

**Health Ministry Spokeswoman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on Monday
Some 121 More Iranians Have Died
From the Coronavirus Disease
Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing
The Total Deaths to 54,814**

IRAN NEWS

**Researchers at an Iranian
Knowledge-Based Company
Have Indigenized 30
State-of-the-Art Equipment to
Treat Infertility, Advancing the
Country to Stand Among Top
States With this Technology**

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Iran Formula for Decline in COVID-19 Cases Discovered

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) said a unique door-to-door screening campaign with the participation of Basij forces has led to a fall in the number of coronavirus cases in Iran without the need for vaccine.

In comments on Monday, Major General Hossein Salami said the door-to-door screening program, dubbed 'Martyr Soleimani' initiative, has resulted in a reduction of the COVID-19 cases in Iran.

The program, carried out in cooperation with the Health Ministry and Basij, reveals that Iran has discovered the formula for overcoming the pandemic, the commander said.

He added that the Martyr Soleimani screening program, which is unique in the world, is the centerpiece of the successful approach that has helped Iran achieve a declining rate of infection without vaccine.

Nearly one million patients have recovered from the coronavirus infection or have been discharged from hospitals across Iran. The number of new COVID-19 cases, hospital admissions and deaths in Iran has declined constantly in recent days, while the local scientists are going to begin the human trial phase of a homegrown vaccine, which the health minister says outperforms many vaccines developed by other countries.

Purchasing COVID-19 Vaccine Via SHTA Needs No FATF

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – President of Iran-Swiss Chamber of Commerce Mr. Sharif Nezam Mafi says Iran will face problem for purchasing of coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine out of the Swiss humanitarian trade agreement (SHTA), adding that the SHTA has been launched for this purpose and it will need no joining the FATF.

Speaking to ILNA, Nezam Mafi said that the chamber predicted that the SHTA would be one of the few channels for providing COVID-19 vaccine and the process is underway, adding the strange thing is the U.S. Administration issued license for Iran to use its frozen assets to purchase vaccine. He said nobody expected this to happen during the Trump Administration but the world community pressures forced the U.S. to make such a decision.

He further said that since the SHTA can function out of the FATF system, this license was issued, adding that two Iranian banks observe the FATF regulations and for this reason there is no problem for such trades through these banks. **See Page 7**

Iran Not to Let General Soleimani's Assassins Go Unpunished



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran says it will not let those behind the assassination of the country's legendary anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani evade punishment.

"We will not allow the martyr's blood to go to waste and those who did it escape punishment," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told a virtual news conference in Tehran Monday.

The Islamic Republic has ceaselessly pursued this matter and will keep doing so through the international channels, he said.

"This is not something that the Iranian government and the establishment could let go by. The U.S. administration is accountable in this regard," the diplomat added.

Khatibzadeh said the United States committed a monumental strategic mistake by perpetrating the terrorist act. "We will not abandon this pursuit until we have taken all those who abetted this [atrocious] or were involved in it, to the altar of justice."

General Soleimani was the former commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC). He was admired as the Middle East's most potent counter-terrorism combatant, with a unique charisma. He was Iran's lead military advisor helping in Iraq and Syria defeat foreign-backed takfiri terrorists, chiefly Daesh in late 2017.

He was assassinated in a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad on January 3 during an official visit. His Iraqi trenchmate Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Hashd al-Sha'abi anti-terror force, was also killed along with their other companions when their convoy was hit.

Khatibzadeh touched on Tehran's efforts to present the enormity of the atrocity to the world and bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Islamic Republic, he said, has registered more than five letters and official notes with the United Nations and used its diplomatic missions to introduce General Soleimani and the nature of his mission to the world.

The official said Agnes Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, denounced the assassination as an act of terrorism earlier this year, only after Iran's Foreign Ministry presented the world body with a detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the terrorist act.

Tehran will follow up on its efforts in this area across international courts and tribunals, he added.

Apart from commanding the Quds Force, General Soleimani served as a "pillar of regional stability" who contributed most to the realization of peace and maintaining interaction with different leaders of the region, Khatibzadeh said.

The spokesman touched on General Soleimani's famous "We are a nation of martyrdom" remarks, saying extremism cannot be defeated unless through the courage and pure blood of those confronting

Khatibzadeh further warned the outgoing administration of President Donald Trump against any new adventurism, saying the U.S. would bear responsibility for any act of mischief. **See Page 7**

Majlis Wants Unsuitable Budget Structure To Be Changed

TEHRAN (IP) – Majlis Presiding Board spokesman said the upcoming budget bill's unsuitable structure must be changed whether in the tax system or other sectors.

In response to a question on the general points of the upcoming budget bill and its implementation, Mohammad-Hossein Farhangi stated on Monday that the members of the 2021 Budget Integration Commission, as well as the chairmen of the Planning and Budget Commission, Budget Integration Commission, and the head of the Research Center, expressed their views on the bill.

Farhangi explained that there were 5 in favor and 5 against MPs who expressed their views on the general points of next year's budget bill.

Those who were against the approval of the budget bill's general points believed that it is not possible to amend the bill in the parliament, and many objections for revenues and budget deficits have raised, so it has been referred to the government to review, he added.

Farhangi noted: "We should not waste opportunities while the government has opened the way for revenues and expenditures." **See Page 7**

Iran Ready to Exchange Views on Human Rights

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's deputy foreign minister for international and legal affairs said on Monday that the Iranians welcome the exchange of views with the West and human rights organizations, but the proud nation would not accept any kind of interfering viewpoints.

Mohsen Baharvand told Iran newspaper that the Islamic Republic has differences with some human rights organizations and Western countries on the implementation of citizenship rights.

According to the official, there is no fundamental difference with Western countries regarding the observance of human rights, but the mechanism of implementing the human rights and the West's political misuse of the issue are among the subjects of disagreement.

There are some judicial procedures in Iran that should be reviewed to stop Western states' exploitation, he said, condemning that the West is grappling with apparent violation of human rights within its own societies. **See Page 7**

Iraq Lifts Hurried Ban On Passenger Travel From Iran

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - The Iraqi government has allowed travel of passengers from neighboring Iran just two days after it announced borders would close for two weeks over fears about the spread of a new variant of the coronavirus.

A deputy Iranian transportation minister said on Sunday that passengers could resume travelling to Iraq from two border crossings in northwest and west of the country.

Shahram Adamnejad said that Iraqi authorities had effectively dismantled a ban enacted on December 24 over fears that passengers from Iran could be infected with a new variant of the coronavirus.

"Based on an announcement by the country of Iraq, the restriction on travel of passengers from Parviz Khan Crossing in Kermanshah province and Bashmaq Crossing in Kurdistan province has been lifted since yesterday December 26," said Adamnejad.

The official said Iraq's ban had only affected passengers, insisting that trade has been flowing across the borders.

Most of Iranians travel to Iraq for religious purposes as the country is home to shrines revered by Shia Muslims. Those visits have reduced significantly, however, since coronavirus erupted in Iran in February. **See Page 7**

Resistance Missiles Can Reach any Point in Occupied Palestine

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah denied Sunday having any data around Israeli or U.S. intention to perform any operation before the end of Trump's presidency dubbing the latter a "crazy who is in a state of severe madness".

"It is not something only concerning Iran, Lebanon or Palestine but even the Republican and Democratic leaderships are worried about what he could do," he pointed out, stressing that "the resistance axis should be cautious throughout these couple of weeks so it wouldn't be dragged into an uncalculated confrontation..."

In an exclusive interview with Al-Mayadeen TV channel, Sayyed Nasrallah revealed that he, along with other Hezbollah leaders are targets for the US, Israeli and Saudi Arabia, adding that the latter have been instigating to assassinate him since many years, even before the Yemeni war began. "Saudi King, Mohammad bin Salman proposed this issue in his first visit to the US after the election of Trump, and the latter approved assigning this operation to 'Israel'," his eminence clarified, noting that "Saudi Arabia, specifically in the last few years, has been acting with grudge not mindfulness".

Sayyed Nasrallah disdained Israeli threats assuring that "when you hear Israelis waging threats on media know that there will be no action... and all the action taking place on the borders with Lebanon only reveal Israel's concern and alertness". As his eminence considered that the military operation that targeted Hajj Qassem Suleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis was a trilateral operation by U.S.-Israel-Saudi Arabia, he remembered Suleimani saying "he had a strong charisma and the power to influence anyone who knows him. He was special on the humanitarian and moral levels. He was a frontline man not a man in the operation room, a man of strategy and tactics and very conscious and well-educated on political and cultural levels." **See Page 7**

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Iran Exports \$1.2b to Afghanistan

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Based on Iran's Customs Administration's statistics, some \$1.2b non-oil products were exported to Afghanistan during the eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (started on March 20) and steel and iron bar with \$70m have had the biggest share.

According to Tehran Chamber of Commerce, the diversity of Iran's exports to Afghanistan is much higher than other countries, and the

top 50 Iranian non-oil goods exports to Afghanistan have a share of about 59.6 percent

During the same period, 798,000 tons of cement worth \$21.4 million was exported from Iran to Afghanistan.

Earlier, Afghan commercial attaché to Iran Ahmad Saeed said grounds have been paved for Iranian companies to extract mineral products in Afghanistan.

Iran Has Always Played Active Role in History

TEHRAN (PressTV) – Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said that the great Iranian nation has always been an active player in international arena and some efforts to challenge the power of diplomacy are not showing the real history of the Iranians.

Addressing the fourth Conference on the History of Iran's Foreign Policy, which was held via video conference, FM Zarif noted that the history of the country's foreign relations is full of endeavors and sacrifices by the Iranian people in the face of foreign invasions as well as the story of their economic and cultural exchanges with other nations.

