

**Health Ministry Spokesman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on Friday
That 71 More Iranians Died Due to
The Coronavirus in the Country
Over the Past 24 Hours as the
Death Toll Is Now 57,807**

IRAN NEWS

**Iran's Ambassador and Permanent
Representative to Int'l Organizations
In Vienna Kazem Gharibabadi
Warned About a Possible Change
In the Level of Cooperation Between
Iran and the IAEA**

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China Warns Taiwan Independence Means War



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Liverpool End Five-Game Winless Run At Tottenham



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IMF Cuts Iran's 2021 Economic Growth Outlook by 0.2%

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has slightly cut its growth outlook for the Iranian economy amid projections that the country might continue to struggle with the economic impacts of one the largest outbreaks of the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East.

Charts and tables published by the IMF related to its World Economic Outlook Update in January showed the global financial body predicts that Iran's economy will grow by 3% in 2021.

The IMF had predicted in October that Iran's growth would reach 3.2% this year, after an estimated contraction of 1.5% last year.

Iran's economy shrank by 6.5% in 2019 when the country began to feel the impacts of lower oil sales because of a series of American sanctions enacted a year before.

However, the IMF raised its forecast for Iran's growth in 2022 by 0.5 percent, saying the country's gross domestic product (GDP) will grow by 2% next year.

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Tehran, Ankara Reiterate Commitment to Cooperate For Regional Peace

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif reiterated Turkey and Iran's commitment to cooperate to ensure stability and peace in the region, as they touched upon the set of mechanisms in this regard.

Speaking in a joint news conference after a bilateral meeting in Istanbul on Friday, Çavuşoğlu said Turkey has multiple diplomatic mechanisms with Iran, including the ones in the Caucasus and the Astana format for Syria.

"We are working on a mechanism with Afghanistan as well," he said.

Noting that the two countries are located in a region "plagued by many problems," Çavuşoğlu said they need to work to not only strengthen bilateral ties, but also the strategic partnership.

Zarif also said relations between the two countries have survived "even in the hardest times."

"These well-established relations will sustain in the future as well," Zarif said.

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Iran Ahead of Schedule in Producing 20% Enriched Uranium



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Majlis Speaker Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf says Iran is ahead of schedule in enriching uranium to a purity level of 20 percent, almost a month after the country began to scale up its uranium enrichment program.

"I now give the glad tidings to the dear people of our country that regarding the 120 kg of 20-percent [uranium] enrichment per year, [Iranian] experts have been able to enrich 17 kg in less than a month. That means we are ahead of the schedule," Qalibaf said on Thursday.

He made the remarks during a visit to the Fordow enrichment facility, which has been renamed after assassinated nuclear scientist Masoud Ali-Mohammadi. Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) Ali Akbar Salehi and AEOI spokesman Behrouz Kamalvandi accompanied Qalibaf during his visit.

Qalibaf said the installation of IR-2m centrifuges is also underway, with a number of centrifuges already installed and the rest being installed.

Iran and the P5+1 group - the U.S., Russia, China, France and Britain plus Germany - reached an agreement in 2015 on Tehran's nuclear program. Under the deal, Iran agreed to limit some aspects of its nuclear activities in exchange for a sanctions relief.

Early in January, Tehran announced the beginning of the process to enrich uranium to 20 percent purity at Fordow in a tit-for-tat move against the US withdrawal and the European countries' failure to protect Iran's interests.

"The P5+1 failed to comply with its obligations within the framework of the JCPOA," said Qalibaf. "Therefore, we have no duty whatsoever to fulfill the enshrined obligations."

He said Iran will honor its commitment once the P5+1 countries begin to honor theirs and lift sanctions that have targeted Iran's oil and banking sectors.

The parliament speaker also said the country's nuclear industry has taken a big step in lifting and nullifying the U.S. sanctions.

"If the enemy does not want [our] country to have this technology, it is because they are upset about the existence of a strong and vigilant Iran," he noted.

The spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, for his part, announced that the country's stockpile of uranium enriched to 20 percent has reached 17 kilograms.

"A small part of Iran's nuclear activities is based at the Fordow nuclear site, and the enrichment facility is nearly one-seventh of the Natanz nuclear site [in terms of size]," Kamalvandi said, according to IRNA.

The spokesman explained that according to a new law passed by the parliament, namely the Strategic Action Plan to Counter Sanctions, the AEOI will install 1,000 IR-2m centrifuges within a three-month period.

Early last month, Iranian parliamentarians overwhelmingly voted in favor of the action plan, which tasked the Iranian administration with suspending more commitments under the JCPOA until the other parties lift the sanctions.

The new law tasked the AEOI with producing at least 120 kg of 20-percent enriched uranium annually and starting the installation, gas injection, enrichment and storage of nuclear materials up to an appropriate enrichment degree within a period of three months using at least 1,000 IR-2m centrifuges.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Kamalvandi said with the continuation of the current process, in the next eight years, two more nuclear power plants will become operational, each of which will save oil consumption between 12 to 14 million barrels on a daily basis.

He also said the enemies cannot impose their will on the Iranian people.

"If it was left to their choice, they would have eliminated every nut and bolt of Iran's nuclear program," said Kamalvandi, in remarks reminiscent of former US President Barack Obama's comments back in 2013.

Tehran Fires Back at Israel Over Military Threat

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian military officials have fired back at Israel after its top general threatened that attack plans against the Islamic Republic were being revised, saying the regime will only speed up its annihilation if it makes even the slightest mistake.

In a tweet on Wednesday, Hossein Dehqan, a military advisor to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, downplayed the threats that the Tel Aviv regime issues against the Islamic Republic from time to time and said the Israelis "do not even dare to fire a bullet at dear Iran." He warned the regime, however, that Iran's "doctrine is defensive but based on severe punishment for the aggressors. Do not rush for annihilation!"

The remarks came one day after Israeli Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi warned the administration of US President Joe Biden against rejoining the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, adding that he had ordered his forces to step up preparations for possible offensive action against Iran.

"I instructed the army to prepare a number of operational plans in addition to the existing ones," he said.

"We are taking care of these plans and will develop them during the coming year. Those who decide on carrying them out, of course, are the political leaders. But these plans have to be on the table."

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ViewPoint By: Hamid Reza Naghashian UNCTAD: China Outpaces the U.S.

If it is said that the current year belongs to Asia with China's economic leadership, do believe it. A couple of days ago the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) announced that China attracted \$163b of foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2020 while at the same time only \$134b of FDI flowed into the U.S. economy. The latest UNCTAD report shows that China has outpaced the U.S. in 2020 in terms of receiving in flows in the world.

The U.S. economy as the largest and the oldest traditional destination for flight of foreign direct investment witnessed the attraction of \$251b of FDI in 2019 while at the same time China could attract \$140b of the FDI. These statistics show that in the past four years, former U.S. President Donald Trump has revealed the nature of the real U.S. culture and economy, and buried even seemingly attraction for enthusiast investors due to the imprudence. Even due to this relative transparency, the ground for the concerns of the global investors, who considered the dollar and the U.S. as the cradle of the capital security, grew day by day.

The statistics show that the Chinese had a winner hand in dealing with the domestic economy. Despite this point that China has saved over \$3,000b of foreign reserves and this capital is able to be used in any country and lay the ground for transfer of significant economic growth in Asia, the country has not yet put aside its sluggish and slow pace move, and it is expected the country to put a 30-year plan for competing with the West, especially with the U.S. on its agenda for development and attracting the FDI.

For example, for better understanding of the feeling of investors disappointed with the U.S., it is good to know that the very last week, the American newspaper "The Washington Post" by publishing a report revealed the number of the false and misleading claims that were made by Trump during his four years in office and claimed the number of false claims was 3,0573 items. The daily launched the Fact Checker database to assess the president's claims. The daily through this database assessed the accuracy of Trump's false and misleading claims and made it public.

According to this report, Trump averaged about six claims a day in his first year as president, 16 claims day in his second year, 22 claims day in his third year - and 39 claims a day in his final year and , it took him 27 months to reach 10,000 claims according to the Fact Checker. But Trump's false claims and lies grew significantly in the last five months in the office and the number of his false claims hit 10,000.

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"Window Is Closing" for Biden to Rejoin Nuclear Deal

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Iran's highest-ranking diplomat in the United States warned the Biden administration it "must act quickly" to return to the 2015 nuclear deal abandoned by former President Donald Trump "because the window is closing" on Tehran's deadline for Washington to lift economic sanctions. Majid Takht-Ravanchi, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, made the comments in exclusive remarks to USA TODAY.

Iran's parliament has set a Feb. 21 deadline for Biden to lift U.S. sanctions as part of a move back into the now-breached agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. If the U.S. fails to act, Iran says, it will halt inspections of its nuclear sites by the International Atomic Energy Agency - a key provision of the accord - and further boost uranium enrichment.

"The party that needs to change course is the United States, and not Iran," said Ravanchi, who helped negotiate the agreement that Trump withdrew the U.S. from in 2018.

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Resistance of Iranian People Makes U.S. Surrender

TEHRAN (MNA) – Iranian First Vice President said that that what made the United States surrender was the resistance of the Iranian people.

Es’ghah Jahangiri made the remark, noting that the victory of the Islamic revolution is due to martyrdom and dedications of the Iranian nation.

He went on to say that the U.S. economic war against the Islamic Republic of Iran indicated that the resistance of the Iranian nation will make the US surrender.

According to Jahangiri, the future of Iran is bright and no one is allowed to disappoint the young generation.

