

Health Ministry Spokeswoman
Sima Sadat Lari Said on Friday
That Some 77 More Iranians Lost
Their Lives From the COVID-19
Over the Past 24 Hours Bringing
The Total Deaths to 59,341

IRAN NEWS

Director of Iran's National
Innovation Fund (INIF) Ali Vahdat
Announced That the Institution
Stands Ready to Help Launch
Armenia's Technology Fund

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Gov't Rolls Out \$330m Worth of Metals, Trade Projects

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Hassan Rouhani has inaugurated four major metals and trade projects in the country as his government presses ahead with plans to diversify the economy away from oil revenues.

The projects came on line on Thursday in a ceremony at Rouhani's office where he used a video conference call to roll them out. Rouhani's website said in a report that some 85.2 trillion rials (\$330 million) had been spent on the four projects which included two iron ore pelletizing plants, a major wharf and a food exports processing facility.

The projects create a total of 1,460 permanent jobs in three Iranian provinces, said the report.

The largest of them, a pelletizing plant in Sirjan, a hub of Iran's iron mining operations in the southeastern province of Kerman, is owned by private investors who have spent \$150 million to bring it on line, it said.

Another privately-owned pelletizing plant opened on Thursday is located in the Persian Gulf Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in the southern Hormozgan province, added the report.

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Fair Vaccine Distribution, Lifting of Sanctions Key to Global Fight Against COVID-19

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's envoy to the United Nations says a fair distribution of COVID-19 vaccines among all nations and removal of sanctions are among the important requisites for a successful battle against the deadly disease.

Majid Takht-Ravanchi made the remarks while addressing the Security Council Open Meeting on Ensuring Equitable Access to COVID-19 Vaccines in Contexts Affected by Conflict and Insecurity.

In order to prevent more severe consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, including loss of the progress already made in fighting against poverty and the intensification of inequality within and between countries, there is no other option but to achieve success in containing the virus, Takht-Ravanchi said.

For that to happen, it is necessary to increase international cooperation, distribute vaccines fairly across the world and lift inhumane sanctions and blockades, he added.

He described the coronavirus as a "common enemy of humanity" that is targeting people regardless of their race, religion and nationality and said practical cooperation and cohesion among all nations is a necessity to fight the outbreak.

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Tehran Urges Washington to Effectively Lift All Sanctions



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's foreign minister has urged the Joe Biden administration to unconditionally lift all sanctions imposed on Iran under former U.S. president Donald Trump after the US retreated from some of Trump's anti-Iran measures.

"U.S. acknowledged Pompeo's claims re Res. 2231 had no legal validity," Zarif wrote in a tweet on Friday, hours after the Biden administration rescinded Trump's alleged restoration of UN sanctions on Iran back in September, which fell short of garnering enough support at the UN Security Council in the first place.

In recent weeks, Tehran and Washington have been at loggerheads over which side should first return to comply with the 2015 nuclear deal, which the Trump administration withdrew from in 2018 and tried to destroy with his so-called maximum pressure campaign.

"U.S. unconditionally & effectively lift all sanctions imposed, re-imposed or re-labeled by Trump," Zarif said. "We will then immediately reverse all remedial measures."

Tehran argues that the U.S. should first lift all the sanctions put in place under Trump before the Islamic Republic returns to full compliance with the deal, as it was the U.S. that caused the complication by pulling out of the deal, which in turn prompted Iran to take remedial measures.

Iran says the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden has kept up his predecessor's "maximum pressure" policy towards Iran that has brought along nothing but defeat and disgrace for Washington.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh later responded to the U.S. move, which he called a mere "gesture" and said the US must lift sanctions in order to revive the JCPOA.

"Remember, Trump left the room and tried to blow it up," Khatibzadeh tweeted. "Gestures are fine. But to revive P5+1, U.S. must Act: LIFT sanctions."

Meanwhile President Hassan Rouhani said the new U.S. administration needs to act swiftly to make up for the past mistakes and return to the rule of law by resuming its commitments under a UN resolution that endorsed the 2015 agreement on the Iranian nuclear program.

"Implementing and respecting international law, commitments and treaties are among the humanitarian and political duties of all governments," Rouhani said in a videoconference address to the inaugural ceremony of four industrial and mineral projects on Thursday.

"Therefore, we hope that they [US] will return to the rule of law so that we will be able to conduct our interactions, particularly in the trade sector, in the world under better circumstances," he added.

He said the former "madman" at the White House waged war against the Iranian nation that was unprecedented in the history, referring to ex-US president Donald Trump.

Trump imagined that he could bring Iran to its knees by exercising pressure on the nation and forcing it to succumb, Rouhani added.

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Biden Administration Reverses Two Trump-Era Measures Against Iran

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden has reversed two measures adopted by his predecessor Donald Trump against Iran and offered to rejoin negotiations with the Islamic Republic and other parties to a nuclear agreement Washington left over two years ago, in the first apparent break with the previous administration's stance against the deal.

In a letter to the UN Security Council on behalf of Biden, acting US Ambassador Richard Mills said the United States "hereby withdraws" three letters from the Trump administration culminating in its announcement on September 19 that the U.S. had reimposed UN sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

In the letter obtained by The Associated Press, Mills said that sanctions measures terminated in the 2015 council resolution endorsing the nuclear deal - known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - with six major powers, but restored by Trump in September, "remain terminated."

In May 2018, Trump unilaterally pulled his country out of the JCPOA and re-imposed the sanctions that had been lifted under the UN-endorsed deal.

A year after the U.S.'s withdrawal, the Islamic Republic began a set of countermeasures that saw it suspending its commitment to the JCPOA gradually and through many steps as the allies would sustain their non-commitment to the deal.

The decision by the Trump administration to invoke a provision in the 2015 council resolution allowing the "snapback" of sanctions because Iran was in "significant non-performance" with its obligations under the accord was ignored by the rest of the Security Council and the world.

The overwhelming majority of members in the 15-nation council described Trump's action illegal, arguing the U.S. was no longer a member of the JCPOA.

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ViewPoint By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Trump's Revenge, Split In the Party

On December 18, 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives for two reasons (abuse of power and humiliation of the Congress) voted to impeach U.S. President Donald Trump. But for the approval of the first Trump impeachment, the court proceedings began in January 2021, and on February 5 of the same year it ended and the verdict, issued by the court, acquitted Trump of these charges and he survived the impeachment. It was for the first time in the U.S. history that a U.S. President was impeached in his first term in office while he competed for his next term and his re-election.

During the impeachment process, Trump was busy with his election campaign activities and rallies. The grounds that Trump caused during this skirmish led to the bipolarization among the voters in the U.S. Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi was determined to kill Trump's political career, and in November 2020 and in the heat of the U.S. presidential election, she was preparing the climate for proceeding of the second impeachment of Trump but due to the political condition in the country, the impeachment was postponed to the post-election.

After the election and disputes over the vote counts and Trump's taking legal action regarding the vote rigging and regularities and ultimately invasion of Trump's fans at the Capitol Hill in December 2020 and in early 2021, the condition was ripe for the second impeachment process and with the Supreme Court verdict on approving the Electoral College votes and announcing Joe Biden as the victor of the election, the Congress decided to impeach Trump and voted for it but this impeachment needed the Senate approval and the second impeachment was also rejected.

The vindictive attitude and behavior of the U.S. Democrat Party with Trump has created a political hatred and revenge among the pro-Trump community that its consequent aftershocks are easily visible in the internal structure of the Republican Party. Now all the currents opposing Trump in the Republican Party have found enough incentive for split in the party, and as per media reports Trump and his fans have also claimed to launch a new part by the name of the Partisan Party.

Tens of former Republican officials are unhappy with the performance of the party in tackling with Trump's actions and they are in talks for the launch of a new center-right party against the former U.S. President. Most of news wires and mostly Reuters have quoted some informed and close sources to the negotiations inside the party as revealing that tens of the Republican Party members believe the performance of the party regarding Trump's actions has weakened the U.S. democracy and they are in talks for launching a center-right party against Trump.

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Venezuela's Conviasa Sets Plan to Reach China, Iran, Russia

CARACAS (Dispatches) - On that occasion, the United States Department of the Treasury informed the airline that the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) included 40 Conviasa airplanes on the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN). This list includes companies, organizations, and individuals that have been identified as a threat to the national security and foreign and economic policy of the United States.

To "celebrate" the anniversary, the Venezuelan flag carrier published a statement on social networks regarding this situation and assured that, "facing the sanction and the blockade, Conviasa presented significant advances that allowed the growth of air transport." The Vice Minister for Air Transportation of the Ministry of Popular Power for Transportation (MPPT) and President of Conviasa, Ramón Velásquez Araguayán, reviewed the airline's achievements and projections for 2021.

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WHO Official Hails Iran's Approaches in Combating COVID-19

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's successful approaches in the battle with COVID-19 to be shared with other states, WHO official said.

World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Eastern Mediterranean Ahmad al-Manzari made the remarks in a meeting with Minister of Health and Medical Education Saeed Namaki, noting that the Iranian health personnel is doing well in the fight against the pandemic.

He further noted that Iran is conducting research and producing vaccines to this end.

Rouhani Tells Merkel Adding Anything to Nuclear Deal Impossible

TEHRAN (PressTV) - President Hassan Rouhani says it would be "impossible" to modify the country's landmark nuclear agreement, emphasizing that the only way to save the deal is to lift the United States' "inhumane sanctions" on Iran.

Rouhani made the remarks in a phone call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Wednesday, hours after he restated Iran's long-held position that it does not seek to develop nuclear weapons or run a secretive nuclear program.