The first and foremost point that seems to be very important in learning from Iran's foreign relations is that Iran has always been an active player and the Iranians could find ways to play their role in regional and international arenas, Zarif stated.

According to such a long history of foreign relations, he added, diplomacy has always been an integral part of the socio-political life of the Iranian nation; so, the



current unreal attempts to belittle diplomacy are deficient and inaccurate in terms of history, incorrect in terms of analysis and contrary to the country's interests in terms of foreign policy.

He also emphasized that the promotion of historical relationships between Iran and other Asian countries would pave the ground for enhancing constructive ties, which could be beneficial in today's world.

Diplomacy provides international players with the atmosphere of interaction, security as well as bargaining power, the Iranian top diplomat said, adding that the relations between Iran and other Asian nations date back to more than 4,500 years.

Armenia, Iran FMs Discuss Regional Security, Stability

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN – Armenian Foreign Minister Ara Aivazian on Monday had a telephone conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia informed.

The agenda on bilateral and regional cooperation was discussed during the talk.

The interlocutors touched also upon regional security and stability issues. In this context, the prospects of cooperation to address new regional challenges were outlined.

In addition, Zarif extended Iran's condolences on the casualties of the war in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), and wished support to the Armenian people.

The interlocutors stressed the importance of further intensifying Armenian-Iranian interactions and dialogue, and reaffirmed their readiness to deepen close cooperation.

Iranian Women Making Their Presence Felt on World Stage

TEHRAN (IFP) - A senior official says Iranian women have not only not been isolated by the Islamic Republic, but have managed to make their presence felt internationally.

Vice President for Women and Family Affairs Masoumeh Ebtekar described women as a key ingredient of the country's social assets.

"The Islamic Revolution set the stage for the presence of women in different social arenas unlike what certain people thought that the Islamic Republic of Iran would restrict or isolate women, something that never happened," she noted.

The vice president underlined Iranian women both handled their duties at home as mothers and wives and at the same time made their presence felt in different social arenas.

"Forty-one years on since the Islamic Revolution, we are seeing women making progress fast on the scientific front," she added.

Ebtekar said these achievements could be due to proper planning by the Iranian government; nevertheless, she stressed, Iranian women's perseverance and hope for future have definitely contributed to their progress.

FM Holds Talks with Senegalese, Ghanaian Diplomats

TEHRAN (IFP) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has separately met the ambassadors of Ghana and Senegal in Tehran.

In the Tuesday meeting with Eric Owusu-Boateng, the new Ghanaian ambassador to Tehran, Zarif received a copy of the African envoy's credentials at the beginning of his mission in the Iranian capital.

Senegal's outgoing ambassador to Tehran Amadou Sow also bid farewell to Foreign Minister Zarif at the end of his diplomatic mission in Tehran.

Iran to Produce 1.5m Doses of Domestic COVID-19 Vaccine in 40 Days

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran will produce one and a half million doses of a homegrown vaccine within the next 30 to 40 days, said the director of Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam after meeting with the researchers who produced the vaccine.

During the meeting, which took place on Sunday, Mohammad Mokhber said the production will reach 12 million doses per month in the next six months, IRIB News reported.

Iran reported the first cases of the coronavirus in mid-February, soon becoming a hub where the deadly virus rapidly spread, making the country one of the hardest-hit in the region.

So far, more than 1.2 million people in Iran have contracted the virus and over 54,000 have lost their lives. However, in recent weeks, with the imposition of tighter social restrictions, the new cases and deaths have dropped significantly.

Iran is also under illegal, inhumane sanctions imposed by the United States, which have hampered its access to medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, and

complicated the process of importing vaccines from other countries. But the country is fairly optimistic about the production of local vaccines.

According to Mokhber, a plan to mass-produce the homemade vaccine is in final stages, and the production line is capable of producing some 120 to 150 million doses of the vaccine to cover the country's needs.

The human trial of the vaccine will start in the next three days, he said. "To date, 60,000 people have called and enrolled for a vaccine test, and 30,000 of them met the conditions," the official explained.

Of course, he continued, "in the first stage, we cannot accept more than 56 people, who must come from a variety of age, gender, region and ethnicity groups."

In remarks on Sunday, Iran's health minister said the country is capable of producing a coronavirus vaccine, calling on the researchers not to become disheartened and keep up their hard work.

"We will prove to the entire world that our domestically-produced vaccine is much better than vaccines produced elsewhere across the globe," Saeed Namaki said.

Leaving Middle East the Only Way to Save Americans

TEHRAN (IP) - The deputy chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the parliament of Iran said that "what saves the Americans is their getting out of the region and ending their hegemony."

Abbas Moghtadaei referred to the U.S.' new moves in the Persian Gulf region and stated that Iran was an influential country in the region with the highest defense capability without fear of U.S. military equipment.

Moghtadaei said: "The Persian Gulf is a marine zone that belongs to the countries that are on its periphery, being used internationally, but the U.S. likes to have a camp in the Persian Gulf region and dominate it."

He went on to say that despite some problems, Iran has a strong and indigenous defense, which has resulted in being introduced as a completely safe country in the insecure region, and that is what the Americans do not like.

The deputy chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of Iran's parliament also stated: "Of course, if Iran needs to take action against the United States, it will certainly have the necessary power by relying on its internal power."

Pfizer to Donate 150k COVID-19 Vaccines to Iran

TEHRAN (MNA) – An official announced that Tehran is to receive 150,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccines from the American multinational pharmaceutical corporation, Pfizer, in the near future.

The Chief of the Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran Karim Hemmati made the remarks in Khorramshahr, Khuzestan province, on Monday, noting that this consignment is a donation.

"Due to the special storage conditions of this vaccine, it will be transferred to the country soon in coordination with the Ministry of Health," he informed.

This is while Head of Scientific Committee of National Coronavirus Combat and Prevention Headquarters said on Monday that the Iranian coronavirus vaccine produced by seven knowledge-based companies will enter the human phase by February.

Dr. Mostafa Ghanei said that seven Iranian companies producing the COVID-19 vaccine are running under the strict supervision of the Biotechnology Development Headquarters of the Vice-Presidency for Science and Technology.

Army to Grant 'Order of Sacrifice' To Martyr Soleimani

TEHRAN (MNA) – The Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran will award the 'Order of Sacrifice' to the martyred anti-terror commander, Lieutenant General Ghasem Soleimani, the Army spokesman said.

Second Brigadier General Shahin Taghikhani said on Monday, "The Army, along with other branches of the armed force as well as the Iranian nation, will have various commemoration plans for the martyrdom anniversary of General Soleimani."

He said, "The Iranian Army strongly believes in the need to honor that dear martyr and explain and propagate his path," as an influential personality, who will be remembered as a lasting model for Islamic Iran and other freedom-seekers in the world. In this regard, he added, "The honorary Order of Sacrifice of the Army will be awarded to Martyr Soleimani."

Taghikhani hailed the unique role of General Soleimani in the victory of the Resistance Front against terrorist groups, saying the Army will have widespread programs on his martyrdom anniversary to raise awareness about the country's battle against terrorism.

MP Vows Massive Response To Any Israeli Sub in Persian Gulf

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran will not hesitate to give a "strong and massive" response to any Israeli submarine in the Persian Gulf, a lawmaker says, after the Washington Post claimed that Tel Aviv was sending one to the strategic waters.

"Israel must know that our response to aggression against our national security will be strong and massive," spokesman for the Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Abolfazl Amouei was quoted as saying.

On Wednesday, the Post reported that an Israeli submarine had embarked for the Persian Gulf as a warning to Iran and that Israel was preparing for a battle amid rising hostilities.

Speaking to Qatar's Al Jazeera network, Amouei said, "Israel is looking for excuses to drag the region into a tension that creates chaos in the last days of the Trump presidency."

Hidai Zilberman, an Israeli army spokesman, recently told Saudi Arabia's Elaph news outlet that Israel was tracking Iranian movements around the region, and Israeli submarines were quietly "sailing everywhere."

Earlier this month, the U.S. military sent two B-52H bombers to the Middle East on a short-notice mission. It also moved the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier back into the Persian Gulf along with other warships.

U.S. naval and air assets, meanwhile, conducted joint exercises with the Royal Saudi Air Force and Royal Saudi Navy in the Persian Gulf, the fifth such exercise this year.

The Politico website cited a military official as saying that the US military was on heightened alert and shoring up its forces in the Middle East.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, the head of US Central Command (CENTCOM), said, "We do not seek conflict, but we must remain postured and committed to respond to any contingency or in opposition to any aggression."

Envoy Warns of Israeli Plot to Sow Discord between Iran, Arabs

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The head of Interests Section of the Islamic Republic in Egypt slammed the Zionist regime as the common enemy of the Muslim world, saying the U.S. and Israel seek to create division between Iran and Arab countries.

In remark on Sunday, Nasser Kan'ani urged vigilance against the U.S.-Israeli policy of fomenting division and hostility between Iran and the Arab world.

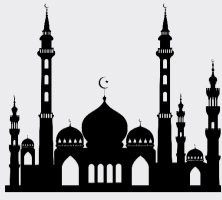
"The interests of Iran and the Arab world would not be fulfilled with such confrontation," the Iranian diplomat added.

He also emphasized that the Zionist regime has been founded on the basis of hostility towards the Islamic and Arab world and will never be considered as a friend of the Arab states.

Highlighting the long history of interaction, civilizational exchanges, and cultural commonalities between Iranians and Arabs, Kan'ani said the Islamic Republic has proved over the past four decades that it favors regional cooperation and attaches significance to the security of its neighbors.

