

**Health Ministry Spokeswoman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on Sunday
That Some 102 More Iranians Have
Died From the Coronavirus
Disease Over the Past 24 Hours
Bringing the Total Deaths to 55,540**

IRAN NEWS

**Iranian Civil Aviation Organization
Said It Has Extended a Ban on
Flights From and to the UK Till
Jan. 19 Over Fear From the
New Coronavirus Variant Upon a
Request From Health Ministry**

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On Winning Track**



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Iran Strategic Weapons Thwart Plot to Disintegrate Region

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian defense minister says the strategic weapons produced by the Islamic Republic and used by resistance forces have prevented a hegemonic plot to disintegrate the region.

"The hegemonic system used all its scientific, financial, and arms capabilities to support terrorists and cause the region to lose its integrity and ensure the Zionist regime's security," Brigadier General Amir Hatami said.

"However, despite all these efforts, Iran's strategic weapons used by resistance forces prevented the realization of their objectives," he added.

"Ultra-regional powers want the Islamic Iran to remain weak and dependent, but we have not only maintained our independence throughout all these years, but have boosted our power as well," he said.

The defense minister praised the "unmatched and unique" position of the country, and said the enemy's plot to create a "geopolitical recession" in Iran will never succeed.

Hatami noted that the enemies created terrorist groups in West Asia in order to achieve their goals, but that never came through thanks to Iran's "strategic presence".

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FM Not to Rest Until Martyr Soleimani Assassins Brought to Justice

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh says Iran's diplomatic apparatus will not rest until those responsible for the assassination of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani are brought to justice.

The official made the remarks to Lebanon's al-Ahed news website on Sunday that marked the first martyrdom anniversary of the senior Iranian anti-terror commander, who was assassinated by the United States early last year.

"Following up the issue of General Soleimani's assassination is among the Foreign Ministry's priorities. The diplomatic apparatus will keep up its efforts until it hands over those -- who ordered, plotted, and perpetrated this atrocity -- to justice," he noted.

The Americans "committed a great act of folly" by resorting to the assassination, and they are "the main losers," Khatibzadeh said.

The official noted that the trend of US expulsion from the region has expedited since the assassination and Washington's dream of disintegrating the regional resistance front has failed to materialize.

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Foreign Investments In Iran Up by 128%



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Some \$ 1.447 billion of foreign investment was approved in Iran from the beginning of Iranian year by December 20, 2020 in the industrial, mine and business sectors compared with last year.

According to Iranian Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade during the first nine months of the current Iranian year (March 20-December 20), some 129 foreign investments at a value of \$ 4.384 billion were approved in Iran. The Industry, mining and trade sector with an investment of 1.477 billion, are on top rank in foreign investment. The Approved foreign investments concerned Germany, China, Turkey and the United Kingdom, respectively in terms of amount of investment.

Meanwhile over 17.46 million tons of basic commodities worth \$8.763 billion have been imported to the country during the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year (March 20-December 20, 2020), the spokesman of the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA) said.

Imports of basic goods in the mentioned period decreased by two percent in terms of weight compared to the same time span in the previous year, according to Rouhollah Latifi.

As reported by the IRICA, more than 2,136,175 tons of basic goods were cleared from the country's customs during the Ninth Iranian calendar months of Azar (November 21- December 20, 2020), about 450,000 tons more than the previous month.

Meanwhile, a total of 25 million tons of commodities were imported into the country during the mentioned nine months, of which 70 percent were basic goods.

Corn, barley, oilseeds, crude and liquid edible oil, and soybean meal were the top five items imported in the mentioned period, with over 12.296 million tons of the mentioned products worth over \$4.145 being shipped into the country.

The said products accounted for 49 percent of the country's total imports as well as 70.5 percent of the imports of basic goods in the mentioned period, according to Latifi.

Iran imported 25 million tons of basic goods during the previous Iranian calendar year, based on the data released by the IRICA.

According to the IRICA Head Mehdi Mirashrafi, 35 million tons of commodities were imported into the country in the mentioned year, of which 25 million tons were basic goods.

India Has No Immediate Plans to Resume Oil Purchases From Iran

NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - India has "no immediate plans" to resume oil purchases from Iran as American sanctions remain in place, and it will take time for the incoming Joe Biden administration to return to the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), ThePrint has learnt.

Sources said India believes the Biden administration will not have an easy time resuming talks with Iran under the JCPOA, or bringing Tehran back in line with the terms of the agreement.

The sources said the sanctions imposed by the outgoing Donald Trump administration will thus remain in place for some time, and so, India is taking a "cautious approach". The expectation is that with the U.S. returning to the JCPOA, a lot of "tough negotiations will take place" before other countries are able to do business with Iran.

As soon as the U.S. begins discussing the JCPOA, Iran's first demand will be to lift the sanctions. "Only after all this is done will other avenues open up and world businesses will start engaging with Iran again," said a source who refused to be identified.

Iran was among the top three countries from where India used to import oil. From the Iranian perspective, India was its second biggest oil customer after China. However, under pressure from the U.S., India brought its oil purchase from Iran down to zero in May 2019. Last month, Oil Minister Dharmendra Pradhan had stated that India hopes to resume crude oil imports from Iran after Biden takes charge as US President on 20 January.

The Trump administration had walked out of the JCPOA in May 2018, three years after it was signed by the Barack Obama administration alongside the UK, France, China, Russia and Germany. Iran said last year that it would stop abiding by the deal, which seeks to restrict the country's nuclear activities.

Due to the economic sanctions imposed by the U.S., India has also not been able to continue with its plans for the expansion of the Chabahar Port project, which entailed building of a rail and road network.

Last year, in September, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had made separate trips to Iran, at a time when Beijing and Tehran were preparing to sign a whopping \$400 billion economic and strategic deal. In December, India, Iran and Uzbekistan held a trilateral working group meeting on the joint use of Chabahar Port as a transit port. "Besides Uzbekistan, other Central Asian countries have also shown interest in using the port. India seeks to cooperate closely with regional countries on this issue," the Ministry of External Affairs had said in a statement.

Another fallout of India not resuming crude oil purchases from Iran has been that it is rapidly losing its share in the west Asian country's basmati rice market, which is being taken over by Pakistan.

ViewPoint By: Hamid Reza Naghashian Soleimani Is Assuredly Alive

The anniversary of assassination of exalted martyred brigadier of Iran and Islam Haj Qassem Soleimani in all over the world incited a grief that since the martyrdom of him and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and their comrades, this grief has not cooled down. A grief that at the very first sight look explodes the revenge feeling inside human and makes him burst into crying and tearing.

The number of interviews which go viral in the cyber space in Arabic, Turkish, Chinese, English, Spanish and even in French language and is so big that at least 5 percent of them could be translated and it is an indication to this point that Soleimani and his comrades have created a passion in the hearts of the world people, whether the adolescent or the old, which is similar to the passion of the third Imam of Shiites, Imam Hussein (A) towards Islam.

Almighty Allah in different chapters of the Holy Quran points to "martyr". In the second chapter of Holy Quran, Al-Baqarah (the Cow), and in the verse 154 He says, "And say not of those who are slain in the way of Allah. They are dead. Nay, they are living, though ye perceive (it) not." In the Battle of Badr which was the first war waged by the infidels on the dear Prophet of Islam, fourteen Muslims were martyred that six of them were from Muhajirun (the first converts to Islam and the Islamic prophet Muhammad (PBUH)'s advisors and relatives, who emigrated with him from Mecca to Medina) and eight from the Ansar (the local inhabitants of Medina who, in Islamic tradition, took the Islamic prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his followers (the Muhajirun) into their homes when they emigrated from Mecca during the hijra).

Some people used to say so-and-so was dead. Then this verse descended by Allah and forbid them to avoid such thought. Allah says, "And say not of those who are slain in the way of Allah, They are dead." Nay, they are living, though ye perceive (it) not."

Not only are martyrs' names or impacts of their efforts alive and will stay alive but also they have a genuine purgatory life, a life filled with joy, livelihood, and good news, a life close to God's blessing where there is no room for fear and grief. In this regard, and in the verse 169 of the third chapter of Holy Quran, Aal Imran (the Family of Omran), Almighty God yells, "Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord". At the end of the Battle of Uhud, Abu Sufyan loudly shouted, "These 70 dead of Muslims in the Battle of Uhud instead of our 70 dead in the Battle of Badr." But Almighty Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said, "Our dead rest in Paradise but yours are in the hell." So the Almighty has responded to the infidels in this chapter of the Holy Quran, in order words, He says "do not think those who are killed on path of God die but they are beside God and live and even earn their livelihood." **See Page 7**

Tehran, Islamabad To Discuss Anti-Narcotics Cooperation

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian and Pakistani anti-narcotics police chiefs will discuss ways of boosting cooperation in a bid to counter the traffic of illegal drugs.

Head of Iran's Anti-Narcotics Police 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 has welcomed by a group of officials of the Pakistan Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) at Islamabad International Airport.

Karimi is scheduled to meet and hold talks with some Pakistani officials, including Minister of Interior Sheikh Rasheed Ahmad, Commander of Pakistan Anti-Narcotics Force Major-General Arif Malik, and Federal Minister for Narcotics Control Ijaz Ahmed Shah.