The president categorically dismissed the possibility of injecting new items into the already negotiated nuclear deal, formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which was struck on July 14, 2015 between Iran and six world powers – the US, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China.

"The JCPOA, as a document approved by the UN Security Council and a product of sustained efforts by Iran and six major countries in the world, has a clear framework and cannot be changed," Rouhani told Merkel, according to the president's office.

Hinting at Europe's lack of commitment to the JCPOA in the aftermath of the US withdrawal, Rouhani said Iran should be able to see the effectiveness of the nuclear deal in practice, and Europe should practically prove that it is really after maintaining the JCPOA.

As part of Iran's response to the US withdrawal, Iranian lawmakers approved a bill in early December, requiring the administration to resume uranium enrichment to 20 percent purity among other things. The Rouhani administration implemented the new



law, but emphasized that Iran will reverse its actions if the other countries in the JCPOA safeguard its interests under the deal.

Rouhani said his administration is committed to further reducing the country's obligations under the JCPOA, unless the sanctions are lifted, in which case "we will also completely implement our obligations within the framework of the JCPOA."

For her part, Merkel called on Iran to take steps to ensure its return to full compliance to the JCPOA.

"She expressed her concern that Iran continues to fail to meet its obligations under the nuclear agreement," Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert said in a statement.

"It is now time for positive signals that create trust and increase the chances of a diplomatic solution," the chancellor said, according to Seibert.

Iran's Conventional Weapons Non-Negotiable

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The senior IRGC official Mohammad Ismaeil Kowsari stressed that Iran's conventional defense weapons are non-negotiable.

He told Yemen's "Al-Masira" website on Thursday that Conventional defense weapons are our right and cannot be negotiated in any way, and it is an issue on which there is consensus."

He added that Iran has never sought war and has defense agents to deter any aggression and will respond to any aggression against its territory with force."

The advisor to the IRGC commander further said that Iran will fulfill the nuclear obligations only if the other parties fulfill their obligations in practice not in words.

The Donald Trump administration has violated Resolution 2231 and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) since May 7, 2016, and has continued to maintain illegal and unilateral sanctions against the Iranian people, despite its resolutions and commitments.

Iran Treated Citizens of Other States Free of Charge

TEHRAN (IP) - Health Minister said that amid the coronavirus pandemic, Iran cured citizens of other neighboring countries free of charge.

Attending a press conference after his meeting with the director of the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office of the World Health Organization (WHO), Ahmed bin Salim Al-Mandhari, Saeed Namaki emphasized that during the last year, Iran had cooperated well with WHO and could manage COVID-19 well despite all the sanctions.

Forming headquarters and supports of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei and other Iranian officials were significant in managing COVID -19 pandemic, Namaki added.

Iran can claim that no patient in any province of the

country is deprived of medical services regarding coronavirus diseases, the Health Minister stated.

After supplying the domestic needs of the country, Iran could import medical equipment to other countries as well, Namaki stated.

"As I have stated before, Iran has taken fundamental steps in producing COVID-19 vaccine and in next month it will be a great producer in the region and after meeting the domestic needs Iran will import the vaccine under the supervision of WHO", the Iranian official pointed.

"We ask Ahmed bin Salim Al-Mandhari to help Iran lift barrier in importing secure coronavirus vaccines and also helps Iran reflect its true statistics regarding COVID-19 death tolls and infected ones," he concluded.

Tehran, Lisbon Confer on Bilateral Relations

TEHRAN (IP) - Deputy Foreign Minister for Europe and Political Director of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs discussed bilateral relations, regional and international issues.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General for Western Europe and Political Director-General of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the third round of political consultations between Tehran and Lisbon, which was held on Wednesday, exchanged views on bilateral relations, regional and international issues.

In this talk, while reviewing the developments in the West Asian region, especially the Persian Gulf, both sides emphasized that the solution to the region's problems are possible only through dialogue, cooperation and building trust.

They also welcomed the support of initiatives in the field of developing relations based on international principles and rules.

The Political Director of the Portuguese Foreign Ministry stated that during the presidency of the Council of the European Union, Portugal intends to interact more closely with the Islamic Republic of Iran in relation to regional and international issues.

The two sides also stressed the importance of maintaining peace, as a major achievement of multilateral diplomacy, and maintained the need to support constructive diplomatic efforts to achieve the full implementation of the commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The Iranian official emphasized that the Islamic Republic of Iran will return to the full implementation of its obligations only after the complete lifting of US sanctions.

Recalling the Iranian government's commitment to implementing the law passed by the Parliament within the set deadline, as specified in the letter of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the IAEA, Iranian official called on Portugal to focus its diplomatic efforts in this direction as the president of the EU Council.

Sanctions, an Obstacle in Iran's Vaccination



TEHRAN (IP) - Referring to the cruel and unilateral U.S. sanctions against Iran, Iran's First Vice President said: "If Iran did not face sanctions at the current juncture, it would be one of the first countries to provide the necessary vaccine against the coronavirus and ensure the safety of the people."

Eshaq Jahangiri, the first vice president, during a meeting with the Regional Director of the World Health Organization, Ahmed bin Salim Al-Mandhari, criticized the policies of the former US President Donald Trump and said: "Sanctions against Iran were imposed by a person who had the same harsh treatment with the policies and practices of the World Health Organization.

"These sanctions, which are against the basic human rights to ensure their health, are anti-human, and unfortunately, the cry of the Iranian people against these oppressive behaviors has not been well heard worldwide," he said.

"Iran is a rich country and does not need help," said the first vice president, noting, "The Americans blocked access to our capital and assets. We have to deal with the outbreak of the coronavirus like any other country when it comes to sanctions. However, it was not possible to send medical equipment purchased with the cooperation of the World Health Organization after one year due to financial constraints."

Jahangiri added: "Currently, Iran has tens of billions of dollars of money in Asian countries, which are blocked in their banks, and we have been delayed for a long time to spend \$50 million in advance to buy COVAX in order to find a way to transfer money."

He added: "We expect the World Health Organization to understand Iran's limitations in providing the required vaccine and to help us provide the necessary amount of this vaccine. We should not compare Iran's situation with other countries that are in a normal situation."

Tehran, Kabul Urge Establishment of Joint Scientific Associations

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's deputy science, research, and technology minister for international affairs Hossein Salar-Amoli called for the establishment of joint scientific associations.

Salar-Amoli made the remarks in a meeting with the acting president of the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan Abdul Zahir Shakib in Tehran, urging holding joint meetings in the future. Both sides enjoy cultural and historical commonality, he said, calling for the significance of Iran's scientific and technological role in the world.

Also, he touched on granting the scholarship to the academic figures and voicing Iran's readiness on the digital library of Afghanistan's Academy of Sciences.

Iran, Azerbaijan to Expand Mutual Ties

BAKU (IRNA) - Chairman of the Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan Sahiba Gafarova in a meeting with Chairman of Iranian Parliament National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Mojtaba Zonnour said that the relations between the two countries will be further developed in the future.

Gafarova said that common historical, cultural, and religious values have provided excellent conditions for the development of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan and the expansion of comprehensive cooperation will provide the interests of the two countries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan reported.

Zonnour said the Islamic Republic of Iran is interested in deepening relations with Azerbaijan in various fields.

The two sides exchanged views on the prospects for inter-parliamentary relations, the expansion of economic and cultural cooperation, and other issues of interest.

Earlier today, Zonnour and Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov reaffirmed that there is a great capacity for further development of cooperation between the two countries.

Also in a meeting with the First vice-speaker of Azerbaijan Parliament, Ziyafat Asgarov, Zonnour reviewed ways to expand parliamentary ties.

He highlighted the joint efforts for the development of the north-south and south-west international transport corridors and Iran's readiness to expand cooperation with the Republic of Azerbaijan in various fields.

Iranian parliamentary delegation also held talks with the Head of Azerbaijan's National delegation to the PACE Samad Seyidov.

Iran Has Provided Information For Ukraine Over Crashed Plane

TEHRAN (IP) - The Chief of Iran's presidential staff stresses that in the talks and meetings of the Iranian and Ukrainian officials, the Ukrainians' questions on the plane crash have been responded to.

On the sidelines of the cabinet meeting and in response to Iran Press question on the claim of the prosecutor in charge of the case of the Ukrainian plane crash in Kyiv that Tehran was hiding information, Mahmoud Vaezi stressed that Iran has always provided the necessary information about the plane to Ukraine.

Vaezi highlighted that no official statements were made at Ukrainian officials' official meetings indicating that Iran had not been cooperating, and such allegations by some Ukrainian officials were show-offs.

Regarding the announcement of the results of the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) review at the Expediency Council by the end of the current Iranian year and the government's prediction, Vaezi stressed that the government welcomes the FATF bill being finalized by the end of the year.

The Expediency Council should decide on the FATF bill in a way that is in the interest of the people and the country, he noted.

Highlighting the U.S. current situation is quite different from Donald Trump's term in office, chief of the presidential staff added that the situation should be the way that if the sanctions were lifted off, Iran would be able to conduct its banking transactions easily.

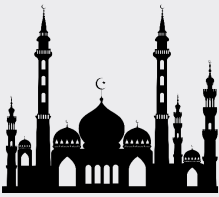
Sensitivities to Financial Channel of Iran, Switzerland Decreasing

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Sensitivities to the financial channel of Iran and Switzerland have decreased, Chairman of Iran-Switzerland Joint Chamber of Commerce Sharif Nezam-Mafi said on Friday.

Nezam-Mafi pointed out that since taking office of the new U.S. administration, the sensitivities to the financial channel between Iran and Switzerland have declined.

He expressed the hope that banks would make their transactions easier in this way.