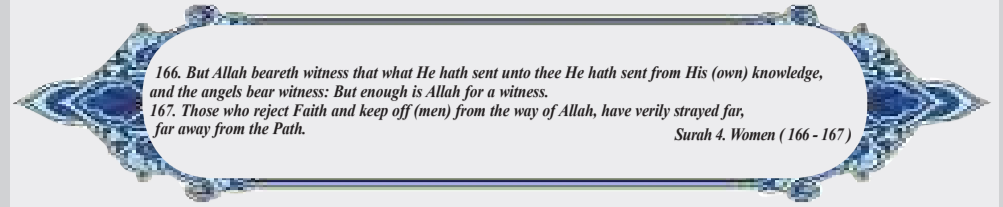
His comments came after Egyptian diplomat and director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Mostafa el Feki, implied in a recent interview that Iran and the Zionist regime are the enemies of the Arab countries.

Iran maintains that its foreign policy is based upon constructive interaction with the Muslim, Arab and neighboring countries.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:09
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:20
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:44
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:14



166. But Allah beareth witness that what He hath sent unto thee He hath sent from His (own) knowledge, and the angels bear witness: But enough is Allah for a witness.
167. Those who reject Faith and keep off (men) from the way of Allah, have verily strayed far, far away from the Path.
Surah 4. Women (166 - 167)

National Security Relies On Economic Power

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade believes the national security depends on economic power and announced the readiness of the ministry for arrival of the big and capable companies into the social responsibilities.

Addressing the 5th International Conference of Industrial Management on Monday, Alireza Razm Hosseini pointed to the root culture of development, saying that type of approach of officials and executives in the country regarding the issue of development is effective in the all-out growth of the country.

He emphasized the attention to the update indicators of the world in the field of development, stipulating that the approach of officials and executives for reaching development, progress and development should be drastically changed, noting that the emphasis of the Holy Islam in the very field of development underscores this point.

Razm Hosseini said that national security depends on economic power, adding that economic power depends on the inflation rate, growth of per capita production, and fair distribution of wealth among the people, adding that that fair distribution of wealth in fact indicates equal opportunities for generating the wealth and job.

He also said indicators of life expectancy, amount of cultural production, social security, providing infrastructures, communications and communication networks, and food security are of the other parameters for attaining economic power.



The minister also said that economic power will lead to protection of social and human assets, elites, public satisfaction and playing more roles in the region and the world.

Razm Hosseini added that the country has provided good infrastructures and to this end, the country should make the most of its human and social assets, and economic growth should be dynamic and to this end, the approaches should be changed.

He also urged the organizers of the conference to put on its agenda for its next session the Supreme Leader's Statement on the Second Step of the Revolution.

The minister noted that the company is to take advantage of capacities and capabilities of 200 famous and successful companies for balanced development in the county and it is on the agenda. Razm Hosseini reiterated that people's livelihood is the priority of his ministry and it works for abundant distribution of goods in the market.

He said in recent months in the production sector, the country has witnessed growth in production of some commodities like home appliances and vehicles.

Webinar on Iran-Oman Trade Opportunities

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mine and Agriculture (TCCIMA) is to hold an online meeting to review the trade opportunities and capacities of Iran and Oman.

The international affairs department of ICCIMA announced that the webinar on the Iran-Oman Trade Opportunities will be held on Monday, January 11.

The webinar will be held in presence of chairman of Iran-Oman Joint Chamber and representatives of some provincial chambers and business activists.

The meeting is to review the ways for easing the arrival of Iranian markets into Oman market.

Despite the U.S. re-imposition of sanctions against the Islamic Republic, Oman is getting closer to Iran both politically and economically. There is also the same approach adopted by Iran, as Iranian companies now prefer to conduct trade with Oman rather than the United Arab Emirates (UAE), given that the UAE is highly complying with the sanctions.

Iran is somehow replacing some of its previous strategic trade partners such as UAE with Oman, considering the Sultanate as an economic-trade hub.

Over the past year, there have been many meetings and negotiations between trade and economic officials from the state-run and private sectors of the two sides with the aim of strengthening and expanding bilateral trade ties.



Gov't Divests Shares in State Companies to Fund Direct Cash Subsidies



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The government will sell its stakes in major state-run companies to pay for cash subsidies targeting tens of millions of people as the country introduces various schemes to mitigate the economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

During a Cabinet session on Sunday, the administrative of President Hassan Rouhani decided to divest its remaining shares in seven major oil, manufacturing and investment companies, a move which is expected to generate 435 trillion rials (over \$1.7 billion) in new finances.

The semi-official ISNA news agency said that the shares will be sold off to the Saderat, Mellat and Tejarat banks, where majority of shares are owned by private shareholders.

The state-run companies subject to the new divestment plan include four refineries in the cities of Tehran, Tabriz, Esfahan and Bandar Abbas as well as the National Investment Company of Iran, HEPCO Machineries and Iran Transfo.

The decision comes nearly a month after the Iranian parliament ratified a motion obliging Rouhani's government to pay \$2.25 billion in direct cash handouts to people most affected by the spread of the coronavirus.

The motion went into law after being ratified by Iran's Guardians Council, the body which vets parliamentary legislations.

The ISNA report said, however, that just more than a third of the funds generated by the planned divestment, some 145 trillion rials (nearly \$570 million), would be allocated to the direct cash subsidy scheme and the rest would be used to reimburse government debts to the three privately-owned banks.

The three banks are supposed to deposit the funds owed to the government for the divestment in four monthly installments to an account owned by Iran's Organization of Targeted Subsidies, the body responsible for distributing monthly benefits in the country.

Unemployment in Home Appliance Industry Falls

TEHRAN (MNA) - The spokesman of Iran's Home Appliances Manufacturers Union said with foreign companies leaving the country's home appliance market the production of domestic companies has increased and the unemployment rate in this sector has significantly declined.

While it was expected that the home appliance industry, like some other industries, would suffer from the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic and the U.S. sanctions, the inauguration of several new projects in this industry showed that the industry is expanding strongly and moving forward, Hamidreza Qaznavi said on Monday. "The sanctions not only have failed to curb production, but they have also created unique opportunities for this industry," Qaznavi said.

The official noted that before the sanctions, foreign companies held more than 60 percent of the country's home appliance market, which had significantly weakened domestic industries and created serious employment problems.

He further mentioned some of the problems that the producers are facing in this industry, saying: "The main problem of the production sector these days, despite all the efforts of the Central Bank, is the supply and allocation of foreign currency, and if this issue is resolved the employment problems will also be solved."

Following the re-imposition of the U.S. sanctions, most of the major international home appliance manufacturers – mainly Asian brands – that were enjoying Iran's \$0-million market suddenly gave in to the U.S. pressures and left Iran. This has created a good opportunity for domestic companies to take over. In this regard, domestic home appliance manufacturers started a new movement to push for more production on one hand and to indigenize the knowledge for producing high-tech components and parts used in this industry, on the other hand, to cut off reliance on foreign sources.

According to the data released by Industry, Mining and Trade Ministry, manufacturing of washing machines in Iran increased 58.2 percent during the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20-November 20), compared to the same period of time in the past year, while the production of refrigerators and freezers increased by 29.2 percent.

Iran Foreign Trade Grows Month-on-Month

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's non-oil foreign trade stood at \$7.37 billion in the ninth calendar month that ends December 20, said the spokesman of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA).

According to Ruhollah Latifi, the figure indicates a 17% or \$1.07 billion jump compared with the foreign trade in the preceding month (22 October – 20 November).

The monthly export, during the month to December 20, reached \$3.66 billion and imports stood at \$3.73 billion, registering a respective jump of 13.5% and 20.5% compared with the preceding month.

China was Iran's top exports destination during the ninth Iranian month, with 2.47 million tons worth

\$1.08 billion, followed by Iraq with 1.48 million tons worth \$568 million, the UAE with 1.5 million tons worth \$564 million, Turkey with 333,000 tons worth \$235 million and Afghanistan with 526,000 tons worth \$199 million.

Iran's top exporters during the same month were China with 354,000 tons worth \$1.03 billion, the UAE with 506,000 tons worth \$854 million, Turkey with 316,000 tons worth \$367 million, India with 212,000 tons worth \$229 million and Germany with 27,000 tons of goods worth \$160 million.

Iran's foreign trade during the nine months of the current fiscal year (March 20 – December 20) reached 110 million tons worth \$52 billion.

Reforming Budget Structure Paves Way for Achieving Economic Goals

TEHRAN (IP) - The spokesman of the Economic Commission of Iran's Islamic Consultative Assembly said the reformation of the budget structure for the Iranian year of 1400 (starting on March 21, 2021) would practically lead to achieving other economic goals.

Mehdi Toghiani emphasized the need to reform the budget structure of the country, adding that reducing inflation in the economy is related to reforming the budget structure, but in any case, the next year's budget is inflationary.

Toghiani said that one of the important tasks of the parliament is to reduce the country's big budget deficit and that the government should get help from the central bank, sell bonds, and depend on oil to cover the budget deficit, which all are inflationary. He stated that in the next year's budget, the sale of 300,000 billion Tomans bonds had been envisaged and the dependence on oil had increased, which must be adjusted to reduce the budget deficit.

The spokesman of the Economic Commission of the Iranian parliament went on to say that if the budget reform was realized in the parliament with the support of the government, a part of people's livelihood problems would be solved in the next year and 1400 would be a better year for the people.

Iran Talks Annual Smuggled Clothing

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Out of \$20 billion smuggled goods entered into Iran annually, over \$6 billion is the share of textiles and clothing which means about 30 percent of the total smuggling of goods, the deputy chairman of the Industries Commission of the Iranian Parliament said.