President Inaugurates Over \$1.33b of Water, Wastewater Management Projects

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – President Hassan Rouhani, on Thursday, inaugurated 3,569 projects worth 56.1 trillion rials (about \$1.33 billion) aimed for natural resources and watershed management, as well as the development of irrigation and drainage networks in the country’s western and northwestern regions including the northern Golestan province.

Inaugurated in the 43rd series of inauguration ceremonies in the current Iranian calendar year (started on March 20, 2020), the mentioned projects are going to create job opportunities for over 105,771 people.

With the construction of irrigation and drainage networks in Golestan province, the net income of farmers through both irrigated and rainfed cultivation will increase by 58 percent and 159 percent, respectively, and the irrigation water productivity index will also increase by 44 percent.

The mentioned projects are aimed at promoting proper use of water, soil, and other natural resources, stabilize the population in rural areas, increase agricultural production, create effective employment and finally, increase the income and welfare of villagers and develop the northern, western and northwestern regions of the country.

Addressing the inauguration ceremony, President Rouhani said that despite all the sanctions, Iran exported over \$28 billion non-oil commodities in the past 10 months of the current Iranian year (started on March 20).



Rouhani inaugurated the provinces in the provinces of Ardabil, Khuzestan, and Golestan on Thursday, marking the days before the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution in winter 1979.

He hailed the Iranian people and government’s achievements under the unprecedented US sanctions as well as the coronavirus pandemic.

He expressed his gratitude to the people’s resistance during the difficult time of the pandemic and the sanctions, thanking the Iranian farmers for their role in the food security of the country.

Despite all the U.S. tough sanctions, Iran exported some \$28 billion non-oil commodities over the past 10 months of the current Iranian year (started on March 20), he said, adding that Iranian imports stood at \$30 billion during the past 10-month period.

He said that Iran’s trade could be even more than the current figure but the COVID-19 outbreak has caused a decline in the country’s foreign trade over the past year.

Zarif , Georgia President Discuss Bilateral Ties, Regional Issues



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has exchanged views with Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili on the latest developments regarding relations between the two countries and the situation in the region.

In a meeting with Zourabichvili in Tbilisi on Thursday, Zarif expressed hope for the expansion of bilateral cooperation in various fields of mutual interest, especially in trade and economic sectors.

Zarif also called on the Georgian government to help resolve the problems caused for the Iranians residing in Georgia as well as truck drivers.

He further explained the Islamic Republic’s position on using the recent post-conflict situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region as an opportunity to expand regional cooperation based on the interests of all parties.

The top Iranian diplomat also invited the Georgian president to pay a visit to Tehran. Zarif is in Georgia on the fourth leg of his five-nation tour, which has already taken him to Azerbaijan, Russia and Armenia with Turkey as his next stop.

Zourabichvili, for her part, referred to the Iran-Georgia historical ties and the issues related to the transportation routes between the Persian Gulf and the Black Sea.

She further emphasized the importance of economic relations between the two countries and joint investments, as well as cooperation to counter the coronavirus pandemic. Additionally on Thursday, the Iranian foreign minister discussed regional issues with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia.

Zarif also held a telephone conversation with his Georgian counterpart, David Zalkaliani, who is in self-isolation after he tested positive for COVID-19.

Zarif Tells He Was Never Buddies With Biden

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Joe Biden’s administration could potentially start to thaw the icy relations between Tehran and Washington, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told RT, but stressed he has never been close with the new U.S. leader.

In an interview with Oksana Boyko, host of RT’s Worlds Apart, the top Iranian diplomat said it would be a mistake to think that his personal relationship with Biden could help trigger a major diplomatic breakthrough between the two longtime rivals.

Zarif said his history with Biden can be traced back nearly 20 years when he served as Iran’s envoy to the UN. But he insisted that his interactions with the Delaware senator were strictly professional.

“Let me make it clear: Joe Biden and I were not buddies. We represented two different countries with different policies,” Zarif stressed.

Although never chummy, the pair were still able to work together. According to Zarif, they had “many civilized meetings in which we disagreed,” and he described their courteous discussions as “the basis for understanding.”

When asked about Biden’s pledge to reshape US foreign policy to make it reflect the wishes of ordinary Americans, Zarif said the vow was a “tall order,” noting that Washington’s current policy of unilateral sanctions is “basically economic warfare” and “economic terrorism.”

He said, however, that he hoped the new administration could begin to move bilateral relations with Tehran in the “right direction.”

Zarif insisted that Iran was not particularly interested in who sits in the White House, so long as the US honors its agreements under the 2015 nuclear deal. The landmark accord lifted UN sanctions on Iran in exchange for tighter regulations and restrictions on the country’s nuclear program, but the Donald Trump administration unilaterally exited the agreement in 2018. The accord was inked while Biden was serving as Barack Obama’s vice president.

The decision to leave the deal has already backfired for Washington, Zarif argued, noting that Iran’s stockpile of enriched uranium has ballooned, from a mere 300 kg to 4000 kgs, following the US’ unilateral withdrawal from the deal.

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Zarif said that U.S. policy towards his country has had devastating humanitarian consequences but has also given Iran an “advantage” during the Covid-19 crisis, as it forced the Islamic Republic to develop its own pharmaceutical industry.

Iran Has Achieved Great Successes Despite Sanctions

TEHRAN (IP) - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) said that the country, despite US unilateral sanctions, has been able to be full of great success.

In a Twitter message on Wednesday, Major General Hossein Salami highlighted the achievements of the Islamic Revolution in the World arena.

In the micro and macro view of the scene, we find that Iran, despite sanctions, has been able to be full of great success. And today we are in a position where the achievements of the Islamic Revolution are comparable to those of Europe and the United states.

Earlier in the day, during a visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, General salami referred to the failure of US maximum pressure on Iran, its failure to disrupt the Islamic Republic’s stabilizing role in the region, and the US failure to disrupt Iran’s internal security by relying on psychological warfare and influencing public opinion, saying: “These are among the successes the country has gained by resorting to resistance, forcing the enemy to defeat and retreat.”

He described the development of missiles with a range of 1,800 km, as well as the production of various types of UAVs as a sign of Iranian intelligence, saying, “In the micro and macro view of the scene, we find that Iran, despite sanctions, has been able to be full of great success. And today we are in a position where the achievements of the Islamic Revolution are comparable to those of Europe and the United States.”

The IRGC Commander-in-Chief emphasized the superiority of the logic of the Islamic Revolution compared to the enemies and said: “The logic of the Islamic Revolution has proven both objectively and theoretically that it is superior to its enemies and therefore this issue should be explained to public opinion.”

Unity, Iran’s Key To Success

TEHRAN (IP) - The head of the Office of Iran’s Leader stated that unity and following the Leader’s guidance are two key factors in Iran’s success.

Speaking at the inauguration ceremony of anti-deprivation projects by Mostazafan Foundation of Islamic Revolution across the country (28 parts), Gholamhossein Mohammadi Golpayegani stressed that enemies have been plotting against the Islamic Republic of Iran nonstop by waging the 8-year imposed war and bombarding the border provinces of Iran, Ilam in particular, sanctioning or any other way.

Mohammadi Golpayegani said the enemies have not put an end to their animosity toward the Islamic Republic, even, Donald Trump the former US president, confessed insolently that Lt. Gen Soleimani was martyred by his direct order.

“The despotic Pahlavi regime had sold the country cheaply, they committed innumerable crimes and corruptions which all must be reminded for the Iranians, but now enemies are begging to sit for negotiations with Iran,” underlined the top cleric.

The head of the Office of Iran’s Leader said that the Shah had confiscated all people’s lands, but Imam Khomeini took them all back.

The inauguration ceremony of anti-deprivation projects worth three thousand billion Tomans by the Mostazafin Foundation of the Islamic Revolution across the country (28 parts) was held on Thursday with the presence of the Head of the Office of Iran’s Leader Gholamhossein Mohammadi Golpayegani and the Head of Mostazafan Foundation Parviz Fattah.

Syrian Constitutional Committee Issues Statement in Geneva

TEHRAN – Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh announced the issuance of a statement at the final meeting of the countries guaranteeing the Astana process.

Khatibzadeh in this regard said: “On the sidelines of the fifth meeting of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, which is being held in Geneva from January 25 to 29, the three countries of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation and the Republic of Turkey after meeting and consulting with Syrian delegations and United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen, issued a statement to report their discussions.

Regarding the provisions of the statement, Khatibzadeh said: “While welcoming the consultations held within the framework of the Syrian Constitutional Committee and the role and actions of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, the three countries will continue consultations at the next meeting of the Astana peace process.”

He added: “This joint statement once again reaffirms strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria and emphasizes the need for all parties to respect these principles.

Official Issues Emergency Use Permit For Russian COVID-19 Vaccine

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Spokesman of Iran’s Food and Drug Administration Kianoush Jahanpour on Thursday announced that Iran has granted emergency use authorization to Sputnik V, a coronavirus vaccine made by Russia’s Gamaleya Center.

Jahanpour made the remarks at the 24th session of the Legal Commission for Diagnosis (the competence to manufacture and enter medicines and biological substances) of the Food and Drug Administration.

He said the committee has given emergency use authorization (EUA) for the Sputnik V vaccine made by the Gamaleya Center of Russia in the form of the freeze-dried solution as well as single-dose and five-dose vials.

Jahanpour noted that the Food and Drug Administration is evaluating other vaccines made in India, China, and Russia.