Swiss companies are one of the few European ones that did not leave Iran after the US started to impose sanctions and maximum pressure on the country, he stated.



PRAYER TIME

■ Noon (Zohr)

■ Evening (Maghreb)

■ Tomorrow's Dawn (Fajr)

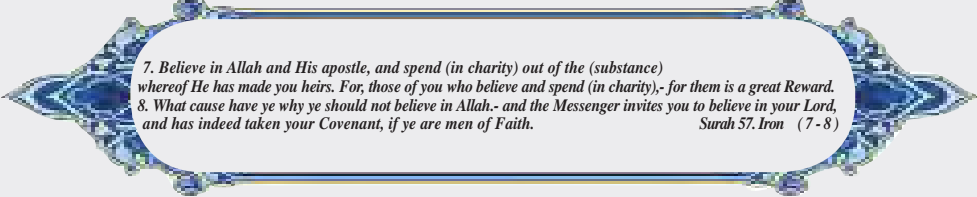
■ Tomorrow's Sunrise

12:18

18:09

05:20

06:43



7. Believe in Allah and His apostle, and spend (in charity) out of the (substance) whereof He has made you heirs. For, those of you who believe and spend (in charity), for them is a great Reward.
8. What cause have ye why ye should not believe in Allah,- and the Messenger invites you to believe in your Lord, and has indeed taken your Covenant, if ye are men of Faith.
Surah 57, Iron (7-8)

Japan, UNIDO Sign MoUs On Cooperation in Tehran

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN – Some memorandum of understandings (MoUs) on gratuitous aids were signed between Japan Embassy and representatives of UNDP and UNIDO in Tehran on Wednesday.

According to IRNA report, in a ceremony in the presence of Japan Ambassador to Tehran Aikawa Kazutoshi, representative of United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Mr. Claudio Providas, Representative United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) Ms. Maryam Javan Shahraki, Deputy Chief of Department of Environment Mr. Ahmad Reza Lahijan Zadeh and head of Iran Fishery Organization Mr. Nabiollah Khoonmirzaee, the MoUs on gratuitous aids were signed.

Addressing the ceremony, Japan Ambassador Mr. Kazutoshi welcomed the participants and explained cooperation of his government with Iran in the developmental fields like revival of Urmia Lake and Fishery Organization in Chabahar Port in training the fishers.

Then Providas, for his part, explained the cooperation of UNDP with Iran and Japan in revival of Urmia Lake and explained the program of this organization for revival of other wetlands.

Meanwhile Lahijan Zadeh said in a condition that COVID-19 has overshadowed many issues and activities in the world, we are here to consult for continuing co-operations, expressed hope that 2021 would be the last year of the COVID-19 and the world would return to the normal condition.

He also reminded the participants of the 50th anniversary of signing Ramsar Convention, saying that one of the activities of Iran has been to revitalize Urmia Lake that the Japan Government supported Iran in terms of financing and offering expert consultation.

Lahijan Zadeh went on to say that Japan has spent some one billion dollars for saving the Urmia Lake, adding that he can point to ecologic management of Anzali Wetlands and identifying the wetlands in the neighboring provinces of the Persian Gulf as one of the Japan government's joint activities with Iran. He further said that developing sustainable agriculture in the Urmia Lake is in this framework.

Then Javan Shahraki thanked Japan Embassy in Tehran and pointed to the cooperation of Iran, Japan and UNIDO in different fields especially in Sistan and Baluchestan Province and concentrating on training fishers and developing activities of the aquatic at Chabahar.

Meanwhile Head of Iran Fisheries Organization Khoonmirzaee, for his part, said that Iran with having coastal lines in north and south and existence of several centers

for fish farming and other aquatics is the biggest producer of fisheries in the region. He further said Chabahar Port due to access to the free waters is dependent on fishery but there are still more capabilities in this regards that with activating them, more opportunities for jobs, deprivation and developing co-operations will be provided.

He then said one project has been operationalized in collaboration with the Iran Fishery Organization, UNIDO and Japan government and its last phase is pursued to be carried out in order to develop the trade of tuna and to boost the level of the aquatics to a considerable level.

Meanwhile according to the United Nations Information Center (UNIC) in Tehran, Japan and UNIDO have signed a funding agreement for a project to promote the sustainable development of the tuna value chain in the Chabahar region of Iran.

Building on earlier interventions to build the capacity of the tuna value chain in Chabahar, the initiative will support the ability of local fishermen to access new markets while at the same time reduce the risk of overfishing. Currently, although tuna caught in the Chabahar region is of high quality, most of it is canned and sold at low prices. Fishermen are catching tuna using methods and at volumes that, if continued, will likely deplete marine resources in the south-east coastal region.

Through a collaborative approach with the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, the Iranian Fisheries Organization and local institutions, UNIDO will provide technical assistance to improve the quality management system, encourage the promotion of exports at higher prices, promote sustainable fishing practices and establish a mechanism to monitor and control the stock of yellow fin tuna.

Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in the fishery sector in Chabahar will directly benefit from these quality and market-related interventions, particularly from Japanese knowledge sharing and technology transfers.

Iran Foreign Trade to Reach \$60b by Yearend

KERMAN (IRNA) - Mohammadreza Ebrahimi, an Iranian Member of Parliament, said on Thursday that despite efforts by the U.S. and some other adversary countries to stop Iran's foreign trade, it is expected that the volume of Iran's foreign trade will reach \$60 billion by yearend.

Referring to Iran's \$2.5 billion trade deficit in transactions with other countries, the lawmaker said, "Our efforts have to be focused on returning to the previous conditions."

Ebrahimi said that the country is going through a tough economic period, but is still making progress despite all the difficulties.

The lawmaker, however, complained that some 90 percent of the country's foreign trade is being made with only 12 main trade partners, saying this is not something good.

South Pars Gas Complex Yields 526k Tons of Sulfur

TEHRAN (Shana) – An official with South Pars Gas Complex said the plant's granular sulfur production had crossed 526,000 tons in the first 10 months of the current calendar year, which began on March 21.

According to National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC), Ali Ahmadi said the complex supplies 70% of the country's demand for gas.

"Fortunately, this percentage will increase in the future," he said.

Majlis Adopts 4,200-Toman Dollar for Basic Goods

TEHRAN (IP) - The spokesman of the Iranian Parliament's Budget Integration Commission said that with the government's insistence, the commission agreed to allocate the price of 4,200 Tomans for foreign exchange to provide basic goods.

In the Budget Integration Commission press conference held in Tehran, Rahim Zare said that a committee was formed in the presence of the head of the Planning and Budget Organization, the head of the Central Bank, as well as the ministers of economy, industry, mining and trade, and agriculture to monitor the delivery of these goods to the people in a timely manner and at the same rate.

Reviewing the amendment of the government's budget bill to increase oil sales by more than 1.5 million barrels, Zare highlighted that the oil-sales surplus was used to develop educational and academic sectors, public transportation, production, health, environment, and exhausted infrastructure.


He noted: "In the field of health, 8 billion Tomans were given to the government so that we will not see inflation in the distribution of goods in this field, next year."

Regarding gas supply to villages and mountainous areas, Zare said that the ceiling for gas supply to these areas was approved at 2,000 billion Tomans.

On Tuesday, Iran's Parliament approved the amendments to the generalities of the budget bill of 1400 Persian year (starting on March 21) in the open session with 211 votes in favor.

In an open session on February 2, the parliament members had opposed the generalities of the budget bill for the year 1400.

Caracas, Tehran To Ink MoU on Tourism Cooperation



TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Venezuelan Ambassador to Tehran Carlos Antonio Alcalá Cordones says Venezuelan Minister for Tourism and Foreign Trade, Felix Plasencia is going to visit Iran next week in order to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on expansion of tourism cooperation with the Islamic Republic.

The Venezuelans ambassador made the remarks on Wednesday night in a meeting with Minister of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism of Iran Ali-Asghar Mounesan, noting that Plasencia's trip to Iran is aimed at paving the way for more collaborations in tourism industry.

The ambassador also noted that he has been in Iran for two years and it is obvious that a short visit by the Venezuelan minister will not give him enough time to get acquainted with history and tourist attractions of the country.

Cordones underlined that joint venture in tourism industry will bolster ties between Iran and Venezuela and help the two countries' economy.

He further noted that Plasencia intends to offer a pavilion to Iran at the International Tourism Fair of Venezuela.

For his part, Mounesan said that during a webinar with former Venezuelan tourism minister, both sides decided to expand tourism ties and hold an introductory tour.

The Iranian minister added that the two countries are going to sign a MoU to expand cooperation in tourism industry and that tourism practitioners from Venezuela and Iran will hold talks for future cooperation. The Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism has determined a five-day trip for the Venezuelan delegation, but it seems that they are going to stay less time in Iran, he noted.

The relationship between Venezuela and Iran became more serious following an official visit by the then Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to Tehran in 2001. Now, the two nations are determined to expand cooperation in tourism.

According to previous agreements, Venezuelan and Iranian nationals can have visa-free travels to each other's countries to stay for two weeks. The visit by the Venezuelan minister is expected to pave the ground for expansion of cooperation in cultural, economic and political fields.

New Pelletizing Plant Launched in Bandar Abbas

TEHRAN (MNA) – The first phase of a pelletizing plant with a production capacity of 2.5 million tons per year came on stream in the southern port city of Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan province, on Thursday.

The project was inaugurated by President Hassan Rouhani via videoconference, with other senior Industries Ministry officials in attendance. According to Khalil Qasemi, head of Hormozgan Industries, Mining and Trade Organization, the first phase of Maad Koush Iron Ore Pelletizing Company has been implemented by an investment of 23.2 trillion rials and has created 360 direct job opportunities.