"Clothing smuggling ranks third among the goods

smuggled into the country, which is a high and worrying figure," Iranian Member of Parliament Ali Jeddi said.

He went on to say that smuggling has decreased slightly with the rise of the foreign exchange rate but we are more concerned about the smuggling of second-handed clothing from Europe at a lower price.

Production Output Rises Over 20%

TEHRAN (MNA) - The deputy industry, mining and trade minister announced that with the supply of raw materials for production units following the new announcements of the government's Economic Headquarters, production has grown over 20 percent in 330 units with high value-added products.

Mehdi Sadeqi Niaraki, who is the deputy minister for the industrial affairs, said the new announcements of the government's Economic Headquarters have reduced the problems of production units for the supply of raw materials, and these units achieved good results as they can supply raw materials through imports in exchange for exports.

Supporting production units is a major policy of Iranian government in this Iranian calendar year (begins on March 20), which is named the year of "Surge in Production".

The acting head of Iran Small Industries and Industrial Parks Organization (ISIPO) has recently announced that 1,170 idle industrial units have been revived in the country during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20-December 20).

Asghar Mosaheb said that reviving the mentioned units has created jobs for 19,446 persons.

According to the official, there are over 46,000 small and medium-sized industrial units in Iran's industrial parks and zones, of them about 9,200 units are inactive.

Industry, Mining, and Trade Ministry was initially planning to revive 1,500 idle units in the current year, but then it revised its programs to revive 2,000 units.

Over 300,000 Tons of Banana Imported in 9 Months

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran has imported 308,970 tons of banana worth \$210.32 million during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20-December 20), according to the spokesman of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA).

Ruhollah Latifi said the nine-month import equals the whole imports of this product in the past year.

As the IRICA has announced, Iran's non-oil imports stood at 25 million tons valued at \$26.8 billion during the first nine months of this year.

As reported, the country's top five sources of imports during this period were China with \$7 billion, the UAE with \$6.3 billion, Turkey with \$3 billion, India with \$1.6 billion, and Germany with \$1.6 billion worth of imports.

The price of banana in the market has soared in recent days as some have blamed the officials for imposing restriction on imports of banana. Some also believe that officials by imposing restrictions are to bolster the domestic production of banana.

An official in the Agriculture Ministry has recently said that the domestic production capacity of bananas as well as other tropical fruits is higher than the current levels. "The Agriculture Ministry is prepared to grant incentives, bank facilities and subsidies to help farmers produce these fruits," he said.

Brazil Vice President Tests Positive for Coronavirus

RIO DE JANEIRO (Reuters) - Hamilton Mourão, Brazil's vice president, has tested positive for the coronavirus, his office said on Sunday, when the country registered 344 new COVID-19 deaths.

Mourão, President Jair Bolsonaro's deputy, is the latest in a long line of senior Brazilian officials to contract the virus. Bolsonaro, a prominent coronavirus skeptic, was infected in July, and recovered.

In a statement, Mourão's office said he tested positive on Sunday afternoon, and that he will isolate in Jaburu, his official residence.



Man Charged in Illinois Shooting That Killed 3

WINNEBAGO (Dispatches) - A U.S. serviceman from Florida has been charged in a shooting at an Illinois bowling alley in which three people were killed and three others wounded, authorities have said.

Winnebago County State's Attorney J Hanley said Duke Webb, 37, has been charged with three counts of murder and three counts of first-degree attempted murder in the shooting at Don Carter Lanes, in Rockford, on Saturday evening.

Webb was taken into custody shortly after the shooting at about 7pm (01:00 GMT on Sunday), Rockford police chief Dan O'Shea said at a news conference on Sunday morning.



Many Europeans Wary of Taking COVID Shot



WARSAW (Reuters) - Europe rolled out a huge COVID-19 vaccination drive on Sunday to try to rein in the coronavirus pandemic but many Europeans are sceptical about the speed at which the vaccines have been tested and approved and reluctant to have the shot.

The European Union has secured contracts with a range of drugmakers including Pfizer and BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca, for a total of more than two billion doses and has set a goal for all adults to be inoculated next year.

But surveys have pointed to high levels of hesitancy towards inoculation in countries from France to Poland, with many used to vaccines taking decades to develop, not just months.

"I don't think there's a vaccine in history that has been tested so quickly," Ireneusz Sikorski, 41, said as he stepped out of a church in central Warsaw with his two children. "I am not saying vaccination shouldn't be taking place. But I am not going to test an unverified vaccine on my children, or on myself."

Surveys in Poland, where distrust in public institutions runs deep, have shown fewer than 40% of people planning to get vaccinated, for now. On Sunday, only half the medical staff in a Warsaw hospital where the country's first shot was administered had signed up.

In Spain, one of Europe's hardest-hit countries, German, a 28-year-old singer and music composer originally from Tenerife, also plans to wait for now.

"No one close to me has had it (COVID-19). I'm obviously not saying it doesn't exist because lots of people have died of it, but for now I wouldn't have it (the vaccine)."

A Christian Orthodox bishop in Bulgaria, where 45% of people have said they would not get a shot and 40% plan to wait to see if any negative side effects appear, compared COVID-19 to polio.

"Myself, I am vaccinated against everything I can be," Bishop Tihon told reporters after getting his shot, standing alongside the health minister in Sofia.

He spoke about anxiety over polio before vaccination became available in the 1950s and 1960s.

"We were all trembling in fear of catching polio. And then we were overjoyed," he said. "Now, we have to convince people. It's a pity."

The widespread hesitancy does not appear to take into account the scientific developments in recent decades.

The traditional method of creating vaccines - introducing a weakened or dead virus, or a piece of one, to stimulate the body's immune system - takes over a decade on average, according to a 2013 study. One pandemic flu vaccine took over eight years while a hepatitis B vaccine was nearly 18 years in the making.

Moderna's vaccine, based on the so-called messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) technology, went from gene sequencing to the first human injection in 63 days.

Trump Signs Pandemic Aid And Spending Bill

PALM BEACH (Reuters) - U.S. President Donald Trump on Sunday signed into law a \$2.3 trillion pandemic aid and spending package, restoring unemployment benefits to millions of Americans and averting a federal government shutdown in a crisis of his own making.

Trump, who leaves office on Jan. 20 after losing November's election to President-elect Joe Biden, backed down from his earlier threat to block the bill, which was approved by Congress last week, after he came under intense pressure from lawmakers on both sides.

The Republican president, who golfed on Sunday and remained out of public view even as the government crisis loomed, had demanded that Congress change the bill to increase the size of stimulus checks for struggling Americans to \$2,000 from \$600 and also cut some other spending.

It was not immediately clear why Trump, who has refused to concede defeat to Biden, changed his mind on the stimulus package. His resistance had threatened to inject further chaos into the final stretch of his presidency.

After signing the bill behind closed doors at his beachside club, Trump sought to put the best face on his climb-down, saying he was signing the bill with "a strong message that makes clear to Congress that wasteful items need to be removed."

"Much more money is coming," he insisted in a statement, though he provided nothing to back this promise.

And with less than a month left in office, Trump is expected to gain little or no traction with lawmakers to make changes.

White House officials have been tight-lipped about Trump's thinking but a source familiar with the situation said some advisers had urged him to relent because they did not see the point of refusing.

Democrats have long been on board with the \$2,000 payments but many Republicans have opposed it, making it unlikely that the figure will be revised upwards while Trump is in office.

Many economists agree the financial aid in the bill should be higher to get the economy moving again but say that immediate support for Americans hit by coronavirus lockdowns is still urgently needed.



Several Soldiers Killed by Gunmen in Southwestern Pakistan

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - At least seven soldiers were killed in an attack by unidentified gunmen in southwestern Pakistan, the military said.

The assailants attacked a security post in Balochistan province's Harnai district early on Sunday, the military's media wing, the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), said in a statement.

Senior police officer Shawli Tareen gave a slightly higher death toll than the army, saying that during the exchange of fire, six paramilitary personnel and two private guards were killed.

He said six other soldiers were critically wounded in the attack.

The attackers fled the scene and made their way into the mountainous terrain before other security teams could arrive to assist, Tareen said.

The attack on the Frontier Corps comes a day after a bomb exploded near a football field, killing two spectators and wounding another six in Panjgur district in southwestern Balochistan.

No group has so far claimed responsibility for either attack.

Similar attacks in the past have been claimed by separatist groups in the area. Other armed groups also operate in the region.

Balochistan, which shares borders with both Afghanistan and Iran, is Pakistan's largest and most volatile province.

It faces a multifaceted threat from several armed groups, including the Taliban and other movements seeking the province's secession from Pakistan. Other targets of the groups include projects initiated by China under a \$62bn investment plan are common.

Violence, however, has declined significantly in Pakistan in recent years, after the country's army pushed back armed groups in a series of offensives near the border.

Nashville Blast Suspect Died in Explosion

NASHVILLE (Reuters) - The 63-year-old suspect in the bombing that rocked Nashville on Christmas morning was killed in the blast that destroyed his motor home and damaged more than 40 businesses, authorities said on Sunday.

FBI forensic experts matched DNA samples recovered from the scene to that of Anthony Q. Warner, whose home in nearby Antioch was searched on Saturday by federal agents. "We've come to the conclusion that an individual named Anthony Warner is the bomber and he was present when the bomb went off and that he perished in the bombing," Donald Cochran, U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee, told a news conference.

Officials said it was too early in the investigation to discuss the suspect's motives.

Warner's motor home, parked on a downtown street of Tennessee's largest city, exploded at dawn on Friday moments after police responding to reports of gunfire noticed it and heard music and an automated message emanating from the vehicle warning of a bomb.

