

Health Ministry Spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari Said on Monday Some 110 More Iranians Have Died From the Coronavirus Disease Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing The Total Deaths to 55,650

IRAN NEWS

Head of Iran's Civil Aviation Organization (CAO) Touraj Dehghani Zangeneh Reiterated That Iran Will Not Receive Passengers From Britain Either by Direct or by Connection Flights

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TUESDAY JANUARY 5, 2021 - DEY 16, 1399

2 DOMESTIC

Gov't Passes Bill on Preventing Violence Against Women



> SEE PAGE 2

3 DOMESTIC

Iran Apparel Exports Earn \$40m in 7 Months



> SEE PAGE 3

4 INTERNATIONAL

Anti-U.S. Chants as Iraqis Mourn Commanders Martyred a Year Ago



> SEE PAGE 4

8 SPORTS

Ronaldo Double Lifts Juve, Milan Stay Top



> SEE PAGE 8

Israeli Claims of Attack On Iranians in Syria False

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The deputy commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) calls the Israeli regime's bluff about having hit Iranian outposts in Syria.

"They (the Zionists) know well that if they martyred any Iranian serviceman or person, they would surely be met with Iran's response," Brigadier General Mohammad Hejazi told Lebanon's al-Mayadeen television network on Sunday.

He declared that Iran's presence in the Arab country has always assumed an advisory form, never featuring deployment of servicemen or military units. "Our advisors have been attending [various non-Iranian] military units and providing instructional support," the official said.

"What they (the Zionists) claim about having hit an outpost or a barracks that belongs to Iran is not right because such things do not exist," Hejazi clarified.

The Islamic Republic began lending Syria assistance upon the latter's own request after 2011, when the Arab country found itself in the grip of rampant foreign-backed militancy and terrorism.

See Page 7

Trump Will Have to Pay For Assassination



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Judiciary Chief Hojjatoleslam Seyed Ebrahim Raisi says U.S. President Donald Trump will ultimately have to pay for ordering assassination of top anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani.

"Trump would have to pay back, whatever his position," Raisi told Lebanon's al-Manar television network Sunday night. The chief justice was giving the interview on the occasion of the first anniversary of General Soleimani's assassination in Baghdad.

"Whether he heads the U.S. administration or not, Trump should face retribution for the atrocity he has perpetrated," he added.

The former commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and his companions, including top Iraqi counter-terrorism official Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, were assassinated in a U.S. drone strike while General Soleimani was on an official visit to the Iraqi capital.

Raisi called the assassination an example of "state terrorism" that took place in a third country, while General Soleimani was on an official visit at the invitation of Iraq's prime minister.

"This is definitely an atrocity that does not reconcile with any of the international laws and regulations and humanitarian principles, and whose perpetrators are prosecutable," Raisi said.

He said all those who assisted the US president in committing the assassination or were accomplices in the targeted killing have been identified, pledging that the Islamic Republic would not give up its efforts to prosecute those who ordered, perpetrated, and abetted the assassination.

Tehran is in possession of "significant evidence" related to the assassination, the chief justice noted. It is keeping up its efforts towards prosecution of the culprits through a special tribunal at home, in cooperation with Baghdad, and on the international arena, including through international legal channels and the United Nations, he added.

"If the evidence is examined independently and on the basis of international law and human rights, our efforts will yield result," he said.

However, those behind the assassination should primarily be convicted in the international public opinion and conscience, Raisi noted.

The Judiciary chief also pointed to the late November assassination of senior Iranian nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhriadeh in Tehran. The Islamic Republic considers the Israeli regime to be the prime suspect in the assassination.

The Islamic Republic, Raisi said, will not rest until it also takes revenge for Fakhriadeh's assassination. "Iran has the upper hand because it is up to the country to pick the manner, time, and weapon it chooses to exact the revenge."

Finally, the chief justice predicted that fallout from the assassinations would not favor either the United States or the Israeli regime because neither General Soleimani's assassination managed to weaken the regional resistance axis and pursuit of his struggle, nor Fakhriadeh's targeted killing stamped out advancement of Iran's nuclear energy program.

Tehran Starts 20% Uranium Enrichment At Fordow Facility

TEHRAN (MNA) - Iran has started the process of producing uranium with 20% enrichment at Fordow facility, said the government spokesman.

Government Spokesman Ali Rabiei pointed to Iran's counteractive plan to enrich uranium to up to 20% purity, saying that the gas injection process into centrifuges started "hours ago" following President Hassan Rouhani's recent order on the implementation of the plan.

Rabiei noted that the enrichment started this morning while the pre-requisite measures such as informing the International Atomic Energy Agency and submitting a questionnaire based on the country's safeguard obligations have been taken.

The first UF6 product will be available within the next hours, the spokesman said.

The Iranian parliament approved a bill in December aimed at the lifting of sanctions after the failure of JCPOA's European parties to fulfill commitments and in wake of the assassination of an Iranian scientist.

See Page 7

Tehran Closely Watching Mischievous U.S. Moves In Persian Gulf

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran has said it is closely watching the movements of the United States in the Middle East, a day after the Pentagon ordered an American aircraft carrier to remain in the region.

"The measures and movements and certain mischievous acts of the United States are not hidden from our eyes," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said at a press conference on Monday. "Our intelligence, security and military organizations are fully aware of the ostensibly secretive movements of the United States in the region and in Iraq."

On Sunday, acting U.S. Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller instructed the USS Nimitz to remain in place due to what he described as purported Iranian threats "against President Trump and other U.S. government officials," reversing an earlier decision to move the carrier out of the Middle East. The carrier will now remain on station in the US Central Command area of operations, Miller said. "No one should doubt the resolve of the United States of America."

Khatibzadeh said Iran has sent clear messages to Washington and regional countries over the provocative moves. "The regional countries have been told not to fall prey to these mischievous acts," he remarked.

See Page 7

Iran to Boost Oil Output Via \$1.2b Deal With Local Firms

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iranian energy companies have agreed deals worth \$1.2 billion to raise the nation's crude output, state-run National Iranian Oil Co. said.

The signings were initially meant to take place on Monday in Tehran in the presence of Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanganeh, but have been delayed, NIOC said in a statement. The company didn't disclose the reason for or length of the delay. Zanganeh said in mid-December that Iran planned to roughly double oil production in the next year to 4.5 million barrels daily, as the country anticipates a loosening of U.S. sanctions after Joe Biden becomes president.

National Iranian South Oil Co. and Iranian Offshore Oil Co. will sign deals with domestic contractors covering onshore fields in Bushehr, Fars, Khuzestan, and Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad provinces, NIOC said. The offshore Reshadat deposit in the Persian Gulf is also part of the agreements.

The two NIOC subsidiaries agreed \$1.8 billion of similar domestic contracts in August to boost production at more than a dozen onshore and offshore crude deposits.

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, including Iran, is to meet Monday to assess production. While the 13-nation group has slashed output since May to buoy prices in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, Iran is exempt from a quota due to the sanctions.

Martyr Soleimani Assassination "Nail in the Coffin of Int'l Law"

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - A top UN human rights investigator has termed the U.S. assassination of General Qassem Soleimani as "unlawful", pointing out that the attack was a "nail in the coffin of international law".

Agnes Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, wrote in a series of tweets on Sunday that while the reckless attack did not lead to an international war, many paid the highest price and many continue to risk the same in the aftermath.

So yes, there was no international war. But many paid the highest price, and many more continue, in the name of justice, to risk the same. And didn't the U.S. attack and its aftermath hammer yet another nail in the coffin of international law and international rule?

General Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, was assassinated along with his old friend Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the second-in-command of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and a group of their companions in a drone attack near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

Iran retaliated five days after the attack by firing dozens of missiles at two U.S. bases in Iraq, declaring that it was part of its pledged "tough revenge" and that the full revenge will be the ultimate expulsion of all American forces from the region.

"One year ago, the U.S. targeted killing of #Iran's #GeneralSoleimani in #Iraq became the first known incident outside the context of a declared conflict in which a State invoked self-defense as justification for an attack against a State-actor," Callamard wrote.

She said the UN assassination of Gen. Soleimani, as a state official, failed to meet the standards of "necessity" and "proportionality".

See Page 7

IRGC Seizes South Korean-Flagged Tanker in Persian Gulf

TEHRAN (IFP) - Iran has seized a South-Korean-flagged chemical tanker in its southern waters over "chemical pollution" of the Persian Gulf, informed sources say.

Fars News Agency reported that the Korean vessel has been seized by IRGC Navy and moved to an Iranian port.

The tanker Hankuk Chemi had left Saudi port city of Al-Jubail and was returning to South Korea when it was seized at 10 am (local time) upon the Iranian Ports and Maritime Organization's request over "repeated violation of marine environmental regulations", according to the IRGC Navy.

"It was carrying 7,200 tons of ethanol," the IRGC said, adding that its crew members are from Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar.

According to the IRGC Navy, the tanker is now berthed at the Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas and the Judiciary will deal with its case.

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Iran Among Top-10 in World for Technical Articles

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Deputy Minister of Science, Research and Technology said Iran is among top-10 in the world for the quality of scientific articles and is now standing on the 10th place in technical and engineering articles.

Gholam Hossein Rahimi said the quality ranking of the Iranian articles reached 14th in the world and in some other fields like technical and engineering Iran ranked the 10th.

He noted that Iran is ranking 4th to 5th in nano-technology. Elaborating on the promotion of Iranian articles' quality ranking in the world, he stressed on the importance of placing Iran among top-10 in the world.