The pelletizing unit is part of a two-phase project with a total capacity of 5 million tons of pellets per annum. Iran extracted 64.27 million tons of iron ore during the past Iranian calendar year (ended on March 19, 2020).

In its outlook plan for the Iranian calendar year 1404 (2025-2026) Iran has envisaged production of 55 million tons of steel per annum, and to achieve this target the country requires to extract 160 million tons of iron ore concentrates. As announced by the Industry, Mining, and Trade Ministry, production of iron ore concentrates in Iran reached 47.306 million tons in the previous Iranian calendar year (March 2018-2019), registering a four-percent rise compared to the preceding year.

Iran Aims to Capture 20% Share of Imports Into Neighboring States

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has set a target to supply a fifth of all goods imported into 15 neighboring and nearby countries, says a senior trade official amid efforts to boost non-oil exports to compensate for losses suffered because of lower crude sales.

Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization Hamid Zadboum said that Iran's exports to 15 neighboring and nearby countries should increase by nearly 10 times in the upcoming years to reach around \$200 billion in value terms.

Exports to those states currently account for 60 percent of all non-oil shipments sent from Iran, said Zadboum, adding that the figure amounts to nearly \$25 billion in hard currency revenues. The official said, however, that Iran is seeking to significantly increase its exports to Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan and countries member to in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with whom Iran has entered into a preferential trade arrangement.

"We currently have preferential agreements with six (other) countries and a free trade arrangement with Syria while we are engaged in talks with Serbia to clinch a free trade deal," said Zadboum. Facing a series of American bans targeting its normal crude sales, Iran has encouraged exports of various goods and services in recent years to both offset the impacts of the sanctions on government finances and to spur more manufacturing and agricultural activity in the country.

Iran's customs office announced on Tuesday that exports had declined by nearly a fifth year on year in the month to late January after the country saw shipments surge over the previous two months following an easing of coronavirus restrictions on trade.

Iran-Azerbaijan Railway Lines, Border Opportunities Should Be Activated

Over 2,500 Cultural Heritage Projects in Protection Carried out

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The railway lines and border opportunities between Iran and Azerbaijan should be activated, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said.

He made the remark in a meeting with the governor of Iran's East Azerbaijan Province (northwestern Iran), Mohammad Reza Pourmohammadi in Tabriz city.

The minister said that the relevant institutions and the private sector must make serious efforts to seize the opportunity in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, and the Iranian Foreign Ministry is ready to cooperate in this area.

"The East Azerbaijan Province and Tabriz city play a major role in the development of trade and economic relations with neighboring countries," he added.

Zarif noted that he had recently visited the countries of the region and got acquainted with the Jolfa border.

According to him, the activation of potential opportunities, including railway and border opportunities, will create conditions for Iran's active participation in international corridors and regional markets.

TEHRAN (IP) - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts said that over 2500 cultural heritage projects were carried out with the help of people and the government, which also created employments and promoting tourism.

On the sidelines of the inauguration of 206 tourism projects and 4 hotels in Tehran province, Ali Asghar Mounesan in an interview with Iran Press said these projects were inaugurated with the value of more than 600 billion Tomans.

The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts added 320 projects in the field of cultural heritage had been carried out in order to repair and restore the old buildings, which was very laborious and costly. Mounesan highlighted, "Until the end of the current government, we will have the continuous inauguration of these projects, which have been unparalleled in the field of cultural heritage and restoration of old buildings."

"In the government, the tourism industry had experienced a surge and the number of tourist beds has increased from 219,000 to 471,000 beds. We have also developed tourism products such as ecotourism, and nature tourism which has been welcomed by both domestic and foreign tourists", the minister went on to say. Today, in a ceremony in Tehran province, 4 hotels (namely Raya and Valieasr) and 206 tourism projects were inaugurated in the presence of the Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Mr. Mounesan.

2 Journalists Jailed for 2 Years In Belarus for Filming Protests

KYIV (Reuters) - A Belarusian court sentenced two Belarusian journalists from Poland-based TV news channel Belsat who filmed protests against President Alexander Lukashenko to two years in prison on Thursday.

Katsiaryna Andreieva, 27, and Darya Chultsova, 23, were detained in an apartment in November from where they had been filming protests taking place over the death of a protester who was killed several days earlier.

Both women pleaded not guilty after being accused of orchestrating the demonstrations by filming them.

The two journalists appeared in a cage at the hearing on Thursday, hugging and making "V" for victory signs. Their lawyer said they would appeal the verdict.



Czech Republic Reports Record Number of COVID Patients

PRAGUE (Reuters) - The Czech Republic reported a record number of COVID patients hospitalized in serious condition - 1,227 - on Thursday, as the country's capacity to care for such cases dwindled.

As of Thursday morning, the country had 14% of capacity free in intensive care and high dependency units, including 154 beds for COVID patients. The country of 10.7 million has had the most cases per capita in Europe except Portugal on a two-week basis, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control's data showed.

Health Minister Jan Blatny has said on Wednesday that Czech hospitals may be overwhelmed with coronavirus patients in two or three weeks, issuing the starkest warning yet.



NATO Puts Holds on Afghanistan Decision, Expands in Iraq



BRUSSELS (AFP) - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Thursday the alliance had made "no final decision" on the future of its Afghanistan mission, as new US President Joe Biden weighs pulling out troops.

While defense ministers held off on making that call at a two-day virtual conference, they did decide to expand a NATO training mission in Iraq from 500 to "around 4,000" personnel.

The fate of NATO's 9,600-strong support mission in Afghanistan was top of the agenda after former US leader Donald Trump struck a deal with the Taliban to pull troops out.

Biden's administration is reviewing whether to stick to a looming May 1 deadline to withdraw or risk a bloody backlash from the insurgents by staying.

"We are faced with many dilemmas and there are no easy options. At this stage, we have made no final decision on the future of our presence," Stoltenberg said at a news conference.

"But as the May 1st deadline is approaching, NATO allies will continue to closely consult and coordinate in the coming weeks."

Stoltenberg insisted the Taliban must live up to commitments under the deal with the US, including making progress in peace talks with Kabul, reducing violence and cutting ties to "international terrorist groups".

"NATO's goal is to ensure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for terrorists that would attack our homelands," he said.

The Taliban has launched a string of offensives threatening at least two provincial capitals and warned NATO ministers not to seek a "continuation of occupation and war" by staying.

"The protection of our troops remains paramount, and we will take all necessary measures to keep them safe," Stoltenberg said.

Allies are waiting anxiously for Biden to make his decision on whether to end two decades of involvement in Afghanistan -- but say they are willing to remain if the US stays too.

While Trump cut U.S. forces to just 2,500 troops in January, the other NATO members rely on the American capabilities to keep the mission going.

U.S. officials said new Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, keen to revitalize ties after years of tensions under Trump, was going to listen to the allies and pass on their input to Biden.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the review with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani in a call on Wednesday and vowed the US would consult closely "on the way ahead", Washington said.

On Iraq, defense ministers agreed to bolster a NATO training mission aimed at strengthening the country's military as it looks to curb the resurgence of the Islamic State group. "The size of our mission will increase from 500 personnel to around 4,000," Stoltenberg said, adding that the increases would be "incremental".

Algeria's President Calls for Dissolution of Parliament, Elections

ALGIERS (AFP) - Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune on Thursday called for the dissolution of parliament and early legislative elections as the North African nation struggles with health, political and economic crises.

In an address to the nation, Tebboune said he will also carry out a government reshuffle and issued a pardon for dozens of jailed activists of the "Hirak" protest movement.

The government has struggled to stem renewed Hirak protests.

"I have decided to dissolve the National Popular Assembly and call for elections," Tebboune said, in a speech broadcast on state television.

Tebboune, who has previously expressed dissatisfaction with the cabinet of Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad, said the government reshuffle would take place "within 48 hours at most".



Georgia PM Resigns Over Plans to Arrest Opposition Leader

TBILISI (Dispatches) - Georgia's prime minister resigned on Thursday over plans to arrest a top opposition leader, saying it risked escalating a political crisis in the ex-Soviet nation.

Giorgi Gakharia said he was stepping down because of disagreement in the government over enforcing the court order to arrest opposition leader Nika Melia. "It is inadmissible to enforce a judiciary decision... if that poses a risk to the health and lives of our citizens or creates the possibility of a political escalation in the country."

A court in Georgia on Wednesday ruled to place Melia in pre-trial detention. Melia, who faces up to nine years behind bars if found guilty of "organising mass violence" during anti-government protests in 2019, has rejected the charges as politically motivated.

"The case against me is judicial nonsense... It is part of ongoing repressions against the opposition," he told AFP.

The move to arrest Melia -- chairman of the country's main opposition force, the United National Movement (UNM) -- raised the stakes in a political crisis that has gripped Georgia since parliamentary elections in October.

The opposition denounced the polls as rigged after the ruling Georgian Dream party claimed victory, while rights groups and international observers said the vote has been marred by irregularities.

Leaders of nearly all of the country's opposition parties have gathered since Wednesday at the UNM party headquarters in the capital Tbilisi, vowing to obstruct police if they moved to arrest Melia.

Georgian television stations on Wednesday night aired footage of riot police mobilising close to the UNM headquarters.

Georgia's interior ministry said in a statement it had "temporarily postponed the planned detention" of Melia in connection with the prime minister's resignation.

Draghi Promises Sweeping Reforms, Urges National Unity

ROME (Reuters) - Prime Minister Mario Draghi called on Italians to pull together to help rebuild the country following the coronavirus pandemic and promised his new government would introduce sweeping reforms to revitalise the battered economy.