The explosion in the heart of America's country music capital injured three people and damaged businesses including an AT&T switching center, disrupting mobile, internet and TV services across central Tennessee and parts of four other states.

As investigators followed up on hundreds of tips from members of the public, they searched Warner's home on Saturday and visited a Nashville real estate

agency where he had worked on computers.

The owner of Fridrich & Clark Realty, Steve Fridrich, told the Tennessean newspaper that for four or five years Warner had come into the office roughly once a month to provide computer consulting services, until this month when Warner told the company in an email that he would no longer be working for them. He gave no reason, according to Fridrich.

"He seemed very personable to us - this is quite out of character I think," Fridrich told the newspaper.

Nashville Mayor John Cooper said on CBS News' "Face the Nation" program on Sunday that local officials felt there had to be some connection between the bombing and the AT&T Inc building. Damage to the switching center was so extensive that AT&T teams had to drill access holes into the wreckage to connect generators to critical equipment, as well as pump three feet of water from the basement. The company said in a statement on Sunday that it made "significant progress" overnight and had restored power to four floors of the building.

AT&T said it was aiming to restore all its wireless service by the end of Sunday.

"As of now, 96% of our wireless network is restored, 60% of our business services are restored, and 86% of our consumer broadband and entertainment services are restored", AT&T Communications Chief Executive Jeff McElfresh said



Turkey Warns Haftar Against Attacking Its Forces in Libya

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's defence minister said that any attack by eastern Libyan renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar on its personnel in the North African country would be met with force.

"A war criminal, murderer Haftar and his supporters must know that they will be seen as a legitimate target in case of any attack on Turkish forces" by his troops, Hulusi Akar said in an address to Turkish units in Tripoli late on Saturday and made available to the media on Sunday.

His comments come days after Haftar said his self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) would "prepare to drive out the occupier by faith, will and weapons", referring to the Turkish troops operating in support of Libya's United Nations-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).

"If they take such a step, they will be unable to find any place to flee to," Akar said, referring to Haftar's forces.

"Everyone should come to their senses."

Turkish support for the GNA earlier this year helped repel a 14-month offensive against the capital by Haftar, who is backed by Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. The two sides struck a ceasefire agreement in October, setting the stage for elections at the end of next year.

Akar on Saturday made an unscheduled visit to Tripoli where he discussed, according to Libyan officials, military cooperation between Ankara and the GNA. Turkey's defence minister said political talks based on the ceasefire sought to find a solution.

"What matters here is that everyone should contribute to a political solution. Any action other than that would be wrong," he added.

Haftar had said there would be "no peace in the presence of a coloniser on our land" in his speech on Thursday.

Al Jazeera's correspondent Mahmoud Abdel Wahed, reporting from the Libyan capital Tripoli, said a senior Egyptian delegation including the country's defence minister and intelligence chief deputies were in the city to meet government officials. "Regional players are pushing for a peaceful solution instead of a military one," Abdel Wahed said.



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BMW Aims for 20% of Its Vehicles to Be electric by 2023

FRANKFURT (Reuters) - German luxury carmaker BMW is planning to step up its production of electric vehicles, Chief Executive Oliver Zipse told German daily Augsburger Allgemeine. "We are significantly increasing the number of electric vehicles. Between 2021 and 2023, we will build a quarter of a million more electric cars than originally planned", Zipse told the newspaper's Monday edition according to a pre-released version.

BMW wants roughly every fifth car it sells to be powered by an electric engine by 2023, Zipse said, compared to about 8% this year.



South Korea Sleepwalks Into Virus Crisis

SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korea had seemed to be winning the fight against the coronavirus: Quickly ramping up its testing, contact-tracing and quarantine efforts paid off when it weathered an early outbreak without the economic pain of a lockdown. But a deadly resurgence has reached new heights during Christmas week, prompting soul-searching on how the nation sleepwalked into a crisis.

The 1,241 infections on Christmas Day were the largest daily increase. Another 1,132 cases were reported Saturday, bringing South Korea's caseload to 55,902.

Over 15,000 were added in the last 15 days alone. An additional 221 fatalities over the same period, the deadliest stretch, took the death toll to 793.

As the numbers keep rising, the shock to people's livelihoods is deepening and public confidence in the government eroding. Officials could decide to increase social distancing measures to maximum levels on Sunday, after resisting for weeks.

Tighter restrictions could be inevitable because transmissions have been outpacing efforts to expand hospital capacities.

In the greater Seoul area, more facilities have been designated for COVID-19 treatment and dozens of general hospitals have been ordered to allocate more ICUs for virus patients. Hundreds of troops have been deployed to help with contract tracing.

At least four patients have died at their homes or long-term care facilities while waiting for admission this month, said Kwak Jin, an official at the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency. The agency said 299 among 16,577 active patients were in serious or critical condition.

"Our hospital system isn't going to collapse, but the crush in COVID-19 patients has significantly hampered our response," said Choi Won Suk, an infectious disease professor at the Korea University Ansan Hospital, west of Seoul.

Choi said the government should have done more to prepare hospitals for a winter surge.

"We have patients with all kinds of serious illnesses at our ICUs and they can't share any space with COVID-19 patients, so it's hard," Choi said. "It's the same medical staff that has been fighting the virus for all these months. There's an accumulation of fatigue."

Critics say the government of President Moon Jae-in became complacent after swiftly containing the outbreak this spring that was centered in the southeastern city of Daegu.

The past weeks have underscored risks of putting economic concerns before public health when vaccines are at least months away. Officials had eased social distancing rules to their lowest in October, allowing high-risk venues like clubs and karaoke rooms to reopen, although experts were warning of a viral surge during winter when people spend longer hours indoors.

Indonesia's Economy to Improve Soon

JAKARTA (Dispatches) - Indonesia's economic situation is expected to improve soon, as the government is preparing a number of recovery plans, Coordinating Economic Minister Airlangga Hartanto has said.

During a virtual discussion entitled "Outlook 2021: Wajah Indonesia Setelah Pandemi" (How Indonesia will look after the pandemic), Airlangga said he believed that the nation's economy had started to pick up.

"The signs are already here. The [COVID-19] vaccine's arrival will increase the public's confidence and sense of security, which should lead them to restarting their activities. The economy is closely related to [people's] mobility," he added.

The minister claimed that Indonesia even managed to control the economic impact of the pandemic better than other G20 members.

Indonesia recorded a gross domestic product (GDP) drop of 3.5 percent year-on-year (yoy) in the July-September period that sent the country into its first recession since the 1998 Asian financial crisis. The contraction however was less severe than the 5.3 percent yoy decline seen in the second quarter.

Despite the economic optimism, Airlangga assured the public that the government would prioritize health care, saying that it had allocated a large portion of the 2021 state budget for the nation's health sector, including the national vaccination drive.

"The government has allocated between Rp 63 trillion [US\$4.4 billion] and Rp 73 trillion to support the vaccination program," he said.

In order to improve the economic situation, the government has also launched social protection programs to boost people's purchasing power. Airlangga explained the government had allocated Rp 48.8 trillion to assist the small enterprise sector in 2021.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati said last week that the government projected a GDP contraction of between 1.7 and 2.2 percent this year driven by shrinking household spending, which accounts for more than half of Indonesia's GDP.

This figure was lower than the ministry's previous forecast in September, in which the government predicted an economic contraction of 0.6 to 1.7 percent.

"We expect household spending to contract by around 2.6 to 3.6 percent due to rising COVID-19 cases in December that triggered tighter restrictions," Sri Mulyani said during a Dec. 21 virtual press briefing.



Pakistan's Trade With Africa Reaches \$4.18b in 2019-20

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Adviser to Pakistan Prime Minister on Commerce and Investment Abdul Razak Dawood on Sunday said Pakistan's trade with African countries touched US \$ 4.18 billion in 2019-20, which was increased by seven percent as compared to the previous year (2018-19).

As a result of Pakistan's new engagement with African countries through "Look Africa Campaign" started by government of Pakistan, despite Covid-19 pandemic, exports to Africa increased by seven percent in 2019-20 from \$1.38 billion in 2018-19 to \$ 4.48 billion in 2019-20, the Adviser told APP.

The Adviser said total trade with Africa has increased from \$.19 billion in 2016-17 to \$4.18 billion in 2019-20. Replying to a query on the surge in trade with African countries, he said Pakistan's trade with Africa remained stagnant at US \$ three billion per year for last few years but because of government's trade policies with Africa, now multilateral trade with African region crossed the mark of \$4 billions.

He added that main reason of the low trade volume was low level of engagement of Pakistan with Africa. Razak Dawood said traditionally, rice has been our top export to Kenya and other African countries.

However, "we are planning to enhance exports of Pharmaceuticals, Surgical goods and Light Engineering and Electronic products including Tractors and Agricultural implements, two and three wheelers, Commercial and Domestic Fans, Water pumps and Electrical Machinery and equipment etc".

He said there was a lot of potential of these products to connect with the untapped African Market.

Replying to a question, he said under the "Look Africa Policy" of Ministry of Commerce, "We are taking different initiatives including six new Commercial Sections have been opened in Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Senegal, Sudan and Tanzania, in addition to four existing Commercial Sections in Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria and South Africa, to cover top ten economies of Africa".

He informed that "Look Africa Trade Forums" have been organized in all major cities of Pakistan to create awareness among business community of Pakistan about potential of African markets.

He added that establishment of bilateral linkages with major African countries was underway.

Morocco's Pledge to Repay IMF Loan Suggests Economic Turnaround



RABAT (Dispatches) - Morocco pledged to soon repay part of a \$3 billion International Monetary Fund credit facility, suggesting the kingdom's economy may have seen off the worst effects of the pandemic and an acute drought.