Gov't Passes Bill on Preventing Violence Against Women

TEHRAN (IP) – The government has ratified a bill that would protect the women's dignity and support them against violence.

In a cabinet session on Sunday evening, chaired by President Hassan Rouhani, the ministers approved the bill aimed at protecting women against violence, strengthening the family bonds, and preserving the dignity of women.

The bill criminalizes any action causing physical or mental harm to women because of gender or a vulnerable position, harming their dignity, and restricting or depriving women of the legal rights and freedom.

According to the bill, the Judiciary will be tasked with setting up and sponsoring offices that provide support for the women who suffer some kind of violence or are susceptible to violence, safeguarding the rights and dignity of women in the legal courts, and holding training courses for the judges and prosecutors.

The bill also entails the establishment of a fund under the auspices of the Ministry of Justice for protecting victimized women. The fund would also provide support for the female inmates, cover their health costs, and finance training courses during their prison sentence.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) is tasked under the bill with promoting media programs about preserving women's dignity and protecting women against violence in the family or the society.

The bill also entails special educational plans at schools, promotion of social care consultancy services, constant monitoring of social harms and domestic violence,



detection of the students prone to violence, enrollment of poorly supervised schoolgirls in boarding schools, and screening of the girls who have left school or been deprived of schooling.

The cabinet has also defined new responsibilities for the Ministry of Health regarding rapid treatment of the women harmed by violence, obliging the police to set up a special unit in police stations to ensure the safety of women, open special stations with female personnel, and detect the potential sources of violence against women.

The new bill also specifies punitive action on violence against women, including legal punishment, civil redress, and sentence terms in various cases threatening the physical and mental safety of women.

Tehran, Moscow Preparing Meeting on Coronavirus Vaccines

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iran's Ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali said that Iran and Russia are preparing a personal meeting on cooperation in producing vaccines against the coronavirus.

"The phone conversations in April-October 2020 between the presidents of Iran and Russia underlined Iran's interest in cooperation with Russia in the field of producing the coronavirus vaccine and exchanging the experience. Currently, Russian documents on the vaccines are being studied. It has been decided that soon a personal meeting will take place," Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali said in an interview with Izvestia newspaper published on Sunday.

The ambassador also noted that although Tehran had declared the launch of the first phase of testing the first Iranian vaccine on humans, the Republic was still considering all vaccines being produced, including the Russian.

The first phase of the clinical trial of a COVID vaccine developed by companies under the Execution of Imam Khomeini Order (EIKO) kicked off on December 29.

Senior managers of EIKO and the daughter of Mohammad Mokhber, the head of EIKO were among the 56 volunteers for injection of the vaccine.

Russia also announced shortly before the official start of the corona vaccine test on its citizens.

Zarif Hails Martyr Soleimani as Peacemaker

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has praised the diplomatic skills of the late Iranian anti-terror commander Lt. General Qassem Soleimani, describing him as a hero in peace-making.



"As a person who has always worked in the field of peace and negotiation, I truly consider him not just a champion of fight against terrorists, but also a hero in peace-making efforts," Zarif said in a televised interview on Sunday night. The Iranian top diplomat said he always consulted with General Soleimani, and his advice was always "useful" to him.

"In the time when I was Iran's ambassador and permanent (UN) representative in the US, and during the negotiations I had been ordered by the Supreme Leader to hold, I used to come back to Tehran to consult with Hajj Qassem, and then leave the country to hold negotiations," Zarif said.

"Hajj Qassem's consultations were always useful to me, and I really didn't take any advice from other people. Once I asked the Supreme Leader to allow Hajj Qassem to personally participate in the session, and I was sure the talks would have been much more successful (with him in attendance)," he added.

Zarif further praised Soleimani's personal characteristics, describing him as a person who cared about people's lives, reputation, and end of conflicts.

"Any peace plan I pursued had definitely been devised by Hajj Qassem; he both encouraged us and helped us with the follow-ups," he added.

Zarif then highlighted the significant role played by General Soleimani in the 2001 Bonn Conference, which resulted in an agreement on the re-creation of the State of Afghanistan following the US invasion of the country. "Hajj Qassem played a more important role in Tehran by holding talks with all jihadi groups of Afghanistan, to convince them to accept an equation which could shape a new future for Afghanistan in the years to come," he noted.

Zarif made the comments on the first anniversary of the assassination of General Soleimani, along with his comrades, in a U.S. drone strike near the Baghdad International Airport.

In his Sunday remarks, the Iranian top diplomat slammed U.S. President Donald Trump for assassinating Soleimani in such a "cowardly" way.

"Hajj Qassem used to tell me he was waiting for a bullet, and he thought he'd be shot in the battlefield. He would never think the Americans may hit a car in the mid-night in such a way. It was an easy job to hit that car... It really shows Trump's misery and cowardice," Zarif said.

"The Americans were terrified of Hajj Qassem and considered him a genius in the battlefield. He was a genius who had defeated them in Syria and Yemen," he added.

Iran Calls on Pakistan for Increased Anti-Narcotics Cooperation

TEHRAN (MNA) – Head of Iran's Anti-Narcotics Police said further strengthening of cooperation between Tehran and Islamabad is on the agenda, while Iran emphasizes stronger actions of the Pakistani side to combat narcotics.

Second Brigadier General Majid Karimi made the remarks in an interview with IRNA in Pakistan on Sunday.

"The current visit to Pakistan is in line with the official invitation of the Pakistani government and the Anti-Narcotics Force," he said.

As he informed, in this trip, simultaneous border patrols and joint operations between the Iranian and Pakistani anti-narcotics police are being discussed with the Pak authorities.

He expressed content that Iran has very good cooperation via trilateral cooperation in UN projects with Pakistan and Afghanistan, and apart from that, it has bilateral cooperation with the Pakistan Anti-Narcotics Police.

Asked about the purposes of his trip, Karimi said "Further strengthening bilateral cooperation, exchange of information, cross-border cooperation, prevention of drug trafficking and transit, investigation of traffickers' methods and routes are among the main agendas."

He noted that Iran underlines cooperation at the border points with the Pakistan Anti-Narcotics Police.

"Iran discovered 980,000 kilograms of narcotics in 2020, which is why we believe that our partners in Pakistan should take more measures to prevent narcotics from entering Iran through the joint borders," he added.

The Iranian Police official added that his country welcomes the implementation of the plan to fence the joint borders with Iran by the Pakistani side and added: "Blocking the borders will definitely reduce the opportunity for smugglers."

He underscored that Iran wants to increase the presence of Pakistani border guards and counter-narcotics police at the joint borders with Iran.

"We expect more effective cooperation from Pakistan," he added.

Second Brigadier General Majid Karimi arrived in Islamabad on Sunday morning at the invitation of his Pakistani counterpart to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the fight against narcotics.

He was welcomed by a group of officials of the Pakistan Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) at Islamabad International Airport.

Being a neighbor to the biggest producer of drugs in the world has caused the Islamic Republic of Iran to shoulder a heavy burden as one of the main routes for drug transport.

Tehran Ready to Negotiate With Riyadh

TEHRAN (MNA) – Stating that Iran welcomes any attempt to bridge the gap among regional neighbors, the Iranian envoy to Kuwait expressed Iran's readiness to discuss any disputes and crises with Riyadh via peaceful and formal negotiations.

Speaking in an interview with the Kuwaiti Al-Rai newspaper, the Iranian Ambassador in Kuwait City Mohamad Irani expressed his views on regional and non-regional issues.

Answering a question about the possibility of reviving the nuclear deal after Biden's take over, he said that if the United States returns to the nuclear deal, Iran will fulfill its obligations, but in Iran's view, returning to the table of JCPOA does not require preconditions.

Referring to the summit of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council which will be held tomorrow, the Iranian envoy stated that the Islamic Republic of Iran welcomes any attempt to bridge the gap, unite and unify the views of the countries in the region.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as the largest neighbor of the Persian Gulf countries, strives for the best relations with its neighbors and emphasizes strengthening security and stability in the region as well as peaceful coexistence with neighboring countries.

Regarding relations with Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic does not believe in severing relations with this country. Iran considers this country an important and large country in the region, he said, adding, "We believe that within the framework of joint cooperation, bilateral problems and regional crises can be resolved."

"We have repeatedly expressed our readiness to discuss the allegations and all disputed issues at the negotiating table," he added.

He also considered the U.S. presence in the region as a source of tension and instability, stressing, "The demand of the nations of the region, including the people of Iraq is that the

Americans must leave the region soon."

Stating that the U.S. assassination of top Iranian Commander General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis is a clear example of such instability in the region he said, today both Iran and Iraq are overwhelmed with grief and sorrow, but this has led to the unity of the two nations.

First VP Meets Heads of Joint Chambers to Discuss Trade With Oceania

TEHRAN (MNA) - Heads of Iran's joint chambers of commerce with Oceanian countries met with First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri to discuss issues and ways of boosting trade with the mentioned countries, the portal of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) reported.

The meeting was attended by senior government officials as well as representatives of the private sector including the ICCIMA Head Gholam-Hossein Shafeie and the Foreign Affairs Ministry's Director General of Economic Diplomacy Rasoul Mohajer.

During the meeting, the private sector representatives talked about their concerns and the problems and challenges that the traders are currently facing, and made some suggestions to improve the conditions and develop trade and economic relations with the target countries in Oceania.