Earlier, speaking to IRNA, he said as the Minister of Health had previously stated and the President had emphasized, there are four different ways to supply the coronavirus vaccine, including direct purchase from a foreign country, procurement from the World Health Organization’s COVAX facility, a joint production with a Cuban company as well as domestic production of the vaccine.

The arrangements for the joint production of the vaccine with a foreign country have been pursued. He noted that Iran set conditions for conducting a human clinical trial of the vaccine which is that it should be jointly produced and its technology should be transferred to Iran, he added.

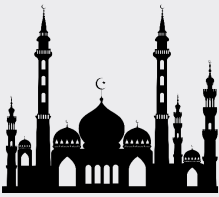
One of the well-known institutions in Cuba, which has old cooperation with the Pasteur Institute of Iran in the field of vaccine production for many years, accepted to kick off the joint venture, he noted.

Getting Stronger; Deterrent Factor Against Enemies

ILAM (IP) - The Commander of IRGC Ground Forces said that getting stronger is a deterrent factor against the enemies because they never stop conspiracy against Iran.

Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour on Thursday stated: “The enemies have never stopped various conspiracies against Islamic Iran; saying: if it were not for the military forces and the IRGC’s authority today, we would have had to wait for other military plans, but this courage has been taken from the enemy.”

“The western borders of Iran, like other regions and borders of the country, have good security, and such security is unique in today’s world,” he noted. A week later, the chief commander of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi, during ‘Eqtedar-99’ drills said that the enemies would regret if they make wrong calculations, saying that Iran Army Ground Forces are ready to launch special and combined operations.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)

■ Evening (Maghreb)

■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)

■ Tomorrow's Sunrise

12:17

17:48

05:38

07:04

28. He is the One that sends down rain (even) after (men) have given up all hope, and scatters His Mercy (far and wide). And He is the Protector, Worthy of all Praise.

29. And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the living creatures that He has scattered through them: and He has power to gather them together when He wills.

Surah 42. Councel, Consultation (28 - 29)

Turkey Important for Iran Foreign Trade Expansion

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK


TEHRAN - Deputy Head of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) for International Affairs Mohammad-Reza Karbasi in meeting with Iran's newly appointed commercial counselor to Turkey Mr. Kamran Davari Nikou emphasized the move in the framework of bilateral trade agreements and also enjoying multilateral agreements related to Turkey.

In the meeting where the head of Iran-Turkey Joint Chamber of Commerce Mehrdad Saadat Dehqan was also present, the latest developments regarding economic cooperation between Iran and Turkey and also ways for removing obstacles in way of boosting trade between the two countries were discussed.

Karbasi pointed to the record of cooperation and amicable relations of Iran and Turkey in recent years and reviewed the recent challenges in way of economic cooperation with Turkey and emphasized amend and return of cooperation to the main track.

He said recent obstacles as well as the previous problems resulted from sanction in the past two years have led to the decline in the bilateral trade volume of Iran and Turkey. Imposing ban on imports, rise in the tariffs and getting taxes by the Turkish government as well as the Turkish customs office problems and delay for the trucks in the borders are of the major issues which have slowed down the circulation of trade between the two countries and have increased the trade cost with this country, he added. Karbasi further said therefore it is necessary that both countries look at each other as long term partners and to have more serious actions to remove hurdles in way of cooperation.

He noted that ICCIMA has always emphasized the complementary role of economies of Iran and Turkey and currently the most important priority is to remove hurdles for bilateral economic cooperation and to move in direction of bilateral trade agreements as well as enjoying the multilateral agreements like ECO, D-8 and



international chambers of commerce (ICC) in order to return to a better and more stable condition.

Karbasi also pointed to the unnoticed potentials for expanding and diversifying cooperation, adding that trust-building is the key issue for developing bilateral trade, reiterating if it is neglected, some small problems will turn into big and complicated hurdles as the time passes. He also pointed to the significance of Turkey for expanding Iran's foreign trade, saying that despite the absolute need for presence of a commercial counselor in Turkey, almost one year after the Trade Promotion Organization named a commercial counsellor, it is wonder why the counsellor has not started his work and it should be accelerated.

Meanwhile Mr. Davari Nikou highlighted some of his program regarding resolving the problems and said promotion and developing Iran's brand, Iranian products and services as well as activating Iran's economic and trade potentials are his priorities during his mission. He then briefed some of his programs like attracting Turkish investors, consultation with big Turkish holdings, expanding tourism and increasing the share of exports of the knowledge-based products.

Then Mr. Sadaat Dehqan enumerated some of the problems regarding the Turkish market and stipulated that he expects constructive actions from Turkey. He also reiterated immediate deployment of the commercial counsellor in Turkey and also briefed the participants of the actions of Iran-Turkey Joint Chamber of Commerce for reciprocal reopening of the trade centers in both countries.

Exports to Japan in 2020 Was 3% of 2019

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Statistics from Japan's Economy Ministry show that imports from Iran reached \$34 million over the past year, equivalent to only 3 percent of its imports from the Islamic Republic in 2019.

Last year, the country imported \$1.2 billion from Iran, according to the report published Thursday, January 29, on the Japanese Economy Ministry's website.

Japan's exports to Iran also reached \$82 million over the past year, up about 19 percent from 2019.

For the first time, Japan's exports to Iran have outseen its imports.

Customs statistics from China, India and South Korea also show that their exports to Iran have outseen their imports for the first time in the past year.

Iran's exports to China halved in 2020 to \$6.4 billion. Iran's exports to India and South Korea have also fallen from \$4.3 billion in 2019 to \$288 million last year.

Gold Jewelry Purchases Fall Sharply in Iran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In its annual report published on Thursday, the World Gold Council says the purchase of gold jewelry in Iran has fallen sharply over the past year to the lowest level in a decade.

Iranians bought about 20 tons of gold jewelry in 2020, down 34 percent from 2019 and 2018, and less than halved compared to 2017.


In 2017, Iranians had purchased 45 tons of gold jewelry, and the previous year it was 40 tons.

The report also says that the purchase of gold and coin bullion in Iran over the past year has dropped about 7 percent from 2019 to 36 tons and 300 kilograms compared to the previous year. In 2018, the figure was nearly 62.

Indigenization of Sensitive Parts of Control System at PGSOC

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC NEWS

TEHRAN — Head of electricity, IT and precision instruments unit of Persian Gulf Star Oil Company (PGSOC) says the company has managed to indigenize the manufacture of sensitive parts of the control systems, and the home-made parts have been tested successfully and they can compete with its foreign likes.



Mr. Hossein Jokar announced this achievement and pointed to the manufacture of solenoid valve. He added that due to the need of the super Persian Gulf Star refinery to this type of the necessary valve especially in the sanctions condition, the specialized team of electronic workshop of the precision instruments started its specialized actions and research for indigenizing the manufacture of this important part.


He added that it took 500 man hours to finish the project for manufacturing the solenoid part, and calculation, design of the body and solenoid of the apparatus were carried out precisely and after finishing all phases, the product underwent different practical tests and after its success it was handed over to the maintenance group.

Jokar noted that the result of tests was favorable and this product can compete with its foreign likes. He stated he hopes with support of the youth in the refinery and full support of the management, the company would be able to indigenize other products required by the company to save the waste of financial resources and to cut the dependence on the foreign products.

He also pointed to design and manufacture of 120 power distribution boards in line with reducing the time and current costs of the company.

Jokar went on to say that one of the other actions of this unit was the design and programming of the smart control system and monitoring.

Iran Ready to Enhance Maritime Cooperation With Pakistan



TEHRAN (MNA) – The Iranian envoy to Pakistan has called for stepping up cooperation between the two neighbors in the field of maritime trade.

Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan Mohammad Ali Hosseini held a meeting with Pakistan's Minister for Maritime Affairs Ali Haider Zaidi at the Iranian embassy in Islamabad on Wednesday.

During the meeting, the two sides reviewed bilateral cooperation between Iran and Pakistan in the fields of ports and maritime services.

They also called for the development of regional and international cooperation between the two neighboring countries in the field of maritime trade, noting the importance of strengthening border relations in light of increasing crossings and establishing border markets.

The Iranian envoy and the Pakistani minister also reviewed the latest status of economic and trade cooperation, including the barter trade.

After the meeting, the Pakistani Maritime Ministry issued a statement in which Haider Zaidi had assured the Iranian side that the Pakistani government was committed to cooperating with Iran and accelerating the establishment of the border markets.

Emphasizing the importance of the country's traditional and fraternal relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Pakistani Minister for Maritime Affairs called for the expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation in all fields.

Tehran Ready to Help Nairoi on Knowledge-Based Companies

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Vice President of Science and Technology Sourena Sattari in a meeting with Kenya's Minister of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs Joseph Mucheru expressed Iran's readiness for sharing its successful experience of knowledge-based companies with Kenya.

Sattari headed a delegation of knowledge-based and creative companies to Nairobi, the Kenyan capital.

Sattari said in the meeting that Iran has been fighting with the most oppressive sanctions of the US for the past 40 years, but not only the sanctions could not stop Iran's progress, they were also the best stimulus for the Iranian scientists to become self-sufficient in various fields.

Iran has to make all the equipment it needs, which drove the country toward self-sufficiency and the indigenizing of industries, he said, adding that all these products are made at the highest standard levels and capable Iranian companies are ready to share their experiences with Kenyan enterprises.

Referring to the newly inaugurated House of Innovation and Technology of Iran in Nairobi, he said he had promised the center two years earlier.