Post-program monitoring may not be necessary for the North African nation after it said it would "soon" repurchase an unspecified part of the credit line it drew on in April, the IMF said Wednesday in a statement following its latest Article IV consultation.

The repurchase will be for \$936 million and takes effect Jan. 8, almost 30 months before the end of a three-year grace period, the finance ministry said in a statement. The move allows "an easing in future sovereign financial obligations" and should "boost investors' confidence" in the economy, the ministry said.

Foreign currency holdings are projected to remain at their current level equivalent of seven months of import needs through the medium term, according to the ministry statement.

It points to a potential turnaround for Morocco, where major foreign-currency earners such as tourism and exports, including to key market Europe, have taken a hit this year. The situation prompted authorities to raise record amounts of domestic and foreign debt, including a \$3 billion Eurobond.

The IMF said a steady flow of remittances sent by Moroccan expatriates and lower imports helped maintain official reserves at "an adequate level." It forecast the country's gross domestic product will rebound with 4.5% growth next year after a projected 7.2% contraction in 2020.

External debt as part of GDP is projected to remain around 39% over 2020-2025, versus 32.8% in 2019, the IMF said. But the Washington-based lender also warned that "exceptional uncertainty" surrounds its outlook and authorities would need to continue supporting the economy until recovery is "well-entrenched," and then resume fiscal consolidation.

China's Industrial Firms See 15.5% Profit Growth in November

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's industrial firms reported a seventh straight month of profit gains in November, supported by strong production and sales, as the recovery from the Covid-19 downturn continued.

Profits in the month rose 15.5 per cent year on year to 729.3 billion yuan (US\$111.9 billion), easing from October's three-year high of 28.2 per cent, according to figures released on Sunday by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

China's industrial sector has rebounded well from the shock of the pandemic, with factories ramping up production to meet demand overseas. Factory-gate prices, a gauge for profitability, fell less than expected last month.

The slower growth in November was mainly due to a higher base a year earlier, said Zhu Hong, a statistician at the NBS.

"Profits at some traditional industries have showed improvement. With the approach of the heating season, demand for coal has risen and prices have increased, leading to an accelerated recovery in the coal sector," he said in a statement.

Coal industry profits rose by 9.1 per cent in November, the first increase this year.

"Industrial profits are expected to maintain double-digit growth over the next few months, driven by low base effects, domestic economic recovery, improvements in overseas demand and the rebound in commodity prices benefiting the upstream sector," Zhou Maohua, an analyst at China Everbright Bank, said.

Industrial firms' profits for the January-November period rose 2.4 per cent year on year, accelerating from 0.7 per cent growth for the first 10 months.

Earnings at China's state-owned industrial firms fell 4.9 per cent for January-November, narrowing from the 7.5 per cent decline in the first 10 months.

Private sector profits grew 1.8 per cent in the year through November, up from 1.1 per cent for the January-October period.

The industrial profit data covers large firms with annual revenue of more than 20 million yuan from their main operations.

Vietnam's 2020 Economic Growth Slips to 30-Year Low

HANOI (Reuters) - Vietnam's economic growth slowed this year to its weakest in at least three decades, buffeted by the COVID-19

pandemic, natural disasters and a sluggish global economy, government data showed on Sunday.

The economy expanded 2.91% this year after having posted gross domestic product growth above 7% for two consecutive years, the General Statistics Office (GSO) said in a statement.

The country likely posted a trade surplus of \$19.06 billion in the year the GSO said. Average consumer prices rose 3.23%.

"This is the lowest GDP growth level in decades. However, amid the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is considered a success for Vietnam, with the growth rate among the world's highest," the GSO said.

"We've successfully battled against the virus but at the same time kept our economy open. The pandemic is more or less under control in Vietnam."

With strict quarantine and tracking measures, Vietnam quickly contained coronavirus outbreaks, allowing economic activity to rebound faster than in much of Asia. The country has recorded 1,440 coronavirus infections, with 35 deaths.

The processing and manufacturing industry grew 3.98%, remaining the main growth driver for the economy, while services sector rose 2.34% and the agricultural sector was up 2.68%, the statement added. Exports and foreign investment were robust.

For October to December, the economy grew 4.48% from a year earlier, the slowest rate for a fourth quarter since at least 2011, the statistics office said. It revised third-quarter growth to 2.69%, up from 2.62%.

Tehran's Subway Uses AI For Smart Distancing

TEHRAN (IP)- The Managing Director of Tehran's Urban and Suburban Railway Operation Company announced the use of artificial intelligence in its operating system to manage smart social distancing amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

Farnoush Nobakht said on Monday that the outbreak of the coronavirus has made businesses face critical conditions

amid the COVID-19 pandemic, especially public transportation (metro).

To implement social distancing and curb the outbreak, he said, an artificial intelligence system was designed that simultaneously collects information about the entrance and exit gates.



Southeast Asia Must Prepare for the Worst in 2021

LONDON (Dispatches) - The optimist, someone once said, proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist fears this is true.

Anyone who hopes that 2021 will be an improvement will be disappointed. The trajectory of developments within Southeast Asia and in the region's relations with the U.S. and China will not shift substantively, at least not for the better. We will do well if things do not get worse.

Southeast Asia has managed the pandemic better than other regions, except Northeast Asia. But better is not well, and the virus has exposed serious failures of governance in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. Viable vaccines will be rolled out during the year. But a vaccine is not a panacea for bad governance. These countries will still struggle to avoid being overwhelmed.

Nor can the danger of a second wave of infections in those Association of Southeast Asian Nation members that have managed the pandemic relatively well be discounted. As the pandemic drags on and fatigue sets in, new waves of infections are likely. Avoiding complacency and maintaining social discipline will be serious challenges, particularly because we cannot forever remain closed to each other and the world. The economic costs are mounting and the final bill is far from being tallied.

Some ASEAN countries could do well. If the pandemic speeds digitalization, the more advanced economies like Singapore could steal a march on competitors not just in the immediate region, but globally. Other Southeast Asian countries could benefit from the movement of companies out of China and elsewhere.

But these are possibilities not certainties. Much will depend on the ability of governments to adapt quickly to expedite the business environment, plug gaps in hard and soft infrastructure, and nurture ecosystems of supporting industries. At the same time, uncertainties in global supply chains cast doubt over the next phase of ASEAN's ambition of creating an economic community.

The key to success nationally and regionally is politics. Governments must resist economic nationalism. This has become harder as the pandemic enhances stresses within every ASEAN member. It will take considerable effort to prevent this spilling over to relations between ASEAN members. The outlook is not conducive to easy optimism.

Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand face serious domestic political uncertainties. Do not be surprised by surprises. Vietnam and Laos will hold Party Congresses in early 2021 and will play for safety for some time after. The outlook for Myanmar and the Philippines is, as always, uncertain, particularly in the latter which will hold presidential elections in 2022. Even in Singapore, a new generation of leaders must contain anti-foreigner sentiment in the context of a political transition that looks likely to be delayed.

The incoming Biden administration will talk more about ASEAN centrality. It may even speak less negatively about plurilateral trade agreements like the Regional

Comprehensive Economic Partnership, or RCEP, and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP. It will continue to push back against China in the South China Sea and Mekong and on trade and technology. But ASEAN is only instrumental in these efforts. The Biden administration's focus on rebuilding alliance relationships will relegate ASEAN to a second-order concern unless ASEAN can muster the political will to act collectively in support of U.S. objectives.

The next ASEAN Chair, Brunei, is a safe and experienced pair of hands. Brunei is unlikely, however, to take ASEAN boldly forward. There is no appetite in ASEAN for this, except rhetorically.

Biden's nominations for National Security Adviser and Secretary of State are seasoned foreign policy hands, but they have no special experience of or connection to Southeast Asia. The nominated Secretary of Defense has no experience of Asia outside the Middle East.

None of them is likely to be very impressed by ASEAN's characteristically cautious and incremental diplomacy in which form and process are as important as outcomes. They, like their Trump predecessors, will give priority to bilateral relationships with major friends and allies. Japan, Australia, South Korea and India will continue to receive more attention than ASEAN.

Joe Biden's priority as president will be the domestic health and economic consequences of the pandemic. He will face contradictory pressures from Republicans and the progressive wing of his own party. What Biden will do to assuage the latter will have a significant impact on Southeast Asia. Subcabinet posts for a secondary region as well as ambassadorships could be sacrificed to political correctness.

The Biden administration will stress democratization and a return to American values. These are vague terms. Handled clumsily, these issues will complicate relations with ASEAN. But ASEAN cannot brush aside these concerns either. Unless both sides find appropriate compromises on these issues as well as labor and climate change, ASEAN should not take it for granted that President Biden will attend the East Asia Summit. He wants wins not liabilities.

ASEAN should not overreact if the Biden administration fails to give it as much priority as ASEAN believes it deserves. China will always loom large in Southeast Asia -- as much as a concern as an opportunity and hence to be balanced as well as engaged.

Only the irredeemably corrupt or terminally naive take Beijing's rhetoric about a community of common destiny seriously. Even if not prepared to say so, most ASEAN members understand that the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia is still the irreplaceable element of any strategic balance and that balance is the essential condition for comfortable engagement with China.

Iraq Aims to Boost Crude Export Capacity to 6m Bpd



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraq aims to increase crude oil export capacity from its southern ports to 6 million barrels per day from the current 3.5 million barrels a day capacity, Karim Hattab, deputy oil minister for distribution affairs said in a statement.

Hattab said the increased capacity would be after 2023 and that the plan includes building 24 storage tanks.