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Reciprocal Action Against Perpetrator of Martyr Soleimani Assassination

TEHRAN (IP) - On the martyrdom anniversary of Lt. Gen. Soleimani and the 40th day of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh's assassination, Iranian MPs have prepared a bill entitled "Reciprocal action against the U.S., the main perpetrator of General Soleimani assassination.

The bill was received by the presiding board of the Islamic Consultative Assembly on Wednesday, December 29, to be

referred to the parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission for expert review.

The necessity to respond to the evils of American terrorists in the host country," prohibition of negotiating on armament power, the prohibition of import of goods and services from the United States, and condemnation of the assassination of Lt. Gen. Soleimani" are among the provisions of the bill.

Vaccinating Priority Groups Against COVID-19 To Start in Weeks

IRANM NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani has unveiled plans for a mass rollout of an inoculation program across the country within the next few weeks, saying the administration has identified the key groups that should be offered COVID-19 vaccination first.

In an address to a Sunday session of the Administration's Economic Coordination Headquarters, President Rouhani highlighted the government's serious efforts to develop a homegrown vaccine for the coronavirus and purchase it from various foreign companies.

He expressed hope that the delivery of coronavirus vaccine to Iran in the coming weeks would allow the start of a nationwide vaccination program.

The president said the inoculation scheme will begin according to a list of priorities in the target groups, noting that the medical staff and the elderly will be the first to get the vaccine.

After hearing a report from the Health Ministry and the Central Bank of Iran about the plans to finance the purchase of coronavirus vaccine from the foreign producers, President Rouhani called on the Central Bank, the Foreign Ministry, and the Plan and Budget Organization to work with the Health Ministry for detailed plans to expedite the purchase and import of the vaccine.

The president further pointed to his administration's experience of fighting a tough



economic war for three years, saying the cabinet has devised the next year's national budget with reliance on the experience of dealing with a full-blown war and neutralizing the inhumane sanctions and with the purpose of economic development and improving the livelihood of people.

He also dismissed any decision that may mount pressures on people and the country's economy, calling for efforts to create a promising prospect for economic development.

The president finally underscored that the next year's budget has been devised on the basis of a realistic view of the tax incomes and the oil revenues with a sensible prediction of economic progress.

In late December 2020, the president said his administration has devised a realistic, detailed and targeted budget for the next Iranian year with the purpose of nullifying the sanctions.

The budget bill is based on an in-depth analysis of needs of people and is cohesive, targeted, realistic and accurate, he explained.

General Soleimani Autobiography Debuts With Leader's Autograph



TEHRAN (PressTV) – Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei has signed an autobiography written by Iran's martyred senior anti-terror commander, Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani.

Last week, Ayatollah Khamenei lent the autograph to the book, whose title translates as "I was Not Afraid of Anything." The autobiography was unveiled at a ceremony in Tehran on Sunday.

The Leader's note reads, "Anything that brings the memory of our dear martyr to the fore appeals to the eye and the heart."

"Even though, God has brought his memory to the height of prominence and, in this manner, rewarded the purity of his good deeds, each and every one of us also has a duty," Ayatollah Khamenei wrote, underlining the need for the Iranian nation to commemorate General Soleimani.

The cover of General Soleimani's autobiography in Persian that was released on his martyrdom anniversary on Jan. 3, 2021.

The 136-page book is the first work to be published by Haj Qasem Publications that is tasked with safeguarding his legacy through written content.

The book features handwritten notes by the general, spanning from his childhood years through his youth and up to his participation in the struggle that led to the victory of Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Biden Should Return to JCPOA Not Only in Word, But in Deed

TEHRAN (IFP) - Foreign ministry spokesman says U.S. President-elect Joe Biden should show in practice that he would like to re-enter the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Saeed Khatibzadeh noted that the next U.S. administration should walk the walk, and not just talk the talk.

"What we are constantly hearing today is that they (Biden and his camp) keep saying that they will unconditionally return to the JCPOA. We believe the United States should fully live up to its commitments under [UN Security Council] Resolution 2231," he said in an interview with Fars News Agency.

"We have also announced that if the other party (the US) effectively, and I repeat, 'effectively,' which means just signing a piece of paper won't do. If they return to the JCPOA effectively, we will reverse all the measures we have adopted to scale down our obligations under the JCPOA," he added.

"But this will happen the day when the United States effectively implements the JCPOA, i.e., the U.S. fulfills its commitments under Resolution 2231," the spokesman said.

"All of the United States' commitments are clear and written down," he added.

Khatibzadeh noted that the nuclear deal was drawn up based on complete mistrust in the Americans.

"The reason why the JCPOA contains so many pages and provisions is that there was no trust between us. ... When two people do not trust each other, they write down all possible scenarios. The JCPOA was drawn up based on absolute distrust," said Khatibzadeh.

"It is pretty obvious that we do not trust the United States at all. And in recent days, months and years, our mistrust has grown and the wall of distrust has become higher," he explained.

"The United States should win our trust, not on paper, but in practice.

"The next few weeks are those vital weeks when the other side will either begin to make good on its commitments or lose the chance of [using] diplomacy, which was once created with the conclusion of the JCPOA," he said.

Zarif Says Any Fireworks Will Backfire Badly

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has warned that Israeli agent provocateurs are planning to provoke a war through attacks on American forces in Iraq, advising outgoing US President Donald Trump to avoid falling in such a "trap."

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif issued the warning in a post on his official Twitter account on Saturday on the first anniversary of the assassination of Iran's legendary anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani by the United States.

"New intelligence from Iraq indicate that Israeli agent-provocateurs are plotting attacks against Americans—putting an outgoing Trump in a bind with a fake casus belli," the top Iranian diplomat said.

New intelligence from Iraq indicate that Israeli agent-provocateurs are plotting attacks against Americans—putting an outgoing Trump in a bind with a fake casus belli.

Zarif advised Trump to be cautious of the trap, adding,

"Any fireworks will backfire badly, particularly against your same BFFs", (an initialism for best friends forever).

His tweet came after two nuclear-capable American B-52 bombers flew over the Persian Gulf on Wednesday after nonstop flights to the region from their US-based hangars. It was the third time in six weeks that American bombers were conducting long-range flights off the Iranian coast.

The latest deployments came after the US Navy announced the arrival of a nuclear-powered submarine in the Persian Gulf last week. The USS Georgia passed the Strait of Hormuz accompanied by two American warships, making it the first missile-loaded submarine of its kind to enter the Persian Gulf in eight years.

The region has witnessed escalating tensions since outgoing US President Trump accused Iran of playing a role in attacks on the American embassy in Iraq late last month, which Tehran has dismissed as false flag operations.

Gen. Soleimani Manifestation of Iranian Commanders' Valor

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Vice-president and Head of Foundation of Martyrs and War Veterans' Affairs Saeed Ohadi on Saturday said that Iran's anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani was the clear manifestation of all commanders' valor in the war against the enemies of Islam.

General Soleimani stood up to the ISIS terrorist group heading to Baghdad and helped the Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) to be organized, Ohadi noted.

What is significant is that he should be emulated as a school of thought not just as an ordinary individual, he underscored.

Iran's anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani and the acting commander of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) - known as the Hashd al-Shaabi - Abu Mahdi Al-Mohandis, separately leaving Baghdad airport in two cars were targeted and assassinated on the 3rd of January this year on the instruction of U.S. President Donald Trump.

Gov't Pushing for Development of Knowledge-Based Companies

TEHRAN (IFP) - Vice-President for Science and Technology Sorena Sattari has highlighted his organization's strategy to support the domestic knowledge-based and innovative companies.

In a meeting with the lawmakers representing Tehran in the Iranian Parliament, held on Sunday, Vice-President Sattari stressed the need to settle the country's problems with scientific methods and considering the domestic ecosystem.

The Vice Presidency for Science and Technology is currently pursuing two major strategies simultaneously, namely the development of knowledge-based and innovative companies and the promotion of soft technologies, he added.

Sattari noted that enhancement of soft and innovative technologies in Iran would create employment, promote innovation, and generate wealth for the country, citing new soft technologies in various sectors such as the motion pictures industry, publishing, video game industry, education, cultural heritage, fashion and clothing industry, and handicrafts sector.

The vice-president also criticized the educational system for its failure to train entrepreneurs, saying the Parliament's support for the Vice Presidency for Science and Technology would accelerate the achievement of development goals on the basis of science and knowledge.

In the meeting, the vice-president and the lawmakers agreed on the formation of a "joint task force on science and technology".

The MPs also expressed their support for the vice presidency and its scientific programs.

Martyr Soleimani Thwarted U.S. Plot

KERMAN (IRNA) - Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) spokesman Brigadier General Ramezan Sharif said the U.S. seeks to plunder nations in the region and disintegrating Islamic states, adding that Martyr Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani thwarted the U.S. plot to disintegrate states in the region.

Speaking in a meeting to commemorate anniversary of General Soleimani's martyrdom, Shrif said that formation of a powerful Islamic force for the first time in 200 years helped Muslims fight united against a common enemy.

The U.S. officials did not expect General Soleimani to become a national hero and tried for 10 years to tarnish his image.

Range Limit to 2,000km for Iranian Missiles Not Everlasting

TEHRAN (MNA) – Stating that Iran's missile capability is non-negotiable, the Commander of IRGC Aerospace Force said that the range limit to 2,000 kilometers for Iranian missiles is not everlasting.