Sattari also invited the Kenyan minister to visit Iran and get acquainted with the achievements and growing technology of the Iranian knowledge-based enterprises.

Thanking Iran and Sattari for their efforts, Mucheru, the Kenyan Minister of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs, said in the meeting that his country is willing to share Iran's experiences in novel technologies and technology biospheres.

Eurasia Has High Capacity to Export Iran's Building Materials

TEHRAN (MNA) – Chairman of Iran-Kazakhstan Joint Chamber of Commerce said that Eurasia enjoys high capacity and potential for exporting Iranian construction materials.

Speaking in a Conference of Economic Relations between Iran and Eurasia on Wed., Amir Abedi reiterated that Eurasia has high capacity and potential for exporting Iranian-made building materials.

He emphasized the high capacity of the country in the field of exporting construction materials including tiles and ceramics, glasses, wires and cables to Commonwealth Independent States (CIS) as well as Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

He said that Islamic Republic of Iran enjoys salient advantages in the field of technical-engineering services, water, electricity and energy fields, so that Iranian

technical and engineering companies should register their companies in Kazakhstan in order to take part in development projects of this country and also use facilities from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB).

Some civil activists in Golestan province, who had visited Turkmenistan for exporting technical and engineering services as well as implementation of development projects, could not receive cost for implementation of these projects due to the sanctions, Ali Mohammad Chooapani chairman of Gorgan Chamber of Commerce said.

This is while governments in other countries throw their weights behind contracts concluded in the field of exporting technical and engineering services and support these companies wholeheartedly, he added.

Tehran, Muscat Negotiate to Remove Monetary-Financial Exchanges Barriers

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Governor of the Central Bank of Iran Abdolnasser Hemmati said that Iran and Oman stressed taking necessary measures to develop trade relations and remove barriers to monetary and financial exchanges.

"Today we had a joint meeting with the head of the Central Bank of Oman and the Minister of Industry and Trade of Oman," Hemmati wrote on his Instagram page on Wednesday.

Important negotiations were conducted to establish the necessary measures for the development of trade relations and to remove barriers to monetary and financial exchanges in this meeting, he added.

Hemmati noted that there were also fruitful negotiations with Oman's foreign minister yesterday.

Oman's main international financial and trade relations officials expressed their serious interest in developing strategic economic relations with Iran during these meetings, he underscored.

China to Provide Iran With BeiDou

BEIJING (IP) - The ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Beijing announced that China would provide Iran with its new global positioning system called BeiDou.

Mohammad Keshavarzzadeh described the cooperation between Tehran and Beijing in various fields, including the fight against COVID-19, the design of a belt and a road, trade exchanges and friendly cooperation between the two countries. The payment. Referring to China's progress in various fields, including communication technology, the Iranian ambassador said: "Tehran will cooperate with Beijing to provide the fifth generation Internet infrastructure in the country."

He said that the aerospace industry in China had made great strides, and the completion and the official launch of the Beido system is one of China's great achievements in this field; China's Beido system, as part of our new relationship with China, can lay a solid foundation for expanding new relations between the two countries. Keshavarzzadeh stated: "China will provide Iran with "Beido" system, which is a new global positioning system.

BeiDou Navigation System (BeiDou) is China's project to develop an independent satellite navigation system.

Pope to Meet Top Shiite Cleric Sistani on Iraq Visit

BAGHDAD (AFP) - Pope Francis is to meet top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani during the first-ever papal visit to Iraq in March, a senior Catholic cleric told AFP on Thursday.

Louis Sako, patriarch of Iraq's Chaldean Catholic Church, said it would be a "private visit" between the two religious figures at Sistani's residence in the shrine city of Najaf, "without formalities."

Sistani, 90, is never seen in public and rarely accepts visitors. The confirmation of the bilateral meeting comes weeks after other parts of the Pope's visit were set.



German Neo-Nazi Sentenced To Life for Assassination of

BERLIN (Dispatches) - A German neo-Nazi was sentenced on Thursday to life in prison for murdering pro-migration politician Walter Luebecke, a killing that shocked the country and highlighted the growing threat of right-wing extremism.

Stephan Ernst, 47, was found guilty of shooting dead the lawmaker from Angela Merkel's conservative CDU party on June 1, 2019, in what is believed to be Germany's first far-right political assassination since World War II.

Luebecke was found on the terrace of his home near the central city of Kassel, with an autopsy showing he was shot in the head at close range.



China Warns Taiwan Independence Means War



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China toughened its language towards Taiwan on Thursday, warning after recent stepped-up military activities near the island that "independence means war" and that their armed forces were taking action to respond to provocation and foreign interference.

Taiwan, claimed by China as its territory, reported multiple Chinese fighter jets and bombers entering the island's southwestern air defense identification zone over the weekend, prompting concern in Washington.

China believes that Taiwan's democratically-elected government is moving the island towards a declaration of formal independence, though President Tsai Ing-wen has repeatedly said they are already an independent country called the Republic of China, its formal name.

Asked at a monthly news briefing about the air forces' recent activities, Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Wu Qian said Taiwan was an inseparable part of China. "The military activities carried out by the Chinese People's Liberation Army in the Taiwan Strait are necessary actions to address the current security situation in the Taiwan Strait and to safeguard national sovereignty and security," he said.

"They are a solemn response to external interference and provocations by 'Taiwan independence' forces," he added.

The Chinese incursions coincided with a U.S. carrier battle group entering the disputed South China Sea to promote "freedom of the seas".

Wu said a "handful" of people in Taiwan were seeking the island's independence.

"We warn those 'Taiwan independence' elements: those who play with fire will burn themselves, and 'Taiwan independence' means war," he added.

Democratic Taiwan has denounced China's threats and efforts at intimidation, and Tsai has pledged to defend the island's freedom and not be coerced.

China routinely describes Taiwan as its most important and sensitive issue in relations with the United States, which under the former Trump administration ramped up support for the island in terms of arms sales and senior officials visiting Taipei.

President Joe Biden's government, in office for a week, has reaffirmed its commitment to Taiwan as being "rock solid", potentially auguring further strains with Beijing.

On Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed Washington's commitment to the support of Southeast Asian nations in a long-running dispute with China over sovereignty in the South China Sea.

Russian Court Rejects Navalny's Appeal; Allies Arrested

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - A Russian court has rejected opposition leader Alexey Navalny's appeal against his arrest while authorities arrested several of his allies and issued warnings to social media companies.

Thursday's developments came after tens of thousands swarmed the streets in more than 100 Russian cities last weekend demanding his release. Speaking to court via video link from jail, Navalny denounced criminal proceedings against him as part of the government's efforts to intimidate the opposition.

"You won't succeed in scaring tens of millions of people who have been robbed by that government," he said.



His lawyers said Navalny would appeal against the ruling to keep him in custody, the Interfax news agency reported.

After the ruling was handed down, Navalny said to the judge: "Everything was clear to me before the start of the court hearing, thank you."

The 44-year-old Navalny, the most well-known critic of President Vladimir Putin's government, was arrested on January 17 upon his return from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Russian authorities have rejected the accusations.

Navalny was jailed for 30 days on request by Russia's prison service, which charged that he had violated probation terms from a suspended sentence on a 2014 money-laundering conviction, which he rejected as politically driven.

He now also faces accusations in two separate criminal probes. The Moscow Region Court on Thursday rejected his appeal against the arrest. Al Jazeera's Aleksandra Godfroid, reporting from Moscow, said Navalny used his chance to speak during Thursday's hearing to deliver a "political speech" aimed at boosting his supporters' morale.

WHO Team to Begin Wuhan Covid-19 Probe

BEIJING (Dispatches) - A team of experts from the World Health Organization left quarantine in Wuhan on Thursday to begin a heavily scrutinised probe into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic, after Washington urged a "robust and clear" investigation.

The group started a two-week quarantine on arrival on January 14 in the central Chinese city where the first known cluster of virus cases emerged in late 2019.

Wearing masks, they peered at the ranks of waiting media from the window of a bus which whisked them from the quarantine to another hotel on Thursday -- although it was not immediately clear when and where their investigation will start.

"So proud to graduate from our 14 days... no-one went stir crazy & we've been v productive," tweeted team member Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, a global NGO focused on infectious disease prevention.

The virus is believed to have come from bats and to have initially spread from a wet market in Wuhan where wild animals were sold as food.

The WHO insists the visit will be tightly tethered to the science of how the virus -- which has killed more than two million people -- jumped from animals to humans.

But in a sign of the political baggage attached to their mission, U.S. President Joe Biden's new administration weighed in before the experts had even finished quarantine.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, new White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said it was "imperative we get to the bottom" of how the virus appeared and spread worldwide.

Psaki voiced concern over "misinformation" from "some sources in China" and urged a "robust and clear" probe.

Beijing snapped back on Thursday, warning the United States to "respect facts and science, respect the hard work" of the WHO experts.

They must be allowed to work "free from political interference", Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters.

Unrest Grows in Lebanon Amid Coronavirus Lockdown

TRIPOLI (AP) — Lebanese rioters set fire to several buildings in the northern city of Tripoli Thursday as outrage over the country's coronavirus lockdown and inaction of the political class in the face of economic collapse took a more violent turn.

After hours of clashes and following the fires, Lebanese military troops deployed around the city in an effort to quell the rage. Firefighters were battling the flames rising from a historic municipal building, after the rioters set fire to it, two other government buildings and a private university that belongs to a rich businessman and politician from the deeply impoverished city.

The unrelenting protests in Tripoli, now in their fourth day, came as Lebanon grapples with both the pandemic and the worst economic crisis in its history, with only a caretaker government in charge.