In a statement, he revealed that "the ministry is keen to expedite the completion and implementation of projects to develop oil warehouses in Al-Faw district in Basra Governorate, which aim to enhance and maintain oil exports from southern ports."

The deputy oil minister added that the ministry is working on developing the Al-Faw oil depot.

He indicated that "the aim is to raise the export capacity of the current system ranges from (3.5) million cubic meters to (6) million barrels per day after 2023."

Hattab stressed the need to "differentiate between the export capacity available for the export system and the actual export determined by the ministry according to the requirements of the actual need in the future."

The ministry's plans also aim to implement the marine pipeline project from the Faw warehouse, he pointed out.

In another context, the Head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Iraq, Tokhir Mirzoev welcomed the Council of Ministers' approval of a draft of the 2021 Federal Budget Law and expressed the fund's readiness to support reform efforts by the government.

Purchasing COVID-19...

FROM PAGE 1

He expressed hope that after purchase of COVID-19 vaccine, the country would be able to do more purchases and by revising the decision on joining the FATF, Iranian banks could be delisted by the FATF.

Nezam Mafi went on to say that the country should work to remove some 18 Iranian banks from the FATF black list because even the U.S. under Joe Biden returns to the JCPOA, the FATF woe will still remain and this is the woe that we ourselves have created it.

Iraq Lifts...

FROM PAGE 1

An annual march to the holy Iraqi city of Karbala, an event held in late summer which normally attracts millions of people, was cancelled this year because of fears over a mass spread of the virus.

Adamnejad told the semi-official Fars news agency that Iraq had intended to hold its recent ban on passenger travel from Iran for two weeks.

A new variant of the coronavirus, which is believed to be much more infectious than its normal type, has been circulating in European countries since the middle of December.

Iran has banned travel from the United Kingdom where the new variant was first reported by the scientists and government authorities.

Resistance Missiles...

FROM PAGE 1

"In the last period before his assassination, his role and movement was highlighted a lot in Western media. They usually do that before the assassination of anyone to show their people the significance of the man targeted. I was very concerned about him and I warned him about that," Sayyed Nasrallah said, adding "I miss him so much, I used to feel that we are one person".

"As for Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, he was a great leader and resembled Hajj Qassem so much. He had a major role in both victories against the U.S. and ISIL," he further stated.

In parallel, Sayyed Nasrallah spoke about the strong relation Hajj Qassem had with all the resistance factions in Palestine and his concern that these factions get all the support they need to resist the occupation, revealing that he was the one behind sending Kornet missiles to the resistance in Gaza Strip.

"President Bashar Al-Assad bought "Kornet" missiles from the Russians, and they are the missiles we used in July war. Hajj Qassem demanded that these missiles be sent to Gaza, and I proposed the issue to President Assad who instantly approved," his eminence explained, asserting that "I am not surprised with the Arab betrayal to the Palestinians because most of the Arab regimes have only been selling words to Palestine and have only used Iran as an excuse to normalize the relations with Israel. This took place because the Palestinian cause has become a burden on them. There is no excuse for anyone to abandon Palestine."

As he considered that these countries have long had ties with Israel but were not made public, he assured that this new peace deal is positive because it brought this hypocrisy to public and divided the lines.

"When lines are divided this means a great victory is on its way," he said.

In this context, Hezbollah SG stated that the relation between Hezbollah and Hamas is based on the legitimacy of the resistance and the Palestinian cause despite the conflict that emerged between Damascus and Hamas due to the Syrian developments.

He further assured that the resistance axis is stronger than before and the Palestinian people have not been influenced by the normalization treaties as they still stand firm and steadfast, praising the joint maneuvers between the resistance factions in Gaza.

While his eminence expressed that the Palestinians of 1948 in the occupied territories want the liberation of Palestine more than anyone else, he stated that "as an Islamist, I find the stance of the Justice and Development Party in Morocco concerning normalization with Israelis more painful than other stances".

On Hajj Qassem's role in Iraq, Sayyed Nasrallah revealed that the Iraqi resistance factions who defeated ISIL were the ones who performed most of the operations that urged the U.S. to pull out if Iraq, unlike what media portrayed about Al-Qaeda being behind them.

"I assure to you that the Iraqi resistance groups were the ones performing operations against the occupation under the support of Al-Quds force led by Hajj Qassem Suleimani, and we were in contact with them since then," his eminence said, indicating that "4 800 suicide attacks were waged in Iraq, while the resistance operations were very accurate and merely against the occupation".

Hezbollah SG recalled the speech of Imam Khamenei in which he asserted that whoever ordered and implemented the assassination of these two martyrs should be personally punished wherever he is, stating that "this should be the duty of every honorable person in the world, specifically our people in Iraq as Hajj Qassem was their guest and was martyred on their territories."

Iran Not to...

FROM PAGE 1

"We are not looking for tension, but we would defend Iran's national interests with all our might," he said, adding the Islamic Republic has given the message that it would hold "the U.S. and other plotters" responsible for any mischievous act against it.

Khatibzadeh said he hoped level heads would prevail at the White House over warmongering elements during the final days of the Trump administration.

The spokesperson also said that Iran has never been willing to resolve its issues in another region and it is the United States who has made regional countries as bases of insecurity against Iran.

Khatibzadeh answered questions raised by reporters over recent development in the field of foreign policy.

The senior Iranian diplomat spoke about the recent meeting JCPOA member countries at the ministerial level, stating that in the meeting the Islamic Republic emphasized the commitments of the other side, and the latest situation was discussed in this informal meeting.

In response to a question about Muqtada al-Sadr's claims that Iran should not turn Iraq into a place of conflict with the United States and the purpose of the recent rocket attacks on the Green Zone in Iraq, he said, "I said last week that in our view, attacks on diplomatic and residential premises are completely rejected. Iranian diplomatic facilities in Iraq have been attacked several times."

What Trump and Pompeo claimed are both condemned and rejected, he said, adding that the type, timing, and content of such claims and tweets are questionable and suspicious.

"We have made our message clear, while we do not seek tension, we defend the interests and national security of Iran with all our might", he stressed.

According to Khatibzadeh Iran has never been willing to resolve its issues in another region and it is the United States who has made the countries of region bases of insecurity against Iran.

Majlis...

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At the end of the meeting, Parliament's Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf summarized what has been discussed, stating that it will be announced tomorrow before the parliament's open session. He noted that no voting took place in today's meeting, and all the members outlined their agreement and disagreement.

On Tuesday, 29th December 2020, the Budget Integration Commission will vote on the 2021 budget bill's general points, and then the revenues and expenses will be examined.

The results of the examinations will be referred to the parliament session after two weeks. Still, if the general points are rejected tomorrow, they will be referred to the open session again immediately, he explained.

Iran Ready...

FROM PAGE 1

Baharvand pointed to the West's attempt to resort to human rights as pressure leverage on countries that they do not have friendly ties with, noting that the Western powers' critical stance toward Iran comes from their political motivations.

Referring to his recent speech at the Geneva University, the deputy minister underlined that the globally accepted human rights principles need to have a mechanism, which enables the implementation and inspection of the principles at the international level; thus, targeting certain countries and ignoring others' blatant human rights violations seem to be completely discriminatory.

However, he accepted, there need to be some reforms in certain laws and procedures as well as a number of misconducts by a few people in charge of dealing with the Iranian nation.

The Islamic Republic of Iran believes in respecting human rights as the main element to strengthen trust-building between the people and the government, he stated, noting that the observation of human rights would help economic growth and security enhancement in every society.

The states, which pay great attention to human rights, are well aware that the issue affects all other aspects of life; therefore, the judiciary systems play a key role in bolstering trust and confidence in all countries, he said, reasoning that there is a direct link between the rule of law and the economic development.

In conclusion, Baharvand said that countries should avoid interfering in other states' internal affairs, including issues related to judiciary procedures, but they could exchange views in order to provide each other with a precise understanding of their justice systems.

Clippers' Star Leonard Cut by Elbow to Mouth

LOS ANGELES (AFP) - Los Angeles Clippers star Kawhi Leonard suffered a cut in his mouth that required eight stitches to seal but should be ready to face the Dallas Mavericks on Sunday. Leonard was injured in a collision with teammate Serge Ibaka in the fourth quarter of the Clippers' 121-108 NBA victory at Denver. The 29-year-old forward was struck by an elbow in the face and fell to the court, blood around him on the wood. Leonard was helped off, bleeding from his mouth, and did not return, the club later revealing details of the injury.

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Momota Wins Japan Title to Cap Comeback

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Badminton world number one Kento Momota won the All-Japan championships on Sunday to complete the first step of his comeback, nearly a year after suffering serious injuries in a car crash. Momota came from behind to beat world number 11 Kanta Tsuneyama 18-21, 21-12, 21-17 in Tokyo, marking a successful return from the accident that left him fearing his career might be over after fracturing an eye socket.

Liverpool, Tottenham Held by Rivals

LIVERPOOL (Reuters) - Liverpool's hopes of opening up a menacing five-point lead at the top of the Premier League were scuppered in unlikely fashion as struggling West Bromwich Albion snatched a 1-1 draw at Anfield to leave manager Jurgen Klopp scowling on Sunday.

Leading through Sadio Mane's early goal, Klopp's side appeared to be heading for an eighth successive home league win but a late header by Semi Ajayi left Liverpool frustrated.

Not that the weekend's most odd result will cause Klopp a sleepless night, even though it left them with only a three-point lead over neighbours Everton.

With Leicester City and Manchester United sharing the spoils on Saturday, Tottenham Hotspur had the chance to move into third spot on Sunday but conceded a late goal in a 1-1 draw away to Wolverhampton Wanderers.