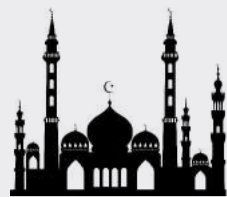
The officials attending the meeting also underlined the significant role of the private sector in the country's economy and called for necessary measures to be taken by the government for removing the obstacles facing the private sector traders.

Shafeie, for his part, emphasized the importance of joining regional and international treaties like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) for the country's trade and called for a detailed study of this agreement by the government to be simulated and implemented in Iran as a detailed case study.

RCEP is a free trade agreement initiated by Indonesia, between the Asia-Pacific nations of Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam.

"The main objectives of this agreement are the gradual elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers in foreign trade, as well as the gradual elimination of restrictions and discriminatory regulations in the field of services trade to create a free, facilitating and competitive investment environment in the mentioned region," Shafeie explained.

Jahangiri, in his speech, referred to his several meetings with the heads of joint chambers of commerce, and said: "The most important message of these meetings is that foreign trade and developing exports and imports should be among the government's priorities."



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:09
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:25
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:45
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:14

1. Ha-Mim
2. 'Ain. Sin. Qaf.
3. Thus doth (He) send inspiration to thee as (He did) to those before thee, -Allah, Exalted in Power, Full of Wisdom
Surah 42. Counsel, Consultation (1-3)

Iran Apparel Exports Earn \$40m in 7 Months

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Deputy Head of Iran Textile Exporters and Manufacturers Association says according to the official statistics, Iran has exported apparel worth \$40m in the first seven months of the current year.

Speaking to IRNA, Majid Nami said that some of Iran's apparel exports are not registered in official statistics because they are done unofficially. He also pointed to the presence of traders and merchants from neighboring states like Iraq, Afghanistan and Central Asia who buy Iranian garments and clothing with Iran's national currency rial and take it legally or illegally into their countries, reiterating that this is also some sort of exports that domestic producers do not benefit it.

Nami added that the statistics for the first seven months were announced while in the past years the average annual apparel exports of the country had been between 50 to 60 million dollars on average.

He also pointed to the exodus of famous foreign clothing brands from the country in the past two years, adding that the government has decided to ban import of apparel which is a good opportunity for Iranian producers.

He said the private sector should take advantage of this opportunity to reinforce the infrastructures for production, to improve the quality, to boost the quantity of



production and scientific work on their products in order that when due to some reasons the door for imports opens, they can compete with the foreign brands.

Nami also admitted the coronavirus pandemic has seriously affected the clothing sector and almost 90 percent of producers or those who are active in this business have lost their revenues. He added that however some good steps have been taken for online sales of productions in the online and digital stores which have been welcomed by Iranians.

He reiterated that current the condition for production is good but producers are facing concerns and challenges like providing raw material and machineries.

Experts in the apparel industry predict apparel exports would grow 30 percent by the yearend. Nami also said that since last week, the operation for collecting foreign apparel brands' products from stores in the country have begun.

He said that after receiving reports that major shopping centers are selling the foreign apparel brands, the Headquarters for Combating the Smuggling of Commodities and Foreign Exchange launched operation for collecting the foreign brands from the stores.

He also noted that the amount of smuggled clothing into the country was around \$2.7 in 2018 and the figure faced a considerable decline in 2019 as the figure stood at \$1.8b.

Nami noted that since almost two years ago, the government has slapped over 1400 items of goods whose the likes are produced in the country.

He reiterated that only those foreign apparel brands are allowed to be in the country that produce some part of their products in the country and export them.

Iran Oil Reserves in Persian Gulf Increase

TEHRAN (SHANA) - Recent studies on the reservoirs of four Iranian oil fields in the Persian Gulf have shown that the estimations of the in-place oil in these fields have increased by more than 740 million barrels.

Based on the Fast Track studies carried out by the Iranian Offshore Oil Company (IOOC) on Hendijan, Behregansar, Abouzar and Nowruz oil fields, the total in-place oil reserves of these fields have increased by 742 million barrels compared to the last approved study carried on the fields and has reached 9.9 billion barrels, an official with the company announced.

According to Ali Khajavi, the mentioned studies have been completed in collaboration with capable domestic companies in less than nine months and with average monthly progress of over 11 percent.

The new findings indicate that the total extractable oil from the mentioned fields has also increased by 217 million barrels to reach more than 3.2 billion barrels, Khajavi said.

"Considering the oil price at \$45 per barrel, the added volume is equivalent to about \$10 billion," he added.

According to the official, conducting Master Development Plan (MDP) studies is the most important tool for optimizing production, choosing the appropriate way of reservoir development, and ultimately increasing the recovery factor of hydrocarbon reservoirs.

MDP studies typically include the processing and interpretation of seismic data, complete studies of basic geology and static modeling, complete studies of basic reservoir engineering, history matching and construction of dynamic simulation models, preparation and implementation of production scenarios, and finally complete economic studies of the reservoir development project.

IOOC, a subsidiary of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), is one of the world's largest offshore oil-producing companies. The company accounts for one-third of the Iranian oil exports, operating on the Iranian side of the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea.

Optimal Consumption Is Priority

TEHRAN (IP) - Iran's interior minister stressed that the country faced three main challenges: air pollution, blackout, and fuel shortages; hence, people were urged to consume fuel as properly as possible. On the sidelines of "Winter Fuel Usage" meeting with ministers of Oil and Energy Bijan Zanganeh and Reza Ardakanian, held at the Ministry of Interior, Abdolreza Rahmani-Fazli stressed the pressure on the people due to the economic challenges caused by the US sanctions, coronavirus, and the continuous threats. Rahmani-Fazli added: "The fuel shortages in the winter may cause other challenges for people at this time." He noted that every single individual must take care of optimal, especially household, consumption. "Any vehicle mainly lorries lacking "Vehicle Inspection" must be banned to commute in the cities," he said. "Each province is obliged to regulate its fuel consumption based on its climatic conditions and air pollution to decrease its fuel usage," Iran's interior minister added.

The chairman of the board announced the tenth largest producer of sweets and chocolates in the world

Shirin Asal Reached a Production of 1 Million Tons Per Year



Shirin Asal Food Industries Company opened its new line with a new investment of 2.8 trillion Tomans. The company increased its production capacity to one million tons of products per year. Shirin Asal became the largest producer of sweets and chocolates in the Middle East and the tenth largest producer of these products in the world. According to reports, Shirin Asal production group of food industries opened its new production lines in East Azerbaijan with a production capacity of one million tons and an investment of 28,000 billion rials. Shirin Asal became the largest producer of sweets and chocolates in the Middle East and the tenth largest producer of these products in the world. With the launch of these production lines by Shirin Asal (Unit No. 2), more than one thousand and one hundred new jobs have been created in the field of food industry. In total, the employment rate of Shirin Asal Company has reached 20,000 people.

Export capacity of \$ 10 billion food industry

Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade Razm Hosseini attended the opening ceremony of this production line in the East Azerbaijan Entrepreneurs Industrial Town in Shabestar city of East Azerbaijan province. Shirin Asal phase two production was inaugurated by him. He announced the export of five billion dollars of food industry in the country. Razm Hosseini added: the capacity and potential for exporting food industries up to 10 billion dollars is also possible. Achieving this goal is possible with the help of economic activists. He further referred to the Supreme Leader's orders to honor entrepreneurs and said: "The Supreme Leader has named entrepreneurs and producers as economic activists." Our religious culture also emphasizes the issue of entrepreneurship and job creation. Minister Samat added: "If we want to judge fairly, those who create jobs



and entrepreneurship are great personalities." The system and the revolution respect these people. Razm Hosseini continued: "Gratitude for those who bring blessings is necessary and culture must be created." The globalization of Tabriz carpets has been due to the efforts of entrepreneurs. Shirin Asal brand is one of the top brands in the country's food industry. Shirin Asal, along with other brands, has become the world's leading exporter of samples. He added that jobs and entrepreneurship must be created by the private sector. We must build the country with big, famous and capable companies. In the second step of the revolution, we are looking for a strong economy for urban and rural households by these companies. Minister Samat also expressed hope that Shirineh Asal would have social responsibilities in job-deprived areas and create jobs. In the continuation of this ceremony, Razm Hosseini visited different parts of this complex.

Creating more than 1100 new jobs

Younes Jaileh, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Shirin-Asal Food Industries Group, also thanked the Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade, deputies, governors and provincial officials for attending the opening ceremony. He provided a report on the company's production capacity and the jobs created. He described the company's future plans to build new production lines. He further added:



"New production lines of Shirineh Asal have been launched in line with the company's development policies." In these lines, packaging containers and multi-layered sheets and all kinds of confectionery and chocolate products are produced using the latest technologies in the world and the best machines. Jaileh said: "The launch of these lines and this investment has been done with the cooperation of provincial and national officials." I should appreciate and thank the cooperation and support of these loved ones. Development plans of Shirin Asal food industry group include chocolate, toffee and cake production lines with investment of eight thousand and 500 billion Rials and employment of 400 people, Tetrapak juice and milk production line with investment of seven thousand and 500 billion Rials and employment of 360 people, sheet production plan Thermoforming with an investment of six thousand billion rials and employment of 170 people and the production line of plastic containers with an investment of six thousand billion rials and employment of 170 people. 28,000 billion rials have been invested in these lines. Jobs have also been created for 1,100 people. This development is a step towards increasing production. Increasing production is done on the recommendation of the Supreme Leader. Despite the sanctions, the will and ability of the country's private sector to develop work and employment and export goods made in Iran is high.