In his maiden speech to parliament, the former head of the European Central Bank said his broad-based administration would throw all its efforts into defeating COVID-19, while looking to leave a stronger, greener nation for future generations.

"Today we have, as did the governments of the immediate post-war period, the possibility, or rather the responsibility, to launch a new reconstruction," Draghi told the Senate, ahead of a mandatory confidence vote that he won by a huge margin.

His immediate priorities will be ensuring a smooth coronavirus vaccination campaign and re-writing plans for how to spend more than 200 billion euros (\$240 billion) of European Union funds aimed at rebuilding the economy.

To guarantee the money is well spent, Draghi signalled that he wanted to overhaul the public administration, which is throttled by red tape, and the justice system, one of the slowest in Europe.

Draghi also put a strongly pro-European stamp on his administration, which includes parties such as the right-wing League which have been highly critical of the euro common currency and Brussels bureaucracy in the past.

"Supporting this government means sharing the irreversibility of the choice of the euro, it means sharing the prospect of an increasingly integrated European Union that will arrive at a common public budget," said Draghi, who received a standing ovation from senators after his 50-minute address.



If he succeeds in his mission, Draghi will not only help revive Italy after the worst recession since World War Two, but will also give a boost to the whole EU, which has long fretted over Italy's chronic sluggishness.

Draghi is among Europe's most respected figures after his eight-year stewardship of the ECB, and his nomination as prime minister has been hailed by investors - as reflected in Italian bond sales on Tuesday that drew record demand.

Investment bank Morgan Stanley on Wednesday predicted a major improvement in Italy's closely-watched bond spreads - the premium investors demand to hold Italian government bonds rather than German debt - and a double-digit outperformance by its stock market.

However, Draghi faces daunting challenges, with many sectors of the economy stalled and some companies only surviving thanks to state handouts. Draghi said he could not protect every job or business, adding: "Some will have to change, even radically."

His cabinet will have to move fast. It can only govern for a maximum two years, with national elections due in early 2023.

Draghi said he would call on the army to help speed up the anti-coronavirus vaccination campaign, but warned the disease would force lasting changes in a country which has registered some 94,000 deaths -- the second highest toll in Europe.

"The main duty to which we are called, all of us... is to fight the pandemic by all means and to safeguard the lives of our fellow citizens," he said.

Draghi won Wednesday's confidence vote in the 315-seat Senate by 262 to 40 and he is certain to secure a similar sized victory in the lower house on Thursday after all but one party -- the far-right Brothers of Italy -- rallied to his side.

UN Boss Says 10 Nations Used 75% of All Vaccines

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The United Nations chief has sharply criticized the "wildly uneven and unfair" distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, pointing out that just 10 countries have administered 75 percent of all vaccinations.

Addressing a high-level meeting of the UN Security Council on Wednesday, Antonio Guterres said 130 countries have not received a single dose of vaccine. "At this critical moment, vaccine equity is the biggest moral test before the global community," he said.

Guterres called for an urgent Global Vaccination Plan to bring together those with the power to ensure fair vaccine distribution -- scientists, vaccine producers and those who can fund the effort -- to ensure all people in every nation get inoculated as soon as possible.

The secretary-general further called on the world's leading economic powers in the Group of 20 to establish an emergency task force that should have the capacity to bring together "the pharmaceutical companies and key industry and logistics actors".

Guterres said a meeting on Friday of the Group of Seven top industrialised nations "can create the momentum to mobilise the necessary financial resources".

Reporting from the UN headquarters, Al Jazeera's diplomatic editor James Bays said there was a broad agreement over the potential future problems in the fight against the pandemic due to the uneven distribution of vaccines.

"Rich countries are vaccinating people but many other parts of the world are not. You're never going to get rid of COVID-19 if you have it spreading in some parts of the world and potentially mutating, and potentially in the future making vaccines not work," Bays said.

"Less than 1 percent of COVID-19 vaccines so far globally have been administered in the 32 countries currently facing the most severe humanitarian crises."

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, whose country holds the Security Council presidency this month, urged the UN's most powerful body to adopt a resolution calling for ceasefires in conflict zones to allow the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines.

The UK said more than 160 million people are at risk of being excluded from coronavirus vaccinations because they live in countries engulfed in conflict and instability, including Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia.



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Fully Furn

Parsian

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Kamranieh (\$3000) 250sq.m, 3bdrs, S/p, S, J, balcony, F.F
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Turkey's Consumer Confidence Rises in February

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Consumer confidence in the Turkish economy posted a rise in February, the country's statistical authority announced on Thursday.

The consumer confidence index stood at 84.5 this month, up 1.5% from 83.3 in January, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat) said. The index value is jointly calculated by TurkStat and the Central Bank of Turkey through the measurement of consumer tendencies.



Kuwait Plans to Shorten Oil Supply Deals for Some Asian Buyers

NEW DELHI (Reuters) - Oil producer Kuwait Petroleum Corp (KPC) is in talks to shorten its annual supply deals with some customers in India and Japan to nine months this year to meet demand from its new refinery, sources close the matter told Reuters.

At a meeting with Indian refiners this month, KPC officials said the state-run company's next oil supply contracts with Indian buyers would run from April to December, the sources said, rather than to March 2022.

The fourth-biggest producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) said it would assess the situation in over October and November before committing supplies for the first quarter of 2022, the sources said.

The proposed change follows a decision by Iraq, OPEC's second-biggest producer, to cut its oil exports to India this year to comply with OPEC quotas just as Indian refiners ramp up output to meet a demand uplift as the world's third-largest crude importer emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

KPC's 615,000 barrel per day Al-Zour refinery, the country's fourth, is due to start operating towards the end of the year, turning the nation into one of the biggest fuel producers in the region, the sources said.

"The company is aligning and arranging its contracts with customers as domestic demand will rise early next year. To avoid making any full-year commitment, KPC has cut the contract duration to nine months," said one of the sources, adding that KPC will again sign 12-month contracts from April 2022.

KPC did not respond to Reuters' emailed request for comment.

Indian refiners had planned to ramp up imports of Kuwaiti oil this year after Iraq cut term supplies of its Basra Light grade this year, the sources said.

Bharat Petroleum Corp has sought a 25% increase in its KPC supplies to 60,000 bpd with an option to buy an additional 50,000 bpd for 2021/22. The company had an option to buy 28,000 bpd in this financial year to March 31, the sources said.

Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals was another Indian refiner looking to boost contract volumes, seeking a 14% uplift to 40,000 bpd while raising optional purchase volumes to 15,000 bpd from 10,000 bpd in 2020/21.

Indian Oil Corp, meanwhile, wants to cut its contract volume to 100,000 bpd from 120,000 bpd but seeks to raise optional volumes to 50,000 from 30,000 bpd.

The three refiners did not respond to Reuters' emailed requests for comment.

The refiners and KPC are still negotiating volumes under the new supply deals while a Japanese refiner is in talks over the duration of its contract, the sources added.

Toyota, Honda Can Likely Cope With Global Chip Shortage

TOKYO (Reuters) - The global semiconductor chip shortage is not likely to significantly affect the financial profiles of Japan's Toyota Motor Corp or Honda Motor Co, ratings agency Fitch said in a statement on Wednesday.

The automakers have enough financial flexibility to absorb more costs and maintain significant rating headroom, even if the shortage persists till the second half of 2021, according to the statement.

The automobile industry has been grappling with a shortfall in chip supply since the end of last year, driven by coronavirus lockdowns in Southeast Asia and bulk-buying by U.S. sanctions-hit Chinese tech giant Huawei Technologies, among other reasons.

The shortage prompted top U.S. automaker General Motors Co to extend production cuts at three North American plants last week, while Honda Motor and Nissan Motor were set to sell a combined 250,000 fewer cars in the current financial year.

Meanwhile, Toyota shrugged off the issue in its quarterly report last week and said it has up to a four-month stockpile of chips, with no immediate hit to production expected.

"We believe the shortage should ease or even be resolved in the second half of 2021 as suppliers boost production for automotive clients," Fitch said.

Top economic and national security officials in the White House have launched a new effort to help the U.S. auto industry fight the chip shortage, a White House official said on Thursday.

The issue could impact nearly 1 million units of global light vehicle production in the first quarter, according to data firm IHS Markit.



World's \$281 Trillion Debt Pile Is Set to Rise Again in 2021

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The world has never been more indebted after a year of battling Covid-19. And there's even more borrowing ahead.

Governments, companies and households raised \$24 trillion last year to offset the pandemic's economic toll, bringing the

global debt total to an all-time high of \$281 trillion by the end of 2020, or more than 355% of global GDP, according to the Institute of International Finance. They may have little choice but to keep borrowing in 2021, said Washington-based director of sustainability research Emre Tiftik and economist Khadija Mahmood.

Even as vaccines are rolled out, low central bank policy rates are keeping issuance above pre-pandemic levels. Governments with big budget deficits are set to increase debt by another \$10 trillion this year as political and social pressures make it hard to curb spending, pushing this group's debt load past \$92 trillion by end-2021, the IIF estimates.

"The most important challenge is to find a well-designed exit strategy from these extraordinary fiscal measures," Tiftik said during a Wednesday webinar.

Both mature and emerging markets will be searching for a perfect balance. While an economic recovery may lead some governments to start developing strategies to roll back stimulus, doing so too soon could magnify default and bankruptcy risk. But waiting too long could lead to unwieldy debt loads.

Even amid historically muted credit spreads, global debt markets have started selling off, pushing up sovereign yields. Long-term U.S. Treasury yields reached the highest in about a year this week.