"According to the sublime instruction of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran will support anyone and/or any country that confronts the Zionist regime," said Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh.

"What you see in missile power existing in Palestine's Gaza and Lebanon is supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran," he added. He noted that Iran has given military knowledge and technology to countries of the Resistant Front, adding, "Today, Palestine has been equipped with sophisticated missiles and this issue has caused fear in the Zionist regime and high power and strength of Axis of Resistance cannot be compared with 10 years ago."

In general, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and other Islamic countries enjoy pinpointing missiles to confront the Zionist regime, Hajizadeh said. Pointing to Iran's missile attack on US Ain al-Asad Airbase in Iraq's Al-Anbar Governorate after the assassination of Martyr Gen. Soleimani, he said, "In fact, Iran undermined prestige and grandeur of the U.S. in international arenas."

"We were ready for the Americans' response, and if they responded, we would hit all their bases from Jordan to Iraq and the Persian Gulf and all their ships, even in the Indian Ocean," Hajizadeh added. Regarding Iran's missile power and some efforts to limit it, he highlighted, "Iran's missile capability is non-negotiable and nobody allowed to negotiate on this issue and that is the red line."

He stressed that the range limit to 2,000 kilometers for Iranian missiles is not everlasting.

Tehran Urges Developing Ties With Baghdad

NAJAF (IP) - The Iranian ambassador to Iraq called for developing economic cooperation between the two countries in a meeting with "Najaf Ashraf" Governor on the sideline of a trip to the holy city of Najaf at the first anniversary of the Martyrdom of Lt Gen Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

"Iraj Masjedi", Iran's ambassador to Iraq, on Saturday met with "Najaf Ashraf" Governor Luay al-Yassiry to discuss ways to strengthen joint cooperation in all mutually interesting fields including economic cooperation and tourism.

The governor of Najaf Ashraf also supported the joint projects between Iran and Iraq and talked with the Iranian ambassador about expanding cooperation, especially in the field of tourism and pilgrimage.

The Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq receive several thousands of tourists and pilgrims to holy places every year due to their cultural and religious commonalities.

Attending martyr Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis tomb, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq paid tribute to the martyr on Saturday.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Iraqi PMU (Al-Hashd al-Shabi), and Lt General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Quds Force, along with eight others of their companions, became martyred in a US military terrorist attack on their convoy departing Baghdad airport on Friday morning, January 3, 2020.

The reaction of the owner of the largest date grove in Iran to the budget bill of 1400:

People's livelihood Problems are Increasing

Agriculture in Iran is not profitable in the current situation

Although the government is constantly chanting the slogan of improving the living conditions and welfare of the people, a look at the budget of 1400 shows that if this budget is realized, the living problems of the people will increase. This sentence is said by Dr. Mohammad Reza Kamali, an expert and veteran economic activist of the country. He believes that if the government does not think about amending next year's budget bill, it will surely face a significant deficit with its dream figures. He is a member of the Iran-Belarus Friendship Association. He emphasizes that in the current situation, due to the spread of the Corona virus as well as the intensification of international sanctions, the sale of Iranian oil and the country's foreign trade in general is in trouble. Therefore, the government must adopt policies that will save the Iranian economy from the current situation. However, next year's budget has been formulated in such a way that it is not only a cure for economic challenges, stagflation and corporate business problems, but also more politically closed. It can even further weaken the private sector in the country. This will put Iran's state economy in a more critical position. It will also increase the living problems of the people, especially the poor, such as farmers. In addition to working in the economic field, Dr. Kamali also owns the largest date palm grove in Iran. "Agriculture is not profitable in Iran at all," he said. This is a very thought-provoking topic. Governments are expected to consider arranging for agriculture to grow and develop as a valuable area for the country's economy. Following the conversation with Dr. Mohammad Reza Kamali, an analysis of the situation of the country's foreign trade, the recent decision of the Central Bank on trade, the supply of dates on the stock exchange, the shortcomings of the 1400 budget bill, etc. are presented.



it can be said that the rise in the price of the dollar, which is the basis of all export and import activities, has created the ground for the high price of goods.

How do you assess the current state of exports and foreign trade in general?

There are two very important issues with the current trade; First, the corona, which is a global problem and has posed many challenges for countries like Iran in the red. The second issue is the escalation of sanctions, which has severely affected economic actors in the field of trade and banking. Another important point is that in such a situation where there is a need for empathy and coordination, we see the performance of the islands of different government agencies in various fields, which has caused exports and imports to be as they should be and may not be in good condition. We now see that the directives of each part of the government are contradictory. In this regard, we can refer to the recent decision of the Central Bank, which closes the way for exports and trade, while we do not know on what basis these decisions are made. The next point is why the Supreme Export Council does not take action in this regard and does not give a special order in a situation where the recent directive issued by the Central Bank has closed the hands of many exporters. The cabinet and the chamber are at odds, and there is no way out of coordination between government agencies in consultation with the private sector. This makes foreign trade difficult and ultimately hurts the people. However, with the coordination of the Ministry of SAMT and the Chamber of Commerce to adopt policies and communicate approvals, at least many economic problems can be prevented. In terms of foreign trade, we also face political factions that ultimately trouble the economy. For example, the issue of the FATF and sanctions is an issue that needs to be examined and decided from a professional perspective. As you ask any economist or expert about the FATF today, they will tell you that although the consequences of the FATF are economic and livelihood, the decision-making process is political. In fact, the internal resistance to its acceptance has a political aspect. In the current situation, given that the government's revenues have fallen sharply due to declining oil sales, it is necessary to focus more on exports in order to have more currency for the country through non-oil sectors.

How do you see the import situation in the current situation?

In the current situation, many factories are facing problems in the field of raw material supply, to the point that in some cases we even see that production units are operating at the lowest capacity or have stopped their production line. The fact is that there is currently no acceptable coordination between decision-making bodies and those involved in the economy, and this has led to imports not being in a good position. While solving such problems requires strong determination and will, and most importantly coordination between different organs.

What is your opinion about the policies of the new Minister Samt? Why do we face the sudden changes of some managers every day, such as the CEO of the Export Guarantee Fund of Iran? Wouldn't such measures hurt exports?

There is not much time left until the end of the twelfth government, and usually any changes made to the directors of the various departments by the ministers end to the detriment of all the people. In other words, it takes six months for the new manager to adjust to the new situation, while we no longer have time for that. Therefore, my suggestion is that the ministers of the twelfth government, instead of making changes in the last days of the government, give the necessary instructions to make the necessary reforms. Given the government's current short time, the changes will not be very beneficial and will exacerbate problems in various areas, including exports.

As an expert in agriculture, how do you see government policies in this area?

The government's policy in the field of agriculture is not evaluated as positive at all, because we face a shortage of some crops due to the officials' inattention to issues such as the one-year cultivation pattern. Next year, so much is produced from one product that all products must be discarded. In fact, in this regard, the government has not implemented a proper policy, so that in different cases and in relation to the production of each agricultural product, we have clearly seen the existence of problems in recent years. However, mismanagement in this sector will ultimately be to the

detriment of farmers and consumers, and intermediaries who buy agricultural products will benefit in any case. For example, this year, intermediaries bought dates from a farm for six thousand toman per kilogram and offered them to retailers for about 40,000 toman. Of course, part of this number is related to packaging, which is not more than 10%, and the rest goes to brokers and intermediaries and does not allow profit to reach the farmer.

As the owner of the largest date farm in the country, have you achieved acceptable profitability in production and export this year or not?

The largest date farm in the country in the tropics, as well as farms producing rosemary, potatoes, wheat, barley, chickpeas, etc. in the cold regions belong to me. I can boldly say that none of these agricultural lands in the tropical and cold regions are very profitable, because the general policy of the government on this sector is very weak. In this way, the crop stays on the ground for one year and the crop becomes rare the next year. But despite the government's inappropriate policies in this area, farmers have to pay for planting, holding and harvesting costs for their crops, which would be unprofitable if production was not profitable. Meanwhile, high-interest bank loans do not help farmers at all. All these cases have ultimately made agriculture unprofitable in the current situation in Iran and farmers are not in a good financial position. While such a problem is painful and makes farmers inevitably look for other ways to earn a living. In terms of exports, not much has been done due to the corona and the discussion of sanctions. For example, in the past, food and products such as citrus fruits and pomegranates were easily exported to countries such as the UAE, but now this is not possible and exports are difficult. The same is true for dates, and a country like Russia does not buy this product from Iran due to safety and health issues related to the corona. Previously, Iranian dates were exported to three very important countries, including the UAE, India and the United Kingdom, but in the current situation, such a possibility is not available.

Explain the situation of the date market and the pricing discussion of this product. Dates have different prices in different countries, but in our country there is no reference for pricing dates, and the price of dates is determined by the agreement of brokers, which is very low compared to market prices. Also, many farmers are forced to pre-sell their produce at a much lower price than the cash selling price due to the need for liquidity. With these interpretations, providing the supply of dates in the commodity exchange and creating a price reference and the possibility of future transactions of dates will be a big step in order to support farmers. However, the areas that produce dates are considered deprived areas, and such decisions can have a significant impact on the living conditions of the people of these provinces. Therefore, the government should think about helping these areas.

What happened to the supply of dates in the commodity exchange?