Fifth Body Found In Norway Mudslide



OSLO (Dispatches) - Rescue workers have uncovered a fifth body four days after a landslide buried homes near Norway's capital, police said Sunday, as the search goes on for five people still missing.

The tragedy occurred in the early hours of Wednesday when houses were destroyed and shifted hundreds of metres under a torrent of mud at the village of Ask, 25 kilometres (15 miles) northeast of Oslo.

"Just before six am a deceased person was found," a police statement said.

The discovery of a fourth body had been made Saturday after three were recovered the day before at the bleak, snow-covered scene at Ask, in Gjerdrum municipality.

10 Hurt in Lebanon Gas Depot Blast



BEIRUT (AFP) - At least 10 people were injured Sunday when an explosion rocked a warehouse storing gas canisters near Lebanon's border with Syria, the Lebanese Red Cross and the army said.

The Red Cross said it dispatched several teams of rescuers to the village of Al-Qasr in the eastern Hermel region where the explosion occurred and rushed the injured to hospitals.

"We have responded to an explosion in a warehouse that stores gas canisters. We have responded with three teams. Ten people have been wounded and transported to nearby hospitals," a Red Cross statement said.

Anti-U.S. Chants as Iraqis Mourn Commanders Martyred a Year Ago



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Thousands of Iraqi mourners Sunday condemned the "American occupiers", one year after a U.S. drone strike assassinated Iran's revered commander Qasem Soleimani and his Iraqi lieutenant Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

The anniversary of their deaths in Baghdad -- which brought arch enemies the United States and Iran to the brink of war -- was also marked in Iran and by supporters in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere.

The lead-up to the commemorations of the Shiite Muslim commanders has again heightened regional tensions in the weeks before U.S. President Donald Trump, who ordered the assassinations, leaves the White House.

In Iraq, the powerful Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary network which Muhandis commanded has led the somber and angry vigils for him and General Soleimani, who headed the foreign operations arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Thousands of black-clad mourners Saturday night converged at the spot near Baghdad's international airport where the U.S. hit the two vehicles and martyred Soleimani, Muhandis and eight other men. By candlelight, they honored their "martyrs" and condemned the American "great Satan" at the site where nearby walls are still pockmarked by shrapnel.

"We tell America and the enemies of Islam that they can inflict the greatest sacrifices on us, but we will continue to resist despite the bloodshed," said Hashed supporter Batul Najjar.

The Hashed -- factions of which Washington has blamed for rocket strikes against its embassy and troops in Iraq -- has increasingly challenged Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhemi, whom it accuses of having helped plot the drone strikes.

This has brought to the boil once more tensions in the war-battered and politically fragile country which the United States invaded in 2003, and which is struggling with economic crisis amid low oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic.

With more mass gatherings planned Sunday at Baghdad's central Tahrir Square, Ahmed Assadi, one of the leaders of Hashed's parliamentary bloc, vowed: "Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, we will go out by the millions to brandish your portrait on Tahrir".

Giant posters of Soleimani and Muhandis were hung up above the iconic square, which in late 2019 became the centre of large anti-government protests, from an abandoned building known as the Turkish restaurant.

Amid the tensions, Iraqis, and many in the wider region, are nervously watching for any signs of escalation before Trump leaves the White House on January 20.

In recent days, U.S. B-52 bombers have flown across the region for the second time in less than a month but, in what some read as a sign of deescalation, Washington has also reportedly ordered its Nimitz aircraft carrier to leave the Persian Gulf.

Pelosi Re-Elected as U.S. House Speaker With Slim Majority



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Nancy Pelosi, the only woman to serve as U.S. Speaker of the House, was narrowly re-elected to the position Sunday in a deeply divided new Congress that convened in the final weeks of Donald Trump's presidency.

Pelosi, 80, faced a scare when five fellow Democrats defected and voted "present" or for someone else during the floor vote. But the woman who is third in line to the presidency secured her fourth -- and perhaps final -- non-consecutive term as House speaker by earning 216 votes versus 209 for Republican leader Kevin McCarthy.

In a symbolic gesture beginning the 117th Congress, McCarthy formally handed the speaker's gavel over to Pelosi, who raised it in triumph as Democrats cheered and applauded.

"We begin the new Congress during a time of extraordinary difficulty," Pelosi told the chamber, noting the toll of 350,000 dead and 20 million infected by Covid-19. "Our most urgent priority will continue to be defeating the coronavirus," a masked Pelosi said. "And defeat it, we will."

The vote took hours, as lawmakers were required to vote in groups of several dozen due to social distancing rules imposed during the coronavirus pandemic.

Pelosi has been Trump's chief nemesis in Congress, and the two clashed bitterly over the past two years, particularly as she leveled impeachment charges against the president.

Trump was impeached in December 2019, but the Senate acquitted him early in 2020. His successor, Joe Biden, takes office on January 20.

With Pelosi scrambling to keep her post, it was a handful of progressive lawmakers and members-elect who have been critical of her leadership but ultimately voted for her on Sunday.

Among them was Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, one of the most high-profile Democrats in Washington, and incoming lawmaker Cori Bush, who is the first African-American woman to represent Missouri in Congress.

100 Dead in Attacks on Two Western Niger Villages

NIAMEY (AFP) - "Terrorists" killed around 100 people in two villages in western Niger, the latest in a string of civilian massacres that have rocked the jihadist-plagued Tillaberi region, a local mayor said Sunday.

The attacks on the villages of Tchoma Bangou and Zaroumadareye occurred Saturday just as first-round presidential results were announced.

They were waged by "terrorists who came riding about 100 motorcycles," said Almou Hassane, the mayor of the Tondikiwindi commune that administers both villages. "There were up to 70 dead in Tchoma Bangou and 30 dead in Zaroumadareye," he told AFP, adding he had just returned from the scene of the attacks.

The two villages are 120 kilometres (75 miles) north of the capital Niamey. "There have also been 75 wounded, some of whom have been evacuated to Niamey and to Ouallam for treatment," Hassane said.

The attackers split into two columns to carry out simultaneous attacks on the two villages, which lie seven kilometres (four miles) apart, the mayor added.

Prime Minister Brigi Rafini led a delegation to the area on Sunday, while President Mahamadou Issoufou will hold an extraordinary security council on Monday, the presidency's office said. Local elected officials first reported the raids on Saturday, but the death toll was unclear, with one source putting it at around 50.

Issoufou Issaka, a former government minister who comes from the region, said the jihadists carried out the double massacre after local people had lynched two of their number. He gave an estimated death toll of 83.

One senior regional official said the attack was carried out at midday (1100 GMT), at the same moment the results of the first round of legislative and presidential election were announced.

Election officials announced that ruling party candidate and former minister Mohamed Bazoum won the first round of Niger's presidential vote, which was held last weekend. Bazoum has promised to step up the fight against the jihadists.

Gunmen Kill Many Coal Miners in Southwest Pakistan

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Gunmen have opened fire on a group of minority Hazara Shia Muslim coal miners after abducting them, killing 11 in the southwestern Balochistan province, a Pakistani official has said.

Moazzam Ali Jatoi, an official with the Levies Force which serves as police and paramilitary in the area, said the attack took place early on Sunday near the Mach coalfield, about 48km (30 miles) east of the provincial capital, Quetta.

Jatoi said armed men took the coal miners to nearby mountains where they opened fire on them. He said six miners died on the spot and five others were critically wounded and died on the way to hospital.

Jatoi said an initial investigation revealed the attackers identified the miners as belonging to the Hazara Shia community and took them away for execution, leaving others unharmed.

Local television footage showed security troops surrounding a desolate mountainous area diverting traffic and guiding ambulances to pick up the bodies.

Security forces were also seen spreading out in the mountains to search for the attackers. The ISIL (ISIS) group later claimed responsibility for the attack, through its Amaq news agency via its Telegram communications channel.

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a banned Sunni hardline group, has targeted the minority Hazara community in

Balochistan province in the past.

"The condemnable killing of 11 innocent coal miners in Mach Baluchistan is yet another cowardly inhuman act of terrorism," Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan said in a tweet.

"Have asked Frontier Constabulary to use all resources to apprehend these killers and bring them to justice," he said. Quetta is home to roughly 600,000 Hazara Shia Muslims, largely confined to two fortified enclaves on either side of the city. The enclaves are ringed with high walls topped with barbed wire, and many checkpoints are manned by paramilitary personnel.

Members of the community have long complained that security restrictions have cut them off from the rest of the city, not allowing them to effectively manage businesses or send their children to school.

Balochistan faces multifaceted threats from several armed groups, including the Taliban, which have targeted Shia Muslims and nationalist groups seeking independence for the province.

Attacks against workers from other provinces, especially those working on projects initiated by China under a \$62bn investment plan, are common.

On December 26, gunmen attacked a security post and killed seven soldiers in Harnai district of the province.



Ex-Pentagon Chiefs Warn Against Using U.S. Military in Election Row

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - In an extraordinary rebuke of US President Donald Trump, all 10 living former secretaries of defense cautioned on Sunday against any move to involve the military in pursuing claims of election fraud, arguing that it would take the country into "dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory".

The 10 men, both Democrats and Republicans, signed on to an opinion article published in The Washington Post newspaper that implicitly questioned Trump's willingness to follow his constitutional duty to peacefully relinquish power on January 20. Following the November 3 election and subsequent recounts in some states, as well as unsuccessful court challenges, the outcome is clear, they wrote, while not specifying Trump in the article.

