don't take it for granted." Goran Dragic scored 18 points, Bam Adebayo had 17 and Avery Bradley finished with 12 for Miami, and Spoelstra improved his Christmas record as Heat coach to 8-0. Precious Achiuwa and Tyler Herro each scored 11 for Miami, which lost Jimmy Butler at halftime with right ankle stiffness. Zion Williamson had 32 points and 14 rebounds in 38 minutes for New Orleans - the rebounds and minutes both being career highs. Brandon Ingram finished with 28 points. But the Pelicans shot 40% to Miami's 51%. Robinson's seven 3s tied the Christmas mark Ingram set last year. JJ Redick's 3-pointer with 7:43 left cut Miami's lead to 91-85 and came during a stretch when the Heat went five minutes without a field goal. But the Pelicans got no closer. The Heat restored order by scoring 11 of the game's next 13 points, and when Achiuwa - the rookie who had strong defensive minutes - forced Williamson into a turnover with 3:55 left, the entire Miami bench rose in celebration. New Orleans led 17-9 midway through the opening quarter - and got outscored 52-21 by Miami over the next 13½ minutes, with the Heat hitting nine of their 13 first-half 3s in that span on the way to a 23-point lead. The Pelicans chipped away, getting within 66-53 at the half and 88-79 after three. But New Orleans shot only 30% in the final quarter and Ingram went scoreless in those 12 minutes after playing the entire third period. Meanwhile Khris Middleton scored 31 points and Milwaukee Bucks routed Golden State Warriors to win its first Christmas Day home game 138-99 in



over half a century. Middleton went 6 for 8 from 3-point range, leading a strong performance from deep for his team. Milwaukee was 20 of 37 from beyond the arc, while Golden State was 10 of 45. The Warriors were outscored by 65 points in their first two games, the second-highest total in NBA history through two games to 71 points for the 1987-88 Clippers. Golden State lost 125-99 at Brooklyn in its season opener. Milwaukee's only other Christmas home game came during the franchise's inaugural season in 1968. The Bucks were on the road for Christmas the last two seasons, losing at Philadelphia in 2019 and winning at New York in 2018. Anthony Davis scored 28 points and LeBron James had 22 while becoming the second-leading Christmas scorer in NBA history during Los Angeles Lakers' 138-115 victory over Dallas Mavericks in Los Angeles. Montrezl Harrell scored 17 of his 22 points in the second half, and Dennis Schröder had 18 points and six assists in a second strong game for both new additions to the NBA champions. Los Angeles outrebounded Dallas 53-27 and closed out its first win of the season with a dominant fourth quarter. Luka Doncic had 27 points and seven assists in his first starring role in the NBA's showcase Christmas evening game for Dallas. Josh Richardson and Trey Burke had 17 points apiece as the Mavs started 0-2 with a late fade at Staples Center.

Salah Is Happy At Liverpool



LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool coach Jurgen Klopp moved to dismiss speculation over Egypt forward Mohamed Salah's future saying on Thursday he is happy at the Premier League champions. The 28-year-old gave an interview in Spain last week in which he said Barcelona and Real Madrid were top clubs and "who knows what will happen in the future". This led to speculation over whether he was seeking a new longer-term contract beyond 2023 or he was upset Trent Alexander-Arnold had been given the captain's armband for the Champions League group match with Midtjylland. "We do not speak about deals -- well, not with you (the media). Why should we start now?" said Klopp at his press conference ahead of Sunday's game with struggling West Brom. "Mo is in a good mood, always a good moment. He is in really good shape and that is the most important thing for me. "We did not have pictures (from the training ground) this morning but if we did you would have seen him laughing, he enjoyed the session. "All the rest is nice for all of you to write about but internally, no, nothing really." If Salah is unsettled it has not been reflected by his performances on the pitch this season.

Jesus, Walker, out Until New Year With Covid-19

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City forward Gabriel Jesus and defender Kyle Walker will miss the busy festive period after contracting coronavirus, the Premier League club said on Friday. Two members of staff have also tested positive for the virus with Brasil's Jesus and England's Walker set to be sidelined until January 6's League Cup semi-final with Manchester United due to a 10-day quarantine. "All four personnel will now observe a period of self-isolation in accordance with Premier League and UK Government protocol on quarantine," City said in a statement. The players will sit out Saturday's match with Newcastle, Monday's trip to Newcastle and January 3's visit to Chelsea.