I have been emphasizing that dates have been listed on the stock exchange for two years, but unfortunately, for various reasons, such as the differences between administrative systems, this has not happened yet. However, if this product enters the commodity exchange, its first advantage is related to the standardization of products to participate in global markets. In fact, with the entry of dates into the commodity exchange, many brokerages disappear and it is a very positive move. Accordingly, I had previously announced that I strongly agree with the supply of dates in the commodity exchange, and if it is possible to supply dates in the ring, I will definitely offer my product in this market, but unfortunately this action has not been done yet.

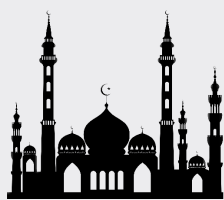
Farmers in Iran do not make much profit from the sale of any product they produce, and most of the profits from agricultural products go to brokers. Dates are also among the products that there is a multiplier distance between the selling price of dates to the final consumer and the purchase price of farmers. Meanwhile, the commodity exchange is a good market for the direct supply of dates and will push traders to the margins of the market. On the other hand, the possibility of selling agricultural products at a more realistic price will definitely be an incentive for farmers and the development of the agricultural sector in the country.



As you know, the prices of basic commodities are rising day by day. For example, due to the problems in the livestock input market, we even saw at some point that the price of each kilo of chicken reached 40,000 toman. What do you think is the reason for the constant increase in the price of basic goods and what should be done to solve this problem?

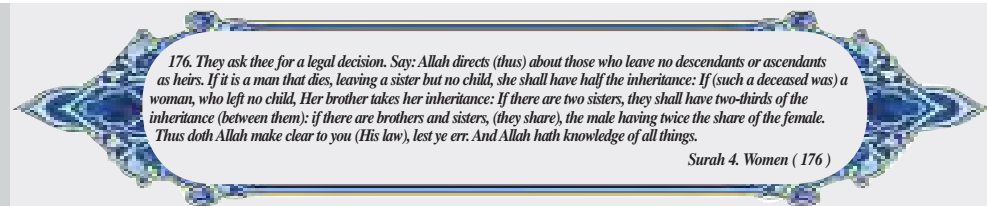
Mismanagement and problems in the economic management structure in some sectors have inevitably led to an increase in the price of basic goods. Meanwhile, exchange rate fluctuations and economic instability are one of the main factors in increasing production costs and ultimately the high cost of all kinds of goods in the country, which has made it difficult to meet the living needs of the people. The current market trend is that when a commodity becomes more expensive, the price of the other commodity is also affected. For example, some say how onions relate to the dollar while these issues are interrelated. Agriculture will inevitably face rising production costs and rising exchange rates and other energy factors. While it can not be expected to keep the price of the final commodity constant despite rising production costs. In fact, property, gasoline, currency, etc. cannot be expensive, but agricultural or manufacturing goods cannot be expensive in other areas. For example, at one point we saw that some experts were reluctant to accept the negative effects of rising gasoline prices on the commodity market, while it was clear that rising gasoline prices would lead to higher prices for goods and services. Energy plays an irreplaceable role in the production of a product or commodity, and its price change affects the cost price (producer price index). Unless the subsidy to the producer or the supply of energy at a subsidized price to the supply chain and production of goods, its incremental effect is reduced. However, in many cases we saw a significant increase in the price of goods and services. In this way, the increase in the price of other indicators will affect the price of goods and will definitely and naturally increase their price. With regard to protein products such as chicken, which you mentioned, the producers say that supplying raw materials such as animal feed such as corn and soybeans is not an easy task and has faced rising prices, which have been strongly affected by exchange rate fluctuations. Another issue is the general increase in prices that has arisen in the country with rising prices and has even increased the supply of labor and services. Accordingly, in recent months, for example, we have seen an increase in the total cost of poultry farms, ranches, and so on.

Another important point is the US sanctions against Iran, which have caused problems for the Iranian economy in various dimensions. However, we will see some destructive economic phenomena until the sanctions are lifted and the flow of foreign currency into the country is normalized. In this regard, there is no denying the direct and indirect effects of sanctions on macroeconomic indicators. Unbridled inflation, the spread of absolute poverty, and others are other consequences of this restriction. In the meantime, of course, psychological issues in the face of economic turmoil are thought-provoking, which at times led to the warehousing and depot of some goods by brokers and provided the ground for further increases in the price of basic goods. But mainly



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)	12:09
■ Evening (Maghreb)	17:24
■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)	05:45
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise	07:14



Tehran, Seoul Begin Talks on Bartering Frozen Assets With Vaccine

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Head of Iran-South Korea Chamber of Commerce says Iran and South Korea have begun talks on bartering \$8.5 blocked Iranian assets in South Korea with COVID-19 vaccines and other commodities.

Speaking to ILNA, Hossein Tanhaee pointed to some details of the meeting of the members of the chamber with First Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri on the fate of Iran's blocked assets in South Korea and said, in the meeting with Mr Jahangiri, the chamber presented its suggestions for bartering goods with South Korea.

He admitted that South Koreans have not yet begun any practical action for barter or release of Iran's frozen assets and during the meeting with the First Vice President, some solutions for this woe were presented by the chamber.

Tanhaee noted that in the meeting, the barter of some kinds of goods which can be bartered and their tariffs were determined and now all should wait and see the result of next meeting with South Koreans and how much they would cooperate with Iran over the suggested list of goods for barter.

On the proposed goods for barter in exchange with Iran's frozen money, he said the



list has been prepared based on the priorities of the country and it includes raw materials, medicines, petrochemicals, auto and home appliances parts.

He emphasized that the most important issue in bartering Iran's frozen money is the purchase of COVID-19 vaccines, adding that necessary coordinations are underway by the health ministry. Tanhaee added that the amount of Iran's frozen assets in South Korea is between 8 to 8.5 billion dollars, adding that for imports of each items of goods for bartering, a certain amount of blocked money has been earmarked but it depends on South Korean how much they would cooperate.

On the cost of holding the frozen money in South Korean banks, he said in most countries, banks charge some fee for the public deposits and its amount is insignificant and it is in the framework of banking system of countries.

Power Consumption Hits Record High

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Energy Ministry has issued a warning about increased use of electricity in the country as demand in the manufacturing sector surges to record levels.

A spokesman of Iran's national electricity company said that power usage across the country had increased by 17.5 percent year on year on January 2, saying consumption had exceeded the alert threshold.

Mostafa Rajabi would not elaborate on detailed usage figures. However, a report earlier this week suggested that Iran's total consumption of electricity was reaching nearly 40 gigawatt hours (GWh) in peak hour times.

Rajabi said that growing demand in the manufacturing sector was responsible for a bulk of increased electricity consumption in the country, adding that large manufacturers had consumed 15 percent more electricity year on year January 2.

Rising power use have also put Iranian fuel supplies under strain as power plants across the country have been forced to change fuel supplies from natural gas to mazut and other liquid fuels.

Rajabi said power plants had decreased their natural gas consumption to 183 million cubic meters (mcm) per day from highs of nearly 200 mcm per day seen last month.

That has come to help the Oil Ministry to maintain a stable flow of natural gas to the households during the current cold spell in the country, he said.

The official said electricity generation by the Iranian hydroelectric power plants had increased significantly to compensate for lower output in gas-fired plants, adding that hydroelectric plants were using 74 percent more water to be able to supply enough power to the national electricity grid.

A report by the official IRNA news agency on December 28 showed that Iran's total electricity usage had reached 39.940 GWh in peak hours, a surge of 6.77 percent year on year. The report said that off-peak consumption on the same day had also risen by 13.28 percent to 38.316 GWh.

Tehran, Moscow Preparing Meeting on Coronavirus Vaccines

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran and Russia are preparing a personal meeting on cooperation in producing the vaccine against the novel coronavirus, Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali said in an interview with Izvestia newspaper published on Sunday.

"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," the envoy said.

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.

Iran Spent \$15.5m on Masks Imports

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran spent \$15.5 million on imports of various types of face masks to control the spread of the coronavirus in the 8 months to late November before becoming a net exporter of the protective item in later months of 2020, shows a report.

A study published by Tehran's Chamber of Commerce (TCCIM) on Saturday said that Iran had imported 132 metric tons of face masks from four countries between March 20 and November 20.

China had accounted for 98 percent of face masks shipments to Iran, said the report.

However, it said Iranian government gradually lowered imports and began marketing home-made face masks in other countries as it scaled up domestic manufacturing of medical equipment to respond to a growing demand.

The TCCIM study said that Iranian-made masks had been shipped to nine countries over the eight-month period. It said, however, that declining prices of masks in the international markets caused earnings to fall to only \$206,000 for nearly 9.2 tons of face masks exported over the period.

On average, Iran had spent \$126 for each kilogram of masks imported into the country while the average price for exports was significantly lower, around \$22 per kilogram, said the report.

A bulk of Iranian-made face masks had been sent to Oman and Afghanistan as the two countries took delivery of 62 percent of all shipments.

Iran has tapped its home-grown capacities to respond to one of the harshest outbreaks of the coronavirus in the Middle East region.

That has offset the negative impacts of the American sanctions on the government's ability to buy drugs and medical equipment from abroad.

Cooperatives Capacity To Be Used in Distribution of Basic Goods



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – In the meeting of Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Alireza Razm Hosseini and Chairman of Iran's Chamber of Cooperatives (ICC) Bahman Abdollahi it was decided the cooperatives to play more active role in distribution of basic goods and joining of ICC to the market regulation headquarters with having voting right.