"The time for questioning the results has passed; the time for the formal counting of the electoral college votes, as prescribed in the Constitution and statute, has arrived," they wrote. The former Pentagon chiefs warned against use of the military in any effort to change the outcome.

"Efforts to involve the U.S. armed forces in resolving election disputes would take us into dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory," they wrote. "Civilian and military officials who direct or carry out such measures would be accountable, including potentially facing criminal penalties, for the grave consequences of their actions on our republic."

A number of senior military officers, including General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have said publicly in recent weeks that the military has no role in determining the outcome of U.S. elections and that their loyalty is to the constitution, not to an individual leader or a political party.

The 10 former Pentagon leaders also warned in their Post article of the dangers of impeding a full and smooth transition at Defense Department prior to Inauguration Day as part of a transfer of power to President-elect Joe Biden. Biden has complained of efforts by Trump-appointed Pentagon officials to obstruct the transition. Without mentioning a specific example, the former defense secretaries wrote that transfers of power "often occur at times of international uncertainty about U.S. national security policy and posture," adding: "They can be a moment when the nation is vulnerable to actions by adversaries seeking to take advantage of the situation."



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Singapore Economy Seeing Signs of Stabilization

SINGAPORE (Reuters) - Singapore's economy, which is set for its worst contraction this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is seeing signs of stabilization, its prime minister said on Thursday. "After our most severe downturn since independence, we look forward to a rebound in 2021, although the recovery will be uneven, and activity is likely to remain below pre-COVID-19 levels for some time," Lee Hsien Loong said in a New Year message. Singapore's economy is likely to contract between 6% and 6.5% this year, marking its worst recession, and grow 4% to 6% in 2021, according to official forecasts.



Azerbaijan Starts Gas Exports to Russia-Dominated European Market

BAKU (Reuters) - Azerbaijan has started commercial natural gas supplies to Europe via the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), the energy ministry said, beginning its push into the lucrative energy market dominated by Russia.

The project has the backing of the European Commission as part of efforts to curb Europe's dependence on Russian energy. Russia controls 34% of Europe's gas market and plans to raise gas exports to Europe, including Turkey, to 183 billion cubic metres (bcm) next year from the 171-172 bcm expected this year. Europe's annual consumption stands at around 500 bcm, used mostly in power generation.

TAP is a part of the \$40 billion Southern Gas Corridor, stretching 3,500 km from Azerbaijan to Europe and drawing from Azerbaijan's giant Shah Deniz II field in the Caspian Sea.

Azerbaijan aims to supply European gas markets with 10 bcm of gas a year, including 8 bcm to Italy and a combined 2 bcm to Greece and Bulgaria. It already supplies gas to Turkey.

"The Southern Gas Corridor will strengthen the system of global energy security. It has connected the Caspian region to Europe," the energy ministry said in a statement.

Rovnag Abdullayev, head of state energy firm SOCAR, hailed the start of the gas sales to Europe as a "historic day". Analysts have said Azeri gas is unlikely to change Russia's dominant position in Europe, but that it still poses some threat to Moscow's share of the region's gas market.

Russia is still seeking to complete its subsea Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Germany. The project stalled a year ago due to sanctions from the United States. Russia resumed construction, albeit slowly, earlier this month. The TAP stakeholders are BP, SOCAR, and Snam, with a 20% holding each, plus Fluxys with a 19% stake, Enagas with 16%, and Axpo with 5%. The first phase of the Shah Deniz field began production in 2006, delivering more than 10 bcm a year of gas to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

The second phase started output in 2018, adding 16 bcm of gas production capacity at its peak to bring total capacity to 26 bcm.

China Warns of Retaliation for NYSE's Delisting of Companies

BEIJING (AP) — China said Saturday that it would take necessary countermeasures in response to the New York Stock Exchange's announcement that it would delist three major Chinese telecoms, in the latest flare-up of tensions between Beijing and Washington.

The stock exchange said Thursday that it would delist China Telecom Corp. Ltd., China Mobile Ltd. and China Unicom Hong Kong Ltd., with trading of the companies to be suspended sometime between Jan. 7 and Jan. 11.

The move stems from an executive order President Donald Trump issued on Nov. 12 barring investment in publicly traded companies that the U.S. government says are owned or controlled by the Chinese military.

"China opposes the Americans from abusing national security by listing Chinese companies into the so-called 'Communist China Military Companies' list and will take the necessary countermeasures to resolutely safeguard



the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies," a spokesperson for the Chinese Commerce Ministry said in a statement.

The actions will also "greatly weaken all parties' confidence in the U.S. capital market," the statement said.

The ministry did not offer details on what the measures might be.

Under Trump, the U.S. has stepped up economic sanctions and travel bans against Chinese companies, government officials and Communist Party members, especially recently in Trump's last few weeks in office.

In December, the U.S. announced plans to limit visas for members of the Chinese Communist Party and their family members to one month, instead of 10 years.

Chinese tech giant Huawei has been shut out of the U.S. market and the U.S. has lobbied other countries to follow suit, albeit with mixed results.

Oman Looks to Borrow \$4.2b in 2021 to Cover Budget Shortfall

MUSCAT (Dispatches) - Oman's government will finance most of its budget shortfall in 2021 by borrowing to plug a fiscal gap battered by a decline in

oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic.

The Persian Gulf state is looking into borrowing that will cover 73%, or 1.6 billion rials (\$4.2 billion), of the country's 2.2 billion-rial shortfall, with the remaining 600 million rials to be drawn from its reserves, according to a post on Twitter by the state-run Oman News Agency on Friday. The government based its 2021 budget plan on an oil price of \$45 per barrel.

Oman has taken measures such as reduced spending and plans to impose a 5% value-added tax in 2021. It will implement developmental projects valued at 371 million rials as part of the effort to redirect resources toward "national priorities," according to the Oman News Agency.

The sultanate's economy is estimated to have shrunk 10% in 2020, according to projections from the International Monetary Fund, among the steepest in the Persian Gulf. Bond spreads in the nation have increased in 2020 compared to neighbors and "while financial buffers remain ample in Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, they are significantly weaker in Bahrain and Oman," according to a report by the fund.

The largest oil exporter outside of OPEC, Oman has been hammered by the coronavirus pandemic as well as lower crude prices and has raised the possibility of assistance from its Persian Gulf neighbors. The country is rated at junk levels by three of the leading rating firms.

The sovereign has three bonds maturing through 2023. This year, its \$1.5 billion issuance matures in June.

South Korea Exports Post Sharpest Expansion In 26 Months in December

SEOUL (Reuters) - South Korea's exports expanded at their fastest pace in 26 months in December, on robust chip demand and improved global demand, providing additional signals that the recovery is on track despite resurgences in the novel coronavirus.

Exports in the final month of 2020 grew 12.6% year-on-year, the sharpest growth since October 2018 when it grew 22.5%, government data showed.

The rate of growth was sharply higher than forecast as analysts had expected a 5.6% jump from a year earlier, and was much faster than a 4.1% growth in November.

"Semiconductor exports were exceptionally strong, with 11 of 15 major export items posting growth... sales of IT products boosted the overall growth," a trade ministry official told Reuters.

South Korea's monthly trade data, the first to be released among major exporting economies, is considered a bellwether for global trade.

Overseas sales of semiconductors surged 30% from a year earlier, marking the sharpest expansion since August 2018, towing the overall exports recovery.

Other major items such as mobile devices, displays and computers also soared 39.8%, 28.0% and 14.7% year-on-year.

By destination, exports to China, South Korea's biggest trading partner, gained 3.3% from a year ago, and those to the United States and European Union jumped 11.6% and 26.4%.

Imports rose 1.8%, reversing a 1.9% decline in November and marking the best reading since April 2019. Reuters' poll had expected a 2.6% decline.

Meanwhile, for the whole of 2020, South Korea's exports slid 5.4% as the coronavirus pandemic swept world trade, but that was much better than a 10.4% fall in 2019, the worst in a decade and the third-worst in the country's modern history.

South Korea's financial markets are closed on Friday for the New Year's Day holiday and will resume trade on Monday.

African Free Trade Bloc Opens for Business, But Challenges Remain



JOHANNESBURG (Reuters) - African countries began officially trading under a new continent-wide free trade area, after months of delays caused by the global coronavirus pandemic.

But experts view the New Year's Day launch as largely symbolic with full implementation of the deal expected to take years.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to bring together 1.3 billion people in a \$3.4 trillion economic bloc that will be the largest free trade area since the establishment of the World Trade Organization.

Backers say it will boost trade among African neighbours while allowing the continent to develop its own value chains. The World Bank estimates it could lift tens of millions out of poverty by 2035.

"There is a new Africa emerging with a sense of urgency and purpose and an aspiration to become self-reliant," Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo said during an online launch ceremony.

But obstacles - ranging from ubiquitous red tape and poor infrastructure to the entrenched protectionism of some of its members - must be overcome if the bloc is to reach its full potential.

Trade under the AfCFTA was meant to be launched on July 1 but was pushed back after COVID-19 made in-person negotiations impossible.

However, the pandemic also gave the process added impetus, said Wamkele Mene, Secretary-General of the AfCFTA Secretariat. "COVID-19 has demonstrated that Africa is overly reliant on the export of primary commodities, overly reliant on global supply chains," he said. "When the global supply chains are disrupted, we know that Africa suffers."