Brady to Play 300th

NEW YORK (AFP) - Six-time Super Bowl champion Tom Brady plays his 300th regular-season game Saturday trying to lift Tampa Bay into the NFL playoffs, the Buccaneers among seven teams that can clinch berths. The 43-year-old quarterback and former New England Patriots star will lead the Bucs into Detroit seeking a victory to clinch Tampa Bay's first post-season appearance since 2007. The penultimate week of the campaign kicks off Friday with Minnesota at New Orleans, making this Covid-19 disrupted season the NFL's first with games played on all seven possible days. It concludes Monday with Buffalo, a division champion for the first time in 25 years, at New England, already eliminated from the post-season chase. In between, answers will come about the playoff lineup and Brady will reach a milestone in Michigan, the same state where he was a college star and where he made his NFL debut off the New England bench in 2000. "Yeah, I think it's pretty cool," Brady said of reaching 300 games. "I don't get caught up too much in statistics and those types of things, but football has just been a very important part of my life for a long time."

Russia's Shirokov Sentenced to Community Service



MOSCOW (Reuters) - A Moscow court on Friday sentenced Roman Shirokov, the former captain of the Russian men's national soccer team, to 100 hours of community service over an assault on a referee, the Interfax news agency reported. The 39-year-old, who was taking part in an amateur tournament in August, was angry when referee Nikita Danchenko refused to award him a penalty after he was challenged

in the area, footage from the incident showed. Danchenko sent Shirokov off, prompting the midfielder to punch and kick the official. Shirokov, who played most of his career at Zenit St Petersburg and earned 57 caps for the national team, apologised to Danchenko after the incident. "I am well aware that not being assigned a penalty kick and then being shown a red card cannot be a reason to raise my fists," Shirokov, who retired in 2016, wrote on Instagram. Shirokov is not the only Russian professional soccer player to have had run-ins with the law in recent years. Alexander Kokorin and Pavel Mamayev were jailed last year for their involvement in an assault on two civil servants, including a trade ministry official, and an altercation with the driver of a television presenter.

Fanless Games Resemble Training Sessions

BELGRADE (Reuters) - Premier League matches without fans in attendance look like blueprint copies of each other and resemble training sessions, Manchester United midfielder Nemanja Matic told Belgrade daily Vecernje Novosti on Friday. No supporters were allowed to watch games when the league resumed in June following the shutdown in March due to the coronavirus pandemic. Up to 2,000 fans were permitted to attend matches this month in some areas of the country, but a resurgence in COVID-19 cases means Liverpool and Everton are the only Premier League clubs who will be allowed to welcome fans from Saturday. "It's come down to having games which all look like carbon copies of each other resembling training sessions with no fans in the stadiums," Matic said. "The coronavirus pandemic has made the circumstances much different and I am sure that Liverpool would never have lost to Aston Villa 7-2 if fans had been present. "Football has survived, the league is in motion but I sorely miss the noise and the reaction from the terraces." Serbian Matic said winning the league title with United would be a dream come true after lifting the trophy twice with Chelsea in 2015 and 2017. "It would certainly amount to making another dream a reality after winning two titles at Chelsea," he said. "If we enjoyed a slice of good fortune and clinched the Premier League title, it'd be on par with what I accomplished at Chelsea. I am in good shape and hope to carry on playing at the top level for another four or five years."



Barca Loom for Expected New PSG Coach Pochettino

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Mauricio Pochettino is widely reported to be Thomas Tuchel's successor as Paris Saint-Germain coach and the number one item on the Argentine's in-tray will be February's date with Barcelona. Tuchel was reportedly given his marching orders on Thursday, four months after guiding the Qatari-backed club to their first ever Champions League final, August's 1-0 defeat to Bayern Munich. The German, whose dismissal has yet to be officially confirmed by the club, leaves the Parc des Princes having secured a last 16 Champions League clash with Barca and PSG sitting third in Ligue 1, a point shy of leaders Lyon. Pochettino's opening match in charge will be January 6's trip to Saint-Etienne on Ligue 1's resumption after the winter break. Then, on February 16, the 48-year-old has his first massive test against his compatriot Lionel Messi's Catalans, with the return leg on March 6. Pochettino was let go after five and a half years at Spurs in the aftermath of leading the north London side to their first ever appearance in a Champions League final against Liverpool in 2019. Although he has yet to win any silverware the former PSG defender's stock is high in managerial circles. The Parisians will be keen to complete his signing and avoid missing their man who has been linked to the likes of Real Madrid, Manchester United and Barca in recent months.