Liverpool lead the standings with 32 points from 15 games, with Everton on 29, Leicester on 28 and United on 27.

Tottenham have 26 points alongside Manchester City.

Leeds United beat Burnley 1-0 on Sunday with an early penalty by Patrick Bamford while Brighton and Hove Albion twice led at West Ham United but had to settle for a 2-2 draw with Tomas Soucek scoring late on for the hosts.

The hectic Christmas program continues on Monday with the standout game being Everton's home clash with Manchester City.

Klopp criticised West Brom's defensive approach at Anfield but what soured the taste of his Christmas was the way his side tossed away two points by failing to kill off the game.

"The problem that I have is I think West Brom deserved the point -- it's our fault, but they deserved a point in the second half," Klopp conceded.

"We don't live in dream-land and just win football matches because we want to win them: we have to work for it and we have to play for it and we have to finish the situations off and we have to pass in the right moments."

Klopp's mood was hardly helped by a



groin injury to central defender Joel Matip -- one of his few options with Virgil van Dijk and Joe Gomez long-term absentees.

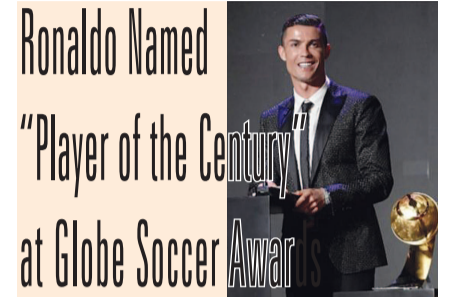
"It is a massive worry but it is not a new worry," former Liverpool defender and Sky Sports pundit Jamie Carragher said, saying Klopp must sign a defender in January.

While West Brom remain in deep trouble having picked up only eight points from 15 games, the result will give the fans some hope that new manager Sam Allardyce, who has never experienced relegation with 11 previous clubs, can inspire a great escape.

Jose Mourinho's Tottenham have now gone four games without a Premier League win and once again their defensive tactics came under scrutiny against Wolves.

Tottenham were given a perfect start when Tanguy Ndombele thumped home a shot after 57 seconds but they spent most of the game thereafter soaking up Wolves pressure.

They failed to have a shot on target from the 21st minute onwards. Wolves were rewarded for their relentless attacking when defender Romain Saiss glanced in a header from a corner in the 86th minute. Wolves almost snatched all three points when Fabio Silva headed a glorious chance straight at Hugo Lloris. "One point against Wolves normally wouldn't be a bad result because they are a strong opponent," Mourinho said.



DUBAI (Dispatches) - Cristiano Ronaldo has been named the 'Player of the Century.' Cristiano Ronaldo's collection of personal accolades is pretty sizeable.

In fact, there are few footballers in the history of the sport to have scooped more awards than the 35-year-old.

The Juventus superstar has won the Ballon d'Or on five occasions, along with a plethora of other high-profile accolades. On Sunday afternoon, Ronaldo added to his collection of awards as the Portuguese striker was officially named as the 'Player of the Century' at the Globe Soccer Awards.

The global icon beat both his eternal rival Lionel Messi and Mohamed Salah to the award, with Bayern Munich striker Robert Lewandowski named as the 'Player of the Year' for 2020.

Real Madrid have been named as the 'Club of the Century', Los Blancos winning the Champions League on five occasions between 2001 and 2020. Much of the Spanish giants' continental success during that time period coincided with Ronaldo's stint at the club. The Portuguese signed for Real Madrid in the summer of 2009 and he played a pivotal role in their last four Champions League triumphs. Ronaldo played 438 times for Los Blancos during his nine years at the club, contributing 450 goals and 132 assists.

Brady Lifts Tampa Bay Into NFL Playoffs

WASHINGTON (AFP) - Tom Brady threw for 348 yards and four touchdowns in the first half Saturday to power Tampa Bay to a 47-7 win over Detroit and lift the Buccaneers into the NFL playoffs.

The 43-year-old quarterback, who joined the Bucs this year after 20 campaigns and six Super Bowl crowns with New England, delivered one of his greatest one-half efforts to put Tampa Bay into the post-season for the first time since 2007.

The Buccaneers led 34-0 at half-time on the way to improving to 10-5, securing an NFL wildcard berth while the already eliminated Lions slid to 5-10.

"It's just the beginning," said Bucs coach Bruce Arians. "Our goal when this all started was to get into the dance. Now it's to win 11 games and see who we play next."

Brady, who completed 22 of 27 throws before being benched in the second half, set a first-half career best and club record in passing yardage and the four touchdown passes were his most in a first half since 2014.

Brady's 36 passing touchdowns this season are a Bucs record and enabled his new club to reach the playoffs -- a feat his old team, the Patriots, failed to manage this year.

The Buccaneers set a team record with 410 total yards in the first half, the most by any NFL club in a decade.

Brady threw touchdown strikes of 33 yards to former New England teammate Rob Gronkowski, 27 yards to Mike Evans, 12 yards to Antonio Brown and 7 yards to Chris Godwin. Leonard Fournette added a four-yard touchdown run in the first half and Brady's back-up Blaine Gabbert added third-quarter touchdown passes of 25 yards to Gronkowski and 22 yards to Evans in the rout.

Evans, who had 10 catches for 181 yards, broke his own one-season touchdown reception record with 13 on his second-half scoring catch. Arians said he could sense a great performance coming while watching workouts during the week.

"You could feel this was a playoff practice week," Arians said. "Even with the holidays, they handled their business well."

Man Utd Make Huge Decision Over Bundesliga Star



Cup, where they will play Manchester City in the semi-final. Indeed, United have not lost in the Premier League since November 1st, when they fell to a 1-0 defeat to Arsenal.

Since then, they have beaten Everton, West Bromwich Albion, Southampton, West Ham

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester United are heading into the January transfer window in good shape.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's side are currently fourth in the Premier League table, and drew 2-2 with Leicester City on Boxing Day.

They are just four points off leaders Liverpool, and also remain in the Carabao

United, Sheffield United, and Leeds United, and drawn with Manchester City and Leicester.

That is fine form and with the January transfer window looming, they could potentially look to strengthen Solskjaer's squad.

There have been reports of potential interest in Bayern Munich defender David Alaba but it appears that has now been put to bed.

The Athletic reports that the club are not interested in signing the Austria international and will not be making a move in the January transfer window.

United are said to have been made aware of the sizeable fees involved in a deal to sign the 28-year-old, and have subsequently made it known they will not be pursuing a deal.

Alaba is instead likely to move to Real Madrid, as he has turned down an offer of £200,000-per-week to stay at the Allianz Arena, though that will likely take place in the summer.

Line-Up for Abu Dhabi WTA Open Announced

ABU DHABI (Dispatches) - Reigning Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin will be among the top four top 10 players to compete at the first WTA tournament of the 2021 season - inaugural Abu Dhabi Open.

The Capital's first-ever official tennis tournament will be held at the Zayed Sports City International Tennis Centre from Jan.5-13.

The Abu Dhabi's WTA 500 tournament has a star-studded line-up in place as the event features World No.5 Elina Svitolina, former World No.1 Karolina Pliskova and Aryna Sabalenka.

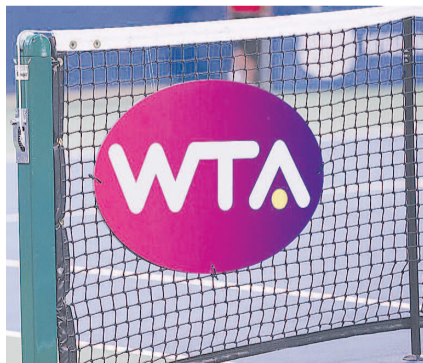
Chosen as the perfect destination to kick-off the season further enhances Abu Dhabi's reputation as host to top-level sporting events.

For the past 12 years many of the world's best male players, including Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal, have descended on the capital to compete in the pre-season Mubadala World Tennis Championships.

The last three editions of the tournament were also graced by Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova. The tournament will see four top 10 players along with other 60 players competing for 500 points.

Joining Kenin, Svitolina, Pliskova and Sabalenka at the event are former Roland Garros champions Garbine Muguruza, Jelena Ostapenko and Svetlana Kuznetsova.

Among the game's rising stars on the entry list are Coco Gauff, Elena Rybakina, Elise Mertens and Marketa Vondrousova.



Rahane Century Puts India in Driving Seat Against Australia

MELBOURNE (AFP) - Stand-in skipper Ajinkya Rahane rode his luck to hit a gritty unbeaten century as India built an ominous 82-run lead over Australia on day two to take a stranglehold on the second Test in Melbourne.

It was a determined and crucial knock against a world-class attack by the mild-mannered 32-year-old, who assumed the captaincy from Virat Kohli after he returned home for the birth of his first child.

Batting at four, he faced 200 balls for his 104 to steer India to 277 for five before rain ended play 15 minutes early. Ravindra Jadeja was not out 40.

The hosts took just four wickets during a frustrating day in the field as the match began to slip away with India zeroing in on levelling the series after losing the first Test by eight wickets in Adelaide. "Not our best day, but not our worst," said Australia's Mitchell Starc, who has two wickets but also saw catches put down off his bowling.

"Jinx (Rahane) batted really well through the day there and they had some pretty good partnerships. "I thought there was some really good stuff from us as well, we just didn't capitalise on some of the chances we created to finish in a better position."

"We're just going to have to back up tomorrow and take five wickets as quick as we can."

While Rahane was the hero, it was a gutsy Indian team performance, with three 50-plus wicket partnerships to help silence their critics after being skittled for their all-time low of 36 last week.