Every African country except Eritrea has signed on to the AfCFTA framework agreement, and 34 have ratified it. But observers such as W. Gyude Moore - a former Liberian minister who is now a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development - say the real work begins now.

"I would be surprised if they can have everything set up within 24 months," he told Reuters. "For long-term success, I think we'll need to look at how long it took Europe. This is a multi-decade process."

Historic challenges including Africa's poor road and rail links, political unrest, excessive border bureaucracy and petty corruption will not disappear overnight.

And an annex to the deal outlining the rules of origin - an essential step for determining which products can be subject to tariffs and duties - has not been completed yet.

72% of Japan Firms Expect Moderate Economic Growth in 2021

TOKYO (Dispatches) - Some 72% of major Japanese companies expect the economy to expand at a moderate pace in 2021 amid hopes that the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic will subside, a Kyodo News survey showed Saturday.

Despite the positive forecast for the world's third-largest economy, more than a quarter of the 109 firms in the survey, or 29%, said they are not sure when their sales will return to pre-pandemic levels, and 13% expect any recovery to materialize in 2023 or later, indicating that corporate Japan remains cautious about business conditions.

A sense of caution prevailed toward the end of 2020 as Japan was hit by a resurgence of coronavirus cases. The third wave of infections came as the Japanese economy was gradually rebounding from its worst contraction in the April-June quarter when Japan was placed under a state of emergency over the virus. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga had sought to balance supporting the economy and tackling the health crisis but his handling of the pandemic has been called into question.

The survey found 72% see moderate growth, followed by 17% that expect economic conditions to remain unchanged. Around 2% said the economy will expand, while another 2% project a moderate contraction, according to the survey.

With multiple answers allowed, 64% of the firms expecting economic growth in the year ahead said the impact of the pandemic will stabilize and 47% cited recovering private consumption. Some 32% picked a recovery in overseas economies and 14% pinned hopes on the effects of economic stimulus by the government.

Economists say uncertainty over the economic outlook will persist with vaccines and treatment drugs for COVID-19 seen as critical, after virus outbreaks led to lockdowns in some countries and depressed economic activity and travel. The Japanese government projects a 4.0% expansion in real gross domestic product in fiscal 2021 from a year ago. The Kyodo News survey showed an increased shift toward digitalization to cope with the spread of the virus as all companies introduced teleworking and 99% said they promoted online meetings.

Digitalization is one of the priority areas for Suga, who has seen his support ratings plunge in recent weeks after the honeymoon period of his tenure ended. Among the prime minister's policy items, 29% said they support the creation of a digital agency that will be tasked with digitalizing administrative work, followed by 28% that are in favor of promoting regulatory reforms.

Some 20% backed the government's efforts to fight global warming, while only 1% were in support of the administration's move to lower mobile phone fees that it sees as higher than in other countries. Major mobile carriers have yielded to government pressure and announced cheaper options in what is shaping up to be a price war.



Hosseini to Star in Biopic of Iranian Physicist

TEHRAN - Actor Shahab Hosseini, best known for collaborations with Oscar-winning director Asghar Farhadi in "About Elly", "A Separation", and "The Salesman", is set to play Iranian-American physicist and inventor Ali Javan in an upcoming biopic.

According to The Hollywood Reporter, Kourosh Ahari, who most recently directed horror-thriller "The Night", is attached to write and direct the film. Javan first proposed the concept of the gas laser in 1959 at the Bell Telephone

Laboratories. A successful prototype, constructed by him in collaboration with WR Bennett, Jr and DR Herriott, was demonstrated in 1960. Ahari, Hosseini and producer Alex Bretow's production banner Pol Media has acquired exclusive worldwide rights to the life of Javan. Hosseini has starred in Farhadi's Oscar-winning foreign-language films "A Separation" and "The Salesman", for which he won the best actor award at Cannes Film Festival in 2016.



Italian Gov't Totters as Conte, Renzi Divide Deepens

ROME (Reuters) - Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte faces a showdown with his coalition partner and former premier Matteo Renzi this week that could bring down his government even as it struggles to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

Long-strained relations between the two men have deteriorated markedly in recent weeks, with Renzi calling for radical changes to plans to reboot the economy while also demanding that Conte cede his control over the secret services.

The prime minister has resisted the pressure, saying last week he was prepared to confront Renzi in parliament, effectively challenging him to act on his recent threats and abandon the coalition, thereby triggering an ill-timed crisis.

Renzi told Il Messaggero newspaper at the weekend he would not back down and dismissed suggestions that Conte could persuade a limited number of opposition politicians to prop up the government if his small Italia Viva party walked away.

"If he has decided to go to parliament and see the numbers, we accept the challenge," Renzi said. "If ... he goes under, we have several different solutions that can be assessed by parliament and the head of state," he added.

A political source said matters could come to a head at a cabinet meeting expected for Jan. 7, when Conte was expected to ask ministers to support his economic recovery plan. If Italia Viva's two ministers refused, the prime minister would go to parliament and start work on trying to find a new consensus.

Conte's two main coalition allies, the 5-Star Movement and centre-left Democratic Party (PD), have both urged restraint, but appeared resigned to an eventual face-off with Renzi, who is looking to carve out a strong identity for his group which is struggling in the opinion polls on around 3%.

"At this point, it is difficult to move ahead without a real clarification, in terms of the content and structure of the government," Luigi Zanda, a senior PD senator, told Corriere della Sera on Sunday.

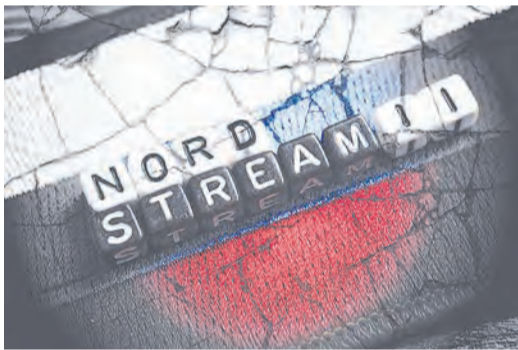
If the government falls, the coalition parties could seek to draw up a new pact and



agree on a new team of ministers, with or without Conte as prime minister. Alternatively, the head of state could try to put together a government of national unity to confront the health and economic crisis.

If all else fails, national elections would have to be held some two years ahead of time, but such an outcome would appear highly unlikely given the COVID emergency in Italy, which has registered 74,985 COVID-19 deaths, the highest toll in Europe and the fifth highest in the world.

U.S. Imposes New Sanctions to Kill off Putin's Pet Pipeline



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. Senate began 2021 by delivering a major blow to Russian President Vladimir Putin by passing the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which includes sanctions designed to kill off the Kremlin's strategically important Nord Stream 2 pipeline project.

The geopolitical significance of this legislation cannot be overstated. It means almost certain doom for Putin's most important energy project and prevents Russia from tightening its control over EU natural gas supplies.

The new legislation imposes draconian sanctions that should permanently end construction of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas line between Russia and Germany. This energy pipeline, which runs underneath the Baltic Sea, aims to make Europe more dependent on Russian energy while giving Moscow greater direct control over gas flows.

If completed, it would also damage Ukraine by rendering the country's gas transportation system largely redundant and depriving Kyiv of significant transit revenues. Many fear that by reducing Moscow's reliance on Ukraine for gas transit to EU markets, Nord Stream 2 would also increase the likelihood of a future escalation in ongoing Russian military aggression against Ukraine.

The introduction of tough new U.S. sanctions represents a major strategic setback for Putin and Gazprom. The cost of the incomplete pipeline is so far estimated at USD 11.6 billion, while the project has also galvanized political opposition to Europe's continued reliance on Russia for the continent's energy supplies. Critics have long pointed to the lack of economic justification for Nord Stream 2. They see it as a geopolitical weapon, and regard US sanctions as an attempt to disarm the Kremlin.

Germany's reputation has suffered badly in recent years due to its unapologetic backing of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. This support has remained strong despite the vocal concerns of Berlin's EU partners. Germany stands to gain economically from the deal, which promises to transform the country into a regional natural gas hub while securing cheap supplies for German industry. However, few other European nations shared this enthusiasm for the project.

In December 2018, the European Parliament voted overwhelmingly to condemn Nord Stream 2 as "a political project that poses a threat to European energy security," and called for the cancellation of the project. Despite this opposition, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has steadfastly defended the pipeline as a strictly commercial deal.

Turkey Yearly Inflation Miss Sets Stage for High Rates Into 2021

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkey's year-end inflation rate is set to exceed even the central bank's bumped-up forecast, leaving Governor Naci Agbal with little choice but to keep access to credit tight well into 2021.

Data due Monday will probably show consumer prices rose an annual 14.2% through December, up from 14% the previous month, according to the median estimate in a Bloomberg survey. That's higher than the central bank's raised October forecast of 12.1%, and nearly triple the target of 5%.

A weak lira and rapid credit growth driven by negative real interest rates kept the rate of price growth in double digits the entire year. Agbal took over only days after the October revision, promising a simple monetary policy and borrowing costs high enough to tame inflation. He's since raised the benchmark interest rate by 675 basis points to 17%, stabilizing the lira as foreign investors returned.

Despite the change in policy guidance, though, price growth is unlikely to slow to single digits next year either, according to Nihan Ziya Erdem, chief economist at Garanti BBVA Securities. She says she expects that



to mean a period of tight monetary policy through the end of the coming year.