Protesters had earlier Thursday pelted with rocks the security forces, who responded with volleys of tear gas.

The protests continued after the burial of Omar Taibi, a 30-year-old who was shot by security forces during protests the night before. More than 220 others were injured in the overnight clashes as frustrations boiled over.

The demonstrators took to the streets to denounce Lebanon's nearly-one month shutdown that has exacerbated already dire conditions. The confluence of the crises has posed the biggest threat to Lebanon's stability since the end of its civil war in 1990.

Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city and its most impoverished, has been a center for demonstrations against the country's political class. Smaller protests were reported Thursday and earlier in the week in Beirut and the eastern Bekaa region.

Even before the crises, almost the entire Tripoli workforce depended on day-to-day income. A September study by CARE International in the city of over 250,000 found that the average household income is 145,000 Lebanese pounds — or less than \$20 at the current average black market rate — and 33% of those sampled were unemployed. Dozens of young men have been taking part in the nightly protests in Tripoli, throwing rocks at security forces and in some cases, torching vehicles. On Wednesday, protesters repeatedly tried to break into the municipal building. Some lobbed hand grenades at security forces, who responded with water cannons, volleys of tear gas and finally, live ammunition.

The National News Agency said 226 people were injured in the confrontations, including 26 policemen. Taibi, who was hit by a bullet, died of his wounds Thursday, it said.

On Thursday, security forces brought reinforcements and put up barbed wire around the municipal government compound, known as the Serail. Two torched cars stood nearby. Shops and cafes were open and traffic appeared normal on the streets in clear defiance of the government's lockdown measures.



Biden Administration Pauses Weapons Sales to Saudi Arabia, UAE

WASHINGTON (Dispatches)

- The United States is reviewing weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) authorised by former President Donald Trump, a move that Secretary of State Antony Blinken said was "typical" of a new administration.

In his first press briefing on Wednesday, Blinken said the review aims "to make sure that what is being considered is something that advances our strategic objectives and advances our foreign policy".

"That's what we're doing at this moment," he told reporters.

The Wall Street Journal first reported on Wednesday that the Biden administration has imposed a temporary freeze on billions of dollars in weapons sales to the two countries, including the sale of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia and F-35 fighters to the UAE.

The move comes one week after Biden, who has promised to "reassess" Washington's relationship with Riyadh, was inaugurated. Since taking office, he has signed a string of executive actions to review or reverse some of Trump's key policies. Trump oversaw a close-knit U.S. relationship with both the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in line with his staunch support for Israel and "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran.

In May 2019, the former U.S. president declared a national emergency over tensions with Iran to sidestep objections from Congress about the sale of \$8bn worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan.

The Trump administration also authorized \$290m worth of small munition sales to Saudi Arabia at the end of December of last year.

The Trump administration notified Congress in November that it had approved the sale of more than \$23bn in advanced weapons systems, including F-35 fighter jets and armed drones, to the UAE.

That announcement came shortly after the Emirati government agreed to normalize relations with Israel in a U.S.-brokered deal.

"This is in recognition of our deepening relationship and the UAE's need for advanced defense capabilities to deter and defend itself against heightened threats from Iran," then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement at the time.





Jordan Apt (\$2500)
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S/pool, S, J
fireplace
marble fl
pkg, & F.F

Shanon (adviser)

Darrous Villa (\$4000)
1000sq.m
5bdrs, S/p
S, J, & pkg
green yard
Fully Furn

Parsian

Farmanieh (\$2000) 220sq.m, 2bdrs, S/p, S, J, pkg, & F.F
Mahmoodieh (\$2100) 180sq.m, 2bdrs, S/p, S, J, pkg, & F.F
Gheitarieh (\$2600) 220sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, S, J, pkg, & F.F

Elahieh Apt (\$3000) 200sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, S, J, & F.F

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Europe Lifts Safety Ban on Boeing 737 MAX Jet

LONDON (Reuters) - European regulators lifted a 22-month ban on flights of the Boeing 737 MAX after a design and pilot training overhaul in the wake of crashes that killed 346 people.

The European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) confirmed a provisional approval given in November, but dropped calls for an extra flight-angle sensor to back up a system implicated in crashes.

“Let me be quite clear that this journey does not end here,” Executive Director Patrick Ky said in a statement.

“We have every confidence that the aircraft is safe, which is the precondition for giving our approval. But we will continue to monitor 737 MAX operations closely as the aircraft resumes service.”



China Likely to Avoid Setting 2021 GDP Target Over Debt Concerns

BEIJING (Reuters) - China will likely avoid setting a 2021 growth target, dropping the closely watched measure for a second straight year on concerns that maintaining one could encourage provincial economies to ramp up debt, policy sources told Reuters.

The world's second-biggest economy eked out 2.3% growth last year despite the ravages of the pandemic that emerged in the central city of Wuhan, and will rebound a sharp 8.4% this year thanks to Beijing's aggressive COVID-19 response and global recovery, according to a Reuters poll of economists.

But policymakers fear that pegging official ambitions to a specific rate of growth could encourage regional governments to pursue even higher growth, in turn prompting an unhealthy rise in debt to hit the target, two sources said.

Government advisers who call for scrapping the gross domestic product (GDP) target again this year appear to be gaining the upper hand, while policymakers may again signal a goal implicitly by targeting employment and other indicators, said the sources, who asked not to be identified because the discussions are confidential.

“We will not set an explicit target, but in reality there will be a target,” said a government adviser, one of three sources saying the target will again be scrapped. “We will not emphasise the importance of achieving a target at all costs.”

But internal discussions are continuing ahead of China's annual parliament meeting in early March, and one source said the National Development and Reform Commission, the top state planner, remains keen to have a growth target.

The commission and the information office of China's State Council did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Even before the pandemic, internal calls to scrap growth targets - a legacy of decades of central planning in the Communist Party-ruled country - had been growing since President Xi Jinping pledged in 2017 to pursue “higher-quality” growth, reducing reliance on debt-fuelled stimulus and encouraging more productive investment.

China set no target last year, for the first time in 18 years, as COVID-19 roiled the global economy, sending China into a sharp contraction before it mounted a robust recovery thanks to strict virus controls and heavy demand for Chinese-made goods from countries struggling with the outbreak.

Still, many economists suspect the government maintained an implicit growth goal of around 3% in 2020.

The government is expected to target inflation around 3% this year, below last year's goal of about 3.5% but above the actual 2.5% rise in consumer prices, the sources told Reuters. Among the options proposed by advisers, they said: a GDP target around 8%, in line with forecasts, or no forecast.

Policymakers plan to set an average annual growth target of around 5% for the 14th five-year plan starting this year, Reuters reported in November.

Ma Jun, an influential policy adviser to the central bank, told a recent forum that China should abolish GDP targets, switching to employment and inflation as the main policy goals.

Kuwait Oil Prices to Reach Around \$60 pb in 2nd Half

KUWAIT (Dispatches) - An oil expert yesterday anticipated Kuwait oil prices to increase to \$60 per barrel (pb) in second half of this year as the world is projected to witness stability following coronavirus pandemic with provision of vaccines thus return of normal life. Mohammad Al-Shatti, addressing a virtual seminar about horizons of global economy and crude oil prices for 2021 organized by Kuwait's Oil Ministry, said return of normal aviation operations would also help improve prices. He said prices between \$70-80 pb were “relatively desirable” for the Arabian Persian Gulf countries and achieve some balances in their budgets.

Improvement of oil prices, added Shatti, would primarily benefit the budgets of Arab Persian Gulf countries which largely depend on oil as a major source of income. He therefore called for diversification of income and execution of immediate reforms because oil prices were affected by global political and health conditions. Shatti anticipated global economy to recover by over four percent in the second half of 2021, triggered by availability of COVID-19 vaccines.

Recovery of economy, he added, would encourage return of oil and gas investment coupled with optimism driven by a new U.S. Administration. Initial estimates show that global oil stocks dropped by two million barrels per day (bpd) in December 2020, however it remained 11 percent higher than 2019, he said. “That is why the decision by OPEC+ and the Saudi initiative for further (production) cuts were key in creating positive atmospheres in oil markets,” he said.

Global Oil Demand to Rise, Boosted by Vaccine Distribution, Economy - WoodMac

SINGAPORE (Reuters) - Global oil demand is expected to rise by nearly 7% this year, boosted by quicker vaccine distribution and a better economic outlook, consultancy Wood Mackenzie said on Thursday.

Total liquids demand is expected to average 96.7 million barrels per day (bpd) in 2021, 6.3 million bpd higher than last year when the Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented oil demand shock.

“Our short-term forecast assumes vaccine

distribution accelerating through 2021 and is underpinned by 5% expected growth in global GDP, according to our macroeconomic outlook, following the global economy's 5.4% contraction last year,” said the consultancy's vice president, Ann-Louise Hittle.

“The pace and strength of the global liquids demand recovery will depend on the pace of Covid-19 vaccine distribution and global economic recovery.”

In terms of supply, WoodMac expects oil output from the U.S. Lower 48 states to reduce by about 500,000 bpd this year, moderating from last year's decline.

Rig activity is expected to continue to rise but much of the recovery rate will be dependent on oil prices and the industry's willingness to spend on volume growth again, WoodMac said.

It added that decisions by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies, a group known as OPEC+, will be a huge uncertainty.

“Can OPEC+ negotiate deals each month and remain committed to production restraint? Some production restraint is needed in 2021 for market balance, but compliance could wane with demand recovery,” Hittle said.