Increases in non-financial industry debt-to-GDP ratios in France, Spain and Greece were among the sharpest in mature economies, as governments rapidly ramped up borrowing. In emerging markets, China saw the biggest jump in debt ratios last year, followed by Turkey, Korea and the United Arab Emirates, IIF data show.

Pakistan Meets Conditions to Get Next \$500m From IMF

ISLAMABAD (Reuters) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Pakistan on Tuesday reached a staff-level agreement that Pakistan had completed reforms required for the release of around \$500 million in IMF funds that had been suspended for about a year.

"The package strikes an appropriate balance between supporting the economy, ensuring debt sustainability and advancing structural reform," the Fund said in a statement issued by both sides.

"Pending approval of the Executive Board, the reviews' completion would release around US\$500 million."

Financial analysts say the hold-up was due to questions around fiscal and revenue reforms. "This is a good development for Pakistan," Finance Minister Abdul Hafeez Shaikh said in a tweet.

Agreement was also reached on the measures required to complete further reviews of the reform program, which should eventually bring Pakistan \$6 billion from the IMF's Extended Fund Facility (EFF).

Pakistan has also received \$1.4 billion from the IMF's Rapid Financing Instrument in separate, emergency funding to help it fill a funding gap stemming from the coronavirus pandemic.

It requested money from the EFF in 2019 after the then newly elected government of Prime Minister Imran Khan refused for months to seek a bailout, and has received the first tranche, worth \$450 million..

Khan later acknowledged that it had been a mistake to delay seeking the funds to stabilise an economy under strain from due to a yawning current account deficit and low foreign reserves.

Khan inherited economic growth of 5.8% in the fiscal year July-June 2017/18 (FY2018), but saw it dip to 1.0% in 2018/19 and a contraction of 0.4% in 2019/20. Inflation on his watch peaked at over 14%.

The IMF said economic reforms prior to the COVID-19 shock had started to reduce Pakistan's economic imbalances and created the conditions for better economic performance.

"As result of the authorities' actions, the COVID-19 first wave started to abate over the 2020 summer and the impact on the economy was significantly reduced. The external current account improved due to stronger-than-expected remittances, import compression, and a mild export recovery," the fund said.

It projected economic growth of 1.5% in fiscal 2020/21.

India Likely in Fastest-Growing Emerging-Market Economies



NEW DELHI (Dispatches) - S&P Global Ratings said India will be one of the fastest growing emerging-market economies with a 10% growth in the next fiscal, and future sovereign rating action would hinge on lowering fiscal deficit and sustaining debt burden.

S&P director, sovereign & international public finance ratings, Andrew Wood, said the forecast for India in 2021 is on stronger side and shows that a lot of economic activity, which was frozen last year, is coming back on line to normalization, thereby brightening the growth prospects.

"India will be one of the fastest-growing economy in the EM (emerging market) space. India's contraction this year was steep and may be deeper than global average, but a bounce back of 10% that we are expecting next fiscal year will be putting India amongst the fastest growers in 2021 and more importantly, we see Indian economy growing at 6% over medium term, may be slightly higher, and that compares very well to EMs all around the world," Mr. Wood said in a webinar.

S&P said India's economy has stabilised over recent months, with progressively better manufacturing, services, labour-market and revenue data. The hard part will be converting the trends into a sustained recovery over the next few years.

U.S. Manufacturing Production Rises Solidly

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Output at U.S. factories increased more than expected in January even as a shortage of semiconductors weighed on the production of motor vehicles, pointing to resilience in the manufacturing sector recovery.

Manufacturing production rose 1.0% last month after gaining 0.9% in December, the Federal Reserve said on Wednesday. That was the ninth straight monthly advance in factory production.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast manufacturing output increasing 0.7% in January. Manufacturing, which accounts for 11.9% of the U.S. economy, has powered ahead as the pandemic left Americans grounded at home, shifting demand to household goods from services like airline travel and hotel accommodation.

Manufacturing momentum could slow in the spring as the distribution of vaccines reaches large swathes of the population, helping to slow the spread of the virus. That could unleash pent-up demand for travel.

Still, production at factories will be supported by low customer inventories, as well as lean stocks at manufacturers. A survey this month showed a dip in manufacturing sentiment in January.

The Fed report showed motor vehicles and parts output declined 0.7% in January. Production at auto plants has been hampered by a shortage of semiconductors. Motor vehicle production slipped 0.2% in December. Excluding autos, manufacturing output increased 1.0%.



The strength in manufacturing output combined with 2.3% jump in mining to lift industrial production by 0.9% in January. That followed a 1.3% surge in December. Industrial production remains below its pre-pandemic level. Utilities output fell 1.2%.

Capacity utilization for the manufacturing sector, a measure of how fully firms are using their resources, rose 0.7 percentage point to 74.6% in January. Overall capacity use for the industrial sector increased 0.7 percentage points to 75.6%. It is 4.0 percentage points below its 1972-2019 average.

Officials at the Fed tend to look at capacity use measures for signals of how much "slack" remains in the economy — how far growth has room to run before it becomes inflationary.

Iran to Launch Manufacturing Line of Russian COVID-19 Vaccine

TEHRAN (IRNA) – Iran will launch manufacturing line of Russian prototype vaccines for campaign against COVID-19. Vaezi said that the project will be carried out as per Iran-Russia prior agreement to that effect.

Iran has decided to provide a variety of vaccines ranging from the WHO-affiliate COVAX vaccines, to Russian,

Indian and Chinese vaccines as well as domestic vaccines, he pointed out.

The Iranian government does not prioritize the domestic or foreign producers of the vaccines, he said, adding that what is vital for Iran is the vaccination campaign to save life of all Iranians.



Making Peace With Nature Is Possible, If We Start Now

By Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme

Even amid a pandemic, 2021 can go down as the year we made peace with nature and set the planet to healing.

As COVID-19 upends our lives, a more persistent crisis demands urgent action on a global scale. Three environmental crises - climate change, nature loss, and the collapse of nature, and the pollution of air, soil and water add up to a planetary emergency that will cause far more pain than COVID-19 in the long-term.

For years, scientists have detailed how humanity is degrading Earth and its natural systems. Yet the actions we are taking – from governments and financial institutions to businesses and individuals – fall far short of what is needed to protect current and future generations from a hothouse Earth, beset by mass species extinctions and poisonous air and water.

In 2020, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) announced that, despite a dip in greenhouse gas emissions caused by the pandemic, the world is still headed for global warming of more than 3°C this century.

This month, the Dasgupta review reminded us what UNEP has long warned: the per capita stock of natural capital – the resources and services nature provides to humanity – has fallen 40 per cent in just over two decades. And we know that a staggering 9 out of 10 people worldwide breathe polluted air.

Finding answers to such daunting problems is complex. It takes time. But experts have developed solutions. The economic rationale is clear. And the mechanisms and institutions to implement them are already in place. There are no more excuses.

This year, the UN will bring governments and other players together for crunch talks on climate action, biodiversity and land degradation. COVID-19 has delayed these summits and complicated their preparation. Again, this is no excuse for inaction. These summits must show that the world is finally serious about tackling our planetary emergency.

To guide decision-makers toward the action required, the UN has released the Making Peace with Nature report. The report pulls together all the evidence of environmental decline from major global scientific assessments, with the most advanced ideas on how to reverse it. The result is a blueprint for a sustainable future that can secure human well-being on a healthy planet.

Our environmental, social and economic challenges are interlinked. They must be tackled together. For example, we cannot achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, including ending poverty, by 2030 if climate change and ecosystem collapse are undermining food and water supplies in the world's poorest countries. We have no choice but to transform our economies and societies by valuing nature and putting its health at the heart of all our decisions.

If we did this, banks and investors would stop financing fossil fuels. Governments would shift trillions of dollars in subsidies to nature-positive farming and clean energy and water. People everywhere would prioritize health and well-being over consumption and shrink their environmental footprint.

There are signs of progress, but the problems are escalating faster than our responses. We all need to not step up, but leap up, in 2021.

The number of countries promising to work towards net-zero emissions stands at



126. The ask is for all countries to deliver stretched nationally determined contributions ahead of the climate COP and immediately kickstart the transitions to net-zero. At the climate COP, governments must also finally agree on the rules for a global carbon trading market. The USD 100 billion that developed countries promised to provide every year to help developing nations cope with the impacts of climate change must finally flow.

As we also seek to agree an ambitious post-2020 biodiversity framework that ends fragmentation of our ecosystems, the task is for us is to feed the world without destroying nature, felling forests and emptying our oceans.

We can create an amazing economy by moving to circular economic systems that reuse resources, reduce emissions and weed out the chemicals and toxins that are causing millions of premature deaths – all while creating jobs.

Addressing our planetary emergency is a whole-of-society effort. But governments must take the lead, starting with a smart and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that invests in the right places. They must create opportunities for future industries that generate prosperity. They must ensure that transitions are fair and equitable, creating jobs for those who lose out. They must give citizens a voice in these far-reaching decisions, even if it is virtual.

We can do it. The pandemic has shown humanity's incredible ability to innovate and respond to threats, guided by science. In the three planetary crises of climate change, nature loss and pollution, we face an even greater threat than COVID-19. This year, we must make peace with nature and, in every subsequent year, we must make sure that this peace lasts.

Russia's Strong Economic Position Among OPEC+ Members Underpins Its Negotiating Power

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - In early 2021 Russia secured an increase to its oil output quota under the OPEC+ agreement for February and March, the latest sign that Russia's comparatively strong economic position is allowing it to push for better terms under the deal.

Economics are set to underpin future negotiations in 2021, with Russia likely to continue to push to increase output volumes, despite uncertainty over demand.