In the meeting, Mr. Abdollahi pointed to the capacity of the cooperatives sector, and added that cooperatives sectors has major share of national economy and it has active presence in all fields like industry, agriculture, services, health, education and transportation.

He underscored that cooperatives sector is not merely limited to consumption and housing, adding that over 14.5 million people are members of the cooperatives in the country and some 40 million people of the total population of the country enjoy cooperatives' services.

He also pointed to the membership of ICC in all supreme and specialized councils in the country, adding that cooperatives have considerable capacities and capabilities which have been less noticed.

Abdollahi then pointed to the final cost of products in creating sustainable jobs and said the final cost in other sectors is a considerable figure but in the cooperatives sector with the least final cost, sustainable jobs can be created.

He stipulated that if the government and especially the ministry of industry, mine and trade employs all capacities of the cooperatives sector, then some economic problems of the country can be resolved.

He also announced readiness to help the government in some foreign countries as its commercial attaches. Then he highlighted some tasks and performance of the cooperatives and the ministry.

Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade Razm Hosseini, for his part, said that due to the vast network of distributing goods in the cooperatives sector, this sector can be employed for organizing the favorable distribution of the basic goods, noting that it can be a big help to the ministry for transparent and targeted distribution of the basic goods.

Later the Secretary of ICC Mr. Azimi pointed to the range of relation between the cooperatives sector with the industry ministry. He then proposed one of the deputies of the ministry to be appointed as the guy responsible in coordination between the ICC and ministry which was welcomed and approved.

Chadormalu Co. Gets Award for Social Responsibility and Professional Ethics



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – In the closing ceremony of National Social Responsibility and Professional Ethics Conference which was held at conference hall of Al-Zahra University, the organizers honored the CEO of Chadormalu Mining and Industrial Company Eng. Naser Taghizadeh for the effective services of him and his company in observing the social responsibility and awarded him with special statue of the conference.

It is noteworthy to say that Mr. Taghizadeh with more than 40 years of brilliant records in different management responsibilities has always regarded sustainable development beside his efforts in pick-up in the production and development with an eye on creating value in the mine and industry sector.

In this regard, he has been successful in implementation of some mega national projects for improving the environmental indicators and providing infrastructures for development like road construction, rail transportation, and energy, and participating in desalinating water and its transfer to the central parts of the country.

The company under his management has been a pioneer in helping the natural disasters victims and helping during the national crisis like the outbreak of the coronavirus.

ESCO Experts Able to Build, Launch Blast Furnace

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – The ceremony for launching the hot air blowing process into the blast furnace No. 1 of Esfahan Steel Company (ESCO)



was held in the presence of deputy head of the company on exploitation Mr. Mehrdad Tavalaian, head of purchase department Mohammad Jafar Salehi, director of blast furnace unit Mr. Kazem Tadayon and some of senior officials of the company.

Addressing the ceremony, Mr. Tavalaian hailed the endeavors of staff of the company in reconstruction and renovation of the blast furnace No.1 and said that the furnace after 5 years of hiatus will be re-launched and it will be the first blast furnace of ESCO with the capacity of 1,000 cubic meters and with nominal capacity of 800,000 tons per year which can boost the productivity of the company.

He noted that the predicted plan for the furnace No.1 for 2021 is annual production of 600,000 tons of cast iron and this amount will be added to the capacity of the furnaces number 2 and 3.

Tavalaian added that in case the raw material for this furnace is provided, it will continue its function with its nominal capacity. He said that with changes in the process of renovation and reconstruction in the furnace, the quality of production will increase.

He also reiterated that experts of ESCO are able to construct and launch the blast furnace in accordance to the state-of-at knowledge. He said in this project, new equipment has been used for design and automation.

Gas Storage Capacity to Reach 6.5bcm by March 2023

TEHRAN (MNA) - The managing director of Iranian Gas Engineering and Development Company has announced that the country's gas storage capacity will reach 6.5 billion cubic meters (bcm) by the Iranian calendar year 1402 (starts in March 2023). Bahram Salavati put the country's current gas storage capacity at 3.25 bcm, and expressed hope that through implementation of different projects the figure will reach 6.5 bcm by the calendar year 1402.

Iran has two major natural gas storage facilities in Sarajeh and Shourijeh, in which every year the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) stores the gas received from gas refineries all over the country to be used in the colder months of the year.

Following the development of the South Pars gas field and the increase in the country's gas production capacity, construction and development of the country's natural gas storage facilities has become a top priority.

Reproduction from Sarajeh and Shourijeh storages increased by 33 percent in the past Iranian calendar year (ended on March 19, 2020) compared to the preceding year, according to Ahmad Rajabi, director of technical affairs at the National Iranian South Oil Company (NISOC).

The mentioned storages supply gas to six northern and northeastern provinces that are far from the southern gas-rich regions, eliminating the need for importing gas from Turkmenistan.



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250sq.m, 4bdrs
S/p, Sauna
J, balcony
marble fl
Fully Furn

Shanon (adviser)

Jordan Villa (\$5000)
1000sq.m
5bdrs, S/p
S, J, balcony
parquet floor
Fully Furn

Parsian

Fereshteh
180sq.m, 3bdrs
S/pool, S, J
balcony, F.F
(\$1800)

Niavaran (\$2000)
220sq.m, 3bdrs, S/pool
S, J, pkg, & F.F

Velenjak Bldg
5storey, 20bdrs
S/p, S, J, pkgs
Brand new, F.F
(\$10000)

Shahrak-e-gharb (\$2000)
220sq.m, 2bdrs, balcony
pkg, & Fully Furn

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Pakistan Arrests Alleged Militant Group Leader

LAHORE (Reuters) - Pakistan on Saturday arrested a man accused of being a leader of an Islamist militant group blamed by the United States and India for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, a counter-terrorism official said.

The arrest is in relation to terrorism financing, the official said, and not a specific militant attack.

“Proscribed organisation LeT (Lashkar-e-Taiba) leader Zaki ur Rehman Lakhvi (has been) arrested on charges of terrorism financing,” a spokesman for the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Pakistani province of Punjab said.



Italy Reports 364 Coronavirus Deaths on Saturday

ROME (Reuters) - Italy reported 364 coronavirus-related deaths on Saturday against 462 the day before, the health ministry said, while the daily tally of new infections plunged to 11,831 from 22,211, with far less testing than normal carried out on New Year's day.

Just 67,174 swab tests were carried out in the past day, the ministry said, down from a previous 157,524.

Italy has registered 74,985 COVID-19 deaths since its outbreak came to light on Feb. 21, the highest toll in Europe and the fifth highest in the world. The country has also reported 2.141 million cases to date, the health ministry said.



A Dozen U.S. Senators Mount Drive To Oppose Biden Certification



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - A group of Republican senators led by veteran lawmaker Ted Cruz said Saturday they would not vote next week to certify Joe Biden's election win -- the latest last-ditch move to support Donald Trump's efforts to undermine the vote.

The initiative, which appears certain to fail, flies in the face of rulings in dozens of courts, and the findings by officials in several key states, that there were no widespread voting problems.

The Republicans' statement, signed by Cruz and six other current senators along with four senators-elect, asserts that “allegations of fraud and irregularities in the 2020 election exceed any in our lifetimes.”

The group said that when Congress convenes in a joint session on Wednesday -- for what normally would be a pro-forma certification of Biden's victory -- they will demand the creation of a special commission to conduct “an emergency 10-day audit” of the election results.

The statement says individual states could then convene special legislative sessions and potentially revise their vote totals.

The 11 signees join Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri, who said earlier that he planned to raise objections on Wednesday. A Republican member of the House of Representatives, Louie Gohmert, has also announced his plan to oppose certification, and more than 100 House Republicans reportedly will back his challenge.

Gohmert sought to further raise the stakes with a lawsuit that would have given Vice President Mike Pence -- traditionally in a ceremonial role in Wednesday's session -- the power to overturn the election result. Pence opposed that effort, and a federal judge in Texas on Friday rejected the suit.

The Hawley and Gohmert challenges will ensure that Congress must meet to hear the complaints. Cruz is trying to undermine a fairly decided election (which DHS called the “most secure in American history”), cynically knowing that though the current attempt will fail, it will now be much more likely that a future one will succeed. This is sedition.

The Congress sessions, sure to be contentious, will play out against a backdrop of pro-Trump rallies in Washington next week encouraged by the president himself. As with Trump's other attempts to reverse his election defeat, the latest political maneuvering appears doomed. Democrats control the House, and many Republicans are expected to vote Wednesday for certification.

The 11 senators conceded that most Democrats and “more than a few Republicans” would likely oppose their initiative. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell has urged fellow Republicans to vote to certify and avoid a divisive political brawl, saying, “The Electoral College has spoken.” Biden won in the all-important Electoral College by a vote of 306 to 232.

Bomb Kills Two French Soldiers in Mali

PARIS (Dispatches) - Two French soldiers were killed when their vehicle hit an improvised explosive device in northeastern Mali on Saturday, just days after three others died in similar fashion.

Their deaths brought to 50 the number of French soldiers killed in the West African nation since France first intervened in 2013 to help drive back jihadist forces, according to army staff.

President Emmanuel Macron “learnt with great sadness” of the deaths of Sergeant Yvonne Huynh and Brigadier Loic Risser in the Menaka region, his office said in a statement.