Still, despite the potential increase in oil demand, refinery utilization this year is expected to remain low, amid the ongoing pandemic, OPEC+ production cuts and new capacity additions, WoodMac said.

Over one million bpd of refining capacity will be completed this year in the Middle East and Asia, which could threaten further refinery rationalization.

Refineries under the threat of closure could repurpose the facilities to produce liquid renewables instead of converting into a terminal, which could help oil companies' aim of achieving carbon neutrality.

U.S. Economy Likely Logged Its weakest Performance in 74 Years in 2020

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. economy likely contracted at its sharpest pace since World War Two in 2020 as COVID-19 ravaged services businesses

like restaurants and airlines, throwing millions of Americans out of work and into poverty.

The Commerce Department's snapshot of fourth-quarter gross domestic product on Thursday is also expected to show the recovery from the pandemic losing steam as the year wound down amid a resurgence in coronavirus infections and exhaustion of nearly \$3 trillion in relief money from the government.

The Federal Reserve on Wednesday left its benchmark overnight interest rate near zero and pledged to continue injecting money into the economy through bond purchases, noting that “the pace of the recovery in economic activity and employment has moderated in recent months.”

President Joe Biden has unveiled a recovery plan worth \$1.9 trillion, and could use the GDP report to lean on some lawmakers who have balked at the price tag soon after the government provided nearly \$900 billion in additional stimulus at the end of December.

“Last year was awful for the economy,” said Sung Won Sohn, a finance and economics professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. “This was the first service industry recession in recent memory where a lot of jobs were lost.”

Economists are forecasting that the economy contracted by as much as 3.6% in 2020, the worst performance since 1946. That would follow 2.2% growth in 2019 and would be the first annual decline in GDP since the 2007-09 Great Recession. In the fourth quarter, GDP is estimated to have expanded at a 4% annualized rate, according to a Reuters survey of economists. The virus and lack of another spending package curtailed consumer spending, and partially overshadowed robust manufacturing and the housing market.

The anticipated big step-back, following a historic 33.4% growth pace in the July-September period, would leave GDP roughly 2.3% below its level at the end of 2019. With the virus not yet under control, economists are expecting growth to further slow down in the first quarter of 2021, before regaining speed by summer as the additional stimulus kicks in and more Americans get vaccinated.

“No doubt it will be a challenging few months as the vaccines struggle to get distributed and lockdowns remain in place,” said Sam Bullard, a senior economist at Wells Fargo Securities in Charlotte, North Carolina. “However, as COVID gets under control, we expect growth to ratchet higher, running at around a 7% pace in the second half of the year.”

Swatch Falls to First Loss In Nearly 40 Years



ZURICH (Reuters) - Swatch Group on Thursday reported its first annual loss since the early days of the Swiss watchmaker almost 40 years ago as the COVID-19 pandemic battered demand in the luxury sector.

The company posted a net loss of 53 million Swiss francs (\$60 million) for 2020, its first loss since 1983 - the year Swatch Group was set up in its current form and launched the Swatch plastic watch.

Lockdown restrictions that shuttered shops and drastically reduced international travel battered sales of the Biel-based company, which also sells pricier Tissot, Longines and Omega timepieces.

Swatch Group, like other watchmakers, was also hit by the political unrest in Hong Kong, which dramatically reduced the number of Chinese tourists to the territory during the year.

Peer Richemont posted a 14% drop in sales at constant currencies for the nine months to Dec. 31, but grew in the Christmas quarter thanks to strong jewellery sales.

Unlike Richemont, Swatch Group can't fall back on a jewellery business and its entry-price Swatch and Tissot brands are vulnerable to competition from smartwatches like the Apple watch.

As a result, Swatch Group 2020 sales fell by almost a third to 5.59 billion francs. The 32% decline was worse than the 22% fall reported by the Swiss watch industry overall.

The company proposed cutting its dividend, slashing its 2020 payout for the more frequently-traded bearer share to 3.50 francs from 5.50 francs a year earlier.

Still, Swatch - famous for its optimistic view of the market - flagged signs of recovery.

China, the world's biggest market for luxury watches, saw double digit growth in the second half of 2020, while the United States saw sales reach pre-pandemic levels in December, Swatch said.

“For 2021, the Group sees a good chance that sales in local currencies will approach those of 2019, with significantly improved margins,” it said.

Gold Demand Plunged to 11-Year Low in 2020 as Virus Upended Trade

LONDON (Reuters) - Global demand for gold fell to its lowest in 11 years in 2020 as the coronavirus upended the market, triggering huge stockpiling by investors but collapsing sales of jewelry and purchases by central banks, an industry report said on Thursday.

The pandemic also transformed the geography of the bullion trade, sucking gold from Asia, where most gold is sold as jewelry, to Europe and the United States, where investors are the dominant consumers.

It also pushed the value of gold up 25% in 2020, because investors have much more impact on prices than the jewelry market.

Global demand for gold fell to 3,759.6 tons last year, down 14% from 2019 and the first year below 4,000 tons since 2009, the World Gold Council (WGC) said in its latest quarterly report.

The year ended on a weak note, with demand over October to December at 783.4 tons, down 28% year-on-year and the lowest of any quarter since 2008, the WGC said.

Gold is traditionally used as a safe store of wealth, and investors bought 1,773.2 tons last year, up 40% from 2019 and the most for any year on record.

At current prices of around \$1,850 an ounce, that gold is worth some \$100 billion.

Exchange-traded funds (ETFs) holding gold for larger investors added a record 877.1 tons to their stockpile, but those inflows reversed late in the year as money flowed back to assets that benefit from economic growth.

Demand for gold bars and coins bought by smaller retail investors picked up pace towards the end of the year, lifting annual

buying to 896.1 tons, up 3% from 2019.

Consumption of gold by jewelers - typically the biggest source of demand, dominated by China and India - fell to 1,411.6 tons as coronavirus lockdowns closed stores and put people out of work, while higher prices also curbed interest among buyers.

That was 34% lower than in 2019 and the lowest annual total on record, though demand was reviving by year-end, the WGC said.

Central banks bought 273 tons of gold in 2020, down 59% from 2019, with purchases falling sharply in the second half of the year.

Supply of gold fell 4% to 4,633 tons last year as the pandemic disrupted mining activity, the WGC said.



Mehrdad Minavand Laid to Rest

TEHRAN (MNA) - Former Iran and Persepolis football team midfielder Mehrdad Minavand was laid to rest on Thursday.

Minavand passed away at the age of 45 Wednesday night after losing battle against COVID-19.

Former Persepolis coaches and players including Ali Parvin, Ali Daei, Ali Karimi, Mohammad Khakpour, Afshin Peyrovani,

Yahya Golmohammadi and Karim Bagheri attended the funeral. Minavand started his career at Tehran based football club Pas in 1994 but joined Persepolis a year later.

The left winger also played for Austrian club Sturm Graz and Charleroi from Belgium before returning to Persepolis once again in 2002.



Swiss Gold Exports Fell to Record Low in 2020

LONDON (Reuters) - A collapse in shipments to China and India, whose vast jewelry markets were partially shut by the coronavirus, drove Swiss exports of gold in 2020 to the lowest since at least 2012, customs data showed on Thursday.

India's demand for gold recovered strongly as the year ended, but China, once the biggest buyer, received no gold at all from Switzerland for the third straight month in December.

Switzerland is the world's biggest gold refining center and a transit hub, and its trade data shows how the pandemic transformed the bullion market.

Consumption plunged in Asia, where most gold is sold as jewelry, and metal moved west to satisfy an explosion in demand from investors who are the main buyers in Europe and North America.

This dynamic is now beginning to reverse but left its mark on the 2020 figures.

Switzerland shipped 148 tons of gold to India in 2020, compared to 232 tons in 2019 and 253 tons in 2018.

It exported just 30.5 tons to China, down from 181 tons in 2019 and 432 tons in 2018, and 26.7 tons to Hong Kong, down from 73 tons in 2019 and 222 tons in 2018.

Hong Kong, a regional trade hub, shipped 178 tons of gold to Switzerland in 2020, dwarfing the amount it received.

By far the biggest destination of Swiss gold last year was the United States, which received a staggering 508 tons in 2020, up from 17.8 tons in 2019 and 8.1 tons in 2018.

The pace of these shipments -- most of which have been deposited in vaults in New York, where they underpin trading of futures contracts -- has slowed sharply in recent months.



In total, Switzerland exported 1,180 tons of gold last year, down from 1,189 tons in 2019 and the lowest since the country began publishing data in 2012.

December's exports of 76.4 tons were the lowest since February.

An ounce of gold currently costs around \$1,850 and a ton is worth \$60 million.

India Seen as Fastest Growing Economy in FY22



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - JIndia's economy is expected to bounce back strongly in the next fiscal year with 11.5% growth, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said, forecasting a sharp global recovery in 2021 after the havoc wrought by the pandemic.

India is the only major economy forecast to grow in double digits next year and forecast to follow that up with the highest 6.8% rise in the FY23 fiscal.

Policy support and vaccines are expected to lift economic activity across the world, the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook (WEO) update on Tuesday.

The latest forecast for India's FY22 gross domestic product (GDP) marks an upward revision from the 8.8% growth the IMF had estimated in its last assessment in October.

"Notable revisions to the forecast include the one for India (2.7 percentage points for 2021 [FY22]), reflecting carryover from a stronger-than-expected recovery in 2020 after lockdowns were eased," the IMF said.