"Despite the appreciation in the lira in December, the increase in Brent oil prices to an average of \$50 per barrel caused fuel prices to increase," she said.

Turkey's November's overhaul of its economic management team -- installing Agbal and replacing the Treasury and Finance minister, spurred a 16% rally in the lira against the dollar. Still, the currency is down about 19% from a year earlier, fueling broad price pressures because Turkish producers rely on imports of raw materials and energy.

Retail prices in Turkey's largest city, Istanbul, rose 1.36% in December from the previous month, according to the city's Chamber of Commerce. Its annual retail inflation accelerated to 14.4% from 14.1% in November.

Turkey's interest rate adjusted for realized inflation is back above zero since October

The currency weakness was driven largely by low interest rates offered by Agbal's predecessor, who set borrowing costs below the inflation rate. If consumer prices rise in line with the median estimate of 14.2% in the survey, Turkey's interest rate would cap the year at about 2.8% above it.

Libya Starts Using New Exchange Rate as Economy Struggles

TRIPOLI (Dispatches) - The Central Bank of Libya on Sunday introduced a new unified exchange rate agreed last month after years of division between rival branches based on opposing sides of the front line.

As part of the change, the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli suspended a fee on foreign currency transactions that it introduced two years ago to bring the official rate closer to the black market rate.

The Central Bank of Libya board agreed to the new rate of 4.8 dinars to the United States dollar last month in its first full meeting for five years after splitting when the country divided between western and eastern factions.

In Tripoli, the black market rate on Sunday was 5 dinars to the dollar after dropping last week towards the new official rate.

"We'll have to wait three or four months to see how things go at commercial banks," said Amer, a currency dealer. Black market exchange shops in the east were mostly closed on Sunday waiting for the market to settle.

Malik al-Fakhri, an electronics dealer in Benghazi, said he had stopped using banks after 2013 because he lost too much money importing at the official rate and turned instead to the black market.

"The most important thing for the trader is stability," he said.

The new rate is an effective devaluation, meaning the cost of imported goods is likely to rise.

"This decision is a mistake that will harm citizens more than benefiting them and is only to satisfy traders," said Hatem al-Barghathi, also in Benghazi.

Martyr Soleimani...

FROM PAGE 1

Callamard argued that the act set a dangerous precedent based on which countries may opt to strategically eliminate high-ranking officials of their rivals outside the context of a known war, after classifying them as a "terrorist" who posed an undefined, future threat.

"And it means we also face the possibility that ALL soldiers, anywhere in the world at any time, may be deemed a legitimate target," she added.

Elsewhere in her remarks, the UN rapporteur said, "Further, by assassinating General Soleimani on Iraqi soil without first obtaining Iraq's consent, the US violated the territorial integrity of Iraq."

"What about the fact that, one year later, the US and Iran are still threatening each other, thus the whole region, if not the world, with further attacks?" she asked.

"Where is the global leadership mediating for its resolution? Demanding accountability for its prosecution? How are we to mend the law and standards there to protect us all, but damaged perhaps beyond repair? Where are the institutions ready and able to intervene, to act, to mend?" she added.

Israeli Claims...

FROM PAGE 1

Led by the Quds Force's former commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, the support helped Syria defeat the Takfiri terror group of Daesh in late 2017.

Hejazi went on by expanding on General Soleimani's personal traits as well as his contribution to the development of the Quds Force and the regional resistance axis.

He said the commander, who was assassinated in a United States' drone strike against Baghdad last January, enjoyed a practical and strategic character, and helped the IRGC branch "take a great step forward."

General Soleimani attended regionwide battlefronts over 40 years, never abandoning the frontline, Hejazi said.

The martyr helped invigorate the Palestinians, who used to be armed with just rocks, to such a level that has come to deter Israel from attacking them, the deputy commander said. "Because it (the Israeli regime) knows it would have to pay a dear cost if it attacked them," he noted. General Soleimani also contributed to the armament of Hezbollah, Hejazi said, adding that the Lebanese resistance movement now "possesses more missiles than the enemy imagines." The deputy commander, meanwhile, cited the Quds Force's current Commander Brigadier General Esmaeil Qa'ani as saying, "We will continue to pursue General Soleimani's path."

Iran Starts 20%...

FROM PAGE 1

The plan obliges the AEOI to produce at least 120 kg of 20% enriched uranium annually and store it inside the country within two months after the adoption of the law.

According to the motion, the AEOI should start the installation, gas injection, enrichment, and storage of nuclear materials up to an appropriate enrichment degree within a period of three months using at least 1,000 IR-2m centrifuges. The motion also requires the Iranian government to stop any regulatory access beyond the Additional Protocol within two months of its enactment in line with Articles 36 and 37 of the JCPOA which was signed between Iran and major world powers in 2015.

Meanwhile the European Union (EU) has reacted to Iran's decision to increase its uranium enrichment level, which was recently reported to the International Atomic Energy Agency. According to Sputnik, the European Union has claimed that Iran's move is a significant deviation from the nuclear deal. EU's remarks came while Russia's Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov in a tweet a few minutes ago wrote, "#Iran announced that it resumes enrichment of uranium to 20%. This isn't breaking news." "This step was predictable in the light of the law passed by the Iranian Parliament. The main point is that it remains reversible within possible normalization of the situation around #JCPOA," he added.

Tehran Closely...

FROM PAGE 1

The neighboring countries, he continued, know well how the United States' unilateralism and its acts of defiance have harmed regional nations.

"The U.S. would bear responsibility for the consequences of any adventure," the spokesman warned. "If any action is taken, we will respond clearly and without a moment's hesitation." In reference to the incident, Khatibzadeh said Iran and Iraq enjoy deep, historical relations that cannot be ruined by false flag measures.

"The policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region is good neighborliness," he emphasized. The spokesman said unlike the U.S., which hatches plots and uses its regional bases to inflict harm on others, Iran has tried to prevent Washington-Tehran hostilities from affecting the region.

Khatibzadeh also called for the expulsion of American forces from the region, but at the same time, he said Iran will never try to foist choosing between Iran and the U.S. upon its regional friends.

He further said Iran's foreign policy is not based on daily developments, stressing that close relations with China and Russia would not be affected by the U.S. administration's policies. Khatibzadeh rejected the notion that Iran's cooperation with Russia and China may be impacted by the next U.S. administration's probable decision to rejoin the 2015 nuclear deal. "Iran's foreign policy does not change according to daily developments," he stressed.

Describing China and Russia as the main parties cooperating with Iran under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Khatibzadeh said, "Our relations with China have reached a strategic level, and the 25-year (cooperation) document is a testimony to it."

He said Iran maintained cooperation with the Chinese officials after the US and Europe "imposed sanctions on themselves" regarding the JCPOA. The spokesman also emphasized that Iran's relations with Russia are "in the best conditions" in various arenas. Khatibzadeh said that Tehran will never negotiate about its missile and defense capability, stressing that the Americans know there won't be any such talks.

"As for Iran's defense capability, there has never been, there is no and there won't be any negotiation," Khatibzadeh said, adding that the American officials know it well that the issue of the defense capability is out of question and has nothing to do with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

He made it clear that according to the content of the JCPOA and the UN Security Council Resolution 2231, the issue of Iran's missiles is a finished issue.

The diplomat added that all resolutions were annulled on January 16, including resolution 1929, noting that a few restrictions that linger will be annulled in January 2023.

Referring to the incoming U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's remarks, Khatibzadeh reiterated that no talks will take place on JCPOA and his words have domestic consumption. Incoming U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told CNN on Sunday that the assassination of Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani did not make America safer or protect U.S. interests.

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Sainz Wins Dakar First Stage

BISHA (Dispatches) - Defending champion Carlos Sainz won the first stage of the Dakar Rally on Sunday. The Spaniard, a three-time Dakar winner, covered the 277km special between Jeddah and Bisha in his Mini Buggy in 3hr 18min 56sec. Sainz finished 25sec ahead of French teammate Stephane Peterhansel, with Czech Martin Prokop (Ford) rounding out the podium.

Kriel to Retain IBF Light Flyweight Crown

WASHINGTON (AFP) - Nicaragua's Felix Alvarado stopped South Africa's DeeJay Kriel after 99 seconds of the 10th round to retain his International Boxing Federation light flyweight title. Making his U.S. debut in Dallas, Texas, Alvarado improved to 36-2 with his 31st stoppage inside the distance. Alvarado stretched his win streak to 18 fights since losing to Argentina's Juan Carlos Reveco by decision for a flyweight title in June 2014.

Ronaldo Double Lifts Juve, Milan Stay Top

TURIN (Dispatches) - Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice as champions Juventus bounced back from their first Serie A defeat of the season by beating Udinese 4-1 on Sunday to move up to fifth place.

The Milan clubs are top of the Italian league with Juventus 10 points adrift of the summit having played a game less.

Leaders AC Milan stayed one point ahead of Inter with a 2-0 win over midtable Benevento despite playing an hour a man down. City rivals Inter crushed lowly Crotona 6-2 with Lautaro Martinez bagging his first hat-trick for the club.

But Milan restored their advantage thanks to a Franck Kessie penalty on 15 minutes and Rafael Leao's terrific curling strike from a tight angle shortly after half-time.

Sandro Tonali's sending off after 33 minutes for a high tackle on Artur Ionita did not hold back Stefano Pioli's side. Gianluigi Donnarumma was solid in the Milan goal while Gianluca Caprari dragged a penalty wide on the hour.