Huynh, aged 33 and mother of a young child, was the first female soldier killed in the Sahel region since the French operation began.

Risser was 24. Both were members of a regiment specialising in intelligence work.

“Their vehicle hit an improvised explosive device during an intelligence mission,” the French presidency said of Saturday's incident.

Another soldier was wounded in the blast but their life is not in danger, it added.

France's Barkhane force numbers 5,100 troops spread across the arid Sahel region and has been fighting jihadist groups alongside soldiers from Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, who together make up the G5 Sahel group.

But lack of equipment, funds and training, together with problems in deployment and coordination on the ground, have left the group struggling for credibility and still dependent on France, the force's big political backer.

Macron affirmed France's determination to continue its role in “the battle against terrorism” after Saturday's attack.

The Al-Qaeda-linked Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM) has claimed responsibility for the earlier attack that killed three French soldiers in the centre of the poor Sahel state.

Those deaths were also due to an army vehicle hitting an explosive device.



Kazakhstan Scraps Death Penalty

NUR SULTAN (Dispatches) - Kazakhstan has abolished the death penalty, making permanent a nearly 20-year freeze on capital punishment in the Central Asian country, according to a notice on the presidential website.

The notice published on Saturday said President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had signed off on parliamentary ratification of the Second Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights -- a document that commits signatories to the abolition of capital punishment.

Executions were paused in Kazakhstan from 2003 but courts continued to sentence convicts to death in exceptional circumstances, including for crimes deemed “acts of terror”.

Ruslan Kulekbayev, a lone gunman who killed eight policemen and two civilians during a rampage in Kazakhstan's largest city Almaty in 2016, was among the convicts set to be executed if the moratorium were lifted.

Kulekbayev will serve a life sentence in jail instead.

Life imprisonment was introduced in Kazakhstan in 2004 as an alternative punishment.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was adopted in 1966, entered into force in 1976, and 173 states acceded to it.

The Second Optional Protocol to it, aimed at the abolition of the death penalty, was adopted on December 15, 1989, and came into force in 1991.

Kazakhstan's parliament ratified the protocol on December 29. Apart from Kazakhstan, 88 other nations are members of the agreement.

“The signatory countries take the following obligations: first, not to apply the death penalty, second, to take all necessary measures to abolish the death penalty within their jurisdiction. The only exception is the death penalty is allowed in case of wartime,” Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi said at the time.

Niger Presidential Favorite Wins First Round

NIAMY (AFP) - Ruling party candidate and former minister Mohamed Bazoum won the first round of Niger's presidential vote, the electoral commission announced on Saturday, with a runoff set for next month.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) said the close ally of outgoing President Mahamadou Issoufou garnered 39.33 percent of the votes in last weekend's election.

Bazoum will face former president Mahamane Ousmane, who won 16.99 percent, in the February 20 runoff in the West African country, which is fighting a bloody jihadist insurgency.

Former prime ministers Seini Oumarou and Albade Abouba came third and fourth respectively with 8.95 percent and 7.07 percent of the ballots.

Turnout reached 69.67 percent or 5.2 million of the 7.4 million registered voters, CENI said, in an election hoped to be the country's first peaceful handover between elected presidents.

Bazoum, who has been both interior and foreign minister, campaigned on promises of improved security and education.

The 61-year-old was the favorite and had hoped to clinch victory in the first round. But he will now likely have to join forces with one or more of the other 29 candidates who ran in Sunday's election.

Before the vote, Ousmane clinched a deal with

several rivals to back him in a second round, including former foreign minister Ibrahim Yacouba, who came in fifth with 5.38 percent.

Negotiations are likely to be complex in the former French colony, where alliances are made and broken quickly.

Issoufou had received support from Yacouba in 2016, the president rewarding him with a ministerial post. But Yacouba was sacked just two years later over “disloyalty” and went into the opposition.

On Saturday Yacouba cast doubt on the ballot, saying that CENI had given turnout rates of “97.8 percent or even 99.9 percent in areas where this is unimaginable”.

Bazoum's ruling Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS) is leading in the legislative vote also held on Sunday, with 80 of the 165 seats and five diaspora seats remaining to be decided.

However, insecurity overshadowed campaigning. Niger has been battered by jihadists on its southwestern border with Mali and on its southeastern frontier with Nigeria.

Five years of violence have cost hundreds of lives with many more displaced.

Issoufou, who was elected in 2011 after the country's last coup in 2010, is voluntarily stepping down after two five-year terms.

In a New Year radio address he hailed the election as “a new, successful page in our country's democratic history”.



Johnson Could Lose His Seat, Majority at Next Election

LONDON (Reuters) - British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is on course to lose his own seat and neither of the two main political parties is likely to win an outright majority at the next general election, not due until 2024, according to a new poll.

This is the first detailed survey of the public's perception of Johnson's handling of the recently concluded Brexit talks and the COVID-19 pandemic after he reversed plans to allow families to meet up at Christmas in parts of southern England to combat the spread of the virus.

More than 22,000 people were surveyed in a closely watched poll constituency-by-constituency poll over a four-week period in December, which was conducted by the research data company Focalldata and published by the Sunday Times.

The so-called multilevel regression and post-stratification (MRP) poll found the ruling Conservatives would lose 81 seats, wiping out the 80-seat majority. This would leave the Conservatives with 284 seats, while the opposition Labour Party would win 282 seats, the poll showed.

The Scottish National Party, which wants to break away from the rest of the United Kingdom, is predicted to win 57 of the 59 seats in Scotland, meaning the party could potentially play a kingmaker role in forming the next government.

The prime minister is at risk to lose his own seat of Uxbridge, west of London, the poll found.

Johnson won a resounding election victory last year that allowed him to take Britain out of the European Union's orbit on New Year's Eve after almost half a century of close ties.

But Johnson's premiership may increasingly be defined by the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic, which has already killed more than 74,000 people and crushed the economy.



Lifting Sanctions Sole Way for U.S. to Rectify Trump Policies

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani reminded the White House that removal of the sanctions against Iran would be the only option to correct the outgoing US administration’s wrong strategies. “America’s perceptual war to magnify a trivial

issue such as its return to JCPOA will not be successful,” Shamkhani said in a post on his Twitter account on Sunday.

“The complete and definitive lifting of all sanctions is Washington’s sole option to correct Trump’s failed strategy of maximum pressure,” he underlined.



Russian Annual Oil Output Falls for First Time Since 2008

MOSCOW (Reuters) - Oil production in Russia declined last year for the first time since 2008 and reached its lowest level since 2011 following a global deal to cut output and sluggish demand caused by the coronavirus, statistics showed on Saturday.

Russian oil and gas condensate output declined to 10.27 million barrels per day (bpd) last year, according to energy ministry data cited by the Interfax news agency.

In tons, oil and gas condensate output dropped to 512.68 million in 2020 from a post-Soviet record-high of 560.2 million, or 11.25 million bpd, in 2019.

The sharp decline was almost in line with expectations.

The 512.68 million tons reading for 2020 was the lowest since 511.43 million tons in 2011, and the first annualized decline since 2008 amid the global financial crisis and falling oil prices.

Russia agreed to reduce its oil production in April last year by more than 2 million barrels per day, an unprecedented voluntary cut, along with other leading oil producers and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

The move was designed to bolster the oil market beset by the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

OPEC+ is due to hold its next summit on Monday, Jan. 4. Russia has been expected to increase its oil output by 125,000 bpd from the New Year.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak, in charge of Moscow’s ties with OPEC+, has said Russia would support a gradual increase of the group’s output by another 500,000 bpd starting in February.

Darya Kozlova, an analyst at VYGON Consulting, a Moscow think tank that advises the government, said the market is in better shape now than it was in



March or April, when oil demand declined sharply at the height of the first wave of the pandemic.

“There is a deficit of around 3 million barrels per day on the market because of the actions by OPEC+,” she said.

“Vaccination (against COVID-19) has started in many countries. So we will probably see a tactical increase by another 500,000 bpd (agreed) in January. Further actions will depend on the market situation.”

2021 to Be Year of Recovery, Reforms for Turkey



ANKARA (dispatches) - Turkey is aiming to make 2021 a year of recovery and reforms in various domains, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said.

Addressing the inauguration ceremony of a bridge in the country’s east, Erdoğan said the ruling AKP had identified various areas where reforms were needed.

“At a time when the global political and economic order has been shaken to its roots, we should work harder to take our country to the point where it deserves to be,” the president asserted.

“We want to make 2021 a year when we leap forward. That is what we are now preparing for.”

He underlined the success of Turkey’s response to the coronavirus pandemic and its efforts to mitigate the economic effects of the global crisis.

“We mobilized all of state resources to protect the nation’s health as well as our citizens’ jobs and future,” said Erdoğan.

Speaking about the COVID-19 vaccination efforts, he said Turkey’s locally produced vaccines will be ready for rollout by April.

“I believe the start of the vaccination drive will mark an important step forward in our struggle against the coronavirus [pandemic],” he added.

The Kömürhan Bridge that Erdoğan opened on Saturday connects the eastern Malatya and Elazığ provinces.

The bridge, which covers a distance of 660 meters (0.41 miles), is the fourth biggest project in its class.

Designed and constructed by Turkish companies and engineers, the project has been completed at a cost of some 720 million Turkish liras (over \$96 million).