Moscow-based analysts welcomed the latest OPEC+ decision, which allowed Russia to increase output by 65,000 b/d in February, and a further 65,000 b/d in March. Russia's crude output was 9.10 million b/d in December according to the S&P Global Platts OPEC+ production survey.

In contrast, most other members of the group will maintain output at January levels, with Saudi Arabia announcing that it would add an extra 1 million b/d cut. Russia's close ally Kazakhstan also secured a small increase to its quota from February.

Biden...

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Meanwhile, Ned Price, a spokesman for the State Department, said Thursday the Biden administration was willing to meet with Iranian officials and other world powers involved in negotiating the nuclear deal.

Price said Washington "would accept an invitation" from the European Union's top diplomat to attend a meeting aimed "to discuss a diplomatic way forward on Iran's nuclear program." So, far no meeting has been arranged yet, but the EU's high commissioner, Josep Borrell, has expressed willingness to invite the parties to engage in talks. A State Department official, briefing reporters on the condition of anonymity, said on Thursday Washington would be represented at the meeting by Biden's special envoy for Iran, Rob Malley.

Meanwhile, Republicans, who have pressed the Biden administration to keep the US sanctions on Iran, were quick to criticize Thursday's announcement. "It is concerning the Biden administration is already making concessions in an apparent attempt to re-enter the flawed Iran deal," said Rep. Michael McCaul, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Shortly before Price's statement, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif called on European leaders to push the US to lift its sanctions.

"Instead of sophistry & putting onus on Iran," Zarif wrote on Twitter, the EU must "demand an end to Trump's legacy of #EconomicTerrorism against Iran."

Gov't Rolls Out...

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The two trade projects opened by Rouhani included a fifth wharf in South Parsian SEZ and an agrifood export terminal in the northern province of Mazandaran.

Boosting non-oil trade has been a major component of plans by Rouhani's administration to diversify the Iranian economy as the government has been struggling to offset the impacts of US sanctions on the country's oil exports.

Along petrochemicals, metals and agrifood have been responsible for a bulk of export shipments sent from Iran to other countries in the past two years. The government continues to support development schemes in those two sectors as they bring more hard currency and create more jobs in the country.

Fair Vaccine Distribution...

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He said millions of people in developed countries have so far been vaccinated against COVID-19 but many developing states have failed to receive even a handful of vaccine doses.

No one in any part of the world will have immunity against the virus unless all people are immune, Takht-Ravanchi added.

The Iranian envoy said in parallel with vaccinations, it is also necessary to adopt other measures in developing countries, particularly the removal of unilateral sanctions and inhuman blockades of Yemen and Gaza.

Due to the freeze on its financial resources abroad as a result of illegal US sanctions, the Iranian government has not been able to properly help companies and the private sector make up for the damages they suffered in the face of the coronavirus spread, the diplomat added.

Iran has been contending with the deadliest pandemic the world has seen in many decades amid illegal U.S. sanctions, which have been hampering its access to vaccines, medicine, and medical equipment in the global market.

Venezuela's Conviasa...

FROM PAGE 1

In 2020, the company carried out a total of 4,434 flights including humanitarian, commercial and cargo services, and expanded its fleet, bringing the operational level to 85%, a mark achieved "thanks to the patriotism of the engineering, technical, pilot, crew and worker responsible aeronautics," Conviasa reported.

From Feb. 26, the airline will begin to fly between Maracaibo and Panama, with two weekly frequencies on Fridays and Sundays. Conviasa reported that its priority continues to be expanding to Russia, Iran and China once the restrictions due to Covid-19 are lifted, which will encourage tourism to Venezuela. The project for this year is to install a direct flight between Caracas and Moscow and by March to begin commercial operations to Tehran.

"There is a significant potential for passengers who want to know the tourist activity in Venezuela," said Velásquez, who added, "We are planning to reach China with cargo and passenger flights."

As of Tuesday, the airline has international flights from Caracas to Santo Domingo, Cancun and Santa Cruz de la Sierra, as well as national routes between Caracas and Porlamar and Canaima as well as between Porlamar and Maracaibo.

Conviasa projects a fleet of more than 80 aircraft and claims to be working on expanding to reach that size – although exact deadlines on when the airline is going to reach that number have not yet been given. The airline's current fleet consists of one Airbus A340-200, one Airbus A340-300, 16 Embraer E190s and eight Cessna 208 Caravans for regional operations. These ambitious plans for the airline would involve the incorporation of 600 pilots, the company assured.

Vice Minister Velásquez reported that, after having seen the importance of the air cargo service in 2020 with one million three hundred thousand kilos transported, Conviasa will reinforce cargo services with Aerocargo del Sur (EMTRASUR), a company created with the purpose of mobilizing national and international cargo, having as the initial axis to establish an air bridge with China, Russia and Iran. EMTRASUR will operate from the Libertador Air Base, in Maracay. The official also referred to the start-up of the National Aeronautical Company and the creation of the National Aeronautical Maintenance Center, which will operate in Maracay, to offer greater aeronautical maintenance service to wide-body aircraft in the region.

Trump's Revenge...

FROM PAGE 1

As per this report, some 100 members of the Republican Party present in the talks for forming this new party were officials of governments of Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush and George W. Bush as well as strategists and former Republican ambassadors.



Recent talks of former Republican officials indicate a tense rift among the members of the party on the false claims of Trump especially regarding the vote rig in the controversial 2020 presidential election and the deadly January 6 attack of Trump's diehard fans at the Capitol Hill. Although some of the Republicans still are loyal to former President Trump, another group seeks setting a new direction for the Republic Party.

Fulfillment of opinion and views of opponents of Trump in the party can pave the ground for the emergence of the third party in the U.S. which will be committed to the principles of the Republic Party but with differences in indexing the individual criteria and approval of the non-national stances being at odd with the mother party.

We should take into consideration that split in the big and popular Republic Party is going to happen in a condition that the U.S. is transforming from its inside. This transformation is not merely a political, social and economic one but it covers other dimensions forming the American society. This country while has the most financial and material capabilities, the best health and medical equipment and the biggest research centers has collapsed in tackling with the outbreak of the COVID-19. Hopelessness and disappointment, that this split can create in the American people in a condition that most of the countries in the east which once had been under the yoke of the U.S. despotic and hegemony and are even today considered among underprivileged countries or countries under the heaviest U.S. sanctions have the best management in controlling the virus, can fully disappoint the people towards the survival of the American federalism.

In this psychological condition of the American people, if one thinks that with departure of Trump and arrival of Biden, the U.S. will return to its previous normal track and revitalize its hegemony or regenerate it, is a wrong and doomed notion because the U.S. problems are not essentially superstructural but the power structure and beliefs all in all in the U.S. are suffering from a fundamental turmoil, split and separation.

The emergence of the idea for split in the party is definitely a primary move for the beginning of a domino game on course to the collapse of the cell after cell of the power pillars. Bipolarization of the U.S. people in their expectations and demands from the officials has not emerged in a short period that it can ignored. Therefore, we should wait and see the post-election events in the U.S.

Tehran Urges Washington...

FROM PAGE 1

However, he said, American people and the current president of the country have realized that the former president was wrong," expressing hope that "those mistakes will be compensated for as soon as possible, and the new U.S. administration will submit to the law, regulations and [UN Security Council] Resolution 2231."

Later on Thursday, Rouhani said as an important international actor, the European Union must play a suitable role in counteracting the U.S.' unilateral policies and protect the landmark nuclear deal with Iran as a major fruit of multilateral diplomacy.

Rouhani made the remarks in a Thursday phone call with Charles Michel, president of the European Council, during which he highlighted the important role of the Council in setting the direction of the European Union's major policies and delineating its priorities.

"As an important actor in the international arena, the European Union must play a suitable role to counteract the U.S. unilateralism," Iran's president said.

Rouhani reiterated that as such an important achievement for globally-inclusive diplomacy, the deal -- officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) -- should not be allowed to come apart easily.

He advised that Mogherini's successor Josep Borrell continue serving the duty of coordinator by devising the steps that could salvage the deal.

Michel, for his part, laid emphasis likewise on the need to save the nuclear deal and ensure its complete implementation on the part of all the signatories. He reiterated Europe's sustained support for the accord in the aftermath of the US' self-willed withdrawal.

Japan Appoints Female Olympic Head

TOKYO (Reuters) - Japan's Seiko Hashimoto, a woman who has competed in seven Olympics, said on Thursday she had been chosen as president of the Tokyo 2020 Organizing committee, replacing a man who resigned after setting off a furore with sexist remarks.

Yoshiro Mori, 83 and a former prime minister, resigned as Tokyo 2020 president last week after saying women talk too much, a fresh blow to an event already marred by an unprecedented delay of a year due to the coronavirus pandemic and strong public opposition.

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Leaders Atletico Held by Levante After Glaring Correa Miss

MADRID (Dispatches) - Atletico Madrid failed to move eight points clear at the top of La Liga on Wednesday as they were held to a 1-1 draw at Levante in a game which saw a dreadful miss from Angel Correa.

Diego Simeone's men sit six points clear of second-placed Real Madrid and have a game in hand, but have seen their control of the title race slip slightly after two draws in three matches.

Atletico are looking for a first league title since their shock triumph in 2014 but suffered a setback in this delayed encounter.

Porto Catch Juventus Gold In Champions League

LISBON (Dispatches) - Goals by Mehdi Taremi and Moussa Marega propelled Porto to their first victory against Juventus in the Champions League as they secured a 2-1 first-leg win against the Italian champions in their round-of-16 tie on Wednesday.