"We don't let ourselves be put under pressure by the results of the opponents," said Pioli whose side are unbeaten in 27 league games going back to March. "We're ambitious, we're not hiding it and we aim to win the next match as well against Juventus (on Wednesday)."

Ronaldo once again proved decisive for Juventus scoring a goal in each half to bring his league-leading tally to 14 this campaign and teeing up Federico Chiesa after the break.

Paulo Dybala added the fourth deep into injury time as Andrea Pirlo's side moved on from their shock 3-0 loss to Fiorentina last time out.

At the San Siro, Martinez and Romelu Lukaku combined to devastating effect for Inter who have now won eight league games in a row. The strike duo were involved in five goals although midfielder Arturo Vidal was hauled off at half-time after conceding a penalty in a woeful display.

Antonio Conte's side had been pegged back 2-2 at the break with Niccolo Zanellato scoring first with a 12th-minute header for the rock bottom Calabrians with the worst attack in the league. But Martinez picked up a Lukaku cross to



pull the hosts level eight minutes later.

Martinez had a role in Inter's second just after half an hour when Crotona defender Luca Marrone turned the ball into his own net under pressure from the Argentina forward.

Vladimir Golemic put the sides level six minutes later after Vidal fouled Arkadiusz Reca, with a furious Conte replacing the Chilean with Stefano Sensi at the break.

Martinez restored the lead for Inter before the hour connecting with a Marcelo Brozovic through ball following a Lukaku back-heel, and headed in his third with 12 minutes to go off a rebound. Lukaku blasted in his 50th goal for Inter after 64 minutes but limped off after taking a knock to his right thigh 10 minutes later, before Achraf Hakimi rounded out the win with three minutes to go.

Roma held third place, six points behind Inter, with captain Edin Dzeko scoring with a quarter of an hour to go in a 1-0 win in the rain over former Roma coach Claudio Ranieri's Sampdoria. The capital side are ahead of Napoli who swept past Cagliari 4-1 with Piotr Zielinski scoring twice and Hirving Lozano and Lorenzo Insigne also on target late, the latter from the penalty spot.

In a clash of European rivals, Atalanta whipped Sassuolo 5-1 with Colombian Duvan Zapata scoring twice.

The Bergamo side were again playing without captain Papu Gomez who has fallen out with coach Gian Piero Gasperini.

Vlhova Wins First World Cup Slalom of 2021



ZAGREB (Dispatches) - Petra Vlhova won the first women's World Cup slalom of 2021 on Sunday, five days after her four-year-long joint winning streak with Mikaela Shiffrin ended.

In tough conditions due to fog and rain, the overall leader from Slovakia beat Katharina Liensberger of Austria by five-hundredths of a second.

Shiffrin was 0.27 behind in fourth.

At a night race in Semmering last Tuesday, Michelle Gisin became the first skier other than Vlhova or Shiffrin to win a World Cup slalom in 29 races since January 2017, when Frida Hansdotter triumphed in Flachau.

Vlhova and Gisin are 1-2 in both the slalom and the overall standings.

On Sunday, the Swiss skier was 0.22 behind in third as the top four from the first run remained unchanged.

Defending overall champion Federica Brignone skipped the race in order to train for upcoming speed events in Austria.

Heavy rain on Saturday weakened the surface of the Crveni Spust course just outside Croatia's capital. Course workers added salt that hardened the top layer but also created a lot of bumps.

Mulder Sparks Sri Lankan Collapse

JOHANNESBURG (AFP) - Fast bowler Anrich Nortje claimed career-best figures of six for 56 as Sri Lanka collapsed to 157 all out on the first day of the second and final Test against South Africa at the Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on Sunday.

South Africa were 22 for no wicket at tea. Sri Lanka were reasonably placed at 71 for one after winning the toss, with Kusal Perera striking an aggressive 60.

They came within 20 minutes of surviving the always-tricky day one pre-lunch period at the Wanderers with minimal damage before all-rounder Wiaan Mulder sparked a calamitous collapse.

The left-handed Perera struck 11 boundaries, punishing anything loose against the fast bowlers but the medium-paced Mulder slowed his momentum with a maiden over. With the first ball of his next over, Mulder had Perera caught at gully.

He followed up with the wickets of Kusal Mendis and Lahiru Thirimanne in a spell of three wickets for one run in three overs.

The tall Nortje had debutant Minod Bhanuka caught at first slip off the last ball before lunch. Four wickets fell for 13 runs in four overs before the interval.

Nortje, who made the first breakthrough of the match when he had Sri Lankan captain Dimuth Karunaratne caught behind in the tenth over, claimed four more wickets after lunch.

Sri Lanka, hit hard by injuries, made four changes from the side beaten by an innings and 45 runs in the first Test at Centurion.

Batsmen Dhananjaya de Silva and Dinesh Chandimal and fast bowlers Kasun Rajitha and Lahiru Kumara were all ruled out of action.

They were replaced by Thirimanne, Bhanuka, Dushmantha Chameera and Asitha Fernando.

Bhanuka and Fernando were making their Test debuts.

Sri Lanka were again without leading fast bowler Suranga Lakmal, who had not recovered from a hamstring injury.

South Africa were unchanged.



FIFA's decision taken late Saturday allows Trippier to return to play for Diego Simeone's side until the appeal is heard at a crucial period of the season.

Suspend Trippier's 10-Week Ban

MADRID (Dispatches) - FIFA has suspended Kieran Trippier's 10-week ban for breaching betting rules, freeing the England international to play for his club Atletico Madrid pending appeal.

The 30-year-old was barred from any football activity by the English Football Association last week, ruling him out for at least 13 matches for the Spanish league highfliers.

They are lying second in La Liga, just one point behind Real Madrid but have games in hand and can regain the summit latter Sunday.

Last week the FA banned him until February 28 with a £70,000 fine (94,000) after being found guilty of charges surrounding his move from Tottenham to Atletico.

One of England's standout performers in their run to the 2018 World Cup semi-finals he denied the seven charges.

The alleged offences took place in July 2019 around the time he completed his transfer from Tottenham to Atletico for a fee in the region of £20million.

FIFA's temporary lifting of the suspension pending the appeal was initiated by Atletico who felt it unfair the player would miss a large chunk of Atletico's matches but none for England.

Man City Outclass Chelsea In 3-1 Win

LONDON (Dispatches) - Frank Lampard said Chelsea will have to go through "periods of pain" to reach the standards set by Manchester City after Pep Guardiola's men outclassed the Blues in a 3-1 win at Stamford Bridge on Sunday.

City brushed off a series of coronavirus-related absences as goals from Ilkay Gundogan, Phil Foden and Kevin De Bruyne killed the game as a contest inside 35 minutes.

Victory lifts City to within four points of Liverpool and Manchester United at the top of the table, but with a game in hand on both to come.

Chelsea were expected to challenge for the title themselves after a £220 million (\$300 million) spending spree in the transfer market, but a run of one win in six games has left them down in eighth, seven points off the pace having played a game more than the leaders.

Roman Abramovich has dismissed plenty of Chelsea managers in the past for similar spells of form and the pressure in mounting on Lampard to prove he can mould a talented squad of individuals into a team capable of competing for major honors.

"There are periods of pain we are going to go through. That was painful in the first half for the players," said Lampard, who publicly lambasted his side's effort in a 3-1 defeat to Arsenal last weekend.

"It'll be the first to look at myself today. When I look at this squad, I know there is uplift in this team but I know where we are at because I can see and I know the work it takes to be at the level Man City showed today.

"It's normal that as a squad we take little knocks along the way, now it is a test."

City had scored more than twice in a league game just once since their opening match of the season.



New York Knicks Squeak Out Win Over Indiana Pacers

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Austin Rivers hit a 3-pointer that gave the New York Knicks the lead for good late in the fourth quarter and added the clinching layup with 35.3 seconds remaining as the Knicks surprised the host Indiana Pacers, 106-102.

Rivers, who played his second game for the Knicks after missing the first four games due to a groin injury, scored 15 points off the bench for New York, which has won three of four.

RJ Barrett scored a team-high 25 points and was 4 of 5 on 3-point attempts. The Knicks hit 44.4 percent (12 of 27) of their 3-pointers Saturday, two nights after shooting a franchise record-low 8.3 percent (3 of 36) from the 3-point line. Julius Randle finished with 12 points and 11 rebounds, Elfrid Payton had 19 points and eight rebounds, and Mitchell Robinson went of 8 of 10 shooting and netted 16 points.

Malcolm Brogdon scored 33 points for the Pacers, who have lost two of three. Domantas Sabonis (13 points, 13 rebounds) had his sixth double-double in as many games to start the season, while Myles Turner scored 17 points. Victor Oladipo finished with 16 points, and Justin Holiday added 12 points off the bench. John Wall had game highs of 28 points, six assists and three steals as host Houston Rockets capped a back-to-back sweep of Sacramento Kings 102-94.

Rockets guard James Harden, who poured in 33 points with eight assists in a 122-119 victory over the Kings on New Year's Eve, was a late scratch with a right ankle sprain. Houston found sufficient scoring elsewhere, with Eric Gordon replacing Harden and recording 21 points. Christian Wood notched his third double-double for the Rockets with 20 points and 15 rebounds. De'Aaron Fox led the Kings with 23 points, while Buddy Hield chipped in 17 points and five 3-pointers. All five Kings starters scored in double figures, but after a scorching start, Sacramento finished just 35 of 90 (38.9 percent) from the floor.