The IMF also raised its India forecast for the current fiscal -- it said the economy is likely to contract 8% compared with the 10.3% decline it had forecast in October.

The revisions came as July-September quarter GDP surprised on the upside, it said. India's numbers are based on an April-March fiscal year while for the rest of the world the forecast is for the calendar year.

The results of a survey conducted by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (Ficci) earlier this month matched the multilateral lender's assessment, with the median expectation of FY21 growth at -8%, according to the quarterly Economic Outlook Survey.

The global economy is projected to grow 5.5% in 2021 and 4.2% in 2022, the IMF said.

It attributed the 0.3 percentage point upward revision for 2021 to "expectations of a vaccine-powered strengthening of activity later in the year and additional policy support in a few large economies."

The IMF also saw a narrower 3.5% contraction in world output in 2020 as opposed to a 4.4% decline seen earlier, "reflecting stronger-than-expected momentum in the second half of 2020."

It warned "surging infections in late 2020 (including from new variants of the virus), renewed lockdowns, logistical problems with vaccine distribution" were risks to this assessment.

Global trade volumes are forecast to grow about 8% in 2021. The IMF expects oil prices to rise in 2021 by just over 20% from the low base for 2020 but they will still remain well below their average for 2019.

Non-oil commodity prices are also expected to increase with those of metals, in particular, projected to accelerate strongly in 2021, it said. Multiple vaccine approvals and the launch of mass inoculation campaigns have raised hopes of an eventual end to the pandemic, the IMF said.

It expects vaccines and therapies to become more readily available in the second half of 2021.

"With growing vaccine availability, improved therapies, testing, and tracing, local transmission of the virus is expected to be brought to low levels everywhere by the end of 2022," the IMF said.

Toyota Becomes World's No.1 Car Seller in 2020

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's Toyota Motor Corp overtook Germany's Volkswagen in vehicle sales last year, regaining pole position as the world's top selling automaker for the first time in five years as the pandemic demand slump hit its German rival harder.

Toyota said on Thursday its group-wide global sales fell 11.3% to 9.528 million vehicles in 2020. That compared with a 15.2 percent drop at Volkswagen to 9.305 million vehicles.

Automakers have suffered as coronavirus lockdowns have stopped people from visiting car showrooms and forced manufacturing plants to reduce or halt production.

Toyota, however, has weathered the pandemic better in part because its home market Japan, and the Asian region in general, have been less affected by the outbreak than Europe and the United States.

"Our focus is not on what our ranking may be, but on serving our customers" a Toyota spokeswoman said.

As demand for cars rebounds, particularly in China, Toyota, Volkswagen and other manufacturers are scrambling to tap growing demand for electric cars. Toyota said that the ratio of electric vehicle it sold last year grew to 23% of total sales from 20% in 2019.

Methanol Output to More Than Double in 2025

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's output of methanol in expected to increase by more than a double as the country seeks to capture nearly a half of the global market for the highly-strategic product by 2025.

Behzad Mohammadi, a deputy Iranian oil minister said on Thursday that methanol output will reach a target of 23 million metric tons per annum (mtpa) by 2025.

Iran's current output capacity for methanol is around 12 mtpa, said Mohammadi, adding that nearly 80 percent of the capacity is currently active.

The official, who heads the National Petrochemical Company (NPC), said that Iran consumes less than six percent of its methanol output inside the country and the rest is exported to generate some \$2 billion in foreign currency revenues for the government.

Mohammadi added that Iran will need to provide over 150 million cubic meters of gas per day as feedstock for

petrochemical plants in 2025 to be able to meet the target of 23 mtpa in methanol output.

He said Iran would gain a dominant share or around 45 percent of the global trade for methanol in 2025.

NPC chief said China, the largest producer and one of the largest importers of methanol in the world, will remain the top buyer of Iranian methanol in the upcoming years with estimates suggesting that Iran will supply nearly a fourth of China's total demand for the product, or around 13 mtpa, in 2024.

However, Mohammadi insisted that Iran should seek to reduce the exports and use the strategic raw material inside the country to manufacture products with higher added value.

Iranian authorities said last year that researchers had obtained the know-how to turn methanol to propylene, a technology known as MTP which was previously exclusive to companies in only two Western countries.

"Window Is Closing" ...

FROM PAGE 1

Biden's new Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday, his first full day as the U.S.'s top diplomat, that Washington will only return to the deal once it is satisfied that Iran has come back into full compliance with the agreement. This means, in part, limiting uranium enrichment to just under 4%.

Blinken said the U.S. was a "long ways" from meeting Biden's aspiration to rejoin the deal.

"Iran is out of compliance on a number of fronts, and it would take some time, should it make a decision to do so, for it to come back into compliance, and for us then to assess whether it was meeting its obligations. So, we're not there yet, to say the least," Blinken told reporters at a press briefing. Iran counters that Washington, not Tehran, is behind escalating tensions. It points to the Pentagon's assassinating of Iran's top commander Gen. Qasem Soleimani in a U.S. airstrike in Baghdad in January last year, and the assassination of Mohsen Fakhriadeh, its top nuclear scientist, outside Tehran in November. Iran's government accuses Israel, with U.S. support, of being behind Fakhriadeh's killing.

Tehran Fires Back...

FROM PAGE 1

Additionally, the spokesperson for the Iranian Armed Forces described Kochavi's rhetoric as "nothing more than hallucinations."

"If the Zionists make a foolish move or any mistake, even the slightest one, against Iran, they will face a reaction that will destroy Tel Aviv and hasten the end of their regime," Brigadier General Abolfazl Shekarchi told Iran's Arabic-language Al Alam news network. He also said the Iranian Armed Forces have been strengthening their defensive capabilities day by day, and that the country is capable of carrying out strategic operations to level the enemy to the ground.

"Iran has a message for the countries of the world that the holy establishment of the Islamic Republic is not seeking to build nuclear weapons and will never move in this path -- based on Ayatollah Khamenei's fatwa -- as it considers such a measure forbidden regarding its defense policies and has nothing to hide," Shekarchi said.

The Zionists have already tested themselves against the resistance forces, said the Iranian general, describing the regime's military as "coward and weak." He further referred to the widening political rift in the Israeli regime and growing calls for the scandal-hit Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to step down, saying sarcastically that Tel Aviv first needs to contain the protest rallies against Netanyahu before issuing threats against others. Iran has repeatedly enunciated its nuclear program as exclusively civilian, subject to the most intensive UN supervisions ever.

UNCTAD...

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The Fact Checker of the Washington Post announced that Trump had made more than 2,500 coronavirus-related false claims. Trump was largely quiet for six days as he recovered from his own bout with covid-19. But after his recovery, Trump resumed making false

claims. It is said he made an average of 150 claims

Therefore and according to this report as some kind of fact, one can realize that lack of interest by the well-to-do people and the sensitive nature of capital for entering the U.S. can be considered as the assessment of an honest trend of management in a country.

In Iran, unfortunately we are also struggling with inaccurate remarks from the officials in the executive branch of power. This issue in any country can be considered as the source of emergence of disappointment and frustration as well as killing the necessary vigor. UNCTAD considers these statistics in China as the liveliness of the economy and the art of management by the Chinese officials in winning global trust, and it acknowledges this fact that several facts and figures cause emergence of appetite and interest in a country for investment.



IMF...

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That comes as some experts estimate that Iran could even show a better GDP performance next year if a current administration in the US decides to ease sanctions on the country by rejoining a 2015 international agreement on Tehran's nuclear program.

Increased economic activity that might follow an easing of coronavirus-related restrictions in Iran could also help boost the country's growth in 2022.

IMF forecasts for 2021 means Iran will outperform regional rival Saudi Arabia at 2.6% of GDP growth while trailing Turkey at a growth rate of 3.5%.

However, the IMF data and forecasts, presented on the basis of Iran's fiscal year to late March, showed that the country would continue to grapple with high levels of inflation in 2021 with a projected increase of 30% in its consumer price index.

Tehran, Ankara...

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The Iranian top diplomat also said Ankara-Tehran cooperation in the Caucasus region would also benefit the people of the region to a great extent.

He noted that the two countries are working with Afghanistan for a trilateral mechanism upon the request of the Kabul administration

Regarding the new administration in the U.S., both ministers expressed hope that Biden returns to the nuclear deal, unilaterally abandoned by former President Donald Trump in 2018.

"Turkey hopes that the newly elected Biden administration in the U.S. will return to the nuclear agreement with Iran and withdraw sanctions on the Iranian people," Çavuşoğlu said, while Zarif said they expect relations to flourish even further "with the U.S.' more constructive approach." The Iranian FM noted that his country does not see nuclear weapons as a means of security, and on the contrary, they want all countries possessing such weapons to eliminate them.

Informally known as Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was seen as a great step toward ensuring peace and stability in the Middle East when the P5+1 countries -- the U.S., the U.K., France, China, Russia and Germany -- along with the EU agreed to relieve sanctions imposed on Iran on the condition that the country curbs its nuclear capacity. After nearly three years, U.S. President Donald Trump announced on May 8 that his country would withdraw from the agreement, which took effect during the term of his predecessor Barack Obama. The U.S.'s allies across the Atlantic -- Germany, France and the U.K.-- criticized Trump's decision and they have been working on a special purpose vehicle (SPV) to facilitate the payments for the EU-Iran trade.

Zarif also said Tehran has "vehemently" condemned U.S. sanctions on Turkey. "These sanctions have no value for us. The U.S. has turned into a state that is accustomed to imposing sanctions recklessly," he said.