On a night when very little went Juventus's way, Federico Chiesa's late strike at least gave them something to take into the return leg in Turin on 9 March. Taremi pounced on a sloppy back pass after 63 seconds to fire in the opener that left Juventus rattled and they failed to create any clear chances before half-time.

Things got worse for Andrea Pirlo's side when Marega blasted in Porto's second goal 19 seconds into the second half. Juventus eventually mustered a response when Chiesa fired home a precious away goal with eight minutes remaining.

The winger's strike ended Porto's run of five consecutive clean sheets in the competition, and leaves the tie wide open ahead of the return leg. Juve impressed in the group stage by winning five games out of six, including a 3-0 victory at Barcelona.

But they got off to the worst start possible when Taremi anticipated Rodrigo Bentancur's pass back to Wojciech Szczesny and slid in to shoot past the goalkeeper from close range. Juve were visibly knocked off their stride by the aggression of Porto's pressing and were almost caught out again when Szczesny cleared the ball straight to Sérgio Oliveira, whose shot was deflected wide.

Matters were made worse for the Turin club when their captain, Giorgio Chiellini, limped off injured after 34 minutes. Porto were even quicker out of the blocks in the second half when Marega got on the end of a Wilson Manafá cut-back to score the second goal.

Szczesny stuck out a hand to stop an Oliveira shot from making it three, but the visitors finally came to life in the final 20 minutes. Agustín Marchesín had to scramble to palm away a deflected Chiesa shot, before the Italy international raced on to a pass to cushion a finish into the corner.

The goal made Chiesa the first Juventus player other than Cristiano Ronaldo to score in the knockout stages of the



Champions League since Blaise Matuidi in April 2018. Ronaldo, the competition's all-time top scorer, was largely kept quiet on his return to his home country, before having an appeal for a penalty waved away in stoppage time.

Meanwhile in another match of the night, Erling Haaland's remarkable UEFA Champions League scoring record helped Borussia Dortmund to a comeback victory at Sevilla as the German club took a significant step towards a first quarter-final in four years.

In the round of 16 for the first time in three years, Sevilla were quickly out of the traps, Suso's strike deflecting in off Mats Hummels in the seventh minute. Dortmund needed some inspiration and found it via Mahmoud Dahoud's fine curling equaliser 12 minutes later, before Haaland took centre stage yet again.

The Norwegian first exchanged passes with Jadon Sancho and beat goalkeeper Yassine Bounou to the return ball to give the visitors the lead, before Sevilla lost the ball in midfield and Marco Reus played in Haaland to slot under Bounou. It was his eighth goal in this season's competition and makes him the top scorer.

The home side pressed for a way back into the match throughout the second half, but an Óscar Rodríguez free-kick against the woodwork was all they could muster until the substitute's set piece from the left was volleyed in by another replacement, Luuk de Jong, to give Sevilla hope for the second leg.

Bale Towards End of Career



LONDON (Dispatches) - Gareth Bale is not playing regularly at Tottenham because he is coming towards the end of his medal-strewn career, his agent Jonathan Barnett said on Wednesday.

When the Wales international rejoined Spurs on loan from Real Madrid in September, the emotional homecoming was hailed as a perfect fit for the player and the club where he rose to global stardom.

Jose Mourinho's team have been involved in 22 Premier League matches following Bale's return to the north London club but the 31-year-old has started just two of those.

Mourinho last week questioned Bale's Instagram post which suggested he was in good health despite being unavailable to feature in his side's FA Cup defeat at Everton.

Asked why Bale was not playing regularly in his second spell at Spurs, Barnett, speaking at the Financial Times' Business of Football Summit, said: "He's towards the end of his career. Really, you have to ask Mourinho that."

Barnett defended Bale's record in the game -- the Welshman has won two La Liga titles and four Champions Leagues at Real Madrid.

Brady Edges Into Australian Open Final Against Osaka

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - American Jennifer Brady edged Karolina Muchova 6-4, 3-6, 6-4 in a tense Australian Open semi-final on Thursday to set up a title match with Naomi Osaka.

The big-serving 22nd seed secured her first Grand Slam final appearance on her fifth match point against the Czech 25th seed in front of thousands of fans allowed back on Rod Laver Arena after a snap five-day lockdown in Melbourne was lifted.

She will play Osaka in Saturday's final after the world number three earlier ended Serena Williams' bid for a record-equalling 24th major title 6-3, 6-4.

Brady, 25, is the last player standing among those forced into a hard 14-day quarantine after arriving in Australia.

"My legs are shaking, my heart is racing," said Brady, who had 20 winners and eight aces.

"My legs felt fresh but they weren't moving. They felt stuck in mud.

"I didn't really pick up my intensity until the beginning of the third set."

Brady set up a rematch of last year's epic US Open semi-final, where Japan's Osaka prevailed in three sets.

"We had a tough match in the U.S. Open, where she said it was one of her top two matches," said Brady, who sports a 1-2 win-loss record against Osaka.

"I'll be nervous but I'm going to be super-excited."

Compared to the blockbuster first semi-final, this was a surprise contest between first time Slam semi-finalist Muchova and Brady.

The warm conditions were expected to suit Brady and she started fast with an early break, but Muchova settled her nerves and clawed back into the contest.

But a loose service game in the 10th game punctuated by a double fault handed Brady the first set.



of the Premier League but has been at fault for a number of goals lately, including two in Saturday's 3-0 defeat by Manchester City.

Mourinho Backs Lloris Despite Errors

LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham Hotspur manager Jose Mourinho said goalkeeper Hugo Lloris still has "all my trust and confidence" despite a number of costly errors in recent matches.

The France captain enjoyed an impressive start to the campaign as Spurs rose to the top for a number of goals lately, including two in

Mourinho said the 34-year-old remained one of the best goalkeepers in the world, comparing his errors with those of Liverpool's Alisson Becker.

"For me Alisson is one of the top five best goalkeepers in the world and in the last couple of matches, not at Leipzig, but in the matches before he's made big mistakes but he's one of the top five goalkeepers in the world," the Spurs boss said on Wednesday.

"And Hugo is the same. He's an amazing, amazing goalkeeper that is performing super-consistently since he recovered from that fracture."

Mourinho added: "He's my number one choice and he has all my trust and my confidence."

Warriors Rally, Take Down Heat In Overtime

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Stephen Curry brushed aside his worst shooting night in three weeks with a pair of 3-pointers in overtime, including a go-ahead hoop with 1:15 to go that propelled the host Golden State Warriors to a come-from-behind, 120-112 victory over the Miami Heat in San Francisco.

After trailing by as many as 19 points in the first half and by 14 with under seven minutes remaining in regulation, the Warriors rallied to force overtime, then got the better of the Heat thanks to Curry's late treys that bookended one by Andrew Wiggins.

The Warriors never held the lead until 1:38 remained in overtime, when Kent Bazemore tipped in a layup to go ahead 109-107.

Attempting to become the first guard since Michael Jordan in 1995-96 to record 11 consecutive games with at least 25 points while making at least half his shots, Curry failed on both fronts Wednesday, finishing with 25 points on 8-for-25 shooting. He missed 13 of his first 18 3-point attempts before connecting on the last two.

Curry also found time for a game-high-tying 11 assists and got a lot of help from Bazemore with a season-best 26 points while Wiggins and Kelly Oubre Jr. added 23 apiece.

Golden State, which experienced a setback when Draymond Green couldn't play because of a sore right ankle, won its second straight to go three games over .500 for the first time this season.

Down 99-85 with 6:40 to go, the Warriors rallied down the stretch to force the overtime. Bazemore's driving layup with 52 seconds remaining capped a 20-6 run that drew Golden State even at 105-all.

Neither team scored after that in regulation, with Miami's Jimmy Butler missing a short jumper, Oubre misfiring on a 3-pointer and the Heat's Kendrick Nunn failing to connect on a buzzer-beating runner.

Butler (13 points, 12 rebounds, 11 assists) had a triple-double and Tyler Herro (11 points, game-high 15 rebounds) a double-double for the Heat, who lost their third straight while playing the middle contest of a seven-game trip.



Tsitsipas Finds Nirvana in Stunning Nadal Upset

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Stefanos Tsitsipas said he found "nirvana" on the tennis court as he recovered from two sets down to halt Rafael Nadal's bid for a record 21st Grand Slam title at the Australian Open.

Second seed Nadal was on course for a comfortable victory before Greece's Tsitsipas turned the quarter-final around to prevail 3-6, 2-6, 7-6 (7/4), 6-4, 7-5 in four hours and five minutes.

It was just the second time Nadal had lost when two sets up in a Grand Slam, having previously fallen to Fabio Fognini in the third round of the 2015 U.S. Open.

The fifth seed turned the match on its head after snatching the tiebreak in the third set and clinched the memorable victory with a backhand down the line.

Known as occasionally a hot-headed player, the 22-year-old has made a conscious effort to take a calmer approach, which paid dividends when he was on the brink of elimination against a rampant Nadal.

"I wasn't thinking about a lot of things," said Tsitsipas, who hit 49 winners and 17 aces in his second win in eight meetings with Nadal.

"How would I describe myself? Nirvana. Just was there... playing, not thinking."

He added: "I woke up today and I felt really relaxed. I felt things would go my way.

"I was very serene during the match. Maybe the absence of a crowd kept me like this."

Tsitsipas said celebrating with his father Apostolos and his coaching team, among the few people at Rod Laver Arena during a state-wide coronavirus lockdown, was a "special moment".

"The way I was able to come back, the way I did, and how I fought against Rafa, was something I've never felt before," he said.

"To be able to hug my team and share that moment of appreciation was epic. "It's everything I ever dreamed of."