Malaysia, Singapore Terminate High-Speed Rail Link Agreement

SINGAPORE (Reuters) - Singapore and Malaysia said on Friday a long-delayed project to build a high-speed rail (HSR) link between the two neighbors will be terminated, with Kuala Lumpur to pay compensation for costs incurred.

First announced in 2013, the 350-km (217-mile) project linking Kuala Lumpur to Singapore has been estimated by analysts to cost around \$17 billion.

It was suspended in 2018 shortly after former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad came to power with a pledge to tighten finances and review major deals made by his predecessor Najib Razak.

In May, the suspension was extended another six months to allow discussion of changes to the project.

Malaysia had proposed several changes but was unable to reach an agreement with Singapore on them before the suspension period lapsed on Dec. 31, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in a joint statement.

“Both countries will abide by their respective obligations, and will now proceed with the necessary actions, resulting from this termination of the HSR



agreement,” said the statement, released by Muhyiddin’s office.

Malaysia’s economy minister Mustapa Mohamed said the original terms signed in 2016 were no longer viable, given the country’s economic and fiscal position which had been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It had proposed changes to the project structure and station design, Mustapa said in a statement.

The changes would have provided Malaysia with more flexible financing options and brought forward the construction phase by two years to help boost the country’s post-pandemic recovery, he said.

Malaysia and Singapore would work together to determine the amount of compensation owed, he added.

In 2018, Singapore said it would seek to recover over S\$250 million (\$189.14 million) should Malaysia cancel the project.

The rail link’s operations had been set to begin in January 2031. Companies from China, Japan, South Korea and Europe had expressed interest in winning contracts to build, operate and finance the trains and rail assets, people close to the bidding process previously told Reuters.

India Holds Vaccine Drills Ahead of Mass Inoculation Drive

NEW DELHI 9Dispatches) - India on Saturday staged nationwide drills to start one of the world’s biggest coronavirus vaccination programs as the drug regulator prepared to approve the first vaccine.

A government panel on Friday recommended emergency use of the AstraZeneca-Oxford University shot and the first injections could be given in the coming week after the Drugs Control Authority of India gives final approval.

India, which has the world’s second highest number of pandemic cases -- more than 10.2 million -- has set an ambitious target of inoculating 300 million of its 1.3 billion people by mid-2021.

Serum Institute of India, the world’s biggest vaccine producer, has already stockpiled tens of millions of doses of AstraZeneca’s Covishield ready for the campaign and 96,000 health workers have been trained for the inoculation drive.

The drills saw 25 health workers receive dummy vaccines at each of the centres to be used across the country in a test run ahead of the launch.

Health minister Harsh Vardhan said the exercise would help build expertise “so that the upcoming vaccination drive may proceed without any glitch.” He has also called for a campaign to counter “misleading rumours” that may scare people off getting the vaccine.

Tehran, Islamabad...

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He is also set to travel to Karachi to meet with the head of the Maritime Security Agency and discuss the development of cooperation between the two countries to prevent drug trafficking by sea.

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. Iran has spent more than \$700 million on sealing its borders and preventing the transit of narcotics destined for European, Arab, and Central Asian countries.

Soleimani Is...

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In the narrations, it has been mentioned that martyr has been granted with seven special blessings by God: the first drop of his blood makes his sins be forgiven; puts his head on the lap of the houri (women who will accompany faithful believers in Paradise); adorned with Paradise dressings; aromatized with the best smelling perfumes; sees his position in the Paradise; he is allowed to excursion in all part of the Paradise; curtains are pulled away and he looks at God’s face. “Sobhan Allah (Glorified be Allah) for this greatness which is said about the martyr.”

Soleimani, Abu-Mahdi, martyrs of resistance and all martyrs through the history, all and all, are alive and we talk with them. Among the very these Sacred Defense martyrs, there are some martyrs that people have recourse to their tombs and their prayers are fulfilled. We humans are covered in different hijabs (dressings). The sin has this property that it runs man in secret. Many of humans despite being innocent finds purgatorial eyes and they can see the beyond. Our infallible imams have been so, and Imam Mahdi (A) may the soul of the world be sacrificed for his sake is the same as whatever he wishes he can know and see.

Martyrs all, that with sacrificing their first blood whose sins are forgiven, are the same. They excursion in the skies. They fulfill prayers and are redeemed in the world of Creation. And Soleimani is definitely of this type. Voice of the nation’s approval is the signature of this word that it is a software voice of the type of revelation, of the type of inspiration, of the type of understanding, of the type of perception, and of the type of dignity.

Materialists do not understand this point. Materialist life grounds them. They are incapable of understanding the inspirational heavenly voice. The impact of assassination of resistance martyrs on the world is a software one. The supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution during his meeting with family of Martyr Haj Qassem Soleimani and a group of the organizers of the first memorial ceremony of him said, “More severe slaps to come are subduing the shallow dominion of the Front of Arrogance, which requires the efforts of our revolutionary youth and faithful elites.”

It is for sure that we will not fall short of taking revenge of Martyr Soleimani’s blood because of the global impacts of this martyrdom. Today we have a list of culprits of this big crime whether internal mercenaries or conductors of this assassination, and undoubtedly will proceed them in due time but this importance that martyrs like Haj Qassem are alive and awake and ready to lead the freedom-seeking nations for continuing their cause will not be forgotten, either.

Iran Strategic...

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“That the enemies call for a decrease in Iran’s regional presence is because of conflicting interests pursued by others in this region,” he added.

Sanctions and martyrdom are among the prices Iran is paying for its independence, Hatami said in an address to university students in a ceremony to mark the first anniversary of the martyrdom of Iranian anti-terror commander Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated by the US in early January last year.

“Those behind the assassination of General Soleimani must know it will be avenged; of course the biggest revenge will be the withdrawal of Americans from the region, but those who ordered and executed the assassination will also be punished,” Hatami said in his Saturday remarks.

The martyrdom anniversary of General Soleimani was commemorated in Iran and several other countries including Russia, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

FM...

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Soon after the U.S. drone strike that killed General Soleimani and a number of his companies in Baghdad, the Iraqi Parliament overwhelmingly passed into law legislation that mandated the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Arab country’s soil.

“The United States thinks it can influence the public opinion by assassinating people, but the history has proven this policy to be futile,” Khatibzadeh said.

General Soleimani, who commanded the Quds Force of Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), was admired as the Middle East’s most influential and charismatic counter-terrorism leader. He played a key role in helping Iraq and Syria defeat foreign-backed terrorists, chiefly Daesh, in late 2017.

The top commander was assassinated on January 3, 2020 in a drone strike in the Iraqi capital upon a direct order by U.S. President Donald Trump.

Green Energy Sparks Lowest Electricity Prices in Spain for 17 Years

MADRID (Dispatches) - The cost of electricity in Spain has fallen to its lowest level in 17 years due to a boost in renewable energy production.

Just in 2020, the price dropped by 28.8%, with wind-generated power preventing a rise in household bills due to escalating gas rates, according to a report by energy consultants Grupo ASE.

Analysts reveal that the cost of electricity production in Spain is among the lowest in the European Union thanks to the key role played by renewable sources. Spanish electricity is currently one of the most competitively priced in Europe, as prices have increased in the UK, France, Germany and Italy.

This tendency is expected to continue over the coming years, in keeping with an agreement between the Spanish government and the EU for 74% of the country’s electricity to generate from clean energy by the year 2030.

According to Grupo ASE, wind power accounted for 32.6% of electricity generation in Spain in December, followed by nuclear (23.3%), hydraulic (14%), gas (11.5%), solar (3.1%) and others.

In addition, and as with everything last year, the coronavirus has also played a vital role in the downwards trend of electricity prices, with a drop in demand of over 5% due to the lockdown and the ensuing economic crisis.

Experts suggest that Spanish society is also increasingly energy-efficient, as part of a general consciousness regarding the environment that has also led to an increase in recycling and a reduction in reliance on single-use plastics.

December has reportedly been a very volatile month for energy prices, as a series of events have altered the markets including Brexit and a nuclear power plant strike in France, plus the commitment reached by the EU to cut CO2 emissions by 55% before 2030.

Five Indian Cricket Players in Quarantine

MELBOURNE (AFP) - Five Indian cricket players currently touring Australia were self-isolating on Saturday after dining inside a Melbourne restaurant put them in potential breach of strict Covid-19 health measures.

The players – Rohit Sharma, Rishabh Pant, Shubman Gill, Prithvi Shaw and Navdeep Saini – are being kept away from the rest of the Indian and Australian squads ahead of the third Test starting in Sydney on Thursday.

LICENCE HOLDER: SOKHAN GOSTAR INSTITUTE

Switchboard:

(+98) (21) 44253448

Public Relations Tel:

(+98)(21) 44253450

Editorial Board: 44253449

Public Relations Fax:

(+98)(21) 44253395

Advertising Department:

Tel/Fax: (+98) (21) 44253335-9/44253234

Website:

http://www.irannewsdaily.com

E-Mail Address:

info@irannewsdaily.com

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Ganguly Hospitalized After Chest Pains

KOLKATA (AFP) - Indian cricket legend Sourav Ganguly was rushed to hospital Saturday after complaining of chest pains, the chief minister in his home state said.