In December, the U.S. imposed sanctions on Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries (SSB) and its chief Ismail Demir over the country's purchase of S-400 missile defense systems from Russia.

The U.S. sanctions on Turkey defused tensions between the two countries over a poem recited by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who attended Azerbaijan's victory parade on Dec. 10 to celebrate Nagorno-Karabakh victory. Iranian officials, including Zarif, were infuriated after Erdoğan recited a poem about the Aras River:

Russian “Bad Boy” Kokorin Joins Fiorentina

ROME (Dispatches) - Fiorentina announced the signing of Russian international striker Aleksandr Kokorin on a permanent deal from Spartak Moscow, just a year-and-a-half since he was released from prison.

The 29-year-old was found guilty of assaulting a Russian government official in 2018, alongside then-Krasnodar midfielder Pavel Mamayev.

“What I did in Russia was a mistake that I paid for dearly,” Kokorin told the Fiorentina website.

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Llorente Joins Udinese From Napoli

ROME (Dispatches) - Former Spain striker Fernando Llorente has joined Udinese from Napoli, the struggling Serie A club announced.

The 35-year-old has signed a deal until June 2022 and arrives at a team sitting 14th in the Italian top flight, but only four points above the relegation zone. “I am very happy to be an Udinese player, from the first moment I arrived I felt at home,” Llorente, who has only made three substitute appearances in Serie A for Napoli this season, told the Udinese website.

Liverpool End Five-Game Winless Run At Tottenham

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool ended a five-game winless run in the Premier League to move back into the top four with a 3-1 win at Tottenham on Thursday as Spurs also lost Harry Kane to an ankle injury.

The English champions had not even scored in their last four league games, but Jurgen Klopp said he recognized his side again as their front three sparked back into life after Roberto Firmino ended a 492-minute goalless drought in first-half stoppage time.

Kane had soldiered on after twice receiving treatment on ankle knocks in the first-half and was eventually replaced at the break with Jose Mourinho predicting the England captain will be absent for at least a few weeks.

“Two injuries in both ankles, the second one worst than the first one,” said Mourinho. “A few weeks, I don’t know for sure.

“There are some players you can’t replace. When it happens it happens, but I believe we have to fight against it, we cannot do anything else.”

Liverpool’s worst run in the league since 2017 had seen them slip from the top of the table to fifth before kick-off with Klopp admitting his first priority is now to secure Champions League qualification for next season.

But the German was delighted with the response from the Reds as they clicked back into gear, particularly after going in front.

“What I saw today it’s not about shape or form it’s about who we are. That was us, second half especially it was us,” said Klopp.



Kane and Son Heung-min have been the most deadly duo in the Premier League this season and thought they had combined for the opening goal inside the first five minutes.

Son finished coolly from Kane’s through ball, but the South Korean had just strayed offside in the build-up and the goal was ruled out by a VAR review.

There were signs of life in Liverpool’s attacking play despite a 3-2 defeat to Manchester United in the FA Cup on Sunday and they created many more clear-cut chances than in recent weeks as Hugo Lloris twice denied Mane with excellent saves.

With Kane clearly hobbling, Tottenham were clinging on for half-time when Liverpool finally struck.

Sadio Mane got in behind and squared for Firmino to bundle in at the back post for his first goal in eight games.

Trent Alexander-Arnold’s drop off in form has been another major part of Liverpool’s regression from the side that romped to the title last season with 99 points.

However, the England right-back connected sweetly to drill in his side’s second after Lloris could only parry Mane’s initial effort into his path.

Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg’s brilliant strike from outside the box halved the deficit just two minutes later.

Liverpool, though, rarely looked troubled after Kane departed and could have won far more convincingly.

Mohamed Salah’s powerful strike was ruled out after a VAR review for a handball by Firmino earlier in the move. But Mane restored the two-goal cushion when he pounced on an error from Joe Rodon to fire high past Lloris.

Victory takes Liverpool back above West Ham, who they face on Sunday, into fourth.

Mourinho Expects Alli To Stay at Spurs

LONDON (Dispatches) - Jose Mourinho said that he does not expect Dele Alli to be reunited with his former boss Mauricio Pochettino at Paris Saint-Germain by the end of the transfer window.

Alli, 24, has been a peripheral figure for Mourinho at Tottenham Hotspur this season, playing just 74 minutes in 18 Premier League games.

The England midfielder played his best football during Pochettino’s reign at Spurs and has been linked with a move to PSG as the Argentine’s first signing since taking charge in December.

“I’m saying that since the beginning of the transfer window. I was not expecting anyone to leave, not expecting anyone to come,” Mourinho told reporters ahead of Tottenham’s clash with Liverpool on Thursday.

“I don’t believe anything is going to happen but the window is open still. Sometimes unexpected things can happen, but I don’t expect it.”

Alli, who will miss the visit of Liverpool due to injury, has made just five starts all season, none of which have come in the league since the opening weekend of the campaign.

Clubs Chief Warns of Losses up To 8.5b Euros Due to Pandemic

TURIN (Dispatches) - The head of the powerful European Club Association, Andrea Agnelli, has warned that top-level football clubs across the continent face more dire financial losses this year as they struggle to come to terms with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Agnelli was speaking after the release of the Deloitte Football Money League report this week which showed combined revenue of the top 20 richest clubs in Europe in 2019/20 had dropped by 1.1 billion euros (\$1.33 billion) compared to the previous season.

The report estimated those clubs will miss out on over two billion euros of revenue across the 2019/20 and 2020/21 seasons, but Agnelli sounded a stark warning for the game as a whole.

Zlatan Condemns Racism After Spat With Lukaku

MILAN (Dispatches) - Zlatan Ibrahimovic spoke out against racism on Wednesday after a heated exchange with former Manchester United teammate Romelu Lukaku during the Italian Cup quarter-final in which he evoked voodooism.

The AC Milan striker squared up to his Inter Milan counterpart in Tuesday’s match, accusing the Belgian international of using voodoo, according to Italian media reports.

On Wednesday the Swede took to Twitter, writing: “In ZLATAN’s world there is no place for RACISM.

“We are all the same race - we are all equal!! We are all PLAYERS some better than others.”

The heated altercation between the pair began at the half-time whistle in the San Siro. Ibrahimovic taunted Lukaku and infuriated the Belgian by laughing in his face before the pair went head-to-head.

They continued to trade insults as they headed towards the tunnel with a furious Lukaku being restrained by his teammates.

Both players were booked over the incident and Ibrahimovic was subsequently sent off after picking up a second yellow card 15 minutes into the second half for bringing down Aleksandar Kolarov.

Christian Eriksen scored a last-gasp winner to send Inter into the semi-finals with a 2-1 victory after goals by both Lukaku and Ibrahimovic.

Nadal, Serena Support Strict COVID-19 Protocols During Australia Open

LONDON (Dispatches) - Rafa Nadal feels tennis players are privileged to be able to compete at the Australian Open during the COVID-19 pandemic and urged fellow participants to have a wider perspective of the strict health measures in the country.

About 1,200 participants were allowed to fly to Australia for the summer of tennis as thousands of its citizens are unable to return home due to travel restrictions.

Players are serving 14 days of isolation during which they are allowed five hours outside their rooms each day to train for the year’s first Grand Slam, which has been delayed by three weeks and will be played from February 8-21.

But 72 players have been confined to their rooms after passengers on the charter flights that carried them to Australia tested positive to the virus.

Nadal, along with top players like Novak Djokovic and Serena Williams, is isolating in Adelaide and said he felt “very sorry” for those in hard isolation.

“But when we came here we knew that the measures were going to be strict because we knew that the country is doing great with the pandemic,” the Spaniard told CNN.

“It’s normal to complain in some way but on the other hand when you have little bit wider perspective of what’s going on ... you see how many are dying around the world.

“You see how many people are losing their father, their mum, without having the chance to say goodbye. It’s a real thing, that’s what’s happening in my country for example. Close people to me are suffering this situation.”

Australia has recorded more than 22,000 cases and 909 deaths from the novel coronavirus. It had no new local cases for the 10th straight day on Wednesday.



UEFA Still Planning 12-Venue Tournament For Euro 2020

LONDON (Dispatches) - UEFA reiterated its plan Wednesday to stage the delayed European Championship in 12 cities all across the continent despite ongoing concerns about the Covid-19 pandemic, but said it recognised the need for flexibility over tournament arrangements.

European football’s governing body held a meeting to discuss logistics with representatives from each of the 12 host nations for Euro 2020, postponed from last year and due to run from June 11 to July 11.

“UEFA is committed to holding Euro 2020 in the 12 cities originally planned. The Euro is the flagship competition for national team football in Europe and is a vital source of funding for grassroots and wider football development,” UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said in a statement.

“I am optimistic that things are highly likely to be very different with regard to the virus as we move closer to the tournament and it is important that we give the host cities and governments as much time as we can to formulate an accurate picture of what will be possible come June and July.”

UEFA has pushed back the deadline for submitting plans to accommodate fans inside stadiums to early April. Four options are on the table regarding supporters, with games across Europe largely being played behind closed doors due to the health situation.

“We are currently working on four operational scenarios for UEFA Euro 2020 (full stadium; 50-100% capacity with various mitigation measures; 20-30% capacity with various mitigation measures; and behind closed doors,” a UEFA spokesman said last week.

“Fans are such a big part of what makes football special and that is true of the Euro as much as it is of any game. We must allow ourselves the maximum space to allow their return to the stadiums,” added Ceferin.