The 48-year-old, who now heads the country's cricket board, "suffered a mild cardiac arrest and has been admitted to hospital", tweeted Mamata Banerjee, chief minister of West Bengal.

Ganguly "suffered a blackout" while exercising at his personal gym in the morning and was immediately taken to Woodlands hospital in state capital Kolkata, according to a senior doctor there.

Spurs, Arsenal Back On Winning Track

LONDON (Dispatches) - Harry Kane and Son Heung-min were again Tottenham's talismen in a 3-0 win over Leeds to revitalise their Premier League title challenge as Arsenal maintained their return to form with a 4-0 thrashing of West Brom.

However, it was another difficult day for the Premier League's battle against coronavirus as a third game this week was postponed due to outbreaks, while Tottenham and West Ham players were caught breaking restrictions by attending a Christmas party.

Burnley's clash with Fulham, scheduled for Sunday, was called off due to a number of positive cases among the Fulham squad.

Fulham's trip to Tottenham was also postponed just hours before kick-off on Wednesday, to the frustration of Spurs boss Jose Mourinho.

But even as his side ended a four-game winless run against Leeds, Mourinho also lambasted three of his players for breaking coronavirus rules.

Giovani Lo Celso, Erik Lamela and Sergio Reguilon were pictured attending a large party with family and friends over Christmas along with West Ham's Manuel Lanzini.

"We are extremely disappointed and strongly condemn this image showing some of our players with family and friends together at Christmas, particularly as we know the sacrifices everybody around the country made to stay safe over the festive period," a Tottenham statement said.

"The matter will be dealt with internally."

The latest breach by players will do little to ease the pressure on the Premier League to halt the season as a "circuit-breaking" measure to cope with the soaring infection rates across England.

Despite the latest postponement, the Premier League again insisted there were no plans for a pause.

"With low numbers of positive tests across the overwhelming majority of clubs, the League continues to have confidence in its COVID-19 protocols, fully backed by the Government, to enable fixtures to be played as scheduled," the league said in a statement.

On the field, Kane and Son ended two games without a goal to move Tottenham



up to third and within four points of leaders Liverpool and Manchester United.

Kane opened the scoring from the penalty spot before turning provider for Son to slot home his 100th goal for the club. It was the 13th time Kane and Son had combined for a goal this term, equalling the Premier League record set by Alan Shearer and Chris Sutton for Blackburn in 1994-95.

"He knew I was there. Sometimes it is telepathic," said Son

"To score 100 goals with one team is a big thing. I'm very proud. It's a good way to start the new year." The South Korean then also got an assist early in the second-half when his corner was headed home by Toby Alderweireld.

Arsenal's disastrous start to the season has been turned around in a week as they won for the third time in eight days and in some style at Sam Allardyce's hapless West Brom.

Kieran Tierney's stunning solo effort and a brilliant team goal rounded off by Bukayo Saka put the visitors into a comfortable half-time lead at a snow covered Hawthorns.

Alexandre Lacazette's quickfire double in the second-half completed the scoring as the Gunners rose to 11th, within three points of the European places. West Brom on the other hand remain second from bottom and six points adrift of safety after conceding nine goals in their last two games. Sheffield United look destined for a return to the Championship as they remain without a win this season after a 2-0 defeat at Crystal Palace.

Jeffrey Schlupp and Eberechi Eze's brilliant run and finish secured the Eagles' first win in six games.

PSG Hire Pochettino as New Manager



PARIS (Reuters) - French champions Paris St Germain have named former Tottenham Hotspur boss Mauricio Pochettino as their new head coach after sacking Thomas Tuchel, with the Argentine signing a deal until June 2022, the Ligue 1 club said on Saturday.

Pochettino, who played for PSG as a defender in the early 2000s and also captained the side, has been out of a job since being dismissed by Spurs in November 2019, a few months after guiding the north London club to the Champions League final. The 48-year-old Argentine said he was honored to take on the role and that the Parisian club "has always held a special place in my heart".

"I return to the club today with a lot of ambition and humility, and am eager to work with some of the world's most talented players," Pochettino, who has an option for a one-year extension in his contract, said in a statement here.

"This team has fantastic potential and my staff and I will do everything we can to get the best for Paris Saint-Germain in all competitions. "We will also do our utmost to give our team the combative and attacking playing identity that Parisian fans have always loved."

Doncic Carries Mavericks To 93-83 Win Over Heat

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Luka Doncic scored 27 points to outduel fellow Slovenian Goran Dragic as the Dallas Mavericks took advantage of some woeful three-point shooting by Miami to beat the Heat 93-83 on Friday night.

Doncic also tallied 15 rebounds, outperforming compatriot Dragic who finished with 10 points and seven assists at American Airlines Center arena in Dallas, Texas.

This was the first time in three career meetings that Doncic had beat guard Dragic, as Dallas snapped a six-game losing skid to Miami. In what appears to be a growing trend in the NBA, Miami was undone by poor shooting from the three-point range.

On Thursday, the New York Knicks shot three for 36 from beyond the arc in a 100-83 loss to the Toronto Raptors.

Miami missed their first 14 three point attempts, making a total of just seven of 33. The Heat didn't hit their first three pointer until the third quarter when Duncan Robinson finally sank one. Dallas was 12 of 37 on three-point attempts.

Heat star Jimmy Butler, who returned after missing two games due to a sprained right ankle, scored just two points, three rebounds and two assists in 27 minutes. Miami's Bam Adebayo produced his second straight double-double with 19 points and 11 rebounds. He also had a game-high four steals.

Tim Hardaway scored 18 points, and ex-Heat players Josh Richardson (11 points) and James Johnson (eight points) also contributed. Dorian Finney-Smith scored 18 in the win.

Elsewhere, De'Andre Hunter scored 23 points, and Trae Young chipped in 21 as the Atlanta Hawks bounced back from giving up 145 points in their last game to beat the cold-shooting Brooklyn Nets 114-96 in New York.

The win comes two nights after Atlanta lost one of the highest scoring games in recent NBA memory, a 145-141 defeat to the same Nets. The Hawks also snapped a six game losing skid to Brooklyn.

John Collins added 20 points and eight rebounds, Clint Capela and Cam Reddish contributed 12 points apiece as Atlanta drained 16 of 39 three-pointers.



Uruguayan Academics Slam FA Over Cavani Ban

LONDON (Reuters) - The Uruguayan Academy of Letters on Friday denounced a three-game ban given to Manchester United's Edinson Cavani on Friday, calling the sanction for alleged racism an example of English football's lack of "cultural and linguistic knowledge."

The 33-year-old Uruguayan used the word "negrito" in an Instagram post after the club's victory over Southampton on Nov. 29, before taking it down and apologising. He said it was intended as an expression of affection to a friend.

On Thursday the FA said the comment was "improper and brought the game into disrepute", fined Cavani 100,000 pounds and ordered him to complete "face-to-face education" as part of his punishment.

The academy, an association dedicated to protecting and promoting the Spanish language used in Uruguay, said it "energetically rejected the sanction."

Real Madrid Beat Celta to Take Liga Top Spot

MADRID (Dispatches) - Real Madrid jumped to the top of La Liga on Saturday with a 2-0 home victory over in-form Celta Vigo.

Lucas Vazquez headed in a cross from Marco Asensio at the far post in the sixth minute, barely a minute after Real centre back Nacho had cleared a shot by Celta striker Iago Aspas off the line.

He returned the favor in the 53rd minute, laying a diagonal ball into the path of Asensio with the visiting defence in disarray. Asensio drove his shot into the roof of the net.

"We said before the game that if we counter-attacked we could do damage and that's how it turned out," said Asensio.

Real rebounded from a draw with promoted Elche on Wednesday to move one point clear at the top of the table, but second-place Atletico Madrid have played three fewer games and can regain the lead when they face Alaves.

"After the draw in Elche we wanted to show aggression," said Vazquez.

With Real Madrid in control, coach Zinedine Zidane took off Asensio, Luka Modric, Dani Carvajal, Toni Kroos and, right at the end, captain Karim Benzema and brought on Eden Hazard and Fede Valverde, who are returning from injuries, and youngsters Martin Odegaard and Vinicius Junior.

"Today we played well from the first minute until the end," said Zidane. "There is a lot of the season left and we have to keep going."



Spurs Slam Stars For Flouting Coronavirus Protocols

LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham have condemned Erik Lamela, Sergio Reguilon and Giovani Lo Celso for breaking coronavirus protocols after the trio were spotted at a large party.

Spurs stars Lamela, Lo Celso and Reguilon were pictured at the gathering over the Christmas period.

West Ham's Manuel Lanzini was also in attendance, breaching strict tier four guidelines that prohibit mixing with other people indoors due to Covid-19.

The photo was circulated on social media and Tottenham are set to take disciplinary action after issuing an angry rebuke about the players' behaviour.

Lamela was not named in the squad for Saturday's Premier League clash against Leeds, with Reguilon on the bench, while Lo Celso is out injured.

"We are extremely disappointed and strongly condemn this image showing some of our players with family and friends together at Christmas, particularly as we know the sacrifices everybody around the country made to stay safe over the festive period," the Tottenham statement said.

"The rules are clear, there are no exceptions, and we regularly remind all our players and staff about the latest protocols and their responsibilities to adhere and set an example.

"The matter will be dealt with internally."

This is not the first time Tottenham players have broken lockdown rules as there were several incidents during the first lockdown in the spring.

